

**William Perkins Bull, K.C., LL.D.  
1870-1948**

On Thursday, September 6, 2007, at 2 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Peel Heritage Complex unveiled a provincial plaque to commemorate William Perkins Bull, K.C., LL.D., in Brampton, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

**WILLIAM PERKINS BULL, K.C., LL.D. 1870-1948**

Financier, philanthropist and historian William Perkins Bull was born in Downsview, Ontario, in 1870. Bull attended Osgoode Hall Law School and was called to the bar in 1896. He established a law practice but soon broadened his interests to include oil, lumber and land speculation. His business interests took him to England where, during the First World War, he and his wife Maria Brennan Bull established a convalescent hospital for wounded Canadian officers. Following the war he returned to Canada to continue his legal and business affairs. In 1931 Bull's interest in history was spurred when he assembled a library of rare books by Canadian authors. He began a study of Peel County's history that eventually grew into ten published volumes on Peel's cultural and natural history. Perkins Bull was considered ahead of his time in recognizing the historical value of oral and written accounts, photographs, everyday objects and the built environment. He collected pioneer artefacts and Canadian art and much of this collection, including his research, is preserved at the Peel Heritage Complex in Brampton.

**WILLIAM PERKINS BULL, C.R., LL.D. 1870-1948**

William Perkins Bull, financier, philanthrope et historien, naquit à Downsview, en Ontario, en 1870. M. Bull fit ses études à la faculté de droit d'Osgoode Hall et fut admis au barreau en 1896. Il exerça d'abord le droit, mais s'intéressa bientôt également à l'industrie pétrolière, à l'industrie forestière ainsi qu'à la spéculation immobilière. Ce sont ses intérêts commerciaux qui l'amènèrent à s'installer en Angleterre où, pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, sa femme et lui créèrent un hôpital pour convalescents accueillant les soldats canadiens blessés. À l'issue de la guerre, M. Bull revint au Canada où il poursuivit sa carrière d'avocat et d'homme d'affaires. En 1931, il développa un vif intérêt pour l'histoire lorsqu'il se mit à collectionner des livres rares écrits par des auteurs canadiens. Il entreprit d'étudier l'histoire du comté de Peel et finit par publier une histoire culturelle et naturelle du comté en dix volumes. Perkins Bull a en quelque sorte devancé son époque en

comprenant la valeur historique des récits oraux et écrits, des photographies, des objets usuels et de l'environnement architectural. Il collectionna des objets de l'ère pionnière ainsi que des œuvres d'art canadiennes. La majeure partie de sa collection, y compris ses travaux de recherche, est conservée au complexe du patrimoine de Peel, à Brampton.

## **Historical background**

William Perkins Bull was undoubtedly one of the most colourful Canadian personalities in the first half of the 20th century. Though he left to posterity two archival volumes of autobiographical notes, no one, to date, has attempted to write his biography.<sup>1</sup> In later years, he himself dismissed the idea, saying that nobody would ever believe an accurate recounting of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Born the eldest son of a successful Ontario dairy farmer, Bull became a lawyer, entrepreneur, land developer, patron of the arts and a gatherer of Canadian history.

Well over six feet tall, Perkins Bull was a man of impressive stature and imposing personality.<sup>3</sup> He enjoyed a life of high society and good living, rubbing shoulders with royalty and the business elite of two continents. With his forceful enthusiasm for life, he won many a friend and admirer, as well as some enemies, during his colourful and flamboyant career.

William Perkins Bull was born in Downsview, Ontario, on July 25, 1870, the eldest son of Bartholomew Hill Bull and Sarah Duncan Bull.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after William's birth the family moved to Peel County. There, in Chinguacousy Township, just southeast of the village of Brampton, Bartholomew established what would become a successful Jersey cattle breeding farm, B. H. Bull and Son. Young William attended the local rural school and high school in Brampton before heading off to the University of Toronto's Victoria College. He graduated with a bachelor of arts in 1893 and a law degree from University College in 1895. He then attended Osgoode Hall and was called to the bar in 1896. That same year, he married Maria Brennan, daughter of a prosperous Hamilton businessman.

