

## **‘A Confession of Being a Gael’: F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ireland**

With a recent adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* at the Gate receiving strong reviews and a new biography of its author F. Scott Fitzgerald joining a collection of his ‘lost’ stories on the bookshelves earlier this year, my thoughts were drawn to that pivotal yet generally unappreciated aspect of Fitzgerald’s life and work – his Irishness.

Although the very name ‘Fitzgerald’ proclaims Irishness, almost nothing is known about his paternal grandfather Michael Fitzgerald, other than that he married into a fading but still well-regarded old colonial Maryland family. Instead, it is with the McQuillans, his mother Mollie’s family, that Fitzgerald’s true Irishness lies, his maternal grandfather Phillip McQuillan leaving Fermanagh as a child on the eve of the Famine before setting up a business and prospering in St Paul, Minnesota, the city in which Fitzgerald was born and raised. Fitzgerald never knew his grandfather. Yet with his own father Edward proving a serial failure in business, the family were still living off the McQuillan money well into Fitzgerald’s twenties.

Failure or not, it was to his father’s grand-seeming family that Fitzgerald looked for inspiration in his youth, Edward’s evocative tales of the Confederacy and the Civil War looming large in the first flighty fictions he published in school magazines. The fascination continued into adulthood, Southern belles like his wife Zelda Sayre and their genteel world of balls, black servants and broken hearts dominating many of his most popular early short stories. In later years, he would write a warm preface to a book on old Maryland families – always holding that state close as his real ancestral home. Caught up in a morass of personal and financial struggles in the 1930s, he would find solace visiting Baltimore and a statue of the ‘Star-Spangled Banner’ author Francis Scott Key – the distant cousin from his father’s side of the family after whom he (Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald) was named.

Fitzgerald attached no such romance to the McQuillans, with their penurious immigrant past, featureless Mid-West locale and grubby ‘new’ money. Obsessed with social status, he always felt a class below where he wanted to be and did not like to be reminded of his origins, once hitting Zelda for calling his father an ‘Irish cop’ in the middle of a drunken argument. Nevertheless, when it came to his most vital works, it was to the era of his Irish grandfather

McQuillan – a living embodiment of the ‘America Dream’ – that Fitzgerald turned, the genesis of *The Great Gatsby* coming during a prolonged 1922 sojourn in St. Paul – McQuillan country, ‘self-made man’ territory, Jay Gatsby land.

Nor did Fitzgerald shy away from incorporating his Irishness (together with its close cousin – Catholicism) into his work, from the characters of Beatrice O’Hara Blaine (modelled on Fitzgerald’s mother) and Monsignor D’Arcy in his breakthrough novel *This Side of Paradise* to the drunken screenwriter Pat Hobby, eponymous ‘hero’ of some of his last stories. In *Tender is the Night* and *The Last Tycoon*, meanwhile, Rosemary Hoyt and Kathleen Moore, the beautiful young women the leading men become infatuated with, both have Irish lineage. Despite their regular appearances, however, Fitzgerald’s treatment of his Irish characters was usually fairly clichéd and crude, red hair and red faces appearing in abundance. His knowledge of Irish politics was also patchy at best, despite being close for a while to the now largely-forgotten Anglo-Irish author Shane Leslie, who was attached to British embassy in Washington during the First World War, while Fitzgerald was in Princeton.

Fitzgerald was also helped by Irish writers, the aforementioned Leslie providing an entrée into the New York publishing world and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* a heavy influence on *This Side of Paradise*. Fitzgerald admired everything Joyce wrote, greeting him ostentatiously on bended knee when they met in Paris in 1928. His enjoyment of *Ulysses*, however, was tainted by his conflicted feelings about Ireland. ‘There is something about middle-class Ireland that depresses me inordinately,’ he wrote. ‘I mean it gives me a sort of hollow, cheerless pain. Half of my ancestors come from just such an Irish strata or perhaps a lower one. The book makes me feel appallingly naked.’

In a 1933 letter to the Irish-American novelist John O’Hara, ‘a confession of being a Gael’, Fitzgerald described himself as ‘half black Irish and half old American stock’. The derogatory language is indicative of the disdain Fitzgerald held for the Irish side of his family throughout his life – as opposed to the better-bred, less-hyphenated Maryland family. Nevertheless, he also admitted to O’ Hara how profoundly he was affected by that Irishness, that blood. Fitzgerald did not hide his lineage – even if he occasionally tried to disown it. Perhaps he could not, marked as he was both physically and psychologically, his friend and rival Ernest Hemingway remarking on his ‘delicate long-lipped Irish mouth’ and ‘cheap Irish love of defeat’.

Further Reading:

David S. Brown, *Paradise Lost: A Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Harvard University Press, 2017)

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *I'd Die for You and Other Lost Stories* (Simon & Schuster, 2017)

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