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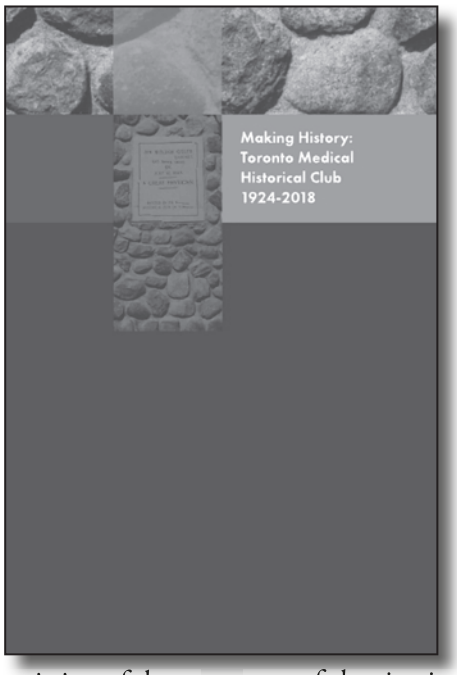
Making History

Toronto Medical History Club, 1924-2018

Edited and compiled by Peter Kopplin and Irving Rosen

Durham, NC: 2021. 125 pages. US$ 15.95 softcover (Lulu.com)

Local or regional historical organizations dot the landscape. The Ontario Historical Society identifies and depicts the location of over 400 groups that are affiliated with the larger provincial society (https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/directory-and-map/). Typically, these smaller constituent societies are voluntarily run, well-organized, and are devoted to the maintenance of an historic site, house, or cemetery; or they might record and promote the history of a particular locale. Alternatively, such groups may foster knowledge about a particular occupation or industry that was important to the social and economic well-being of the area, e.g. agriculture, fishing, railways, and so on. So-called professional historians may well be included in the membership of such organizations, but a typical identifying feature of almost all of them is the predominance of "amateur" historians from all walks of life who are wholly committed to the mission of the society, and who are knowledgeable about its historical subject matter.



One species under the genre of amateur historical organizations is the local medical history society. Generally, such groups have flown under the historical radar as their purpose and membership are highly specialized, if not exclusive—maybe, in the opinion of some, even litist. By my reckoning based on personal knowledge there are about half a dozen (or were before COVID-19 struck) such clubs functioning across Ontario. These groups flourish in cities which are also home to medical schools. The oldest is likely based in London owing to its origins as the Harvey Club, dating to 1919, founded by Dr. James Wellington Crane (1877-1959), a University of Toronto Medical graduate (1898) who made his career at Western's medical school as professor of pharmacology. His legacy as an amateur medical historian in the medical school lives on to this day through the several historical organizations he founded, along with his extensive historical book collection that remains an important part of that institution's health sciences library. A brief 1957 biography of Crane by the late, noted McGill physician-historian Donald G. Bates (MD Western '58) described him as "patron saint of Western."

It was also due to Crane that the Toronto Medical Historical Club (THMC) was formed. *Making History: Toronto Medical History Club, 1924-2018* describes how on the evening of 24 January, 1924, Crane, nine other doctors, and Justice W.R. Riddell met at the Toronto home of Dr. Jabez H. Elliot. This gathering marked the club's inaugural meeting, at which the group's name, purpose, and rules were established. Rather than adopting a medical eponym to label the group (i.e. the William Osler or the Christopher Widmer Society—both eminent doctors with Toronto connections), the group decided on the more modest moniker of the TMHC. It also determined to meet only during the winter months, and to limit membership to as many people that might comfortably be accommodated in the home of the rotating host member, which was around 13-14 persons. From the outset a hallmark of the TMHC was genteel, gentlemanly (the gendered term is used advisedly) culture. This founding meeting occurred on 24 January, which is the longstanding date that recognizes the birth of Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard. This may have been coincidental, but it also might have been an additional excellent reason for members to hoist a glass or two of scotch to celebrate the evening's festivities. The fact that one of the TMHC's charter members soon thereafter presented a paper on Burns' physicians adds credence to this speculation. The meeting concluded with Elliot discussing his antiquarian book collection.

