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REFERENCES

William Osler and his legacy to medicine


There are several more comprehensive biographies of William Osler (the first written by the father of neurosurgeon Harvey Cushing, no less) but none, I wager, as accessible or as beautifully presented as this. And, at £13, it would be nice to think that all medical libraries could acquire a copy of David Cranston’s book. All who learn or practise medicine could – and perhaps should – spend a happy few hours reading of the deeds and writings of this great doctor from whom we can learn so much that is still relevant to our profession today.

Over 15 short chapters, the book considers Osler’s journey from rural Ontario, to medical school in Montreal, to building his reputation as one of the finest physicians of his generation in Philadelphia and Baltimore, writing the most significant medical textbook of the time (which was still in print in 2001), and finally, in 1904, to Oxford as the Regius Professor – where his death in 1919 was no doubt hastened by a broken heart. On each page is a quote from his wise, pithy and pertinent writing, and there are many figures, as well as beautiful watercolours by Valerie Petts.

What is conveyed powerfully is the humility, humour and humanity of Osler, as well as his encouragement of his students to concentrate on living in the moment and putting the patient at the heart of their learning and practice. He was clearly universally respected and liked, often preferring the company of his undergraduates to that of stuffy professorial colleagues. He was much sought after, and graciously turned down presidencies of the Royal College of Physicians and Royal Society of Medicine, and the Chair of Medicine in Edinburgh. He stressed the need to work well with others, but also to have interests outside medicine, and was a generous host and devious prankster.

At a time when it seems there is increasing pressure to define and devolve the duties of doctors, this book provides a reminder of the depth of thinking and compassion that is required to perform our privileged role properly. Hence, as Osler said: ‘The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.’

Dominic Hodgson, Consultant Urologist, Portsmouth Hospitals Trust