

The **BOISI CENTER** *for*

RELIGION *and* AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Graduate Symposium on Religion and Politics
2018-2019

VOCATION
IN THE
AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Reading Packet 4: The American Dream

Boisi Center 2018-2019 Graduate Symposium on Religion and Politics

VOCATION IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

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THIS SIDE OF PARADISE *Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald on their honeymoon, 1920. The photo is a virtual compendium of American Dreams: house, car, beauty, youth, talent. (Photo from the collections of the Library of Congress)*

*THE
AMERICAN DREAM*



A Short History
of an Idea That Shaped a Nation


JIM CULLEN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2003

CHAPTER 6

DREAM OF THE GOOD LIFE (III): THE COAST

 THE AMERICAN DREAM was never meant to be a zero-sum solution: the goal has always been to end up with more than you started with. Even the Puritans, whose dream in its purest formulation was about as selfless as any in American history, and who were as skeptical of human will as any people in the Western world of the last five hundred years, nevertheless acted from this premise. There's really no other way to understand their migration except as motivated by a belief that it could procure *some* gain, if not for themselves in providing a reassuring sense of purpose, then at least for the good of their children and community, who might yet be saved even if they themselves were not. Other believers then and since were not nearly as circumspect about their errands in the wilderness, acting with confidence that they could secure their futures in the next world through good works in this one. In all these cases, however, this was the Dream of the Good Life as a spiritual affair.

As we've seen, another Dream of the Good Life was also a spiritual affair, though it tended to be focused (at least in the short term) on this world at least as much as the next one, offering a kind of psychic satisfaction that sustained one through the journey of life—and, ideally, conferring benefits beyond. The foundation of this dream, upward mobility, was a belief that one could realize the fruits of one's aspira-

tions through applied intelligence and effort. This was the dream of Abraham Lincoln and his heirs. A similar emphasis on applied intelligence and effort also animated the Dream of Home Ownership, which typically required investments of many kinds—money, time, labor, among others—in order to yield a domestic dividend.

There is one other Dream of the Good Life, however, that is decidedly different from these other two. For the most part, it is insistently secular (though there are times when the fervent desire for mortal goals such as wealth, fame, looks, or health becomes so ardent as to assume a kind of religiosity). This dream does not celebrate the idea of hard work, instead enshrining effortless attainment as the essence of its appeal. Which is not necessarily to say that applied intelligence and effort don't play a role. Very often they do, sometimes far more than these dreamers would like to acknowledge to themselves, let alone anyone else. But it's the rewards that are least strenuously earned that are the most savored, and even those that *are* strenuously earned tend to be discussed in ways that suggest they aren't.

One might say that the difference between this dream and that of upward mobility is more quantitative than qualitative. After all, there are few Americans who object to the idea of getting rich, and the rising value of a home is one of the things that contributes to the sense of security that inheres in it. But at some point—it's hard to say exactly where—a line gets crossed. A lot of people work hard for their money, but in what sense does one ever really *earn*, say, a million dollars a year, never mind ten million or a hundred million? In any event, very little of the wealth of rich people comes from their salaries; instead, it comes from investments whose value lies precisely in the way they produce income *without* labor on the part of the shareholder. Yet to focus too rigidly on accumulating wealth finally misses the point of this particular American Dream. It's less about accumulating riches than about living off their fruits, and its symbolic location is not the bank but the beach.

The American Dream is very much a national, even global, phenomenon, but some dreams have a strong geographic orientation. The Puritan dream, of course, was grounded in New England, though Puritan values ultimately stretched across the continent. Similarly, the Dream of Equality appeals broadly but owes its deepest resonances to the South, where inequality was most obvious and resistance to it most heroic. The Dream of Upward Mobility has a strong midwestern

accent, as suggested, for example, by the strength of the region's state university systems, which have served as vessels of the American Dream. Abraham Lincoln may have been a national figure, but the Land of Lincoln, as the license plates remind us, is Illinois. And like the Dream of Home Ownership, the dream I'm talking about here has a strong western orientation. It is a dream with roots in the South (specifically colonial Virginia) and one that traverses the mines, wheatfields, and deserts of the West. But its apotheosis is California. This American Dream is finally the dream of the Coast.

... the serene confidence which a Christian feels in four aces.

—Mark Twain, letter to *The Golden Era* (San Francisco),

May 22, 1864

It's not easy to get something for nothing. Even the most highly leveraged speculator usually has to come up with some collateral, and in those cases where there isn't a lot of money at stake, there may be other things that count at least as much: time, energy, reputation, a sense of hope. Gains demand gambles.

America itself—in the broadest sense of that term—is a world built on gambling. Christopher Columbus, Hernan Cortés, Sir Francis Drake: these men were nothing if not gamblers. Ponce de Leon must have known that the Fountain of Youth was a long shot; Henry Hudson had far more confidence than his men did that he'd find the Northwest Passage; a normally cautious Montcalm went for broke and personally led the attack on the Plains of Abraham in the struggle for Quebec. All these men and countless others—among them the Indians who tried to stop this New World from emerging—took their chances. Naturally, because the odds were against them, most lost. But they felt there was no way they'd ever get (or keep) anything worth having here unless they made their wagers.

There's no need to be metaphorical about this. Those who fret about government-sponsored gambling may be surprised to learn that lotteries were among the most important financial instruments in building colonial North America—not only in raising funds for initial settlement but also for homes, schools, and other community institutions. Queen Elizabeth I authorized the first official raffle in 1566 to finance

English harbor improvements, though the practice remained uncommon until the early seventeenth century, when James I authorized the Virginia Company to use lotteries to help prop up its sagging investments overseas. (Those who bought the lottery tickets were known as "adventurers.") Later colonial governments used them as a popular alternative to taxation. The city of Philadelphia actually began speculating in lottery tickets itself in the mid-eighteenth century, and the omnipresent Benjamin Franklin organized a successful contest to raise money for the city's defense during the War of the Austrian Succession in the 1740s.

Such public gambling, much of it conducted by wealthy elites, was accompanied by far more widespread private gaming throughout colonial society. Cards, dice, horseracing, and cockfighting were very early arrivals in America. The publication of books like Charles Cotton's *Compleat Gamester* (1674) and Edmond Hoyle's *Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* (1742) outlined rules and showed readers how to recognize cheating. *The Compleat Gamester* was also something of a philosophical defense of gambling, emphasizing the need for recreation and the likelihood it would take a number of forms, not all of them universally popular—or approved.

