F. Scott Fitzgerald

A Short Autobiography

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Preface

> "I have cleaner hands in the case of non-fiction than in fiction."
>
> —Fitzgerald to Maxwell Perkins,
> April 2, 1936

This book presents a selection of F. Scott Fitzgerald's personal writings from 1920 to 1940, the entire span of his professional career. He was a fine autobiographical writer, blessed with a supple style, a capacious memory, and a great fund of experience on which to draw. He wrote about himself with insight and humor, adopting poses and reinventing himself as the occasion required. In his earliest efforts he was exuberant and cocky, though unsure about how to manage his new fame; during his middle years he was serious and professional-minded, addressing problems of authorship and inspiration; in the late pieces he was reflective and elegiac, looking back on the Jazz Age, which he had named, with affection and only a few regrets.

Twice during the last decade of his life, once in 1934 and again in 1936, Fitzgerald proposed a collection such as this one to Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Charles Scribner's Sons. "I have never published any personal stuff between covers because I have needed it all for my fiction," Fitzgerald wrote to Perkins on May 15, 1934.

"Nevertheless, a good many of my articles and random pieces have attracted a really quite wide attention." Perkins was skeptical about such a book and suggested that a volume of stories might sell more briskly. Fitzgerald obliged by assembling one of his best collections of short fiction, *Taps at Reveille*, which Scribner's published in the spring of 1935, and which performed moderately well at the bookshops, selling some 5,000 copies.

Fitzgerald did not, however, abandon the idea of putting together a collection of his personal writings. He again proposed such a book to Perkins in the spring of 1936, about a year after *Taps at Reveille* was published. "The greater part of these articles are intensely personal," he explained; "that is to say, while a newspaper man has to find something to write his daily or weekly article about, I have written articles entirely when the impetus came from within." Perkins remained lukewarm: "You write non-fiction wonderfully well," he said. "Your observations are brilliant and acute, and your presentations of real characters . . . most admirable." But Perkins had doubts about the appeal of such a collection to readers and suggested that Fitzgerald write a different kind of book, "a reminiscent book,—not autobiographical, but reminiscent." Fitzgerald must have been intrigued by Perkins' suggestion, but in the spring of 1936 he needed to invest his creative energies in producing stories for the high-paying magazines and, he hoped, in writing a new novel. He could not justify composing, from the ground up, the kind of book Perkins had in mind. Fitzgerald put the idea for a collection of personal writings on hold and did not mention it again in his letters to Perkins. In the summer of 1937 he departed from North Carolina, where he had been living, and traveled to the West Coast to take a scriptwriting job with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. He spent his last years in Hollywood and died there in

December 1940, with a new novel called *The Last Tycoon* under way, but without having brought his autobiographical writings together into a book.

If Fitzgerald had been able to publish such a collection, it would have given him a chance to reclaim control of his public image. He had not worried much about that image during the early years of his career. He had always been depicted in the press as a handsome, talented, successful young author. He and his wife, Zelda, had become celebrities: they had learned how to charm interviewers and how to provide dependably good copy. During the 1930s, however, Fitzgerald's relationship with the press deteriorated, reaching a low point on September 25, 1936, when a reporter named Michel Mok published an exposé of him in the *New York Post*. This piece, entitled "The Other Side of Paradise," presented Fitzgerald as a washed-up alcoholic, mired in self-pity. A collection of personal writings would have given Fitzgerald a chance to counter this image and present himself in a different light—as a mature and thoughtful literary artist.

In 1945, five years after Fitzgerald's death, his friend Edmund Wilson assembled a collection of the nonfiction and published it with New Directions under the title *The Crack-Up*. This volume was made up of late pieces, all composed during the final seven years of Fitzgerald's life. To these writings Wilson added some selections from the notebooks, two collaborations with Zelda, and several letters from contemporaries praising Fitzgerald's work. *The Crack-Up* presents Fitzgerald as an apologist for the 1920s, a chronicler of remorse and regret, and a student of failure and lost hope. There is nothing incorrect about this image, but it has come, perhaps unduly, to dominate writing and thinking about him. This is not the image that he wanted to present when he made his proposals to Perkins in 1934 and 1936.

The items in the present volume show another side of Fitzgerald—extroverted, witty, and very much in tune with his times. Many of these pieces emphasize his playfulness and sense of fun. They also show his seriousness about the craft of writing and his acute interest in his contemporaries. Highlights include "Who's Who—and Why," "What I Think and Feel at 25," and an amusing self-interrogation called "An Interview with Mr. Fitzgerald," all written early in his career to satisfy the curiosity of his public. "Princeton," which draws on his years as a college student, is filled with mixed emotions: regret for his failures as an undergraduate mingled with admiration for what his university had come to represent. "How to Live on $36,000 a Year" and "How to Live on Practically Nothing a Year" are very funny essays about how money slips through the fingers of the newly prosperous. The mysteries of literary inspiration are explored in "One Hundred False Starts" and "Afternoon of an Author," both addressed to anyone who aspires to make a living by putting words to paper. "The Death of My Father" is a meditation on the senior Fitzgerald, a man who represented for his son an earlier period of gentility and good manners. "A Short Autobiography" (a catalogue of potations imbibed) and "Salesmanship in the Champs-Élysées" (a take on the French and their droll ways) are amusing bagatelles. "My Generation," written near the end of Fitzgerald's life, is a look back at the times through which he had lived and the people who had shaped his era.

