

1. From Wales to Nova Scotia

John Stanislaus Savage, father of Nova Scotia's twenty-third premier, came to Newport, Wales, to be a doctor. In 1932, Wales, located in southwest Great Britain, was among the world's most depressed countries. Unemployment among Welsh insured males was recorded at 42.8 percent, with depression hitting steel, tinplate, transport workers, and, most especially, coal miners. Between 1925 and 1939, 390,000 people fled Wales in search of greener pastures. Those low-income earners who remained experienced poor health and substandard housing.

A native of Ireland, John Savage Sr. was an outgoing, lively Irish-Catholic republican who took an interest in the fight for freedom. He graduated from medical school from Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. At forty-one years of age he married Rosina (Rose) Maud Harding, a thirty-nine-year-old Welsh Baptist nurse who her grandchildren describe as regimented, gregarious, and somewhat dour. On May 28, 1932, a year

into their marriage, John and Rose welcomed their first son into the world: John Patrick Savage. Two years later, on April 9, 1934, their second child, Michael Hugh Savage, was born. Rose's health became a concern early on in their marriage, and while at the time it was unclear why her body was in such pain, her symptoms, which led her to need the support of a cane by the time Michael was born, could have been linked to multiple sclerosis – an autoimmune disease of the central nervous system.

John Patrick Savage attended Prior Park, a private boarding school in Bath, England, run by the Christian Brothers. When John was eight years old, six-year-old Michael joined him there. Prior Park boasts picturesque grounds and the institution has proudly educated young men who went on to become leaders of their industry, A-list celebrities, and a long line of world leaders. But their other claim to fame is rather unsettling. After a series of court cases, it became public knowledge that while enrolled in these prestigious institutions, many of the young men were physically and sexually abused by their superiors. While attending Prior Park, Michael, who was small for his age, was bullied by the other children. With rigid rules and strict disciplinary measures, older brother John took Michael under his wing.

In 1949, John went on to attend Queen's University (QUB) in Belfast. John aspired to become a doctor, like his father, while Michael, who also attended QUB, studied law. John's outgoing personality and interest in extracurricular activities made him well-known around campus. Beyond the classroom, John was second row forward for the school's rugby team, which eventually earned him a Rugby Blue, a prestigious honour awarded to athletes at the highest level of university competition.

“A lot of people at Queen’s University were Catholic-Irish folks who didn’t play a lot of rugby,” explains Mike Savage, the second oldest of John’s children and current mayor of the Halifax Regional Municipality in Nova Scotia. “The local Protestants were kind of surprised that Dad was a good rugby player.”

John took an interest in politics while attending QUB. He was the first Catholic president of the Queen’s University Student Representative Council, a position he would hold for an unprecedented two years. A former classmate described him as a “right decent man who was prepared to speak his mind, but also was quite open-minded about other persons’ opinions. Clearly, he had a very strong social conscience from an early age.”

While attending QUB, John met Margaret Mary McCartan, a seventeen-year-old aspiring to become a teacher. Margaret and her five sisters and one younger brother grew up in Belfast. Both John’s father and Margaret’s father, who unbeknownst to them lived quite close to one another growing up, were designated as the one in the family to leave home to get an education and find employment to support their families. Margaret’s father, who was a school inspector with the Ministry of Education, felt strongly about the importance of education and six of his children went on to attend Queen’s University.

The McCartan home was not far from the university campus, and it quickly became a gathering place for students, including John, who was tutored by one of Margaret’s sisters. Margaret was a strong, reflective, and kind-hearted woman, whereas John was spontaneous, sometimes impatient, yet quick to forgive because there were things to do and no time to hold a grudge. In his early twenties, John fell in love with Margaret’s calming

demeanour, and not long after beginning their courtship, John asked Margaret for her hand in marriage. As the Savage family tale goes, Margaret knew she would marry John one day, but she wasn't ready to say yes just yet. He was still studying to become a doctor so Margaret presented him with a counteroffer: once his degree was complete and he qualified to practise medicine, then they could wed. John agreed to these terms and completed his training at the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport, Wales. He served as a junior registrar in obstetrics at Downpatrick Hospital in Northern Ireland.

Eight years after John's initial proposal, on February 15, 1958, the couple exchanged vows at St. Brigitte's Church in Belfast amongst family and old friends from university. Margaret had completed a post-graduate course at St. Mary's Teacher Training College in Belfast and was working within the Catholic school system. Once she was married, Margaret was obligated to give up her teaching position as the Catholic school system did not allow women to continue to work after they married.

"Their relationship was very strong," says Mike. "I don't know if they held hands all that much. Or kissed in public all that much. But you never had a question that they had each other's backs. There was a very affectionate connection between them which didn't have to be proven all the time."

