

DOS, SCOTT, ERNEST AND FRIENDS OF THE TWENTIES

(This article by Robert Temple was published February 1, 1962, one week after his 17th birthday, in a literary periodical of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he was in his first year as an undergraduate student).

‘I think you’re an impostor. But I think you’re a very pleasant one.’

I thanked him for the latter remark and admitted that I was an impostor, and he said, “Good.”

Gilbert Seldes has a wry sense of humor and if you ask him about his writings he’ll say, “It seems every publication I’ve ever written for has ceased to exist.”

Then he’ll pull out his book, *The Future of Drinking*, and dolefully admit that Little, Brown & Co. are still extant and also published other of his works.

“I’m primarily a pamphleteer,” Seldes will say. Then he’ll tell you all about his novel. Upon prompting, he’ll discuss his book, *The Seven Lively Arts*, or maybe his *Writing for Television*. And then, if you really push him, Seldes will reminisce over the period when he was Managing Editor for *Dial Magazine*, 1920-1924.

Seldes was 70 this past December, and he’s been around for a while, so he has a real Pandora’s Box full of stories. He’s sly about letting up the lid – he sort of lets the stories creep out, the images forming slowly. But when the forms begin to take shape, we see the real literary greats of our century there. There’s Dos and Sherwood, Scott and Hemingway, and of course Ezra Pound and Cummings, Jim Agee and Ring Lardner.

“I remember going to a second rate prizefight in Paris with Hemingway. I was with my wife and he was with either the girl he was going to marry or had already married – I don’t remember their status at that time.” [*Later note: this was Pauline Pfeifer, who became Hemingway’s second wife in 1927.*]

“But my relations were not nearly as intimate with Hemingway as with Scott (F. Scott Fitzgerald). Hemingway had been a good friend of Ezra’s while Ezra was our *Dial* correspondent in Paris. I arrived in Paris and Pound was replaced by a Frenchman, Paul Morand. Hemingway thought I was responsible for Pound’s dismissal, and he was always a little bit unfriendly over that.”

“How did I meet Scott? Well, I was planning a two page spread in *Vanity Fair* which was to be a series of 25 report cards with people rating the top men in 25 fields. I appointed myself one of the judges, naturally, and we rated men like Mencken, Charles Lindbergh, etc. Lindbergh, by the way, got 100%, 100%, 100% just about all the way across. F. Scott Fitzgerald got rated about 80% all the way across except when he came to me. And I rated him *minus seventy per cent*. Well, of course, he just couldn’t wait to meet me.”

“About five days later I got a visit from Scott and he asked me why I rated him -70%. Well, I told him I rated him that low because I thought he was the most talented of the bunch and that he was absolutely wasting it all. Shortly after that I received a call from Scott asking me out to Great Neck, Long Island, where he and his wife, Zelda, were living. I got out there and he was just sitting there all glum, hung over, you know. Magnificent. Ring Lardner was there too, but I knew Ring. Published some of his stuff – we were on good terms. Well, we just all sat around gloomily for a while and then we went for a ride, and that was it.”

“I got asked out to see Scott more and more frequently. And we had a good many friends in common, you know. And then of course we got together in the South of France when we went abroad, too. Great man.”

“Well, by the time I got over to see Scott from Paris, down to the South of France where he and Zelda were staying, Scott had broken off relations with Edmund Wilson, his literary conscience. Well, Scott made a confidante of my wife – told her things he never would have dreamt of telling me. But with Wilson gone, and nobody around to be a literary conscience, Scott tried to get me to take his place. But I just couldn’t do it. I never have been a very good critic. But I tried. I liked *Gatsby*, thought it was a really fine piece of writing. But Scott had written some crap, you know, some really bad short stories. Well, I just didn’t fill the bill on advising Scott like Wilson had done. I think Scott was working then on *Tender Is the Night*. When it came out later, it didn’t meet with too good a reception from the critics in the States. So Scott went to Hollywood, left, went back. And I guess the last time I got to see Scott was about three years before he died. He was a magnificent man, really magnificent.”

“Next question! ... I remember one time Dos (John dos Passos), Cummings (E. E. Cummings) and I were riding in a carriage through the streets of Paris. No, we were riding to get from the Right Bank to the Left Bank, and Cummings I suppose asked the driver to stop while he got out and relieved himself on the street back of the carriage. Just then a *gendarme* came along and arrested him. Well, we all went trotting off to the police station and saw the officer.

“But this wasn’t so funny as it may seem, because Cummings was terribly afraid of being arrested, and for a very good reason. He’d written a book, you see, called *The Enormous Room* in which he described his experiences when he had been imprisoned in France during the World War, when he’d been with an ambulance corps or something. He and another man were put into an enormous room and just left there. Well, I won’t go into all the details, in fact I’m not quite

sure why he was so afraid of all this coming to light when he would have to face the magistrate the next day. But, at any rate, I decided to do anything possible to get Cummings off. He was absolutely shaking.

“Well, I went immediately to see Paul Morand, who, as I told you, had taken Pound’s place on the *Dial*. Well, Morand had a large interest in politics, in fact he held some sort of position in the French government. I told him I knew the national government couldn’t interfere with the police of the city of Paris, but if he could just say that Cummings didn’t have to appear before the magistrate at twelve noon the way he had been ordered to, then we could get Cummings off and he could leave the country as quickly as possible.

“Well, I don’t know to this day just what it was Morand did, but he pulled some strings and we got Cummings off, and he left practically right away to go back to the United States. So that was a little service I did the world of literature in helping Cummings get clear of the Paris *gendarmes*.”

Seldes is presently the Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications and a Professor of the University. He retires from his position here at the end of this academic year. His strongest feeling in regard to the School under him is that it is important to develop and train students who plan to go into the communications media to have a sense of ethics in their work and to be knowledgeable enough to help direct the mass media towards helpful aims. Mass media partially rule us today and in a democratic country it is essential that there be responsible and informed people directing the media. With Seldes at its helm, Annenberg has developed into a school of importance in a short length of time, turning out several Masters of Communications who may rise to positions of prominence in the communications and entertainment fields.

(Considerations of space and a certain amount of prudery on the part of the editor made it impossible for more to be published. Some of the omitted material, and much else about Gilbert Seldes, whom Temple knew for five years between 1961 and 1966, is to be found in The Reminiscences of Gilbert Seldes. It will be posted on the website separately. This will eventually include a transcription of a lengthy and detailed autobiographical tape recording of Seldes talking about himself which Temple recorded in the winter of 1965/6. Also to be posted separately is an account by Temple of the unexpectedly serious consequences of Seldes’s joking report card rating of Scott Fitzgerald.)