Sir William Osler's speech at Troy: a Trojan horse?

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Troy, New York, is a city of 55,000 people in upstate New York located along the Hudson River. A city of surprisingly rich cultural heritage, it was the home of New York state's first hospital outside New York City. The 50th anniversary celebration of Troy's hospital brought William Osler to the city as the keynote speaker. This speech, delivered on November 28, 1900, is one of Sir William's less well known addresses. Osler began his comments with Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and talked at length about the hospital, its obligations, the influences it has upon the community, and the role of physicians and surgeons. He broached one of his old saws, the salary of attending physicians and their needed role in hospital management. His words were published in the diamond jubilee's records, but the hospital did not outlive its prominent guest professor, and it closed its doors in 1914. Just like the great historical city of Troy, New York's own Troy was on the brink of decline, and its hospital would be the first fatality. Therefore, it is almost prescient that the words of Osler, taken into historical context juxtaposed against the socioeconomic forces at work, are akin to the Greek's offering of a wooden edifice to end the Trojan War.

At the crossroads of development of the modern image of America lie the metaphoric ruins of cities, towns, industries, and relics such as the Erie Canal, which represented the ideals of this new nation. One such city is Troy, New York, which developed, prospered, and declined as America developed. America's medical profession likewise has followed an evolutionary pathway similar in many aspects to the rise and fall of its cities. A curious coupling of medicine, medical education, hospitals, and health care provides a backdrop for review of one of the 19th and early 20th centuries' giants of medicine, Sir William Osler. His opinions from a little known address given on November 28, 1900, in Troy, New York, form the basis of this treatise. His talk was given on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the Old Troy Hospital but also serves as a metaphor, or perhaps more precisely an allegory, of the Trojan horse of Homer's *Iliad*. The wooden horse was a Greek trick to seduce the Trojans into accepting a hidden invading army into the city's midst. Though Osler was invited into the confines of the Old Troy Hospital as a visiting dignitary, the downfall of the hospital was indeed imminent, and his choice of material for his talk is hauntingly prophetic, starting with Thomas More's *Utopia* and linking the hospital to the financial success of the

community. William Osler was then the chief of medicine at the Johns Hopkins, sole author of the *Principles and Practice of Medicine*, and the star of modern American medical education; he was at his zenith and much in demand as a speaker (1).

THE CITY OF TROY

Troy, New York, is a bustling city in upstate New York on the shores of the Hudson River and its confluence with the Mohawk. Troy's history has a remarkable cultural heritage. The foundations of the city are linked to the early colonization of the New England region. The first settlers were Dutch, followed by the English. In 1609, Henry Hudson found the mouth of the river that is now named in his honor. He sailed up the Hudson River on the *Half Moon* and by September 1609 was forced by sandbars to stop at the northward boundary that is now the city of Albany. Lubbert Gijsbertsz established the first colony, then called "Lubbert's Land," in 1634. Between 1656 and 1663, 18 Dutch families were living and thriving in this area called Fort Orange, later to be Albany, New York. The village of van der Heyden prospered, and in January 1789 the residents met at Stephen Ashley's tavern to discuss the future of the town. In records recovered and on display in Troy's library, the freeholders of van der Heyden met to establish a name for the town that they felt could be a modern metropolis (2).

A majority of voices, it was confirmed, that in the future, it should be called and known by the name of TROY. From its present improved state, and the more pleasing prospects of its popularity, arising from the natural advantages in the mercantile line, it may not be too sanguine to expect, at no very distant period, to see Troy, as famous as her trade and navigation as many of our first towns.

With these words, the people of Troy expressed enthusiasm at the future prospects of their fair city. By the late 18th century,

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Troy was beginning to rise in prominence in early America as an industrial center. Hannah Lord Montague in 1794 developed a detachable collar. By the early 19th century, removable collars became the height of gentlemen's fashion in the United States and the world. Troy, New York, was the center of the manufacture of these collars, and it received the nickname "the Collar City." The War of 1812 created a need for rations for troops, which were encamped throughout upstate New York. Troy's Sam Wilson, nicknamed Uncle Sam by locals and family, was a meat packer who rose to his patriotic duty to provide much-needed rations for these troops. Soldiers garrisoned in upstate New York knew of him and began calling rations stamped with "U.S." as coming from Uncle Sam. The popular myth spread rapidly and was culminated by the political cartoonist, Thomas Nast, in his image of Uncle Sam. Troy, New York, was poised on the forefront of early American greatness (2).

