



# Honouring our past and shaping our future

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One of my favourite things to do is to ask Canadians to tell the story of how they came to be in this country. Are your ancestors First Nations or Inuit or Metis, the original people of the land? Did your forebears come here for love? For money? To escape religious persecution? Did they come looking for a better future, not for themselves, but for their children?

I was born in Winnipeg, Man, and although my 4 grandparents lived there when I was born, they all came from elsewhere. I have chosen a theme for my presidential year at the College, which is "Honouring our past and shaping our future." Let me honour the past by telling you about my own origins.

### Family history

Grandfather Wilson came from Scotland as a teenaged boy with his older brother, and promptly went off to World War I with the 11th Battalion Canadian Engineers. Although he didn't talk about it, we have recently realized from his military records that he was at Vimy Ridge. When he returned, he worked in the maintenance department at the Winnipeg General Hospital until he retired. By all accounts he was good at his job, both cheerful and competent.

He married my grandmother when he came back from the war. She was the daughter of his landlady, my great-grandmother, who had come from Scotland with her husband and 4 children when her husband had been advised that only the Canadian prairie air could help his chronic lung condition. He died within a year of arrival; she opened a boarding house. Her daughter, my grandmother, lived alert, well, and independent until 92, and I came to know her well. As an immigrant, she was particularly fond of the Canadian social security system, especially the Old Age Security program and the Canada Pension Plan, which allowed her stay in her own home. She had an eye for the ridiculous and would poke fun at others and herself.

My maternal grandfather grew up on Spadina Avenue in Toronto, Ont. His mother was a widow (her husband died of tuberculosis) who ran a coal store, and he was her only son. He ended up being the Dean of Theology at United College, now the University of Winnipeg. He briefly considered medicine as a career,

but believed that theology was the queen of the sciences. My grandfather had a love for canoeing, camping, and the Canadian wilderness, all of which have been strong themes of our family life.

His wife, my fourth grandparent, traces her family back 15 generations to a couple who came to New England on the *William and Mary* in 1634. They might have come because the plague had swept through their town of Salisbury in England 7 years earlier. My grandmother was a formidable organizer, with a great concern for the mission of the church overseas.

### Common traits

Why tell you about my grandparents? I believe my grandparents' traits exemplify the qualities that all family doctors possess.

First, we're acquainted with maintenance. We are used to the business of cheerfully keeping things going, knowing that something or someone is breaking down every day. We are aware that some problems can be fixed and others prevented, but there is always work to be done. Also, it's worth noting that we're not afraid of using the tools of our trade, be they anesthesia machines, vacuum extractors, or electronic medical records.

Next, we are keen observers of human foibles. We know quite a bit about human nature and see people in their most intimate moments: full of joy, overwhelmed by sorrow, stressed by bad news, or struggling with pain. We know that we need to carry on, as Osler commended, with equanimity, along with a good dose of laughter where we can.

Third, we understand the need to cure souls. Family doctors know that there is health and illness in bodies and in minds; there is no split of the mind, body, and soul. Furthermore, we are aware of something that transcends our very meager understanding of healing.

Finally, we have a concern for people all over the world and the skills to help us help others. So, by remembering the families and the individuals who compose Canada's history, and our own, we draw on their strength and characteristics to shape our future as valued and competent practitioners in the discipline of family medicine.

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