

# WATERMARK

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***Sir William Osler: An Encyclopedia.* Edited by Charles S. Bryan. Novato, CA:  
Norman Publishing, 2020. 967 p. \$125.00. ISBN 978-0-930405-91-5**

Readers of *The Watermark* hardly need an introduction to William Osler (1849-1919). His presence in the annals of medicine is ubiquitous. From his professorships at McGill University (1874-84) and the University of Pennsylvania (1884-89) to his famed role as one of the “Big Four” (along with William Henry Welch, William Halsted, and Howard Kelly) establishing Johns Hopkins Hospital, Osler’s expansive interests and broad influence put an indelible stamp upon the medical profession, so much so that historian Fielding Garrison called him “the greatest physician of our time” ten years after his death.<sup>1</sup> One may wish to temper that enthusiasm with the sobering distance of time, but there can be little doubt that Osler’s ghost will continue to float through many fields, including medical librarianship and the libraries he helped nurture into maturity. Osler was a man of many parts, and so an encyclopedic compendium such as this is not only welcome but long overdue. While one might expect that assessment from a reviewer who is himself a member of the American Osler Society (AOS), my endorsement and excitement over this hefty tome is easily shared by many with or without the AOS connection. Osler is by any measure a towering figure, and it is refreshing to have such a complete reference source in an age that takes particular relish in cutting its heroes down to size.

In its compilation and execution it has an outstanding editorial hand, Charles S. Bryan (“Charley” to those who know him). Many are familiar with the famous biography of Osler by Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler* (1925), and today’s standard authoritative work by Michael Bliss, *William Osler: A Life in Medicine* (1999), but Bryan’s *Osler: Inspirations from a Great Physician*, published by Oxford University Press in 1997, remains a very serviceable and accessible source that places this much lionized figure in a contemporary context. In short, those who consult this new comprehensive reference work—and it *is* comprehensive—can rest assured of expert treatment by this editor. Besides Bryan, this encyclopedia is supported by the careful oversight of a nine-person editorial board and the scholarship of 137 contributors.

This book is essentially an A to Z topical guide to all things Osler and Oslerian sandwiched between a helpful chronology and a thorough 51-page bibliography. It starts with “Abbott, Alexander Crever (1860-1935),” an important figure in microbiology who, along with Welch, discovered the cause of diphtheria. Marrying the daughter of William Osler’s brother, Georgina Picton Osler, Abbott earned a lead spot in the present work. The book ends with “Zadig, Method of,” something Osler urged his students to apply in their practices, which is drawing inferences and deductions from inconspicuous features presented in their patients. The method of Zadig is based upon the 1748 novella *Zadig, or Destiny* by Voltaire that Osler insisted his students read. Naturally there is much more in between, but these two rather obscure entries should be enough to indicate the level of detail Bryan has achieved in this rather remarkable book.

My only criticism is a minor one, but one worth noting. Careful to avoid the charge of hagiography, the jacket states that this volume contains “more than 25 criticisms and potential criticisms of Osler.” Accordingly, Bryan properly mentions Osler’s leading critic Gerald Weissmann’s “Against *Aequanimitas*” in his Foreword and presents Weissmann’s main argument along with a spirited editorial reply in the main section (p. 825-826). He also, somewhat cryptically, refers to “two Australian physicians” who have claimed that it is high time Osler was “unmasked.” Except for a brief mention in the chronology under 2018, I searched in vain for this as a main entry. Actually, a Google search uncovered Patrick Fiddes and Paul A. Komesaroff’s “An Emperor Unclothed: The Virtuous Osler” in *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*. It is listed in the compendious bibliography (p. 885), but there is no separate entry for it so it is rather invisible in the text, which was frustrating given its vague announcement on the jacket and in the editor’s Foreword. Where the other “25 criticisms” are only a needle-in-a-haystack

search will uncover. I must say I did not find Fiddes and Komesaroff's article convincing, but it would have been nice in a ready-reference volume such as this to have it separately identified under a collective heading of "Criticisms" listed alphabetically where all "25 criticisms" could be handled together.

But this is merely an organizational issue; substantively this is a solid work and will likely be an important—if not *the*—standard reference source on Osler for years to come. Although the price tag may seem high, so is the value of the information contained therein. Nicely formatted with high production values, *Sir William Osler* includes a marvelous full-color frontispiece of Osler done by Tarleton Blackwell, an oil painting based upon a photograph of him taken at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1913. Well and appropriately illustrated throughout, the present volume represents the best single source on the man Michael Bliss called "English-speaking medicine's most inspirational father-figure, mentor, and role model."<sup>ii</sup> Here for physicians and health care professionals everywhere this paterfamilias is captured in one cover. No medical library should be without a copy.

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<sup>1</sup>Fielding Garrison, *An Introduction to the History of Medicine*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1929), 631.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Bliss, *William Osler: A Life in Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 499.