In the making of a true surgeon thorough preparation is essential. The founders of a true medical school must be equally well prepared in training and in character. They must be men we’ll skilled in their profession and possessed of high ideals and business acumen. James Kerr and Henry Havelock Chown had these qualifications. They deserve to be remembered not only for their surgical skill but also for the ideals which impelled them to found and administer, under adverse conditions, a medical school in a new province just being opened to immigration. Both men were young, well trained, adventurous and idealistic when they set about their task, and happily both met with success. In Pasteur’s phrase, fortune favoured the prepared mind.

James Kerr was born at Port Stewart, County Antrim, Ireland in 1849, and studied medicine at Queen’s University, Belfast. In his final year he was house surgeon under Sir William MacCormac who made a name for himself as a military surgeon in the Franco-Prussian and Turco-Serbian wars. MacCormac was one of the first to apply Lister’s principles to the surgery of joints and abdomen and his instruction was not lost on the young intern.

Graduating in 1870, Kerr practised briefly in one of the hunting shires of England until, lured by adventure, he sailed to the Ashanti war on the Gold Coast in 1873 as surgeon to the 42nd Highlanders, “The Gallant Black Watch”. On the way Kerr and an officer were watching a school of sharks following the steamship. The officer remarked that a man overboard would stand no chance. Kerr contended that sharks never attack an uninjured man. Other officers joining in, the discussion became more heated until Kerr dived in, swam among the sharks and was picked up unharmed.

Life as a ship’s surgeon appealed to him and he made several trips to Canada in Allan liners. On one voyage he made the acquaintance of Miss Laura Jane Bell, a charming young lady travelling with her parents to Canada, and they became engaged. In 1875 he started practice at Londonderry, Nova Scotia, where there were iron mines, and the original settlers had come from the north of Ireland. Kerr was appointed surgeon to the Steel Company of Canada, and with his future thus assured, he married his sweetheart in Brantford at the home of her cousin, Alexander Graham Bell. It is interesting that their marriage was at the very time and place of Bell’s first message over the telephone. Best man at the wedding was a young Montreal doctor, William Osler. The honeymoon was spent at Philadelphia where the Centennial Exposition was in full swing. There the young couple heard Mr. Lister give his first address in America on antiseptic surgery. Alas, his message
for the most part fell on deaf ears but the young Irishman drank in every word and was confirmed in his belief in the truth of Lister’s teaching.

This teaching, so new and different, was not universally accepted. England at first stood aloof but Germany welcomed it. In order to see the practical application of Lister’s principles, Kerr and a like-minded young surgeon, possibly Francis Shepherd of Montreal, visited German hospitals and were more firmly convinced. On his return to Canada, Kerr practised these principles with success. Word of his ability filtered out and he received an invitation to join the medical faculty of McGill. He went with his wife and two young children to Montreal, and ere long was appointed Chief Surgeon of the Canadian Pacific Railway, then building westward. On a trip to the new province of Manitoba he was impressed with the possibilities of Winnipeg, “loosely jointed, gawky, boisterous and mud-bespattered, but alive with the first flush of youth”, already a city in name but with only 20,000 inhabitants, mostly newcomers. Kerr chose a site for a tuberculosis sanatorium at Banff Springs, and so helped to start Banff as a resort. Kerr was appointed health officer for the province and travelled through it to enforce vaccination. Recognizing the danger of the Red River as the almost universal source of drinking water, he arranged for the sinking of a well near the General Hospital in the west end of the city. By good fortune it proved to be Winnipeg’s first artesian well, and for many years it served the hospital and vicinity.

Continuing to practise antiseptic surgery, Kerr had such success that the other doctors of the city accepted him as leader. When a young medical man fresh from postgraduate studies overseas and a son of the lieutenant-governor of the province came with the avowed intention of starting a proprietary medical school, the Winnipeg doctors met to discuss the situation. Dr. Kerr declared that before a medical school could be started in Manitoba, it must meet two conditions:

1. It must be the co-operative effort of the established doctors.
2. It must be affiliated with the University of Manitoba and accept its standards.

