



# OSLER'S DEADLIEST DIAGNOSIS

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**I**s Osler dead?<sup>1</sup> The spirited youngest surviving child of Canadian frontier evangelical Anglicans, William Osler evolved, with the support of a loving family and the tutelage of a succession of gifted mentors, from a wrongdoing prankster into a renaissance polymath.<sup>2,3</sup> Osler was a pathologist, clinician, innovating medical educator, best-selling solo medical textbook author, founder of extant medical societies, historian, biographer, classicist, orator and bibliophile.

Osler was emblematic of the heroic age of medicine. He was one of the “famous four” who created a revolutionary medical school at Johns Hopkins, establishing the model for American medical education, and he promoted the inculcation of science into medicine.<sup>4</sup> Osler “semi-retired” at Oxford as the Regius professor of medicine and, in 1911, was made a baronet by the King of England.

However, in the century since Sir William’s death, a score of criticism regarding his medical philosophy and character has shaken his stature.<sup>5</sup> While much of this censure has been addressed,<sup>6</sup> there remain aspersions that deserve rebuttal. Did Osler lack social concern and spurn intimacy?<sup>7</sup> Was he a social Darwinist who inspired the notorious eugenicist Alexis Carrel?<sup>8</sup>

Evidence of Osler’s social concern is dramatically documented in his 1884 “Letter from Berlin,” sent to the *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal* (reproduced by Harvey Cushing in his 1926 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Life of Sir William Osler*), which contained Osler’s prescient diagnosis and solution for the deadliest of all societal diseases: genocide, Germany’s “final solution” for “the Jewish problem.”<sup>9</sup>

To state that Osler’s life lacked intimacy is to not know it, for few physicians have loved, been beloved, had the number of cherished friendships or greeted life with arms as widely open as Osler.<sup>10</sup> He enjoyed a gratifying marriage and was a devoted, loving father.<sup>11,12</sup>

### Did Osler lack social concern?

Contrary to norm, Osler grew more socially progressive with age, mitigating his early sexism and advocating that women be admitted to elite medical schools.<sup>13</sup> He had a close professional and personal relationship

with the politically progressive activists Abraham Jacobi (AQA, Washington University School of Medicine, 1905)<sup>14</sup> and Mary Putnam Jacobi.<sup>15</sup>

Osler supported Abraham Jacobi against the august Austin Flint, Sr., in liberalizing the American Medical Association, and transitioning American medicine from sects to science.<sup>4,16</sup> He was the first speaker at Mary Putnam Jacobi’s memorial service, hosted by the Women’s Medical Association of New York.<sup>17</sup>

Osler demonstrated his social concern by his passion for appropriate public health in his crusade against municipal neglect.<sup>18</sup> Osler’s erudition and open world view fostered personal and professional relationships with Mark Twain, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Walt Whitman.<sup>19</sup>

Osler’s last mentor, Rudolph Virchow, was a pioneering pathologist, anthropologist, public health advocate, and an aggressive, progressive, philosemitic politician. However, keeping with the aphorism “when giants make mistakes, they make giant mistakes,” Virchow was anti-Catholic, opposed the germ theory of disease, rejected Semmelweis’s call for disinfection, and scorned Darwin’s theory of evolution. Moreover, his study of six million German school children’s hair and skin color (*Schulstatisik*) concluded that there were three times as many German than Jewish blonds. This finding signified to some that Jews were a separate race, thus supporting German eugenics and fueling the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup>

Osler refuted eugenics, while never referring to it by name, in “On the Brains of Criminals,” and discussed the dialectic between nature and nurture.<sup>21</sup> While he attended eugenics conferences in England, Osler never discussed eugenics, issuing only a brief statement on venereal disease.<sup>22</sup>

Dr. Helen MacMurchy, a fellow Canadian and the first female post-graduate trainee at Johns Hopkins, was a prominent eugenicist who encouraged sterilization of those afflicted with developmental delay.<sup>23,24</sup> She wrote to Osler on September 15, 1919, about her book, *The Almosts: A Study of the Feeble-Minded*:

About that Introduction—Don’t you think it was very presuming of me to ask you to do it? I think I should “let you off” your generous promise to do it for me. Of course, one line from you would be quite enough, but I almost feel I should not ask you even for that. Shall I ask Houghton, Mifflin just to publish the book without an Introduction?<sup>25</sup>

Osler’s flaws—his need to be loved, his difficulty saying no, and his tendency to procrastinate—may have

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led him to accept and then drag his feet on this invitation.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, on January 19, 1920, three weeks after Osler's death, MacMurphy wrote in the Preface to *The Almosts*:

Sir William Osler, with characteristic kindness and generosity, wrote an Introduction to *The Almosts* and forwarded the manuscript from Oxford in the spring of 1919. To the great loss of the reader, the manuscript never arrived. All efforts to find it have been unavailing, and now the master has laid aside his pen. Nevertheless, he, being dead, yet speaketh and his spirit still abides with his pupils.<sup>26</sup>

