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Section 7


C. GERALD FRASER

"In My Place," a memoir of integration, by Charlayne Hunter-Gault. Page 9.

More Than A Rake's Progress

JFK
Reckless Youth.
By Nigel Hamilton
Illustrated. 898 pp. New York: Random House. $30.

By Roger Morris

THERE has never been a political love affair quite like it — the brief, intense romance of a generation with a stylish, handsome young President named John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Promising to be epic in life, the passion would only grow with the classic tragedy of assassination and martyrdom in November 1963, leaving the survivors prone to both public myth and private wistfulness about what was and what might have been.

For more than a decade historians and popularizers alike have been slowly peeling away, layer by layer, the long encrusted, often deliberately created iconography surrounding that extraordinary love and loss. It seemed inevitable, therefore, that we would eventually have Nigel Hamilton's "JFK: Reckless Youth," the gripping first volume of an ambitious full-scale life of John F. Kennedy.

Mr. Hamilton, the British scholar who is the official chronicler of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, has been undaunted, almost jaunty, in entering the relatively unfamiliar American terrain for an unauthorized Kennedy biography, even if important elements of

Continued on page 36

Roger Morris, who served on the White House National Security Council staff under both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, is the author of "Richard Milhous Nixon: The Rise of an American Politician."


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John F. Kennedy as a Navy lieutenant during World War II.

In War, Many Are Responsible, Some Are Guilty

Japanese atrocities in World War II were as bad as we said they were; now even they admit it. **13**

From the life of a cell to the atomic bomb, all things connect in the wars of the 20th century. **14**

Doing justice at the Nuremberg trials was far from easy; nevertheless, it was done. **15**

More Than a Rake's Progress

Continued from page 1

this volume, covering only the years 1917-46, involve British policy on the eve of World War II. There will be quibbling about Mr. Hamilton's handling of Boston politics, and about his use of a style often less dignified than the subject — "all was not well in the state of Denmark," "it opened another can of worms." This sometimes repetitive, simplistic, breathless narrative could have benefited from additional editing while excursions into psychology seem out of place for more of the historian's detachment. Although claiming more than 2,000 interviews, Mr. Hamilton can be dependent on surprisingly few sources and perspectives for significant events and periods.

Yet none of this should obscure the fundamental importance or fascination of this book. Mr. Hamilton has mined remarkable new sources, ranging from hundreds of personal letters to extensive F.B.I. files; he has also drawn creatively on materials earlier authors possessed but used only in part or not at all. By the very detail and depth of the revelations, the flashes of brilliance and consistency of insight, "JFK: Reckless Youth" easily takes its place beside the best of recent Presidential portraits, including Geoffrey Ward's Franklin Roosevelt, Robert Caro's Lyndon Johnson and the similar, less well-known triumph of British scholarship, Piers Brendon's Dwight Eisenhower. In the process, Mr. Hamilton enters into an extraordinary literary intimacy with the young man who was to be the most haunting President of recent times. By turns poignant and horrifying, but always awe-inspiring, the first volume gives us back a lost history, and provides J.F.K. himself with an almost familial compassion he never really had in America's most famous and fiercely politi-

The young John F. Kennedy with his father, Joseph P. Kennedy.

wasteland" in which the young Jack grew up nothing less than an abused child. Ill again and again with vague, often undiagnosed maladies, he took refuge as the family "bookworm," witty, bright but careless, seemingly outgoing yet deeply self-protective, in studied revolt against a mother's vacuity and a father's oppression. Scarcely a hundred pages into "JFK: Reckless Youth," there is the overwhelming impression that its protagonist is long before Dallas.

Usually a phlegmatic narrator, Mr. Hamilton seems overcome on occasion by the sheer seediness and "almost psychotic drama" of these instantly decadent parvenus, the "dotty mother" and the lecherous father who "could not resist the temptation to manipulate his own emotionally deprived children," now shouting exhortations to win and excel, now pinching or caressing young girls who visited the house or spreading out pornographic magazines on the bed to greet the frail second son returning home from prep school.

