“The Touch Divine of Noble Natures Gone”: Sir William Osler as a Book Collector

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On Thursday 26 January 1911, the International Association of Antiquarian Booksellers (IAAB) held its fourth annual dinner in the Criterion Restaurant in London, England. The IAAB had been established in 1906 to promote the interests of both major and minor antiquarian booksellers in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.¹ Amidst the ornate splendour for which the Piccadilly Circus restaurant was famous, the IAAB president, London bookseller James Tregaskis, rose and introduced two special guests: Professor William Osler (1849–1919), Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford; and Professor Selwyn Image (1849–1930), Slade Professor of Fine Art at the same institution. In what could be described as indelicate self-interest, Tregaskis stated that these two “stood high in the realms of Literature, Science, Art, Oratory, but, from our point of view, still higher, as book-lovers, and best of all as book-buyers.”² Despite being described as a human money bag, Image (appropriately named, given his profession) responded with an earnest and complimentary toast to the booksellers. In contrast, Osler’s response had a tone of humorous mockery, both of himself and his audience:

I feel very highly honoured that what I might call the toast of the evening has been assigned to me. And really it is out of the deepest spirit of Christian charity that I propose it; because you see before you a mental, moral, almost, I may say, a physical wreck – and all

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¹ Dudley Massey and Martin Hamlyn, “ILAB’s History of the ABA (Part One),” Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association, accessed 6 February 2016, <http://www.aba.org.uk/About-the-ABA/ABA-History/ILAB-S-History-o-the-ABA-%28Part-1%29>.

² “The International Association of Antiquarian Booksellers,” *The Bookseller* 16 (1911): 143–46 (143).

of your own making. (Laughter.) Until I became mixed up with you I was really a respectable, God-fearing, industrious, earnest, ardent, enthusiastic, energetic student. *Now* what am I? A mental wreck, devoted to nothing but your literature [i.e. catalogues]. Instead of attending to my duties and attending to my work, in comes every day by the post, and by every post, all this seductive literature with which you have, as you know perfectly well, gradually undermined the mental virility of many a better man than I. (Laughter).³

Osler vowed, however, that the last laugh would be his. Noting that a copy of his major work, the bestselling textbook *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, had recently appeared in an antiquarian bookdealer's catalogue, he gleefully taunted his audience by stating:

But just think of what will happen in the next generation ... [when] the great dissolver loosens and frees from the libraries the 125,000 copies of that work which at present are busily engaged in helping the practitioners on the other side of the water, and some on this side of the water, to look after your bodily health. Better than that – that is bad enough – you know what it is to have a book like that come in constantly; it is an awful worry and bother. I know it, but I am not sorry for you. But when you think of that System of Medicine⁴ in seven volumes (laughter), seven volumes! each one weighing several pounds; just think when that gets on to your shelves – it will not be worth the paper! Then I know perfectly well that I shall have had my revenge. It is not every man who has the feeling of deep satisfaction that I have; for what? For the wreck that you have made of me I know that I will have in the next generation at any rate a deep and lasting revenge.⁵

³ Ibid., 144.

⁴ *A System of Medicine: by Eminent Authorities in Great Britain, the United States and the Continent*, was edited by William Osler, assisted by Thomas McCrae, and published in London by Frowde between 1907 and 1910. The work was issued in the United States under the title *Modern Medicine, its Theory and Practice: in Original Contributions by American and Foreign Authors* by Lea Brothers. Frowde produced a revised five-volume edition in 1915.

⁵ "The International Association of Antiquarian Booksellers," 144.

Figure 1. William Osler in his personal library, Oxford, 1907. William Osler Photo Collection, Osler Library, CUS_o64-o63_P.

Sir William Osler

At first blush, the easy, teasing rapport between Dr. Osler and the antiquarian book trade fraternity may seem surprising. After all, in 1911 the sixty-one year old Osler stood at the pinnacle of the Anglo-American medical world, and had climbed a very long way to reach it.⁶ He was born in the backwoods of Ontario in 1849, the son of

⁶ There are a number of biographies of Osler. A recent, highly readable one is by Michael Bliss entitled *William Osler: A Life in Medicine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). A much more detailed biography was written by Osler's close friend, the pioneer neurosurgeon Harvey Cushing. *The Life of Sir William Osler* was first published in Oxford by the Clarendon Press in 1925, and reprinted

the Reverend Featherstone Lake Osler, an Anglican missionary who left England to minister to the settlers in Bond Head and later Dundas, Ontario. While at the Toronto School of Medicine, Osler was encouraged to complete his medical studies at McGill University in Montreal, arguably the best medical school in the country. Following completion of the M.D., C.M. degree programme in 1872, he undertook post-graduate study in Europe, where advances in medical knowledge were taking place at a pace not seen in two thousand years. After spending two years in Germany, Austria, and England with some of the greatest medical luminaries of the period, Osler was named Professor of the Institutes of Medicine at McGill. Being only twenty-five years old, he was called the Baby Professor.

