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“Borne Back Ceaselessly into the Past”: Fitzgerald’s Forgotten Civil War Literature

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Abstract

“So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” These are the brilliant last lines of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, *The Great Gatsby*, lines that speak to the fallibility of Gatsby’s American Dream and his inescapable, yet simultaneously unreachable, past. The legendary ending sentence in *The Great Gatsby* has captured me since I first read the book as a freshman in high school and made me want to read every Fitzgerald book I could find. The more I read, the more I realized the unique implications this famous last line had for Fitzgerald’s own life and literary career. Currently, Fitzgerald serves as the visible face of the Roaring 20’s, or the “Jazz Age,” a decade of extravagance known for dancing, drinking, and merry-making. As forward-looking as he may have tried to live his life, though, Fitzgerald found the past inescapable. “The Cruise of the Rolling Junk” is Fitzgerald’s first hint to the public that, despite his best efforts, he could not escape the past, particularly the Civil War, and neither could the Roaring 20’s. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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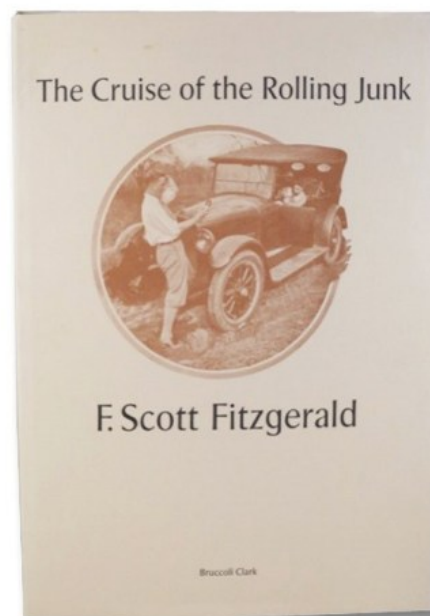
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“Borne Back Ceaselessly into the Past”: Fitzgerald’s Forgotten Civil War Literature

By [Cameron Sauers '21](#)

“So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” These are the brilliant last lines of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, *The Great Gatsby*, lines that speak to the fallibility of Gatsby’s American Dream and his inescapable, yet simultaneously unreachable, past. The legendary ending sentence in *The Great Gatsby* has captured me since I first read the book as a freshman in high school and made me want to read every Fitzgerald book I could find. The more I read, the more I realized the unique implications this famous last line had for Fitzgerald’s own life and literary career. Currently, Fitzgerald serves as the visible face of the Roaring 20’s, or the “Jazz Age,” a decade of extravagance known for dancing, drinking, and merry-making. As forward-looking as he may have tried to live his life, though, Fitzgerald found the past inescapable. “The Cruise of the Rolling Junk” is Fitzgerald’s first hint to the public that, despite his best efforts, he could not escape the past, particularly the Civil War, and neither could the Roaring 20’s.



Cover of a 1976 re-release

“The Cruise of the Rolling Junk,” a lighthearted story about newlyweds on a road trip gone wrong, is brimming with Fitzgerald’s fascination with the American Civil War. The story was published as a series of articles in *Motormagazine* and recounts the disastrous elements of Scott and Zelda’s journey from their Connecticut home to Montgomery, Alabama, where Zelda’s parents lived. As the title suggests, Scott and Zelda’s car was prone to break-downs, often leaving them stranded or waiting for repairs. In between car troubles, the Fitzgeralds did some sightseeing. Stops on this road trip included Civil War sites, like Richmond, where Fitzgerald comically complained about the city’s roads, wondering if the same barriers meant to stop the Union army were the ones that frustrated him.

The Fitzgeralds also visited the Confederate Museum (now known as the American Civil War Museum) in Richmond, which prompted this passage:

“We visited the Confederate museum and pored for an hour over shredded battle flags and romantic sabers and grey uniform coats, and, as we passed from room to room, the proud splendor of each state’s display was dimmed only a little by the interminable lists of living women who had managed in some way to get their names linked up with these trophies. The trophies needed no sponsoring by the Miss Rachael Marys and Mrs. Gladys Phoebes whom one pictured as large-bosomed and somewhat tiresome old ladies engaged in voluble chatter upon their ancestors in the sitting rooms and boarding houses of Macon, Georgia.”

