

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## SECTION I

### FITZGERALD'S SELECTIONS, 1936

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-69083-7 - My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940: F. Scott Fitzgerald  
Edited by James L. W. West III  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## WHO'S WHO—AND WHY

The history of my life is the history of the struggle between an overwhelming urge to write and a combination of circumstances bent on keeping me from it.

When I lived in St. Paul and was about twelve I wrote all through every class in school in the back of my geography book and first year Latin and on the margins of themes and declensions and mathematic problems. Two years later a family congress decided that the only way to force me to study was to send me to boarding school. This was a mistake. It took my mind off my writing. I decided to play football, to smoke, to go to college, to do all sorts of irrelevant things that had nothing to do with the real business of life, which, of course, was the proper mixture of description and dialogue in the short story.

But in school I went off on a new tack. I saw a musical comedy called “The Quaker Girl,” and from that day forth my desk bulged with Gilbert & Sullivan librettos and dozens of notebooks containing the germs of dozens of musical comedies.

Near the end of my last year at school I came across a new musical-comedy score lying on top of the piano. It was a show called “His Honor the Sultan,” and the title furnished the information that it had been presented by the Triangle Club of Princeton University.

That was enough for me. From then on the university question was settled. I was bound for Princeton.

I spent my entire freshman year writing an operetta for the Triangle Club. To do this I failed in algebra, trigonometry, coordinate geometry and hygiene. But the Triangle Club accepted my show, and by tutoring all through a stuffy August I managed to come back a sophomore and act in it as a chorus girl. A little after this came a hiatus. My health broke down and I left college one December to spend the rest of the year recuperating in the West. Almost my

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - *My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940*: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

final memory before I left was of writing a last lyric on that year's Triangle production while in bed in the infirmary with a high fever.

The next year, 1916–17, found me back in college, but by this time I had decided that poetry was the only thing worth while, so with my head ringing with the meters of Swinburne and the matters of Rupert Brooke I spent the spring doing sonnets, ballads and rondels into the small hours. I had read somewhere that every great poet had written great poetry before he was twenty-one. I had only a year and, besides, war was impending. I must publish a book of startling verse before I was engulfed.

By autumn I was in an infantry officers' training camp at Fort Leavenworth, with poetry in the discard and a brand-new ambition—I was writing an immortal novel. Every evening, concealing my pad behind "Small Problems for Infantry," I wrote paragraph after paragraph on a somewhat edited history of me and my imagination. The outline of twenty-two chapters, four of them in verse, was made; two chapters were completed; and then I was detected and the game was up. I could write no more during study period.

This was a distinct complication. I had only three months to live—in those days all infantry officers thought they had only three months to live—and I had left no mark on the world. But such consuming ambition was not to be thwarted by a mere war. Every Saturday at one o'clock when the week's work was over I hurried to the Officers' Club, and there, in a corner of a roomful of smoke, conversation and rattling newspapers, I wrote a one-hundred-and-twenty-thousand-word novel on the consecutive week-ends of three months. There was no revising; there was no time for it. As I finished each chapter I sent it to a typist in Princeton.

Meanwhile I lived in its smeary pencil pages. The drills, marches and "Small Problems for Infantry" were a shadowy dream. My whole heart was concentrated upon my book.

I went to my regiment happy. I had written a novel. The war could now go on. I forgot paragraphs and pentameters, similes and syllogisms. I got to be a first lieutenant, got my orders overseas—and then the publishers wrote me that though "The Romantic Egotist" was the most original manuscript they had received for years they couldn't publish it. It was crude and reached no conclusion.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Who's Who—and Why*

5

It was six months after this that I arrived in New York and presented my card to the office boys of seven city editors asking to be taken on as a reporter. I had just turned twenty-two, the war was over, and I was going to trail murderers by day and do short stories by night. But the newspapers didn't need me. They sent their office boys out to tell me they didn't need me. They decided definitely and irrevocably by the sound of my name on a calling card that I was absolutely unfitted to be a reporter.

Instead I became an advertising man at ninety dollars a month, writing the slogans that while away the weary hours in rural trolley cars. After hours I wrote stories—from March to June. There were nineteen altogether, the quickest written in an hour and a half, the slowest in three days. No one bought them, no one sent personal letters. I had one hundred and twenty-two rejection slips pinned in a frieze about my room. I wrote movies. I wrote song lyrics. I wrote complicated advertising schemes. I wrote poems. I wrote sketches. I wrote jokes. Near the end of June I sold one story for thirty dollars.

On the Fourth of July, utterly disgusted with myself and all the editors, I went home to St. Paul and informed family and friends that I had given up my position and had come home to write a novel. They nodded politely, changed the subject and spoke of me very gently. But this time I knew what I was doing. I had a novel to write at last, and all through two hot months I wrote and revised and compiled and boiled down. On September fifteenth "This Side of Paradise" was accepted by special delivery.