Osler's career was meteoric. Like many successful Canadians then and now, Osler moved to the United States. After a decade at McGill, he spent 1884 to 1889 at the University of Pennsylvania, the oldest and one of the most prestigious medical schools in the country. In 1889 he was one of a quartet of highly-regarded medical men who were selected to establish the Johns Hopkins medical school and hospital in Baltimore. The school was established in accordance with the highest standards. Prospective students were required to have an undergraduate degree at a time when even the lack of a high school diploma was not a barrier to enter some medical schools. The curriculum eschewed the didactic approach to medical education practiced in many institutions, in which students might never have touched a body, living or dead, nor sat on a lab bench. The pedagogical approach at Hopkins was constructivist, with students doing hands-on laboratory and clinical work. Osler's passion was to have students learn medicine on the hospital wards and at the bedsides of patients, and not solely from the consumption and regurgitation of lectures and readings. Osler's appointment as Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford in 1905 was perhaps the crowning achievement for the career of a Victorian physician, especially one from the imperial periphery. This was followed by a knighthood in King George V's 1911 Coronation Honours List. Indeed, it was not long after the light-hearted IAAB dinner that Dr. Osler became Sir William Osler, Bart.

several times. Writing at the request of Lady Osler after Sir William's death, Cushing quoted extensively from letters and other material in this exhaustive, two-volume biography, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926. Cushing's notes, as well as transcriptions of all the Osler letters he gained access to for the book, were deposited in the Osler Library as the Harvey Cushing Fonds (P417).

Osler's fame in the medical world was multi-faceted. One aspect was his research. Although there are no great discoveries or procedures associated with his name on the scale of the development of penicillin, x-rays, or antiseptic surgery, he was a tireless researcher and the author of over a thousand articles and a handful of books on cases and of observations, especially in the early years of his career. His magnum opus was the textbook, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine: Designed for the Use of Practitioners and Students of Medicine*, which was first published in 1892 and sold over one hundred thousand copies in just over a decade. Eight editions were produced in his lifetime, and it was translated into French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Chinese.⁷ Also, his passion and promotion for teaching students medicine in the hospital wards at the bedsides of patients, and not in the lecture hall, had a profound impact on the structure of medical education. Finally, his vision of medicine as an art as well as a science, encompassing everything from history to histology⁸ and motivated by an overarching compassion for the ill, guided his own highly successful practice and inspired generations of physicians. It is hard to overestimate the impact that Osler has had on medicine. He has often been described as "the father of modern medicine." There are enthusiastic "Oslerians" throughout the world and Osler clubs and societies in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Japan, and elsewhere.⁹

The Leaven of the Whole Lump

Osler's toast at the 1911 booksellers' soiree is indicative of how embedded he was in the world of books. Collecting was an intense passion for Sir William and he devoted an extensive amount of time, money and space to it, particularly in the latter part of his

⁷ For more information about the publishing history of this work, see Richard L. Golden, *A History of William Osler's "The Principles and Practice of Medicine."* (Montreal: Osler Library of the History of Medicine, 2004).

⁸ Osler introduced the teaching of histology to McGill medical students, and spent his entire career embedding medical history into virtually everything he did.

⁹ It is interesting that Osler is not better known to Canadians. This is perhaps due to our tendency not to see ourselves as significant achievers in science and medicine. Had Osler shown even a fraction of his prodigious talent on the hockey rink instead of in medicine, he would be better recognized by the greater public.

life.¹⁰ The fundamental point about Osler's bibliomania is that he regarded historical medical works not as diverting curiosities but as purveyors of the past that were central to medical progress. In a talk entitled "Books and Men," given at the opening of the Boston Medical Library in January 1901, Osler articulated the importance of historical material to the profession in detail. He exclaimed that "by the historical method alone can many problems in medicine be approached profitably. For example, the student who dates his knowledge of tuberculosis from Koch may have a very correct, but he has a very incomplete, appreciation of the subject."¹¹ Osler then defined what he considered to be an even more important service rendered by history, which was to provide role models from the past to inspire and instruct the present and future generations of medical students, practitioners, and researchers. It is worthwhile to quote him at length to get to the heart of Osler's conception of medical history's service to the profession and the particular role that books played in propagating that history. He articulated what he considered the critical role that book collectors played as interlocutors between past and present. Like priests of a religious order devoted to preserving saintly relics for the faithful, collectors were "a small, a silent band, but in reality the leaven of the whole lump."¹² For Osler, collectors keep

alive in us an interest in the great men of the past and not alone in their works, which they cherish, but in their lives, which they emulate. They would remind us continually that in the records of no other profession is there to be found so large a number of men who have combined intellectual pre-eminence with nobility of character. This higher education, so much needed to-day is not given in the school, is not to be bought in the market-place, but it has to be wrought out of each one of us for himself; it is the silent influence of character on character and in no way more potent than

