Where They Belong
The Acquisition of the F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers

BY MATTHEW J. BRUCCOLI

The F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers have made the Princeton University Library a shrine for pilgrims who just want to see or touch them, as well as for scholars. This material is the most frequently consulted archive in a library that also houses the papers of John Foster Dulles and Adlai Stevenson, and includes in its collections letters and other manuscripts of Woodrow Wilson. Given Fitzgerald’s love for his college, Princeton is the inevitable repository for his papers. They almost did not get there. The nine-year history of their acquisition is worth tracing because of its admonitory message, and because the received account is inaccurate.

That F. Scott Fitzgerald accumulated one of the richest archives in American literature is miraculous. At a time when no one would have placed a wager on his chances for immortality, he preserved his manuscripts, typescripts, proofs, correspondence, and memorabilia during the course of a disorganized, peripatetic life: the manuscripts and the revised galley proofs in which he restructured *The Great Gatsby*; the 17 stages of *Tender Is the Night*; manuscripts, typescripts, and edited tear sheets of stories; scrapbooks; correspondence with Hemingway and other literary figures; a collection of books inscribed to him. Fitzgerald scholarship has been so thorough because he was such a good curator.

At his death in December 1940 Fitzgerald left a small insurance policy and less than $1,000 in cash and possessions. The commonplace remark that he died with his books out of print is untrue. The truth is sadder: All nine of his titles were available, but they weren’t selling. *Scribner’s* still had copies of the 1925 second printing of *The

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1 According to Alexander P. Clark, former Curator of Manuscripts. I acknowledge the generous assistance of Mr. Clark and of University Archivist Earle E. Coleman.
Great Gatsby in the warehouse. His last royalty check in 1940 was for $19.19 for 40 copies.

Since Zelda Fitzgerald required expensive psychiatric treatment and their daughter Frances Scott (known as Scottie) was attending Vassar, the executor of the estate, Judge John Biggs, tried to raise capital on Fitzgerald's papers and library. Biggs, Princeton Class of 1918, had been Fitzgerald's roommate and collaborator on the Princeton Tiger. He published two novels with Scribner's and became a United States Circuit Court Judge. Although he is reported to have remarked that Fitzgerald left the estate of a pauper and the will of a millionaire, Biggs managed the estate without fee for eight years to provide an income for Zelda Fitzgerald. His benefactions were motivated by his sense of duty combined with affection and sympathy. He had no recognition of his friend's literary stature and was baffled when the Fitzgerald revival came.

Item eight of Fitzgerald's will covered the disposition of his books:

I give, devise and bequest unto my daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald all my family silverware, portraits, pictures, and all special and valuable books, short stories or other writings which I may have written, or all books of value which I may have collected or purchased to be used and controlled by her until my wife Zelda Fitzgerald shall regain her sanity and in that event the same shall become the property of Zelda Fitzgerald and any portion thereof that she does not desire to keep may be sold or otherwise disposed of by her, and in the event she shall die without regaining her sanity, then the above described property shall be the sole and separate property of my daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald.

Zelda Fitzgerald had never been declared legally insane; therefore the books became her sole property. The will nowhere specifically mentions Fitzgerald's own manuscripts and correspondence, and

1 Fitzgerald's will was executed in Tryon, North Carolina, on 17 June 1937. It appointed Biggs and Maxwell Perkins as his executors, but Perkins resigned because of a possible conflict-of-interest situation.

2 Scottie Fitzgerald included these words in the dedication of The Romantic Egoists (New York: Scribners, 1914) to Judge Biggs as "the very incarnation of the words, 'Family Friend.'"
Biggs construed "other writings which I may have written" to include the manuscripts and other papers. (The other provision in the will that could apply to the papers is item 11, bequeathing "all the rest and residue of my property" to his wife and daughter "in equal proportions."

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The only published account of Princeton's negotiations for the Fitzgerald Papers is in David A. Randall's *Dukedom Large Enough*, the memoirs of the head of the Charles Scribner's Sons rare book department and director of the Lilly Library at Indiana University. Randall is rightly regarded as one of the greatest American bookmen, but he was known as a man who enjoyed a good story. According to his published account, he was introduced by Maxwell Perkins to Judge Biggs, who asked whether $750 was a fair offer for Fitzgerald's papers and library. Randall responded that whoever made that offer was "either a fool or a knave, if not both" and offered $3,750 sight unseen. He was prevented from consummating the deal because Perkins regarded it as a conflict-of-interest situation: Fitzgerald had been a member of the Scribner literary family, and the main concern was to raise money for his widow and orphan.

