

# F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S

# ST. PAUL

## A Writer's Use of Material

Patricia Kane

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, one of America's best-known authors who is sometimes called the chronicler of the Jazz Age, was born in St. Paul in 1896. Two years later his family moved from the city, and he was ten before they returned to St. Paul. In the next ten years, they moved often, but they lived always in houses on the periphery of the city's "best" residential district. Fitzgerald completed his first book, *This Side of Paradise*, while living at 599 Summit Avenue. He wrote exuberantly about the acceptance of his book to a friend ("Ain't I smart!"), and at the top of the letter he located himself

"In a house below the average  
On a street above the average  
In a room below the roof. . ."<sup>1</sup>

Fitzgerald left St. Paul permanently in 1922, but he returned to it periodically in his fiction. His boyhood home town is the setting for or a reference point in several works. The phrase "Fitzgerald's St. Paul" evokes for some people a magical time and place; for others it suggests a distorted portrait. Neither view finds strong

support in his fiction. The St. Paul of Fitzgerald's stories, although grounded in a good sense of place, is more symbolic than actual. It was part of his material, and he molded it for the ends of his art. His use of the city corresponds in part to his experience of it, but he freely altered or reinterpreted his perceptions to suit the characters and themes of his fiction.

Fitzgerald's St. Paul was not the entire city. What he knew of St. Paul, he knew well, but he only knew, and only wanted to know, a small part. The geographic area of his interest was about a mile square, centered on Summit Avenue. The St. Paul of the second decade of the twentieth century was also a city of immigrants, of poor people, of servants. There are literary records of those groups, but not in Fitzgerald's fiction. This is not to say that the writer's St. Paul is a tissue of lies. It is real in the sense that symbols, images, and perceptions have reality. They are not invalid if they do not correspond to other perceptions or if they are partial. It would be disastrous, for example, to try to draw an accurate map of St. Paul using Fitzgerald's fiction as a basis. On the other hand, his works reveal things about his birthplace that no map can.

The most famous Fitzgerald impression of St. Paul comes in *The Great Gatsby*, a novel set in Long Island, in which St. Paul exists only as the remembered home of the narrator, Nick Carraway. He conveys a picture of a stable community of familiar names and places with traditional and personal qualities that contrast with the chaotic and indifferent elements of his Long Island experi-

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 100 (New York, 1962).

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ence. St. Paul understood symbolically becomes for him a city of the pastoral ideal not altered to an urban ash heap as was the eastern green breast of America. Few would dispute that his use of St. Paul functions artfully in the structure of the novel. Its omission in the recent movie version of the story flaws the tale. In the film Nick speaks vaguely of returning to the West. Without a firm sense of St. Paul as a place of continuity and consistent values as Nick's literal and spiritual home, his planned return lacks significant meaning. The West in American parlance usually means an open, fluid place, which is precisely not what Nick wanted. Fitzgerald knew exactly what he was doing, and he used St. Paul to carry that meaning. The key passage in the novel that renders Nick's sense of St. Paul indicates what the city was for him and emphasizes that it is a personal vision of stability and continuity:

"That's my Middle West — not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city

where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name."<sup>2</sup>

Although there is a pattern to Fitzgerald's use of St. Paul, not all the characters in his fiction perceive the city exactly as did Nick in *The Great Gatsby*. In three stories, "The Ice Palace," "Winter Dreams," and "A Night at the Fair," published in the 1920s and set in the St. Paul of 1910–20, other emphases result from different experiences of the city that Nick knew. Each story renders a place important to St. Paul life and dreams — the ice palace located downtown during the week of Winter Carnival held in January, in Fitzgerald's time a sporadic "annual" celebration; the country club in the fashionable lake area near the city, a feature of summer life for the well-to-do; and the State Fair, located on the edge of the city at the end of summer. All the stories deal with young men whose expectations exceed their experiences. Each perceives a St. Paul which varies from Nick Carraway's symbolic retreat.

In "The Ice Palace" (1920), St. Paul symbolizes the North, winter, and urban energy and contrasts with the South of summer and lethargy. Harry invites Sally Car-

<sup>2</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 177 (New York, reprint, 1953).



*THIS ROUND, SMILING* toddler is F. Scott Fitzgerald. His mother stands just behind him (partly obscured) during an outing in St. Paul. A neighbor, Edith Brill, took this photograph.

rol, his Georgia fiancé, to meet his family during carnival time in January. He tells her, "it'll be like fairy-land to you," with skating, skiing, tobogganing, sleighing, and torchlight parades.<sup>3</sup> She fears immediately that she will be cold, but Harry reassures her. The situation is set for their contrasting perceptions.

