

Osler usque ad mare: the SS *William Osler*



Charles S. Bryan,* MD; Marilyn Fransiszyn,† MLS

Abstract

WILLIAM OSLER'S CONNECTIONS WITH THE SEA included a strong family history of seafaring, his own transatlantic crossings (of which there were at least 32) and the occasional use of nautical imagery in his inspirational writings. An unusual Oslerian connection with the sea emerged after his death in the form of a World War II Liberty ship. Through the SS *William Osler* and its sister ships, Osler was symbolically reunited with colleagues associated with the early days of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. The *William Osler* circumnavigated the globe in 1943 without engaging the enemy. She was then converted into an army hospital ship and renamed the USHS *Wisteria*.

Among the few facets of William Osler's life to escape extensive scrutiny has been his connection with the sea. Born in a country that proudly bears the motto *A mari usque ad mare* (From sea unto sea), Osler came from a long line of seafarers from the Cornish coast of England. His great-grandfather Edward may have been a merchant seaman — or even a pirate. One of his grandfathers, another Edward, was a Falmouth shipowner. A third Edward, Osler's uncle, joined the navy as a medical officer and wrote *The Voyage*, an epic poem that, along with his *Life of Lord Exmouth*, a biography of a Cornish admiral, was avidly read in the Osler home in Bond Head, Ont. Osler's father, Featherstone, spent 10 years at sea in the Royal Navy, endured several maritime near-disasters and was nearly shipwrecked on the voyage that brought him and his new bride to Canada. Such associations may have prompted William Osler, when made a baronet in 1911, to choose waves for the field on his coat of arms.

Osler himself spent a great deal of time at sea. He crossed the Atlantic at least 32 times. Many of his extant correspondence bears the letterhead of ocean liners: the *Cedric*, the *Campania*, the *Coronia*, the *Teutonic*, the *Celtic*, the *Parisian*, the *Majestic*, the *Empress of Britain*, the *Empress of Ireland*, the *Empress of India*, the *Ems*, the *Furst Bismark* and USMS *St. Louis*. In 1904, on a trans-Atlantic crossing aboard RMS *Campania*, Osler befriended the ship's surgeon, Francis Vernon, and together they organized the North Atlantic Medical Society, which met for tea in Vernon's cabin. The humorous proceedings included a prospectus for a 700-page volume, *Medico-Nautical Studies*, to be published by "The Utopian Press, Thos. More & Sons, Atlanta," and Osler's paper entitled "Sea, sleep, and obesity: a statistical inquiry."¹ In 1905 he attended the Cowes regatta aboard a palatial yacht, the *Kethbailes*.² In 1911 Osler chose for his holiday a cruise in Egypt aboard Cook's Nile Service steamer, the SS *Seti*. As in his life ashore, while at sea Osler meticulously balanced his waking hours between reading, writing and socializing with his fellow passengers.

Osler appreciated the seashore and enjoyed sea bathing. He spent many summer holidays by the sea in Canada, the United States and England. He rented seaside cottages in Murray Bay, where the St. Lawrence River widens into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, on the coast of Cornwall and elsewhere. Letters from those places to his friends and colleagues often mention his having taken "a header off the rocks." The only known painting attributed to Osler shows a sailing ship on a stormy sea.³

Osler sometimes salted his inspirational addresses with nautical imagery. In "Books and Men,"⁴ he wrote: "To study the phenomena of disease without books is to sail an uncharted sea" [page 210]. In "A Way of Life," an address written on a steamer and delivered to Yale students a year and 10 days after one of the most in-

Education

Éducation

From *the Department of Medicine, University of South Carolina School of Medicine, Columbia, SC; and †the Humanities and Social Science Library, McGill University, Montreal, Que.

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famous disasters in maritime history, he urged students to live in “day-tight compartments” — presumably more secure than the watertight compartments of the *Titanic*.⁵ His remedy for alcoholism was to “throw all the beer and spirits into the Irish Channel, the English Channel, and the North Sea for a year.”⁶

Osler’s main hobby was book collecting. His huge library contained classics and lesser works of nautical medicine, such as James Lind’s *Treatise on the Scurvy*, Sir Gilbert Blane’s *Observations on the Diseases Incident to Seamen* and Stephen Hale’s *Descriptions of Ventilators: Whereby Great Quantities of Fresh Air May with Ease Be Conveyed into Mines, Goals [sic], Hospitals, Work-Houses, and Ships*.⁷ Osler was fascinated by the life of Thomas Dover (ca. 1660 to ca. 1742), an English physician who spent 3 years as a privateer in the South Seas, during which time he discovered the prototype for Robinson Crusoe in the person of one Alexander Selkirk, a shipwrecked Scot.⁸ Also in Osler’s library were the privately printed historical essays of Sylvanus P. Thompson, including an address on “Petrus Peregrinus and the Mariner’s Compass in the Thirteenth Century,” described by Osler in 1908 as “one of the best lectures I have ever heard” [page 117-8].²

