

Osler and the Jewish people

David B. Hogan, MD; A. Mark Clarfield, MD

Abstract

IN HIS WRITINGS AND ACTIONS, Sir William Osler betrayed no evidence of anti-Semitism. In his era, this trait was unusual. Two of his articles, "Letter from Berlin" and "Israel and medicine," dealt directly with his thoughts on the Jewish people. In both he spoke out against anti-Semitism. Osler had friendships with Jewish colleagues — an example is the great regard in which he held US pediatrician Dr. Abraham Jacobi. Osler was not a saint, and he had his "rough side," but in his relationships with Jewish colleagues his example remains relevant.

Résumé

DANS SES ÉCRITS ET SES ACTES, Sir William Osler n'a donné aucune indication d'antisémitisme, ce qui est inusité pour son époque. Deux de ses articles, «Letter from Berlin» et «Israel and medicine», traitent directement de ses réflexions sur le peuple juif. Il s'est prononcé dans les 2 cas contre l'antisémitisme. Osler avait des amis parmi ses collègues juifs — comme en témoigne la grande estime qu'il portait au D^r Abraham Jacobi, pédiatre américain. Osler n'était pas un saint et il avait ses «côtés rugueux», mais dans ses relations avec ses collègues juifs, son exemple demeure d'actualité.

Sir William Osler had a justly deserved reputation for humanitarianism, liberalism and tolerance. What makes these qualities remarkable is that he lived in a time when they were not yet widespread in the Western world.¹ How he came to hold this view of the world and its people is one of the unknowns about Osler. Some of his colleagues and protégés were clearly bigots.¹ There were other influences militating against tolerance. For example, Osler's most beloved book was *Religio Medici* by Sir Thomas Browne, who, some feel, was prejudiced against Catholics, Jews, Moslems, blacks and women — with these prejudices clearly evident in his writings.^{1,2} Yet Osler seemed unaffected by this aspect of Browne. (To be fair to Browne, among other authors he has a reputation for tolerance.^{3,4} Osler had the highest regard for Browne's open-mindedness, stating that Browne had "become denationalized . . . so far as his human sympathies were concerned."⁵)

Examining Osler's relationship with the Jewish people provides an opportunity to learn more about the man and his view of the world. Charles G. Roland stated in his 1987 presidential address to the American Osler Society that there is a need to explore this topic further.⁶

As noted historian Barbara Tuchman has pointed out, in 19th century England, and in Anglo-Saxon society in general, a strong sense of philo-Judaism coexisted with more prevalent anti-Semitic attitudes. Osler was of the former sentiment. For example, in comparing the competing influences of "Athens and Jerusalem," Osler pointed out that

Modern civilization is the outcome of these two great movements of the mind of man, who today is ruled in heart and head by Israel and by Greece. From the one [Israel] he has learned responsibility to a Supreme Being, and the love of his neighbour, in which are embraced both the Law and the Prophets.⁷

Osler grew to maturity in a country where and in an era when Jews were either not tolerated or openly persecuted. As Speisman points out in his work on anti-Semitism in Ontario, the Jews in Ontario, especially those who immigrated in the



Education

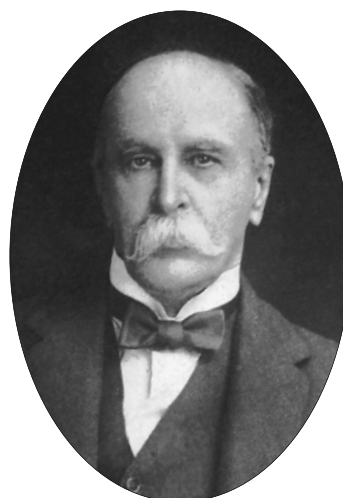
Éducation

Dr. Hogan is Professor and Brenda Strafford Chair in Geriatrics, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alta.; Dr. Clarfield is with the Sarah Herzog Hospital, Jerusalem, and the Division of Geriatrics, Sir Mortimer B. Davis-Jewish General Hospital, McGill University, Montreal, Que.

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Illustration courtesy of the Osler Library, McGill University, Montreal

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Sir William Osler (1849–1919)



latter part of the 19th century, were not welcomed with open arms.

