Du Bois lived and worked within a few miles of each other for decades, I don't know if the two ever met. As much as anyone on the planet, Grant was Du Bois's natural enemy. Grant favored a certain type of white man over all other kinds of humans, on a graded scale of disapproval, and he reserved his vilest ill wishes and contempt for blacks.

As Du Bois would have remembered, in 1906 the zoo put an African man named Ota Benga on display in the primate cages. Ota Benga belonged to a tribe of Pygmies whom the Belgians had slaughtered in the Congo. A traveller had brought him to New York and to the zoo, where huge crowds came to stare and jeer. A group of black Baptist ministers went to the mayor and demanded that the travesty be stopped. The mayor's office referred them to Grant, who put them off. He later said that it was important for the zoo not to give even the appearance of having yielded to the ministers' demand. Eventually, Ota Benga was moved to the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, in Brooklyn, and he ended up in Virginia, where he shot himself.

Madison Grant was someone who preferred to stay in the background and pull strings; but because of history, both past and present, he is not in the background anymore. Like other men of his social set—Teddy Roosevelt and Henry Fairfield Osborn, a president of the American Museum of Natural History, to name two—Grant adored nature, which to his milieu meant the North American continent, minus its original native population and reconstituted as a hunting preserve and contemplative retreat for themselves. Grant and others founded the conservation movement in America. They helped to save the buffalo. When the herds on the Great Plains had been almost destroyed, a new herd was started in Oklahoma, with animals shipped by rail from the zoo. Today, of the thousands of buffalo on the plains, many have distant relatives in the Bronx; the force behind the reintroduction was the American Bison Society, of which Grant was a principal member.

That was the “better” Grant. But, like a character in a comic book who harbors an inner arch-villain with a plan to destroy the universe, Grant had another side. Just as he feared that certain species of native wildlife would go extinct,
he feared that the same would happen to a precious (and largely imaginary) kind of white person. To address this potential disaster, in 1916 he published what remains his best-known book, “The Passing of the Great Race; or, the Racial Basis of European History.” A centenary edition is available online.

To return for a moment to the “better” Grant: starting in 1906, he headed the commission that built the Bronx River Parkway. The commission bought up property along the river valley and created a landscaped autoroute leading to the headwaters in Westchester County. The project became a model for other parkways in the city and beyond.

In an oak grove overlooking the river is a flagpole with a plaque honoring “the founder of the Bronx River Parkway.” But the honoree is William White Niles, another commission member. There is no memorial devoted to Grant anywhere along the parkway; nor are there any public monuments to Grant at the zoo. In the borough where he did a lot for New York’s civic improvement, nothing is named for Madison Grant.

“The Passing of the Great Race” is probably why. It became one of the most famous racist books ever written, and today it's considered part of a modern genre that began with Arthur de Gobineau’s “The Inequality of Human Races,” published in 1853-55. Hitler read “The Passing of the Great Race” in translation, admired what Grant had to say about the great “Nordic race,” and wrote the author a fan letter, calling the book “my Bible.” Grant took pride in the Nazis’ use of his book and sent them copies of a subsequent one, about how American Nordics like himself had conquered North America. He also was a director of the American Eugenics Society, thinking “worthless” individuals should be sterilized, and considered his lobbying for the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, which shut down most immigration to the U.S., to be one of the great achievements of his life.

The preposterousness of “The Passing of the Great Race” approaches the sublime. To summarize: according to Grant, all of Western civilization was reared by a race of tall, blond, warlike people who ventured down from Northern Europe every so often to help start great cultures, such as ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, before retiring into their northern forests. Over time, a lot of these Nordics became “mongrelized” by mixing with “inferior races” (Grant’s books cannot be described without the use of many quotation marks), or else they killed one another off in interregnum wars because of their bravery and their love of fighting, as they were doing at that very moment in the Great War. By Grant’s reckoning, the greatest man in Western history had been Nordics. Among the stars he claimed for the team, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Dante all clearly possessed Nordic blood, as he had determined by careful study of the shapes of their heads in busts.

He wrote that a major problem leading to Nordic “mongrelization” was the uncooperative Nordic women, who had a habit of choosing the wrong men to mate with. Grant himself never married. He conceded, with regret, “It would be in a democracy, a virtual impossibility to limit by law the right to breed to a privileged and chosen few.”