Though Fitzgerald was clearly awed by the artifacts on display at the museum, he appears to have been somewhat annoyed by what he saw as the self-importance of the southern women who so zealously attached their names to each artifact. (Interestingly, the museum found Fitzgerald to be just as unremarkable as he found its donors, as it was only recently that his signature was found in the museum’s guest ledger for July 24th, 1920). The disdain Fitzgerald harbored for the antics of Marys and Phoebes appears to reflect Fitzgerald’s belief that the Civil War was a male-centric conflict in which women could play only subsidiary or tangential, unimportant roles. The portrayal of Marys and Phoebes in “Rolling Junk,” combined with Fitzgerald’s other writings and the restraints he placed on his wife throughout their life, such as refusing to allow her to pursue a career as a ballerina or writer, leads to the conclusion that Fitzgerald thought that males should drive the course of history, and that historical memory should concentrate on their actions alone. As part of a generation that had not experienced the Civil War itself, yet engaged in its own “updated” form of Civil War commemoration through mediums such as literature, film, and historical tourism, Fitzgerald applied his own literary memorialization efforts to his impressions of the museum, forging his own version of Civil War memory in “Rolling Junk.” But even as Fitzgerald continued to dwell on the past and contemplate his own personal relationship with the Civil War, his career continued to progress forward rapidly. Just a day after Fitzgerald’s unnoticed visit to the city, the *Richmond Times Dispatch* published a brief article noting the success of Fitzgerald’s novel *This Side of Paradise*. (Though complimentary of

Fitzgerald's literary prowess, the article's timing was mere coincidence, as the Fitzgeralds' brief visit to Richmond received apparently little attention in the moment).



Scott and Zelda in September, 1921 (via Wikimedia Commons)

“The Cruise of the Rolling Junk” and the road trip described therein was not Fitzgerald's first brush with the Civil War. He grew up surrounded by a society still fascinated by the American Civil War. As a child, Fitzgerald found much enjoyment in stories his father, Edward, would tell about how he helped Confederate spies find their way in Maryland when he was a boy. Additionally, Edward's first cousin, Mary Surrat, was hung for her role in the conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. Fitzgerald also would later blame his father's financial failures on the Confederate defeat, which Fitzgerald claimed to have sapped any sort of ambition from Edward. Edward's colorful stories helped convert Fitzgerald into a Confederate sympathizer, which was evident in some of Fitzgerald's earliest writings. As a primary school student, two of Fitzgerald's first four stories published in school journals centered on the Civil War, including “The Room with the Green Blinds,” which provides an alternative ending to the life of John Wilkes Booth.

Fitzgerald expanded his personal connection to the Civil War when he married his wife, Zelda. Zelda's family, the Sayre family, had deep roots in Montgomery, which had served as the first Confederate capital. Fitzgerald called the city “the cradle of the Confederacy, the utter heart of the old south” in “Rolling Junk,” illustrating his acute awareness of the powerful connection between his wife's hometown and the genesis of

the conflict. Additionally, the Sayre family's burial plot was located in Oakwood cemetery, which also contained the graves of many Confederate dead. Furthermore, in 1918, Zelda graduated from Sidney Lanier High School, named for the famous musician who also served in the Confederate army and worked as a blockade runner. These various connections to the Confederacy highlight just some of the ways in which Zelda, her family, and her husband (like many members of the American public) were immersed in a culture still very much in tune with the Civil War and the long shadows of its memory. (For comparison, the time gap between the American Civil War and the Fitzgeralds' 1920 road trip was smaller than our current distance from the Second World War).