The $750 offer had come from Princeton. "When I pointed out to the then librarian Julian Boyd, that in my opinion, the heirs were being robbed," Randall wrote, "I was reminded tartly that Princeton was not a charitable institution, nor was its library established to support indigent widows of, and I quote, 'second-rate, Midwest hacks' just because they happened to have been lucky enough to have attended Princeton—unfortunately for Princeton." Boyd was a Jefferson scholar who had no enthusiasm for Fitzgerald's work. In 1941 the manuscripts of contemporary authors were regarded by many li-

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Randall, *Dukedom*, pp. 253-255. This Biggs-Randall correspondence does not substantiate Randall's testimony that he offered immediate payment of $3,750. Another error in Randall's published account is his comment that Fitzgerald's reputation was so low that he "had even been dropped from the current edition of Merle Johnson's inclusive book collector's *rade meum, American First Editions*, and it was pretty impossible to get lower than that." If there are degrees of impossibility, a lower level is to have never been included in Johnson—which is the case for Fitzgerald.
brarians as mere collectors' items rather than scholarly resources; but that year Boyd had announced a program for a "systematic approach" to preserving contemporary literary records at Princeton. However, there was bad blood between Boyd and Randall resulting, according to Randall, from his successful endeavor "to force-feed Princeton into obtaining Ray Stannard Baker's notable Woodrow Wilson collection" and other disagreements over acquisitions for the Morris L. Parrish Collection of English Literature.

The verifiable history of the Fitzgerald Papers begins on 12 March 1941 when Perkins wrote Biggs that he had asked Randall what value Fitzgerald's manuscripts would have: "He thought not much, but around a couple of hundred dollars each." This was before Randall had seen the material. The first documented contact with Princeton came when Boyd reported to Biggs that Perkins had told poet Allen Tate about Fitzgerald's manuscripts. Boyd wrote: "If they are to be sold, we should like to have the privilege of considering their purchase."

Eleven months elapsed before Biggs informed Zelda and Scottie on 27 March 1942 that Randall had examined the books and papers and "thinks the whole thing can be sold to the Library of Princeton University for about $1000." At this time Scottie was in her last semester at Vassar, and Zelda was living with her mother in Montgomery, Alabama. Citing item eight of the will but tactfully passing over the question of Zelda's sanity ("Therefore you and Scottie have the disposition of this property"), Biggs recommended the sale to Princeton. Zelda replied accepting Biggs' advice, but Scottie refused to sell ("... if that library were worth $5,000 or $10,000 I couldn't bear to part with it") and offered to buy the books and manuscripts from her mother.

Biggs and Harold Ober—Fitzgerald's agent who was contributing to a fund for Scottie's education—were nonplussed by her unreasonable behavior in rejecting $1,000. After the estate was settled, there was about $15,000 to provide for Zelda. Since the papers were actually Zelda's property under the will, Biggs decided to conclude the deal with Princeton, proposing to Scottie that she retain the books she

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7 All the letters cited are in the care of the Manuscript Division of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, or in the University Archives. The Fitzgerald Estate files were given to Princeton by Judge Biggs' son, John Biggs III, Class of 1931.
wanted. But in May 1942 Biggs was advised by Lester W. Roth, a member of the law firm representing Fitzgerald's interests in California: "The executor can't sell the property, because he holds it only for the purpose of passing it on to the named legatees." Accordingly, negotiations were suspended until the property could pass to Zelda. At this time Scottie wrote to Biggs withdrawing her objections to the sale and bequeathing to him "my iron bed + text books, not to be sold or disposed of or loaned to friends, and an income of twenty cents and four mills every two and a third weeks until you are sixty, at which time you are to receive my Tommy gun and straight-backed chair and a trust fund yielding 44 cents a year providing you eat your broccoli every Tuesday."

In January 1943 Biggs deposited the books and manuscripts at Princeton for safekeeping and examination. Boyd reminded Biggs in March that Princeton was still interested in making the purchase for $1,000 but wanted the correspondence included. Scottie had removed the letters for use in a biography of her father that she hoped to write. She informed Biggs that they were too valuable to throw in and expressed concern about making personal letters available to the public by placing them in a library. Biggs was dismayed when Scottie informed him in June 1943 that she had destroyed certain of the letters: "The letters I threw out had no bearing whatever on Daddy—I am not trying to conceal anything about him—they were in no way interesting, that I promise. . . The letters may belong to the estate, but the personal lives of people who are still very much alive do not belong to the estate, or to me."

The matter rested for a year and a half until Boyd wrote Biggs in February 1945 offering $750 for the manuscripts and books — exclusive of the letters — following the judge's trip to Princeton. An additional $100 was to be paid for what Boyd described as "the notebooks." The library's rough inventory of the material was provided. Biggs referred the offer to Perkins, who consulted Randall: "I am quite sure that I can certainly do better for you," Randall stated. Boyd informed Biggs that he would not be able to "justifiably revise" his offer. On 30 April 1945 Biggs reported to Boyd that Randall had offered to sell the manuscripts, books, and letters for $3,500 less 20 percent commission or to buy them outright for Scribner's at $1,500. (It is not clear whether Randall expected to break up the material for
resale.) Zelda had by then given all of the material to Scottie, who had the sole decision over its disposition.

