

What Disturbs Our Blood by James FitzGerald

Random House Canada, 2010, 484 pages.

Reviewed by Ted Schmidt, Editor of New Catholic Times, July 5, 2010

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James FitzGerald's latest book *What Disturbs Our Blood: A Son's Quest to Redeem the Past* succeeds at all levels. The author of *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College* set out to understand what disturbed his own blood, the tangled web of dark Irish genes which has haunted him for decades. In the admirable psychic digging that has enabled him to survive the FitzGerald curse of suicides, alcoholism and melancholia, he has also reclaimed for us the remarkable story of Canadian public health pioneers, among them his brilliant but haunted grandfather Gerry FitzGerald, the driving force behind the storied Connaught Labs.

FitzGerald takes us back from his own nuclear family, his own doctor father Jack who "shunned contact with flesh and blood offspring" and his vivacious mother who had the sense to put her foot down when Jack wanted to ship James off to boarding school at Upper Canada College at age eight. The school was three blocks up the street. This is the first sign that all is not right in Casa FitzGerald.

The author, whose previous book was an unflattering look at UCC, ultimately attends Canada's premier elite school and despite the demands it made on him he mentions in wonderment about the "ceaseless acts of derision, cruelty and intimidation" doled out there; James becomes convinced his schooling "had done more harm than good." (p.76). Raised by an emotionally distant mother and a father "who shunned his three children as if they were lepers"(p.39), he begins his retreat into adolescent iconoclasm. And then the shocking day his parents came home from their annual Caribbean vacation and his father brushed past him up the stairs to his bedroom. "On the door he taped a note for all to see, for all to never speak about, for all to never forget: Daddy ded."

Dr Jack FitzGerald, a pioneer in allergy treatments, was having a breakdown at age forty-nine. By fifty-three, the jazz loving, high strung sophisticate was sidelined forever, a drug abuser with a failed suicide attempt behind him. The hipster pater who brought Duke Ellington and Count Basie back to his house now sat "zoned on lithium and TV" (p. 109) and "drifting among the living dead" (p.107). This will drive his son James to psychotherapy in a bid to survive "a family script of self-destruction." (p.117). And this is when the book roars into second gear.

At age forty, haunted by dreams, James seriously takes on the family story, "the Petri dish of FitzGerald DNA", the trail of the dominant Y chromosome. From Ulster and County Monaghan, he traces the family journey to Port Hope and Millbrook where his great-grandfather Will began his career as a small town pharmacist. Finally the meat of

this engrossing tale leads us to the brilliant grandfather Gerry whom the author never knew.

And what a tale this is. By "smashing the code of silence" (p. 143) around his grandfather (and without divulging too much of the story), we are treated to a brilliant recreation of one of the key pioneers of public health in this country -- Dr. Gerry FitzGerald, the founder of the Connaught Laboratory and the founding director of the University of Toronto's School of Hygiene. This is required reading for all the market privatizers and shredders of the common good which we have been plagued with latterly. FitzGerald is not blowing family smoke when he states that these public institutions were responsible for the saving of countless lives both nationally and globally."(p.144). Banting and Best's discovery of insulin in 1922 is merely the tip of Connaught's contribution. Killer diseases like diphtheria, syphilis, rabies, tetanus, meningitis, typhoid, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, smallpox, influenza, and polio were tamed and controlled here. We meet the forgotten heroes of medicine, men whose contribution are, for most, names without a history now -- Defries, McKinnon, Fraser inter alias. Make no mistake this book is a necessary reclamation of lost voices and Canadian heroes we should never forget. There will not be one reader of *What Disturbs the Blood* who has not been personally touched by the dedication and contribution of these men to our collective health.

Yet we will discover here not only the flawed humanity of these medical men but their blindness when it came to mental health. The plain fact remains that these brilliant doctors resisted for far too long the genius of "the subversive Jewish outsider" (p.172), Sigmund Freud. FitzGerald documents the bizarre and botched attempts at healing mental illness during this period. Tainted blood, heredity, biochemical roots, and "pathologies buried in cerebral tissues" supposedly cause mental illness. Asylums are overcrowded with the unhinged. They are treated with electricity, exercise, diet, drugs (like his own father would be), surgery, water -- everything except words. The "talking cure" of the Viennese wizard is vigorously resisted for fifty years.

But it saved James FitzGerald. Words did heal.

At the hands of a skilled lay psychotherapist, FitzGerald was spared the descent into madness which not only claimed his father and grandfather but others in his family as well. Sadly the FitzGerald line ends. Neither James nor his siblings have children.

Part detective story, part biography and part history, this book is no downer. On the contrary, it is uplifting and courageous. James FitzGerald's dogged pursuit of dark family secrets not only opened a pathway to his own sanity but flagged for Canadian amnesiacs the extraordinary commitment to public institutions of men like Gerry FitzGerald and his contemporaries. These men eschewed personal aggrandizement and private wealth for the common good and the physical and emotional health of not only Canadians but for the world at large. The recent outbreaks of SARS, H1N1 and West Nile Virus have shown us once again not only how important public health and hygiene are to all of us but how very prescient were those great Canadians like Gerry FitzGerald .