



 Interview

Sheila Fitzpatrick

Through her memoir, the award-winning historian has come to terms with her feelings for a renegade father, writes **TIM ELLIOTT**.

When Brian Fitzpatrick was drunk – which was, it seems, most of the time – he would chase his teenage daughter, Sheila, around their living room, lunging and lurching, apparently mistaking her for one of his girlfriends. A benevolent dictator when sober, liberal with hugs and the pleasures of his intellect, Fitzpatrick on the grog was grandiose and sentimental, a hurtful bore who talked openly about his multiple lovers in front of his wife and children. As Sheila Fitzpatrick writes in her new memoir, one night he even “came into the bedroom I shared with my brother and addressed *both* of us as his girlfriends, which Pat at seven or eight found very funny”.

Memoirs have long been the vehicle of choice for reputation demolition, but rarely has the wrecking ball swung with such a blend of honesty and adoration than in Fitzpatrick's work, *My Father's Daughter*. Subtitled *Memories of an Australian Childhood*, the book is on one level an exploration of a time, place and climate of opinion so radically removed from today as to seem like a kind of fiction, one complete with mentions of “commies”, ASIO dossiers and “school milk, distributed free, in little bottles”. But it is also, of course, a portrait of a daughter's love for a difficult father, the renegade historian and civil libertarian Brian Fitzpatrick.

“My father was central to my childhood, but my relationship with him wasn't easy,” says Fitzpatrick, an award-winning historian and author who teaches modern Russian history

at the University of Chicago and in Sydney. “I left Australia in 1964, and then he died, and so I didn't come back for a long time, and he became very distant. The book, then, was a way of coming to terms with him and also with my mother.”

A pioneering economic historian, journalist and political maverick, Brian Fitzpatrick was a voice of tolerance in Australian politics for 30 years, from the mid-1930s to his death in 1965. His books, including *British Imperialism and Australia 1788-1833*, *The British Empire in Australia* and *The Australian People 1788-1945* became standard texts and influenced a generation of postwar historians. A highly effective social activist, he threw his weight behind campaigns for striking wharfies, Jewish refugees and Aborigines (whom he called “disinherited Australians”), for basic wage increases and the 40-hour week, while also becoming an early opponent of the Vietnam War. Dignified and formal in his public persona, frequently drunk in private, Fitzpatrick was a complex and contradictory character, rejecting the bourgeoisie simultaneously from above (as an aristocrat in mores) and below (as a champion of the people).

“Our life was hard, in that my father never had any money,” Fitzpatrick says. “The expectation then was that if you had a family you got a job and supported them, but he didn't really do that.”

Born the son of a schoolteacher in middle-class Moonee Ponds in Melbourne, Brian soon became a dedicated bohemian, drinking, smoking

and, despite his appearance (portly, florid), womanising. “Many of my father's friends did the same things,” Fitzpatrick says, “but most of them in the 1950s settled down and got a house and jobs.”

An atheist, an intellectual and a socialist, Brian's real job was, as he saw it, to swim against the current, which was fun for him but caused his family no end of grief. “I went to a private girls' school called Lauriston,” Fitzpatrick says. “And immediately I knew we weren't like other families. We didn't have a car. We lived in flat, not a house. We had no money, and my father was notorious for his left-wing ideas. Some of the parents of the girls were strongly anti-communist and they said things to their kids, who would come up to me and say, ‘Your dad's a commie!’”

Brian taught Sheila from an early age to question authority, a skill that she would soon turn on him. “When I was young he seemed so heroic,” she says. “But then as I got older I saw that maybe it wasn't so heroic to stand up against the world all the time, or that there were at least ways of doing it that were less self-indulgent.”

At the age of eight, Sheila decided to “take action” on Brian's drinking. “Since my father almost always did anything I asked him to,” she writes in the book, “and since he also encouraged me to present logical arguments, I would set out the disadvantages of his drinking ... and ask him to stop, and he was bound to do so.” Sheila picked her moment and made her speech, but Brian did not react as she had expected: he didn't



really listen or take her seriously. "He somehow evaded me," she writes. "My voice lost confidence and my sentences started to peter out. And he didn't stop drinking."

Her relationship with her mother, Doff, didn't fare much better. "Making the worst of things was one of Doff's own specialties," she writes. Once Sheila remarked to her mother how "people often said I looked sad. I felt like the kind of person who would look sad, in an interesting and romantic way." Yes, said Doff, "you do tend to have a sulky, discontented look."

My Father's Daughter is as much a work of history as memoir. Fitzpatrick says she wrote the first draft out of her head, "consulting nobody and checking nothing". But then she went back and did research, talking to friends and family, checking facts, reading family letters and her father's and mother's papers in the National Library. She also dug up their ASIO files. Brian had been closely involved in the Petrov affair, advising his friend and ALP leader Dr H.V. Evatt on how to handle the situation in the run-up to the election against Menzies. He had also been active in the local campaign on behalf of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were accused of spying for the Soviets in the US. (They were eventually executed, an event that considerably upped the stakes for dissidents, even in Australia.) In his monthly periodical, *Brian Fitzpatrick's Labor Newsletter*, he also criticised the government for attempting to ban the Communist Party.

Not surprisingly, ASIO, whose director-general, Colonel Charles

Spry, lived "just up the road" from the Fitzpatricks, took a keen interest in Brian, who naturally enough relished the attention. As it turned out, ASIO's files were reasonably accurate, presenting Fitzpatrick as a man who was not a communist but associated with Communist Party members and their causes. One informant said the party wouldn't have him because he "drank too much"; another described him as a "pleasant rogue".

"Writing the book taught me a lot about memory," Fitzpatrick says. "The way I remembered things was not the way my brother did, for example."

Cross-referencing the initial draft with her research, she found that practically everything she remembered was "slightly or significantly wrong". In the end, she concedes that while there are undoubtedly inaccuracies throughout the book, "it's my story and that's the way I had to tell it".

But in one respect – the love of a daughter for her father – Fitzpatrick's memoir is thoroughly, beautifully true. Politics are one thing, but it's in this relationship that the book really sings, in her descriptions of sitting in her father's lap, "stroking the funny short hairs at the back of his neck"; of standing on his shoulders at the beach, of lying in bed listening to him singing a good-night lullaby; of swimming and running with him and climbing trees ("Daddy, are you watching? I'm going to jump!"). This love changed over time, so much so that at one point, Fitzpatrick admits, "I couldn't remember his voice or what he looked like". Now, at least, in the

pages of her fascinating book, we can see him again, clearer than ever.

***My Father's Daughter* is published by Melbourne University Press, \$27.99.**



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Reality check ... Fitzpatrick says writing the book taught her a lot about memory; (left) with her father at the beach in the late 1940s.
Photo: Nick Moir