

THE FIXED PERIOD

In 1880 the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope contemplated euthanasia for everyone upon reaching the age of sixty seven and a half, whether or not they were willing or unwell. Trollope was a prolific writer and one of his last works *The Fixed Period* related the history of the island Republic of Britannula whose subjects had fled New Zealand thirty years earlier and then severed political relations with Great Britain. All of the original settlers were relatively young and when they got around to establishing a legal system, insisted upon compulsory euthanasia to abolish the “miseries and imbecility” of old age, no less the expense of caring for the nonproductive elderly. This was seen as an obligatory act of altruism made for the sake of others.

Told in the first person by the President of the Republic, a Mr. Neverbend, the time of action was projected one hundred years into the future to the distant year 1980. Trollope foresaw that by then people would be transported by wonderful steam tricycles, would converse over great distances using wireless devices and would attend international cricket matches that would be contested by teams of professional athletes. After much debate, the Britannulists agreed that upon attaining the age of sixty-seven all citizens would be “deposited” in a college campus where they would spend a year of contemplation and dignified retirement. But when they reached the age of sixty-seven and a half, “a euthanasia was to be prepared for them” and they would “depart.” Specifically, the victims “veins would be opened” while they were immersed in a warm bath and given morphine.

This remarkable social legislation was intended to assure “a decent and comfortable departure” and was justified not only on the basis of economics, but also because it would spare the elders from “a useless and painful life.” At first the law was enthusiastically supported by the still youthful Britanulists, but by the time of the narrative which was set thirty years after the law was enacted, the citizens began to have misgivings. Just when the first unlucky senior was being led away to college, an English warship with a marvelous new technology — a 250 ton cannon, appeared in the harbor. Neverbend was taken prisoner, the island reverted to English rule and the odious law was rescinded. One can imagine Gilbert and Sullivan putting the fabulous story to music.

Two years after *The Fixed Period* was published, Trollope died after a stroke; ironically, he was age sixty-seven, an age when he would be approaching his own “fixed period” were he living on the island of Britannula. Although Trollope’s novel is little

remembered today, a quarter century later it caused an unexpected sensation. On February 22, 1905 Dr. William Osler was the commencement speaker at the Johns Hopkins University and used the occasion to give a farewell speech before he departed for England where he would become the Regius professor of medicine at Oxford. Dr. Osler called his address “The Fixed Period” after Trollope’s novel.

At the time Osler was fifty-six years old and what he had in mind was not a fixed period of biologic life but of academic life. He cited two of his own longheld “fixed ideas,” the first being the comparative [creative] uselessness of men above forty years of age.” He noted that the most “vitalizing” work in most fields is done between the ages of twenty-five and forty years — “the anabolic or constructive period, in which there is always a balance in the mental bank and the credit is good.” Osler’s second “fixed idea” was the intellectual uselessness of most men above sixty years of age and the incalculable benefit it would be in commercial, political and professional life if, as a matter of course, men stopped work at this age.

The teacher’s life should have three periods – study until twenty-five, investigation until forty, profession until sixty, at which age I would have him retired on a double allowance. Whether Trollope’s suggestion of a college and chloroform should be carried out or not, I have become a little dubious, as my own time is getting so short.

Dubious or not, Osler’s words, which were intended to be humorous, were distorted by journalists reporting the event. As Harvey Cushing wrote in his biography of Osler, “The storm did not break until the next day when it was headlined throughout the country, “Osler recommends Chloroform at Sixty.” Osler protested that he had been misunderstood and held his ground saying, “I meant just what I said, but it’s disgraceful, this fuss that the newspapers are making about it. I know that there are exceptions, but they only serve to illustrate the rule...as to chloroforming men at sixty, that was only a pleasantry.”

A dispatch published in *The Lancet* reported that the great stir among American journalists in response to Osler’s address reflected that “the Americans are somewhat deficient in a sense of humor when they themselves are directly concerned.” Dr. Osler’s speech provoked an enormous response both from supporters and critics. Some people began to speak of “oslerizing” the elderly. One observer noted similarities between Osler’s and Charles Darwin’s opinions. Darwin once had written, “What a good thing it would be, if every scientific man was to die when sixty years old, as afterwards he

would be sure to oppose all new doctrines.” Eleven years after his commencement speech, Osler ruefully recalled the incident:

I had been reading Anthony Trollope’s “Fixed Period” and had been thinking of some professors who had remained at their posts after their period of usefulness was over. It was for them that I with humorous intent advocated chloroform as a peaceful means of retirement. The newspapers made much of it and misquoted it. Boys do not read Trollope. He is dangerous.

Today we can appreciate how Dr. Osler’s remarks were taken out of context and twisted, although one biographer suggested that William Osler had become a prisoner of his own preconceptions that creativity in medical science was a young man’s talent. For example, Osler was remarkably short-sighted about the possibility that medical progress, which he invariably celebrated, might have an impact in delaying the ravages of the years. Although he thought and read about the act of death, medically he seemed uninterested in developing a special knowledge of age. Moreover, he was not in touch with some of the work that was laying the foundation for the development of gerontology. Although it is true that during the 19th century a few books were written about diseases of old age, it wasn’t until 1909, when Osler already was on the down-side of his career, that Dr. Ignatz Nascher of New York City first coined the term “geriatrics.” Nascher himself was far ahead of his time and the public and medical establishment were virtually unresponsive until interest in this field finally had a resurgence in the 1960s.