

LEISURE & ARTS

8/1/93 Wild Tales: Retreading the Teddy Saga

By JAMES M. PERRY *Walden Journal*

The publishers of Joe McGinniss's first book, "The Selling of the President," boasted in the dust jacket that Mr. McGinniss "is known and admired as the author of nonfiction accounts that read and move the reader like fiction." Mr. McGinniss had infiltrated the team that was running Richard Nixon's advertising campaign and emerged with some of the funniest and most revealing anecdotes and quotations to appear in a campaign book. And he did it all in 168 pages.

Now, 25 years later, he is back with a great blob of a book, "The Last Brother: The Rise and Fall of Teddy Kennedy" (Simon & Schuster, 626 pages, \$25), that contains absolutely none of the redeeming qualities that made his first book such a little gem. It's not funny — most of the time it's just plain mean — and it's not even faintly revealing. But some things don't change: It may read a little like fiction.

Over the years, I have wallowed in Kennedy books, and this hulking volume reminds me of a family reunion of all of

airplane crash, and that two more, one a president and the other a candidate for president, were assassinated.

Mr. McGinniss wants us to know that Ted Kennedy, the last brother, has shown worrying signs of insecurity.

I can't tell if Mr. McGinniss has plagiarized these earlier chroniclers of the Kennedy dynasty or not; some of them say so



Bookshelf

*"The Last Brother:
The Rise and Fall of Teddy Kennedy"*

By Joe McGinniss

the writers. Here, once again, we meet all our old friends who have written about the Kennedys, and, like a real reunion, even a couple we had forgotten about.

The book opens with what I suppose is intended to be a tour de force, 127 pages — that's just 41 pages short of his entire firstbook — about Jack Kennedy's funeral. It smacks of the standard work on the Kennedy assassination, William Manchester's solemn "The Death of a President." It moves on to a rehash of the rearing of the nine Kennedy children, based for the most part on earlier works by Doris Kearns Goodwin and James MacGregor Burns. And then, when we blunder on to Ted Kennedy's first Senate campaign, how nice to meet Boston University's Murray Levin again. He wrote a splendid book, "Kennedy Campaigning," about that race and we had almost forgotten about it. It is reprised here.

Mr. McGinniss's book points out early on (once we get past the funeral) that the Kennedy family has endured unparalleled trials and tragedies. We are reminded that one of Joe and Rose Kennedy's nine children was blown to smithereens in a midair explosion in World War II, that another was lobotomized and consigned to an institution, that still another died in an

and have begun talking to lawyers. It does strike me that what we have here is a slightly harassed rewrite man, surrounded by books and notes, trying to make a lot of money in the face of a fast-approaching deadline.

The book, hastily written, usually in breathless prose, shows no evidence of being edited. It contains neither footnotes nor an index, so the casual reader has no idea where some of the book's wilder flights of fancy come from.

And wild flights there are. Mr. McGinniss sets off down a conspiracy trail in which we are told that old Joe Kennedy, unquestionably a scoundrel but in this book an omnipotent one, cut a Faustian bargain with Mafia chieftains: You elect my son Jack president, and we'll depose Fidel Castro and get the casinos in Havana humming again.

How was this supposed to work? We aren't really told. Somehow we begin to imagine Mafiosi prowling the hollows of West Virginia handing out bundles of cash to entice rugged Protestant mountaineers to vote for Kennedy. It's nonsense. Everyone knows old Joe Kennedy spent a lot of his own cash in West Virginia legally, but no one has ever proven that he broke the law. That allegation was checked out at the time by all kinds of people, including Wall Street Journal reporters. They didn't report a single Mafioso sighting and couldn't produce any evidence to show illegal cash payments. Kennedy carried the state with a smashing 61% of the vote, ending Hubert Humphrey's 1960 presidential aspirations.

In weaving his conspiratorial web, Mr. McGinniss employs an absolutely maddening technique. He sets up these wild tales with a certain amount of reserve. "Perhaps the thought occurred to Sam Giancana [a Mafia chieftain] that in return for Mob assistance in the campaign, the new President would see to it that Castro was removed," he writes. But, as the book progresses, the "perhapses" disappear; it becomes accepted fact that the Mob was signed on to put Joe's boy in the White House.

And it becomes an accepted fact too that Bobby Kennedy passed on to Teddy "the truth about the family's entanglements with the Mafia." Of course, Mr. McGinniss says, there are no records "of exactly when and where and under what conditions Bobby first began to share the worst of the secrets with Teddy." He argues it is "common sense" to believe such a private chat took place. Thereafter, "common sense" becomes established fact, and Mr. McGinniss informs us that poor, idealistic Teddy was "broken" by these awful revelations.

The conspiracy theories are accompanied by a prodigious amount of psychobabble, in which Mr. McGinniss, who doesn't know Ted Kennedy and never interviewed him or, as far as I can tell, anyone else for this book, puts himself inside Ted Kennedy's brain. Sometimes the results are hilarious. Shortly after Jack Kennedy's funeral, Ted Kennedy is pictured at loose ends at the family compound

in Hyannisport. "It may have occurred to Teddy," says Mr. McGinniss, "that it was no accident that vodka had been developed first in Russia, a vast land where the winters were long and the sadness ran even deeper than the snows. He [Ted Kennedy] wished that he could be with Bobby. He wished that Jack were still alive." Readers who buy this unfortunate book will wish that Joe McGinniss didn't write this way.

The book ends with a pedestrian and familiar recounting of the drowning of Mary Jo Kopechne, when Mr. Kennedy's Oldsmobile veered off a bridge on Chappaquiddick Island and dropped into a pond in 1969. More than any Mafia revelations, that's what "broke" Ted Kennedy as the last link in the family's carefully worked out Camelot legend.

Life for Ted Kennedy has gone on, sometimes chaotically, sometimes out of control. Yet, for all his problems, he has become one of the ranking barons in the Senate, the champion of what's left of his party's liberal wing. He is surely a more important political figure, historically, than his brother Bobby; he is beginning to rival, simply by hard work and longevity, the achievements of his brother Jack. In the weeks ahead, for example, Ted Kennedy, a much more serious senator than either of his brothers, will play a key role in drafting the Clinton administration's health-care legislation.

But there is none of that in this book. Perhaps Mr. McGinniss discovered there are no up-to-date books dealing with this crucial, and sometimes dull and complicated, part of Mr. Kennedy's life.

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