Once celebrated in Canada, MacMurphy's work and character have undergone a necessary reassessment.<sup>27</sup>

Osler became the first physician to be president of the Classical Association in 1919. He delivered "The Old Humanities & The New Science" speech in which he derided the use of science to further warfare, especially its contribution to civilian casualties. He concluded with the words of Hippocrates: "*philanthropia* and *philotechnia*, the joy of working joined in each one to a true love of his brother."<sup>28</sup>

While Osler was a workaholic and meritocrat, there is no evidence that he was either a social Darwinist or eugenicist.

In stark contrast to his peers, most visibly his first biographer, Harvey Cushing (AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1914),<sup>29</sup> Osler was not only not an antisemite, but also a vocal philosemite.<sup>30,31</sup> Cushing wrote:

I just now seem to be surrounded by Hebrews of unquestioned ability but they simply don't get along with anybody.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, Osler, on April 27, 1914, as the guest of honor at the 25th anniversary of the Jewish Historical Society of England, in his "Israel and Medicine" speech, lauded the accomplishment of Jewish physicians and concluded his address with:

I have always had a warm affection for my Jewish students, and it has been one of the special pleasures of my life, the friendships I have made with them.<sup>32</sup>

### Letter from Berlin

Others have noted that Osler was concerned about the prevalence of German antisemitism, even the possibility of mass extermination of Jews,<sup>30,31,33</sup> but a complete exegesis has not been performed. Osler made the deadly diagnosis in his 1884 "Letter from Berlin" to the Canadian Medical Association. The solution he proposed

was a restating of the plea by George Eliot<sup>31,33</sup> to create a homeland in Palestine, a plea largely ignored by European Jewry but which might have saved countless lives. In his 1884 letter, Osler embraced what would later be termed Zionism as the solution to future genocide.

This "good letter" was one of several Osler wrote to George Ross, the editor of the *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal*. The first part of the letter deals with Virchow's medical, political, and anthropologic interests followed by an account of Frerichs, and the clinics of Leyden, Westphal, and Hensch. A visit to the Royal Veterinary College followed.

Cushing writes on the page entitled, "The Jewish Question" that "The letter closed with this charitable comment on the Semitic invasion of Berlin:"<sup>9,11</sup>

The modern "hep, hep, hep" shrieked in Berlin for some years past has by no means died out, and to judge from the tone of several of the papers devoted to the Jewish question there are not wanting some who would gladly revert to the plan adopted on the Nile some thousands of years ago for solving the Malthusian problem of Semitic increase. Doubtless there were then, as now, noisy agitators-prototypes of the Parson Stocker-who clamoured for the hard laws which ultimately prevailed, and for the taskmasters whose example so many Gentile generations have willingly followed, of demanding where they safely could, bricks without straw of their Israelitish (*sic*) brethren. Should another Moses arise and preach a Semitic exodus from Germany, and should he prevail, they would leave the land impoverished far more than was ancient Egypt by the loss of the "jewels of gold and jewels of silver" of which the people were "spoiled." To say nothing of the material wealth-enough to buy Palestine over and over again from the Turk-there is not a profession which would not suffer the serious loss of many of its most brilliant ornaments and in none more so than our own. I hope to be able to get the data with reference to the exact number of professors and docents of Hebrew extraction in the German Medical Faculties. The number is very great, and of those I know their positions have been won by hard and honourable work; but I fear that, as I hear has already been the case, the present agitation will help to make the attainment of university professorships additionally difficult. One cannot but notice here, in any assembly of doctors the strong Semitic element; at the local societies and at the German Congress of Physicians it was particularly noticeable, and the same holds good in any collection of students. All honour to them!



### The modern “hep, hep, hep”

George Eliot was one of Osler’s favorite authors, and he identified with Dr. Lydgate from *Middlemarch*.<sup>34</sup> As a coda to her career, Eliot became immersed in Judaism,<sup>35</sup> and in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and last essay, “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” (1879),<sup>36</sup> she grappled with the role of Jews in Christian Europe. In the novel, Daniel plans aliyah, a return to the biblical Jewish homeland, the land of Israel, Eliot’s solution to antisemitism. Her recommendation gained popularity, and Eliot became to Zionism what her friend Harriet Beecher Stowe was to abolitionism. Cynthia Ozick repeated Eliot’s essay title when reviewing late 20th century antisemitism.<sup>37</sup>

While walking in the Jewish part of London, Daniel has a reverie of the call “hep! hep! hep!,”<sup>38</sup> the chilling cry of the crusaders in 1095, when they killed 5,000 Jews in Germany before marching eastward to Jerusalem. Like biblical Masada, some “righteous martyrs” preferred infanticide and suicide to slavery or forced conversion. Although other explanations have been offered, “Hep” most likely represents “Hierosolyma est perdita,” Jerusalem is lost (to the Saracens), the battle cry to kill all infidels, Arab and Jew.<sup>39</sup>

The hep, hep, riots of 1819 erupted in Würzburg, Germany, when a professor supported the Jewish plea for civil rights following an economic downturn in which Jews were thought to profit.<sup>40</sup> Enraged students attacked Jews and their property for several days, with the violence spreading throughout Germany into Denmark and Poland. Jews were forced to abandon their homes and businesses and lived in tents at the outskirts of cities during the looting, a foreshadowing of *Kristallnacht*.

