

An American Tragedy

***From Healing to Hell* by William Henry Wall**

Reviewed by Mel Massey

From *Healing to Hell* by William Henry Wall, JR., D.D.S. was published by NewSouth books in 2011 and is described as a “memoir”.

Wall’s father (Wall Sr.) was a medical doctor, a man who only with great persistence managed to obtain his MD in the throes of the Depression. As a surgeon he served his community selflessly, treating patients regardless of race or ability to pay. He played a key role in promoting mental health and modernizing the State’s medical system.

By all accounts, he was a superb surgeon, performing complex and specialized surgery in what today, we would call ‘developing country’ conditions. The author, a medical man, is qualified to appreciate his father’s skill.

The story is told in a linked series of anecdotes which display the texture of the times (thirties through sixties) and Doctor Wall Sr.’s magnetic personality and open handed generosity. The skilled doctor and public figure becomes addicted to Demerol, then considered a non-habituating ‘pain killer, and his enemies arrange for his exposure and incarceration.

It is clear that it is the United States, the society, both local and national which is blameworthy for the Wall Sr.’s pitiful end. The dis-

graced doctor is sentenced to a year and a half at a US Public Health Service Hospital for addicts. There he was likely used as an experimental subject, without consent, under the CIA’s notorious MKULTRA project.

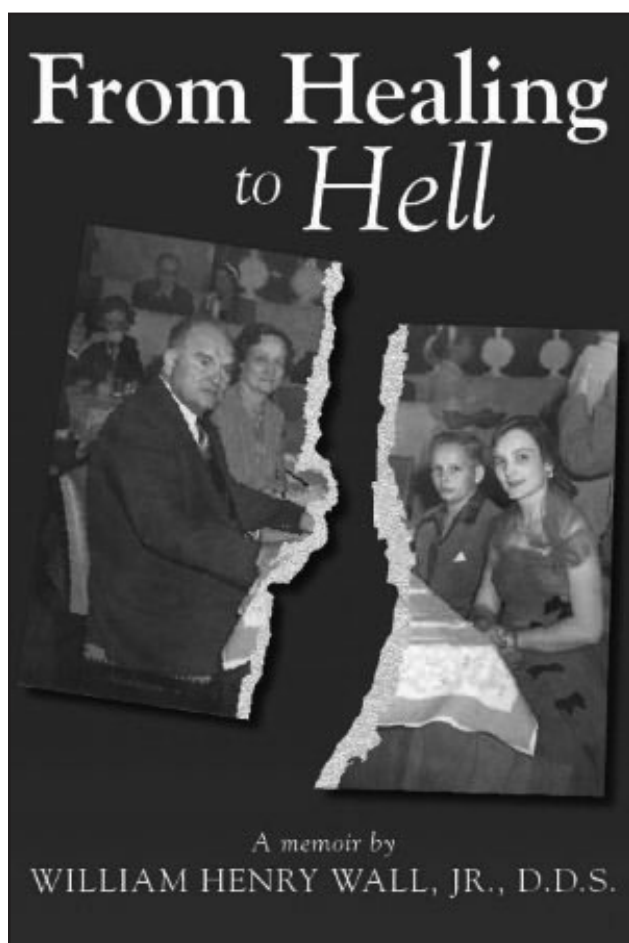
This covert CIA undertaking which was carried out from 1953-73 used just about anyone they chose, as subjects for experimentation using psychedelic drugs, ‘psychological driving’ and other repugnant practices.

In Canada, the notorious Dr. Ewen Cameron performed his despicable experiments in Montreal, using CIA funds at the Allan Memorial-McGill Institute from the late fifties into the sixties.

Wall Sr., formerly renowned surgeon and public figure is shattered by his prison experience. He is thereafter subject to gross delusions (accusing his son, the author of this account) of incest, rages and alcoholism. He brandishes firearms and carries on like a madman.

In the later photographs of Wall Sr. he displays the blank ‘1000 yard’ stare we see in images of Ernest Hemingway taken shortly before the Nobel Prize winner’s suicide.