¹⁰ An interesting analysis of Osler's collecting is W. Bruce Fye, "William Osler's Bibliomania," in *The Persisting Osler, III: Selected Transactions of the American Osler Society, 1991–2000*, edited by Jeremiah A. Barondess and Charles G. Roland (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2002), 67–78.

¹¹ William Osler, "Books and Men," in *Selected Writings of Sir William Osler*, edited by Alfred White Franklin (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 34–39 (37–38). The talk was first published in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 144 (1901) and reprinted in several anthologies.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

in the lives of the great and good of the past, in no way more than in “the touch divine of noble natures gone.”¹³

Osler felt that the touch divine was so important that he recommended that every library should have a special alcove where “a select company of the immortals [be] set apart for special adoration,” as well as alcoves with works that illustrate the historical consideration of diseases.¹⁴

Osler articulated his concept of the book as the main purveyor of historical knowledge in a speech he gave to the Association of Medical Librarians (which later became the Medical Library Association), which he helped to establish, serving as its second president from 1901 to 1904.¹⁵ The purpose of the new association, he claimed, was nothing less than “to foster among our members and in the profession at large a proper love of books.”¹⁶ The nature of that “proper love” was described in a way that highlighted Osler’s particular perspective: “The true bibliophile cares not so much for the book as for the man whose life and mind are illustrated in it. These are men of noble life and high character, every scrape of whose writings should be precious to us, and such men are not rare.”¹⁷

Osler fervently believed that communing with the great minds of the past had been critical in his own development. In the unfinished

¹³ Ibid., 38. “The touch divine of noble natures gone” is a quotation from a nineteenth century poem by the New England romantic poet James Russell Lowell entitled “Memoriae Positum, RGS, 1863” which appeared in the January 1864 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Art and Politics*. The poem memorializes Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the African-American commander of a northern army unit killed during the Civil War, and celebrates the power of role models from the past to inspire future generations. The stanza from which Osler quoted is the following:

As thrills of long-hushed tone
Live in the viol, so our souls grow fine,
With keen vibrations from the touch divine
Of noble natures gone.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For more information see Frances Groen, “Three Who Made an Association: Sir William Osler, 1849–1919; George Milbry Gould, 1848–1922; Margaret Ridley Charlton, 1858–1931 and the Founding of the Medical Library Association,” in *Sir William Osler: The Man and his Books*, edited by William Feindel, Elizabeth Maloney, and Pamela Miller (Montreal: Osler Library of the History of Medicine, 2011), 117–36.

¹⁶ William Osler, “Some Aspects of American Medical Bibliography. Address at the Meeting of the Association of Medical Librarians, Saratoga, June 10, 1902,” *Bulletin of the Association of Medical Libraries* 1, nos. 3–4 (1902): 19–32 (20).

¹⁷ Ibid., 28.

essay, "The Collecting of a Library," which acts as an introduction to the *Bibliotheca Osleriana*, Osler explicitly linked his own development with exposure to books, beginning with his father's library of about 1,500 volumes. A second "father" as described by Osler was Dr. James Bovell, who taught at the Toronto School of Medicine and with whom Osler lived between 1869 and 1870. Osler was permitted to browse Bovell's well-stocked library, which provided him with "a good first-hand acquaintance with the original works of many of the great masters."¹⁸ He described the valuable experience of having access to the "best the human mind has afforded,"¹⁹ which also gave him "an enduring interest in books."²⁰ In the same essay, Osler noted how his interest and depth of knowledge of medical history widened during his years in the United States, including the influence of John Shaw Billings, the head of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office who had recruited Osler for Johns Hopkins, and William H. Welch, the first dean of the Hopkins medical school. Osler described how the years there "brought me, too, into sympathetic touch with another company, those friends of the spirit, the great and good men of the past who, through much tribulation, handed on the torch to our generation ... to know and to make known to students the lives and works of these men was a labour of love."²¹ Ever the educator, Osler felt that he must share with others that which had benefitted him so greatly in his professional and personal life.