What made Troy, New York, such an early American success? This can be traced to many factors, including its location on the upper Hudson River at the confluence of the Mohawk River. Shipping provided an early inexpensive method for transportation throughout New York, and the location of the Hudson River along the northeast passageway down to New York City, connecting it to the natural resources of the Adirondack region of upper New York, came to serve this purpose. Labor was readily available from a large influx of immigrants, primarily coming into the New York City region, especially the Irish. The Adirondack region provided a wealth of resources, including iron, coal, and endless supplies of wood. Finally, the hills around Troy had numerous waterfalls for early hydroelectric power development.

The final key to the success of Troy's early American legacy was the proposed construction of the Erie Canal in 1724. The early proponents intended to connect the Hudson River to Lake Erie and provide cheap water access from New York City in the Atlantic Ocean to the inner hub of early America. Almost a century later, "the great canal bill" was proposed to Congress in 1817. The canal was opened in October 1823 with huge celebrations, particularly in Troy, New York. The Watervliet lock on the Erie Canal was considered an engineering wonder of its time. This canal was championed by New York's first governor, Dewitt Clinton, and was often referred to in the early 19th century as "Clinton's Ditch." The canal was 340 miles long and 4 feet deep with 82 locks. It influenced the country's early economy, and in particular New York's vastly expanding financial hold in the early United States (2).

THE OLD TROY HOSPITAL

By 1845, the influx of immigrant labor and the rise of early industrial establishments, particularly factories, allowed for the development of overcrowded, squalorly conditions. This in turn resulted in epidemic outbreaks of smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, and typhoid fever (3). The community responded by 1845: the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul moved to form a hospital that they felt was necessary for the success of the burgeoning community at Troy. The hospital was initially designed by Markus P. Cummings with a French II empire architecture.

The first hospital was hastily constructed, but the primary hospital was located at 8th Street and Fulton. The cornerstone of the future hospital was placed by the Right Reverend J. J. Conroy, Bishop of Albany, on June 28, 1868. The Troy Hospital became the first full-service hospital outside of New York City (3).

The hospital was clearly linked to its surrounding community, and its style and full-service concept reflected the bright industrious people from the town of Troy. Most notable was Henry Burden, who was an industrialist, innovator, and inventor of early American manufacturing. He was intimately associated and linked with the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, which graduated the future entrepreneurial engineer of the Chicago World Fair, George W. G. Ferris, in 1881. Troy was also the backdrop for Clement Moore, a New York City minister, who upon visiting Troy read "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and published it in the *Troy Record* on December 3, 1823. This piece would later become more fondly known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas." The stove industry reached its zenith with 17 foundries and \$2.8 million in revenue by 1821. One manufacturing plant, the Meanly Bells Company, produced over 50,000 church bells. Corning Winslow and Company obtained a contract to construct the iron cladding for the *USS Monitor* and proceeded to do this in less than 100 days. The end of the Civil War, however, was linked clearly with the beginning of the end of Troy's early American success story (2).

The hospital in Troy attracted several physicians of note. Dr. John Thorn was the first appointed physician. Thorn trained in England, was one of early Troy's most famous residents, and was twice elected mayor. At the end of the Civil War, the growth of Troy and two fires at the old hospital site resulted in plans for a new and larger hospital, which was located at Fulton and 8th Streets. The new Old Troy Hospital was completed in the fall of 1871 in the "Grant style" of building and attracted young, newly minted physicians to the upgraded facility that was thought to be on the leading edge of health care in the U.S. The Sisters of Charity were justly proud of their efforts and meticulously recorded their accounts, daily activities, and photographic archives. In 1895 the hospital added a "special operating room suite" and began a nursing school (3).

SURVEYING OSLER'S COMMENTS AT TROY HOSPITAL'S GOLDEN JUBILEE

Troy's reputation at this time carried more luster than the town held during Osler's visit. By the time of the golden jubilee of Old Troy Hospital, there was a significant feeling of an impending depression. Osler's lecture (*Figure 1*) emphasized the hospital's link to its community; these comments were fortuitous, as the ties binding the medical staff to the hospital and to the town cannot be fully appreciated except in retrospect. Both the town and the hospital would fall before a score of years passed.

Osler commenced his comments with remarks from Thomas More's *Utopia*: "But first and chiefly of all, respect is had to the sick, that be cured in the hospitals" (4). This was the key element of his talk; it formed the foundation for which he would go on to speak throughout his address, and it tied the city's future to

Figure 1. Osler's address printed in the hospital's jubilee book.

