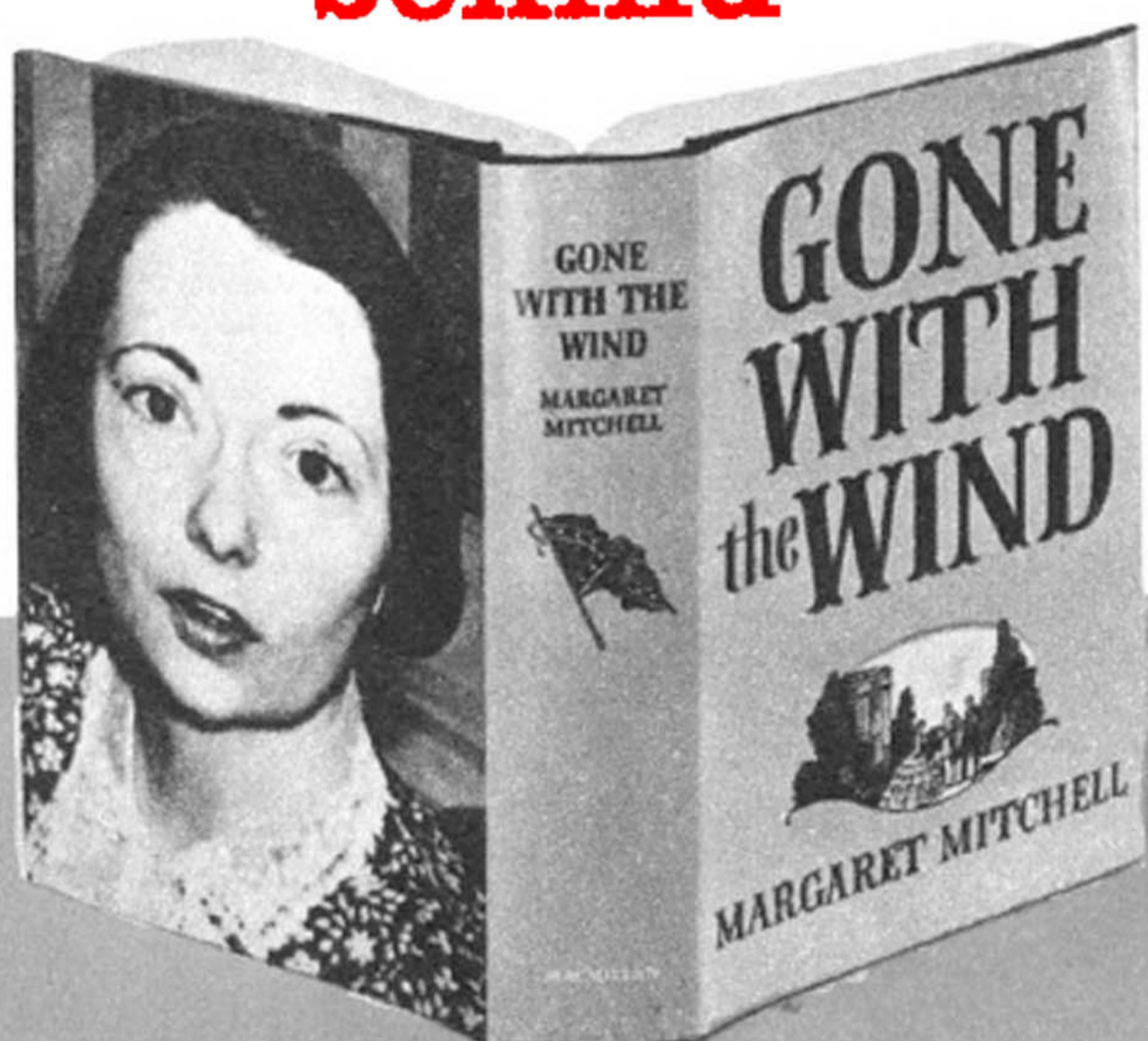


Shy Margaret Mitchell wrote her novel just to please her husband. But she hated what it did to her life—to the very day of her tragic end

## The strange story behind



By ACTOR CORDELL JR.