As a result of the restrictions imposed upon them, and the manner in which they were forced to earn a livelihood, they [immigrant Jews] came to be branded as social exploiters, devoid of business ethics, yet with a special aptitude for commerce which made them dangerous competitors. Incapable of assimilation into the gentile world, according to the conventional wisdom, they were capable nevertheless of positing a constant economic threat. This economic aspect of European anti-Semitism, more than its explicit religious roots, remained dominant (even if latent) in the minds of many Ontario Christians, especially Protestants.⁸

Before he moved to Montreal, Osler probably had little if any contact with Jewish people. Later in his career, however, Osler worked with and trained several Jewish physicians. How much he socialized with them is unknown. He never visited Palestine, but he did journey to Egypt in 1911 with his wealthy brother, Sir Edmund Boyd Osler.⁹ His letters indicate that he enjoyed the visit, which he described as the most “enchanting trip” he had ever taken. Without a doubt, his love of medical history, among other influences, acted as a bridge to Jewish culture.

The Jewish people in Osler’s writings

Osler often touched on the need for tolerance in his writings, as a reading of *Counsels and Ideals*¹⁰ or *Aequanimitas*¹¹ attests.

By his commission the physician is sent to the sick, and knowing in his calling neither Jew nor Gentile, bond or free, perhaps he alone rises superior to those differences which separate and make us dwell apart, too often oblivious to the common hopes and frailties which bind us together as a race.¹⁰

There is plenty of room for proper pride of land and birth. What I inveigh against is a cursed spirit of intolerance, conceived in distrust and bred in ignorance, that makes the mental attitude perennially antagonistic, even bitterly antagonistic to everything foreign, that subordinates everywhere the race to the nation, forgetting the higher claims of human brotherhood.¹¹

Two of Osler’s writings dealt specifically with the Jewish people. In 1884 Osler was on sabbatical in Germany. In a letter to the *Canadian Medical and Surgical Journal*, he discussed the anti-Semitism he saw in Germany.

The modern “hep, hep, hep” shrieked in Berlin for some years has by no means dried 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 brethren.¹²

Uncannily and presciently, Osler detected vibrations of the catastrophe that would befall the Jews of Europe half a century later. However, his view was overly optimistic.

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.¹²

Harold Segall, the noted Jewish-Canadian cardiologist and medical historian, was impressed with this letter and convinced of Osler’s opposition to anti-Jewish prejudice. In 1987 Segall described Osler as

strongly anti-anti-Semitic, very strongly. A Jew could not have written a more positive thing than he did at that time. He was still living in little Montreal. Montreal was a tiny little thing then. The man had a broad mind; the more I know about him, the more I learn about Osler, the more I admire him as a human being.¹³

The second publication concerning Osler’s thoughts on the Jews was an address to the Jewish Historical Society of England, given on Apr. 27, 1914.⁷ In this address, Osler felt that the main gift of the Jewish people to the world was in the area of religion, not science. But he acknowledged the important role Jewish physicians played in preserving ancient knowledge, especially through their pre-eminence in Islamic culture and medicine. He also dealt with this aspect of Jewish medicine in his Silliman lecture on the evolution of modern medicine.¹⁴ He described 3 pre-eminent Jewish physicians of the Middle Ages: Isaac Judaeus (Monarcha Medicorum), Rabbi ben Ezra and Moses Maimonides. He noted the role of Jewish physicians in the revival of medical knowledge in Europe as well as “the grievous persecutions they suffered” intermittently during the Renaissance. He wrote: “In the nineteenth century, with the removal of the vexatious restrictions the Jew had a chance of reaching his full



development.”⁷ Osler developed this line of thinking and closed the lecture by naming distinguished Jewish researchers and physicians of the 19th century. He wrote: “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.”⁷

Osler’s relationships with Jewish people

Osler was on friendly terms with several prominent Jewish-Americans of the 19th century. For example, he corresponded extensively with Drs. Abraham Jacobi, Simon Flexner and Emanuel Libman (whose travels to Palestine would make an interesting story of their own).¹⁵ All had distinguished careers in medical practice, education or research.¹⁶ As an example of these cordial relationships, we will focus on his friendship with Jacobi.

Jacobi was a giant of 19th century medicine.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Born in Germany in 1830 and educated in that country as well, Jacobi was imprisoned during the repression that followed the 1848 uprisings. After his imprisonment he escaped to New York City, where he opened his medical practice in 1853. His practice gradually gravitated toward the care of children; he is called the “father of pediatrics.” His wife, Mary Corinna Putnam Jacobi, was equally noteworthy.^{20,21} The daughter of the New York publisher G.P. Putnam, she was a pioneering female physician.