Indeed, denunciations of gambling have been a fixture of American life as long as gambling itself has. The Puritans in particular objected to it on the grounds that it abetted idleness and especially because gambling so often took place on the Sabbath, a day when people typically did not work and so had time to play games. But perhaps even more than the contests themselves, it was gambling's corollary effects that led lawmakers to write and enforce antigambling ordinances to prevent "much waste of wine and beer," "the corrup[t]ing of youth and other sad consequences," and "hazard" to the "Limbs and lives" of those who conducted horseraces.

Underlying such presumably practical concerns was a more fundamental issue. The behavior fostered by gambling grew out of a different, competing notion of the American Dream. For those who felt that the universe was a fair and orderly place—and, especially, for those who enjoyed a lofty place in their communities—the underlying assumptions of the gambling mentality were profoundly disturbing. At bottom, the gambler does not instinctively regard the universe as a fair or orderly place, tending instead to believe that the world's arrangements are, if not arbitrary, then not finally knowable in any rational way. A Puritan

could well agree that life is inscrutable. But a Puritan could not take the next step a gambler typically does: that rules, even morality, are irrelevant at best and a thinly veiled attempt to take control at worst. This is one reason why gambling tended to promote "undesirable" behaviors like sex and drinking. While the Puritan was inclined to reflect, perhaps even to try and overcome, inscrutability, the gambler tried to gain as much as he could, not feeling compelled to explain success *or* failure. In the end, the appeal of gambling proved too strong even for the Puritans as well as the Quakers, who found it difficult to control the practice as their colonies became increasingly diverse and settlement at their frontiers extended beyond the reach of civil authorities. By the time of the Revolution there was far less difference in attitudes between North and South about gambling than there had been 150 years earlier.

As the western frontier—a mere hundred miles from the eastern seaboard at the time of the Revolution—receded in the nineteenth century, the patterns and arguments about gambling were continuously reenacted. "From the seventeenth century through the twentieth, both gambling and westering thrived on high expectations, opportunism, and movement, and both activities helped to shape a distinctive culture," historian John Findlay explains in his history of American gambling. "Like bettors, pioneers have repeatedly grasped at the chance to get something for nothing—to claim free land, to pick up nuggets of gold, to speculate on western real estate." This dream fostered its own culture, a culture that fostered not only raucous games like cockfights and duels but also a raucous southwestern popular idiom that would furnish the raw material for later writers like Mark Twain and Herman Melville, who set his 1857 novel *The Confidence Man*, a metaphysical meditation on gambling, deception, and faith, on a Mississippi riverboat. Yet even here there was resistance. The professionalization of gambling and presence of sophisticated conmen helped contribute to a feeling that the West was a disreputable, even dangerous, place. One perhaps ironic result of this fear of disorder was vigilantism: in 1835 a group of settlers in Vicksburg, Mississippi, lynched five gamblers and declared martial law. Similar incidents (notably in San Francisco in 1856) demonstrated that not all the hostility toward gambling came from traditional guardians of morality such as elite women and church leaders. Such opposition reflected the threat that unrestricted gambling posed for another American Dream: home ownership. Gambling culture has always been fundamentally antidomestic in orientation.

Wagering—of money, land, even human beings—was an intrinsically destabilizing cultural practice and part of what made frontier life so worrisome to those who really desired to *settle* the West. As countless observers from James Fenimore Cooper to Frederick Jackson Turner on down have noted, settlers in a given locale typically succeeded in stamping out gambling culture, only to have the frontier that sustained it move on. The culture of gambling, in short, was a moving target.

Nor did it move in a straight line. As a number of historians have made clear, the American frontier was an irregular and shifting affair as likely to go east as it did west. For much of the nineteenth century, the general area between the Great Plains and the Pacific coast was commonly known as “the Great American Desert”—terrain to move *through*, not settle *on*. Only after (northern) California was firmly integrated into the Union were Americans tempted—often by the lure of highly deceptive advertising circulated by railroad companies—to settle places like eastern Montana. All too often, this was a wager that proved to be a losing proposition.

Nowhere was this interplay of domesticity and gambling, movement and settlement, played out more vividly than Las Vegas, Nevada. Everything about early Nevada—from the Spanish trails blazed through it to connect Santa Fe and southern California to its hasty, improvised admission to the Union in 1864 to help cushion Abraham Lincoln’s electoral majority—testifies to the transience of its beginnings. Significantly, it was the Mormons, who had a Puritan-tinged dream of a holy community rooted in home ownership, who made the first sustained effort to make the area now known as Las Vegas a permanent settlement, part of Brigham Young’s plan to extend Mormon influence to southern California and provide travelers with a safe haven along the way. To that end, construction of a fort and missionary activity with the Paiute Indians got under way in 1855. But the effort was abandoned three years later.

That evangelical Christians would first try to colonize a place that would become synonymous with vice is only one of many ironies surrounding the rise of Las Vegas. Another is that, the American celebration of the entrepreneurial loner notwithstanding, it was the federal government, not enterprising individuals, who ultimately put the city on the map. Land grants to railroads—a classic example of corporate handouts that proved far less risky and far more profitable than any

casino table—ultimately allowed the construction of rail lines that led to Las Vegas's first identity as a way station between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles in 1905. Construction of the Hoover Dam in nearby Boulder City in the 1930s brought salaried workers into Las Vegas's orbit. (Not until 1945 did gambling replace the Dam as the principal source of tourist traffic.) And military bases, contracts, and testing—the most notable tests being nuclear bomb explosions—brought large sums of money to an area that would otherwise have been impoverished. Nevada's historic stinginess with local and state spending on schools, health care, and other social services belies the federal government support that continues to sustain it (and much of the rest of the West).

Ultimately, however, it would not be government-sponsored industry that made Las Vegas famous. That activities like drinking, prostitution, and gambling did points to yet another irony. At the turn of the century, city officials limited such activities by ordinance to two blocks of clubs near the railroad station that catered to passengers on layovers. The idea, of course, was to limit (and profit) from what could not otherwise be prevented. It increasingly became obvious, however, that vice was the tail that wagged the civic dog. Recognizing the economic potential in such activities—particularly in a state that was otherwise uncongenial to economic development—Nevada legalized prostitution and gambling by 1931 and determinedly looked the other way during Prohibition. It also avowedly made itself the easiest state in the Union in which to obtain a divorce. The promise of secular fulfillment, in all its forms, became the basis of its existence.

