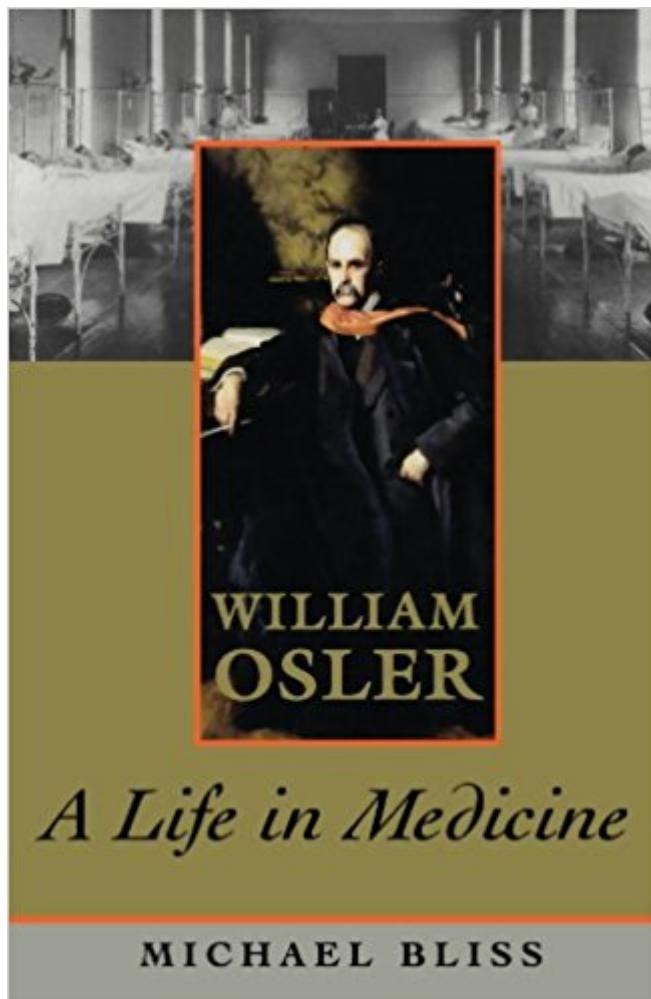


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# William Osler: A Life In Medicine



## **Synopsis**

William Osler, who was a brilliant, innovative teacher and a scholar of the natural history of disease, revolutionized the art of practicing medicine at the bedside of his patients. He was idolized by two generations of medical students and practitioners for whom he came to personify the ideal doctor. But much more than a physician, Osler was a fiercely intelligent humanist. In both his writings and his personal life--and through the prism of the tragedy of the Great War--he embodied the art of living. Indeed, this is a book not only about the evolution of modern medicine, the training of doctors, holism in medical thought, and the doctor-patient relationship, but also about humanism, Victorianism, the Great War, and much else. Meticulously researched and accessibly written, William Osler: A Life in Medicine brings to life both a fascinating man and the formative age of twentieth-century medicine.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Medical historian Bliss (The Discovery of Insulin) has written the authoritative modern biography of 19th-century Canadian physician William Osler. Idolized by many as one of the greatest of all modern physicians, Osler emerges from this critical text as a brilliant, influential physician and teacher, full of compassion for his profession and patients. Bliss offers a glimpse of the rise of modern medicine and medical education as it unfolded around Osler and provides a view of the time as well as of the man. This volume replaces Harvey Cushing's two-volume tribute, *The Life of Sir William Osler* (1956), as the definitive text in the field. Highly recommended for history collections in all academic libraries and essential for medical collections. A. Eric D. Albright, Duke Medical Ctr. Lib.,