Perkins Bull practised law in Toronto for the next decade, becoming personal solicitor to the department store magnate Timothy Eaton. In 1908, he became the youngest King's Counsel in the British Empire.<sup>5</sup> Although he would continue to practise law, Bull soon used his business connections to branch out into a variety of ventures. In 1899, he travelled to Cuba in the company of railway magnate William Van Horne and purchased the first lands of what would grow to be a 20,000-acre sugar plantation.<sup>6</sup>

He assumed control of the family cattle-breeding business when his father died in 1904. In the same year, he became secretary-treasurer of a venture headed by Sam Hughes, a Conservative

politician and future federal cabinet minister, to develop land in Western Canada. Two years later, he and Maria moved into Lorne Hall, a sumptuous home in Rosedale, as he expanded his business activities to include oil and timber, becoming a founding director of the Canadian Oil Company (White Rose) and president of the Okanagan Lumber Company.<sup>7</sup> In 1910, he and a number of other speculators bought property through the Red Deer Investments Company, a venture designed to market to British investors land in the new and booming province of Alberta.<sup>8</sup> In 1911, he moved to the United Kingdom to pursue this enterprise, and Maria and their five children joined him there in 1912.

When war broke out in August 1914, Perkins Bull, then 44 years of age, was too old to enlist, but he and Maria soon found another way of contributing to the war effort. They began hosting dinners and social events for Canadian officers convalescing in Britain. At Maria's suggestion, they developed these occasional social gatherings into a wartime institution. In 1916, the Bulls leased the nearby home of Sir Ernest Shackleton, then on an Antarctic expedition, and with the resources from the rising prices for his Cuban sugar, opened the Perkins Bull Convalescent Hospital for wounded and recovering Canadian officers.

Perkins was in his element, officiating at grand daily dinners and entertaining his fellow countrymen. The hospital received royal patronage and was visited by King George V and Queen Mary.<sup>9</sup> Although the institution received a government allowance while operating, Bull generously contributed funds as well. The hospital and the Bull home saw several thousand young visitors before the former closed in 1919. A grandson, author Scott Symons, later described the venture as "a perfect forum for Perkins Bull, hand-tailored to his extraordinary personality – a blend of patriot and philanthropist, nationalist and imperialist."<sup>10</sup>

Perkins Bull spent the next decade in the United Kingdom, New York and Chicago, as his financial circumstances rose and fell with the vagaries of the sugar market and his other investments. In 1931, while representing the interests of Mabel Sidley, heiress to the Horlick Malted Milk Company fortune, in a divorce case in Chicago, Bull became the centre of a series of bizarre incidents. First, Mrs. Sidley's husband brought legal action against Bull for his aggressive pursuit of the divorce case. Then, Bull's Chicago apartment and that of Mrs. Sibley were raided by American federal agents seeking signs of drug trafficking. No such connections were uncovered, and Bull received an apology for the intrusion.<sup>11</sup> However, in the midst of an overnight motor trip from Chicago to Toronto, the lawyer was involved in a traffic accident and suffered serious injury.

Despite his grave condition, he insisted on being brought by ambulance to Toronto, where he spent three months in hospital recovering from a fractured hip, a badly lacerated tongue, severe bruising and a massive gash on his forehead that would leave a lifelong scar.<sup>12</sup> Rumours immediately began to circulate that Bull had been trying to evade retribution from Mabel Sidley's husband and that some of Al Capone's gangster mob had been paid, presumably by

Sidley, to “do a job” on Perkins Bull and that they had engineered the accident. The rumours spread and grew to such a level that a Toronto police detective felt it necessary to inform the press that Bull was not under police protection, and that none of Capone’s mobsters were in the city gunning for him.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Sidley’s case against Bull was settled out of court and Al Capone, when queried by a Toronto reporter about the rumoured “hit,” quipped: “I don’t even know what street Canada is on.”<sup>14</sup> For several days, Bull was literally headline news in Toronto papers.

It was May 1931 before Bull had recovered sufficiently to return to Lorne Hall to continue his convalescence. Maria had her hands full trying to keep her husband’s energetic and restless spirit in check. She suggested he pass his time writing, perhaps a brief family history (there certainly was material for such an endeavour), and collecting anecdotes about Peel County’s early settlers.<sup>15</sup> Perkins took to the idea in his usual enthusiastic manner, and what began as a short paper evolved into a decade of work and 13 publications. He began, as Maria had suggested, with a review of the life and career of his great-grandfather Bartholomew, an early Methodist preacher, but soon his focus widened to cover many aspects of the area’s past. By 1932, Bull had engaged a staff of 30 researchers, including future East York mayor True Davidson as his chief of staff. At Christmas that year, he hosted a fine luncheon for them and another 100 occasional consultants. The following year, the Toronto *Telegram* printed this vignette of his endeavours:

Seeking fresh and complementary details to supplement data already in the possession of Wm. Perkins Bull, a squad of interviewers ransacked the memories of Toronto Township and the Port Credit neighbourhood in Clarke Memorial Hall yesterday .... fast cars hummed about the countryside picking up aged residents for the interviewing platoon ... Preceding the brisk afternoon work, a banquet was provided by Mr. Bull, at which the guests of honor included the Honourable T. L. Kennedy, minister of Agriculture ... Lady Gage, Lucas Peel, grandson of Sir Robert Peel ...<sup>16</sup>