Las Vegas also became a proving ground for the elasticity of the American Dream, showcasing its penchant for absorbing ethnic influences and in turn being shaped by them. Beginning in the 1940s, organized crime figures from back east began showing an interest in the city for achieving their own American Dream of Upward Mobility—and doing so in an alluring new climate that presented a more attractive life of ease than any they had previously known. These urban frontiersmen were in effect gambling on gamblers; the risk was not so much in making money on gaming (this was something they had been doing successfully for a long time) but rather risking exposure and arrest by bringing their underground economy into the desert and laundering their gains with glittering new enterprises. The most famous of these figures was Benjamin Siegel (or "Bugsy," as he was known to non-

friends). Siegel, who had been sent to Los Angeles in the thirties to reorganize crime there, first came to Las Vegas in 1941 with his associate Moe Sedway as part of an effort by Meyer Lansky and other gangsters to find a legally sanctioned base for their business empires. Siegel's role in the construction of the Flamingo, one of the first major Las Vegas* resorts when it opened in 1946, has become legendary. Plagued by cost-overruns and poor returns that cost Siegel his life, the Flamingo nevertheless became a gold mine that served as a pioneer for a number of other major casino-hotels, among them the Desert Inn and the Stardust. Like Moses—or perhaps more to the point, Daniel Boone—Siegel had glimpsed the promised land. By the early 1950s Las Vegas had become the Great American Playground, a frontier town for the age of jet airplanes.

Film director Martin Scorsese, among others, has vividly depicted the almost biblical fable that followed, as a small group of men gained and lost paradise through their own excesses, greed chief among them. By the late 1970s the implacable hand of corporate capitalism supplanted mobsters and the union pension funds that had sustained them. Las Vegas became an increasingly well organized and financed business.

To a great degree, Las Vegas was also domesticated. This can be largely attributed to the logic of capitalism, a logic that is also predicated on gambling but that tries to square the circle wherever possible in the name of maximizing profit as efficiently as possible. In this case, that means providing safe, reliable, “family” entertainment to go along with gambling, which itself has been carefully circumscribed by an elaborate series of rules and regulations to ensure order. (In the United States, as it turned out, the Puritan and the gambler are never that far apart.)

But the sanding of the city's hard edges also reflects a broader cultural shift—or, at any rate, a variation on this particular Dream of the Good Life. The American Dream embraced most fully by earlier incarnations of Las Vegas, which remains present even now, focuses on get-

* Technically, neither the Flamingo nor any of the subsequent wave of resorts built on the so-called Strip was actually in Las Vegas city limits—in fact, their location was specifically chosen so as to be beyond that city's municipal regulations. Such establishments were situated in the coyly named, regulation-friendly city of Paradise, which has since been absorbed into Las Vegas.

ting something for nothing. Yet an air of exertion, even anxiety, suffuses this dream, as suggested by the recent remarks of this casino shift manager who sympathizes with the players:

I have felt that same rush gambling, and you want to know the really weird part of it all? When I'm gambling, I am having the best time of my life and I am having the absolute worst time too. I'm talking about those nanoseconds when you are waiting for that white ball to drop into the red or black or the dice to stop rolling. It can be absolutely terrifying and absolutely beautiful. You are standing there wishing like hell that you hadn't put down your complete paycheck. You are thinking "Am I nuts? What am I going to do if I lose?" You are terrified and you are totally alive. . . . People will tell you that they gamble to win, but I don't believe them. It's those brief seconds before you know the outcome that really turn you on. Those are the moments when you learn if you are a player or a real gambler, a winner or a loser. Those are the moments that really count because you are up there flying without a net.

There's a curious tension here, something akin to a work ethic: gambling doesn't really count unless there's really something at stake. It's the gambling, not the winning or losing, that finally matters.

There can be little doubt that this person is describing a common psychological profile in the world at large. But the validity of these observations notwithstanding, it must also be true that many people have always gambled to win—have been happy to do so *without* spine-tingling risk or suspense (many no doubt work in the accounting department of this very casino). From the plantation owner happy to survey his fields from the comfort of his porch to the Wall Street executive contentedly savoring the fruits of paper profits at a Caribbean resort, the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast rests on a quest for placidity, not the thrill of risk.

Ground zero for this particular variant is not Las Vegas but rather California. Indeed, for much of its history, Las Vegas looked west, not east, for cultural direction. The gambling houses of San Francisco, with their sense of often garish splendor and (relative) permanence, furnished the model for early Las Vegas casinos. But it was geographically closer Southern California that most decisively shaped the modern American Dream. The rise of the interstate not only brought Los Angeles within the orbit of Las Vegas, but also influenced the pattern

of settlement in ways ranging from roadside architecture to patterns of racial and social segregation. Perhaps the most notable example of this segregation was the shift in the locus of gaming culture from downtown gambling houses—the so-called “Glitter Gulch,” whose very name harkened back to the Old West—to the more exotic and often futuristic resorts of the automotive-friendly Strip.

But to really understand the Dream of the Coast, you have to go back to the beginning, when to many California itself was at least as much a dream as it was a place.

... these States tend inland and toward the Western sea, and I will also.

Walt Whitman, “A Promise to California,” 1867

In March of 1816, two American sailors jumped off a ship on the California coast and found their way to land. One was a Bostonian named Thomas Doak; the other, a black man known simply as Bob. The two took out Spanish citizenship, married local women, and converted to Catholicism; Doak was baptized as Felipe Santiago and Bob as Juan Cristóbal. The former became a well-respected, well-paid carpenter; the latter found at least some of a racial stigma not quite as sharp as it was back home.

It seems fitting that these two became the first recorded permanent American residents of California: their lives suggest the Dream of the Coast. In coming from the East, discarding their identities, and leading a less onerous existence, they resembled many of those who followed—or, at least, the fondest *hopes* of many who followed.

