

**In Memoriam:****William Strathearn Keith**

M.B., M.B.E.  
(1902-1987)

On December 27, 1987 William Strathearn Keith, one of Canada's pioneer neurosurgeons, died at the age of 85, of Hodgkins disease, at his home in Toronto surrounded by his family. He had spent a happy and active summer with his wife Eleanor and his family at his beloved cottage on the Oxtongue River near Algonquin Park.

Bill Keith was born in Toronto on June 20, 1902. He attended Bedford Park and John Fisher Public Schools, and University of Toronto Schools. He completed the program in Biology and Medicine at the University of Toronto on scholarships, and graduated in 1927 as silver medalist. He interned at Toronto General Hospital, where his interest in neurological surgery was sparked by Dr. Kenneth McKenzie, Canada's first neurosurgeon.

Dr. W. E. Gallie, then Surgeon-in-Chief at the Hospital for Sick Children, persuaded him to train in neurosurgery and to develop a neurosurgical service at that hospital. In preparation for this, Dr. Keith spent a year in Chicago with Roy Grinker in neurology and Percival Bailey in neuropathology and neurosurgery. In 1930 he became Kenneth McKenzie's first full-year neurosurgical resident. He then studied neurology for a year at the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, Queen Square, London, England, with some of the neurological giants of the day including Adie, Holmes, Riddoch and Symonds. During that year, Eleanor Newberry, a Hospital for Sick Children nurse, joined him in London, where they were married.

Bill was appointed to the surgical staff at the Hospital for Sick Children in 1933, and performed orthopaedic and general surgery, as well as neurosurgery, until his own specialty grew to occupy

his full time. His unusually wide breadth of medical knowledge, and the versatility of surgical skills which he developed in those early years, remained with him all his life. These attributes, plus his penetrating intellectual curiosity and his stubbornness, and tempered by clear insight into his limitations, gave him dimensions possessed by few clinicians. His wide breadth of interest, knowledge and skills provided a solid basis not only for his clinical and academic life, but also for the numerous general practice locums at United Church Mission Hospitals in British Columbia and Newfoundland, which he so dearly loved, as well as the many medical visits to Northern Ontario Indian settlements long after his retirement.

At the Hospital for Sick Children he pioneered paediatric neurosurgery. He was an early proponent of lumbo-peritoneal shunting for hydrocephalus, which he introduced in 1948. He recruited Bruce Hendrick to the neurosurgical staff in 1956, and remained Chief of what is widely recognized as one of the world's outstanding paediatric neurosurgical units, until his retirement in 1964.

In 1936 he was invited to develop a neurosurgical service at the Toronto Western Hospital. In that year, he performed the first operation in Canada for ruptured lumbar disc. He attracted John Silversides to the Western to form a neurological service in 1950, and together they built a combined neuroscience unit which was a model of close cooperation between neurology and neurosurgery, and thus laid the foundation for the large multi-disciplinary neuroscience program now present at the Western. I was privileged to join Bill at the Western in 1956, and worked closely with him until his retirement from practice in 1968. One

could not have hoped for a kinder or wiser mentor, colleague and friend.

In May 1942, Bill joined the Canadian Armed Forces and was sent to England. He organized and was officer in charge of the Canadian Mobile Neurosurgical Unit which went into action following the allied invasion of Europe in 1944, beginning with the attack through the Reichswald and culminating in the sweep across the Rhine. For his service in action, he was awarded membership in the Order of the British Empire. His citation states "Major Keith's professional leadership was outstanding. He had the ability to get the best out of his helpers by his cheeriness, and even when the team was at its lowest ebb of weariness, his tactful encouragement would spur them on".

Bill was never an "organization man", and, in fact, he had no time for bureaucracy. However, he recognized the need for scientific and academic exchange amongst neurosurgeons. In 1938, while attending the 7th Annual Meeting of the Harvey Cushing Society (now the American Association of Neurological Surgeons) in Memphis, Bill Keith and 6 other colleagues, including his good friend Dr. Frank Mayfield, perceived the need for a smaller more cohesive forum for scientific and academic exchange in neurosurgery, and founded the prestigious American Academy of Neurological Surgery, which remains to this day one of the continent's leading neurosurgical organizations. Bill was also a founding member of the Canadian Neurological Society, and became its president in 1964-65.