Osler's desire to know and to make known the lives and works of medical paragons was manifested in a number of ways. First, he enthusiastically shared his collection with others. For example, he invited students to his house in Baltimore on Saturday nights, where he would pass around books from his collection and discuss their authors over beer and "baccy." Osler also provided select students

¹⁸ William Osler, "The Collecting of a Library," in *Bibliotheca Osleriana: A Catalogue of Books Illustrating the History of Medicine and Science Collected, Arranged and Annotated by Sir William Osler, Bt. and Bequeathed to McGill University*, edited by W.W. Francis, R.H. Hill, and Archibald Malloch (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987 [first published Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929]): xxi-xxxii (xxii). The *Bibliotheca Osleriana* is available online through the McGill Library Catalogue, <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/900572121>.

¹⁹ Ibid., xxiii.

²⁰ Ibid., xxii.

²¹ Ibid., xxix-xxx.

with keys to his house so they could have free access to his library.²² A second method was to create historical clubs where physicians and others could hear and give papers, often of a biographical nature. In 1890, for example, he helped to found the Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club, and he was founder and first president of the historical section of the Royal Society of Medicine in 1912. Finally, he gave talks and published numerous biographical and historical essays, such as a twenty-six-part series of short bio-bibliographical pieces entitled "Men and Books" which appeared between 1912 and 1914 in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.²³ A number of his essays were also collected in *An Alabama Student and Other Biographical Essays*,²⁴ which first appeared in 1908. In all, Osler published over a hundred biographical and historical papers.²⁵ In addition to this, many of his medical writings, including *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, contain historical background information.

Building the Collection

The greatest manifestation of Osler's privileging of history, however, was his plan to amass a collection of books to document the progress of medicine,²⁶ particularly those works by the great minds that propelled the profession forward.²⁷ He believed that his collection could play both a pedagogical and inspirational role for the medical profession. For this to happen, however, Osler felt the need not

²² These students referred to themselves as latch-keys, and the symbol of the key is used today by Oslerians and lovers of medical history, for example by the American Osler Society and the Osler Club of London.

²³ These were collected and reprinted in William Osler, *Men and Books: Collected and Reprinted from the Canadian Medical Association Journal, with an Introduction by Earl F. Nation* (Durham, NC: Sacrum Press, 1987).

²⁴ William Osler, *An Alabama Student, and Other Biographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1908).

²⁵ Fye, "Osler's Bibliomania," 75.

²⁶ Although science gets equal billing in the subtitle of the catalogue of Osler's collection, one cannot say that the two fields are equally represented.

²⁷ It should be made clear that Osler considered that he had two collections, the first being that of historical works that were catalogued in the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* and donated to McGill University where they formed the genesis of the Osler Library of the History of Medicine. The other collection was his working library, made up of contemporary medical works and journals. His working collections were the ones which he largely gave away when he left Montreal, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. This article refers specifically to the historical collection.

only to assemble the collection he envisioned, but also ensure its accessibility, either directly or through a detailed bibliography. Osler's ability to gather close to eight thousand items that reflected his vision of medical history tells us something about both the availability and the affordability of rare medical and related works during his lifetime. Those of us who purchase antiquarian medical books today will agree that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appear to be something of a golden age for collecting. Many books, particularly the sought-after "high spots," were more commonly available then than today, and the prices were certainly lower, even taking inflation into account. Osler noted in "The Collecting of a Library" that his books came from three sources: auctions, antiquarian bookshops, and dealers who circulated catalogues.²⁸ A fourth should be added: friends and admirers gave Osler books, too. Osler thus provides an interesting case study of the dynamics of book collecting during his lifetime.

A good overview of the English antiquarian book market of that time is provided by the introduction to *Nineteenth-Century British Book Collectors and Bibliographers*.²⁹ This period was seemingly awash in rare books. A number of large English private collections came on the market as a result of changes in taxation laws, which made selling inherited property easier. Periods of economic instability in agriculture also adversely affected the fortunes of the collection-owning gentry. Terry Belanger has noted that in the 1880s alone there were more auctions bringing in £10,000 or more than in the previous six decades combined, and that there had not been such a large number of books on the market since the Napoleonic era.³⁰ Sales of large collections continued into the twentieth century, in part fueled by the dissolution of many major country estates and London houses and the continued sale of large private collections. One example is Osler's acquisition of a very rare manuscript copy of his favourite work, Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, which predated the first printing in 1642. Bought at Sotheby's in 1906, the auction catalogue noted that it had come from the library of an estate in Lancashire, where it had been held for over 250 years. Recent attempts to determine the name of the estate were unsuccessful.

²⁸ Osler, "Collecting of a Library," xxxii.

²⁹ Introduction in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 4, *Nineteenth-Century British Book Collectors and Bibliographers*, edited by William Baker and Kenneth Womack (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), xv–xx.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.