Indeed, for hundreds of years, California was above all else a matter of potential. Despite the staggering beauty of its mountains, valleys, and deserts, the region was notably light in population for much of its history. (The south, for example, was too arid to support the large native populations common elsewhere in North America.) In 1535 the legendary Spanish conqueror Hernan Cortés landed in what is now Baja peninsula and named the place “California” after the island mountain kingdom in a popular Spanish romance of the time, *Las Sergas de Esplandían* (in which the protagonist, Esplandían, converts the Amazons of California to Christianity). In 1542 the Spanish explorer

Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sailed into what is now San Diego Bay and continued north along the Pacific coast, making frequent trips ashore to claim the land for Spain. Despite the relative lack of resistance from the notable variety of native peoples, the Spanish showed little interest in the region. In 1579 the English explorer Sir Francis Drake reached northern California, which he named Nova Albion and claimed for England. But it would be almost two hundred years before Europeans settled in the region, and when they did, it was the Russians and French who established naval posts and contemplated the establishment of imperial outposts in the Pacific. It was to prevent this that the Spanish governor of lower California established a presidio, or military post, in San Diego in 1769. He also sent Junípero Serra, a Franciscan missionary, to San Diego to establish the first of many missions that formed a chain between San Diego and San Francisco. The purpose of the missions was to convert Native Americans, who were forced to live and work in what were essentially authoritarian religious communes. The collapse of Spanish authority in the 1820s brought California under nominal Mexican rule, but a steady influx of outsiders and internecine factionalism raised questions as to who would finally claim it as their own. The growing presence of maritime Americans from New England and trappers traveling overland from the South and border states gave the United States the upper hand in this imperial contest—though not without cost. The almost mythic tale of the Donner Party, trapped in the mountains during an overland journey into California and forced to eat human flesh, became a potent symbol of the nightmares that could result from the pursuit of this dream.

The process whereby the United States realized what its boosters called its manifest destiny began with the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846, which provided the pretext for a detachment of U.S. soldiers under the command of General John Frémont to support an insurrection and the creation of the so-called Bear Flag Republic, named for the grizzly bear that adorned the flag of the revolutionaries. A series of American-led invasions, some unsuccessful, followed, but in 1848 California was ceded to the United States as part of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The United States promised to honor the rights of Mexican landholders, but the demand that they document their claims in Washington, D.C., typically led to expensive litigation that effectively stripped Mexicans of ranches that were in some cases themselves the

spoils of the Franciscan missions. Two years later, California became a (free) state as part of the Compromise of 1850, though its native, Mexican, and Chinese populations would work in ways all too similar to those of southern slaves and tenant farmers.

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had not even been signed when an unexpected event transformed California—and the American Dream. In 1839, the Mexican government, seeking to check American expansion, made a huge land grant to a Swiss immigrant, John Sutter, who established a large ranch near Sacramento. Sutter needed lumber and turned to his American partner, James Marshall, to build him a sawmill on the South Fork of the American River. On January 24, 1848, Marshall was inspecting the construction site when he picked up a yellow nugget: gold. Marshall and Sutter tried to keep the discovery quiet, but it was no use. The gold rush was on. In 1848 there were twelve thousand émigrés in California; six years later there were three hundred thousand. In the century between 1860 and 1960, the state's population would double every twenty years.

The California gold rush is the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast in American history. The notion that transformative riches were literally at your feet, there for the taking, cast a deep and lasting spell on the American imagination. Paradoxically, the prospect of seemingly effortless riches led Americans to move mountains in pursuit of this dream. It goes without saying that most failed. Sutter, for his part, died bankrupt; Marshall drank himself to death. Yet even when the promise of the gold rush proved illusory—except for the mining companies, which quickly gobbled up the land and created a large-scale industry—it continued to have enormous metaphorical power for generations of Americans, for whom California (a.k.a. “the Golden State”) offered the potential for riches of many kinds.

One of these was railroads. As in so many other ways, California's experience was much like the rest of the country's, only more so. Shrewd speculators were given vast tracts of land by the federal government, which they then used to finance the railroads by selling off pieces of it at an exorbitant profit. The first railroad within the state, a twenty-two-mile line between Sacramento and Folsom, was completed in 1855. Two railroad companies built the first transcontinental railroad: the Union Pacific Railway laid tracks west from Omaha, and the Central Pacific Railroad, under the leadership of Sacramento business-

men Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, and Mark Hopkins, laid track east from Sacramento. The two lines were joined at Promontory, near Ogden, Utah, on May 10, 1869. In 1876 the Central Pacific was extended southward, reaching Los Angeles. Railroads became major players in the California economy, dictating the commercial and political development of the state and who would prosper in it. Men like Stanford and Huntington became rich—obscenely rich, in the eyes of some—while others paid the price for lacking their luck, timing, or social connections.

But it wasn't only modern industries like mining and railroads that dangled the prospect of the Good Life before a lucky few. Farming, perhaps all the more alluring because it was familiar to most Americans, also played a role. In the 1860s and 1870s California became the nation's breadbasket, as farmers depleted the soil at an extremely rapid rate, sometimes planting two or three crops a season. This was not the work of small homesteaders tilling dreams of upward mobility; it was agribusinessmen like Dr. Hugh Glenn, who owned sixty thousand acres and employed six hundred workers (one of whom murdered Glenn after he was fired for drinking, suggesting the frustration and violence that often accompanied the quest for the American Dream). The advent of refrigerated rail cars in the 1880s made it possible to ship perishables like fruit over long distances, transforming California's agricultural economy. In 1904 the advertising agency for the California Fruit Growers Exchange created a new trademark, Sunkist, to market individually wrapped oranges. Millions of Americans became devotees of a fruit most had never seen a few years earlier.

In a sense, they became even more devoted to the *image* that Sunkist promoted. Crates containing the oranges were illustrated with vivid, idyllic lithographs of Southern California landscapes. One, "Sea Side," from 1919, showed a family at the beach; another, "Suburban," from 1915, depicted a bungalow in an orange grove. The name of yet another illustration, this one of two peacocks in a grove near a castle, made explicit what was really being presented in these images. It was called "California Dream."

Indeed, to focus too much on the broad economic transformation of California runs the risk of losing sight of its deeply personal appeal in ways that were as much psychological as material. Eastern journalist Charles Nordhoff's best-selling book *California for Health, Wealth, and*

Residence (1872) was only one well-known example of a large literature promoting the good life to be found there. "I think nothing can be more delightful than the life of a farmer of sheep or cattle in Southern California," Nordhoff reported. "The weather is almost always fine; neither heat nor cold ever goes to extremes; you ride everywhere across country, for there are no fences; game is abundant in the seasons; and to one who has been accustomed to the busy life of a great city like New York, the work of a sheep or cattle *rancho* seems to be mere play." More than the prospect of great riches per se, it was the idea of easy living that captured the national imagination. You would happily let the industrial barons divide the world among themselves if you could just simply enjoy yourself back at the (economically self-sufficient) ranch.

