

Perfidious Family: Like Father, Like Sons

By Mark Y. Herring

The Last Brother, by Joe McGinniss, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) 626 pages.

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In light of all the books that have fulgurated their sparks over the last two years on the Kennedy family, some tribute should be paid to those who forewarned us long ago. So here's a partial payment.

Before we had such books like *A Question of Character*, by Thomas Reeves or *Reckless Youth*, by Nigel Hamilton, a handful of individuals were working overtime trying to prevent the approaching massacre of public morals the Kennedy family was about to make on a naïve citizenry. One such individual was a woman who would later become my mother-in-law. This woman worked tirelessly to combat the myth the press had already engendered in fawning accolades on the family that would befriend racketeers, the Mafioso, gun-runners, and a whole unheavenly host of other rounders that eventually funded the Kennedy multi-million dollar empire. It's hard for those of us living in this hour to understand what a challenge this was. During an age when the mainstream press still had something resembling a good reputation, people like my mother-in-law pleaded with individuals not to believe everything they read in newspapers. Of course she was branded by some as a fool, by others as a barbarian.

People like her fought hard to get Nixon elected, using her children to man telephones and stuff envelopes. She called friends, neighbors, relatives and acquaintances. Bear in mind that people like her did this when local newspapers were virtually onanistic about the Kennedy family in general, and in a white hot lust about Jack in particular. She must have appeared not only un-American but also myopic in the extreme. A treasure trove of debt must be paid to people like her by my generation. We, long-haired know-it-alls, were most fooled by the sweet-talking Kennedys and the legendary Kennedy family. We believed every bit of the nonsense that Theodore White and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. fabricated, lapping it up like so many fawning lap dogs. Today, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to men and women like my mother-in-law. It is they who kept the small flames—pilot lights, really—going until scholars could finally get at the truth. Had their persistence not been so strong, their intransigence of faith so unshakable, it is unthinkable

that scholars would ever have reexamined the myth that is the Kennedy family as quickly as they did. Their flashes of light drew the attention of scholars who finally probed the feet of the Kennedys long enough to discover them to be clay from the toes up. Thanks R.L., and to all those like you!

So, another book about the Kennedys arrives, this one on Edward M., the “fat, awkward” last son of the Kennedy patriarch. What is interesting is that Teddy, as he is fondly called, is often thought of as the odd man out in the Kennedy clan, the other three sons having used up all the Kennedy magic. But the arch-image that was Joe Sr. never had Prospero's touch. He really didn't even have the Midas touch. Rather, his touch was mortmain, and the dead hand he laid upon all his sons has been caricatured in Teddy. Teddy has proven to be all three of the other sons wrapped up in one: womanizer, liar, cheat, dipsomaniac and adulterer. Teddy is nothing more, or less, than all the Kennedys ever were: an overly ambitious son of an overweening family who would stop at nothing—literally nothing—to achieve the phantasmagoria set by father Caliban himself.

Everything is here, from Teddy's early womanizing, his cheating at Harvard, his vigorous and often merciless campaigning, to his pathetic and tragic, yet often comical, dipsomania. The fatal Chappaquiddick drive is also here. But the book is as much about Jack's presidency and assassination and Bobby's failed presidential campaign and assassination, as it is about Teddy's maladroitness. One cannot help feeling genuine sorrow for a family that endures so many hardships: Joe Jr.'s death, Jack and Bobby's assassinations, and the horror that was life as a Kennedy wife. But one cannot also help feeling that this is a case retributive justice. A family that makes its bed among thieves and murderers cannot really be shocked and surprised when it is robbed and murdered.

McGinniss does not cover much that is not also found in previously reviewed books. Indeed, one could say that McGinniss does not cover *anything* that was not also covered by those volumes, but more on that later. Here's the short refresher on Teddy's sad but true life as told in *The Last Brother*.

McGinniss opens his biography on Teddy with a recapitulation of Jack assassination. Oddly enough, McGinniss misses the time by ten minutes, placing the shot at 12:40 instead of 12:30. This may be considered by some mere cavilling over the curious, but why bring it up if you're going to get it wrong?

More than fifty pages are devoted to Teddy's disorientation after the assassination. Much is made about how Teddy walked aimlessly from one place to another, standing outside his office until finally picked up by a Hill driver who happened by. Paragraphs without end are added about how the telephones went out that day in Washington and how everyone, even LBJ, thought it might be a conspiracy. But much is added and padded here and there that could not possibly have been known to anyone but Teddy. That is, in order to footnote it, you'd have to reference Teddy's forehead, and here the reader begins to get a sinking feeling about the content of this book.

