

Powerful history of elitism uninhibited by progress

Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College

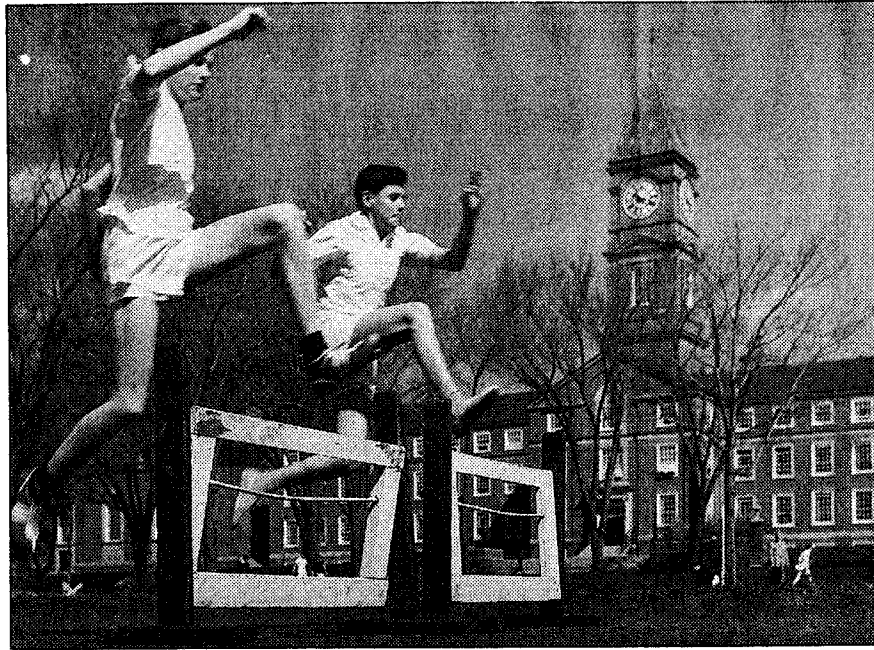
BY JAMES FITZGERALD
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BY CHARLOTTE GRAY

"The bleak stupidity of Toronto Tories is a miracle, you know," remarks Robertson Davies in *Old Boys*, a collection of memoirs from alumni about their days at Upper Canada College (UCC). Davies is remarking on the failure of many UCC boys to recognize that Davies had used their school as the model for "Colborne College" in *Fifth Business*.

But stupidity is of little concern for the old boys of Canada's best-known private school. Like all those brutal British private schools on which it is modelled, brains have never been highly prized at UCC. Some boys, if they look for it, find intellectual stimulation within its walls. But what most have acquired is the *sine qua non* of any ruling elite — a sense of entitlement. Like their British counterparts, UCC alumni emerge from their Forest Hill ashram with the unassailable belief in themselves. The future of their country, or at least of Bay St., is in their hands.

Of course, it takes a while for them to recognize this. Judging by these memoirs, the actual experience of attending UCC is awful. Canings, anti-semitism, social isolation, homosexual exploitation and bullying seem to be everyday occurrences. And several boys, branded as "misfits" by their



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SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT: Contacts acquired at Upper Canada College that help graduates over life's hurdles are one of the saving graces of a place that otherwise seems awful.

peers, made frightful messes of their lives — ending up as gas station owners, communists or worse.

The 71 interviews in the book begin with Harry Wilson, a financier who went to UCC in 1919 (and whose son Michael subsequently became both a UCC old boy and Minister of Finance). It ends with Daniel Borins, who left the school in '93 and is now a student at

McGill.

How did James Fitzgerald (class of '68) select the interviews he used from the over 300 alumni he talked to? What does he himself think of the institution that his subjects either gush or retch over? We never find out.

But *Old Boys* doesn't pretend to be a sociological analysis. Instead it is, as its author claims: "A unique deposit of so-

cial history." It is also a fascinating glimpse into the evolving male psyche.

The oldest of the old boys are mainly manly types, for whom family, school and social values were in perfect harmony. They recall with affection the self-discipline and camaraderie they learnt in the Rifle Company, Cadet Corps or Curfew Club, which prepared them so well for harrowing service during World War II.

Graduates from the '50s and '60s remember a conformist society where jocks were the Big Men On Campus, and where there was a desperate adherence to the kind of Anglican, class-conscious traditions that the rest of Canada was shucking off.

The most recent crop of graduates still wallow in the head-banging, privileged irresponsibility of their school-days. It's amazing that some ever graduated, considering the amount of drink and drugs they brag about. "I don't think I've ever met people who drink as much as the UCC boys," is the chest-thumping chuckle line from Ben Wiener (1983-1990). "People would vomit on Mr. Rogers' rug or blow up Conrad Black's swimming pool with firecrackers ... When we told the cops we went to UCC, they always seemed to let us off."

The one advantage of undigested gobbets of oral history is their raw ingenuousness. Many of the interviewees acknowledge that what their schoolboy selves thought was fine is, in fact, frightful. But most of these alumni end their remarks with a maudlin tribute to the school. A thoughtful few agonize

about whether they got any benefit.

My reaction to this book is fascinated revulsion — mainly because the school seems to have taught successive generations of boys that girls are some alien species that is both terrifying and stupid. Among these UCC alumni, reactions to women range from pathetic, through enraged, to psychotic. They are the strongest arguments I've ever read for co-education for boys.

Allan Lamport (1919-1923), former mayor of Toronto, opines that UCC shouldn't go coed because it might sink "to the depths of degradation." Michael Ignatieff (1959-1965), author and broadcaster, suggests that his own sexual life was warped by single-sex education: "Upper Canada encouraged the sense of the bestial male and the virginal, fleeing female, none of which turned out to be true." His brother Andrew (1962-1969), community worker, is blunter: "Women are treated with such contempt in that system."

And 20 feminism-filled years later, nothing appears to have changed.

"I wasn't even aware of how bad the experience was until after I left UCC," says Chris Gilmour (1957-1965), former commodities broker. "It was like surviving a bad car accident and staggering around for a few years afterwards in a state of mild shock."

Parents pay between \$10,000 and \$20,000 a year for attitudes like this — and for the ineffable superiority of knowing one belongs to the elite.

Charlotte Gray, a contributing editor of "Saturday Night" magazine.

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