Despite all of this, it would be an exaggeration to conclude that Osler had a deep, abiding interest in ships and the sea. His interest in medical history and his efforts in building his library were wide-ranging. His penchant for seaside holidays and his belief in the health benefits of sea bathing were shared by many people of his time. Considering his liking for fast automobiles, his enjoyment of an airplane show in Paris featuring the Wright brothers (“a great treat”), his obvious relief at the end of an ocean voyage and his skill at time management,^{2,9,10} it seems probable that he would have preferred to travel between continents by airplane if given a choice. After his death, however, Osler came to have yet another connection with the sea, as de-

scribed in a brief notice appearing one Saturday in March 1943 in the *Baltimore American*, under the headline “Liberty ship named for Dr. Osler”.¹¹

The Liberty ships formed the backbone of a supply line that enabled the Allies to wage war against the Axis Powers during World War II. In what has been called “the most stupendous building program the world will probably ever see” [page 4]¹² some 2700 Liberty ships — making up nearly three-quarters of the 40 million dead-weight tons of shipbuilding in the United States during the war — were built at an average cost of US\$1.6 million in 18 shipyards.¹³ Baltimore’s Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard was the largest and most efficient of its kind. It was there that the SS *William Osler*, one of 63 Liberty ships named for physicians, was built in a mere 28 days.

Like all of the Liberty ships, the *William Osler* was fitted with gun platforms and anti-aircraft guns and carried a naval gun crew as well as a regular crew. She was assigned the radio call and signal letters 343605 KKNN, was initially valued at US\$1.75 million and was registered in Baltimore.¹⁴ As was typical of the Liberty ships when finances permitted, her launching from the No. 14 way at the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard on Mar. 6, 1943, occasioned a ceremony with music, speeches and flowers for the person chosen to break a bottle of champagne over the bow. The ship’s sponsor was Miss Beryl Scott Hobson, a Wren (a member of the Women’s Royal Naval Service). Special guests included Dr. Thomas Cullen of Canada, a personal friend of Osler, members of the British consulates, and various dignitaries of the Royal Navy and the British Overseas Airways.¹¹

Immediately after her trials the *William Osler* was delivered by the War Shipping Administration to the States Marine Corporation under the General Service Agreement. On Mar. 24, 1943, she sailed by canal to Philadelphia, where she picked up an armed guard and ammuni-



Fig. 1: Converted into an army hospital ship, the *William Osler* was renamed the USHS *Wisteria*.



tion before proceeding to New York City. On Apr. 7 she left New York with a cargo destined for the Persian Gulf; the nature of the cargo is unknown. Her guns and ammunition were never needed, as she circumnavigated the globe without engaging the enemy. She went through the Panama Canal, crossed the Pacific to Australia and took her cargo to Bandar Shapour, Iran. From there she sailed to Durban, South Africa, and then crossed the Atlantic to Montevideo, Uruguay. Her now-declassified secret log contains little of a secretive nature, most of the comments being about the conditions of the sea.¹⁵ “Mountainous seas & swells” were no doubt significant to the crew, for the Liberty ships were notoriously prone to “pitching, rolling, & laboring very heavily,” to the extent that experienced navy gunners often asked to be transferred to another type of vessel. On the evening of Sept. 29, 1943, she had her only potentially serious accident when, while steaming down the Río de la Plata between Uruguay and Argentina, a “bright red light [that] showed up directly ahead approx 300 yards” turned out to be the schooner *Favorita Maria*. The ships collided, with minor damage to both but no casualties. By Nov. 13, 1943, the *William Osler* was back in New York.

The States Marine Corporation was then notified that the *William Osler* was to be delivered to the army for conversion into a hospital ship. She was one of 6 Liberty ships thus converted. The conversion took place at Bethlehem's, 27th Street, Brooklyn, New York Shipyard in New York between Nov. 23, 1943, and July 15, 1944. The extensively rebuilt ship included a new superstructure with 23-m masts and a funnel wide enough to display Red Cross symbols more than 3.7 m in width (Fig. 1). When completed, the ship had 44 wards with a total capacity of 595 patients, an operating room, a laboratory, radiology facilities, an autopsy room and a morgue. There were quarters for a medical staff of 17 officers, 39 nurses and 159 attendants, as well as for chaplains, the signal corps and a crew of 123.¹⁵ Because of a policy of the US Surgeon-General's Office to name army hospital ships after flowers, an order was issued on Feb. 29, 1944, to rename the vessel the USHS *Wisteria*.¹⁶ Thus, it is possible that neither patients, staff nor crew knew about the ship's association with the great physician-educator honoured at her christening.