From this point the story picks up. Teddy goes to the President's funeral, but fails to bring the proper trousers. He has to have a pair of his brother's pants let out for him to wear because he's too big for them. Here's how McGinniss tells the story:

No one would appear. The doors to the White House would stay closed. Everyone in the world would wonder why. And the answer would be because Teddy didn't have a pair of pants.... He looked ridiculous in his dress shirt and tie, with his socks pulled up high on his bulky calves and the long coat of his rented morning suit—rented by stupid Joey Gargan!—hanging down below his boxer shorts. Finally Bobby summoned Jack's valet.... But Teddy's waistline, even then, was considerably larger than Jack's. [The valet] measured Teddy's waist.... Within minutes -- remarkably few considering the circumstances—he reappeared bearing Jack's inaugural pants, the waist newly and considerably enlarged.... Teddy walk[ed] stiffly down the steps, no doubt praying that Jack's pants would not rip....

What readers should come away with is, no doubt, Teddy's agony that he could not fit into his brother's pants, fill his brother's shoes. But how do we know this was what Teddy was thinking?

From there we see Teddy in grade school, failing both English and Geography, and doing equally poorly in high school. But, oddly enough, he is accepted into Harvard (money does talk, and very loudly) but cheats on a final exam in Spanish. In the Kennedy world of morals and manners, this is only bad if you get caught. Teddy got caught and also got kicked out. McGinniss tells how Ted mangled the story, but with people like Arthur Krock, Joe Sr.'s advance man for lies, and the pandering *Boston Globe*, Ted really had nothing to worry about.

Teddy's various campaigns are detailed, his father's ties with the Mafia related, his (as well as that of his father's and his brothers') own womanizing retold, and the family's rather dysfunctional parenting unfolded. Rosemary, we are told, was lobotomized by Joe Sr. for reasons that are never fully explained. Rose, when told that Joe Sr. has probably had a severe stroke, responds with what seems like vengeful justice: she goes to play golf. Joe Sr. is taken to the hospital *after* she returns, at which point she takes her consuetudinary afternoon swim because she is, after all, no nurse. We also learn what palavering virtually every acquaintance must sink to in order to be accepted into the family circle. It is, of course, intelligent palavering, but palavering nonetheless. *The Boston Globe* figures largely into all these goings-on, but only as the family's personal newspaper, ever-ready with the kind word, the right spin on tragic affairs.

So far, nothing that is retold here has not already been told elsewhere, and told better. Why then the hue and cry this book created? When I first heard all the brouhaha about the book, I thought it had to be good. If the Kennedy family hated it, it must be the sort of thing we all needed to read. And not only the Kennedys' hated it, but all, literally all, of the left-leaning journalistic establishment seethed over it. Why would such a book, with

at least as much scholarship to boast of as Kitty Kelley's "biographies" create such a tempest? The benighted Kitty was virtually knighted for her efforts. Why jump on McGinniss? At least, why jump on him for *this* book. His *The Selling of the President* was something of a hatchet job that was universally loved by the same people. That book was about Nixon, I thought, and this one about the beloved Kennedys—that must be the reason!

So I went to the book with great expectations. I wanted to like it, to recommend it to everyone. It is a veritable *vade mecum* to the Kennedy horrors, from Joe Sr.'s stealing and Nazi-sympathizing to the first election the family purchased to its last. Here was another bullet, not silver exactly, but certainly damaging.

Having read the book, however, I must tell you that it is destined, or rather should be, for the dustbin. This book is really not worth the paper it's printed on. It is not the worst book I've ever read, or the worst written, as Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* said, and I do not feel the least bit of contempt or hatred for McGinniss for doing so perfectly an inadmissible job. What mars the book are two things. First, the writing is awful, even for a best-seller specialist like McGinniss. Second, there are the far more egregious errors of padding, embellishments, and suppositions along with some simply wild speculations that McGinniss passes off as history.

First, the bad writing. Consider these extracts:

I remember how small [Teddy] seemed physically: hard but small.

Early in 1974... I found myself needing to talk to Teddy.

I saw him at noon. He looked heavy and tired.... And now he was expected to run for President.

For a moment, Teddy was totally disoriented. He'd been in such a hurry—but such a hurry to get where?—that he wasn't even sure which exit he'd used to leave the Capitol.