So what was Wall Sr.’s tragic flaw? What are we to make of his life, which his son researched for years?



FROM HEALING TO HELL

William Henry Wall

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The only evident ‘mistake’ that Wall Sr. makes (according to his son’s memoir) is that he expected that the American society in which he lived would recompense his humanitarian life efforts by treating him decently and with compassion when he got into trouble.

What sort of society slams a noted medical doctor and politician into a ‘treatment prison’ for addiction? What was behind the need to humiliate and destroy him, to use him as raw human material for experiments with powerful chemicals?

The Wall family lived in a violent society during turbulent times. Georgia was arguably as extreme in its racism as South Africa and, like the United States generally, supported a firearm-friendly culture. Wall Sr. was unswerving in his fair treatment of people of colour, he simply treated them like anyone else and his unswerving rejection of racism and bigotry infuri-

ated many contemporaries.

After he describes thwarting his father’s attempt at suicide, the author says “. . . I knew he had other means of doing away with himself, because he kept three other revolvers etc.” (p.165). The author does not criticize the availability of deadly weapons – it was part and parcel of the society, as it continues to be.

There is a darkness in how the book depicts US Georgian society. The feeling of oppression is based on systemic racism, the gun-friendly culture and corrupt law enforcement.

A thread of mean-spirited antagonism runs through the narrative; small-minded jealous doctors, conniving secretaries, doped-up nurses, and incompetent lawyers. Racism is ubiquitous.

One is reminded of Goya’s horrid painting of Saturn horrifically devouring his son.

The reader is primed for the allegations that the CIA’s clandestine KMULTRA undertaking was to blame for Wall Sr.’s disintegration. It seems part and parcel of the degenerate southern society described in the *From Healing to Hell*.

In the *Afterward* (p.314), the author wonders “could the world Trade Center terrorists’ attack disaster of 9/11/01 have been prevented if Congress had not emasculated the CIA after the scandal of illegal drug experiments was

exposed?" He argues that the public outcry led to greater supervision of the CIA, which weakened it.

"Too few agents on the ground in trouble spots, . . . who understand or are able to work undercover among our country's sworn enemies . . . our country's fate depends upon their success." (p.215).

However, this insular and paranoid vision is not related to Wall Sr.'s ordeal. With all respect for the author's qualifications as a medical man and with deep sympathy for the destruction of his father and the agony of his mother and family, these statements must leave the liberal reader aghast.

It seems intelligence agencies everywhere are prone to using deceit and duplicity on their own citizens.

However, these statements are short (contained in the Afterward) and do not detract overly from the power and passion of *From Healing to Hell*. The work is not a 'profession-

al' biography; its organization is imperfect and the anecdotes and tales which are rendered in 'down home' language are somewhat artificial. However, the sentiments ring true.

The portrait of the inner workings of a small town in Georgia in the mid-twentieth century and W. Henry Wall, M.D.'s humanitarian work in his society is compelling.

This is an emotional book that contains a lifetime of the author's mixed grief and pride at the large and flawed man who was his father. The downfall of a good man is projected onto a background of a violent society that did not hesitate to devour its citizens for nefarious purposes. It is a cautionary tale in many aspects that deserves thought and analysis in today's hyper-politicized society.

Mel Massey is a retired corporate lawyer living in Ottawa, Canada, with his artist wife, Joan. He engages in a variety of activities including volunteer work with charitable agencies, writing and outdoor activities.

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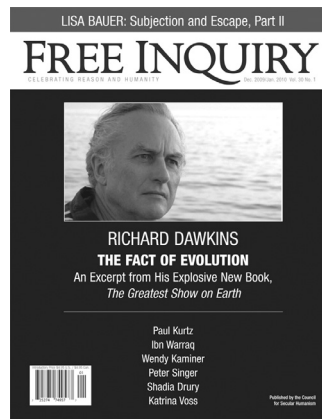
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