Bill was active in the United Church, and for many years was an elder. Some years ago, perceiving the need for a church in his community, he and a group of friends raised funds for the erection of Lawrence Park Community Church, where he remained active until the time of his death. He was also active in the Toronto Medical Historical Club and, with other members, was instrumental in having a cairn erected at the site of Sir William Osler's birthplace at Bondhead, Ontario in 1961. He was an energetic member of the executive of the University of Toronto Medical Alumni Association until two years before his death. Recently, he has been an active member of the North Toronto Historical Society, and a frequent speaker at its meetings.

In his 79th and 80th summers, Bill was camp doctor at a summer camp in Northern Ontario for children with medical disabilities. Besides helping care for their medical needs, he would take the children fishing or strawberry picking, and would lead their sing-songs. At camp, he earned the affectionate title of "Dr. Bill", whom the children loved, and whom they still remember.

He had a passionate love for the out-of-doors, from the roar of the Pacific Ocean's breakers to the thrill of Newfoundland's salmon streams, and the tiny Indian villages of Northwestern Ontario. In his natural and unpretentious way, he befriended people in those settings and became one with them, in just the same way as he befriended so many people in his professional and academic life.

Bill loved life, loved his work, and loved people. His sparkling personality and enthusiasm were legendary, and his warmth, his sense of humour, and his sense of fun, which sometimes could be quite mischievous, endeared him to all who knew him. He took great delight in being unconventional and unpredictable. Who else could shatter the dignity of a formal dinner party or of an august scientific forum with a shrill and piercing moose call, and have everyone love him for it?

A humane and compassionate physician, Bill's concern for the whole person dominated his relationship with all, including patients, residents, students, nurses and colleagues. Shortly after I began working with him, he took great pains to define the work "empathy". Empathy, he explained, is projecting oneself into what others are thinking, feeling or doing. Empathy characterized his relationship with so many people. He would sometimes visit his patients in their homes to assure that they were doing well in their home setting, and on more than one occasion made tea or lit a fire in the hearth for a somewhat despondent patient on a dreary afternoon. He frequently went out of his way to befriend those whose lot in life was less fortunate. He knew many of the non-professional hospital support staff by name, and often knew of their personal or family difficulties, and would sometimes find an opportunity to do something kind for them. In no way was this a form of patronage. It was simply that Bill tried to treat all as equal. In "something beautiful for God" Mother Theresa wrote "we can do no great things, only small things with great love". Such were the ingredient of Bill's life.

Had he lived a generation later, Bill would probably have become what we now call a "clinician-scientist". He was a brilliant and innovative clinician, an excellent technical surgeon, and a creative and disarmingly independent thinker. He read widely, and had a formidable memory. He was impatient with mediocrity and intolerant of arrogance, ostentation, and dishonesty.

Bill kept active and alert intellectually throughout his later years. In 1986 he co-authored a paper on spinal cord infarction, which was published in the *Journal of Neurosurgery*. In the same year, he authored a well thought out paper on C2 nerve root entrapment, which was published in the *Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences*.

At the Annual William S. Keith Visiting Professorship, a difficult neurosurgical case is presented each year at a clinical-pathological conference. On two notable occasions, when he was close to 80 years of age, after the visiting professor had failed to reach the correct diagnosis, Bill, with no prior knowledge of the case, electrified the audience with the correct answer, a tribute to his quick mind, excellent memory and formidable reasoning powers.

Bill often remarked how fortunate he was to be able to enjoy, while he was still alive, the visiting professorship at the University of Toronto, which was named in his honour. It has been remarkable to watch him actively participate in this event each year. For the past 13 years, 13 of the world's outstanding neurosurgeons have assumed the title "William S. Keith Visiting Professor in Neurosurgery". Their scholarly presentations, together with presentations by University of Toronto Faculty and residents' case presentations and research papers, have made this event the highlight of each academic year. Bill was proud of this tribute and was truly worthy of it. It will continue to honour him for years to come.

To his wife Eleanor, his daughters Jean and Sheila, his son Ian, his daughter and sons-in-law, his nine grandchildren and his great grandchild, we extend our deepest sympathy, but with it, a message of gratitude for the life of Bill Keith.

*Ross Fleming*