A Monumental Biography

A Review by D. R.

SIR WILLIAM OSLER. By Harvey Cushing. New York: Oxford University Press. Two volumes, $12.50.

DR. HARVEY CUSHING has written a monumental biography. It is not difficult to pick faults in it, to criticize this or that. One may say that it is too long, that too much trivial detail or unimportant correspondence has been included. One may note that it is a book by an M.D. about an M.D. and that the author assumes a greater knowledge of medical and scientific terms on the part of his readers than average laymen possess. It would be well, perhaps, in future editions to provide a glossary or footnotes explaining the more recondite phraseology. One may go farther and lament a certain heaviness in the few occasions when the author employs the light touch. But when all is said and done, the book remains a very great achievement.

It is written with infinite detail and scrupulous care. Every document, every scrap of paper, every recorded conversation has been studied and codified. Few men have had their lives presented with such complete and meticulous exactitude. In general, the author's theory has been to let Dr. Osler speak for himself, to let the reader construct, from the letters and journals quoted, his mental picture of the subject of the biography. He has not, of course, refrained from running comment on events, personalities, ideas, and performances. This comment is restrained, intelligent, and appreciative. Writing in the light of greater knowledge, as a result of the immense increase in scientific accuracy, he notes the mistakes of his hero as well as his successes. But in many instances, he is content modestly to tie together, in coherent order, documents or excerpts from documents by or concerning Dr. Osler.

THE book is written *con amore*. There is a great vitality of enthusiasm and affection animating the long, careful record. Indeed, the effect of the two volumes is cumulative. The slow and — to most readers — rather uninteresting accounts of Dr. Osler's early life take on vigorous color as his career and personality develop, reaching a noble climax in his full maturity, and leaving the audience not far from tears when the curtain at last descends on that rich and altogether splendid life.

Not only was he a physician in the very noblest sense, a teacher, and a student, indefatigable in his search for knowledge and generous in his zeal to share it with others; he was also a personality of singular charm and vitality, a collector of books and manuscripts, a lover of a few great books and a friend of many, an author himself of brilliant attainments, a social human being who maintained intimate contacts with a world of friends, a man brimful of energy, inspiring affection and respect everywhere, ever ripening in his appreciation of life.

One is tempted to quote at length from his letters and journals, but is confronted

Father and son

with such an embarrassment of riches in Dr. Cushing's book that it seems impossible to choose the few lines permitted on this page which could convey any sense of his qualities. Almost at random, one can reach into the volume and pick out vigorous phrases or illuminating passages. Speaking of the willingness of the public to follow quacks and charlatans, he said:

> But for a time it must be so. This is yet the childhood of the world, and a supine credulity is still the most charming characteristic of man.

Or he would turn from pathology and speak in an address delivered after his marriage at the age of forty-three:

> Sitting in Lincoln Cathedral and gazing at one of the loveliest of human works, as the Angel Choir has been described, there arose within me, obliterating for the moment the thousand heraldries and twilight saints and dim emblazonings, a strong sense of reverence for the minds which had executed such things of beauty. What manner of men were they who could, in those (to us) dark days, build such transcendent monuments? What was the secret of their art? By what spirit were they moved? Absorbed in thought, I did not hear the beginning of the music, and then, as a response to my reverie and arousing me from it, rang out the clear voice of the boy leading the antiphon, "That Thy power, Thy glory and mightiness of Thy kingdom might be known unto men." Here was the answer. Moving in a world not realized, these men sought, however feebly, to express in glorious structures their conception of the beauty of holiness, and these works, our wonder, are but the outward and visible signs of the ideals which animated them.

Some time after the death of an infant son, his wife found a letter one morning on her dressing table, postmarked "Heaven" and written by Paul Revere Osler to his "Dear Mother":

> If we are good & get on nicely with our singing & if our earthly parents continue to show an interest in us by remembering us in their prayers, we are allowed to write every three or four tatmas (i.e. month). I got here safely with very little inconvenience. I scarcely knew anything until I awoke in a lovely green spot, with fountains & trees & soft couches & such nice young girls to tend us. You would have been amused to see the hundreds which came the same day. But I must tell you first how we are all arranged; it took me several days to find out about it. Heaven is the exact counterpart of earth so far as its dwellers are concerned, thus all from the United States go to one place—all from Maryland to one district & even all from the cities & townships get corresponding places. This enables the guardian angels to keep the lists more carefully & it facilitates communication between relatives.

And one may quote that entry in his journal in August, 1917, when the whole structure of his life and hope crumbled:

> I was sitting in my library working on the new edition of my text-book when a telegram was brought in, "Revere dangerously wounded, comfortable and conscious, condition not hopeless." I knew this was the end. We had expected it. The Fates do not allow the good fortune that has followed me to go with me to the grave — call no man happy till he dies. The War Office telephoned at 9 in the evening that he was dead. A sweeter laddie never lived, with a gentle loving nature.

TO those who saw him afterwards, going about his work in the war hospitals despite his sixty-eight years, he was "a lesson in manliness, restraint, and breeding." So he was always and much more besides.