William Osler: saint in a "White man's dominion"

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Although William Osler (1849–1919) continues to be held up as an example physicians should follow, medical students at his alma mater of McGill University have passed a motion in favour of dropping Osler eponyms.[1,2] We examine Osler's treatment of racialized people, and we contrast his lionization with the meagre recognition of his contemporaries who fought racism inside and outside the medical profession.

Osler held authoritative positions in medicine around the turn of the twentieth century.[3] He was the first physician-in-chief of Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he helped to expand the role of bedside teaching, and he was Regius Professor of Medicine at the University of Oxford. Osler wrote a widely read textbook, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* (1892). Many of his contemporaries have attested to his warmth and dedication; some even "worshipped" him.[3] The centenary of his death was marked by multiple publications celebrating his life and contributions.[1] A common theme was how much we can still learn from Osler today. Several medical institutions in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom are named after Osler. There is an Osler Club of London in the United Kingdom and an American Osler Society.

Adulation for Osler at least partly arises from his humanism and "love of humanity."[1] Yet it was Osler who wrote: "I cannot make up my mind about the Pan-America [Medical Congress]. I hate Latin Americans — but I do not like to desert my friends who are in it."[2] An intern recounted that, when she was embarrassed by her colleagues after six deaths from pneumonia on a "coloured" ward overnight, Osler attempted to support her by saying something to the effect that "the coloured, usually both syphilitic and alcoholics, were the worst risk in pulmonary disease …"[3] He also

Alexander Thomas Augusta, courtesy of Oblate Sisters of Providence Archives, Baltimore, Md.

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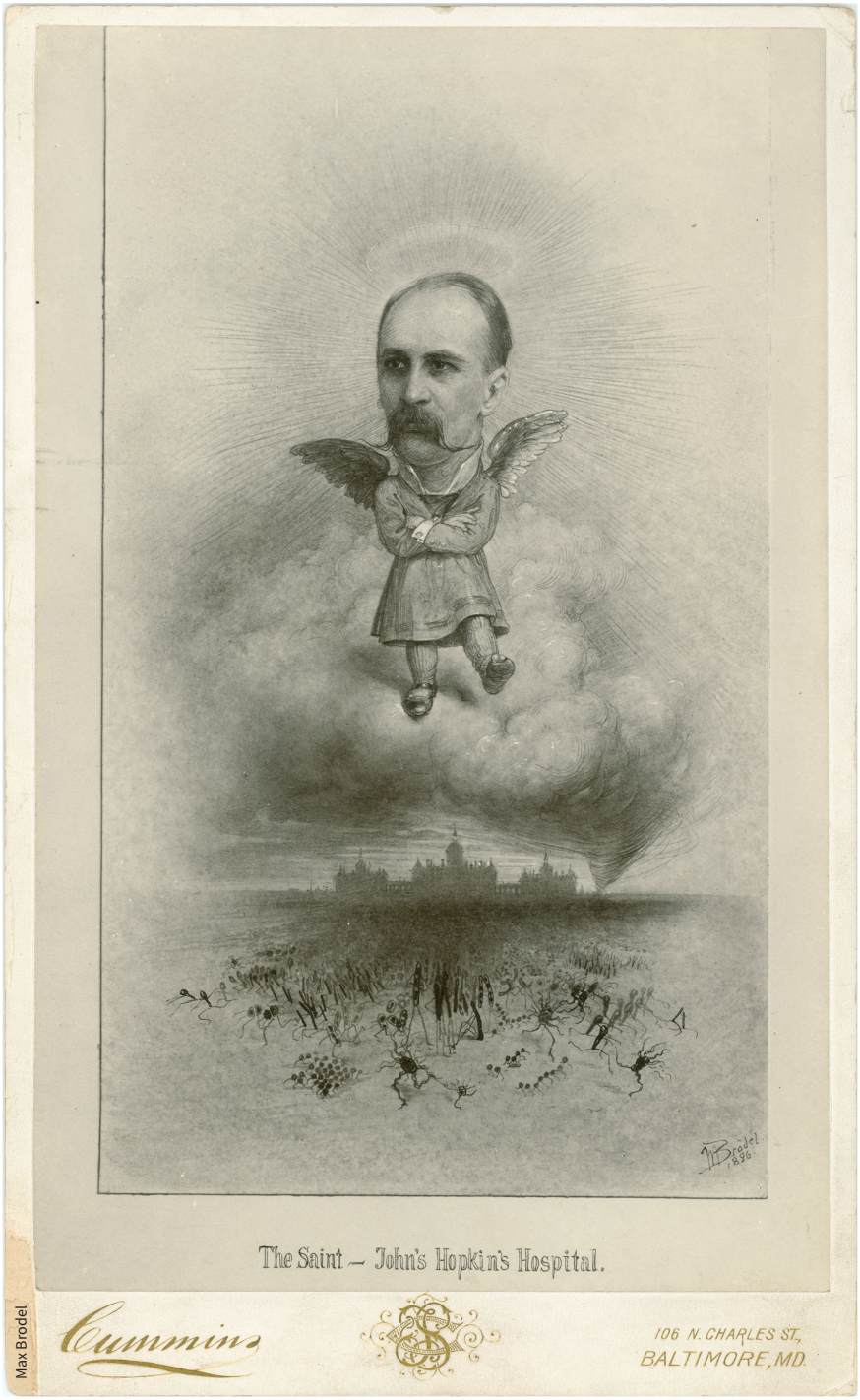
made racist statements publicly. A newspaper reporting on a 1914 speech summarized Osler's view on immigration under the heading "a White man's dominion": "The question with us is what are we to do when the yellow and brown men begin to swarm over … We can say we do not want [Chinese and Japanese] people, but the case is different with the Indians, who are our fellow citizens [of the British Empire]. We ought, if we could, say to them: 'Come in, you are welcome.' But we have to safeguard our country. Therefore, we shall be bound to say, 'We are sorry, we would if we could, but you cannot come in on equal terms with Europeans.' We are bound to make our country a White man's country."[3] Under a pseudonym, Osler wrote a fictional manuscript about Indigenous people, which included this phrase among similar ones: "Every primitive tribe retains some vile animal habit not yet eliminated in the upward march of the race."[4] He also brought "four choice skulls" of Indigenous people from North America to Germany for Rudolf Virchow's collection of human remains from around the world, according to a letter included in a biography by Harvey Cushing.[5]