### The Berlin anti-semitism debate

Anti-Jewish riots recurred in Germany in 1830, 1835, and 1848. In 1862, Wilhelm Marr, a politician and journalist, began a racist literary campaign against Jews, coining the term “antisemitism” in 1879. Newspaper articles on “the Jewish problem” skyrocketed following the “semitic invasion” of Berlin (noted by Cushing), resulting in the Berlin Anti-Semitism debate of 1879-1881.<sup>41</sup>

The debate was set against a backdrop of the emancipation of the Jews with the unification of Germany in 1870, which sparked resentment among German nationalists. In addition, the *Grunderkrise* (“long depression”) that began in 1873, was attributed to Jews. Bismarck’s moderation of his progressive politics and the large influx into Berlin of poor and non-professional Jews escaping pogroms in Russia and Poland triggered by the Tsar’s assassination also

factored into the contention. In 1880 Berlin had 45,000 Jewish residents, compared to 46,000 in England and 51,000 in France.<sup>42</sup> While that number of Jews living in one city seems high, with a population of more than one million, only four percent of Berlin’s residents were Jewish.

There were several solutions proposed for “the Jewish problem” in the 1880s.<sup>41</sup> However, once one believed that the Jews were a distinct race, intermarriage threatened the “purity” of the German race. Aryan eugenicists continued to obtain “scientific” evidence of German racial superiority—first described in the second century by Tacitus, in his “most dangerous book,” *Germania*—that justified the need to eliminate genetic threats such as Jews, gypsies, gays, and the handicapped. Therefore, those who encouraged incorporation of Jews into German life through religious conversion met stiff resistance. The remaining options were emigration or extermination, hence Osler’s citing of the Pharaoh’s order to kill all newborn Hebrew males and a call for a new Moses to lead an exodus to the land of Israel.

Osler was familiar with the Old Testament (his evangelical parents nicknamed baby William “Benjamin”)<sup>44</sup> and he planned a clerical career before turning to medicine. Alternatively, Osler may have been thinking of the German folk song that, five decades later, the Nazis forced Jewish prisoners to sing while laboring in concentration camps:

Dear old Moses, come again  
Lead your Jewish fellowmen  
Once more to their Promised Land  
Split once more for them the sea,  
Two huge columns let it be  
Fixed as firmly as two walls.  
When the Jews are all inside  
On their pathway, long and wide,  
Shut the trap, Lord do your best!  
Give us the world its lasting rest!<sup>45</sup>

### Parson Stocker (sic)

Adolf Christian Stoecker was the Kaiser’s charismatic Lutheran court chaplain, and a conservative politician. In 1878, he founded the Christian Social Workers party, appealing to the “disenfranchised” German lower middle class. He began a mass movement, a “struggle against the Jews” that spread throughout Germany.<sup>46</sup> A devotee of Martin Luther and his book, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Stoecker’s popularity peaked between 1881 and 1884, when Osler was visiting. Stoecker’s racial hatred of Jews led him to preach that Jews and Aryans could

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not coexist and that elimination of one race or the other would occur.<sup>46</sup>

Here, Osler presented his solution for the possible extermination of German Jewry. Endorsing Eliot's Zionist plan, Osler hoped that a future Moses would lead the Jews out of Germany, back to the land of Israel by purchasing a homeland from the Ottoman Empire.

Osler's acceptance of a Jewish state in Palestine is in sharp contrast to his friend Mark Twain, who in his praising of Jews (with controversial stereotypes) voiced concern with the notion of Jews creating a homeland for fear of the power of numbers: "if that concentration of the cunningest (*sic*) brains in the world were going to be made in a free country (bar Scotland), I think it would be politic to stop it. It will not be well to let the race find out its strength. If the horses knew theirs, we should not ride any more."<sup>47</sup>