Ellen B. Wells, a former librarian at the Osler Library, studied over one thousand extant book invoices paid by Osler between 1907 and 1918 that are held in the library's William Osler Collection (P100).³¹ She noted how relatively inexpensive many of the books he purchased were. He paid £2,579 6s. 10d. for thousands of books, of which few cost more than £4.³² Higher prices were paid for manuscripts, incunables, and more sought-after works. One vivid example of the inflation in rare book prices over the past century is Nicolas Copernicus' 1543 treatise on the heliocentric solar system, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. Osler noted in the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* entry for it (entry number 566)³³ that he missed the only copy sold in London at auction in twelve years, where it sold for £22. He finally obtained a copy (the only one in Canada today) from Heffer's bookshop in Cambridge for £18 near the end of his life. So rare was the work that he purchased it despite his qualms about its provenance. It was formerly the property of the Marischal College library, but lacked a withdrawal stamp. This was a particularly rare copy, being one of the 20 percent of all known first editions that contains the errata slip. Using a variety of historical currency conversion sources, £18 in the early twentieth century is equivalent to a couple of thousand dollars today. Copies of the first edition Copernicus sold by New York book dealer Jonathan Hill in the past few years have gone for seven figures. The ability to collect a sizable library of the quality of Osler's demonstrates how relatively inexpensive books were during his time, even though prices were rising due to pressure from American collectors, such as J.P. Morgan and Henry Huntington.³⁴

Wells also documented where Osler obtained his books. Not surprisingly given his passion for collecting, Osler's reach was international and transoceanic. Wells noted purchases from dealers and auction houses in England, France, Germany, Austria, Holland, Denmark, and the United States, and we know that this is not a

³¹ Ellen B. Wells, "Books for the Bibliotheca: A Study of Sir William Osler's Book Bills," *Osler Library Newsletter* no. 26 (1977): 1-4, <https://www.mcgill.ca/library/files/library/No26October1977.pdf>.

³² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³³ Hereafter, references to entries in the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* will be indicated by B.O. followed by the entry number.

³⁴ An interesting study of the price inflation of highly sought-after books is Anthony James West, "The Market Fortunes of the First Folio," in *Out of Print and Into Profit: A History of the Rare and Secondhand Book Trade in Britain in the 20th Century*, edited by Giles Mandelbrote (London: The British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2006), 215-19.

complete list of the countries in which he bought books. Osler felt that auctions were the most economical acquisition method, so he personally attended a number of them in England and the continent, or would have an agent bid for him. In his essay, "A Record Day at Sotheby's," he described the excitement of a major sale of the collection of New Yorker William C. Van Antwerp in 1907, where among the bidders were the local London antiquarian book dealers, and where a record price was set for the sale of a Shakespeare first folio, which was bought by the antiquarian book dealer Bernard Quaritch for £3,600.³⁵ That a major American collection would be sold in London suggests that it was the epicentre of the Anglo-American antiquarian book world, one that was conveniently close to Osler's home in Oxford from 1905 until the end of his life.

No doubt Osler enjoyed the excitement of a major book auction and managed to get a number of significant works that way, but his book bills show that the majority of his purchases were from antiquarian booksellers, either through catalogues, his addiction to which was noted above, or from visits to shops in the United Kingdom, the United States, or the continent. Osler recommended regular trips abroad to recharge intellectually – "brain dustings" as he described them – and these occasions provided opportunities to visit numerous antiquarian bookshops. Osler's letters are filled with references to bookshops visited and treasures found. On one trip to Europe in 1903 he bragged in a letter to his friends back in Baltimore, "I have bagged two 1543 Fabricas! Tis not a work which should be left on the shelves of a bookseller."³⁶ Osler's bibliotourism points to both the existence of antiquarian bookshops throughout Europe and North American and the supply of enough interesting and desirable books to make visits worthwhile. One can sense the existence of a network of bookshops of particular interest to medical collectors. In 1911 the medical historians and librarians Fielding H. Garrison and Felix Neumann published "How to Collect Old Medical Books in Europe: Where to Go and What to Look For", in the *Journal of*

³⁵ William Osler, "A Record Day at Sotheby's," in *Bibliotheca Osleriana: A Catalogue of Books Illustrating the History of Medicine and Science Collected, Arranged and Annotated by Sir William Osler, Bt. and Bequeathed to McGill University*, edited by W.W. Francis, R.H. Hill, and Archibald Malloch (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987 [first published Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929]: xxxiii–xxxv.

