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They Belong to the Ages

It is difficult not to sympathize with the feelings of Mrs. John F. Kennedy toward the publication of William Manchester's book on the President's assassination; and it is impossible to agree with the legal steps she has taken against the publishers.

Essential elements in the dispute have not been publicly disclosed. No one knows precisely to what extent conversations between the President's widow and the author were restricted, or to what degree confidences were abused. No one knows exactly what passages have excited objection. The misunderstanding between author and widow are common enough in the relationship between the authorized biographers of great men and their survivors and heirs. Such misunderstandings almost invariably arise.

The legal step she has taken against the publishers is another matter. It is one of a succession of recent obstructive actions by the relatives of public men. Helen Frick is trying to stop the publication of a book containing references to her father. The Department of Justice obstructed the publication of the Valachi memoirs. Mary Hemingway sought an injunction to block the publication of A. E. Hotchner's book on Hemingway. Two publishers are in court over books about Howard Hughes.

Mrs. Kennedy has sought to discourage a book about the President's assassination by Jim Bishop. She has also made plain her displeasure at the contents of another book of remembrances about her husband. All this is as understandable as it is unacceptable from the public viewpoint.

The lives of public men—the records of their careers, the thoughts of others about them—are not the property of their families, but the property of posterity. The great public figure, upon his death, belongs to the ages and not to his survivors.