It's worth mentioning that Fitzgerald wrote the items in this collection for money. He was a professional author with no other job, no trust fund, and no independent source of income. He made his way on what he earned with his pen. He kept a record of funds received in a personal ledger: for the pieces published in this collection he was paid a total of $9,225. This sum translates into

more than $100,000 in buying power today. Fitzgerald published these pieces in prominent outlets, including the *New Yorker, The Bookman*, the *Saturday Evening Post, College Humor, American Magazine, Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Esquire*. He knew how to reach his audience; he also knew how to be compensated for what he wrote. He wanted to make money *and* to be taken seriously—a difficult combination for any author to pull off. The pieces collected here are amusing to read but are also full of keen insights about American society, ambition and fame, the expatriate scene in Europe, and the literary life.

One of the myths about Fitzgerald, a myth he sometimes encouraged, was that he was quick and facile and that composition came easily to him. His manuscripts and typescripts tell a different story. He was rarely able to produce good writing spontaneously; usually he arrived at a publishable text only after much revising, cutting, polishing, and recasting. Preserved among his papers at Princeton are manuscripts and typescripts for most of the items in this collection. These documents testify to the work that Fitzgerald put into these pieces. For example, five typescripts in two different versions are extant for "Author's House"; three variant typescripts survive for "Afternoon of an Author"; six typescripts, all bearing handwritten revisions, are preserved for "My Generation." Fitzgerald took pains with these pieces and released them for print only after much literary labor.

Fitzgerald's life ran parallel to the peaks and dips and spasms of American society. For him the 1910s were a hopeful time of striving and idealism; the 1920s were boom years filled with new pleasures; the 1930s were an extended period of reflection and retrenchment. He would have captured all of that in a personal memoir. If he had lived into the 1940s he would have had a great deal to say about that decade as well—a period during

which his country went through a second great war, very different from the one in which he and his college classmates had participated. A memoir by Fitzgerald would have been a brilliant performance, comparable to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. It's regrettable that Fitzgerald did not write such a book, but he did leave behind a substantial body of personal writing, from which the items in this collection have been taken. His writings about his own life retain their bite and freshness; they teach important lessons and offer insights into his professionalism and his genius.

J.L.W.W. III

Quotations in this preface are taken from Fitzgerald to Perkins, May 15, 1934, and April 2, 1936, and from Perkins to Fitzgerald, March 26, 1936. These letters are published in *Dear Scott/Dear Max: The Fitzgerald-Perkins Correspondence,* ed. John Kuehl and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 197, 228–29.

Textual Note

The texts for fifteen of the nineteen items in this collection are taken from *My Lost City: Personal Essays, 1920–1940*, a volume in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald published in 2005 by Cambridge University Press. The texts in the Cambridge series have been newly established from original manuscripts, typescripts, and other materials in the Fitzgerald Papers at Princeton University Library. Passages excised by magazine editors for reasons of space have been restored. Fitzgerald's characteristic pointing and word division have been followed, including his habit of occasionally omitting the comma that divides the two clauses of a compound sentence, his inconsistent use of the final comma in a series, and his habit of placing titles of books, newspapers, and other publications within quotation marks in order to reserve italics for emphasis. A full record of textual variants is included in the Cambridge volume, together with extensive explanatory notes, from which the annotations in the present volume are drawn. The texts of "An Interview with Mr. Fitzgerald," "Three Cities," "Salesmanship in the Champs-Élysées," and "The Death of My Father" have been taken from their first periodical appearances.

A Short Autobiography

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, coördinate 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 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.

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."

—*Saturday Evening Post,* September 18, 1920

An Interview with Mr. Fitzgerald by F. Scott Fitzgerald

With the distinct intention of taking Mr. Fitzgerald by surprise I ascended to the twenty-first floor of the Biltmore and knocked in the best waiter-manner at the door. On entering my first impression was one of confusion—a sort of rummage sale confusion. A young man was standing in the center of the room turning an absent glance first at one side of the room and then at the other.

"I'm looking for my hat," he said dazedly. "How do you do. Come on in and sit on the bed."

The author of *This Side of Paradise* is sturdy, broad-shouldered and just above medium height. He has blond hair with the suggestion of a wave and alert green eyes—the mélange somewhat Nordic—and good-looking too, which was disconcerting as I had somehow expected a thin nose and spectacles.

We had preliminaries—but I will omit the preliminaries. They consisted in searching for things: cigarettes, a blue tie with white dots, an ash tray. But as he was obviously quite willing to talk, and seemed quite receptive to my questions, we launched off directly on his ideas of literature.

"How long did it take to write your book?" I began.

"To write it—three months, to conceive it—three minutes. To collect the data in it—all my life. The idea of

writing it occurred to me on the first of last July. It was sort of a substitute form of dissipation."

"What are your plans now?" I asked him.

He gave a long sigh and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll be darned if I know. The scope and depth and breadth of my writings lie in the laps of the gods. If knowledge comes naturally, through interest, as Shaw learned his political economy or as Wells devoured modern science—why, that'll be slick. On study itself—that is in 'reading up' a subject—I haven't anthill-moving faith. Knowledge must cry out to be known—cry out that only I can know it, and then I'll swim in it to satiety as I've swum in—in many things."

"Please be frank."

"Well, you know if you've read my book. I've swum in various seas of adolescent egotism. But what I meant was that if big things never grip me—well, it simply means I'm not cut out to be big. This conscious struggle to find bigness outside, to substitute bigness of theme for bigness of perception, to create an objective *magnum opus* such as *The Ring and the Book*—well, all that's the antithesis of my literary aims.

"Another thing," he continued. "My idea is always to reach my generation. The wise writer, I think, writes for the youth of his own generation, the critic of the next and the schoolmasters of ever afterward. Granted the ability to improve what he imitates in the way of style, to choose from his own interpretation of the experiences around him what constitutes material, and we get the first-water genius."

"Do you expect to be—to be—well, part of the great literary tradition?" I asked, timidly.

He became excited. He smiled radiantly. I saw he had an answer for this. "There's no great literary tradition," he burst out. "There's only the tradition of the eventual