

A MAN OF  
**MANY FIRSTS**

/ by PHILIP FINE /





PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALEXSANDRA WRIGHT

Melville, with daughter, Enid (Melville-Wright, BA, MDCM'59), in 1949. It has been suggested that Melville-Wright may have been the first black woman to graduate from McGill's undergraduate medical program. She was one of only two female graduates for her year.

**K**enneth Melville, BSc'26, MDCM'26, MSc'31, (1902–1975) attained a level of success that many would have thought impossible for a black man of his time and place.

Born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, Melville, who came to Montreal in the early 1920s, is remembered as the first black medical student at McGill University. He graduated at the top of his class, earning the Holmes Gold Medal for his year, as well as the Hills Prize in Pharmacology and, in 1930, won a postdoctoral fellowship at the prestigious Pasteur Institute in Paris.

In 1953, he became the first (and only) black Chair of McGill's Department of Pharmacology & Therapeutics—and the first person from a developing country to hold a Chair at McGill.

Throughout his career Melville served as a mentor to students from the developing world, a leader in Montreal's West Indian community and an advocate for civil rights. An internationally respected pharmacologist, he was among the first to show that adrenaline is not a sympathetic neurotransmitter.

His grandson Chris Wright says few black people then were simply judged on talent alone. "It's a testament to Canada at that time," says Wright, who muses on whether his grandfather would have had as much opportunity in that era had he settled elsewhere.

Over a period spanning almost half a century, Melville published extensively, primarily on the physiology of stress responses. He trained foreign graduate students, helped

Nigeria develop its domestic medical program, and was a founding member of the International Union of Basic and Clinical Pharmacology.

The media also sought out his expertise on the dangers of certain recreational drugs.

During the late 1930s, he chaired a defence committee for Fred Christie, a Jamaican-born resident of Verdun, Quebec, who was refused service at a tavern in the Montreal Forum prior to a boxing match because he was black. In 1960, Melville was arrested with seven other physicians attending a medical congress in Atlantic City after protesting when the cafeteria refused to serve them because they were black.

Although he worked primarily in research, Melville also ran a limited family practice. Wright remembers his grandfather each Christmas going around to the homes of all his patients, most of them fellow immigrants from the West Indies.

Two generations of physicians followed: Melville's daughter, Enid Melville-Wright, BA, MDCM'59, who was a psychiatrist, and her son, the aforementioned Chris Wright, currently Chief Medical Officer at Pronutria Biosciences in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Melville's memory lives on at McGill through the Melville Fellowship in Pharmacology, a prize awarded for the best poster presentations on Pharmacology Research Day.

*With special thanks to Chris and Alexandra Wright, to Joseph Hanaway, BA, MDCM'60, and to the Medicine Class of 1955 for inspiring this story.*

Left: Melville, pictured top left, in Cairo, with wife, Gladys, earned recognition from both *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines for his accomplishments. In 1957, the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper referred to him as "the most outstanding figure" in a piece on Montreal.