By the turn of the twentieth century, California, north and south, had established itself as a kind of American Mediterranean—a haven of sorts from the hard-driving tenor of much of the rest of national life. San Francisco in particular enjoyed a reputation as a cosmopolitan entrepôt, notable for quality restaurants, its arts community, and ethnic diversity, while Los Angeles grew rapidly as railroads, the oil industry, and the completion of its new harbor in 1910 allowed its population to triple over the course of the decade. Not even earthquakes, frontier violence, or racism stopped newcomers, who often found themselves facing daunting odds. For few were the odds more daunting than for the Japanese, whose triumph over such obstacles in accumulating land so infuriated Anglo-Californians that state legislators made it illegal for them to do so. Yet none of this displaced the sunny visage California presented to the outside world.

That sunny visage in what was still a remote location could also prove quite practical for some enterprises. The first decade of the twentieth century was pivotal in the new industry of motion pictures, which had rapidly developed from an arcade attraction to be viewed through a peephole-like device called the kinetoscope to a mass medium projected onto screens in nickelodeons. Much, though not all, of the early movie industry was concentrated in metropolitan New York, the stomping grounds of inventor—and speculator—Thomas Edison, whose trust controlled key patents on projectors and demanded royalties from filmmakers. (The idea that you could make something once in a fixed period of time and earn income from it continuously thereafter without further effort is one of the most cherished scenarios in the Dream of

the Coast.) Edison believed that the key to mastery of the movie industry lay in controlling the means of production. A group of Jewish immigrants with names like Fox and Warner, however, realized the money really lay in content, that is, in making movies that people truly wanted to see. (Edison regarded films themselves as a virtual afterthought, something he'd let someone else do—as long as he was paid.) Over the long run, the future would belong to these people, who proved much better at making sure *they* were paid.

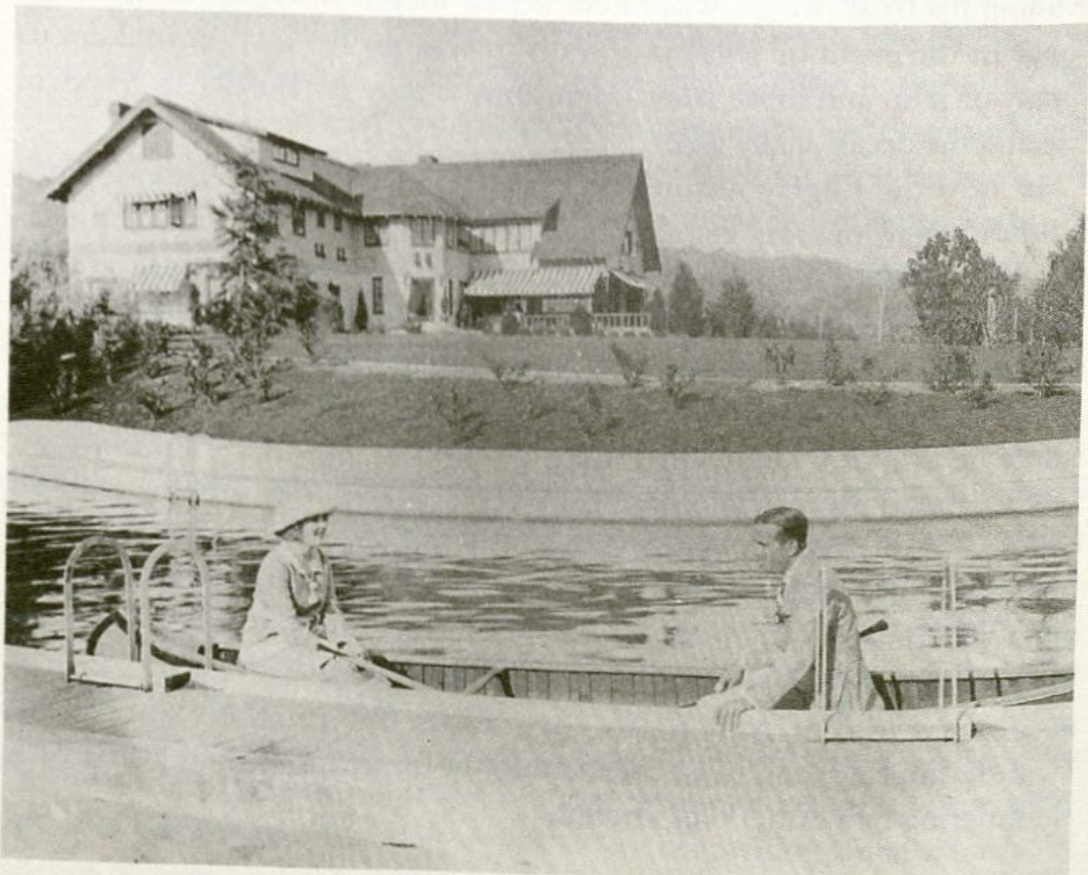
In the winter of 1907, a director named Francis Boggs and his cameraman, Thomas Persons, had finished shooting the interior scenes for their film *The Count of Monte Cristo* in Chicago. They needed good weather to shoot the exterior scenes, but it was overcast in the Windy City, so they went to Los Angeles. A steady stream of filmmakers followed, lured not only by the weather and the lack of strong unions but also because Southern California was generally beyond the reach of Edison's lawyers, who served subpoenas to those they suspected of evading his trust (which was declared an illegal restraint of trade in 1915). In the event of legal problems, it was useful for filmmakers to simply pick up and move their operations across the border to Mexico, which some occasionally did.

In 1910 the hugely ambitious actor/writer/director David Wark Griffith began making regular trips to Southern California to make films that would culminate in the epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), widely regarded as the first major feature film. He brought with him a troupe of actors, among them a seventeen-year-old girl named Mary Pickford, whom he deployed in a series of movies, which he shot with the consummate skill of a genius inventing an entirely new artistic grammar. Griffith based his operation in Hollywood, a small city created in 1888 by Horace and Daeida Wilcot, a wealthy midwestern couple bereaved by the loss of a child. A small, sober-minded community that did not allow alcohol—or movie theaters—Hollywood was in some ways an unlikely site for an international capital of popular culture. But its absorption by Los Angeles in 1910 made this possible, and D. W. Griffith (himself soon to be left behind) became a founding father of a shimmering new American Dream.