Willard Thorp, a distinguished professor of English at Princeton, had become involved in the transaction as Boyd's advisor and negotiator. Thorp was determined to bring the Fitzgerald archive to Princeton; his correspondence with Boyd indicates his concern to prevent the librarian from breaking off negotiations in response to what Boyd regarded as extortion. On 21 June 1945 Boyd sent Biggs a stiff letter declining to meet Randall's $2,800 figure ($3,500 less $700), which he noted was not a firm offer. Boyd expressed his conviction that the current "highly inflated" prices of books and manuscripts would not hold and suggested that Biggs invite offers from Yale and Harvard: "Princeton is quite willing to meet this kind of competition." Boyd sent a copy of this letter to Thorp with a two-page memo, authorizing him to go to $1,500, which was Randall's firm figure, and adding that "I am really very anxious to buy the papers, especially the correspondence, in spite of all my obtuseness to Fitzgerald's greatness. ... Consequently don't make the mistake of thinking that I am not enthusiastic about the papers—I only lack enthusiasm about Fitzgerald as an artist and perhaps even there I shall be educated in time." Boyd further authorized Thorp to tell Biggs that "Randall is on public record as being inimicable to Princeton" and was using the Fitzgerald papers to make Princeton pay more than they were worth.\(^*\)

In response to Boyd's letter of 21 June, Randall wrote an angry letter to Biggs guaranteeing a payment of $2,250 if he could not sell the collection on commission within a year: "In my opinion, Princeton should pay at least $2,500 for it." On 2 July Boyd—prompted by Thorp—wrote Biggs agreeing to meet Randall's $2,500 figure. During his summer vacation Boyd attempted to read Tender Is the Night "thoughtfully and prayerfully" at Thorp's urging, but turned with relief to Gibbon. In August Biggs reported to Thorp that Scottie and Zelda had accepted the $2,500 offer "subject to a bill of sale the conditions of which are to be worked out." Biggs then proposed that Princeton restrict access to the letters dealing with Zelda's illness and

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\(^*\) Five days after Boyd's letter to Biggs, Scottie—now married to Navy officer Samuel J. Lanahan, Princeton '41, and working at the New Yorker—wrote to the judge offering to buy everything from her mother for $1,500. No response to her letter survives.
to items _ejusdem generis_ (of the same kind). The sale was not concluded, and there is no explanation for the suspension of the correspondence.

Meanwhile the first stage of the Fitzgerald revival was launched. During the summer and autumn of 1945 _The Crack-Up_ and the _Portable F. Scott Fitzgerald_ were well received, and reprints of _The Great Gatsby_ were published by New Directions, Bantam, and the Armed Services Editions. In 1945 some 50 reviews and critical articles about Fitzgerald appeared. Moreover, American literary manuscript values were undergoing a postwar appreciation, and the Fitzgerald papers became increasingly valuable. Nothing happened on the Princeton front until Boyd wrote Biggs in August 1946—a year later—suggesting a plan for restricting the sensitive material. Three days later Biggs reported to Boyd that Zelda had returned to Highlands Hospital and was unable to execute a bill of sale. It was agreed that the material would be left at the library for "classification" until she recovered. When Zelda Fitzgerald perished in a fire at the hospital on 10 March 1948, the transaction had not been concluded.

As the result of Thorp's urging and of the rapid increase of critical interest in Fitzgerald, Princeton became anxious to close the deal. In November 1948 Boyd reminded Biggs that the matter was still unsettled; Biggs promised to talk to Scottie about it "at once." There is no extant follow-up correspondence. Boyd wrote Scottie in June 1949 expressing his eagerness to conclude negotiations. During the autumn of 1949 Scottie and Boyd tried to arrange a Princeton meeting, which took place in December; at that time the matter was presumably settled, for on 9 January 1950 Princeton sent her a bill of sale at $2,500. Scottie responded on 21 May 1950:

> I'd like to give all the manuscripts, papers, letters, etc. to Princeton, with a very few restrictions such as we discussed before. But—I'd like to keep the books, + the scrapbooks + photograph albums + the ledger containing the diary, leaving you only those books by Daddy himself. . . .

> I enclose a carbon copy of a section of my father's will which turned up among some papers in Wilmington + which is partly responsible for my decision. I do not think the wishes of the dead should be respected in every case.
but in the matter of the scrapbooks I was delighted to find a good excuse to back up my reluctance to part with them.9

Boyd expressed suitable gratitude and drafted a deed of gift in June.10

On 18 November 1950 Scottie came to Princeton to select the books she wanted to retain and signed the deed of gift. The ceremony was commemorated by a photograph of Boyd, Scottie, and her husband that subsequently appeared on the cover of the Princeton Alumni Weekly11 — the periodical F. Scott Fitzgerald was reading when he suffered his fatal heart attack.

9 This document has not been found. Since Fitzgerald's executed will does not refer to the scrapbooks, the will Scottie refers to was probably an earlier will.

10 Not even Randall was able to accept the growth in the literary and monetary value of Fitzgerald's papers. On 7 June 1965 he told me a version of his dealings with Boyd in which he put his offer at $5,000. Randall was incredulous when I remarked that the archive was probably worth five million dollars. If my estimate was bullish in 1965, it is conservative in 1988. What would the manuscript of The Great Gatsby now bring at auction?