And what was the special attribute the Nordics possessed that made them so unique and sacred? Grant didn’t talk about it much, but it slipped out once in a while. The secret dwelt in a mysterious substance known as “germ-plasm.” Everybody had it, but the Nordics’ germ-plasm was the best. Grant and his co-believers could apparently use phrases such as “our superior germ-plasm” with a straight face.

Grant often popped up in the news. He had a bald head, white sideburns, and a mustache that spread widely on either side of his face. The social pages followed his comings and goings, when he summere in Bar Harbor and wintered in Boca Raton. New York society either did not know what he had written (and said, and done) or did not care, or it agreed with him.

He died in 1937. Soon the war put his love of the Nazis in a new light, and years of almost no public mention followed. But, as dependable old hatreds are rising up again, Grant has become more current. An excellent and unsparing biography, “Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant,” by Jonathan Peter Spiro, came out in 2009. (Grant was the first person to use the term “master race” in a modern context.) And earlier this year Daniel Okrent published “The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America,” which skillfully describes Grant’s and his pals’ nativist maneuverings. Okrent notes that Charles Scribner’s Sons published Grant’s major books and others by authors of similar leanings. At the same time that Scribner published Hemingway and Fitzgerald, it was the leading purveyor of white-supremacist books in America.

In March, 1929, the Chicago Forum Council, a cultural organization that included white and black members, announced the presentation of “One of the Greatest Debates Ever Held.” According to the Forum’s advertisement, the debate was to take place on Sunday, March 17th, at 3 P.M., in a large hall on South Wabash Avenue. The topic was “Shall the Negro Be Encouraged to Seek Cultural Equality?”

In smaller letters, the ad asked, “Has the Negro the Same Intellectual Possibilities As Other Races?” and below that the answer “Yes!” appeared with a photograph of Du Bois, who would be arguing the affirmative. Alongside the answer “No!” was a photograph of Lothrop Stoddard, a writer, who would argue the negative. In the picture, Stoddard projects a roguish, matinée-idol aura, with slicked-down hair and a black mustache. The ad identified him as a “vastly popularizer of certain theories on race problems” who had been “spreading alarm among white Nordics.”

The Forum Council did not oversell its claim. The Du Bois-Stoddard debate turned out to be a singular event, as important in its way as Lincoln-Douglas or Kennedy-Nixon. The reason more people don’t know about it may be its asymmetry. The other historic match-ups featured rivals who disagreed politically but wouldn’t have disputed their opponent’s right to exist. Stoddard had written that “mulattoes” like Du Bois, who could not accept their inferior status, were the chief cause of racial unrest in the United States, and he looked forward to their dying out.

Du Bois’s life has been chronicled definitively in David Levering Lewis’s biography, and Grant now has a biographer, but nobody has written a
biography of Stoddard. One does exist of Stoddard’s father, John Lawson Stod-
dard, the world traveller who became
one of the most successful public speak-
ers of his day. Stoddard’s mother di-
vorced his father for abandonment when
Stoddard was a teen-ager. Later, Stod-
dard, Sr., in his villa in the Tyrol, en-
listed an admiral to write the story of his
life, and when the biography came out it did not mention that
he had a son.

The Forum ad got it right—Stoddard was a “ver-
satile popularizer.” As Hux-
ley was to Darwin, so Stod-
dard was to Madison Grant.
You can almost, but not re-
ally, feel sorry for the fa-
ther-deprived young writer who
found a hero in the wealthy older racist. Stod-
dard grew up in Brookline, Massachu-
setts, attended Harvard like Stoddards be-
fore him, and got a Ph.D. in history.
In the course of thirty-six years, he wrote
at least eighteen books and countless
magazine and newspaper articles. He al-
ways had to hustle. Basically, he was a
freelance writer. His first book, “The
French Revolution in San Domingo,”
came out in 1914, and he dedicated it to
his mother. In it, he discovered what
would become his most successful writ-
ing strategies: scaring the reader with
the specter of race war, and scaring the
Nordic reader with the prospect of los-
ing a race war, as Stoddard interpreted
what had happened to the Frenchmen
in San Domingo (Haiti). There, as in
later Stoddard imaginings, the villains
were “mulattoes.” They became inflamed
by the French Revolution, and then in-
flamed their fellow-blacks.

