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GONE WITH the WIND

by MARGARET MITCHELL

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With a preface by
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Preface

THE NOVEL *Gone With the Wind* shaped the South I grew up in more than any other book. For the most part, I was raised in a house without books, but the ones displayed and laid out flat for the inspection of visitors were the Bible and *Gone With the Wind*, in no particular order of importance. My mother bought countless numbers of the novel during my childhood to hand out as gifts or to replace the ones she read so frequently that they came apart in her hands. Few white Southerners, even today, can read this book without conjuring up a complex, tortured dreamscape of the South handed down by generations of relatives who grew up with the taste of defeat, like the bluing of gunmetal, still in their mouths. What Margaret Mitchell caught so perfectly was the sense of irredeemable loss and of a backwater Camelot corrupted by the mannerless intrusions of insensate invaders. The Tara invoked in the early chapters of this book is a mirror image of a Southern Utopia, a party at Twelve Oaks that might have gone on forever if the hot-blooded boys of the South could have stemmed the passions of secession and held their fire at Fort Sumter. It is the South as an occupied nation that forms the heart of this not impartial novel. This is *The Iliad* with a Southern accent, burning with the humiliation of Reconstruction. It is the song of the fallen, unregenerate Troy, the one sung in lower key by the women who had to pick up the pieces of a fractured society when their sons and husbands returned with their cause in their throats, when the final battle cry was sounded. It is the story of war told by the women who did not lose it and who refused to believe in its results, long after the occupation had begun. According to Margaret Mitchell, the Civil War destroyed a civilization of unsurpassable amenity, chivalry and grace. To Southerners like my mother, *Gone With the Wind* was not just a book, it was an answer, a clenched fist raised to the North, an anthem of defiance. If you could not defeat the Yankees on the battlefield, then by

God, one of your women could rise from the ashes of humiliation to write more powerfully than the enemy and all the historians and novelists who sang the praises of the Union. The novel was published in 1936 and it still stands as the last great posthumous victory of the Confederacy. It will long be a favorite book of any country that ever lost a war. It is still the most successful novel ever published in our republic.

Gone With the Wind is as controversial a novel as it is magnificent. Even during its publication year, when Margaret Mitchell won a Pulitzer Prize, the book attracted a glittering array of literary critics, including Malcolm Cowley and Bernard De Voto, who attacked the artistry and politics of the novel with a ferocity that continues to this day. Margaret Mitchell was a partisan of the first rank and there never has been a defense of the plantation South so implacable in its cold righteousness or its resolute belief that the wrong side had surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse. In this novel, the moral weight of the narrative is solidly and iconoclastically in line with the gospel according to the Confederate States. It stands in furious counterpoint to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that Margaret Mitchell ridicules on several occasions by scoffing at Stowe's famous scene of bloodhounds pursuing runaway slaves across ice floes.

Margaret Mitchell writes of the Confederacy as Paradise, as the ruined garden looked back upon by a stricken and exiled Eve, disconsolate with loss. If every nation deserves its own defense and its own day in the sunshine of literature, then Margaret Mitchell rose to the task of playing the avenging angel for the Confederate States. There have been hundreds of novels about the Civil War, but *Gone With the Wind* stands like an obelisk in the dead center of American letters casting its uneasy shadow over all of us. The novel hooked into the sweet-smelling attar that romance always lends to the cause of a shamed and defeated people. Millions of Southerners lamented the crushing defeat of the Southern armies, but only one had the talent to place that elegiac sense of dissolution on the white shoulders of the most irresistible, spiderous, seditious and wonderful of American heroines, Scarlett O'Hara.

Gone With the Wind is a war novel, a historical romance, a comedy of manners, a bitter lamentation, a cry of the heart and a long, cold-hearted look at the character of this one lovely, Machiavellian Southern woman. The book is sure-footed and beautifully constructed into fine, swiftly

moving parts and sixty-three chapters. Margaret Mitchell possessed a playwright's ear for dialogue and the reader never becomes confused as the hundreds of characters move in and out of scenes throughout the book. She grants each character the clear imprimatur of a unique and completely distinct voice. Once Miss Mitchell has limned the outlines of the main characters, they live completely and eternally in the imagination of the reader. She was born to be a novelist, but one of that rare, hybrid breed who bloom but once on the American landscape, then withdraw into their own interiors, having given voice to the one novel bursting along the seams of consciousness. Margaret Mitchell sings her own song of a land-proud, war-damaged South, and her voice is operatic, biblical, epic. Her genius lay in her choice of locale and point of focus and heroine. She leaves the great battlefields of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Bull Run and Antietam to the others and places the Civil War in the middle of Scarlett O'Hara's living room. She has the Northern cannons sounding beyond Peachtree Creek as Melanie Wilkes goes into labor, and has the city of Atlanta in flames as Scarlett is seized with an overpowering urge to return home that finds her moving down Peachtree Street with the world she grew up in turning to ash around her.

