



The Left Atrium

Osler on the Nile

Dearest G... Yours WO: William Osler's letters from Egypt to Grace Revere Osler

Lawrence D. Longo and Philip M. Teigen, editors
Montréal: Osler Library, McGill University, 2002
129 pp \$25 ISBN 0-7717-0601-4



As Charles Roland points out in the short but illuminating foreword to this volume, although William Osler travelled a lot, his journey to Egypt was “[his] most exotic trip, and certainly the furthest from [his birthplace in] rural Ontario.” The good doctor left his wife Grace and son Revere at home in Oxford, where Osler was enjoying his status as Regius Professor of Medicine. Joining his brother Edmond in February 1911, he planned to sail up the Nile to “visit the temples,” as was *de rigueur* for many a Victorian gentleman of the time. The 27 letters collected in this slim volume are chatty, informal and do not go much into either medical or archeological detail, but their familial and familiar nature charms. Although Osler took his work very seriously, his biographers agree that, despite his status and fame, he did not view himself with the same gravity. These letters certainly show this.

Osler’s affection for his wife and son shines through the correspondence; it is heartwarming to realize how very human the great man was. Early on, he writes to Grace, “I am just furious that you are not here. I have no one to squeeze.” Several times he mentions their son Revere, whose academic progress (or probable lack thereof) was of great concern, at least to Grace. As an example of many attempts, toward the end of the cruise, Osler tries to reassure his wife: “Please, please do not worry about that dear boy. I am sure he will be all right.”

Although they took a good deal longer to arrive, these missives are not unlike today’s family emails. For example, spelling and grammar did not seem to concern this writer so famous for his literary interests and fluent style. Thus

we find “to” for “too,” “buyed” rather than “bought” and “umerous” instead of “humorous”—the last perhaps showing the influence of his profession.

As has been well documented, Osler was no racist, at least with respect to the Jews.¹ He also admired and valued Islam, mentioning his positive feelings for the religion several times. In a postcard to the president of Johns Hopkins University he remarks, “It takes a life course to know the Koran. An extraordinary religion & with great potency.” Elsewhere: “It is a great religion!” But he also registers some criticism: “If only they had any idea of the position of women!”

Despite his admiration of Islam and “Muhammedans” in general, he was less complimentary toward the locals in particular. In describing an enjoyable lunch with a colleague, Dr. T. Cook, Osler refers to his surroundings and complains, “Lord, they are a dirty people (I do not mean T. C. & Son) but the Egyptians.” Elsewhere, it looks like he suffered from a mild case of White Man’s Burden: “The English are thoroughly hated, but they [the Egyptians] are not fit for self government.”

Given that these are personal letters home (albeit those of a public man), from time to time I felt a frisson of voyeuristic guilt. For example, we catch a glimpse of Osler the smoker. Back in Cairo after his Nile excursion and preparing to return to Oxford, he reports, “I am ordering some cigarettes — as per 1000 with duty & c they only come to \$15 & we pay \$20 at least.” A true tourist he was, looking for a bar-

gain. This fact is particularly of interest given that Osler died of bronchiectasis. However, as Michael Bliss has pointed out in his magisterial biography, “His own smoking habit had become two or three cigarettes a day. The ability to use a highly addictive substance in moderation for years is a striking marker of Osler’s constitutional capacity for self-control.”²

The editors make a valiant effort to provide a useful introduction as well as a bibliography, a chronological account of Osler’s trip and a bit of Egyptian history. The letters are well annotated with explanations of who various people mentioned in the correspondence were and with useful and interesting background information. However, occasionally the editors get it wrong. For example, in referring to the khamsin, the hot dusty desert winds that often plague the Middle East, the editors offer that “The word is derived from the Arabic khamsa for ‘five’ and refers to the fifth month, May, when the storms are at their worst.” Actually, the word

comes from the Arabic for “fifty,” alluding to the average annual number of days these winds lash the area. But the book’s editing faults are few.

In his last letter home from Rome, Osler reassures his wife: “Got your saturday [sic] letter here — poor lonely thing!” In an attempt to reassure her about his homecoming after nearly two months abroad, Osler the husband offers soothingly, “I shall not go away again for weeks.”

A. Mark Clarfield

Geriatrician
Beersheva, Israel
and Montréal, Que.

References

1. Hogan DB, Clarfield AM. Osler and the Jewish people. *CMAJ* 1997;156:1559-62.
2. Bliss M. *William Osler: a life in medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1999. p. 275.