Thirteen incorporators, including the Provincial Secretary, Dr. D. H. Wilson, obtained a charter from the provincial government in September, 1883. At this point the incorporators were disposed to rest, for they were not convinced that the time was ripe or that the instruction would be efficient. However, a few days later a group of would-be medical students and some who had had a year or two of training elsewhere met and passed a resolution urging that the school be started. The incorporators, mostly in their early thirties, caught the spark and on the evening of November 15, 1883, the newly chosen Dean, Dr. Kerr, delivered the inaugural address in rooms at the corner of Main and Portage. Among his words were these “What would be premature and impossible in older countries becomes here justified and even necessary”.

Classes began at eight o’clock the next morning in a cottage on Harriet Street and in rooms in the Central School. The following year the faculty secured a mortgage of $4000 at 9% interest on land near the General Hospital—tight money in those days—and in 1885 a two storey brick and stone building was erected. At about this time the General Hospital had moved into new brick buildings making it the finest hospital in the Canadian west. Wards A and B of this structure have recently been torn down to make way for a modern unit.

When the North West rebellion broke out in March 1885, Dr. Kerr was appointed Surgeon-Major in the Medical Corps, and the Winnipeg General Hospital was named the base hospital. Dr. Kerr was surgeon, and young Dr. F. H. Mewburn was assistant. The Surgeon-General, Dr. Thomas Roddick, arranged that the per diem rate for military sick and wounded should be $1.50 and the base hospital continued on this financial arrangement until the discharge of the last patient in the middle of 1886. The annual report of the Winnipeg General Hospital for that year records that Dr. Kerr had done three major operations on soldiers; incision and drainage of an empyema, excision of a large hydrocele of the neck in contact with the carotid
sheath and subclavian artery, and incision of a knee joint with extraction of a bullet. All ran an aseptic course and resulted in complete cures. Mewburn became the first Professor of Surgery in the University of Alberta in 1906.

During the campaign which lasted from March to May 1885, Kerr made a two-week trip to the front lines with Roddick and James Bell of Montreal. Kerr suffered an acute attack of nephritis and rheumatism, brought on by icy winds and jolting buckboards, and with his health thus undermined he left Winnipeg in 1887. Before doing so he reduced successfully an intussusception in the young son of a colleague after medical measures by other doctors had failed. At that time surgical intervention for this condition was a most daring procedure.

Kerr was then offered the post of chief surgeon at the Johns Hopkins Hospital at Baltimore but found so many restrictions placed on his activities that he declined. He moved to Washington, D.C., where he attracted a group of surgical disciples and soon was appointed to the chair of surgery in one of the two medical schools in that city. He resigned to become Professor of Surgery in Georgetown University and later at the George Washington University. He had several "firsts" to his credit in the Washington district; first cholecystectomy, first gasserian ganglion operation, and first operation for intussusception.

He resigned in 1894 because of failing health, but continued in private practice, honoured and esteemed. At his summer home in Virginia, his love of fine horses led him to breed steeplechase racers, for jumping ability as well as speed. He died in 1911 at Warrenton, Va. His portrait hangs in the office of the Dean in Winnipeg Medical School.

DR. HENRY H. CHOWN

Unlike James Kerr, H. H. Chown was a second generation Canadian. His paternal grandparents came from Devonshire, England, to Canada in the sailing ship "General Wolfe" in 1832, and made Kingston their home. The eldest son, Edwin, father of Henry, became a well-to-do manufacturer and a pillar of Sydenham Methodist Church. Other Chowns made their mark in business, at Queen's University and in the Methodist Church of Canada.

Henry Chown was born on February 16, 1859, and was educated in Kingston schools, Victoria College (then at Cobourg) where he obtained the B.A. degree, and Queen's University, graduating M.D. in 1880.

The opening up of railway communication with "the last great west" brought a rush of adventurers to Winnipeg, among them this young doctor. After two years of practice in the new city he sailed on the Allan line "Peruvian" to London and enrolled as a clinical clerk at The London Hospital Medical School in Whitechapel. It boasted a distinguished group of teachers: Sir Andrew Clark, Queen Victoria's physician, Frederick Trefres, who later operated on the Prince of Wales for pertussis, Morrell Mackenzie, the laryngologist who attended Emperor Frederick of Germany, Hughlings Jackson the neurologist, Jonathan Hutchinson, Harry Fennick the urologist, and George Ernest Her-
man of “Difficult Labour”. One day Chown went to King’s College Hospital to see Lister. An entry in his diary for June 8, 1882 runs a description of Lister “a fine gentlemanly, well built man, full face, white side whiskers and hair turning grey — only a poor operator, removal of the tongue for cancer”. On July 12 at the Samaritan Hospital he noticed among those gathered to see an operation for removal of a fibroid uterus with a four month fetus, Robert Emmett of New York—“middle aged gentleman, cool and quiet looking”.