Martin Agronsky of NBC was on line three. Would Teddy be flying to Dallas? He didn't know. How was he supposed to know?

But Jack wasn't there. Jack would never be there again. Jack was in Texas. Jack was dead.

Once, after Time reported that Teddy had, on some occasion, smiled "sardonically...."

The last entry may puzzle. But it offends only because McGinniss refers to it two or three

more times in book as in, Teddy might not know how to grin sardonically, but he was learning how; or, he grinned—Even Sardonically.

While The poor writing may be overlooked as the pressures of a book contract bearing down on a deadline (only Dostoyevsky could write well with only a week's notice), the garnitures cannot. Each one should have been identified as such but never are. What is more, most seem to have been contrived in such a way as to make the reader think they were history. The conflation with other sources makes the disambiguation of fact from fiction nearly impossible.

For example, Manchester's works (*The Death of a President* and *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative of American History, 1932-1972*) are relied upon heavily, as are Reeves's and Hamilton's, books, mentioned earlier. When Chappaquiddick is rehashed, Leo Damore's book, *Senatorial Privilege*, takes center stage. But in every case, McGinniss adds, pads furbelows and festoons additional material that simply cannot be verified. In the midst of something we know to be true such as Joe Sr.'s purchasing of enough copies of *Why England Slept* to get it on the best-seller lists, a few paragraphs later, a quote will be thrown in. Readers would naturally think this to be first-hand reportage, but are never instructed that is a first-hand accounting.

While reporting a factual event, McGinniss might write that something “appeared” or “seemed” or “felt like” it should be a certain way. But upon reflection on a passage (take the one where Teddy is worrying about his pants tearing), one sees it is all speculation. Much of what is added by McGinniss cannot be verified unless a passion of honesty were to strike Teddy or another member of his family (and the snowball's chance in hell has better odds).

This is not to argue that what McGinniss has written isn't believable. But stop and think for a minute. If we accept this sort of untutored writing into our canon, the field is open for all sort of wild accusations to be made, some of which will eventually get around to camps on either side of the big government, little government line. If we allow the one, we have to allow the other. And it's simply no good to argue that this has already been done to “our side”. Of course it has. But wild accusations, whether made about honest men or mad ones, are wrong.

In the “Author's Note”, looking for all the world like an afterthought, McGinniss tries to account for all his pilfering and padding, but it simply doesn't wash. He writes:

The facts of [Teddy's] life are not in dispute. The events described herein took place as described, to the best of my knowledge. The quotations attribute to people throughout the book represent in substance what I believe to have been spoken—at the times and under the circumstances described herein.
[Emphases added]

This presents the reader with a most perplexing problem: where are places in the book speculation, and where accurate renderings? Where are attributions and where direct quotes? Essentially, one might think of McGinniss's book much the same way one could think of *The Living Bible* as paraphrased by Kenneth Taylor. Taylor's work is no translation and should, of course, not be used by one who wishes to understand holy writ. It's a perfect example of what dumbing down has come to in America. McGinniss has essentially parsed, we might say generously, the work of Manchester, Damore, Hamilton and a dozen others, and simply amplified, without regard to words actually said, what he felt might have been thought but left unsaid.

Such a work does a huge disservice to readers. For people like my mother-in-law, and others who fought hard to gain a hearing against the Kennedys, such a work renews the aspersions on any who might take the Kennedys to task. If McGinniss's work is iniquated with various ramblings, amplifications and out right whimsicalities, and his work relies virtually completely on the work of others, what then of *their* work? In large measure, McGinniss did the Kennedys a favor. In one fell swoop he has impugned the work of dozens and thus, in some small measure, cast a hue of doubt over them all: the Kennedys aren't really as bad as all that; they're just victims of hatchet jobs.

In the end, however, we have absolutely nothing to worry about. Simply discard McGinniss's book as one to add to the Kennedy corpus. Truly remarkable books like Doris Goodwin's *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* and John Davis's *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster, 1848-1984*, and the others mentioned above are easily accessible and have been meticulously verified. Even when they try to be favorably partial, they end up telling the awful truth about the Kennedys. And, as long as there are Kennedys like Teddy, randying about on the beach with William, or Joe Jr., unable to hide acting like a nincompoop in Congress, there will never be a dearth of material to finally bury the outrageous myth that was the Kennedys' Camelot. The Kennedys themselves will always make certain that any version of the King Arthur story will always play like a Monty Python rendition.