

MEDICAL HUMANITIES

Sir William Osler and Sir Henry Newbolt: Admiral Death and Strains of Aequanimitas

By Daniel Sokol

On 30th March 2020, Dr James Tait Goodrich died from complications of Covid-19, aged 72. Dr Goodrich was a paediatric neurosurgeon best known for his separation of conjoined twins fused at the cranium. He was also a bibliophile and antiquarian bookseller. Following Dr Goodrich's death, his estate sold part of his vast collection of books and manuscripts at auction in New York. On 24th February 2021, after a fierce bidding war, I purchased lot 222, described as a 'collection of six Osler items'. One of the items was a fragment of poetry from Sir Henry Newbolt's poem *Admiral Death*, written in Osler's hand:

*Steady your hand in time o' squalls
Stand to the last by him that falls
And answer clear to the voice that calls*

The note was written on stationery from the Turnberry Station Hotel. Accompanying the note was a letter from the medical historian Dr Nicholas Dewey, dated 12th July 1999, addressed to Dr Goodrich. The letter surmises that Osler wrote the note during a trip to Ayrshire in Scotland in 1905.

I contacted what is now called the Trump Turnberry for more information and received the following response:

'Dear Mr Sokol

Many thanks for your email. I can confirm that Turnberry was indeed known as Turnberry Station Hotel. Although the golf course was in place first, the hotel opened in 1906 and was originally a British Rail Hotel. Guests could take the night train from London and arrive in Turnberry the following morning.

*Kind Regards
Gemma'*

This casts serious doubt on the 1905 theory. Regrettably, the hotel's guest ledger did not date back to that period so it was not possible to check when the Oslers visited.

Harvey Cushing, in volume 2 of his biography of Osler, included a letter by Osler to his friend Mabel Brewster dated 21st August 1908:

'[...] We have had such a happy time – our first long motor trip. We went up the great north road to Scotland. Revere had been promised trout fishing in the Fleet in Kirkcudbright which took us into the Guy Manner & Crockett Country. It was most interesting. [...] We made excursions all about the country.' (p.134)

As Kirkcudbright is only some 60 miles from Turnberry, 1908 seems a better guess than 1905. I proceeded to ask Dr John Ward, a leading Oslerian in the UK, for his view and he observed:

'I agree with you that the most likely date of the Oslers' visit to the Turnberry Station Hotel was in August 1908 [...] He says in that letter that it was their first long motor trip and as I describe in the new encyclopaedia [the 2020 encyclopedia on Sir William Osler, edited by Charles Bryan] that will have been in the newly acquired Renault.'

Sir Henry Newbolt

Sir Henry Newbolt was a British barrister, novelist, playwright and magazine editor. The poem 'Admiral Death' appears in Newbolt's *Collected Poems 1897-1907*. Osler first met Newbolt on 1st April 1919, during a dinner of the exclusive 'Dr Johnson's Club' which met fortnightly at the Prince's Hotel, Jermyn Street, London.

On the back of the menu card, Osler wrote:

'There were present Sir Henry Newbolt, Kipling, John Buchan, Pember, Bailey, Oman, Kenyon and Fisher. All but Newbolt and Bailey I had known. Newbolt was in the Chair and I sat between him and Fisher, the minister of Education. Very good evening [...] Kipling was in very good form and told many good war stories. Newbolt is the smooth faced type of thin Englishman like Morley and looks more like a keen American professor. He was full of interesting reminiscences.'

Osler died a few months later, on 29th December 1919, of a post-operative haemorrhage. He was 70.

Significance

It is reasonable to assume that Osler was drawn to the 3 lines from Newbolt's poem. Why else would he have copied them? As such, they provide some insight into this thought.

Again, the verses are:

*Steady your hand in time o' squalls
Stand to the last by him that falls
And answer clear to the voice that calls*

The maritime theme is reminiscent of the quote by Marcus Aurelius at the start of Osler's *Aequanimitas* (1889):

Thou must be like a promontory of the sea, against which, though the waves beat continually, yet it both itself stands, and about it are those swelling waves stilled and quieted.

In the address itself, Osler again uses the metaphor of the storm to describe the bodily virtue of imperturbability:

'coolness and presence of mind under all circumstances, calmness amid storm, clearness of judgment in moments of grave peril [...] It is the quality which is most appreciated by the laity though often misunderstood by them; and the physician who has the misfortune to be without it, who betrays indecision and worry, and who shows that he is flustered and flurried in ordinary emer-

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*(Continued from page 8)**gencies, loses rapidly the confidence of his patients.'*

Newbolt's verses also remind us of Osler's comment, delivered during a farewell dinner in New York in 1905 (and published as L'Envoi), that he has sought 'to be ready when the day of sorrow and grief came to meet it with the courage befitting a man.'

That day of sorrow and grief came 12 years later, on 29th August 1917, when his only son, Revere, was killed by shrapnel from a German shell in Belgium. Osler made this entry at the time:

'I was sitting in my library working on the new edition of my textbook when a telegram was brought in, 'Revere' dangerously wounded, comfortable and conscious, condition not hopeless'. I knew this was the end. We had expected it. The Fates do not allow the good fortune that has followed me to go with me to the grave – call no man happy till he dies. The War Office telephoned at 9 in the evening that he was dead. A sweeter laddie never lived, with a gentle loving nature.'