Sally Carrol finds St. Paul dismal and the snow oppressive; for Harry it is a place of energy and health-producing weather. When they visit the palace made of ice blocks, both see it at first as beautiful, with its crystal walls and smooth surfaces. But as they explore the labyrinths, Sally Carrol panics when she finds herself alone with no lights. For her the ice palace embodies the dreary loneliness and trackless wastes of the North.<sup>4</sup> She returns to Georgia.

The obvious contrast in perceptions of the city in "The Ice Palace" depends on the fact that for Harry it is home, for Sally Carrol it is foreign. She feels the whole style of life cold and alien, without the flirtations and slow-moving graces of her experience. Harry has a trace of Babbitt in his admiration for the energy of the city and the Ivy League athletes come home to business success. For him St. Paul has the close ties of a smaller town, with his friends and family forming a society that excludes any who do not fit — finally even the southern girl he loves.

In part because the reader is made to identify with the southern girl's criticism of the city, "The Ice Palace," an early Fitzgerald story, purveys a much less affirmative sense of the city than that of the later *The Great Gatsby*. Perhaps when Fitzgerald's own memory of the city was most vivid, it was most negative. It may also be argued that his characters' differing perceptions were artistically motivated.

Harry's St. Paul anticipates in part the city Nick Carraway remembers in *The Great Gatsby*. Harry's notion of winter pleasure resembles Nick's perception of the holiday season when he comes home from school. Nick, unlike Harry, understands that it is *his*, not everyone's,



FITZGERALD, the writer, at work

Middle West that he describes as he remembers his youthful complacency at being part of the city. For both Nick and Harry, St. Paul is a place of stability, a small area bounded by friends with similar values and experiences. For Nick one of its charms lies in the lack of business bustle of the sort he knows in the East; the same city has a bustle Harry finds essential. Neither, however, experiences the city as a place of 200,000 persons. St. Paul always seems smaller in Fitzgerald's fiction than census figures report it to have been.<sup>5</sup>

"Winter Dreams" (1922), often read as an anticipation of the *Gatsby* story, features a self-made man who yearns for a young woman who is of the rich and for "the glittering things themselves."<sup>6</sup> Dexter Green first glimpses Judy Jones and the life of the wealthy when he caddies at the golf club at Black Bear Lake (an obvious play on White Bear Lake, site then of summer homes for St. Paul's wealthy families). Son of a grocer and a mother from the Bohemian peasant class, Dexter patterns his manners on the wealthy and grows rich operating a chain of laundries in St. Paul. He joins the University Club (located in the best residential area of St. Paul) and lives there, accepted by the families for whom he once caddied. For him the city is a place of business opportunity,

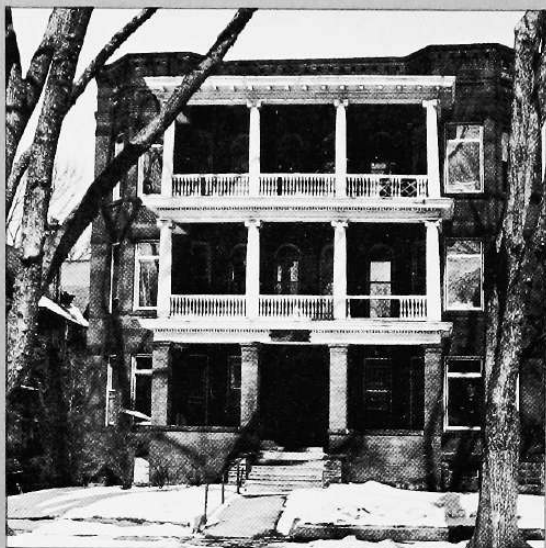
<sup>3</sup>[Malcolm Cowley, ed.], *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Selection of 28 Stories*, 67 (New York, 1951).

<sup>4</sup>The St. Paul Winter Carnival celebrates the power of the North Wind. Thus Sally Carrol feels the impact of a vast icy power: "She was alone with this presence that came out of the North, the dreary loneliness that rose from ice-bound whalers in the Arctic seas, from smokeless, trackless wastes where were strewn the whitened bones of adventure"; Cowley, *Stories of Fitzgerald*, 80. Writing about St. Paul in 1949, J. F. Powers singled out "The Ice Palace" as "a story that still says something about St. Paul." See "Cross-Country: St. Paul, Home of the Saints," *Partisan Review*, 16:718 (July, 1949).

