

The Leslie Connection – How a forgotten Irish writer set F. Scott Fitzgerald on the path to literary fame

In Dublin recently, I paid a visit to the First World War exhibition at the National Library on Kildare Street. I entered with thoughts of recruitment posters, trench warfare and brutalised bodies but left humming tunes from the Jazz Age. The reason: the inclusion in the exhibition of some letters by the now largely forgotten Irish writer Shane Leslie, who was attached to a British ambulance corps in the early part of the war and whose brother, Norman, was killed by a German sniper in October 1914.

Born into the heart of the Anglo-Irish protestant ascendancy in Castle Leslie, County Monaghan, in 1885, Shane Leslie was a writer of some renown across Ireland, England and America, best known, perhaps, for his autobiographical novel *Doomsland* (1923). A first cousin of Winston Churchill's, he was also something of an unofficial go-between during the talks that led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. I knew of him, however, as one of the men who helped set a young F. Scott Fitzgerald on the road to literary fame, their paths first crossing when Fitzgerald was a sixteen-year-old student at the Newman School, a Catholic boarding school in New Jersey, in late 1912. 'He came into my life as the most romantic figure I had ever known ... He had sat at the feet of Tolstoy ... he had gone swimming with Rupert Brooke,' wrote Fitzgerald of Leslie, who was more than ten years his senior and who had recently married into a politically well-connected American family.

Fitzgerald – both of whose parents were Catholic – was introduced to Leslie by Fr Cyril Sigoourney Fay, a Washington-based priest from a wealthy family who was a trustee at Newman. Formerly an Episcopalian minister, the sophisticated, intellectual Fay was a recent convert to Catholicism. So too was Leslie, who had converted while studying at Cambridge around 1907. Together they made the church 'a dazzling golden thing' for the teenage Fitzgerald, taking him to parties at the bejewelled mansions of the east coast Catholic aristocracy and inculcating in his impressionable young mind the sense of the 'mystical element' that could only be found in religion. 'You make a great mistake if you think you can be romantic without being religious,' Fay wrote to Fitzgerald, who was already publishing stories in school journals. It was advice Fitzgerald would carry all his life, for while his novels and short stories are set mainly in the material and materialistic world of early-twentieth-century America, it is the 'mystical element' with which they are suffused that has carried them to greatness.

The world opened up by Leslie and Fay was far removed from the Catholicism on which Fitzgerald had been raised, the family home in St Paul, Missouri, filled with dully pious relatives fiddling rosary beads and saying prayers, or, as Fitzgerald would put it, 'mumbling stray nothings over crystalline beads'. Indeed, the influence of Leslie and Fay was so great that the man who would both give name to and come to embody the excesses of the Jazz Age thought briefly of becoming a priest. Later, in Princeton, he would go to mass regularly and make a point about not eating meat on Fridays before slipping back into more hedonistic ways.

The two Catholic sorcerers and their talented young apprentice stayed in touch during the years of the First World War, when Leslie was working with the British ambassador in Washington to convince the United States to declare war on Germany, while also acting as something of a roving publicist and propagandist for John Redmond and the Irish

Parliamentary Party in America. Fitzgerald, meanwhile, would leave Princeton to enlist in the American army in late 1917. The war ended before he could join the fighting in Europe, but not before he had finished writing a novel called *The Romantic Egotist*. In the spring of 1918 he sent the manuscript to Leslie, who had promised to recommend it to his American publisher, Charles Scribner's Sons. Leslie, who read and commented on some of the chapters as they were being written, corrected some spelling and grammar and sent it in, complete with a note likening Fitzgerald to an American Rupert Brooke, the talented and handsome young English poet killed in France in 1915. Although initially rejected, a rewritten version of the novel was published under the title *This Side of Paradise* in March 1920. It was an immediate and incredible success, making a huge star out of Fitzgerald. Fay, who died in 1919, would be immortalised in print as Monsignor Darcy, by far the most sympathetic character in the book. Leslie would receive his thanks a few years later, the dedication in Fitzgerald's second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, thanking him for all the 'literary help and encouragement' he had bestowed upon the aspiring writer.

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