Since his death in 1919, William Osler has been the subject of intense biographical interest. Although Harvey Cushing's Pulitzer prize-winning *Life of Sir William Osler* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), which is more than 1400 pages long, remains the definitive (if uncritical) biography, it belongs to a life-and-letters tradition of a more leisurely age than our own. Bliss's streamlined narrative of fewer than 600 pages is meant to introduce Osler to a generation for whom he is little more than a medical icon. Born in a rural community in Ontario, Canada, Osler attended the medical school at McGill University, which was relatively small at that time, and earned his medical degree in 1872. Following the fashion of the day, he traveled to Europe to study in London, Berlin, and Vienna; he was deeply impressed by German clinical medicine and laboratory research. On his return to Canada, he was appointed to a professorship at McGill. His growing reputation led to an appointment in clinical medicine at the University of Pennsylvania in 1884. When Johns Hopkins Hospital opened its doors in 1889, Osler was invited to become one of the six founding members of what was intended to be the country's leading medical school; the school was established four years later. His *Principles and Practice of Medicine* (New York: Appleton, 1892), which has been called the first great textbook of modern medicine, earned him an international reputation. Active on many fronts, Osler became the best-known physician in America. But he was overworked, and in 1904 he accepted the less-demanding Regius Professorship of Medicine at Oxford University, a largely honorary position that provided a base for his multifarious activities, which he carried on with unmatched vigor until his death. To write a biography of Osler 80 years after his death is a demanding task. A contemporary biographer might be expected to react to the long tradition of Oslerian hagiography by cutting his subject down to size. A number of present-day historians would welcome the opportunity to deconstruct this figure of the Victorian medical establishment in the interest of defrocking doctors and unmasking medicine as a political enterprise. Fortunately, Bliss eschews an agenda-laden approach. A respected medical historian best known for his biography of Sir Frederick Banting, the codiscoverer of insulin, Bliss poses new questions about such matters as sex, class, and race that would not have interested earlier generations of readers. Did Osler share the racial prejudices of his contemporaries? Was he patronizing in his attitude toward women? Did he make distinctions among his patients on the basis of their social standing? Are there skeletons (particularly sex scandals) in his closet? The answers that Bliss gives may surprise some readers. Osler displayed little of the patronizing attitudes toward blacks, women, and the poor manifested by many of his contemporaries. Nor can Bliss find evidence of scandal:

persistent rumors of youthful indiscretions, when investigated, lacked substance. Bliss admits that he found almost nothing that would undercut Osler's enormous reputation. In an era when heroes of the past are often shown to have had feet of clay, it is refreshing to see a medical paragon such as Osler emerge from close scrutiny with his personal integrity not merely intact but enhanced. Bliss explores several themes that, although not new, illuminate Osler's outlook and intellectual development. The son of an Anglican minister, Osler abandoned his boyhood faith and espoused the Darwinian secular liberalism, with its unquestioned belief in progress, that gained popularity in the late 19th century. But his loss of religious faith left a void that was never quite filled. Unable to profess a belief in life after death, he compensated by finding meaning in work and by memorializing great physicians of the past, regarding memory and influence alone as bestowing immortality. As Osler turned away from Christianity, he found consolation in the writers of Greco-Roman antiquity, especially the Stoic philosophers. A humanist and genial skeptic, he laced his speeches, which were enormously popular in their day, with classical and biblical allusions that contemporary readers may find challenging. Bliss's biography can hardly be termed revisionist. Although he recounts the well-known features of Osler's life and career that have often been discussed elsewhere, his access to previously unused materials sheds light on a number of points. Perhaps the best chapter is the last: "Osler's Afterlife," in which Bliss traces Osler's reputation since his death. Adored in his lifetime, he was acclaimed after his death as his era's "most famous, most beloved, and most influential physician." His textbook was published in updated versions until 1947. Cushing memorialized his life in his great biography, numerous reminiscences were published, and Osler's essays continued to enjoy a wide readership. The Osler cult was assiduously cultivated by a number of his students and admirers, especially his nephew William W. Francis, who catalogued and guarded his library (and relics) at McGill. By the 1950s, memories of Osler had faded, but he became the subject of renewed interest in the 1960s, as a model of medical humanism in a world in which medicine was increasingly dominated by science and technology. Toward the end of the century, books and articles on Osler appeared regularly. If the Osler mystique has faded somewhat, his image possesses a remarkable longevity, and he continues to be one of the most quoted physicians of all time. Bliss's biography will of course be compared with that of Cushing. A few readers will miss the luxuriant detail that Bliss has omitted, but most readers will welcome a biography that is both more manageable in scope and more up to date in its assessment not merely of Osler but also of the bustling and creative medical world of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in which he practiced. For a generation of readers whose shared values are so different from Osler's, *William Osler: A Life in Medicine* is certain to generate a new appreciation of the man and his remarkably diverse

achievements. Reviewed by Gary B. Ferngren, Ph.D. Copyright © 2000 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS.

