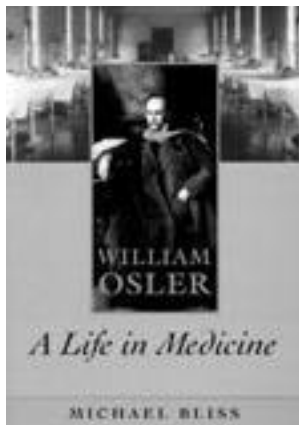


BOOK REVIEW



**William Osler:
A Life in Medicine**
by Michael Bliss

Oxford University Press,
1999, 581 pages
ISBN: 0-19-512346-8
\$50 CAN, \$35 US, £ 27.50

**WILLIAM OSLER –
AN INDEFATIGABLE SPIRIT**

William Osler was born in Bond Head, Ontario, on July 12th 1825. His early years were not particularly auspicious but despite a handful of disciplinary problems, William entered the University of Trinity College in Toronto in 1867 to study classics and divinity, with plans of entering the ministry. However, a developing interest in natural history would, by the end of the school year, alter his career path. Osler began his medical studies at the Toronto School of Medicine but moved to Montreal to complete his medical degree at McGill University. After some postgraduate training in Europe, Osler returned as a professor at McGill. Over the course of his life he moved from McGill to the University of Pennsylvania, and then to the Johns Hopkins University and Hospital, and finally, as Regius Professor of Medicine, to Oxford. During his lifetime he revolutionized the teaching of medicine, with the unflinching belief that students must learn medicine by working at the bedside rather than purely through didactic lectures (1). His textbook, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* (2), published in 1892, was an amazing success and unquestionably superceded all other medical textbooks of the era (3).

William Osler had a profound influence on the evolution of modern medicine, both directly and through his countless disciples. In fact, at his death in 1919, he was considered by many the greatest physician in history. Was this an accurate appraisal? Francis Bacon wrote "Truth is the daughter, not of authority, but time." The objectivity of Harvey Cushing's authoritative treatment of Osler's life published in 1925 (4) may be questionable. But an additional 75 years have not seen

Osler's reputation fade away. Nonetheless, this time may allow the novel interpretation of Osler's life and influence. There was a call for a modern biography of Sir William Osler (5) and, alas, it is here.

William Osler: A Life in Medicine by Michael Bliss is a 581 page biography that has already received wide praise (6-8). Bliss does not simply enumerate Osler's accomplishments using a "life and letters" approach; instead, he describes Osler's experiences from the smallpox ward of the Montreal General and the Blockley dead house to the Open Arms at no. 13 Norham Gardens. One gains insight into the state of medical knowledge and teaching at the time. Hence, the reader who has no particular interest in Osler himself nevertheless learns a great deal about medical practice, medical education, and life at the turn of the previous century. But for those who wish to understand Osler, Bliss's account helps by not only describing the physician and professor, but by describing the friend, husband, father, and uncle who touched so many lives. Bliss attempts to bring together the different aspects of Osler such as his love of children and books, and his position on various matters (e.g. women in medicine). Fortunately Bliss does not subscribe to the fanaticism that seems to characterize a subset of Oslerians who are willing to describe anything related to Osler, no matter how superfluous, and he instead focuses on information that contributes to our understanding of Osler, his life, his times, and his lasting influence.

Anyone interested in the history of medicine should enjoy this book. Anyone interested in Osler will love it. *William Osler: A Life in Medicine* does not replace *The Life of Sir William Osler* (4), instead, this second biography complements the first. Cushing's biography will remain a valuable source of information to anyone seeking to know the details of Osler's life, but to the modern reader, the writing seems dated and the book is unlikely to be read from cover to cover. In contrast, Bliss's book is a delightful read and one much better suited to today's readers, both in style and content. Perhaps most importantly though, in describing Osler's life and times, Bliss captures Osler's spirit. Osler was a role model and motivational force to thousands of students and colleagues during his life. With this book, Osler's spirit can continue to motivate students and physicians today.

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