For Stoddard, the pivotal event of
recent history was the Russo-Japanese
War. By his reckoning, the defeat of a
“white” country (Russia) by a “colored”
country (Japan) in 1905 had opened the
door to disaster. At some point after his
Haiti book came out, he read “The Pass-
ing of the Great Race,” and it changed
his life. Combining Grant’s view of the
besieged and noble Nordics with his
own ideas about nonwhite peoples, he
predicted an imminent worldwide up-
rising against the “Nordic race.” “The
Rising Tide of Color Against White
World-Supremacy” appeared in early
1920. Grant wrote the introduction.
The book was an instant hit. Review-
ers noticed it favorably. Franz Boas, the
anthropologist, panned it, but the Times
wrote an approving editorial:

Lothrop Stoddard evokes a new peril, that
of an eventual submergence beneath vast waves
of yellow men, brown men, black men and red
men, whom the Nordics have hitherto domi-
nated . . . with Bolshevism menacing us on
the one hand and race extinction through warfare on the other,
many people are not unlikely to
give [Stoddard’s book] consider-

In a speech outdoors be-
fore more than a hundred
thousand people, black and
white, in Birmingham, Al-
abama, in 1921, President
Warren G. Harding declared
that blacks must have full
economic and political rights, but
that segregation was also essential to prevent
“racial amalgamation,” and social equal-
ity was thus a dream that blacks must
give up. Harding added:

Whoever will take the time to read and
ponder Mr. Lothrop Stoddard’s book on “The
Rising Tide of Color” . . . must realize that
our race problem here in the United States is
not just a phase of a race issue that the whole
world confronts.
The plug must have sold more than a few
books for Stoddard.

Black people as well as white read
“The Rising Tide of Color.” Black news-
papers called him “the high priest of ra-
cial baloney” and “the unbearable Lo-
throp Stoddard.” A black columnist
wrote that the news of the white race’s
impending demise would probably come
as a surprise to Negroes in the South.
And Stoddard’s statistic, that the “col-
ored races” outnumbered whites, did not
alarm the black demographic. “The New
Book by a White Author Shows Ris-
ing Tide of Color Against Oppression;
Latest Statistics Show Twice As Many
Colored People in the World As White,”
an optimistic headline in the Baltimore
Afro-American said.

Stoddard, in the fog of his apocalyp-
tic musings, made some predictions. He
said that Japan was going to expand its
influence in the Pacific and get into
conflict with the United States, that the
brown people of India would throw the
British out, and that the Islamic world
would grow militant and begin hostil-
ities against the West. Whatever his
philosophy and methods, his guesses
sometimes proved out.

Stoddard was also more talkative
than his mentor on the subject of the
Nordic race’s secret sauce. In “The Re-
volt Against Civilization: The Menace
of the Under Man,” a follow-up to “The
Rising Tide of Color,” he explained:

The new individual consists, from the start,
of two sorts of plasm. Almost the whole
of him is body-plasm—the ever-multiplying cells
which differentiate into the organs of the body.
But he also contains germ-plasm. At his very
conception a tiny bit of the life stuff from
which he springs is set aside, is carefully iso-
lated from the body-plasm, and follows a course
of development entirely its own. In fact, the
geru-plasm is not really part of the individ-
ual; he is merely its bearer, destined to pass it
on to other bearers of the life chain.

This was the person whom Du Bois
would debate, and try to prove that a
black person could be the equal of.

At the time of the debate, Du Bois
had just turned sixty-one. He had
already written “The Souls of Black Folk,”
helped to found the N.A.A.C.P., or-
ganized and led Pan-African conferences,
and gained tens of thousands of readers
for The Crisis, the N.A.A.C.P.’s magazine,
which he edited and frequently contrib-
uted to. Like Stoddard, he had a Ph.D. in
history from Harvard. He wore a more
modest mustache, stood barely five feet
six, and smoked Benson & Hedges cig-
arettes. Despite being often on the road
and under plenty of stress, he lived for
thirty-four more years.

Stoddard admitted to reading Du
Bois’s books, and once went so far as to
tell that he treasured them in his library.
He seems to have taken a kind of neg-
ative inspiration from Du Bois. On
the first page of “The Souls of Black Folk,”
published in 1903, Du Bois wrote,
“The problem of the Twentieth Cen-
tury is the problem of the color line.”
On page 1 of “The French Revolution
in San Domingo,” Stoddard wrote, in
1914, “The ‘conflict of color’ . . . bids fair
to be the fundamental problem of the
twentieth century.” In “The Rising Tide
of Color,” he cites Du Bois, to the effect
that the colored peoples of the world
are getting tired of white domination
and will soon rise up.

The Chicago debate happened in this