Figure 2. Troy Hospital's annual report for 1902.

ed the picture of a community no longer scrapped by financial considerations. The hospital was the primary reference in his work, where he poignantly referred to man's potential greatness, especially when removed from financial considerations (4).

The 1902 annual report of the Troy Hospital (Figure 2) commented, "After this pleasing picture, it is with reluctance that we refer to our deficit for current expenses and a number of requirements, which are absolutely needed for future demands." Expenditures and indebtedness of the hospital stood then at a staggering \$72,700 (6). The town of Troy had only one remaining active foundry at the time of Osler's visit. Manufacturing had left the area for the upstart communities of Pittsburgh and Chicago. Waves of labor strikes had taken their toll on the once thriving city of Troy. Medicine and medical education were also

that of the hospital and its community. He switched in his next statements to the idea of the Good Samaritan, "not so the problem of the sick, poor, which charity answers with the smile." Osler proceeded to his main theme: "The hospital centers all that is best and highest in the profession of medicine. . . . In it . . . we doctors live and move and have our beginnings."

This address represents a classic Oslerian oration. He began with a theme from a classical author, in this case Sir Thomas More and *Utopia* (5). Osler next moved into his "old saw" about the ability of good men in medicine to contribute greatly. Neither Osler nor his audience were fully aware of the financial peril that both the city and the hospital were facing. This was particularly eerie in light of his choice of *Utopia*. In *Utopia*, More painted

crossing the Hudson River; the downfall of Troy's medical practice became a blessing for the rising Albany Medical College.

The Old Troy Hospital is now West Hall at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (6) (Figure 3). It no longer serves the "sick" of the community, and like long ago Troy, it is now a legacy of the past. It is supposedly haunted by Betsy the ghost, who roams the first two floors only (7). This is intriguing since these were two active floors of patient wards during the heyday of the Old Troy Hospital; the third floor housed the women's ward. Osler stated early in his address that "society is built upon a tripod—the schoolhouse, the hospital, and the jail" (4). Could he have known that the Old Troy Hospital would fail in its service to the sick and then become a schoolhouse? This is improbable given the enthusiastic and upbeat nature of his address at the time of the golden jubilee.

We can only speculate what brought the central figure of early American medicine to the city of Troy to give this golden jubilee address. Osler made several comments regarding specific physicians during his talk, especially the hospital's pathologists and surgeons. Troy had become a center for training of surgeons, especially the orthopedists and the laryngologists (3). Osler specifically alluded to their contributions to medicine, particularly training resident physicians (4).

CONCLUSION

At the January 5, 1789, foundation, the fathers of Troy, New York, felt that the naming of their fair city, Troy, would bring great commerce to their town. In fact, Troy did become a center of early American manufacturing and trade. But for Troy, New York, the era had come and gone by the golden jubilee of the Old Troy Hospital. As evidenced in the hospital's annual report, deep financial concerns were gathering.

It is impossible when reading these interactions from a less hectic medical past not to find similarities between Osler's address and the Trojan horse. In the New York Troy, the Greeks were not the cause of the downfall, but a rapidly changing America. Almost poignantly, we can conclude with Sir Thomas More's quote: "For where money beareth all the swing, there

Figure 3. West Hall at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, previously Troy Hospital.

many vain and superfluous occupations must needs be used, to serve only for riotous superfluity and dishonest pleasure” (5).

1. Bliss M. *William Osler, A Life in Medicine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
2. Rutherford J. *Facts and Observations in Relation to the Origin and Completion of the Erie Canal*. New York: N. B. Holmes, 1825.
3. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. A brief history of West Hall. Available at <http://ces2.geo.rpi.edu/History/westhall.html>; accessed September 22, 2011.
4. Osler W. Address delivered on the occasion of Troy Hospital's golden jubilee, Nov. 1900. In *Diamond Jubilee of the Troy Hospital*. Troy, NY: Troy Hospital, 1900:48–56.
5. Bruce S. *Three Early Modern Utopias*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
6. Sisters of Charity. *Annual Report, Troy Hospital, October 1901 to October 1902*. Troy, NY: Troy Hospital.
7. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. *West Hall: Getty Campus Heritage Study*. Troy, NY: Rensselaer. Available at https://oneness.scup.org/asset/55742/Rensselaer_West_Hall.pdf; accessed September 25, 2011.