<sup>5</sup>Turnbull (p. 18) estimates the Summit area of Fitzgerald's fiction as about a mile square. Census figures for 1920 show an urban population for Ramsey County, which is essentially St. Paul, as 234,698. See *United States Census, 1920, Population*, 1:162.

<sup>6</sup>Cowley, *Stories of Fitzgerald*, 130.





481 LAUREL, St. Paul, where the Fitzgeralds lived when F. Scott was born.

286-294 LAUREL AVENUE was another Fitzgerald family residence.

512-514 HOLLY AVENUE. Fitzgerald once lived at 514, which has been altered since then. He also lived at 499 Holly, now razed, and 509 Holly, now altered.



587-601 SUMMIT AVENUE. Fitzgerald lived at 593 and at 599.





599 SUMMIT, where Fitzgerald lived while completing his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, is the best-known of the writer's St. Paul residences and is a National Historic Landmark.



THE COMMODORE HOTEL, 79 Western Avenue, just off Summit, was another famous Fitzgerald residence. This photograph was taken about 1925.

626 GOODRICH AVENUE, where the Fitzgeralds lived at the time of their daughter's birth in October, 1921, and for some months after. Scott worked on *The Beautiful and Damned* here.





a means to fulfill the winter dreams of glory that Judy Jones represents to him. After her final rejection of him, he goes East, amasses more wealth, and at last loses his dream.

The St. Paul of "Winter Dreams" somewhat resembles the city Harry experiences in "The Ice Palace" in that it provides opportunity for energetic business enterprise. But the city Dexter perceives is less the downtown of business than the neighborhood of wealth that surrounds the University Club. The tissue of his feeling emerges in a description of Judy's family house in St. Paul:

"The dark street lightened, the dwellings of the rich loomed up and around them, he stopped his coupé in front of the great white bulk of the Mortimer Joneses' house, somnolent, gorgeous, drenched with the splendor of the damp moonlight. Its solidity startled him. The strong walls, the steel of the girders, the breadth and beam and pomp of it were there only to bring out the contrast with the young beauty beside him. It was sturdy to accentuate her slightness — as if to show what a breeze could be generated by a butterfly's wing."<sup>7</sup>

Dexter yearns for the butterfly, the glittering things rather than solidity and strength. He achieves only wealth.

Dexter's St. Paul, unlike Harry's or Nick's, is a place to be won, a stage for Judy Jones, a site for dreams. But all experience it as a relatively small area with a small group of wealthy people who matter. A city of 200,000 seems like a village. Dexter ceases to yearn for St. Paul after he loses Judy. Unlike Nick, he cannot abandon Wall Street and return to the city of his youth. For Dexter, the locus of winter dreams has vanished.

IN THE late 1920s Fitzgerald wrote several Basil Duke Lee stories, some of which take place in St. Paul. Basil's city is that of an adolescent, not dissimilar to what Nick's St. Paul must have been before he went East and met Gatsby. Of the Basil Lee pieces, "The Scandal Detectives" (1928), "A Night at the Fair" (1928), "He Thinks He's Wonderful" (1928), "Forging Ahead" (1929), and "The Captured Shadow" (1928) are the St. Paul stories.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Basil Lee stories include a nostalgic note in the feel for prewar St. Paul and rarely suggest a perspective other than that of the adolescent hero, they contain more solid specifications than do most other place descriptions. The city is much more in focus than, for example, the blurred Minneapolis briefly observed in *This Side of Paradise*. ("Afterward they would stroll home in the balmy air of August night, dreaming along Hennepin and Nicollet avenues, through the gay crowd.") Basil's age and condition parallel those of Nick, and the

texture of the city — created fictionally three years after the novel was published in 1925 — suggests the place Nick remembers. Nick's memory perhaps has idealized his past since it contains no suggestion of the genuine pain of adolescence that is Basil's lot.

The eight published Basil Lee stories detail summer months in St. Paul and winter months at prep school or college. They cover the years approximately from 1911 to 1913, when Basil is fifteen to seventeen years old. Taken as a group they are a chronological tale of learning and maturation which often parallels Fitzgerald's biography. They include details of a neighborhood yard, a triumphant theatrical production, disastrous encounters with girls, and school failures and successes. Through them all Basil remains firmly rooted in his St. Paul.