At its most compelling, California could be a moral premise, a prescription of what America could and should be. At its most trivial, it was a cluster of shallow dreams, venial hankerings which mistook laziness for leisure, selfishness for individualism, laxity for liberation, evasion and cheap escape for redemption and a solid second chance.

—Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream*, 1973

It was, if you were to believe the newspapers, magazines, radio, and newsreels, the most fabulous house in America. The two-story colonial had an L-shape, its varied rooms a mélange of Frederic Remington paintings, Oriental carpets, and hand-carved Italian chairs. Outside, one could find kennels, stables, a tennis court, a miniature golf course, a swimming pool, and a bathhouse fitted with swimsuits of all sizes. The estate's fifteen servants had their own dormitory (the majordomo,



COASTING Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford at Pickfair in the mid-1920s. The couple's marital merger was one of the first, and most alluring, examples of modern celebrity culture. (Photo Collection/Los Angeles Public Library)

Albert, had his own cottage). Located in the hamlet of Beverly Hills—which, like nearby Hollywood, had recently become part of Los Angeles—the house became a mecca for a new breed of people who were settling the frontier of American entertainment.

The house was called “Pickfair” in honor of its residents—Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Pickford, the premier movie star of the 1910s and 1920s, was known as “America’s Sweetheart” (which, in typical fashion, her handlers would revise to “the World’s Sweetheart”). While seductresses like Theda Bara and Greta Garbo played the role of vamp, Pickford was cast as the eternal child in films like *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917), *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1919), and *Pollyanna* (1920). Fairbanks, who went to Harvard not as a student but to socialize with people who were actually enrolled, was renowned for his grace and sex appeal in films like *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), *The Three Musketeers* (1921), and *Robin Hood* (1922). In 1919 Fairbanks and Pickford teamed up with D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin to form United Artists, their own movie studio. Chaplin, a frequent guest at Pickfair, had his own room there, even though he owned a house a block away.

Pickford and Fairbanks’s marital merger was a little more difficult to execute than their business partnership. Both had been married prior to their 1920 wedding. The two, along with Chaplin, had generated much good will in their Liberty Bond fundraising drive in support of World War I, but divorce carried a strong social stigma, particularly for women. When the Catholic Pickford stretched Nevada’s already lax divorce laws by leaving the state almost immediately upon procuring a settlement, marrying Fairbanks the same month after openly insisting she had no plans to do so, and having a Baptist minister perform the ceremony, she provoked the wrath of the Church, the Nevada Attorney General, her former husband, and a good deal of the public. But lawyers, money, and a European honeymoon largely defused the furor. The leading fan magazine of the period, *Photoplay*, reflected the new consensus when it published a telegram that ended COME HOME ALL IS FORGIVEN. The couple returned to the house Fairbanks owned before the marriage, renaming it “Pickfair.”

By 1922, according to one biographer, Pickfair had become a kind of collective dream house, a place fans felt they instinctively knew even if they had never actually been there. “No one much cared about how Mrs. Harding or Mrs. Coolidge ran 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but Mary’s boudoir, her servant problems, the table she set, her scheme of

interior decoration—these were fascinating topics for the American public, and the papers kept readers informed of each new development at Pickfair,” explained one biographer. Albert Einstein, Babe Ruth, and Lord and Lady Mountbatten were typically atypical guests; the dinner table was automatically set for fifteen and was usually full each evening.

Yet great care was taken at Pickfair not to suggest anything resembling decadence. This was a real concern in the Hollywood of Fairbanks and Pickford, which had seen its share of squalor. In 1920 Pickford’s sister-in-law Olive Thomas, a former showgirl and rising actress celebrated for her beauty, poisoned herself in a Paris hotel room. (Her husband, Pickford’s brother Jack, also an actor, was reputed to have a heroin habit.) A year after Thomas’s death, another actress, Virginia Rappe, also died in a hotel room, this one north of San Francisco, after a party hosted by the famed comic actor Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle. Arbuckle, arrested on charges of first degree murder, was ultimately acquitted, but his career was nevertheless in shreds. Incidents like these—and there were many—led the new movie moguls to hire a powerful Washington lawyer, William Harrison Hays, who gave up his position as postmaster general of the Harding administration to orchestrate the public relations of the film industry through an internal censorship operation known as the “Hays Office.” His help wasn’t needed at Pickfair, however. No liquor was served there (at least officially—these were the days of Prohibition), and the movie screenings that followed dinner always ended by ten P.M. so that Fairbanks and Pickford would arrive fresh on the set by six the next morning. In short, Doug and Mary were nice young people.

They were also *forever* young people. Writing in 1973, movie critic Richard Schickel marveled at the durable power of Fairbanks’s image: “No one has quite recaptured the freshness, the sense of perpetually innocent, perpetually adolescent narcissism that Douglas Fairbanks brought to the screen.” Pickford, for her part, was cherished as an eternal child; well into her thirties she was playing characters in golden curls and frilly dresses in what were popularly known as “Mary pictures.”

One might say that Fairbanks and Pickford lived out a dazzling American Dream, but to leave it at that would obscure the way their lives reflected new currents in the Dream that have shaped it ever since. Some versions of the American Dream stressed the value of hard work for its own sake; others recognized it as a necessary evil, but one that afforded the promise of a leisurely life of many happy returns on profitable investments. In an important sense, however, the appeal of Doug

and Mary rested less on what they did or what they acquired than on playing themselves. Simply being Doug and Mary was in *itself* perceived to be desirable (and profitable). To be sure, these were people with real talent, but exercising that talent was something that presumably came naturally, something that simply happened in the course of a normal day. To put it another way: the American Dreams of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Carnegie rested on a sense of *character*; those of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford rested on *personality*. They were celebrities, people whose fame rested not on talent, however defined, but on simply being famous. One of the strangest paradoxes of subsequent American history would be the histories of other Americans, among them Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, who emerged from highly particular cultural communities possessing enormous talent and yet who trivialized, even discarded, their gifts in a desperate desire to live the Dream of the Coast.