³⁶ Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 612.

the American Medical Association.³⁷ The authors complain that the growing demand has driven up prices, and counsel collectors to avoid the more popular antiquarian bookshops. The article provided a list of suggested European bookshops for medical collectors – in effect a kind of Baedeker's for bibliophiles. Osler had an offprint of the article bound and added it the Bibliographica section of his catalogue (B.O. 7057). The fact that the article was published in a major medical journal suggests a growing interest in medical book collecting by the profession, one perhaps inspired by Osler.

Osler's enthusiasm nurtured a network of collectors. This was characterized by some good-natured rivalry, as is to be expected in any pursuit of scarce resources, but there appears to have been an even stronger sense of comradely collaboration in the shared passion of collecting books. Osler made numerous generous gestures to other collectors and libraries. Harvey Cushing's 1925 biography, *The Life of Sir William Osler*,³⁸ recounts numerous occasions when Osler either purchased books for a library or individual, or raised the funds to do so. For example, he donated six copies of Andreas Vesalius's (1514–64) richly illustrated sixteenth-century anatomical treatise *De humani corporis fabrica* to libraries and individuals because he thought it was such an important book in the history of medicine. This generosity was consistent with Osler's ultimate goal, which was not to hoard books but to propagate history, so that they could be "the leaven of the whole lump." Generosity was a two-way street, however, for friends and admirers were equally lavish with him. As noted above, Osler's library contained a number of books that came as gifts. One notable example is a first edition of Voltaire's *La Henriade*, 1741 (B.O. 5551), which was presented to him in 1905 when he left Baltimore for Oxford. It was an especially significant addition to Osler's collection of literary works by physicians because it was inscribed by Voltaire to his fellow physician, Jean Baptiste Silva:

Esculape françois recevez cet homage,
De votre frere en Apollon.
Ce Dieu vous a laissé son plus bel heritage,
Tous les Dons de l'Esprit, tous ceux de la raison.
Et je n'eus que des vers hélas pour mon partage.

³⁷ Fielding H. Garrison and Felix Neumann, "How to Collect Old Medical Books in Europe: Where to Go and What to Look For," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 57, no. 11 (1911): 895–98.

³⁸ Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925).

Figure 2. Voltaire's dedication to Silva, *La Henriade*, 1741 (B.O. 5551).
Osler Library Collection.

Sometimes the gifts were unintended. In 1914 the renowned British neurologist Charles Sherrington loaned Osler his copy of the first edition of René Descartes' 1662 *De homine figuris* (B.O. 931). This early work on physiology, which has a wonderful flap anatomy of the heart, was extremely rare. In 1916 Sherrington was browsing through Osler's bookshelves when he found his book, opened it, and discovered that Osler had written "given to me August 16th 1914 by C.S. Sherrington." Not wanting to disillusion his friend, Sherrington added "E Libris, Gulielmi Osler, 1914." Sherrington recounted to the first librarian of the Osler Library, Dr. William Willoughby Francis, that Osler not only did this with the Descartes, but also with one of his sixteenth-century herbals.³⁹

The importance of the network of bibliophiles and suppliers that gathered around Osler is perhaps best seen in the acquisition of a number of Islamic medical manuscripts. Osler openly discussed his desire to obtain old manuscripts of the famed medieval Persian physician Avicenna or Ibn Sīnā for his collection. Word of his search reached Dr. Anthony Richard Neligan, physician to the British Legation in Teheran, via Sir Archibald Edward Garrod, a fellow physician who would later succeed Osler as Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford. Neligan promised to have his Persian friends search for manuscripts for him, and had the great good fortune in

³⁹ William Willoughby Francis, "Showman's Patter: A Description of Books in the Osler Library; Dictated by the Author, 1950–1957" (Montreal: unpublished typescript, n.d.), 113, also available online at <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/428022411>.

The Bibliotheca Osleriana

Osler's ultimate motivation for creating his library was altruistic. In keeping with his vision of the power of the great minds of the past to teach, inspire, and even ennoble the present through their writings, Osler made sure that his library would be accessible. One means was to donate his collection to McGill University, on the proviso that his books be made accessible to all practitioners and students. Osler chose McGill over other institutions with which he had been affiliated partially out of respect for his alma mater, being especially appreciative of the support he received at the start of his career. He also believed that Canada, unlike the United States or the United Kingdom, did not possess the same rich collection of books. He particularly hoped that his French-Canadian colleagues would make use of the library, particularly its rich collection of French literature.⁴¹ This gesture of reaching beyond the institutional, linguistic, and often sectarian division between English and French medicos in early twentieth-century Montreal was remarkable for the time and exemplifies his belief that medicine was a unifying field.⁴²

The second means through which he hoped the collection would fulfill its mandate was through a printed catalogue. This would extend the reach of the library beyond the physical limitations of its Montreal location. The catalogue was divided into eight sections, called bibliotheca, mostly on the basis of genre or type of work, except for the first two sections. The "Bibliotheca Prima" consists of 1,702 entries that listed works by and about those whom Osler considered

⁴¹ Osler, "The Collecting of a Library," *Bibliotheca Osleriana*, xxxi–xxxii.