You may or may not have heard of William Osler. He did not discover anything of major importance in medicine and his name does not ring loud or clear in the 21st century. But for fifty years he was the image of what a physician should be in three countries – Canada, the United States and Britain. He was a leader in establishing Canadian medicine at McGill, a founder of Johns Hopkins Medical School and then Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, all after being raised in the Canadian backwoods in a preacher's family. Michael Bliss says many times that the image of Osler seems too good to be true and he went out of his way to find negative points about him or hypocrisy about his image. Bliss says that literally nothing he could find, and the research in this book is enormous, showed Osler to be anything other than an open, honest, brilliant, empathetic physician whose personal life seemed to match his professional one. This is not a hagiography about Osler; it is just a biography of a good and highly intelligent human being who made an enormous impression on the history of Western medicine. In 504 pages of text I did not once find the writing dull, repetitive or clichéd. Bliss is a smooth and articulate writer who knows when and how to insert humor into the book, largely because Osler himself consistently inserted intelligent humor into his work. You genuinely get to know this man who insisted that science, not tradition, be the foundation of medicine and who combined that with a teaching style that was extraordinary. When he made rounds, students flocked to be with him. When he saw a patient, the patient always felt that he or she was the most important person in the world to Osler at that time, and he or she was. Bliss makes this biography a fluent and thoroughly enjoyable read. The reader not only comes to understand Osler but gets a clear and understandable overview of medicine in the late 19th and early 20th century. I had only marginally heard of Osler beforehand and only then because I had heard that Bliss was a great writer and one of his books was on this physician. When I saw how long this biography was, I seriously questioned whether I wanted to read a book of this length about someone who is not one of the big names in the 21st century public consciousness. But it was worth every minute. Smooth, fluent, well-organized and enjoyable writing about an extraordinary physician. This book has my highest recommendation.

This is a great read and I recommend it to anyone interested in medicine, William Osler and/or the history of medicine. It goes into great detail on his life and achievements. It seems to be very

accurate and lists all of its sources. At times it might feel a little heavy for a read, but it is entertaining from cover to cover.

Well written. A good read about an incredible icon in the field of medicine. Should be of interest to anyone with interest or experience in medicine or medical history. Those were the days when physical diagnosis reined supreme, and well before the advent of the vast array of diagnostic aids, sophisticated laboratory studies and imaging modalities in common use today. Many names of medical and surgical pioneers appear in the book, and the reader will instantly make the connection with procedures still known in the field, and now famous hospitals, medical schools, studies or reports named after many of the early medical leaders.. Provides fascinating insight into the development of medical school curricula, clinical studies, and rounding techniques that still remain, at least in broad outline, incorporated into the 4 year structure of modern medical school programs. The book delves into interesting personality traits, work habits, health hazards, and early substance abuse problems rampant in those days, around the turn of the 20th century, which impacted the entire medical community in that time period. Very worthwhile and a good addition to any Doctor's library.

Osler was the most famous doctor in the 19th-century English-speaking world (He taught medicine at McGill in Montreal, was one of the four founders of modern American medicine at Johns Hopkins, and finally taught at Oxford during the Great War), and deservedly so. Even though he made few discoveries, he was the kind of doctor we would all like to have: a brilliant diagnostician filled with kindness and humor towards his patients, his medical students, his family, children, and his community. This all while carrying a schedule of travel, medicine, writing, publishing, teaching, speeches, and even hobbies of collecting ancient medical texts that would exhaust several lesser men. He's so exemplary, in fact, that the biography is a bit boring! This is not the fault of the author, who has read probably every word that remains by or about Osler. It is a definitive biography.

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