AMID a "grueling adolescence," Jack Kennedy found his own tortured sexuality. At the exclusive, stilted, hypocritical boarding school Choate, a kind of institutional variation of his family life, he remained a clever but academically mediocre, contemptuous student. Slovenly and mischievous, he cultivated through his good looks the likableness and easy indulgence that would win him a succession of less imaginative, less attractive male friends, and later would enable him to seduce a virtually endless train of willing young women. Together with his lifelong intimate K. LeMoyne Billings, whose letters from Kennedy form a documentary treasure trove for this biography, the 17-year-old future President lost his virginity in a Harlem whorehouse, and then in a panic sought out medicines, creams and eventually a doctor to "clean out" the imagined infection. It was, in every way, only the beginning of an obsession that would far surpass even his father's sexual debauchery.

Sent after Choate to an indifferent stay at the London School of Economics, Jack returned to the United States in 1935 to [illegible] to endure another round of painful, isolating

IT is, as we have glimpsed in previous books and documentaries, a grand story — though just how rich and textured, how tortuous and disturbing, Mr. Hamilton reveals in many ways for the first time. The telling genealogy is all here: an affecting portrait of Jack's maternal grandfather, John Fitzgerald, later to be the legendary Boston mayor and congressman Honey Fitz, lovingly washing and dressing his orphaned baby sisters and brothers; an equally revealing picture of a less tender politico, the state representative and ward boss Patrick J. Kennedy, Jack's paternal grandfather. When their children — prim, psychologically stunted Rose Fitzgerald and "big, brash and insensitive" Joe Kennedy — met in Old Orchard Beach, Maine, in 1906, it was the beginning of a troubled courtship that grew into a singular political union and a singularly disastrous marriage.

By the time John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in May 1917, the sickly second child of what would be a brood of nine, his parents were trapped in an already loveless, mutually tyrannical relationship. Joe Kennedy's philandering was about to become as infamous as his draft avoidance and business scandals in World War I, or as notorious as what Mr. Hamilton calls the "financial larceny on a vast and unseen scale" that produced the family fortune in the stock market of the early 1920's.

While Joe moved on to Hollywood, literally and figuratively to rape the actress Gloria Swanson and cheat others, Rose retreated to a "*grande toilette*," trips abroad and a sterile, distanced "management" of the offspring of periodic obligatory sex with her largely absent husband. The result, Mr. Hamilton documents convincingly, was an "emotional

The Tension at Abbotsford Road

Jack . . . thought about why his mother was not there much of the time. Rose's announcement that she was departing on another six-week vacation with her sister, Agnes, earned the 5-year-old's memorable rebuke: "Gee, *you're* a great mother to go away and leave your children all alone!"

When not engaged in fisticuffs with his older brother, Jack turned more and more to books. Though he'd survived his bout with scarlet fever, he remained frail, skinny, and subject to almost continual illnesses. According to Rose, it was his enforced incarceration that caused him to learn to read. . . . "The fact that he was so often sick in bed or convalescing in the house and needed entertainment," she reflected, "only encouraged what I think was already a strong natural bent."

The bent, however, was far from natural: a solitary escape from often unbearable domestic tension between his parents when home, as well as solace when they were not. Books certainly fueled a growing curiosity, however, about the world beyond his Brookline veranda. "Before he ever went to school," Joe Kennedy later recalled, Jack was asking schoollike questions. "I remember when he was a little bit of a shaver trying to find out where the Canary Islands were because he had read something about them in a Billy Whiskers book. Me, I had never heard of the Canary Islands at the time."

Rose had heard of the Canary Islands, but not the Sandwich Islands, "I confessed I didn't know but said I'd find out, as I did, and then showed him in the atlas," she later recalled. The Billy Whiskers book, however, Rose "wouldn't have allowed in the house except that my mother had given it to him. It seemed to me very, very poorly illustrated, with the pictures in brash, flamboyant colors."

Brashness and flamboyance were anathema to the Ice Maiden of Abbotsford Road. Apart from hating the mention of sex, she recoiled from plays and novels that portrayed "poverty, dirt and sloth," as she put it. Her own taste in books remained as secondhand as the reproduction paintings with which she covered the walls of her home. For little Jack she permitted only volumes "from the P.T.A.- and library-approved lists." Like the films that would later be shown in the house, all had to be vetted, screened and approved by others before the children were allowed to be exposed to them. . . . "Naturally, anything shown to our young audience was recommended or checked by someone in advance as being suitable for family viewing."