⁴² The existence of largely separate French and English educational and medical facilities in Quebec reflected the historic role that the Roman Catholic Church played in providing schools and health care to the French-speaking population going back to the French colonial period. Even though a few English-language Catholic schools and hospitals existed, anglophone institutions were usually designated Protestant, although in reality Protestant encompassed everyone who was not Catholic, for example in primary and secondary school attendance. Although the divisions were never absolute, the reality of linguistic relations in Montreal was famously described by the writer Hugh MacLennan in his 1945 novel, *Two Solitudes*. Given this separation, Osler's invitation to the francophone medical community, like his inclusion of both the maple leaf (a symbol of Canada) and the fleur-de-lys (representing French Canada) on his coat of arms in 1911, points to an exceptionally open individual for the time, at least towards different linguistic communities. Other attitudes, for example towards women, have been seen by some as being less enlightened and more typical of his era.

to be the most important individuals in medical (and to a lesser extent scientific) history. The sixty-six men and one woman⁴³ are listed in chronological order, emphasizing the idea of historical progress. The “Bibliotheca Secunda” has 2,596 entries, listed alphabetically by author, of notable contributions to medicine by those whom Osler considered less significant than those in the Prima.⁴⁴ “Litteraria” lists 1,311 works of poets, novelists, and playwrights who were either physicians, or who wrote about medicine. The fourth section, “Historia,” contains 956 books and offprints on medical history, and is followed by “Biographia,” which has 297 works not included in other areas. The “Bibliographia” section consists of a variety of works that assisted Osler in collecting and interpreting his books, and has 538 entries. “Incunabula” lists 105 items published before 1501 not listed in other sections, notably the Prima. “Manuscripts” contains 163 entries. Addenda were listed at the end.

Of greatest importance to Osler was the Bibliotheca Prima. Its pedagogical importance was articulated in a pamphlet he wrote to accompany a display of several of the Prima authors that he curated in 1919 for members of the Classical Association during his presidency. He asked rhetorically, “faced with a bewildering variety of ever-increasing literature, how is the hard-pressed student to learn, 1: the evolution of knowledge in any subject, and 2: the life and work of the men who made the original contributions? So far as concerns Science and Medicine, an attempt is made to answer the question by the Collection of the Bibliotheca Prima ... The idea is to have in a comparatively small number of works the essential literature grouped about the men of the first rank, arranged in chronological order.”⁴⁵ The cardinal importance of individuals in the history of medicine and the pedagogical intent of the catalogue are evident when one analyses the entries in the Prima. One example is that of Andreas Vesalius, the great sixteenth-century anatomist whom Osler revered and collected exhaustively. The section is prefaced by a long biographical description in which Vesalius is praised lavishly for having no less than remade the field of anatomy, and to have completed his great atlas “before his 29TH year ... a feat to which the literary history of the profession offers no parallel.”⁴⁶ This was written by Osler on one of the index

⁴³ Florence Nightingale.

⁴⁴ He entered his own works in the Secunda.

⁴⁵ “Exhibitions at the Classical Association,” *Annals of the History of Medicine* 2, no.2 (1919): 211–12 (211).

⁴⁶ *Bibliotheca Osleriana*, 58.

cards created while cataloguing the collection. Osler had hoped to write a number of bio-bibliographical entries, plus introductions to each of the eight sections, but his death in 1919 interrupted this task. The chief editor of the catalogue, Osler's second cousin and godson, Dr. William W. Francis, helped to fulfil Osler's plans by transcribing some of Osler's commentary from other sources into the catalogue. Many of these annotations came from comments Osler wrote directly into his books. In the section for Vesalius, Francis apparently felt that more praise was needed, so he transcribed a letter Osler wrote accompanying the copy of the *de fabrica* that he sent to McGill in 1909. In the Prima, works by an author are followed by material about him or her, such as biographies, exhibition guides, and pamphlets. This approach was followed extensively for individuals listed in the Prima, and to a lesser extent in Secunda and Litteraria.