These behaviours have been downplayed in a number of descriptions of Osler. Cushing modified a transcription of Osler's letter that included "I hate Latin Americans," replacing the word "hate" with "don't care for," before deciding to leave this out of his Pulitzer Prize–winning biography, which spanned two volumes and more than a thousand pages.[5,6] The biography of Osler by Michael Bliss describes the comment about "Latin Americans" as something Osler once "offhandedly remarked," although it was written in a letter, and Bliss explains that "he could not have had much contact with them."[3] Bliss includes the anecdote about deaths in a "coloured" ward as an example of Osler supporting women in medicine.[3] Others have acknowledged that some of Osler's actions were problematic but have tempered this by, for example, explaining that his "prejudices, like those of many people, operated at a distance and for the most part evaporated on face-to-face contact" and that "Osler was as much of a racist as the next Edwardian."[7] Other articles about Osler do not mention these instances at all.

Osler lived in a time of rampant racism and he wrote copiously, but not about racism. The volumes written about Osler have, similarly, tended to erase the experiences of racialized people, even though Osler practised medicine on "coloured" wards in Baltimore as segregation laws spread after the American Civil War. He was an active member of the American Medical Association when — after a contentious debate — it rejected membership applications from qualified racialized physicians.[7]

One of those physicians was Alexander Thomas Augusta (1825–1890), who was a



Drawing of Osler, "The Saint — John's Hopkin's Hospital." Original Repository. Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University, Montréal, Que. William Osler Photo Collection. 12787. URL. http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/osler/. Free text. Image no.: CUS_046–007B_P. Available: https://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/spotlight/gf/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101743406X27-img

contemporary of Osler's and who, like Osler, started his training in Toronto.[8,9] Augusta was born a freeman in Norfolk, Virginia, and secretly learned to read. By the 1840s he had moved to Baltimore, Maryland, to begin studying medicine with private tutors while he worked as a barber. Augusta moved to California to earn funds for his medical education but eventually accepted that he would not gain admittance to a school in the US, so he relocated to Toronto. After completing his training and working for a short period in Canada, Augusta wrote to Abraham Lincoln to request a commission in the Union Army. Augusta was eventually promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and went on to teach anatomy at Howard University after the Civil War. He was the first African American soldier buried in Arlington Cemetery, but he was repeatedly mistreated and underpaid by the military and was refused membership in the Washington, D.C., branch of the American Medical Association. Augusta prominently fought racism in both Canada and the US.

Augusta mentored Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott, who was born in Canada after his parents left Alabama out of concerns that their grocery store would be burned down.[10] Abbott studied medicine at Trinity College in Toronto and was licensed by the medical board of Canada West in 1862. While African American people who wanted to serve as surgeons in the army had great difficulty obtaining commissions, Abbott was also disadvantaged as a Canadian. Abbott repeatedly wrote letters to the Secretary of War, requesting an appointment as a surgeon in the Union Army, and eventually served as a civilian surgeon and earned several distinctions. He was among a small number of individuals invited to stand vigil while Abraham Lincoln lay dying.

Two licensed Indigenous physicians — Dr. Oronhyatekha (Burning Sky) and Dr. Peter Edmund Jones — trained in Toronto around the same time as Osler. Jones helped to usher in the *Electoral Franchise Act*, which allowed some Indigenous people to vote in federal elections.[11,12]

Today, no hospitals are named after these physicians, and there was no outpouring of praise in medical journals on the centenaries of their deaths. How many have even heard of them? The works and even the lives of Osler's contemporaries who fought racism tend to be erased by the notion that Osler's racist behaviours were typical for his time.[3] Such racist behaviours might have helped Osler fit in among the White men who made up the medical elite. There is nothing in the records to indicate that Osler advocated at the American Medical Association for fair treatment of racialized physicians, and quiet acceptance of racism might have been a prerequisite for holding leadership positions. A century later, White men still head prominent medical institutions and there is a dominant view of the history of medicine that stars the likes of Osler.

As statues of once-revered individuals who participated in racist crimes are being removed around the world, we should change Osler's place in medical curricula and explicitly address racism in medicine. What effect did Osler's racist behaviours have on his devoted trainees and the many others he influenced during and after his life? Osler quotes are a mainstay of medical school lectures, albeit not the statements we have highlighted here. Rather than continuing to heap recognition on Osler and other White men whose names still reverberate through medical school lecture halls today, we can acknowledge the accomplishments of racialized physicians who managed to make important contributions despite racism, and who showed extraordinary courage by fighting racism. The lives of Augusta, Abbott, Oronhyatekha and Jones, as well as other Black, Indigenous and racialized physicians, matter now.

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