Standing next to Revere at his death was a group of eminent doctors which included Osler's close friend, Harvey Cushing, true to Newbolt's verse 'Stand to the last by him that falls'. This verse speaks to the dedication of doctors to their patients, even when all seems lost. In *The Evolution of Modern Medicine* (1913), Osler wrote:

'Medicine arose out of the primal sympathy of man with man; out of the desire to help those in sorrow, need and sickness.'

For Osler, doctors also had duties towards each other, of encouragement, support, solidarity and civility. He would be appalled by the mud-slinging and name-calling between doctors that one encounters too frequently on social media. He believed doctors had an *esprit de corps* that should be nurtured. I have little doubt that, for Osler, 'him that falls' in 'Stand to the last by him that falls' also applied to medical colleagues under stress at work. This is apposite in these pandemic times, when scores of healthcare professionals have fallen ill or succumbed to Covid.

While the first verse - *Steady your hand in time o' squalls* - was about technical skill and sound clinical judgement, the second is about the doctor's attitude towards others. Together, they represent Osler's favourite dyad: head and heart.

Newbolt's poem takes place on a ship, with sailors united in a common purpose and destination. Osler also sees the medical profession as a tight-knit community with a common goal. In *The Master-Word in Medicine* (1903), he wrote:

'You enter a noble heritage, made so by no efforts of your own, but by the generations of men who have unselfishly sought to do the best they could for suffering mankind.'
of an ancient and honourable Guild.'

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POETRY CORNER

**Admiral Death***Sir Henry Newbolt*

Boys, are ye calling a toast tonight,
Hear what the sea-wind saith,
Fill for a bumper strong and bright,
And here's to Admiral Death!
He's sailed in a hundred builds o' boat,
He's fought in a thousand kinds o' coat,
He's the senior flag of all that float,
And his name's Admiral Death!

Which of you looks for a service free?
Hear what the sea-wind saith,
The rules o' the service are but three,
When ye sail with Admiral Death.
Steady your hand in time o' squalls,
Stand to the last by him that falls,
And answer clear to the voice that calls,
Ay, Ay! Admiral Death!

How will ye know him among the rest?
Hear what the sea-wind saith,
By the glint o' the stars that cover his breast,
Ye may find Admiral Death.
By the forehead grim with an ancient scar,
By the voice that rolls like thunder far,
By the tenderest eyes of all that are,
Ye may know Admiral Death.

Where are the lads that sailed before?
Hear what the sea-wind saith,
Their bones are white by many a shore,
They sleep with Admiral Death.
Oh, but they loved him, young and old,
For he left the laggard and took the bold,
And the fight was fought, and the story's told,
And they sleep with Admiral Death.

Henry John Newbolt (1862-1938) was born in Staffordshire, England. He graduated Clifton College and Corpus Christi College Oxford from which he was called to the bar and practiced from 1887-99. He joined the War Propaganda Bureau at the beginning of the First World War and subsequently became Controller of the Telecommunications at the Foreign office. He wrote poetry, novels, and was an accomplished historian.

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The voice that calls, for Osler, is not Admiral Death, but the high ideals inherent in the practice of medicine and the sacred relationship between doctor and patient. In the same essay, Osler wrote:

'To you the silent workers of the ranks [...] is given the harder task of illustrating with your lives the Hippocratic standards of Learning, of Sagacity, of Humanity, and of Probity. [...] Of a humanity, that will show in your daily life tenderness and consideration to the weak, infinite pity to the suffering, and broad charity to all. Of a probity, that will make you under all circumstances true to yourselves, true to your high calling, and true to your fellow man.'

Elsewhere in The Master-Word in medicine, Osler wrote:

'The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.'

Osler refers to medicine as a 'calling' in other essays. In Teacher and Student (1892), Osler warns medical students about treading the wrong path in medicine:

'The choice lies open, the paths are plain before you. Always seek your own interests, make of a high and sacred calling a sordid business, regard your fellow creatures as so many tools of trade and, if your heart's desire is for riches, they may be yours; but you will have bartered away the birthright of a noble heritage, traduced the physician's well deserved title of the Friend of Man, and falsified the best traditions'

That belief in medicine as a calling, perhaps, is why the verse "And answer clear to the voice that calls" resounded with Osler.

I am unaware of Osler ever having used Newbolt's verses in his published writings but those 3 lines are notable for capturing so concisely Osler's views on the ideal clinician: one who must be able to use skill and judgement under pressure; one who is loyal, selfless and supportive of patients and colleagues; one who can combine head and heart in equal measure; and one who shows true commitment to the moral ideals and nobility of the medical profession. Little wonder that Osler wrote down the verses for safe keeping.

Living up to this lofty standard is no easy task but the actions of so many doctors, nurses and healthcare workers during the Covid pandemic show that it is possible to cling to this ideal, however savage the storm, and that doing so will benefit patients while enhancing the reputation of clinicians as Friends of Humanity.

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