The novel begins and ends with Tara, but it is Scarlett herself who represents the unimaginable changes that the war has wrought on all Southerners. It was in Southern women that the deep hatred the war engendered came to nest for real in the years of Reconstruction. The women of the South became the only American women to know the hard truths of war firsthand. They went hungry just as their men did on the front lines in Virginia and Tennessee, they starved when these men failed to come home for four straight growing seasons, and hunger was an old story when the war finally ended. The men of Chancellorsville, Franklin and the Wilderness seemed to have left some residue of the fury on the smoking, blood-drenched fields in battles, whose very names became sacred in the retelling. But Southern women, forced to live with that defeat, had to build granaries around the heart to store the poisons that the glands of rage produced during that war and its aftermath. The Civil War still feels personal in the South, and what the women of the South brought to peacetime was Scarlett O'Hara's sharp memory of exactly what they had lost.

With the introduction of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, Miss Mitchell managed to create the two most famous lovers in the English-speaking world since Romeo and Juliet. Scarlett springs alive in the first sentence of the book and holds the narrative center for over a thousand pages. She is a fabulous, pixilated, one-of-a-kind creation, and she does not utter a dull line in the entire book. She makes her uncontrollable self-centeredness seem like the most charming thing in the world and one feels she would be more than a match for Anna Karenina, Lady Macbeth, or any of the women of Tennessee Williams. Her entire nature shines with the joy of being pretty and sought after and frivolous in the first chapters and we see her character darkening slowly throughout the book. She rises to meet challenge after challenge as the war destroys the entire world she was born into as a daughter of the South. Tara made her charming, but the war made her Scarlett O'Hara.

The cynicism of Rhett Butler is still breathtaking to read about, and his black-hearted, impudent humor resonates throughout the book. He serves as the clarifying eye in the midst of so much high-toned language speaking of the Cause and the Southern Way of Life. His is the first sounding of the New South, rising out of the chaos left in the passing of the old order. Yet in the arc of his character, it is Rhett and Rhett alone who seems to change most dramatically in this book. He, who never let an opportunity pass in order to mock the pieties and abstractions of Southern patriotism, joined the Confederate Army only when its defeat was certain. Rhett Butler, who profited greatly while blockade running, food speculating, and bankrolling prostitutes, turns out the softest of fathers, the most self-sacrificing of friends, the most flamboyant and ardent of lovers; yet it is his wounded masculinity that haunts the book as the secret toll the war took on the South. His one great flaw was making the terrible and exhilarating mistake of falling in love with Scarlett O'Hara.

Both Scarlett and Rhett are perfect representatives of the type of Southerner who prospered amidst the ruins of a conquered nation. They both collaborated with the occupying army, both prospered by embracing pragmatism and eschewing honor. Rhett and Scarlett are the two characters in the book who let you know what the South will become. Ashley Wilkes and Melanie Hamilton let you know what the South was and will never be again. The practicality of both Rhett and Scarlett make

them the spiritual parents of Atlanta. Born of fire, Atlanta was the first Southern city to fall in love with the party of hustle and progress. The burning of Atlanta increased the city's lack of roots and made it even more like Dayton than Charleston. Rhett and Scarlett were masterful at cutting deals and playing the percentages and not looking back, and they bequeathed these gifts to the reborn city itself.

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I owe a personal debt to this novel that I find almost beyond reckoning. I became a novelist because of *Gone With the Wind*, or more precisely, my mother raised me up to be a "Southern" novelist, with a strong emphasis on the word "Southern," because *Gone With the Wind* set my mother's imagination ablaze when she was a young girl growing up in Atlanta, and it was the one fire of her bruised, fragmented youth that never went out. I still wonder how my relationship with the language might be different had she spoon-fed me Faulkner or Proust or Joyce, but my mother was a country girl new to the city, one generation removed from the harsh reality of subsistence farming, and her passion for reading received its shaping thrust when *Gone With the Wind* moved its heavy artillery into Atlanta to fight its rearguard action against the judgment of history itself.