In the next two months I wrote eight stories and sold nine. The ninth was accepted by the same magazine that had rejected it four months before. Then, in November, I sold my first story to the editors of the "Saturday Evening Post." By February I had sold them half a dozen. Then my novel came out. Then I got married. Now I spend my time wondering how it all happened.

In the words of the immortal Julius Caesar: "That's all there is; there isn't any more."

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PRINCETON

In preparatory school and up to the middle of sophomore year in college, it worried me that I wasn't going and hadn't gone to Yale. Was I missing a great American secret? There was a gloss upon Yale that Princeton lacked; Princeton's flannels hadn't been pressed for a week, its hair always blew a little in the wind. Nothing was ever carried through at Princeton with the same perfection as the Yale Junior Prom or the elections to their senior societies. From the ragged squabble of club elections with its scars of snobbishness and adolescent heartbreak, to the enigma that faced you at the end of senior year as to what Princeton *was* and what, bunk and cant aside, it really stood for, it never presented itself with Yale's hard, neat, fascinating brightness. Only when you tried to tear part of your past out of your heart, as I once did, were you aware of its power of arousing a deep and imperishable love.

Princeton men take Princeton for granted and resent any attempt at analysis. As early as 1899 Jesse Lynch Williams was anathematized for reporting that Princeton wine helped to make the minutes golden. If the Princetonian had wanted to assert in sturdy chorus that his college was the true flower of American democracy, was deliberately and passionately America's norm in ideals of conduct and success, he would have gone to Yale. His brother and many of the men from his school went there. Contrariwise he chooses Princeton because at seventeen the furies that whip on American youth have become too coercive for his taste. He wants something quieter, mellower and less exigent. He sees himself being caught up into a wild competition that will lead him headlong into New Haven and dump him pell-mell out into the world. The series of badges which reward the winner of each sprint are no doubt desirable, but he seeks the taste of pleasant pastures and a moment to breathe deep and ruminate before he goes into the clamorous struggle of American life. He finds at Princeton other men like himself

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - *My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940*: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Princeton*

7

and thus is begotten Princeton's scoffing and mildly ironic attitude toward Yale.

Harvard has never existed as a conception at Princeton. Harvard men were "Bostonians with affected accents," or they were "That Isaacs fellow who got the high school scholarship out home." Lee Higginson & Company hired their athletes for them but no matter how much one did for Harvard one couldn't belong to "Fly" or "Porcellian" without going to Groton or St. Mark's. Such ideas were satisfying if inaccurate, for Cambridge, in more senses than one, was many miles away. Harvard was a series of sporadic relationships, sometimes pleasant, sometimes hostile—that was all.

Princeton is in the flat midlands of New Jersey, rising, a green Phoenix, out of the ugliest country in the world. Sordid Trenton sweats and festers a few miles south; northward are Elizabeth and the Erie Railroad and the suburban slums of New York; westward the dreary upper purlieu of the Delaware River. But around Princeton, shielding her, is a ring of silence—certified milk dairies, great estates with peacocks and deer parks, pleasant farms and woodlands which we paced off and mapped down in the spring of 1917 in preparation for the war. The busy East has already dropped away when the branch train rattles familiarly from the junction. Two tall spires and then suddenly all around you spreads out the loveliest riot of Gothic architecture in America, battlement linked on to battlement, hall to hall, arch-broken, vine-covered—luxuriant and lovely over two square miles of green grass. Here is no monotony, no feeling that it was all built yesterday at the whim of last week's millionaire; Nassau Hall was already twenty years old when Hessian bullets pierced its sides.

Alfred Noyes has compared Princeton to Oxford. To me the two are sharply different. Princeton is thinner and fresher, at once less profound and more elusive. For all its past, Nassau Hall stands there hollow and barren, not like a mother who has borne sons and wears the scars of her travail but like a patient old nurse, skeptical and affectionate with these foster children who, as Americans, can belong to no place under the sun.

In my romantic days I tried to conjure up the Princeton of Aaron Burr, Philip Freneau, James Madison and Light-Horse Harry Lee, to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - *My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940*: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tie on, so to speak, to the eighteenth century, to the history of man. But the chain parted at the Civil War, always the broken link in the continuity of American life. Colonial Princeton was, after all, a small denominational college. The Princeton I knew and belonged to grew from President McCosh's great shadow in the seventies, grew with the great *post bellum* fortunes of New York and Philadelphia to include coaching parties and keg parties and the later American conscience and Booth Tarkington's Triangle Club and Wilson's cloistered plans for an educational utopia. Bound up with it somewhere was the rise of American football.

For at Princeton, as at Yale, football became, back in the nineties, a sort of symbol. Symbol of what? Of the eternal violence of American life? Of the eternal immaturity of the race? The failure of a culture within the walls? Who knows? It became something at first satisfactory, then essential and beautiful. It became, long before the insatiable millions took it, with Gertrude Ederle and Mrs. Snyder, to its heart, the most intense and dramatic spectacle since the Olympic games. The death of Johnny Poe with the Black Watch in Flanders starts the cymbals crashing for me, plucks the strings of nervous violins as no adventure of the mind that Princeton ever offered. A year ago in the Champs Élysées I passed a slender, dark-haired young man with an indolent characteristic walk. Something stopped inside me; I turned and looked after him. It was the romantic Buzz Law whom I had last seen one cold fall twilight in 1913, kicking from behind his goal line with a bloody bandage round his head.