There are interesting parallels between Osler and Jacobi. They were both instrumental in shaping the future course of medical practice; they were cofounders of the American Pediatric Society and each served as its president; and they were both prolific authors and avid medical historians. Both were offered prestigious professorships in the latter parts of their careers — Osler accepted a position at Oxford University and Jacobi turned down a position at the University of Berlin. Both died in 1919.

Osler and Jacobi were good friends, and they held each other in great mutual regard. On Osler’s 70th birthday, Jacobi wrote to him,

Seventy years, or any age, is no period for you. You are eminently the one, the indispensable man in medicine — the indispensable man! Everybody feels that, knows that. The world is crowded with nonentities, but even they realize your superiority and feel grateful for your existence. So do I. Keep on.²²

Their relationship was so friendly that Osler felt comfortable playing a joke on the press that involved Jacobi. This is recounted in Cushing’s biography of Osler.

Jacobi, a small man of frail physique despite his leonine head and shock of hair, was a guest at 1 Franklin Street (Osler’s home in Baltimore) and the house was besieged by reporters, one of whom Osler finally saw. The press that evening contained a long account of Professor Jacobi’s athletic prowess, for though he was

incidentally a children’s specialist he was chiefly known as a pole-vaulter and high jumper, in which events he held a record at the New York Athletic Association, etc. For this and similar pranks Osler was to be severely penalized in a few months’ time.²³

The final comment alludes to the uproar in the press that followed Osler’s “fixed period” address of 1905.²⁴

Jacobi had another connection to Osler’s controversial remarks about elderly people. Osler’s comments at the gathering to celebrate Jacobi’s 70th birthday, held May 5, 1900, presaged the “fixed period” speech he was to give 5 years later.

Mr. Chairman, this magnificent demonstration is a tribute not less to Dr. Jacobi’s personal worth than to the uniform and consistent character of his professional career . . . Happiness at three-score years and ten is for the man who has learned to adjust his mental processes to the changing conditions of the times. In all of us senility begins at forty — forty sharp — sometimes earlier. To obviate the inevitable tendency — a tendency which ends in intellectual staleness as surely as in bodily weakness — a man must not live in his own generation; he must keep fresh by contact with fresh young minds, and ever retain a keen receptiveness to the ideas of those who follow him. Our dear friend has been able to do this because he was one “whose even-balanced soul/Business could not make dull or passion wild/Who saw life steadily and saw it whole.”²⁵

Osler was clearly unafraid to express affection for his Jewish colleagues, both privately and publicly. Hookman, in a comparison of Osler with his mentor, Browne, asked a fascinating question. Given his background and the times, “How was Osler . . . any different? Did he hide his prejudicial feelings from his public persona? Was he preciently being ‘politically correct’ or was he showing a patrician’s *noblesse oblige*?”¹ Hookman responds to his own queries in the negative. He describes interviews with the children of Osler’s Jewish contemporaries, all of whom attested to the consistency of Osler’s private and public personae, especially with respect to Jews.

Conclusion

No man is an island, and all of us are influenced by the time and culture in which we are raised. Osler recognized this fact. In explaining the contradictions evident in the actions of Browne, who had participated in the condemnation of 2 poor women as witches, Osler stated: “But a man must be judged by his times and his surroundings. . . . We must believe how hard it was in the 16th and 17th century not to believe in witches.”¹ Although we will never know “what lay in Osler’s heart of hearts,”¹ his written and spoken words showed him to be unmarked by anti-Semitism. His relationships with Jews as individuals and his attitude toward the Jewish people as a whole appear to have been exemplary, especially if one takes into



account the society in which he came to maturity and the time in which he lived, which was one of widespread and ever-heightening anti-Semitism. This is not to say that Osler's attitudes were above reproach. For example, he appears to have been guilty of holding attitudes that we would interpret as ageist²⁴ and sexist.²⁶ In spite of this, in his open-mindedness toward his Jewish colleagues, as in so many other areas, Sir William Osler provided an example that is still relevant.

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Reprint requests to: Dr. David B. Hogan, Health Sciences Centre, 3330 Hospital Dr. NW, Calgary AB T2N 4N1; fax 403 283-1089; dhogan@acs.ucalgary.ca

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