

Book World 6/13/76

Public Enigma Number One

EDWARD KENNEDY AND THE CAMELOT LEGACY. By James MacGregor Burns. Norton. 383 pp. \$11.95

THE LAST KENNEDY. By Robert Sherrill. Dial. 239 pp. \$8.95

DEATH AT CHAPPAQUID-DICK. By Richard L. Tedrow and Thomas L. Tedrow. Green Hill. 217 pp. \$8.95

By WILLIAM GREIDER

SOME OBSERVERS tell us he is a no-good kid. Others insist that he is merely human. One tells us he is actually better than his brothers but then another tells us his brothers were not much actually. The search for secret flaws continues, so does the yearning for mystical perfection. Opinion is divided. Facts are clouded. Rumors persist. Questions remain.

Well, if you like that sort of grass to chew on, here are three more books about Edward M. Kennedy. Although they are vastly different in style, quality and motivation, they each leave us at about the same point: fogged again by this character, tired of the particular facts of his life, vaguely convinced that he remains the most intriguing candi-

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date of 1976 or 1980 or whenever. One book suggests he ought to be president someday; another says he should be in jail. I can imagine Kennedy grimly amused that, once again, he has eluded the analysts' search for his real self and sucked them into publishing their Kennedy books in 1976, like the bunch who chose 1972, like probably the next class of 1980 or beyond.

He remains opaque and adaptable; he is whatever you wish to make of him. Good Teddy wears the emerald sash inherited from his noble big brothers. Bad Teddy runs around with women who are not his wife. Bad Teddy drinks rum and coke. Good Teddy has more courage than his brothers; he stands up for racial equality and the dispossessed, he speaks for the humanity of Oriental refugees. Bad Teddy gets in trouble and tells lies, whoppers which not even his friends can believe. Good Teddy loves his children and his brothers' children too, for his life has been soaked, unspeakably, in tragedy. Bad Teddy is a reckless kid, subject to panic, hallucination, escapist capers.

The good Teddy is admired and well-loved, according to the public-opinion polls, even as the bad Teddy persists in his indiscretions. What are we to make of this confusion? It would be soap-opera political fiction except, good grief, it is real. Is he the noble Irish prince? Or just a wee bit of the wild Ginger Man? And will public understanding ever be able to assimilate these two into one believable man? It is as though Edward M. Kennedy, in all of his facets, is the ultimate expression of how confused American democracy has become in

choosing its leaders. He inherits the family mythology, just as we grasp how deceptive political myths are. He has been reduced in public print to commonplace and callous personal flaws, yet Kennedy still evokes—his name, his voice, his speeches—a larger resonance than other public figures. What a wonderful mystery to unravel.

Alas, it remains unsolved. Professor Burns tries so earnestly in his scholarly manner, taking apart each facet and laboring over it objectively. Yet he seems, most of all, to have succeeded in rendering this extraordinary character into a routine public figure, ready for the archives. Burns seems so eager to present all views of this man that one gets a little bored waiting to hear what the professor thinks himself. In the end, he admires him, of course, and sees an enormous progressive potential embodied in Kennedy's future, in part because he inherits the myth but also because he has grown beyond his brothers in understanding the world.

Indeed, part of what burdens this book is what burdens the last Kennedy, the need to trim down the swollen legend of JFK to its honest size. The inspirational rhetoric which sustained his popular memory not only seems less courageous now, but it contributed profoundly to the illusions which tore apart American society in the last decade. Burns trims soberly. He did not create the Camelot hokum but his 1960 biography of John F. Kennedy lent important respectability to the notion that JFK represented a fundamental turn in America's direction. Surely nobody

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