When my mother described the reaction of the city to the publication of this book, it was the first time I knew that literature had the power to change the world. It certainly changed my mother and the life she was meant to lead forever. She read the novel aloud to me when I was five years old, and it is from this introductory reading that I absorbed my first lessons in the authority of fiction. There is not a sentence in this book unfamiliar to me since my mother made a fetish of rereading it each year, and the lines of *Gone With the Wind* remain illustrated in gold leaf in whatever disfigured *Book of Kells* I carry around with me from my childhood. I can close my eyes today and still hear my mother's recitation of it in the same reverential voice she used when she read to me from the Story of Genesis. When she drove me to Sacred Heart School, she could point out areas where the two armies of the Americas clashed as we moved South along Peachtree Street. She would take me to the spot outside the Loew's Grand theater and show

me where she was standing in the crowd on the night that the movie premiered in Atlanta and she saw Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh and Margaret Mitchell enter the theater to great applause. Though she could not afford a ticket, she thought she owed the book the courtesy of standing among the crowd that night. Together, we visited the grave of Margaret Mitchell at Oakland Cemetery and my mother would say a decade of the rosary over her tombstone, then remark proudly that the novelist had been a Roman Catholic of Irish descent. On weekends, she would drive me to Stone Mountain to view the half-finished effigies of Southern Generals on horseback carved into the center of that massive granite outcropping, then off to Kennesaw Mountain and Peachtree Creek where she taught me the battle of Atlanta according to the gospel of Margaret Mitchell. My mother, during these visitations, taught me to hate William Tecumseh Sherman with my whole body and soul, and I did so with all the strength I could bring to the task of malice. He was the Northern General, presented as the embodiment of evil, who had burned the pretty city where I was born. My mother would drive me near the spot where Margaret Mitchell was struck down by a taxicab in 1949 and look toward the skyline at Five Points saying, "Could you imagine how beautiful Atlanta would be if Sherman had never been born?"

But the story of this novel and my mother goes deeper than mere literary rapport. I think that my mother, Frances Dorothy Peck, modeled her whole life on that of Scarlett O'Hara. I think that fiction itself became such a comfortable country for me because my mother treated the book as though it were a manual of etiquette whose *dramatis personae* she presented as blood relations and kissing cousins rather than as creations of one artist's imagination. She could set our whole world against this fictional backdrop with alarming ease. My mother, the willful, emotional beauty with just the right touch of treachery and flirtation, was Miss Scarlett herself. My father, the Marine Corps fighter pilot, flying off the deck of his aircraft carrier, dropping napalm on the enemy North Koreans an entire world away, played the role of the flashy, contemptuous Rhett Butler. My Aunt Helen was the spitting image of Melanie Wilkes, my mother would inform me as she prepared our evening meal, and my Aunt Evelyn acted just like Sue Ellen. My Uncle James could play the walk-in part for Charles Hamilton, and my Uncle Russ could be the stand-in for Frank Kennedy. My mother

could align our small universe precisely with that of *Gone With the Wind* and she could do it effortlessly while stirring the creamed corn. Once she had read the novel, it lived inside her the rest of her life, like a bright lamp she could always trust in the darkness.

Even my young and tenuous manhood was informed by lessons of instruction from her interpretation of the novel and she would fight about it with my father. "No matter what girls say," my mother would tell me, and this was a recurrent theme broached upon often, "they'd much rather marry a man like Ashley Wilkes than Rhett Butler."

"I hate Ashley Wilkes," my father would say. Literary criticism was not an art form conducted at a high level in my family, and I still do not believe my father ever read my mother's sacred text. "That guy's a pansy if I've ever seen one. Of course, Rhett Butler's a pansy compared to me."

My mother would sniff and say, "Your father's from Chicago. He doesn't even know what we're talking about."

Gone With the Wind presented my mother and people like her with a new sense of themselves. She hailed the book as the greatest book ever written or that ever would be written, a nonpareil that restored the South's sense of honor to itself after the unimaginable hours of war and occupation. I have come across legions of critics that deplored my mother's taste in fiction, but this was my mother and I was heir to that taste, for better or worse. My mother's hurt childhood had damaged something irreparable in her sense of self and I think she won it back by her obsessive identification with Scarlett O'Hara. My mother's family suffered grievously during the Depression, but Scarlett taught that one could be hungry and despairing, but not broken and not without resources, spiritual in nature, that precluded one from surrendering without a fight. When Scarlett swears to God after rooting around for that radish in the undone garden of Tara that she will never go hungry again, she was giving voice to every American who had suffered want and fear during the Hoover years. It was this same Scarlett who gave Southern women like my mother new insights into the secrecies and potentials of womanhood itself, not always apparent in that region of the country where the progress of women moves most slowly. *Gone With the Wind* tells the whole story of a lost society through the eyes of a single woman and that woman proves match enough for a world at war, an army of occupation, and every man who enters those sugared realms of

her attraction. Rarely has a heroine so immoral or unscrupulous as Scarlett O'Hara held the deed to center stage during the course of such a long novel.

