William Osler's The Transatlantic Voice: A Philological Study by Richard L. Golden, MD, Charles S. Bryan, MD, and John T. Golden, MD


Reviewed by Beverlee Warren, MA, MS

This previously unpublished manuscript is a tribute to the still viable power of oral communication in our electronic society. In his opening essay, Osler illustrates this point by paraphrasing a passage from Robert Southey, 19th-century poet laureate of Britain: “A Welch triad says that those unconcealable traits of a person by which he shall be known are the glance of his eye, the pronunciation of his speech, and the mode of his self motion—in brief—his look, his voice and his gait, and of the three the voice is the most important & distinctive force” (p. 24).

Over approximately three decades, Osler collected personal observations that compare and contrast the sounds of speech between American, British, and Canadian English speakers. This philological study was announced in a 1911 advertising brochure for The Century Magazine as a forthcoming article in the 1912 publication under the title, “The American Voice.” For unknown reasons, the publication never materialized, adding to the mystique of Osleriana. Thanks to the tenacious and meticulous scholarship of Golden, Bryan, and Golden, a trio of American Osler Society members, the rough manuscript has been “rearranged, sentences combined, punctuation and spelling corrected, abbreviations and redundancies eliminated, and in a few areas of illegibility sentences have been completed (in square brackets) where one could logically infer his meaning” (p. 9). As a result, an often illegible, repetitive, and illogically sequenced collection of thoughts made on Osler's 21 transatlantic voyages has been transformed into a readable text. The authors assure us, “We feel that the manuscript in its present form represents Osler’s ultimate intent and how it might have appeared in The Century Magazine had he brought it to fruition” (p. 9).

In addition to their precise and reverent work of authentically restoring the text, the authors have annotated Osler’s many historical, literary, biblical, and classical allusions that may be unfamiliar to present-day readers, with references and explanations that enhance the reading experience without detracting from the original text. A parallel page format is used so that the explanatory annotations run alongside the text. The reader may pick and choose the annotations to read without the inconvenience of flipping to endnotes.

Considering Osler’s fascination with speech attributes such as vocal quality, intonation, affectation, articulation, dialectical variation, and projection, it is unfortunate that no audio record of his voice exists. The introduction to this book mentions that Osler met Thomas Edison in 1879, 2 years after he had invented the phonograph. Given Osler’s curiosity and Edison’s love of experimentation, one would have hoped their collaboration would have produced a Professor Henry Higgins moment for posterity. But, perhaps, the lack of audio confirmation keeps Osler’s speaking voice mercifully shrouded in mystery. “Bliss suggests that Osler was aware of his American-Canadian high-pitched, nasal accent and may have been endeavoring to modify his speech” (p. 21). Osler included himself in this confession, “Some of us with voices harsh & untutored may have like [Thomas] Fuller [English clergyman and historian] to wait until admitted to the choir of heaven for another more harmonious one” (p. 56). As it is, we can focus on Osler’s extraordinary content rather than his delivery.

This work is the tenth in a series of Studies in the History of Medicine published jointly by the Osler Library of McGill University, Montreal, Canada, and the American Osler Society. The index references both the Osler text and the annotations.

The value of this manuscript lies not so much in the linguistic or scientific knowledge gained—although it is said that Osler contributed to our understanding of the brain’s mechanism for speech, particularly in the findings of patients with aphasia from strokes (p. ix)—but in the further insight into a truly remarkable man whose interests spanned the scientific and literary. The inspiration embedded in the unfinished aspect of this work demonstrates that Osler seems to have been a lifelong learner who never planned to cease absorbing, organizing, and integrating new information.

As a medical librarian, this reviewer takes pleasure in noting Sir William Osler’s commitment to the integration of medicine and information by serving as the second president of the Medical Library Association from 1901 to 1904. During his presidency he made the following statement in an address to the Boston Medical Library in 1901: “It is hard for me to speak of the value of libraries in terms which would not seem exaggerated. . . . To study the phenomena of disease without books is to sail an uncharted sea, while to study books without patients is not to go to sea at all. . . . For the teacher and the worker a great library such as this is indispensable” (1). This newly published manuscript of Osler’s observations is another monument to his entrepreneurial spirit of service to mankind.


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