Medical History

Sir William Osler's gown returns home

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At a ceremony at 13 Norham Gardens, Oxford, on 31 May 1984 Professor Michael Brain of McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, and Professor Charles Fletcher formally presented William Osler's former DSc gown to Sir John Walton, warden of Green College. The gown will be displayed permanently in Osler's old home and made available for use by any future regius professor of medicine in Oxford or by any warden of Green College holding the degree of DM (Oxon).

Unearthing the gown in a trunk

In his opening remarks Professor Fletcher said "Sir William Osler received the degree of honorary DSc by Oxford University in 1904 when the British Medical Association held its annual meeting there. Others who received the degree on that occasion included Jonathan Hutchinson, Clifford Albutt, and Patrick Manson.

"In 1905 Osler was appointed professor of medicine at Oxford and was given the DM by decree. My father, Walter Morley Fletcher, was then working with Frederick Gowland Hopkins on the physiology and chemistry of muscular contraction. Osler, who was known as 'the young man's great friend,' developed a close friendship with him, particularly over their mutual enthusiasm for old medical books. In 1914 my father left Cambridge to become the first secretary of the Medical Research Council. In 1926 he was offered an honorary DSc by Oxford University. His pleasure at this honour was heightened by an invitation from Lady Osler to stay at 13 Norham Gardens, where he had often visited Osler before his death in 1919 and he was delighted to accept Osler's DSc gown to wear for the ceremony and to keep it thereafter.'

"In his oration about my father the public orator, after referring (in Latin, of course) to his work at Cambridge and his appointment as secretary of the 'council for Medical Research,' continued 'by no means slender are those streams which he has directed to Oxford from the splendid funds which great men have bequeathed for the relief of human suffering. If you seek for evidence of his kind feeling towards his little sister, Oxford, the way to the parks lies open where the architect is just putting the finishing touches to the kingly edifice.' This was the Dunn Laboratory, later to become the birthplace of penicillin, perhaps the greatest of Oxford's gifts to medicine in whose testing I had the honour to play a minor role.

"The gown then disappeared from recorded history. After my father died in 1933 my mother and I lived in a flat while I was a student at Barts and much of our furniture was in store. After my

marriage in 1941 I acquired some of it including a large trunk, in the top of which I found my father's Cambridge MD gown, black and scarlet, which I wore on academic occasions. Below this were some other formal clothes of my father's which we did not further

Sir John Walton, warden of Green College, Oxford (left), and Professor Charles Fletcher help Professor Michael Brain to display Sir William Osler's gown. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of the Oxford and County Newspapers.

explore, but when we returned to London from Wales where I had directed the Medical Research Council's pneumoconiosis research unit we had less storage space, so we went through the trunk and to my surprise found another scarlet gown. This was identified by Ede and Ravenscroft as an Oxford DSc gown and when I asked my mother about it she told me of its origin.

"Since I could never expect to receive an honorary degree at Oxford, I decided to have the gown repaired and converted to an Oxford DM gown and to present it to the Royal College of Physicians of London for college lecturers with the Oxford DM to wear for their lectures. Unfortunately, the cost of the repairs and replacement of the silk facings was more than I could then readily

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afford, so I wrote to the president of the Royal College of Physicians, Sir Russell Brain, as he then was, suggesting that the college should have the gown converted and use it as I had suggested. He replied that he would prefer to have the gown converted himself for the use of his son, Michael, then a medical student if and when he became DM. He stipulated that I should have the gown returned to me if I ever obtained an honorary Oxford DM and that if Michael had no child likely to take the Oxford DM degree he should leave it in his will to the Royal College of Physicians in London."

Alias Father Christmas

Professor Michael Brain took up the story.

"I obtained the Oxford DM in 1965 and also acquired, after my father's death, his Oxford DM gown so that I then had two scarlet gowns. In March 1983 the town of Dundas, Ontario, where much of William Osler's childhood was spent, commissioned a posthumous portrait of him to be displayed in the town hall and I was asked to lend the gown for this portrait. I then wrote to Professor Fletcher asking whether the gown might not be kept in Canada to form part of the memorabilia of Osler in Dundas or part of the section of the history of medicine in the faculty of health sciences at the McMaster University: otherwise I would arrange for the gown to be transferred to the Royal College of Physicians according to Professor Fletcher's original plan. He asked Sir Douglas Black, then president of the Royal College of Physicians, whether the college would still like to have Osler's gown, but he replied that the college had no use for it since the late Dr Thomas Hunt had left his DM gown to the college for the use of future lecturers. In my reply I said that I felt it should be displayed where there was an interest in Osler either in Oxford or in Canada.

