



# Family Secrets: Crossing the Colour Line

*Catherine Slaney*

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## **Family Secrets: Crossing the Colour Line** Catherine Slaney

Catherine Slaney grew into womanhood unaware of her celebrated Black ancestors. An unanticipated meeting was to change her life. Her great-grandfather was Dr. Anderson Abbott, the first Canadian-born Black to graduate from medical school in Toronto in 1861. In *Family Secrets* Catherine Slaney narrates her journey along the trail of her family tree, back through the era of slavery and the plight of fugitive slaves, the Civil War, the Elgin settlement near Chatham, Ontario, and the Chicago years.

Why did some of her family identify with the Black Community while others did not? What role did "passing" play? Personal anecdotes and excerpts from archival Abbott family papers enliven the historical context of this compelling account of a family dealing with an unknown past. A welcome addition to African-Canadian history, this moving and uplifting story demonstrates that understanding one's identity requires first the embracing of the past.

"When Catherine Slaney first consulted me, her intention was to research the life of her distinguished ancestor Anderson R. Abbott. After she told me her story of the discovery of her African heritage and the search for her roots, I urged her to make that the subject of her book. Cathy has served both of these objectives, giving us an intricate and fascinating account of her quest for her own lost identity through the gradual illumination of Dr. Abbott and his legacy for modern Canadians. *Family Secrets* carries an important message about the issue of 'race' as a historical artifact and as a factor in the lives of real people."

– James W. St. G. Walker, University of Waterloo

"This is a welcome addition to the growing collection of African-Canadian materials that connects an unknown past to a promising future. That Slaney was unaware of her Black ancestry, despite that heritage being so rich and powerful, speaks to the dilemma of Black history research – it is there but requires considerable digging to uncover."

– Rosemary Sadlier, President, Ontario Black History Society

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