"A Night at the Fair" epitomizes the youth's perception of St. Paul in the Basil Lee sequence. It details Basil's experience of his home town shortly before he leaves for prep school. The importance of the State Fair to the story is suggested by the opening description:

"The two cities were separated by only a thin well-bridged river; their tails curling over the banks met and mingled, and at the juncture, under the jealous eye of each, lay, every fall, the State Fair. Because of this advantageous position, and because of the agricultural eminence of the state, the fair was one of the most magnificent in America. There were immense exhibits of grain, live-stock and farming machinery; there was a tumultuous Midway with Coney Island thrillers to whirl you through space, and a whining, tinkling hoochie-coochie show. As a compromise between the serious and the trivial, a grand exhibition of firework, culminating in a representation of the Battle of Gettysburg, took place in the Grand Concourse every night."<sup>9</sup>

During a daytime visit to the fair, Basil feels excluded from the success his friends enjoy during an encounter with girls they met at the fair. Blaming his failure on the fact that he wears short pants, he resolves that at their prearranged evening meeting with the girls he will appear in the long pants that will make him an equal competitor. As he walks home from a fitting, feeling a new confidence, he sees Gladys Van Schellinger, a rich girl who invites him to sit in her family's box at the fair to

<sup>7</sup> Cowley, *Stories of Fitzgerald*, 142.

<sup>8</sup> The stories are listed in a chronology following Basil's age. Fitzgerald wrote nine Basil Duke Lee stories, eight of which were published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Five of the eight were included in *Taps at Reveille* (New York, 1935). The other three appear in [Arthur Mizener, ed.], *Afternoon of an Author: A Selection of Uncollected Stories and Essays by F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> Mizener, *Afternoon of an Author*, 15.

watch the fireworks that evening. Basil is drawn to the aloof Gladys but refuses her invitation out of competitive urge to outdo the friends who had long pants before he did.

Fitzgerald describes the evening at the fair as containing forms that "suggested things more mysterious and entrancing than themselves."<sup>10</sup> Basil's enchantment shatters as the glamorous Hubert Blair lures the most attractive girl from the nonrich girls in the group they have picked up. Excluded again, Basil goes to the grandstand alone where he finds another chance to join Gladys. He settles in, feeling smugly virtuous and triumphant.

But Basil's triumph is short. Despite the hundreds who attend a Minnesota State Fair, for him it might have been a small neighborhood bazaar. Hubert Blair and the others from his earlier group come into the grandstand with a great flurry of exhibitionism. Those in the box remark that the boys' mothers will be told of this outrage. No escape into crowd anonymity at the fair seems possible. Although Basil escapes this neighborhood censure, for him, neighborhood cohesiveness has an even worse feature. The glamorous Hubert dazzles Gladys, who deflates Basil by asking him to bring Hubert when he comes to call on her. For Basil, St. Paul might be a hamlet. Like Nick Carraway he moves in a small world where families are known and attention is paid. For Nick this quality seems reassuring; for Basil it produces pain because his losses occur conspicuously. Nick looks back to adolescence as a time of tranquillity; Basil experiences its tumult.

Nick's St. Paul, in light of these three stories that convey essentially the same geographic and social locus, assumes a more abstract and symbolic aspect. His experience of the East made his sense of home assume a quality that only a blurred memory and subsequent pain produced. Other Fitzgerald characters on the scene do not experience the pastoral retreat of Nick's longing. Common to the perceptions of St. Paul in the short stories and *The Great Gatsby* is the sense of it as a neighborhood rather than a relatively large city with industrial and commercial development and a mixed population. Fitzgerald and his characters perceived the city of their particular experience and longing.

Fitzgerald might have made further, and perhaps different, uses of St. Paul had he lived to write more fiction. During his lifetime he kept a notebook filled with his observations, anecdotes, descriptions of emotions, and

ideas from which he drew often for his writing. One such entry describes Summit Avenue, called Crest, as shown by a native to a visitor. Fitzgerald began by noting that the cathedral inaugurates the avenue, followed by a "great brownstone mass" (a reference to James J. Hill's house), "followed by a half mile of pretentious stone houses built in the gloomy 90's." He called the houses mausoleums and wrote that although the avenue ran along the river bluff, it "neither faced it nor seemed aware of it, for all the houses fronted inward toward the street." The rest of Summit is described more briefly; it was not the part Fitzgerald knew well or found especially interesting. He concludes by having the native call the avenue "our show place," and the visitor, who has the final word in this fragment, replies: "A museum of American architectural failures."<sup>11</sup>

The notebook description is scarcely one of romantic awe or idealized memory. For a different literary purpose, a different place is evoked. Its difference from other uses made of St. Paul suggests something of the Fitzgerald techniques of using the past.