Whenever the movie version was released again by MGM, my mother would march all her children to the local theater with a sense of religious anticipation. I remember that feeling of participating in some rite of sacred mystery when the movie began and my mother let herself be taken once again by this singular, canonical moment in Southern mythmaking. She would hum along when the theme from Tara began playing and she would weep at all the right places. I would observe my mother watching her heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, my mother mouthing the words as Scarlett spoke them to Ashley, to Rhett, to Melanie, to the Yankee interloper who desecrated the sanctuary of Tara, and I would be thinking what I think now —that my mother was as pretty as Scarlett O'Hara, that she had modeled herself completely on this fictional creation and had done so as an act of sheer will and homage. I would wonder if anyone else in the theater could see what was perfectly obvious to me—that this movie belonged to my mother; that it was the site of her own invention of herself, the place where she came to revive her own deepest dream of her lost girlhood. The movie version of *Gone With the Wind,* like the book, was a house of worship my mother retired to so she could experience again the spiritual refreshment of art.

Yet it is as a work of art that *Gone With the Wind* has been most suspect. From the beginning, the book has endured the incoming fire of some of the nation's best critics. It is a book of Dickensian power, written after the dawn of the age of *Ulysses*. Its vigorous defense of the Confederacy was published three years before the German panzer divisions rolled across the borders of Poland. In the structure of Margaret Mitchell's perfect society, slavery was an essential part of the unity and harmony of Southern life before Fort Sumter. No black man or woman can read this book and be sorry that this particular wind has gone. The Ku Klux Klan plays the same romanticized role it had in *Birth of a Nation* and appears to be a benign combination of the Elks Club and a men's equestrian society. Liberal critics took the novel apart from the beginning, then watched as it proceeded to become the best-selling book in American history. Its flaws may have

doomed a lesser book, but this one rode out into literary history with Rhett and Scarlett in complete command of the carriage.

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Literature often has a soft spot for the lost cause. Defeat lends an air of tragedy and nostalgia that the victors find unnecessary. But history will forgive almost anything, except being out-written. None can explain the devotion that *Gone With the Wind* has inspired from one generation to another, but one cannot let this ardor go unremarked upon either. Because its readers have held it in such high esteem, it has cheapened the book's reputation as a work of art. Democracy works because of the will of the people, but it has the opposite effect when scholars begin to call out those books that make up the canon of our nation's literature. *Gone With the Wind* has outlived a legion of critics and will bury another whole set of them after this century closes.

Gone With the Wind works because it possesses the inexpressible magic where the art of pure storytelling rises above its ancient use and succeeds in explaining to a whole nation how it came to be this way. There has never been a reader or a writer who could figure out why this happens only to very few books. It involves all the eerie mysteries of enchantment itself, the strange untouchable wizardry that occurs when a story, in all its fragile elegance, speaks to the times in a clear, original voice and answers some strange hungers and demands of the Zeitgeist. I know of no other thousand-page book that reads so swiftly and grants such pleasure. The characters are wonderful, and the story moves with swiftness and bright, inexorable power. The novel allows you to lose yourself in the glorious pleasures of reading itself, when all five senses ignite in the sheer happiness of narrative. The Civil War and its aftermath may not have felt like this at all, but it sure seems that way when one gets carried away in the irresistible tumult and surge of *Gone With the Wind*. This book caught the imagination of Americans and the world as few books ever have or ever will. It demonstrates again and again that there is no passion more rewarding than reading itself, that it remains the best way to dream and to feel the sheer carnal joy of being fully and openly alive.

Gone With the Wind is a book with many flaws, but it cannot, even now, be easily put down. The book still glows and quivers with life. American letters will always be tiptoeing nervously around that room where Scarlett O'Hara dresses for the party at Twelve Oaks as the War Between the States begins to inch its way toward Tara.

—PAT CONROY