From "JFK: Reckless Youth."

hospitalizations, even a mistaken diagnosis of terminal leukemia. He survived it all, Mr. Hamilton explains, with an insouciance that became both charm and strength, and in the mid-1930's Jack's world of suntans, sailing races, society parties and sex went on, with no apparent intrusion by Depression America. Meanwhile, Joe Kennedy went on ceaselessly jockeying, bribing and maneuvering for power in the Roosevelt Administration his money helped create.

As a student at Harvard from 1936 to 1940, Jack slowly began to awaken intellectually. An unoriginal but earnest freshman essay on the French Renaissance leader Francis I eerily and self-consciously foreshadowed some of Jack's own profligacy, ambition and capacity. As a political-science major, he later applied himself diligently to courses in comparative politics and international affairs, doing at one point a conscientious field study of a congressman's office.

At the same time, however, he seemed to shed none of the social shallowness of his frozen youth. There was a ritual European tour and spree. But after Joe Kennedy's carefully manipulated appointment as United States Ambassador to Britain in January 1938, the young hedonist also acted, when well enough, as occasional and avid assistant in his father's seamy double game of appeasing Hitler in Europe while grandiosely and quixotically plotting to replace Roosevelt as President of the United States.

Mr. Hamilton tells as never before the tale of Jack's embroilment in that authentic scandal of American diplomatic history — including his scabrous unsigned editorial in The Harvard Crimson parroting his father in assuming an Allied defeat and proposing the tribute of colonies and the surrender of Eastern Europe to buy off Hitler. It was an article that might well have cost Jack Kennedy his later political career had its author been identified.

YET Mr. Hamilton also stresses Jack's tentative steps toward political and intellectual independence from a corrupt, imperious father — letters with a questioning tone, Harvard papers on class politics that at least hinted by 1939-40 that "Jack's sympathies were shifting away from those of his father."

That emancipation was to be a lifetime struggle, in some ways never fully resolved. But Mr. Hamilton [illegible] and his older brother, Joe Jr., in whose shadow he grew up, and in whom resided the father's innate bigotry and shallowness as well as Joe Kennedy's longer-term political megalomania. Joe Jr. was "incapable of writing articulately or arrestingly," Mr. Hamilton observes. "He was snide, bullying, short-tempered, standoffish, aggressive with girls, insincere in his affairs and slavishly anxious to do his father's bidding." Whatever their similarities, the difference between the two Kennedy heirs — as emphasized by the second son's mind, grace and relative imperturbability — made Jack the far more honorable bearer of the family political standard.

As it was, Jack's mediocre senior honors thesis on Britain's attempted accommodation with Hitler — written after war began in Europe and with sources gathered largely by courtesy of Joe Kennedy's London Embassy and the official diplomatic pouch — would be converted into a 1940 best seller with the aid and advice of Arthur Krock, a journalist with The New York Times who was a longtime intimate of and de facto publicist for Joe Kennedy. Additional help came from Henry Luce, the publisher of Time magazine, whose wife, Clare Boothe Luce, had probably been one of Joe Sr.'s many conquests. For a world aghast at the Nazi blitzkrieg in the summer of 1940, "Why England Slept" discreetly softened or excised entirely portions of the Harvard senior's original defense of appeasement.

For Jack Kennedy, however, the essential point of the episode he had just studied and seen in part first-hand went beyond London's (and his father's) savagely discredited diplomacy. From the fateful descent toward war in the 1930's he drew a bleak moral about the intrinsic limits of policy in democratic societies.

Britain's military weakness, the infamous Munich agreement that grew out of it, the appeasement strategy altogether, he declared, were not the fault of politicians or regimes, but rather were "due to the slowness of the conversion of the British public in general" to sacrificial national preparedness. In the tumult of electoral politics, where careers were crushed in the service of unpopular causes, political leadership, he concluded, ultimately had no choice but to follow.