True Davidson later recalled him as “a very shrewd man, a good businessman,” and added: “He paid me a proper screw [a good salary] and this was during the Depression when people were working for nominal sums.”<sup>17</sup> In 1934, Bull’s first two studies appeared – *From Medicine Man to Medical Man* and *From Rattlesnake Hunt to Hockey*, studies of medicine and sports, respectively, in the Peel County area. The works were an eclectic mix of archival material, oral interviews, and folk traditions, all gathered together with little critical analysis or discrimination. Bull compiled archival records for preservation and had many of the illustrations in his studies especially commissioned. While the mainstream of Canadian history was focussed on nation building in the 1930s<sup>18</sup>, Perkins Bull was gathering and documenting the minutiae of pioneer life in a single county. In doing so, he preserved the recollections of the last of those who had actually experienced the period first hand. Young scholars such as James J. Talman and Fred

Landon recognized the value of what Perkins Bull was accomplishing and remained friends throughout his life.<sup>19</sup>

In tandem with his writing efforts, Perkins Bull became an inveterate connoisseur and collector of Canadiana, ranging from paintings to pioneer tools and artifacts. These he frequently lent for exhibitions at such gatherings as the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) in Toronto and the Royal Winter Fair.<sup>20</sup> Much of this rich collection now rests in the exhibits and archives of the Peel Heritage Complex in Brampton where it is conserved and displayed.

In 1934, the same year that Perkins Bull's first studies appeared, his wife Maria died suddenly, at just 58 years of age. Bull was devastated by the loss and seems to have thrown himself even more strenuously into his historical works. In less than a decade he produced another eight books, ranging in subject matter from the flora and fauna of Peel County to its military and religious history.<sup>21</sup> Each study focussed on the county but drew its stories within the wider context of the developing Canadian nation. To Perkins Bull, history or heritage as it would be viewed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century included the written and the spoken word, artifacts (including art and crafts) and the built environment – grand and humble.<sup>22</sup> All the fabric of this tapestry can be found in his published works and in the voluminous collection of notes that he and his researchers left to posterity. Each publication was limited to 1,000 copies, most of which went to libraries and archival collections. This, coupled with the fact that he maintained a large research staff, makes it clear that Perkins Bull did not see his historical series as a money-making venture.

With his last book, *From Oxford to Ontario: A History of the Downsview Community*, published in 1941, Perkins Bull, now 71 years of age, began to slow his pace. With most of his wealth spent on his writing endeavours, he sold Lorne Hall and its contents, and retired to Niagara-on-the-Lake, another historic area close to his heart.<sup>23</sup> He died there on June 30, 1948, and was buried beside Maria at Toronto's Davenport Road United Church – the church Perkins Bull's great-grandfather, Bartholomew Bull, helped found in 1834.

Perkins Bull left an impressive legacy of Canadian art, artifacts, written records and oral recollections. A passionate patriot, Bull used his wealth during the First World War to comfort wounded Canadian soldiers and raise the status of his homeland in the centre of the British Empire. His wedding present to his eldest son, who had chosen to remain in the United Kingdom, was, fittingly, a library of Canadiana. Though sometimes viewed as a flamboyant and eccentric character, Bull was far ahead of his peers in his recognition of the breadth and depth of Canadian heritage. Ultimately his gift to future generations was his ability to turn this perception into a tangible and rich collection of historical resources. He cut a larger-than-life figure throughout his career and tackled every endeavour with a seemingly inexhaustible energy and exuberance. In the introduction to his autobiographical notes he wrote what is perhaps his best epitaph:

Folk have wondered why I undertook the Perkins Bull Historical Series. Why pour out so much money and energy in a project with so little chance of profit? They will now ask sarcastically why I think anyone might be interested in the story of my life. They are amongst those unfortunates who cannot understand a man doing anything for sheer joy in the task. ... Like Popeye the Sailor man, I am what I am.

... I have made money and given most of it away, or lost it, studied, travelled and written this book, all for the same reason – the reason for which I have eaten more pumpkin pie and blackberry roly-poly than was good for my figure – because I enjoyed myself in the doing.

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To me life is a perpetual adventure. It was fun being young. It is magnificent being old. And I expect death will be the greatest experience of all. It is for men and women of kindred temperament that I jot down these reminiscences, as one old sea-rover might yarn with another at the end of the voyage, in the taproom of The Mariners' Hope.<sup>24</sup>

The Peel Heritage Complex in Brampton cares for the vast quantity of materials gathered by Bull and is currently in the process of amalgamating the parts of the collection that were dispersed to different archives and universities following his death.

