

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* versus Prince Harry and his polo-playing American friends

David Walsh
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"Prince Harry rounded off his hugely successful week-long tour of the U.S. today very much in his comfort zone – playing polo. ... He was greeted by club founder Peter Brandt [sic] and his model wife, Stephanie Seymour. Brandt, 65, – whose wife is 44 – is an American industrialist and businessman, worth an estimated \$2.7 billion." – *Daily Mail*, May 15, 2013

"According to the anonymous friend, [Prince] Harry was hoping to see *Great Gatsby* director Baz Luhrmann, a pal of his father [Prince] Charles, but any Hollywood hobnobbing is forbidden." – *New York Post*, May 9, 2013

"Mrs. Buchanan . . . and Mr. Buchanan ——" After an instant's hesitation he [Gatsby] added: "the polo player." ...

"I'd a little rather not be the polo player," said Tom pleasantly, "I'd rather look at all these famous people in — in oblivion." *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald

The visit to America in mid-May by Prince Harry of Wales, third in line of succession to the British throne, coinciding with the release of a new film adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), brings into focus a number of issues.

Harry is the younger son of Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana. He is perhaps best, or at least most revealingly, known for wearing a swastika armband and a German Afrika Korps outfit to a fancy dress party in January 2005. The *Sun*, a British tabloid, published a photograph of the 20-year-old prince under the unflattering headline, "Harry the Nazi." Four years later, Harry made the headlines again, after referring on a video to a Pakistani member of his British army platoon as "our little Paki friend."

The prince's most recent trip to the US had something of the character of an ongoing effort at damage control, after the fiasco of an August 2012 visit to Las Vegas during which Harry was photographed naked while playing a drunken game of strip billiards in a "high roller suite."

This month's tour was designed to present Harry as a responsible, caring and sober individual. The visit's official purpose was to promote the rehabilitation of US and UK troops, "our wounded warriors," as his private secretary, Jamie Lowther-Pinkerton, explained to the media. Harry also traveled to New Jersey, somewhat incongruously, to view the damage caused by last fall's Hurricane Sandy, in the company of Governor Chris Christie. During his brief visit to the Jersey Shore, the prince commented sagely, "It's fantastic American spirit, everyone getting together and making things right."

The final stop on Harry's trip, however, is what interests us most at the moment. On Wednesday he took part in a charity polo match in Greenwich, Connecticut, hobnobbing with multimillionaires and "celebrities," America's aristocracy of sorts.

And in an appropriate setting. Greenwich, in affluent Fairfield County, is one of the wealthiest communities in the US. *Money* magazine listed Greenwich number two on its list of "top-earning towns" in 2012 (it has placed first in other years), with a median family income of \$167,502 and a median home price \$1,901,029. If you want to take up residence there, "a magnet for hedge funds and boutique financial service companies," the magazine counseled, "Bring your checkbook and your Swiss bank account."

The match was played at the exclusive Greenwich Polo Club. According to one media report, "Guests at the polo dined on grilled peppered fillet of beef, served with an arugula and spring vegetable salad and crispy warm panisse, followed by vanilla bean creme brule, mixed berry trifle, Lemon Curd tart with mixed berries and truffle brownie squares.

"Just 400 seats were available in all, however, making it literally the hottest ticket in a town, with dozens of elegantly-coiffured ladies—both young and old—trying to beg, borrow or steal an invite." (The regular fee for attending the club's seven seasonal polo matches is \$1,000, but tickets for Harry's match were not offered for sale at any price.)

The prince's host at the polo club was its founder, Peter Brant, who inherited a paper company and is now reputedly worth several billion dollars. He currently owns White Birch Paper, one of the largest pulp and paper companies in North America, and Brant Publications. Brant, the owner of a 53-acre estate in Greenwich, is known for his extensive art collection, worth tens of millions of dollars, and his marriage to former model Stephanie Seymour. The couple filed for divorce in 2010 and their nasty relations were fought out in public, with accusations of drug abuse and art theft filling the air. They later reconciled. Also, in 1990, Brant served 84 days in federal prison for tax evasion.

In February 2010 White Birch sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. At the time it employed 1,300 workers at its Stadacona paper mill in Quebec City, Quebec. In January 2012, the company announced it was closing the mill "for good," after workers rejected a proposal that would have slashed wages and pension benefits. "The union," noted a CBC report, "said workers over the age of 55 would lose 45 per cent of the value of their pensions under White Birch's final offer and younger employees would lose 65 per cent."

The *New York Times*, in June 2012, dubbed Brant's sons Peter II and Harry (!) "The New Princes of the City," in a sycophantic piece in the newspaper's Fashion & Style section. The piece described the pair as "the well-spoken product of cross-pollination of the Übermenschen. ... Despite their youth, the boys are omnipresent on the social scene and staples of Patrick McMullan party photographs. Their every move is tracked on assorted fashion blogs."

