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### *The Chief: Doctor William Osler.* R. Palmer Howard, Canton, MA, Science History Publications/Watson International, 1983. Pp xiii, 194

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTEs RENDUS

*The Chief: Doctor William Osler.* R. Palmer Howard, Canton, MA, Science History Publications/Watson International, 1983. Pp xiii, 194.

The spell cast by that medical magus, William Osler, continues to enthrall doctors and historians to this day. Osler's many latter-day disciples will accordingly be keenly interested in this new biographical work. The author, R. Palmer Howard, is the grandson and namesake of the distinguished McGill professor of medicine who was one of Osler's first mentors. His father, Campbell Palmer Howard, was born in 1877 and was Osler's godson. Campbell was still a teenager when he and his siblings were orphaned, but Osler, already off to a professorship in Philadelphia, discharged his godfatherly duties with copious correspondence. Osler's warm letters encouraged Campbell as he studied at McGill's medical school, drew him to Johns Hopkins for a stint as assistant resident and ultimately followed him to the University of Iowa where he became professor of medicine and head of the department of internal medicine in 1910.

Campbell Howard's younger sister, Marjorie, who was also a favourite of Osler, has her own interesting connections. She married Thomas B. Futcher who served as chief resident under Osler at Johns Hopkins from 1898 to 1901. Thus, between them, Marjorie Howard Futcher and Campbell Howard were the recipients of scores of letters from Osler. It is in large measure this correspondence that the author has used to shed additional light on Osler's character, career and viewpoints. Archives at McGill and the University of Iowa have also yielded up some hitherto unpublished material.

Howard does not attempt to provide a comprehensive biography of Osler. In fact, the main body of his book is only ninety-nine pages long. What he has done, however, is to weave information and quotations from the Howard correspondence around a skeletal account of Osler's life. We therefore end up learning as much about the Howard clan as about Osler himself: the last chapter, for example, discusses Campbell Howard's career after Osler's death in 1919, and the book includes bibliographies of both the original R. Palmer Howard and Campbell Howard. Although I found this additional detail to be interesting and entertaining, other readers who prefer their Osleriana 'neat' may be bothered by the biographical admixture.

It must be stated that nothing in this volume really changes the view of Osler that one gets from standard sources such as Harvey Cushing's two-volume *Life*. Nevertheless, the new information is welcome, and the photographs--most of which have not been previously published--are delightful. The index is five pages long and helpful. Whether a ninety-nine page book needs sixty-three pages of biographical notes is another matter, but there is no denying that this section will be useful for historians seeking data on many prominent medical men and women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Perhaps the greatest flaw in this scholarly and readable little book is one that is common to most of the items about Osler that I have encountered. *The Chief* is not really biography in the modern sense so much as hagiography, and the same could be said of many other wholly unanalytical works on a list of Osleriana that must now extend to almost two thousand articles, books, book chapters, pamphlets, etc. Nobody is asking that some ham-fisted iconoclast should undertake to debunk the inspiring Osler legend, but I do find it strange that no historian has systematically applied the tools of sociological, political and psychological analysis to Osler's life and career. Indeed, the very fact that a major historical figure has so far eluded such analysis is a phenomenon of some psychosocial interest. I personally suspect that few medical historians of this generation will do other than further buff the Osler icon with lapidary prose, for in this often ugly and complex world, most of us can take consolation and inspiration from fairy tales and flawless heroes. Dare I confess that a portrait of Osler at work on his textbook hangs above the desk in my own study?

C. David Naylor