After the beauty of its towers and the drama of its arenas, the widely known feature of Princeton is its "clientele."

A large proportion of such gilded youth as will absorb an education drifts to Princeton. Goulds, Rockefellers, Harrimans, Morgans, Fricks, Firestones, Perkinses, Pynes, McCormicks, Wannamakers, Cudahys and DuPonts light there for a season, well or less well regarded. The names of Pell, Biddle, Van Rensselaer, Stuyvesant, Schuyler and Cooke titillate second generation mammas and papas with a social row to hoe in Philadelphia or New York. An average class is composed of three dozen boys from such Midas academies as St. Paul's, St. Mark's, St. George's, Pomfret and Groton, a hundred and fifty more from Lawrenceville, Hotchkiss, Exeter, Andover

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Princeton*

9

and Hill, and perhaps another two hundred from less widely known preparatory schools. The remaining twenty per cent enter from the high schools and these last furnish a large proportion of the eventual leaders. For them the business of getting to Princeton has been more arduous, financially as well as scholastically. They are trained and eager for the fray.

In my time, a decade ago, the mid-winter examinations in freshman year meant a great winnowing. The duller athletes, the rich boys of thicker skulls than their forebears, fell in droves by the wayside. Often they had attained the gates at twenty or twenty-one and with the aid of a tutoring school only to find the first test too hard. They were usually a pleasant fifty or sixty, those first flunk-outs. They left many regrets behind.

Nowadays only a few boys of that caliber ever enter. Under the new system of admissions they are spotted by their early scholastic writhings and balkings and informed that Princeton has space only for those whose brains are of normal weight. This is because a few years ago the necessity arose of limiting the enrollment. The war prosperity made college possible for many boys and by 1921 the number of candidates, who each year satisfied the minimum scholastic requirements for Princeton, was far beyond the university's capacity.

So, in addition to the college board examinations, the candidate must present his scholastic record, the good word of his schools, of two Princeton alumni, and must take a psychological test for general intelligence. The six hundred or so who with these credentials make the most favorable impression on the admissions committee are admitted. A man who is deficient in one scholastic subject may succeed in some cases over a man who has passed them all. A boy with a really excellent record, in, say, science and mathematics, and a poor one in English, is admitted in preference to a boy with a fair general average and no special aptitude. The plan has raised the standard of scholarship and kept out such men as A, who in my time turned up in four different classes as a sort of perennial insult to the intelligence.

Whether the proverbially narrow judgments of head masters upon adolescents will serve to keep out the Goldsmiths, the Byrons, the Whitmans and the O'Neills is too early to tell.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69083-7 - *My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940*: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Edited by James L. W. West III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I can't help hoping that a few disreputable characters will slip in to salt the salt of the earth. Priggishness sits ill on Princeton. It was typified in my day by the Polity Club. This was a group that once a fortnight sat gravely at the feet of Mr. Schwab or Judge Gary or some other parietal-like spirit imported for the occasion. Had these inspired plutocrats disclosed trade secrets or even remained on the key of brisk business cynicism the occasion might have retained dignity, but the Polity Club were treated to the warmed over straw soup of the house organ and the production picnic, with a few hot sops thrown in about "future leaders of men." Looking through a copy of the latest year book I do not find the Polity Club at all. Perhaps it now serves worthier purposes.

President Hibben is a mixture of "normalcy" and discernment, of staunch allegiance to the *status quo* and of a fine tolerance amounting almost to intellectual curiosity. I have heard him in a speech mask with rhetoric statements of incredible shallowness; yet I have never known him to take a mean, narrow or short-sighted stand within Princeton's walls. He fell heir to the throne in 1912 during the reaction to the Wilson idealism, and I believe that, learning vicariously, he has pushed out his horizon amazingly since then. His situation was not unlike Harding's ten years later, but, surrounding himself with such men as Gauss, Heermance and Alexander Smith, he has abjured the merely passive and conducted a progressive and often brilliant administration.

Under him functions a fine philosophy department, an excellent department of classics, fathered by the venerable Dean West, a scientific faculty starred by such names as Oswald Veblen and Conklin; and a surprisingly pallid English department, top-heavy, undistinguished and with an uncanny knack of making literature distasteful to young men. Dr. Spaeth, one of several exceptions, coached the crew in the afternoon and in the mornings aroused interest and even enthusiasm for the romantic poets, an interest later killed in the preceptorial rooms where mildly poetic gentlemen resented any warmth of discussion and called the prominent men of the class by their first names.

The "Nassau Literary Magazine" is the oldest college publication in America. In its files you can find the original Craig Kennedy