

A Boomer's Guide to JFK

by Nina Ogden

The Kennedys, America's Emerald Kings: A Five-Generation History of the Ultimate Irish Catholic Family

by Thomas Maier

New York: Basic Books, 2003

704 pages, hardcover, \$29.95

New York Newsday reporter Thomas Maier's hefty book on the Kennedys would have made an interesting feature-length magazine article, composed of a number of colorful examples illustrating the rise to the U.S. Presidency by a member of an Irish immigrant family with a legacy of rebellion against occupation, oppression, and starvation. A few examples, such as the poet Robert Frost's inscription in the book he gave to JFK at the President's inauguration, "Be more Irish than Harvard," would have delivered the message. Rather, like a bad raconteur trying to explain a joke, Maier absurdly uses up three pages trying to explain a poet's cogent quip. Many of the remaining pages fall victims to the same problem—and others which are worse.

A certain kind of historian who is deeply indebted to his personal computer has popped into publication over the last decade. Downloading thousands of references, this type carefully sorts them into chapters and intersperses one quotation

after another with explanatory evaluations. He elaborates on the same quotations based on the name of the new chapter. He is not, technically, a plagiarist, because he carefully cites his sources. The proper name for this category of writer is "Baby-Boomer biographer." In Maier's case he probably can't help himself, since his first published book was a biography of Dr. Benjamin Spock.

If this reviewer were unfamiliar with the material, she would merely find this example of Baby-Boomer biography boring. However, the publicity for Maier's book kicked up a nasty row of press coverage based on the 13 pages devoted to Father Richard McSorley, a close friend of this reviewer in the decade before his death in October 2002. McSorley was a modest Jesuit priest, with a fiery devotion to principle. His fights for racial integration, against war and the death penalty, and for the poor, kept him from advancing in the church. He gleefully accepted this limitation and was unrelenting in his principled fights with his superiors in his order and in the church as a whole. His role of pastor and tutor to the Kennedys, and later, as Georgetown professor and then friend to President Bill Clinton, was one which he described as "interestingly providential."

The deceptive news reports that repeat the assertion in *The Kennedys'* preface that Father McSorley "spoke for the first time about Jacqueline Kennedy's depression and thoughts of committing suicide in the wake of her husband's 1963 assassination," and that McSorley revealed these so-called "confessions" (which were actually discussions on Bobby Kennedy's family tennis court) to set the historical record straight, are not only totally untrue, but also totally unlike the unrelentingly virtuous Father McSorley. The personal papers and letters which have been exhibited at Georgetown University since Father McSorley's death, were accessible to all in the old observatory which was, for many years, McSorley's "Center for Peace Studies" office at Georgetown University. His autobiography, *My Path to*



Georgetown priest Rev. Richard McSorley with John Kennedy, Jr. in 1964; President John F. Kennedy visiting Ireland in 1963. The author tries to use both to show the "Irish roots" side of JFK, missing the content of McSorley's friendship with the President—and with Bill Clinton later.

Peace and Justice (one of the few sources not referenced in Maier's book), recounted his discussions with Jackie Kennedy about, as he put it, her "incisive questions about resurrection, eternal life, glorified bodies, God's knowledge of the future."

In my interview with Father McSorley in *Fidelio* (Fall 1997), although we talked about the details of these discussions with Jackie and other members of the Kennedy family, we agreed to use the same wording as he had used in his book.

A True Story

If Maier wanted to retell a more characteristic, and less opportunistic, story about the relationship of the Kennedy family and Father McSorley—as indicative of the relationship between the Kennedys and their Irish Catholic background—he could have made use of the following from *My Path to Peace and Justice*:

"In 1963 . . . I was on the Kennedy back lawn having a lunch of hot dogs and cokes when Robert, pulling a sweater over his head, came out of the house. When he got near the table, Ethel said in a loud voice, 'Father, what can be done about Catholic schools that are segregated?' . . . 'Well,' I answered, 'they should go to the bishop about it.' Ethel continued, casting her eyes back and forth between Robert and me. 'But suppose the bishop won't do anything about it? Then what can you do? . . .' 'You can go to the apostolic delegate,' I said. 'Well, what if the apostolic delegate won't do anything about it, what do you do?' At this point Robert stood up and walked along the table saying 'Dear John, . . .' Ethel exclaimed, 'Oh Bobby, let me write that letter!'"

The priest chosen by the Kennedy family to help the grief-stricken widow of the assassinated President was the same one who been removed from his parish in southern Maryland just a few years before, for working to desegregate the parishes there and throughout the rest of the country. Later, on his unswerving path to peace and justice, among other things, he marched side by side with Martin Luther King, Jr. for civil rights and for an end to the war in Vietnam; kicked Henry Kissinger's think-tank off the Georgetown University campus; opened the first Washington, D.C. homeless shelter; and spoke internationally against war and the death penalty. He also became a friend of Lyndon LaRouche and worked for his exoneration with all those he came into contact with, including his old student, President Bill Clinton.

Maier's Worst Sin of Omission

Chapter 27, "Holy Wars," is *The Kennedys'* most obviously egregious chapter. After spending hundreds of pages on documenting the Kennedy family's fight against religious bigotry and President Kennedy's Constitutional dedication to the separation of church and state, Maier blunders into

attributing the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missiles Crisis disasters to the Kennedy family's supposed unquestioning adherence to the Cold War faction within the Catholic Church of that time. Anyone who has read contemporaneous accounts, such as Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*, the oral histories published after JFK's assassination, or the memoirs by Kennedy Administration members such as Theodore Sorenson, Arthur Schlesinger, and Pierre Salinger, will instantly recognize the quote from President Kennedy that Maier inserts while completely overlooking its meaning: "The advice of every member of the executive branch brought in to advise was unanimous—and the advice was wrong." President Kennedy's growing defiance of those members of his own administration whom his predecessor, President Eisenhower, had warned against as "the military-industrial complex," is the ignorantly untold story of this book.

Not only Father McSorley, but also other, still living, friends of this reviewer who were active in the government during the Kennedy Administration are turned into cardboard creatures to serve the unwitting untruthfulness of this Baby-Boomer biography. Let us hope that not only this review, but also Lyndon LaRouche's recent correction of the common error of those historians who "never touch directly that sublime subject which is the history of man," will serve to liberate subjects, authors, and readers from this sterile, Boomer approach to history.

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