One of these uncrowned princes, Peter, made his way into the news in November 2012 because of a text he sent to a friend, Andrew Warren, in the aftermath of Barack Obama's reelection. The conversation went like this, reported the *Greenwich Time* :

"Guess were [sic] poor now," grouses Warren.

"I have a contingency plan," Brant replies. "Kill Obama hahaha."

Warren then wrote: "HAHA well Atleast (sic) women have rights. Oh wait I don't care."

Brant replied: "Hahahaahaha exactly."

Needless to say, neither Brant nor Warren were run in for making terrorist threats.

Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby* come into the story of this sordid crowd through the following connections.

First, it was intriguing to learn that the *New York Post* considers Baz Luhrmann, the Australian-born director, "a pal" of Harry's father, Prince Charles, and that the young prince hoped to meet up with the filmmaker while in the US. Charles made a well-publicized appearance at the premiere of Luhrmann's dreadful *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

It could be proven, and it would not take much effort, that no one enjoying the personal acquaintance of a member of the British royal family has any business tackling Fitzgerald's novel, which expresses a thorough-going disgust for the idle rich.

One of racketeer Jay Gatsby's efforts to reinvent himself as a man of wealth and breeding involves his brief period at Oxford and a photograph he always carries. The photo, Gatsby explains, "was taken in Trinity Quad—the man on my left is now the Earl of Dorchester."

The narrator continues: "It was a photograph of half a dozen young men in blazers loafing in an archway through which were visible a host of spires. There was Gatsby, looking a little, not much, younger—with a cricket bat in his hand." The novel hardly has to spell out what the author thinks of the Earl of Dorchester and his parasitic ilk.

Polo, at which both Prince Harry and Brant apparently excel, is an important social motif in *Gatsby*. The game is used as something of a synonym for the uselessness and worthlessness of the old moneyed classes and is closely identified with the book's vilest figure, Tom Buchanan.

The novel's opening chapter observes that Buchanan's family "were enormously wealthy ... but now he'd left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away: for instance, he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that."

Describing Tom and his wife Daisy, the book goes on: "They had spent a year in France for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together." Wonderful phrase: "Wherever people played polo and were rich together"!

In Chapter Four, Tom and Daisy attend one of Gatsby's extravagant parties and the host, in a subtle effort to humiliate Buchanan, as he is in love with the man's wife and has been for five years, insists on introducing his rival in the manner noted at the top of this article, as "the polo player." This is a not so subtle means of presenting Tom as a mere idler.

Catching on to the barb, Buchanan tries to reject the appellation. "'Oh no,' objected Tom quickly, 'not me.' But evidently the sound of it pleased Gatsby, for Tom remained 'the polo player' for the rest of the evening."

Fitzgerald was fascinated by the very rich throughout his life, and it would be false to suggest that his attitude was free from ambiguities. However, when he was clear- and cold-eyed, no American author has ever written so directly, thoughtfully and unsparingly about the wealthy.

Famously, in *The Rich Boy* (1926), he wrote: "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me." The narrator goes on to observe that the only way he can describe his protagonist, the rich boy of the title, "is to approach him as if he were a foreigner and cling stubbornly to my point of view."

In 1938, Fitzgerald wrote in a letter: "That was always my experience—a poor boy in a rich town; a poor boy in a rich boy's school; a poor boy in a rich man's club at Princeton ... I have never been able to forgive the rich for being rich, and it has colored my entire life and works."

In her autobiographical *College of One*, Sheilah Graham, Fitzgerald's companion for the last several years of his life, recalls that "Scott's library contained two large volumes of [Marx's] *Das Kapital* ." Marx's comment about "The unity of the ruling classes, landlords and capitalists, stock-exchange wolves and shopkeepers, protectionists and free traders, government and opposition, priest and free thinkers, young whores and old nuns, under the common cry, For the Salvation of Property, Religion, the Family and Society," elicited from Fitzgerald: "Grand prose."

Graham further notes that the writer "was always so vehemently on the side of the poor and oppressed. He detested people like [heiresses] Barbara Hutton, [Mary] Woolworth Donahue, and especially business tycoons. 'I don't know any businessman I'd want to meet in the next world—if there is a next world,' said Scott."

It is clear what Fitzgerald would have thought of "Harry the Nazi" and Mr. Brant "the polo player." And it is improbable he would have had much time either for Luhrmann, a friend of the man next in line to become king of England.

As for the ever-increasing obsession of the super-rich in America with British royalty, this has unmistakable social roots, as we noted in December 2012: "The United States is ruled today by a financial-corporate aristocracy, with infinitely more in common with George III and Jefferson Davis than with [Tom] Paine, [Thomas] Jefferson, [Abraham] Lincoln, the abolitionists, [Mark] Twain and any progressive figure in US history. ...

"America's multimillionaires and billionaires, and their hangers-on, envy Britain's 'legitimate' royalty and dregs of a nobility, long for such rank themselves and despise the 'common people' with as much fervor as the aristocrats of an earlier age."

Hence, the intermingling in Greenwich of the human waste of the two countries.



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