Sir Thomas Naghten FitzGerald (1838-1908)

Sir Thomas Naghten FitzGerald (1838-1908), surgeon, was born on 1 August 1838 at Tullamore, Ireland, son of John FitzGerald and his wife Catherine Naghten, née Higgins. He was educated at St Mary's College, Kingstown, and the Ledwich School of Medicine, Dublin, taking his clinical studies at Mercer's Hospital (L.R.C.S.I., 1857); there he was dresser to Richard Butcher who was surgeon to the Queen and outstanding in pre-Listerian British surgery. In 1857 FitzGerald won a commission in the Army Medical Service but had to resign because of illness. As a ship's surgeon he arrived at Melbourne in July 1858. Almost immediately he was appointed acting house surgeon at the Melbourne Hospital until E. M. James returned from England. FitzGerald then opened a private practice near the hospital in Lonsdale Street West. He had applied for the position of surgeon to the Bendigo Hospital but was beaten on the chairman's casting vote. Elected an honorary surgeon to the Melbourne Hospital in 1860, he held that post until 1901 and in 1902-07 was consulting surgeon. He had similar consulting appointments at St Vincent's, Queen Victoria and Austin Hospitals and in 1884 the first clinical lectureship in surgery created by the University of Melbourne at the Melbourne Hospital. In his long service there he influenced large numbers of medical graduates whose memories of 'Fitz' were among their cherished hospital recollections. When he resigned as senior surgeon his colleagues placed a tablet in the Melbourne Hospital vestibule commemorating his long association with the institution; this tablet is now in the operating suite of the hospital at Parkville.

FitzGerald was extremely rapid, resourceful and successful in the operations possible at that time and he introduced original methods, described in the *Australian Medical Journal* in 1887, in the treatment of inguinal hernia, fractures, cleft palate and talipes. His technical skill was great: his mere tying of a knot in a cleft palate operation was said to be a work of art. Brilliant and dexterous as was his operating, his diagnostic skill was also noteworthy. He seemed to have an extra sense, so that he could describe the position of fragments in a fracture as accurately as if they were demonstrated by X-ray; his deductions from symptoms were equally unerring and his opinion was widely sought by patients.

FitzGerald, under average height with a large handsome head, sideboards, broad shoulders, deep chest and dignified carriage, was a distinguished figure in any assembly. To undaunted surgical courage he added instant resourcefulness; with unexpected developments one operation would change into another as if all had been prearranged and no emergency ever took him aback. He had little facility in the spoken or written word; his occasional lectures were more practical than theoretical, and in the wards students learnt more from what he did than from what he said. Always kind and considerate both with his patients and his colleagues he held high the honour of his calling and became the unquestioned leader of the profession in all the Australasian colonies.

During FitzGerald's life the science and art of surgery and medicine were revolutionized. In a presidential address to the Medical Society of Victoria in January 1900, he reviewed some of the changes from 1860 to 1900: 'Will such a difference ever reoccur … shall we ever again go through such a period of unlearning, such a period of relinquishing beliefs, of learning that most of the remedies in which at one time we had so much faith were in reality delusions, more harmful than beneficial'. In his own branch of surgery he said that it was 'not until 1874, about ten years after Lister had commenced his experiments, that things began to wake up in operative surgery'. Before Lister's researches were

published, FitzGerald had been deeply impressed by the differences in the dangers of simple and of compound fractures, and in order to avoid the yet unexplained risks of surgical infection, he devised a whole system of subcutaneous surgery through small incisions. But he had neither the biological knowledge nor the speculative insight that led Lister to his epoch-making discoveries. Perhaps because of his success FitzGerald did not at first fully appreciate Lister's contribution, although his own concern about surgical infection led him to condemn the Melbourne Hospital as a source of wound infection in 1886; he refused to operate for a time and with Richard You precipitated an inquiry by a select committee of the Legislative Council. Chaired by James Beaney, with whom FitzGerald had been in legal conflict in 1863, the committee's report favoured the hospital. In 1890 FitzGerald gave evidence to the royal commission on charities.

At his death two of his distinguished pupils, Harry Allen, professor of pathology in Melbourne, and *George Syme*, later president of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, wrote appreciations of FitzGerald and his work; both spoke of him as 'a genius'. In 1884 he visited Ireland and became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland; the examiners were said to have been astounded by the rapidity of his amputations. In May 1897 he was knighted, the first Australian to be so honoured for eminence in the medical profession. In the Boer war he offered his services to the imperial government, and for three months in 1900 was a consulting surgeon in South Africa. For this work he was appointed C.B. in 1900 and thanked by the Victorian government. His South African experiences were published in the *Intercolonial Medical Journal of Australia*, December 1900. He was president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1884 and 1900, the surgery section at the first Intercolonial Medical Congress in 1887 and the Australasian Medical Congress at Sydney in 1889.

Before his wife died in 1890, beside his private hospital he had built an Italianate mansion, Rostella, a place of gracious hospitality; his tennis court was a miniature club and in his active years he always played before breakfast. With his lucrative practice he maintained a 'handsome brougham complete with two magnificent horses and coachmen and footman in livery' to take him daily to the hospital gates and to the races each week. A skilled four-in-hand driver he loved horses, breeding them at his Doncaster country home and racing under the name of T. Naghten; his most successful horse was Rhesus, winner of the Victorian Grand National Hurdle Race in 1882. A familiar figure at Flemington, he was surgeon to the Victoria Racing Club for many years. Among his collection of fine pictures was Lefebvre's 'Chloe', which has long adorned Young & Jackson's Hotel, Melbourne. Soon after his return from South Africa FitzGerald relinquished his hospital position and most of his private practice because of ailing health. Little benefit was derived from a voyage to England and on a later trip to Cairns he died in the *Wyreena* on 8 July 1908 at sea off Townsville from the after-effects of pneumonia; he was buried with Roman Catholic rites in the Melbourne general cemetery.

On 17 December 1870 FitzGerald married Margaret, daughter of James Robertson, of Struan House, Launceston, Tasmania. Of their three daughters, Ethel married Captain (later Admiral) Lumsden, Eleanor married Edward Cairns Officer, and Kathleen married Colonel Archibald Douglas. On Kathleen's death in 1951, her residuary estate was bequeathed to the University of Melbourne for founding a surgical scholarship in memory of her father.

Source: Colin Macdonald, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.4, 1972.