"Nothing else Jack would write in his life would so speak the man," Mr. Hamilton observes, praising the comments on leadership as the sort of "unsparing political realism" that would be the hallmark of a Kennedy Presidency. Nothing else, too, he might have added, would separate so cynically and expediently John F. Kennedy the President from the many he inspired to a concept of public service as leading rather than following.

All but crippled by an unrelieved back injury, plagued by chronic stomach and bowel afflictions, newly racked by venereal disease, the 23-year-old Jack paused at Stanford for a time after Harvard. He was drafted, rejected because of his ailments, and finally secured through his father's influence a direct commission as an officer in naval intelligence.

While in the Navy, and under Government surveillance, he carried on a torrid affair with Inga Arvad, a beautiful Danish journalist whom a crudely bungling F.B.I. suspected (with no real evidence, the book makes plain) of being a Nazi spy. The vital, sensuous Inga, Mr. Hamilton judges from myriad letters, telephone transcripts and testimony, was "the greatest love of Jack's life," yet a passion J.F.K. himself would eventually deride, in the face of his father's disapproval, as "just something I picked up on the road."

PETER HUNTER/MAGNUM

John F. Kennedy at a birthday party for his sister Eunice in London, 1939.

Mr. Hamilton is at his historian's best in the tangled military and political episode of PT 109, Jack's wartime heroism in the South Pacific that became, typically, such a mixture of reality, confection and exploitation. The book's reconstruction of the fateful prelude to action and its gritty evocation of battle's authentic pathos and caprice, the nobility and bravery amid "the chaos, cowardice and confusion," are all masterly.

After the war Jack returned to a country in which family influence was still powerful, despite Joe Kennedy's exile from government after his pre-Pearl Harbor resignation as Ambassador, and where the senseless, almost suicidal death of Joe Jr. while on a bombing mission, trying pathetically to become his father's hero as well, had left the second son the political heir apparent.

It is in the immediate sequel to that death that Mr. Hamilton ends the first of what is intended to be three volumes. He relates in great detail the marvelous story of Jack's successful 1946 run for Congress in Boston. Replete with graft and manipulations that would have made old Honey Fitz and Pat Kennedy blush, with recreational sex on top of the rented desks at campaign headquarters, even with a midcampaign vacation in Hollywood for affairs with actresses and ice skaters, it was J.F.K.'s political debut, a portent of the fame to come.

> *Mr. Hamilton poses the most anguishing questions about style and substance, money and power, personal and public virtue.*

The biographer leaves us in that November 46 years ago, promising an "even more extraordinary political career about to begin." The reader knows how it all ends, of course, but one can only imagine what the comparable revelations will be between this volume and the account of that blinding moment in front of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas 29 years ago to the day.

THERE are in this first volume so many moments when we can glimpse in the boy and young man, even in his shameless rake's progress, some of the undeniable gifts of the later political hero. But after Mr. Hamilton, it will never be enough merely to justify John F. Kennedy by the inspirational, sometimes great events of a Presidency, or even by the comparative frailties of his rivals. ("Do you realize the responsibility I carry?" he used to say in a favorite line. "I'm the only person standing between Nixon and the White House.")

What price did we pay for the deeper flaws and scars of which the sexual and sexist pathology was only a manifestation? What of Kennedy's ruthless, often demagogic run at the Republicans in the 1950's from the right, the electoral fraud, the White House liaisons with organized crime?

It was said of John F. Kennedy's ultimate popularity and martyrdom that we could never again allow ourselves such identification, such investment in a politician. Perhaps. History in any case has since spared us the temptation.

But Nigel Hamilton's "JFK: Reckless Youth" remains far more than a disillusioning dossier on the first lost love. Again and again in this unsparing if not always unsentimental saga, he refuses to turn away from the sheer paradox and ambiguity of the man — the vitality and weakness, energy and indolence, narcissism and self-deprecation, charm and coldness, curiosity and obliviousness, loyalty and cruelty, intimacy and detachment, intelligence and ignorance, engagement and complacency, courage and cravenness.

This rich biography poses, unspoken, the most anguishing and ancient questions of elective politics — questions about character, personality, style, substance, money and power, personal and public virtue, and, not least, inspiration and example. In the end it is a book not only about a remarkable young John F. Kennedy, but also about American democracy's own still reckless age. □