A useful analysis of the several pasts that exist for everyone was made by the geographer David Lowenthal. He lists the irrecoverable past, the ostensible past, the altered past, and the invented past.<sup>12</sup> The irrecoverable past is that for which no record is left. If no hints of it remain, it cannot even be imagined. Even for so recent a past as Fitzgerald's, this condition may exist for aspects of the city, but since it is irrecoverable, there is nothing to say of it except to note that we may have an incomplete picture.

Ostensible past is one seen from a particular vantage point. The accepted version of the past generally reflects the values of the period in which its history is recorded and corresponds to written history. The altered past, as the term suggests, is the past changed to meet needs of the present. Clearly, literary artists, without apology, alter the past to create fiction. Further, memory alters the past for all in subtle ways. Persons select from the past that which is needed in the present, and those needs may alter. So it is with Fitzgerald, who had more than one kind of memory of St. Paul he could use according to the needs of his fiction.

Finally, the invented past is an improved past; either a deliberate or a less conscious fabrication. Although nothing in the concept of literature rules out inventing a past, Fitzgerald did not invent his St. Paul. Readers may select from Fitzgerald's fiction the most pleasing aspects of the city. Perhaps the nostalgia for the 1920s is such an invented past. It touches Fitzgerald's fictional St. Paul only at a few superficial points. Fitzgerald's city was not a place of uninterrupted pleasure focused in fashionable places involving chic persons, although parties were an ingredient. For Fitzgerald, unlike the nostalgia purveyors, parties ended and had consequences.

<sup>10</sup> Mizener, *Afternoon of an Author*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Wilson, ed., *The Crack-Up*, 227, 228 (New York, 1956).

<sup>12</sup> David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," in *Geographical Review*, 65:24, 25, 27, 33 (January, 1975).

In Lowenthal's terms, Fitzgerald's fiction renders an altered past that becomes an invented past for some who know his work only generally. The resulting nostalgia for the period about which Fitzgerald wrote does not do justice to the variety of his art. He did not merely transcribe a part of his experience or create a single image; he altered elements of the past into the perceptions and symbols of his fiction.

One of the most pervasive of Fitzgerald's images of St. Paul, a stable place where families lived for generations in the same house, does not reflect his own direct experience of the city. At the time of his birth in 1896, his parents lived in an apartment at 481 Laurel. When he was two years old, they left St. Paul for ten years, living in Buffalo, New York, then Syracuse, and again in Buffalo. After they returned to St. Paul in 1908, when Fitzgerald was twelve, they moved frequently during the next ten years. They lived at 294 Laurel, 514 Holly, 509 Holly, 499 Holly, 593 Summit, and, beginning in 1918, at 599 Summit. When Fitzgerald returned as an adult to the St. Paul area in 1921, he lived at White Bear, at the Commodore Hotel (just off Summit on Western), at 626 Goodrich, and at the White Bear Yacht Club. After he left St. Paul permanently in 1922, he lived in a number of places in several cities.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore difficult to locate a specific house to associate with Fitzgerald. The United States Department of the Interior

has selected one address, 599 Summit, as a National Historic Landmark. It is an appropriate choice, since it is at that address that he completed his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. In understanding the way he transformed experience into art, however, it is important to remember that there was no Fitzgerald home in the sense he suggests for St. Paul characters in his fiction. It is worth noting that even in the stories that convey pain, the city is not seen as a place where one's residence changes frequently. It remains the arena for dreams and a place of remembered stability. Fitzgerald's St. Paul was an altered past place, which has altered irrevocably the way we see it. The power of his talent transformed a literal place into a symbolic place of great beauty and some truth.

<sup>13</sup>Details of Fitzgerald's life, including his various places of residence, may be found in most of his biographies. See, for example, Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Boston, 1951); Henry Dan Piper, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait* (New York, 1965).

PHOTOGRAPHS of the Fitzgerald residences are by Eugene D. Becker, Tom Lutz, Lynne VanBrocklin Spaeth, and Diana Mitchell. Other pictures are from the audio-visual collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

*SUMMIT AVENUE* glitters with snow in this photo, taken in the late 1920s from about Western Avenue.







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