From 1916 to 1920, and then again from 1939 to 1960, men in the United Kingdom were expected to complete mandatory national service, which most often meant enlisting in the military. (The last conscripted soldiers left service in 1963.) John spent three years with the Royal Army Medical Corps as a families' medical officer at bases throughout the United Kingdom and on a troop

ship to Hong Kong and other ports. It was during this time their first child was born. Shelagh Savage was born March 22, 1959, on the Aldershot Army Base in Hampshire, England.

The newlyweds settled in Magor, a little village in Monmouthshire, which was about ten kilometres from Newport, a cathedral and university city in southeast Wales. Shelagh recalls her childhood home, named Lawn Magor, fondly. She describes it as a large house with a big garden and a farm next door. Part of the Savage family home was designated as a “surgery,” meant for emergencies or after-hour patient visits, while John would also sometimes travel to visit his patients.

A year after Shelagh’s arrival, their son, Michael (nee John Michael Savage), was born on May 13, 1960. Four more children would follow, with Jane in 1961, Philip in 1963, Patrick in 1964, and Barney in 1966. It’s not surprising that in 1962 John set up the first pre-natal clinic in South Wales.

John’s father lived with the growing family and spent quite a bit of time at the Red Lion Pub in town. Like most Irish men of his generation, he had taken the pledge of total abstinence until a certain age and as he grew older, Mike says alcohol became a large part of his grandfather’s daily life. “He became an alcoholic pretty quick, which presented certain problems for my mother in managing the household, but he was by all accounts a very loving guy.”

The family lived in a remote area with only one car, so Margaret spent most days at home with their young children. She did have the help of a nanny through a local social program. The couple would take in unwed mothers who had recently given their children up for

adoption. Having a child out of wedlock tended to make these young women social pariahs and families such as the Savages would offer them a sort of stepping stone to integrate them back into society after giving birth. They would have a temporary place to live and assist with the children and other household tasks.

John worked under the National Health Service (NHS), which was created in 1946. The purpose of the NHS is to guarantee equal health care to all British residents. Prior to the Act, residents would, for the most part, pay for their health care. The original design of the NHS was divided into three categories: hospital services, primary care, and community services. Under primary care, general practitioners were considered independent contractors and were paid on a per person basis. In the 1950s, the amount of money going into the NHS was exceeding estimated totals. In an attempt to increase revenue, in 1952, a one-shilling charge was introduced for prescriptions and a £1 charge for dental services. By 1956, the NHS was hemorrhaging money and doctors became increasingly disgruntled with the system. A Royal Commission on doctor's pay was set up in 1957.

John shared the growing exasperation many physicians expressed with the NHS. As a young doctor, he was expected to work hard and get paid very little. New physicians were at the bottom of the barrel and at the mercy of their veteran counterparts until a new crop of up-and-comers took their place. He joined a group of equally frustrated young colleagues who all agreed to hand in their resignation as a formal protest. When the day finally came, John was the only doctor to follow through and formally resigned. His license was eventually reinstated, but his frustrations did not go away. He became

a vocal critic at local meetings of the General Medical Council. His growing disapproval eventually led him to look outside of the United Kingdom for employment opportunities.

On the back cover of an issue of the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, John discovered an advertisement seeking doctors in three parts of the world: Nova Scotia (specifically Dartmouth and Whitney Pier in Sydney), New South Wales, Australia, and a country in West Africa. In the end, his final decision was based on proximity and finances. “The clinic in Africa wasn’t willing to pay the airfare for all of those kids,” explains Mike. “And they thought moving to Australia would have been like moving to a different planet. They thought Canada was closer to get back home.”

John had to choose between Sydney and Dartmouth. He settled on Dartmouth, a city located on the eastern shore of Halifax harbour that in 1961 held a population of approximately 47,000. Boasting twenty-five lakes, it is appropriately tagged as the “city of lakes.” “I think he really liked the doctors [in Dartmouth],” says Shelagh. “He liked the size of the town. I think he liked that it probably felt quite freeing after Wales.” John was also attracted to the idea of living on a lake, something he said was unattainable in Wales.

In May of 1966, John travelled across the Atlantic to Dartmouth. A few months later, his family would join him. John’s father remained in Wales and moved in with his younger son.