The contrast between an older American Dream rooted in character and its replacement, a Dream rooted in personality, is vividly apparent in the 1916 film *His Picture in the Papers*. Fairbanks plays a young man who works for his father, a cereal manufacturer. He is a quiet rebel against parental strictures, dutifully bringing a bag lunch to work only to pull out a martini mixer to drink on the job. (He also defies his family's vegetarianism by eating steaks at restaurants.) In his free time, he goes slumming among immigrants, distinguishing himself in Irish boxing matches. But if such activities bring him censure at home, they pay clear dividends elsewhere: he is a magnet for the attention of women and has the necessary manliness to rescue a fellow businessman when thugs attack him. When reporters ask him the secret of his strength, he answers with "Pringle Products," the food made by his father. Overnight, Pringle's cereal becomes a hotter commodity than it had ever been, advertised as a means to build strong bodies and sex appeal rather than as a sensible vegetarian staple. A charismatic personality makes and breaks his own rules, succeeding in business without really trying.

The key to his success is *lifestyle*, a term that, like "the American Dream," entered common parlance surprisingly recently.* The world

* According to *The Facts on File Dictionary of Cliché* (2001), the term "life style" was coined by psychologist Alfred Adler in 1929 to describe the psychological profile of an individual as defined in childhood. But according to *Brewer's Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Phrase and Fable* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), use of the term to denote attitudes, values, and styles of consumption did not become commonplace until the 1980s.

of Pickfair was not about wealth or achievement but physical beauty, grace, fun. For the Beautiful People, a work ethic does not mean deferred gratification, but rather gratification through novel and exciting work—work that can be talked about on talk shows or in magazine stories, or work not tethered to a clock the way most American jobs are. To be sure, Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Carnegie were famous in their own right (as indeed they wished to be), and they lived in a style that could be considered analogous to that of Pickfair. But neither celebrated—in fact, they explicitly condemned—the values celebrated in *His Picture in the Papers*.

Even from the heights of hypocrisy, they did so for good reason: the values embodied in Pickfair are a fraud, and we all know it. Fairbanks and Pickford did not live happily ever after in a storybook romance; in fact they divorced in 1935, years after their marriage had become a sham. The economic and personal freedom they won was paid for, especially by Pickford, with a cult of youth and beauty that was not only oppressive but would inevitably leave them behind. Their accomplishments, real as they may have been, were not only fleeting but outstripped by ambitions that would be forever beyond them—movies unmade, roles unrealized, a studio that never quite attained the heft of its rivals. Franklin and Carnegie left behind libraries that remain with us; the principal legacy of Pickford and Fairbanks is made of deteriorating celluloid, fading pictures of a world that never was.

And yet that world continues to exert an enormous allure that has only grown more powerful. Doug and Mary were replaced by Clark and Carole, Liz and Dick, Tom and Nicole; the newsreel has been replaced by the website; the stars have their own production companies rather than serving at the convenience of studio chiefs who paid them fixed salaries. While Hollywood remains their home, their values seem to have taken root in other dream capitals, from Washington, D.C., to the Harvard Fairbanks could only pretend to attend.

I know I sound a little skeptical, even dismissive, when I write about people like Douglas Fairbanks. That's hardly surprising coming from someone who began this book by admitting his affection for the Puritans. But I, too, feel the undertow of the Coast. Most of us do. Indeed, a longing for a life of leisure has virtually universal appeal, and given the grind of exertion and duty that has characterized everyday existence for most of human history, it's not hard to understand why.

Nor can I entirely dismiss such longings, which Americans seem to

have an uncanny ability to capture, package, and distribute, as superficial. Despite the enormous gap between what the creators of *Pickfair* portrayed and what their audience lived, their dream world has a paradoxical immediacy and accessibility that make it a democracy of desire. We have fun watching them have fun, and we almost believe they really do represent us. In a crude way, the box office is a kind of voting booth—one rife with corruption, certainly, and yet the repository of a collective hope that I can't help but feel has not only a kind of reality but also a kind of tattered validity. I know the beautiful figure I see on a screen has no life beyond it, and that character, if real, would have no truck with the likes of me (nor should I with her). I know the fable of abundance depicted on the page of a magazine is a marketing ploy, but the magic it appropriates has a life that cannot be wholly contained by a slogan, an image, a bill of goods. I know that the culture of consumption that is finally at the heart of the *Dream of the Coast* preys on my worst impulses—greed, lust, gluttony. But every once in a while there is good to be seized among the goods. The smell of the paper in a freshly printed book; the sound of an electric guitar that emanates from the radio; the grace of an actress, now dead, in a movie on television: so much senseless beauty. Amid all the striving, some worthwhile and some appalling, the American Dream is most fully realized in works of art.

I'LL BEGIN TO END this discussion of the Coast, and this book generally, by heading back east for one final tale of the American Dream. It's a fairly simple story. James Gatz (or "Jimmy," as his father calls him) is born sometime around 1890 in North Dakota. After attending St. Olaf's College in southern Minnesota for two weeks, the seventeen-year-old boy drifts to Lake Superior, where he works digging clams, fishing for salmon, and holding other odd jobs. While there, Gatz meets Dan Cody, a millionaire copper magnate who hires him to serve as a steward-mate-skipper for his yacht. For the next five years, Gatz sails the world with Cody, who adopts the boy as a protégé and trusts him to keep tabs on him when he drinks too much. When Cody dies in 1912, he leaves Gatz twenty-five thousand dollars, but Gatz never receives the money because of the machinations of Cody's mistress.

Gatz's whereabouts are unknown between 1912 and 1917, at which point he appears in Louisville, Kentucky, as a lieutenant in the U.S.

Army awaiting transport to France to fight in the First World War. Here, he falls in love with the beautiful young Daisy Fay, whose background is far more distinguished than his own. Visiting her house with other officers from the local army base, and then alone, brings his life into vivid clarity: she will be the love of his life. But Daisy, while returning his attentions, is out of reach. This is not only because he is about to go to war, but also because his lowly origins pose a serious financial and social obstacle. Nevertheless, he is determined to win her.

