



The American Osler Society:

Its Occasion for Being and Its Origin*

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"The memory of a well-spent life should never be allowed to die; what nobler employment, or more advantageous to the country, than that of the man who instructs properly the rising generation." (Cicero: Divin ii, 2)

AS TO THE REASON for being of an Osler society, let us simply state that a society which is devoted to the perpetuation of Osler's example and counsels on the proper conduct of life and of practice is immensely needed in our day,—locally, nationally, and internationally.

Our medical colleges, for the most part liable for that momentous metamorphosis from unaccountable youth to certain professional, steep medicine's heirs in pragmatic science, as if medicine were synonymous with science. Few measures are provided to balance the deficiencies in humanism that inevitably exist where knowledge and respect for the history and philosophy of medicine should have been taught—but were not. The resultant progeny, knowledgeable concerning the Rh and the pH, are, in Plato's words, not "... learned beforehand in the knowledge which they will afterwards require for their art."¹ Far too many are without self-respect or professional pride, disorderly in appearance and irreverent of their heritage, and might easily be reclassified among the primates by a Linnaeus or a Darwin as *Homo sapiens vulgaris*.

Much time and space might be devoted to the sad and serious need for countermeasures to medicine's decline as a revered and beneficent profession. We shall only remind you that Osler pointed out, at the turn of the

century, the traits within medicine's ranks that threatened to sap the foundations of our esteemed position in society and level it to a dog-eat-dog trade. The unwelcomed traits of prejudice and vaunted conceit, intolerance and uncharitableness, inside and outside the brotherhood, he collected into one word, *chauvinism*.² This essay, "Chauvinism in Medicine," as well as "Unity, Peace and Concord,"³ Harvey Cushing's "Consecratio Medici,"⁴ and Hippocrates' "The Law" and "The Oath,"⁵ should be required and repetitive reading for our profession as are the "Articles of War" for the military.

The need for a company of Oslerites larger and more effective and stimulating than the scattered, localized Osler societies that already exist, had been in the air for several years. Local associations primarily serve relatively small groups with a common historic interest; they do not disseminate the doctrines of Osler as a potent countermeasure to the decadency in the "divine vocational" aspect, as Stephen Paget called the humanistic ingredient of medical practice.⁶ In 1966 and 1967, one of us (A.R.H.) brought the subject up to a number of Oslerians, including Wilburt C. Davison and Wilder G. Penfield, both former Rhodes Scholars under Osler at Oxford. All were of one accord,—that such an organization was, indeed, overdue.

The American Osler Society did not begin to take form until we met at the Smithsonian Institution in the fall of 1967. We had both known Dean Davison but, until then, not each other; and it was the Dean who suggested our visit.⁷ We discussed the possibility of an American Osler Society with a mutual enthusiasm and the determination to follow up the idea

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with a canvass of those in the profession in this country and Canada well known for their keen interest in Osler. Shortly thereafter, Dean Davison wrote: "I also have heard rumors of the formation of an American Osler Society, and I hope very much that one can be formed. Osler's influence is more needed today than ever before."⁸

After much telephoning and letter writing the idea came to fruition, and a temporary board was set up. The first organizational meeting was held in Houston on Feb 21, 1970; a constitution was drawn up, incorporation papers were arranged, and William B. Bean's nomination as our first President was accepted by him from a tennis court telephone in Iowa. The other officers elected were: George T. Harrell, Vice-President; Thomas M. Durant, Second Vice-President; John P. McGovern, Secretary; Alfred R. Henderson, Treasurer-Historian; Edward C. Rosenow, Jr., Secretary-Elect. The first Board of Governors consisted of Walter C. Alvarez, Martin M. Cummings, William J. Gibson, Willard E. Goodwin, A. McGehee Harvey, Chauncey D. Leake, Raymond D. Pruitt, Fred B. Rogers and Charles C. Roland.

The then three remaining Rhodes Scholars who had studied under Osler, Wilburt C. Davison, Wilder G. Penfield and Emile F. Holman, were named Honorary Members.

The first annual meeting was held in Denver in April 1971 in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American College of Physicians. The second annual meeting was held in Montreal in union with the American Association for the History of Medicine. Currently, there are 41 members of the Society, whose membership is limited to 60. The criterion for election of members is a demonstrated genuine interest in Osler and in the promotion of the Society's oslerian ideals as imprinted upon the annual programs:

"The American Osler Society has been founded for the purpose of bringing together members of the medical and allied professions who are, by their common inspiration, dedicated to memorialize and perpetuate the just and charitable life, the intellectual resourcefulness and the ethical example of William Osler (1849-1919). This, for the benefit of succeeding generations, that their motives be ever more sound, that their vision be on ever-widening horizons, and that they shall sail not as Sir Thomas Browne's Ark, without oars and without sails and rudder and, therefore, without direction."

We can agree with Osler, "... so vast and composite has the profession become that the physician separation in which dependent parts are fitly joined together, tends to become pathological . . . some parts becoming disfiguring and dangerous outgrowths on the Body Medical."⁹ Success can be far more difficult to live with than failure. The profession has acquired almost automatic respect and social prestige, the ready availability of the fruits of dedicated research and improved practice, and financial security unheard of before our own era. Yet, in unwholesome numbers and at an expeditious rate, the profession is becoming like the children of John Ruskin's dream.¹⁰

In a lecture in 1868, Ruskin told of a dream he had had. He dreamed he was at a children's party in which every means of entertainment had been provided for them in a stately house and gardens. The children were contented for a while, but soon separated themselves into little parties and each little party staked out its own piece of garden, as little children are inclined to do. There was soon fighting among the boys until there was hardly a flower left standing in the flower beds.

Meanwhile, in the house where there had been provided every kind of indoor pleasure, they eventually became bored and it struck two or three of the more "practical" children that they would like some of the brass-headed nails that studded the chairs. Before long, little hands were straining their fingers, pulling out brass-headed nails. With all they could pull out, they were not satisfied, and then everybody wanted some of somebody else's and, at last, the really practical and sensible ones declared that nothing was of any real consequence that afternoon except to get plenty of brass-headed nails, and they counted and compared their nails all afternoon, even though they knew they would not be allowed to carry so much as one away with them. At last, the noise and confusion became so loud that Ruskin awoke and thought to himself: "What a false dream that is of children. The child is the father of man . . . and wiser. Children never do such foolish things . . . only men do."

So, insofar as the limits of life and capacity make it possible, and in Osler's unpretentious way, "let us do the work of men while we bear

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the form of men . . . and as we snatch our narrow portion of time out of eternity, snatch also our narrow inheritance of passion out of immortality."¹¹ For now, "it is toward evening, and the day is far spent."¹²

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