What happened that evening became the pattern followed for the 500 subsequent meetings during the almost next century as *Making History* chronicles. Exceptions to it were milestone meetings, such as the 350th when TMHC members met in 1991 for a lavish dinner at Toronto's tony Arts & Letters Club; other commemorative dinner meetings have been held in the comfortable ambience of University of Toronto's Massey College. True to its original mandate, membership numbers remained limited. Overwhelmingly members belonged to Toronto's medical élite, and included the likes of Frederick Banting of insulin fame, ranking members of the University of Toronto medical professoriate, and leading specialist clinicians. But since its founding meeting, which included the inclusion of the non-medical Justice Riddell after whom the OHS Riddell award for the best article published in *Ontario History* is named, TMHC has always welcomed practising historians. Scholarly luminaries such as J.M.S Careless (once president of OHS), Michael Bliss, and Edward "Ned" Shorter were among those who shelled out for the nominal two-dollar annual membership dues; so, too, Donald Avery, G.R. "Pat" Patterson, Geoff Hudson, Heather MacDougall, and myself (before leaving Toronto and the club over twenty years ago). The nomination of Dr. MacDougall in 1993 was a TMHC landmark as she was the first woman to become a member. *Making History* generously describes me as a "progressive thinker" (68) as it was I, then as club president, who orchestrated her entry to this male bastion—personally, I just believed that this oversight was one to be corrected after seventy years! Dr. MacDougall's assimilation into the group was seamless; over the ensuing years the club was "privileged" (72) to hear the numerous papers she delivered. Following her were Rosalind Herst (physician) in 1998 and Alison Li (historian) in 2012.

Most of *Making History* is devoted to potted biographies of members. This highly internalist approach targets this slim celebratory but nicely designed and produced volume for a niche readership. Yet it is perhaps less the book's *content* and more its *intent* that makes this work of sig-

nificance—its existence invites several fundamental questions: What is the social and intellectual motivation that nurtures these albeit invisible groups? What accounts for their doctor-driven longevity, especially in light of their relatively informal structure and organization? To be clear, *Making History* addresses none of these matters, but a quick analysis of an appendix that lists the titles of all papers presented at the TMHC from 1957 to 2018 (322 in all) offers clues to answers for such questions. From study of this information, along with personal phenomenological experience as president of TMHC and also through a similar role in clubs in London (Ontario), Washington, DC, and St. John's, Newfoundland, I surmise that active participation in these groups by doctors amounts to the equivalent of episodic micro-sabbaticals. The opportunity to explore an historical topic, often uplifting biographies, grounded in one's vocation yet chronologically removed from the quotidian harsh and grinding realities of it, can be intellectually reinvigorating and healthful. A paper presented at the TMHC or one its sister clubs can be seen as edutainment, but it also can prevent burnout for thinking medical practitioners. The admittance of academic (medical) historians to these clubs, I would argue is a bonus, as their inclusion confers scholarly validation. Their contribution is much more than ornamental, however, as they can leaven the level of historical discourse as the identified list of topics presented by them indicates.

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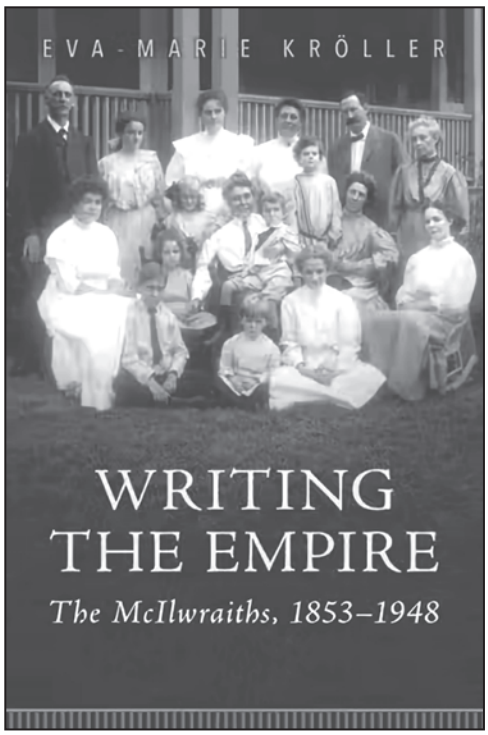
Writing the Empire

The McIlwraiths, 1853-1948

By Eva Marie Kröller

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. 536 pages. $82.50. ISBN 978-1-4875-0757-2 (utorontopress.com)



Eva Marie Kröller's new book on the McIlwraith family follows a family for multiple generations and extends through multiple regions in the British Empire and beyond. This type of study is known as prosopography—the story of several people all connected in some way—in this case through familial connections. The first thing that strikes the reader is the impressive body of varied sources from a wide variety of archives. The author's mastery of the archival material is impressive as she explores generations of a family that was mobilized by education, war, and their careers.