"I quoted one revealing story about Osler's practice in relation to the gown, which had been published by Dr Charles Newman in the proceedings of the 300th meeting of the Osler Society. It had been told to him by Dr Patrick Mallan whose father was also an Oxford physician and a contemporary of Osler's.² His younger brother had severe whooping cough and could not keep down either food or drink. There was no effective treatment and recovery seemed unlikely. The regius was called in when he was about to present for degrees. Hard pressed for time he arrived already wearing his doctor's scarlet gown. To a small child this was like the advent of a doctor, if a doctor in fact it was, from quite a different planet. It was more probably like Father Christmas. After a brief examination this unusual visitor sat down, peeled a peach, squared it, and cut it into pieces; he then presented it bit by bit with a fork to the entranced little boy telling him to eat it up and that he would not be sick but would find it would do him good as it was a most special fruit, and this proved to be the case. As he hurried off Osler, most uncharacteristically, patted his father on the back and said with deep concern 'I am sorry, Ernest, I do not think I shall see the boy again. There is very little chance when they are as bad as this.' Happily, events turned out otherwise and for the next 40 days this constantly busy man came to see the child regularly; on each such occasion he put on his doctor's robes in the hall before going into the sick room. This kind of inspired magic independent of higher degrees and laboratory gimmicks is given only to a doctor with real vocation and the will to enjoy it."

Since Oxford had been the original home of the gown Professor Fletcher wrote to Sir Richard Doll asking him where it might be deposited. Sir Richard replied that he thought that it would be most welcome at Osler's original home at 13 Norham Gardens where there was a collection of Osleriana.

In subsequent correspondence with Sir Richard's successor as warden of Green College, Sir John Walton, it had been agreed to execute a formal deed of gift so that the gown would become the property of the college.

In formally accepting the gown on behalf of Green College, Sir John Walton said that he and the fellows and members of the college were grateful for the generous gift that would be added to the collection of Osleriana being built up at 13 Norham Gardens, Sir William's former home, which had been known for so long as "The

Open Arms." For the past three years, responsibility for the maintenance of the house had been taken over from the university by Green College, the house having been left in Lady Osler's will to the university as a home for future regius professors of medicine. Within the past few years the house had been substantially modified and refurbished to provide not only a gracious apartment for future regius professors of medicine but in addition three small apartments for married students of Green College as well as accommodation in the basement for the University Newcomers Club. The regius professor's apartment included Sir William's original office and library where the panelling and bookcases had remained intact, and it was the intention of the college to provide an illuminated cabinet in the entrance hall to house the gown and other Osler memorabilia so that future visitors to Oxford would be able to see these properly displayed.

Sir John said that he had long been an admirer of Sir William and his work; indeed, the first paper that he had written as a medical student had been about the life of Osler. He and his colleagues in the college were determined to do what they could to keep the Osler tradition alive and to add to the college's collection of memorabilia. He expressed sincere thanks to Professor Brain and Professor Fletcher for their generous gift and was glad that members of Sir William's family and representatives of the London Osler Society should have found it possible to be present. He expressed his gratitude to Professor Philippe Shubik, senior visiting research fellow of Green College, who was at present occupying the regius professor's apartment, for agreeing that the ceremony should take place in the apartment and that guests should have an opportunity of seeing the premises in which Osler lived and worked. He and his colleagues in the college recognised that they had acquired a major responsibility in taking over 13 Norham Gardens from the university since at least £50 000 was going to be required over the next few years to maintain and repair the fabric of the building. He hoped that Osler enthusiasts the world over might feel able to help the college to fulfil its objectives of maintaining the house and its contents in a form appropriate for the many Osler admirers who would be likely to come to Oxford in future.

References

- 1 Fletcher M. *The bright countenance: a personal biography of Walter Morley Fletcher*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957:190.
- 2 Mallan P. In: Dewhurst K, ed. *Oxford Medicine*. Oxford: Sandford Publications, 1970:96.