Mike was six years old at the time of the move and doesn’t recall any democratic discussions prior to boarding a plane to Canada. “I don’t recall being consulted. Today we would probably discuss it with our kids. Sit them

down; bring in a psychiatrist and a travel consultant. Back in the day they told us and off we went. I think I thought of it as an adventure. I just thought this is what you're supposed to do because that's what Mom and Dad decided." Mike does recall, however, the highlight of his journey to Canada. "It was the first time I ever had a soft drink. I had 7up on the Air Canada flight, so I had a good feeling about the whole thing based on that." Shelagh's memories of the big move included a Penguin guidebook called *A Child's Guide to Canada*. "It was typical of Mom and Dad to find us a book so that we could read about it."

John purchased a home in the north end of Dartmouth on Limardo Drive. "It stood out," says Mike. "There were a lot of low-rise houses and there was this bigger house that my dad had picked out for us." Despite its stature, with six children, two parents, a nanny (who returned to the United Kingdom not long after their arrival), and Margaret's mother, the three-bedroom home was cramped to say the least. In 1967, the family once again packed up their belongings and moved just a five-minute drive away to Braemar Drive.

The new home boasted four bedrooms upstairs, two bedrooms downstairs, and a dining room was turned into John and Margaret's master bedroom. Originally built as a summer home on the water, Mike describes his childhood home as "a big barn on the lake." The house also featured a sizable living room, which the children referred to as the "good room," and a library overflowing with books. A large fireplace was another impressive feature, but John and Margaret, who were used to homes with no central heating in the U.K., never took advantage of the added warmth.

“It was a beautiful location. We were surrounded by water,” says Mike. “When you’re a kid, you only realize the experiences you have. You don’t realize until later that it was a big house and a beautiful place to live. It was close to the school. It was a really great place to grow up.”

While the size of the home was much more accommodating for the large family, Mike says the driveway was a constant sore point for John during the winter months. John was accustomed to milder climates and he found Nova Scotia winters to be frigid. It became even more of an annoyance when trying to leave the house. John would load all of the children into their station wagon and begin the frustrating challenge of getting up the icy, snowy driveway and onto the busy street. Eventually he’d task one of the children to get out of the vehicle and their job was to send him a signal once traffic slowed down. As soon as he got the signal, he’d hit the gas and mumble under his breath, “Should have moved to Australia.”

Not long after their arrival in Canada, the couple’s seventh child, Brigid, was born in 1967. John and Margaret got creative when it came to keeping everyone in some kind of day-to-day order and John wanted to empower his children when it came to making important decisions like how much allowance each child should receive. He instructed them to form a “kids’ union.” Brigid says John told them to elect a president, a shop steward, and a treasurer and they were expected to negotiate collectively. “He said, ‘The trade union movement is very important where I come from. I want you to learn about this.’ It was something he tried to teach us.”

Brigid acted as shop steward, Mike was union treasurer, and Shelagh was the president because she was the oldest. Patrick says the union didn’t last very long,

however, as the younger children will recount that the older children turned it more into a dictatorship than a democracy. “The older kids sold out the younger kids as labour. I was three or four at that time. I was the one singing ‘Solidarity Forever.’ That was me. I think it was Mom and Dad’s idea because they thought for at least twenty-six minutes there would be relative quiet.”

The word discipline garners a laugh from some of the children. Margaret and John would often use the term “benign neglect,” which basically means not getting involved in a situation with the hope that the individuals responsible will handle it themselves. They would set the bar and the children were expected to behave in a certain way. There was plenty of room to maneuver within that bar, but they knew what was expected of them.

And when benign neglect and unions weren’t enough, John and Margaret used two very different styles to handle a situation. Margaret had the rare ability to speak softly yet get her point across loudly. Patrick says it was all in her tone. “You knew it would be a soft conversation, but you were going to come out of it feeling like such a bad person. Whereas Dad would kick you in the ass – literally – and then a few minutes later you’d be out playing soccer.”

Margaret put up with an abundant amount of unruly behaviour, but she immediately put her foot down when it came to any unkindness. Her children describe a regular day consisting of seven kids running around the living room while Margaret sits peacefully in a chair reading a book, completely unfazed by the chaos around her. But as soon as an unkind word was spoken, she was quick to stop everything and have a conversation.

While Margaret would provide the gentle touch, John was quick to find a solution to the problem. There was no need for empathy if a solution was obvious. Mike's best example of their differing parenting styles comes from when he cut himself above the eye while playing street hockey. "I ran home through the woods and was bleeding profusely. I came in the house and Mom said, 'Oh my gosh, come here and let's have a look at this.' Dad saw me and said, 'There's no point bleeding on the carpet. Get over here on the linoleum,' and then he stitched me up. So here's my mother, the empathetic, caring person and here's my father: we've got a problem, we need to fix it, and there's no point making the problem worse by bleeding on the carpet. Barney always said if as kids we could have my dad's energy and Mom's patience, we would have been an amazing thing, but we got them backwards."