

A different school of hard knocks

SINCE Upper Canada College has traditionally inspired envy, readers may be surprised to discover that pity is the strongest emotion they feel while reading *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College* (Macfarlane, Walter and Ross, \$35). At first glance it looks like an innocent bathroom book, suitable for reading at odd moments, the tape-recorded memoirs of 71 men who attended UCC between 1919 and 1993. But when I began paging idly through it, I found myself transfixed by the intensity of the emotions it contains. It adds up to a kind of Look Back in Horror, a 369-page scream of pain. In these reminiscences Upper Canada College comes off very badly, much worse than we might have expected.

James FitzGerald, a third-generation UCC old boy, did the interviews. His book is oral history, a format that often reveals more about the writer who selects the speakers and their words than about the ostensible subject. Given the choice, I'd prefer reading a writer who sorts the material into a narrative, sketches in the context, and takes responsibility for the conclusions. Yet even those who find oral history dubious will have to acknowledge that FitzGerald has done something remarkable. He's put together a book that everyone interested in the Canadian elite will be talking about for a good while.

Oddly, his first witness speaks for the defence. He's Allan Lamport, one-time mayor of Toronto, who loved being at UCC in the 1920s, believes in it, and thinks people who complain about it



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have no judgment. But after Lamport's section, *Old Boys* turns into an angry collection of regrets, resentments, and grievances, interrupted only occasionally by a few words of enthusiasm or appreciation.

We have to remember that, while UCC may or may not train the leaders of Canada (it's never produced a prime minister), the hothouse atmosphere of the place tends to encourage a taste for melodrama. One of FitzGerald's subjects, recalling youthful dreams of literary achievement, says, "It was a dangerous thing to be a writer in this country in the 1940s and 1950s." (I'd like to hear him explain that to Rushdie or Solzhenitsyn.) Perhaps UCC gives a course in overstatement. In any case, the story the old boys tell is appalling.

Humiliation seems to have been their daily lot. We're no further than page eight when we encounter the first of many victims, a gas-station manager, not bright and not athletic, who says that at UCC he was treated with contempt by everybody, including the teachers, maybe especially the teachers. On page

15 Mavor Moore says that in the 1920s the headmaster was a sadist like Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*. On page 21 a civil servant describes UCC as "a murderous establishment, just absolutely brutal." And that's only the beginning. After a while, the reader gets used to remarks like "I was made into a nobody by that place."

Physical beatings, eliminated in recent years, are the focus of many older memories. An element of homo-eroticism frequently crops up. A musician who was there from 1935 to 1943, and calculates that he was caned 1.14 times a week, says, "I learned to be a sexual masochist at Upper Canada." Teachers who openly fondled the boys have either retired or changed their ways, but even students who were at UCC in recent years tell stories drenched in bitterness.

Many complaints involve psychological malformation. Alan Walker, an editor at Maclean's, left there in 1953 but still feels sick whenever he passes the UCC grounds in Toronto. He lives alone and hasn't been to a party in 20 years; he thinks that UCC retarded him, socially and sexually. Robert Patillo, a CBC executive, says something similar. He didn't like the other boys at UCC, and apparently they didn't like him. He believes the school forced him inside himself, permanently. He, too, has lived alone for years. He'd like to be accessible and friendly, "but I'm not. I blame UCC for it."

Even those who honour UCC, like lawyer Bela Fejer, have pitiful stories to tell, and some of the most popular and

successful students now resent the place. Michael Ignatieff, a star athlete and scholar, believes he was damaged by his intensely successful time there, "a success you can never repeat." Despite his many achievements, he's "often been haunted by the memory of that success." Later, his younger brother Andrew makes it clear that among the things haunting *him* are the memory of Michael's cruelty to him at UCC, and Michael's elevated status: "Everybody bowed and scraped when Michael passed." Both believe that the school's obsession with hierarchy distorted their relationship.

There are even more striking juxtapositions. Perrin Beatty talks for four pages about UCC as a valuable experience, but then TV journalist David Gilmour undercuts him by telling us that in 1993 Beatty confessed to him, "I hated every second of UCC."

Traditionally, UCC boys give certain teachers nicknames that stick forever. Over the years various masters have been known as Boog and Butch, Buzz and Choppy, Piff and Spud, Skull and Swifty. These odd little sobriquets may have helped subvert oppressive authority, but when they're speckled through these pages the cumulative effect is grotesque. One expects the Three Stooges, Larry, Curly, and Moe, to show up at any minute. Sometimes this collective portrait of an ancient institution reads like an absurdist farce by Nathanael West, the sort of book that produces strangled laughter even when we know we're supposed to be feeling compassion.