Osler had suggested that Francis, Dr. Archibald Malloch, and Mr. Reginald H. Hill of the Bodleian Library complete the task of cataloguing the collection, and that the catalogue be finished before the books were sent from Oxford to McGill.⁴⁷ Contrary to expectations, the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* would only be published in 1929. Francis laboured on it full-time after 1922 with a profound attention to detail. The work was carried out *in situ* at Lady Osler's residence at 13 Norham Gardens in Oxford, where Francis lived with his wife and daughter. Lady Osler accused him of dragging out the job, but Harvey Cushing came to his defence.⁴⁸

Lady Osler lived to see neither the publication of the catalogue nor the opening of the library: she died in 1928. Seven hundred and fifty copies of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* were printed by Oxford University's Clarendon Press, and it became, and remains, an important reference source. It has been described as the history-of-medicine textbook that Osler never wrote, and it helped define the history of medicine as a field.⁴⁹

In 1920 McGill University had begun preparing to house the collection in a dedicated library in the Faculty of Medicine's

⁴⁷ Osler, "The Collecting of a Library," *Bibliotheca Osleriana*, xxxii.

⁴⁸ John F. Fulton, "The Story of the Osler Catalogue, 1922–1929: By a Somewhat Prejudiced Observer," in *Sir William Osler: An Annotated Bibliography with Illustrations*, edited by Richard L. Golden and Charles G. Roland (San Francisco: Norman Publishing, 1988), 168–170.

⁴⁹ Peter McNally, Glenn Brown, and Nicolas Savard, "Osler and Francis: Creating the Bibliotheca Osleriana," in *Sir William Osler: The Man and his Books*, 25–51 (29).

Figure 4. W.W. Francis and R.H. Hill at work on the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* at 13 Norham Gardens, Oxford. William Osler Photo Collection, Osler Library, CUS_o64-097B_P.

Strathcona Building across the hall from the Medical Library. The Osler Library of the History of Medicine was designed to be a memorial to its founder. In addition to bearing his name, the Library was decorated with the coats of arms of every university with which Sir William had been associated as student or professor, as well as his personal coat of arms, which he designed when he was knighted in 1911. The focal point of the library, conceived by Montreal architect Percy Nobbs, was the Osler niche, bearing a plaque of his profile, behind which were placed his ashes, along with Lady Osler's. Osler once wrote of his desire for his astral self to be able "to peak at the books I have loved, and enjoy the delight with which kindred souls still in the flesh would handle them."⁵⁰ Perhaps he does.

⁵⁰ William Osler, "Burrowings of a Bookworm," cited in William Feindel and Wayne Label, "Sir William's 'Astral Self': Origins of the Osler Niche in the Osler Library," in *William Osler: The Man and his Books*, 1–23 (1).

Conclusion

Sir William Osler's bibliophilia is best understood within the wider context of his all-consuming dedication to medicine. His celebrated and prolific career as a practitioner, teacher, researcher, author, and speaker was fueled by his appreciation for the past and in particular for the giants who acted as role models for him. Although he had a great appreciation and love of books as objects, possessing them was not an end in itself. Their real power for Osler was in their ability to allow readers to commune with and be inspired by the great minds of the past. Ever the pedagogue, Osler forged a two-pronged vision – that his collection would eventually be accessible both “in the flesh” at McGill, and at a distance through a printed bibliography. That he succeeded was due largely to a fortunate confluence of a good supply of relatively inexpensive books and an efficient international antiquarian book trade that made most of the items on his desiderata list obtainable. Indeed, it is doubtful that Osler could have created his library today given the inflation in prices, especially of the more highly sought antiquarian book titles. Historical medical bibliography would have been very different without it.

RÉSUMÉ

Sir William Osler (1849-1919) est l'un des médecins les plus connus du monde anglo-saxon. Pour plusieurs, il était le médecin idéal, combinant une approche humaniste des soins accordés aux patients à une connaissance approfondie de la médecine. Cela dit, Osler était aussi un fervent bibliophile. L'histoire de sa bibliomanie constitue une excellente étude de cas de bibliophilie au tournant des dix-neuvième et vingtième siècles. Osler croyait en l'importance du passé, tel que véhiculé à travers les livres, en tant qu'inspiration pour lui-même et pour la profession de médecin. Au cours de sa vie, il a accumulé approximativement huit mille livres qu'il considérait capitaux pour l'histoire de la médecine et de la science. Cependant, pour que cette collection puisse jouer le rôle inspirant qu'il avait imaginé, il a dû créer une bibliothèque et publier un catalogue raisonné. Une décennie après son décès, la *Bibliotheca Osleriana* a été publiée par les Presses universitaires d'Oxford, tandis que l'Université McGill (l'*alma mater* d'Osler) a créé la Bibliothèque Osler, spécialisée en histoire de la médecine. Ces deux réalisations sont devenues des ressources majeures pour l'histoire de la médecine.

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Figure 5. Examples of Osler's book bills. William Osler Collection (P100),
Osler Library.

Figure 7. Title page of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana*.

Figure 8. The Osler Niche, where the ashes of Sir William, Lady Osler, and Dr. Francis reside.