After being decorated for distinguished service in the war and a stint at Oxford, he returns to make his fortune via shadowy means. (Apparently he has something to do with the notorious Black Sox Scandal of 1919, in which the Chicago White Sox allegedly collude with bookmakers to intentionally lose the World Series.) Meanwhile, Daisy Fay comes out as a debutante and marries Tom Buchanan, a Yale graduate from a respectable family. Daisy bears a daughter, Pamela, and the young family moves from Santa Barbara to Chicago, finally completing its migration from west to east by settling on a waterfront estate on Long Island.

How do we know all of this? We learn most of it secondhand from Nick Carraway—who himself learns it secondhand. Nick, a fellow midwesterner, is Daisy's second cousin once removed and knew Tom at Yale. Nick comes to New York in the spring of 1922 to become a bond trader and rents a small house on a peninsula across a bay from Daisy and Tom. It soon emerges that Nick's rich next-door neighbor, who throws wild parties* at his baronial estate and who is the source of endless gossip (Is he a bootlegger? Did he kill a man?), is Daisy's old suitor. Those parties, as it turns out, have a determined purpose: to lure Daisy. Nick becomes the agent of their reunion—and the man who bears witness to the ensuing tragedy.

At some point in reading the last four paragraphs, you probably realized this is the plot of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. It was published in 1925, a time when the Dream of the Coast was both consolidating and spreading. The book has long been considered the quintessential Great American Novel—and, surely not coincidentally, the quintessential expression of the American Dream. The reason is less

* Those parties include glamorous figures from the new world of motion pictures, among them the head of a studio and a "gorgeous, scarcely human orchid of a woman" the host points out to other guests, who stare at her "with that peculiarly unreal feeling that accompanies the recognition of a hitherto ghostly celebrity of the movies."

the plot than a gift for language that here, for example explains the appeal of his protagonist:

There was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of "creative temperament"—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness as I have never found in any other person and which it is unlikely I shall ever find again.

One need not be an especially acute reader to know from the outset that Gatsby's quest for Daisy is not promising. We meet her even before we meet him, and so we know how shallow she is, and most of us know from experience that such strong desire is an unstable compound. Any plausible hopes we might have for Gatsby's dream of Daisy evaporate when Nick advises him not to "ask too much of her" because "you can't repeat the past." To which Gatsby responds: "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!" Subsequent events in the novel reveal just how disastrous it can be to railroad through hard realities like time, space, and the fickleness of the human heart.

But the skepticism that *The Great Gatsby* engenders about its protagonist's American Dream is not only a matter of its fable-like plot of a man who pursues unseemly ends through unseemly means and pays for his dream with his life. Fitzgerald also gives the reader other cues, the most important of which is the famous image of the "valley of ashes," presided over by an optometrist's advertisement featuring the enormous eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. This haunting image, which opens the second chapter of the novel and is the setting for its climax, has sometimes been interpreted as a kind of modernist metaphor for the wasteland of humanity in a godless age. There's a mute quality to Eckleburg and the valley of ashes that makes them all the more unnerving, and at the same time a notion of divine judgment is not wholly absent.

There are also unmistakable allusions to Gatsby as a Christ-like figure as the novel approaches its climax: he's a man who dies for someone else's sins, at three in the afternoon, and has his true identity revealed three days later by his father. It is, of course, highly ironic that this pathetic fraud of a man, an unregenerate sinner, would be the

redeeming figure in the novel. But that's also what makes it all the more appropriate and satisfying.

There's also a mystical strain that runs through the novel. It's apparent, for example, at the point when Gatsby feels his dream is just about within his grasp, a moment when Nick makes some deeply suggestive remarks:

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever.

The problem with the American Dream, this passage implicitly suggests, is not exactly that it's corrupt or vain. Indeed, the great paradox of *The Great Gatsby* is that even as Gatsby pursues his dream through instruments of fraud and adultery there is a deeply compelling purity about his ambition, especially given the smug pieties of those around him (hence Nick's sincere pronouncement that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch of them put together"). Rather, the real problem is that any American Dream is finally too incomplete a vessel to contain longings that elude human expression or comprehension. We never reach the Coast we think we see.

Still we go on dreaming. Even those of us who have the means and desire to pursue their dreams finally have no power over what they happen to be: dreams usually come to us unbidden and are not typically practical or easy to achieve (otherwise they wouldn't be dreams). What makes the *American Dream* American is not that our dreams are any better, worse, or more interesting than anyone else's, but that we live in a country constituted of dreams, whose very justification continues to rest on it being a place where one can, for better and worse, pursue distant goals. This is something Fitzgerald understood very well. "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us," he writes in the soaring conclusion of the novel, his vision pulling back out to encompass the whole of American history all the way back to Dutch sailors—themselves seeking a west coast—who encountered a new world "commensurate with [their] capacity to wonder."



LOOKING BACK *F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1937. "I look at it—and think it is the most beautiful history in the world," Fitzgerald wrote of the nation's past at the end of his life, when he was living in Hollywood, burnishing the dreams of others. "It is the history of me and my people. And if I came here yesterday . . . I should still think so. It is the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream but the human dream." (Photo from the Van Vechten Collection of the Library of Congress)*

At the core of many American Dreams, especially the Dream of the Coast, is an insistence that history doesn't matter, that the future matters far more than the past. But history is in the end the most tangible thing we have, the source and solace for all our dreams. In his 1991 book *The True and Only Heaven*, the late historian and social critic Christopher Lasch suggests its role in sustaining a sense of hope essential to the American Dream:

Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. It derives from early memories—no doubt distorted, overlaid with later memories, and thus not wholly reliable as a guide to any factual reconstruction of past events—in which the experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge it. Such experience leaves as its residue the unshakable conviction, not that the past was better than the present, but that trust is never completely displaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointments.

Gatsby, like other strivers for the Dream of the Coast, lacked such an understanding of the past, seeing it only as an explanation for limits he would inevitably overcome. His creator had a more sophisticated view, though the tragic course of his subsequent life suggests that the past may have been more of a nostalgic refuge than a source of courage with which to confront his demons (alcohol, among others). "I look at it—and think it is the most beautiful history in the world," Fitzgerald wrote of American history at the end of his life, when he was living in Hollywood, burnishing the dreams of others as a largely unsuccessful screenwriter. "It is the history of me and my people. And if I came here yesterday . . . I should still think so. It is the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream but the human dream and if I came at the end of it that too is a place in the line of pioneers." But it was not the end. That will come, but it hasn't yet.

In the meantime we beat on, boats with the current, forced forward ceaselessly into the future.