The *Wisteria*'s voyages were largely uneventful except for a minor collision with a British destroyer. Starting on July 16, 1944, she made several round trips between the United States and England, Belgium and the Mediterranean. After the war she made additional trips to Belgium, England and Germany, carrying up to 611 patients at a time back to New York or to Charleston, SC.¹⁷ After the war, the *Wisteria* reverted to her original name, the *William Osler*. She was laid up in the reserve fleet in 1947 and apparently never saw service after that time. She was eventually scrapped in 1969 in Portland, Ore. Dr. Ralph S. Crawshaw of Portland purchased the nameplate and later presented it to the Mütter Museum of the College of

Physicians of Philadelphia, where it resides today (Fig. 2).

Brief mention should be made of the fate of the *William Osler*'s sister ships, for the *William Osler* was only 1 of 8 consecutive Liberty ships launched from Baltimore during March and April of 1943 and named for Johns Hopkins medical personages. Four of these ships honoured the founding giants of the Johns Hopkins Hospital depicted in John Singer Sargent's *The Four Doctors*: Osler, William H. Welch, Howard A. Kelly and William S. Halsted. The *William H. Welch* was shipwrecked off the coast of Scotland in 1944 with the loss of all but 12 of the 60 crewmen and navy gunners. The *Howard A. Kelly* narrowly escaped an explosion off the coast of Algiers. The *William S. Halsted* was 1 of 14 Liberty ships converted into mule carriers, in which capacity she retained her original name.¹² We can imagine that Sargent, who disliked Halsted to the extent that he allegedly did his portrait in pigments designed to fade over time, would have smiled at this disposition. The other Hopkins Liberty ships were the *Franklin P. Mall*, the *John Howland*, the *William H. Wilmer* and the *John J. Abel*. Other Liberty ships named for persons dear to Osler included the *Oliver Wendell Holmes*, the *Silas Weir Mitchell*, the *Harvey Cushing* and the *William S. Thayer*. Thus the playful perpetrator of the North Atlantic Medical Society was symbolically reunited with his friends in an undertaking crucial to the Allies' cause.

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Fig. 2: The nameplate is all that remains of the SS *William Osler*. Courtesy of the Mütter Museum, College of Physicians of Philadelphia.



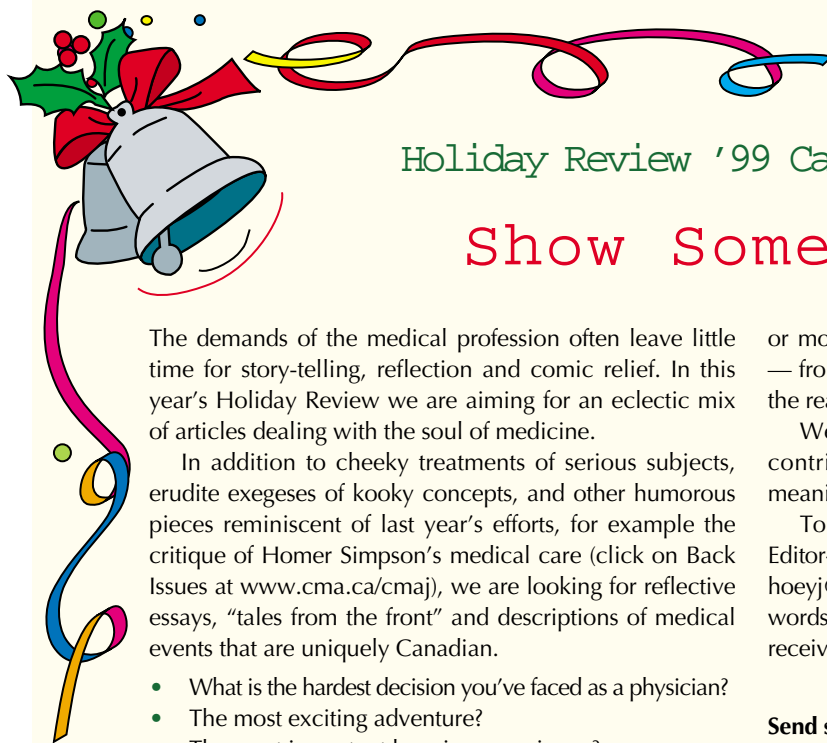
Gibson Bell Smith of the National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, Md.; and Gretchen Worden of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. We also thank Drs. George T. Harrell, Lawrence D. Longo, Alastair H.T. Robb-Smith and Earl F. Nation for valuable suggestions, and Wayne Lebel of the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University, Montreal, for his assistance. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Nicholas Davies (1926–1991), who was working on a manuscript concerning the *William Osler* and her sister ships at the time of his unexpected death.

Competing interests: None declared.

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Reprint requests to: Dr. Charles S. Bryan, Department of Medicine, University of South Carolina School of Medicine, Ste. 502, 2 Medical Park, Columbia SC 29203, USA; fax 803 540-1050; cbryan@richmed.medpark.sc.edu



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