Fitzgerald drew upon his connections to the war, using them as inspiration to follow up "The Cruise of the Rolling Junk" with several more Civil War-related stories. In 1937, *Collier's*, a now defunct weekly magazine, paid \$1,500 for a story titled "Thumbs Up" that Fitzgerald authored based on the Civil War recollections of his father. It is worth noting, however, that the story was declined by thirteen other publications before being accepted and received only a small fraction of the \$5,000 he used to command from magazines. With his literary appeal fading, tapping into the public's enduring fascination with the Civil War enabled Fitzgerald to get back into print. Just one year prior, *Esquire* published Fitzgerald's, "The Night of Chancellorsville," which tells the story of two young prostitutes whose train takes them through the Chancellorsville battlefield, bringing them into contact with wounded from the battle. Fitzgerald also wrote "A Patriotic Short," one of a string of stories centered on a struggling Hollywood hack tasked with writing a short film that "was based on the career of General Fitzhugh Lee, who fought for the Confederacy and later for the U.S.A. against Spain—so it would offend neither North nor South." "Chancellorsville" and "Patriotic Short" are not among Fitzgerald's best stories nor even his decent ones. However, when all of his creative energy was sapped, Fitzgerald turned to the Civil War. He just needed to write *something— anything* that would sell.

The Civil War, besides being a quick way to make some cash without exhausting his energy, was also a lens through which Fitzgerald could reflect on his own life. His last completed novel, and the one Fitzgerald thought would be his masterpiece, *Tender is the Night*, centers on the young Dr. Dick Diver, whom Fitzgerald modeled after himself. Fitzgerald writes that Diver was "like Ulysses S. Grant in Galena," hoping "to be called to an intricate destiny." This is the novel's lone reference to the Civil War, which makes its inclusion fascinating. The novel takes place in the 1920's and 1930's, but Fitzgerald still felt a Civil War simile would best describe the main character. The rest of the novel centers on Diver's struggles to care for his mentally ill wife who, like Zelda Fitzgerald, was in and out of sanitariums. Fitzgerald hoped that he would be able to rescue his languishing literary career (and life) with *Tender is the Night*. Having missed out on being deployed overseas during the First World War, a conflict which defined Fitzgerald's generation, Fitzgerald had to turn to a different, but still shared, national experience to explain his main character to the reader. Perhaps he also thought of the novel as a representation of his own Civil War – a conflict between the literary genius and the man who deeply loved his wife. Fitzgerald was approaching a point where he

had to choose between devotion to his ill and struggling wife and any hopes of a prosperous career. If Fitzgerald did view his life as sort of “civil war,” for him, there was no clear victor: Fitzgerald would die of a heart attack in the apartment of a lover in December 1940, failing to achieve the heroic destiny of his imagined historical facsimile, Ulysses Grant.



Fitzgerald in 1937 (via Wikimedia Commons)

It is fitting that F. Scott Fitzgerald was a dominant voice of the Roaring 20's, a decade striving for a radical new way of living, yet unable to escape the echoes of the past. In a whirlwind life of parties, dancing, and gin, which certainly inspired some of his best writing, Fitzgerald frequently was drawn back to the deep and haunting influences of the American Civil War. Ruminations on the Civil War occupied Fitzgerald's mind throughout his whole life. When the Great Depression hit and the country had little use for tales of flappers, extravagance, and splendor, Fitzgerald returned to the comfort of one of his favorite early literary topics, the Civil War, which had become a permanent and lasting fixture of American literature. William Faulkner's oft-quoted statement, "For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863," appears in countless works on the Civil War, and I myself mentioned Dr. Caroline Janney's recent lecture use of Robert Penn Warren's famed quote, "in the moment of death the Confederacy entered upon its immortality" in a post last semester. But we do not include

Fitzgerald in Civil War scholarship because, rather than creating and defining Civil War memory, he merely (yet tellingly) exemplified it by being a voice of a generation that could not rid itself of the ripple effects of Civil War memory. As Fitzgerald struggled to look towards the future amidst both a nationwide and personal depression, he returned, time and time again, to the Civil War. The strong and enduring cultural currents of the Civil War have ensured that it cannot ever be fully divorced from even the most radical of generations and decades. The “Jazz Age” ultimately found itself unable to “beat on” along its own light-hearted and reckless path, with Fitzgerald and his contemporaries ultimately becoming like the famed Gatsby boats, “borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

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