### The professionals

In Germany, Jews were statistically over-represented in academia, law, medicine, and finance. Osler wrote of the "noticeable" large number of Jewish physicians and students and how "the present agitation will help to make the attainment of university professorships additionally difficult" for Hebrews. These comments foreshadowed the ultimate rescinding of professional occupations for Jews 50 years later. Osler stated that if Jews were to leave Germany, "there is not a profession which would not suffer the serious loss of many of its most brilliant ornaments and in none more so than our own."<sup>9</sup> In his "Israel and Medicine" speech of 1914, Osler named the German-Jewish physicians he referred to in his 1884 letter: Traube, Henle, Valentin, Lebert, Remak, Romberg, Ebstein, Henoch, Cohnheim, Weigert and Ehrlich.<sup>33</sup>

Osler respected what Jews had to overcome throughout history, "the hard laws which ultimately prevailed, and for the taskmasters whose example so many Gentile generations have willingly followed...their positions have been won by hard and honourable work."<sup>9</sup> The Letter from Berlin ends, "All honour to them!"<sup>9</sup> To Osler, the master-word was work.

The Letter from Berlin demonstrates Osler's concern for German Jewry beyond the accomplishments of Jewish physicians, and documents his concern for a future Jewish genocide. Osler recalled Moses leading the captive Hebrews out of Egypt during a time of economic depression to escape the Pharaoh's solution for the "Malthusian problem of Semitic increase:" extermination of all newborn Hebrew males. He wrote "there are not wanting

some who would gladly revert to the plan adopted on the Nile some thousands and years ago."<sup>9</sup> Osler suggested that should "another Moses arise and preach a Semitic exodus from Germany, and should prevail," every German profession would "suffer the loss of many of its brilliant ornaments," and none more than medicine.<sup>9</sup>

Osler's own words reveal why he was able to predict the Holocaust: "The inhumanity of man to man is the greatest atrocity;" "The history of the race is a grim record of barbarism;" "See the future within the context of the past."<sup>48</sup> Osler knew that history repeats itself. He was well aware of the long history of antipathy of many Germans to Jews and the nationwide violent anti-Jewish riots that had occurred several times earlier in the 19th century, and in centuries before (three crusades and the plague).

Osler recognized that having Jews establish a homeland in Palestine would remove them from the type of genocide planned by the Pharaoh in Egypt. His analysis of the anger and evil he observed in Berlin in 1884 culminated in the European holocaust a half century later killing six million European Jews when a later-day Pharaoh, Adolf Hitler, seized power in a defeated, economically depressed Germany whose history of violent antisemitism spanned centuries. It was Osler's deadliest diagnosis.

### Is Osler dead?

Osler was a lifelong prankster<sup>4</sup> who could be peevish when pranked.<sup>49</sup> His alter ego, Egerton Yorrick Davis, was crudely salacious,<sup>2,3</sup> and Osler's take-off on Trollope's Swiftian farce, "The Fixed Period," backfired into an international scandal for which Osler remarked "the way of the joker is hard. I deserve to be caught long ago."<sup>49</sup> Osler had an occasional rough edge<sup>10,51,52</sup> and there are accounts of his expressing racial prejudice.<sup>53,54</sup> However, whatever prejudicial comments Osler was quoted as expressing did not affect his treatment of individuals.<sup>53</sup> Specifically, Osler did not practice overt bigotry as his acolytes MacMurchy and Cushing did.

James Herrick, a former president of the American Heart Association, recipient of the George H. Kober medal from the Association of American Physicians and the Distinguished Service Cross from the American Medical Association, published his reminiscence of Osler in 1949.<sup>49</sup> Herrick stated that, "Dr. Osler was not infallible as a practitioner or as a teacher. He made his share of errors in diagnosis and occasionally missed the mark as a teacher."<sup>49</sup> Osler could be ungracious when learning he was wrong. Nevertheless, Herrick concluded "that the influence of William Osler was as great as, perhaps

even greater than, that of any other medical man in the English-speaking world in the last one hundred years.”<sup>49</sup>

Osler has been criticized for not making any major scientific discoveries or creating a novel therapeutic intervention.<sup>55</sup> However, his textbook inspired medical philanthropy resulting in the creation of the Rockefeller Institute (now University),<sup>56</sup> whose scientists have won 26 Nobel Prizes in Physiology or Medicine; scientists working in the departments established by Osler at Johns Hopkins have won 10 Nobel prizes.

Today, we take clinical clerkships for granted. Allowing medical students to examine patients at the dawn of the 20th century in America was revolutionary, and objectionable to many patients. Osler’s creation of standardized post-graduate medical education was innovative, made more so by the inclusion of women trainees. Defying horrified naysayers, Osler bravely risked his career pioneering medical education.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than cancel him completely as some critics have urged, we should try to place Osler’s character in context. More than a century after his death, Osler and his ethos are cited in medical journals and the popular press. Can we weigh his personal shortcomings against his many ground-breaking professional accomplishments? Osler was an intellectual force of nature who revolutionized American medicine. Let us open our arms to him, dissector’s warts and all, and keep him alive.<sup>57</sup>

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