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## Book Reviews

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# Book Reviews

Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

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**Walt Whitman and Sir William Osler:  
A Poet and His Physician**

by **Philip W. Leon**. Toronto: ECW Press, 1995.

212 pages, indexed, 18 illustrations.

Hardcover, ISBN 1-55022-251-1. (\$42 Canada, \$32 United States).  
Paper, ISBN 1-55022-252-X, (\$29.95 Canada, \$21.95 United States).

US: InBook, P.O. Box 120261, East Haven, CT 06512.

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Canada: General, 30 Lexmill Rd., Don Mills, ON M3B 2T6.

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Reviewed by **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

To counter charges that doctors lack general knowledge beyond the narrow confines of a rigorous scientific curriculum, many medical colleges have recently instituted courses in medical humanities, a rubric that includes medical historiography, ethics, and, especially, the relationship of literature and medicine. Organizations such as the American Association for the History of Medicine attract medical doctors, historians, and literary scholars; there are


literature and medicine databases on the Internet (<http://mchip00.med.nyu/lit-med/medhum.html>) for the sharing of ideas; and we are now seeing books that bring to the fore stories of physicians who can reveal secrets about the medical histories of the famous and infamous. To this latter category can now be added Philip W. Leon's remarkably thorough account of the relationship of Walt Whitman with Sir William Osler, M.D., in the 1880s. Dr. Osler was one of the founding doctors of the Johns Hopkins medical school and later became Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University. When he died in 1919, Osler was the most famous medical doctor in the English-speaking world.

Whitman suffered a series of paralytic strokes, beginning in 1873, that left him in poor health and a virtual invalid until his death in 1892. Fortunately, Dr. Osler arrived in Philadelphia from his native Canada to teach at the University of Pennsylvania medical college at a time when Whitman, living in nearby Camden, New Jersey, experienced a severe setback. Leon tells how Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, superintendent of the London (Ontario) Asylum for the Insane, a fascinating character whose admiration of Whitman approached religious zealotry, implored Osler to care for the ailing poet, which Osler did without charge for the better part of five years.

Leon wisely does not center his book on Whitman's medical problems and Osler's treatments. Rather, he examines their relationship for its personal qualities, evoking in particular their astonishing array of mutual friends from the worlds of medicine, literature, and art. In so doing, Leon engagingly illuminates the intellectual climate of late nineteenth-century America and England. The medical figures in the book include **Dr. S. Weir Mitchell**, who also treated Whitman and who achieved some fame as a novelist. Among Mitchell's patients for his "rest cure" were writers **Edith Wharton**, **Owen Wister**, and **Charlotte Perkins Gilman**. At the behest of Wharton, Osler treated **Henry James**, a great admirer of Whitman.

The artists **John Singer Sargent** and **Thomas Eakins**, both of whom knew Whitman and Osler, appear in this study. Sargent proposed painting Whitman's portrait but never accomplished it, while Eakins, who also painted dozens of members of the Philadelphia medical community, completed his in 1888. Eakins's portrait became one of the best-known of the old poet. Leon deals extensively with the Whitman-Osler-Eakins connection.

Leon's own canvas is broad and he includes in his discussion Osler and Whitman's ties to English literary figures such as **Robert** and **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**, **A.C. Swinburne**, and the **Rossettis**. When Osler left the United States for England (where he was created a baronet by King George V in 1911), he corresponded and visited with many of Whitman's defenders and worshippers there. In 1919, Osler began writing his personal reminiscences of his days with Whitman, but he died before completing them; Leon includes the manuscript, never published in its entirety, and fully explicates Osler's interweaving of the personal and professional aspects of their relationship, thereby uncovering the links between the doctor's objective assessment of Whitman's medical condition and his undeniably subjective attraction to the poet's personal magnetism.

This pathbreaking book, a model of its kind, belongs in every medical college library, particularly at those schools that teach courses in medicine and literature. Undergraduate and graduate colleges and universities will want this book for its revelations of a previously unknown aspect of the life of the unconventional poet. 



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