When he returned to Winnipeg the chief topic was the proposed medical school. Chown thought that the project was premature and declined to be one of the incorporators, but by 1885 he was teaching anatomy. Thus began a connection with Manitoba Medical College which lasted until 1917. He turned to teaching surgery and soon was made Professor of Clinical Surgery. When that most remarkable character Dr. J. W. Good hit the trail of ’98 for the Yukon, Dr. Chown was appointed the third Dean.

Though he was a brilliant operator, his greatest achievement lay in the field of medical education. During his deanship, there occurred the move of the Medical College to a new building on the present site immediately west of the General Hospital, the creation of a pre-medical course with emphasis on science, the appointment of the first full-time professor, and in 1917 the change whereby Manitoba Medical College became the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Manitoba. The property and equipment of the College, valued at $250,000 were turned over, free of debt, to the University. Dr. Chown had represented the College on the old University Council; he now became a member of the first Board of Governors and resigned as Dean.

Dr. Chown’s connection with the Winnipeg General Hospital lasted also for 32 years. He read widely and well and was a daring and expert surgeon, always a little in advance of his confrères. The house staff almost fought to be on his service, though it meant early rising as the Chief felt freshest in the early morning and would have started at six if hospital rules permitted. Though rubber gloves were coming into use on Halsted’s suggestion, Chown never wore them as he thought they impaired his sense of touch, but his hands were gentle, quick and skillful. He confided that he never approached a difficult or dangerous operation without reading all the details an hour or two before going to the hospital.

At a time when a distinguished physician in England said “ovariotomy is not surgery, it is murder”, a woman went to Chown with a large ovarian cyst which made her life a burden. At his own expense he had her placed in a private room, bought fresh linen for the bed, then triumphantly removed the cyst without infection. It was the first ovariotomy in western Canada. Also to his credit was the first gastroenterostomy in this region. News of the latter operation reached the ears of the Governor-General, then visiting Winnipeg, and at a dinner in Government House, he requested Dr. Chown to draw a diagram of what he had done. It was an anterior gastroenterostomy. When the annual meeting of the Canadian Medical Association was held at Winnipeg in 1901, he operated before his colleagues to remove a hydatid cyst of the liver, a condition not infrequently found in the early Icelandic settlers in Manitoba, but seldom encountered by Eastern visitors.

After his marriage to Kate Farrell, a lady of charm and humour, Chown lived first at the corner of Donald and Ellice Streets, and later at 263 Broadway near his beloved Manitoba Club. After his wife’s death in 1916 he was cared for by a Chinese manservant. His elder son, Charles, died in early manhood, his second son Dr. H. Bruce Chown, is internationally known as a serologist. The late Dr. Gordon Chown, whose name is associated with the Children’s Hospital in Winnipeg, was a nephew, and Gordon Chown, M.P. for Winnipeg South, is a grand nephew.

In his early years Dr. Chown read widely in Western Canada’s history, and on September 17, 1915 he was persuaded to read before the Winnipeg Medical Society, a paper on “Medical Men and Medicine in Western Canada”.

When the Great-West Life Assurance
Company was formed in Winnipeg, Dr. Chown was a charter member. On his retirement from active practice he and his friend, Dr. R. J. Blanchard, were the first medical referees of the company.

In 1903, Queen's University, his Alma Mater, conferred on Dr. Chown the LL.D. degree, an honour which he prized highly. On the 60th anniversary of the University of Manitoba, his name was proposed for the same degree but he declined on the ground that one such honour was sufficient.

His later years were spent largely in travel, usually by air. In a humidor presented to him by the Ontario delegation in 1911, is his passport with visas from Japan, China, Brazil, Argentine, Chile, Palestine, Egypt, France, Monaco, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru and Mexico. He maintained a lively interest in men and affairs until he died on October 12, 1944.

In all ranks of life Dr. Chown had many warm friends for he "did good by stealth". He was the prototype of Dr. Towne in "The Viking Heart" by Laura Salverson, and her "Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter" was dedicated to him for his devotion to the poor.

James Kerr and Henry Chown can rightly be called makers of the Canadian West.

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