**ONE DAY IN 1926**, a four foot 11 inch, 26-year-old Atlanta housewife named Peggy Marsh, her foot in a cast from an ankle injury, hobbled to a typewriter in the dim little apartment she and her husband John called “The Dump”. Slowly, uncertainly, she began to hammer out a 1,037-page novel about the Civil War. Previously, magazines had rejected her short stories, and she had given up on a novel about the Jazz Age, but she knew that another stab at fiction would please John, who had more faith in her writing ability than she had. ● Ten years later, in 1936, when her book was finally published, Peggy Marsh became well-known to the world by her pen name -Margaret Mitchell- and her novel, *Gone With The Wind*, broke all records by selling 1,376,000 copies in one year. When she died in 1949, The *Washington Post* said: “If there is any quantitative measure of success in literature, Margaret Mitchell ... was the greatest author of her generation and perhaps the 20th Century.” Today, *Gone With Wind* is printed in 26 languages, with sales

totaling 9,839,144 copies. Only Erskine Caldwell's earthly novel, *God's Little Acre*, with over 10,000,000 copies sold, tops it as modern fiction's best seller. And two years ago, when Soviet Premier Khrushchev and his family visited the U.S., Mrs. Khrushchev revealed that she had read *Gone With The Wind* - three times. ● The 1939 movie version of *Gone With The Wind* - quickly abbreviated to GWTW - has been shown in every nation outside the Iron Curtain and, with a gross of \$115,000,000, is the biggest money-maker in film history. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the War Between the States, Georgia's Civil War Centennial Commission will stage a second "World Premiere" of the movie in Atlanta on March 10. ● Today, in a small unpretentious office in the Peachtree Building in downtown Atlanta, Margaret Baugh, who served as Miss Mitchell's friend and secretary for sixteen years, still keeps tabs on the profitable adventures of GWTW's hero and heroine, Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara. Her employer is Miss Mitchell's brother, attorney Stephens Mitchell, who inherited the rights to GWTW in 1952.

Of all the amazing facets of *Gone With the Wind*, none is more paradoxical than the career of the woman who created it. Fame was something Margaret Mitchell suffered more than she enjoyed. Amid all the wealth that GWTW brought (she left an estate in excess of \$250,000), she and her husband, childless, lived in a modest apartment and gave huge sums to charity. There is still disagreement over what kind of person she really was. Atlantans remember her as a quiet, simply dressed woman—a modern counterpart of Melanie Wilkes, one of GWTW's ill-fated heroines. But close friends describe her as more of a high-spirited, outspoken Scarlett O'Hara—a comparison she hated.



Margaret worked as a reporter until she hurt her leg in 1926. Then only an event like 1939 première of *GWTW* (right) could lure her out of seclusion.

*Scarlett*, she always said, was more a hussy than a heroine.

What was the real origin of *Gone With the Wind*? Margaret Mitchell referred to a simple incident in her childhood. One afternoon, her mother took her on a buggy ride through the countryside around Atlanta, showing her once-proud plantation homes that still stood in crumbling shame from the Civil War, and others that were symbols of revival and progress. The impression never left her. *Gone With the Wind*, she said, was the story of Georgians who survived, and those who didn't.

Born on November 8, 1900, Margaret Munnerlyn Mitchell was the daughter of attorney Eugene Muse Mitchell and Maybelle Stephens Mitchell. "I chose the Civil War period to write about because I was raised on it," she once said. "As a child, I heard everything about it except that the Confederacy lost." During adolescence, she wrote plays which the neighborhood children would act out in the living room of the Mitchell home. When her brother Steve would criticize her style, she would retort, "The story is all that matters! Any good plot can stand retelling and style doesn't matter." A tomboy, she hurt her left leg twice during her youth in spills from horses—injuries which later proved to be of tremendous consequence.

When her mother died in 1919, 90-pound Peggy quit Smith College



**Atlanta children decked grave with flowers after Miss Mitchell's death in 1949. Tourists still gape at the headstone, which bears her married name: Marsh.**

in her sophomore year to keep house for her father and brother. And in 1922, she was married to a North Carolinian named Berrien K. Upshaw. The marriage fell apart after a few months, however, and shortly before Christmas of 1922, Margaret went to work as a \$25-a-week reporter on *The Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine*.

"Peggy wasn't arresting in appearance," recalls one Atlanta newsman. "You wouldn't notice her in any gathering unless she was in the middle of it—which was often the case—telling some yarn with a lot of animation and drawl. Sometimes she was extremely shy, sometimes very gay; she liked parties and dancing and newspaper people. I guess her biggest dislike was 'big shots'."

In 1924, though brought up as a Catholic, she obtained a divorce from Upshaw, and less than a year later was married to John Marsh. Oddly, Marsh had been best man at her first wedding.

In 1926, Margaret severely sprained an ankle already weakened by her childhood horseback riding accidents. She quit her job and for three years limped around on crutches. At first, she simply read voraciously. Finally, responding to her husband's constant prodding, she went to work on her own novel.

*Gone With the Wind* was remarkable even in the way it was written. First, she wrote the last

chapter—the breakup of Scarlett and Rhett—then any chapter she happened to be in the mood for, placing each in a separate manila envelope. Eventually, the sequences were fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. The battles and geography of the Civil War were so familiar to her that she generally wrote without research, attired in an old pair of John's trousers and shirt. Often when friends would drop by, they'd catch her hastily tucking typed pages beneath sofa cushions. The manuscript was a private matter, shared only with John, who would read her work critically and try to put himself in the shoes of heroes Ashley Wilkes or Rhett Butler.