The Ontario Heritage Trust gratefully acknowledges the research of Robert J. Burns, PhD, in preparing this paper.



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<sup>1</sup> William Perkins Bull, "Autobiographical Notes," *Wm .Perkins Bull Collection*, Peel Heritage Complex, Brampton, Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Symons, "The Duke of Rosedale," *Toronto Life*, Mar. 1984, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Author Scott Symons is a grandson of William Perkins Bull and his brief article contains a wealth of insight into Perkins Bull's personality and his relationship with other members of the family.

<sup>4</sup> A brief outline of Perkins Bull's career and accomplishments can be found in the "Finding Aid to the William Perkins Bull Collection." *Wm .Perkins Bull Collection*, Peel Heritage Complex, Brampton, Ontario.

<http://www.region.peel.on.ca/heritage/bullperkins.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Symons, "The Duke of Rosedale," *Toronto Life*, Mar. 1984, p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> "Banquet to Mr. D. O. Bull," *The Conservator* (Brampton, Ont.), 5 May 1905, *Wm. Perkins Bull Collection*, Peel Heritage Complex, Brampton, Ontario.

<sup>7</sup> Library and Archives Canada, "Administrative History," *Wm. Perkins Bull Collection*.

<sup>8</sup> Library and Archives Canada, "Administrative History," British Canadian Realty Limited fonds.

<sup>9</sup> "Royalty at Hospital," *Globe and Mail*, 1 Dec. 1916, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Symons, "The Duke of Rosedale," *Toronto Life*, Mar. 1984, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> "Harmless secret code likely caused action against Perkins Bull," *Toronto Daily Star*, 17 Feb. 1931, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> "W. Perkins Bull Badly Hurt in Auto Crash," headline, *Toronto Daily Star*, 18 Feb. 1931.

<sup>13</sup> "Chicago Gangsters are not in Toronto, Detectives assert," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 20 Feb. 1931, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> C. Roy Greenway, "Mixed up with gangs: Tut, Tut, says Capone pseudo social leader," *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 Feb. 1931, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Scott Symons, "The Duke of Rosedale," *Toronto Life*, Mar. 1984, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Scott Symons, "The Duke of Rosedale," *Toronto Life*, Mar. 1984, pp. 111-12.

<sup>17</sup> Eleanor Darke, *Call Me True; a Biography of True Davidson* (Toronto: Natural Heritage, 1997), p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Harold Innis' *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930) and Donald Creighton's *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* (1937) are good examples of this type of work.

<sup>19</sup> J.J. Talman, PhD (1904-1993), specialized in the social history of pre-Confederation Ontario and served as chief librarian at the University of Western Ontario for many years. One of his best-known works is *Loyalist Narratives from Upper Canada* (1946). Fred Landon, PhD (1880-1969), also associated with the University of Western Ontario, specialized in the history of southwestern Ontario and particularly its relationship with the United States. *Western Ontario and the American Frontier* (1941) is perhaps his best-known study.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the article describing an exhibit of pioneer artifacts at the CNE Coliseum in 1933; *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 3 July 1933, p. 9 and Augustus Bridle, "Peel County History Limned by Artists," *Toronto Daily Star*, 19 May 1934, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> The volumes in the William Perkins Bull Historical Series were:

*Men N Canadiana* (1931, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1934)

*From Medicine Man to Medical Man*, 1934

*From Rattlesnake Hunt to Hockey*, 1934

*The Perkins Bull Collection – Historical Paintings by Canadian Artists Illustrating Pioneers and Pioneering in the County of Peel* (1934, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1935)

*From Brock to Curry*, 1935

*Spadunk, From Paganism to Davenport United* (1935)

*From Hummingbird to Eagle*, 1936

*From the Boyne to Brampton*, 1936

*From Spring to Autumn*, 1937

*From Amphibian to Reptiles*, 1938

*From Strachan to Owens*, 1938

*From Macdonell to McGuigan*, 1939

*From Oxford to Ontario*, 1941

<sup>22</sup> Noted Canadian historian and scholar, and a grandson of Perkins Bull, Thomas H.B. Symons, has pointed to Bull's ability to appreciate a wider scope of Canadian heritage as one of his enduring legacies. Oral interview with Robert J. Burns, 11 May 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Scott Symons, "The Duke of Rosedale," *Toronto Life*, Mar. 1984, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> William Perkins Bull, "Autobiographical Notes," *Wm. Perkins Bull Collection*, Peel Heritage Complex, Brampton, Ontario.