By 1930, the manuscript had been put aside, however, and for the next five years, John Marsh recalled, "She worked on it only now and then." But Harold Latham of The Macmillan Co., a publishing firm, heard of her novel when he came to Atlanta in 1935, searching for new writing talent. Astonished when Latham approached her, Margaret told him, "No, I have no novel." The next day, however, her husband persuaded her to bring the manuscript to Latham's hotel. "It's incomplete and unrevised," she said uneasily. "I had no idea of letting you or any publisher see it." The manila envelopes bore coffee stains, scribbled grocery lists and recipes.

After its acceptance by Macmillan, she rewrote her manuscript for six months, filling in gaps that required heavy research and combing every detail for historical accuracy. Seventy rewrites were done on the first chapter and 20 on many others, but when the final draft went to the publisher, it bore no title. Later, Margaret ran across this line in Ernest Dowson's poem, "Cynara": "I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind." That, she decided, was the perfect title.

Strangely, all that remains of the original GWTW manuscript are a

few pages in an Atlanta bank vault. It was her great love of privacy, her husband explained, that prompted him to burn the bulk of it soon after her death, preserving the small portion, with rewrites and edited proofs, as perpetual proof of her authorship.

GWTW was, in the main, greeted enthusiastically by the critics. "For sheer readability, it is surpassed by nothing in American literature," said *The New York Times*. "One of the great novels of our time," said the *Chicago Daily News*. Twenty-six days after publication, David O. Selznick paid \$50,000 for the screen rights. (Later, he paid an additional, undisclosed sum.)

The projected movie version of GWTW created a public controversy over who would play the leads. Margaret Mitchell couldn't have cared less. In 1938, she told reporters: "I'll have nothing to do with it! My tastes run to Donald Duck and the four Marx Brothers, none of whom, I believe, could effectively portray Scarlett or Rhett."

GWTW made its screen debut on December 15, 1939, with Vivien Leigh as Scarlett and the late Clark Gable playing Rhett. Miss Leigh, a virtual unknown, was chosen over 1,400 candidates, while Gable had to be talked into taking what since became his favorite role. No movie up to that time ever had cost so much (\$4,200,000) or run so long (three hours, 42 minutes).

Margaret Mitchell never got a chance to write again, although she wanted to do a play, drawn from her experience, about what fame does to a couple who want to live quietly. Repeatedly, she denied she was afraid to write because nothing could equal GWTW. During World War II, she worked as devotedly for the U.S. as Melanie and Scarlett had for the Confederacy, overcoming stage fright to make speeches at bond rallies, rolling bandages for the Red Cross, serving as an air raid warden and an-

swering letters from war-oppressed readers. She grew so weary of public acclaim that she seldom posed for pictures for fear of being more easily recognized.

In 1948, when GWTW played a return engagement at a neighborhood theater, she and her husband were turned away at the door when the manager refused to admit them because the picture had already started.

On August 11, 1949, she and John—a semi-invalid since a 1945 heart attack—were crossing Peachtree Street in the early evening, bound for a movie theater. Out of the dusk careened a car driven by an off-duty taxi driver. It struck Margaret Mitchell and she died five days later, never fully regaining consciousness. Her husband escaped unhurt but died in 1952.

The characters and locale of GWTW still cause intense curiosity. Years ago, it was believed that, Tara, Scarlett O'Hara's plantation home, was patterned after a mansion in Clayton County, on the outskirts of Atlanta. "I made Tara up," retorted Miss Mitchell, "just as I made up every character in the book. But nobody will believe me."

Still, tourists come to Georgia in search of some vestige of Scarlett's home. Last year, an Atlanta corporation purchased the GWTW movie set—a Hollywood landmark—and brought it to Georgia, to be used in the construction of a Tara tourist attraction. The State of Georgia also may build a GWTW memorial at Stone Mountain State Park near Atlanta, but neither project is close to fruition.

Publishers have offered as much as \$250,000 for the right to do a sequel to *Gone With the Wind*, resolving the on-and-off romance of Scarlett and Rhett. But Stephens Mitchell will not hear of it. "Scarlett and Rhett must be left the way Margaret left them," he says. "She always said she hadn't the slightest

*Margaret Mitchell*

idea of what became of them after their breakup. She wrote what she felt was the only possible ending." However, David O. Selznick contemplates producing a Broadway musical version.

Even in death, Margaret Mitchell could not achieve the privacy she longed for in life. Caretakers at Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery say tourists gawk at her grave almost every day. "They come from practically all parts of the world," says one attendant. "They expect to see a great shrine, and all they find is a simple stone." Which is the way Margaret Mitchell wanted it.

