

THE LAST BROTHER

Joe McGinniss

Simon & Schuster / 626 pages / \$25

reviewed by THEO LIPPMAN, JR.

In 1974, Joe McGinniss arranged an interview with Sen. Edward Kennedy through his press secretary, Dick Drayne. Drayne warned him not to talk about the Kennedy mystique. "He absolutely freezes . . . that muscle on the right side of his face starts to twitch and then it's all over, buddy."

McGinniss told the senator he would like to spend some time with him, get to know him. He wanted to put him in a book he was writing. The senator turned him down. That may have been because Kennedy knew McGinniss's reputation. McGinniss had come to the fore a few years back by writing a funny, popular book about Richard Nixon's advertising and p.r. campaign in 1968. The word around Washington was that McGinniss had misrepresented himself to get an insider's view of the campaign, then had misrepresented some of what he saw and heard. On the other hand, maybe Kennedy just regarded the McGinniss project as belittling.

The book, McGinniss explained, was to be about why there used to be "heroes" in America, like "your brother Bobby," but weren't anymore. McGinniss writes, "He remained silent. And then the muscle on the right side of his face began to twitch. The meeting ended. I did not see him again for almost fifteen years."

In the pages that follow, McGinniss often presents Ted Kennedy's thoughts in dramatic moments. For example, Kennedy was caught in a traffic jam in the moments after he learned his brother Jack had been shot. McGinniss writes, "There was construction going on outside the Staté Department. It was a useless goddam organization anyway, in

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Teddy's opinion, and to be caught in a construction delay right there seemed somehow more than he should have been expected to tolerate."

The reader might assume McGinniss knows what Kennedy thought because, almost fifteen years after that botched interview in 1974, as he prepared for a new book just about Ted Kennedy, they talked and Kennedy told him. But when you ultimately get to 1988 and the reunion of McGinniss and Kennedy, you learn that Kennedy still wouldn't give him the time of day. There are no interviews.

Sometimes McGinniss merely speculates on Kennedy's thoughts, as when he writes of the disappearance from home (to an institution, without explanation) of Kennedy's retarded sister Rosemary, "It might well have begun to seem that could be the price of failure within the family. . . ." But most of the time, McGinniss writes with the certitude of a man who knows what was in his subject's mind: "he didn't know," "he could scarcely believe," "he could not help but harbor," "the lessons were not lost on Teddy. . ." "to Teddy's dismay. . ." etc. Not much of it is credible.

This kind of imagining precipitated the first wave of criticism of the book. If I am right and McGinniss hoped to fool the reader, he was foiled by his own publisher. Simon & Schuster prepared for the copyright page a disclaimer to the effect that McGinniss made up some of the material for his biography. This became public knowledge. McGinniss protested, and the disclaimer was removed, but the author was forced to admit in an afterword, "I have, as is apparent, written certain scenes and described certain events from what I have inferred to be his point of view."

That McGinniss set out to write fiction

based on fact rather than traditional journalism (or even traditional New Journalism) was "apparent" in a sense before he began this book. In 1988, he signed a two-book contract with Simon & Schuster, subjects undetermined. That's rare for non-fiction. "But I wanted to sell books like novelists," McGinniss told *Publishers Weekly*. "You don't ask Philip Roth for an outline of his next book."

This book was suggested to him by Simon & Schuster's editor in chief, he continued. "Michael Korda had been struck during the 1988 Democratic convention by the fact that Ted Kennedy was only a bit player. Kennedy had become obsolescent in the blink of an eye." Korda suggested McGinniss write a book showing or explaining how Kennedy got to that point.

Korda himself was about to write his own imaginative Kennedy opus—about love affairs between John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe and Bobby and Marilyn. It's fiction, presented in pure novel form, but labeled "faction" by its author. One reviewer described it as a compilation of "every . . . factoid, rumor and lie that has ever been circulated about the Kennedys."

McGinniss's book is not nearly that bad. Most of what he writes is factual. But the facts are not ones that he himself gathered, which brings me to the second wave of criticism. After the publishers' excerpts were distributed, John Taylor compared the first eleven chapters—about a third of the book—to William Manchester's 1967 narrative on John Kennedy's assassination, *The Death of a President*. Taylor reported in *New York* magazine, "The similarity between some of [McGinniss's] passages and Manchester's is really quite remarkable. Cynics might be tempted to say that McGinniss lifted his material from Manchester. Moralists might go so far as to call it plagiarism."

McGinniss replied in a letter to the editor that he was "appalled and outraged at the allegation that I plagiarized from William Manchester. . . I cannot allow it to stand." To which Taylor replied, "Legally the real issue at hand is not plagiarism but copyright infringement." He said he thought McGinniss may have behaved improperly not only by using Manchester's language or very close approximations of it, but also by using

his selection and ordering of facts. Manchester thought so, too. He charged 187 passages were lifted from his book. He said he might sue. When I asked him later if he would do so, he declined comment, explaining that he had reached “that point at which lawyers advise not to talk to the press.”

Meanwhile, another author charged McGinniss with substantial borrowing of her reporting—and her selection and ordering of facts. Doris Kearns Goodwin, who wrote *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* (1987), said McGinniss “took a whole series of interviews I used and presented them as if they might have been his own. He quoted liberally from letters I unearthed at the Kennedy Library and quoted in my book, but he didn’t say where he got them. He even quoted in about the same way secondary sources pretty much in the sequence I had.” She stopped just short of labeling this plagiarism.

But her main (I think) complaint is about something McGinniss took from still another book—and acknowledged for a change. In *JFK: Reckless Youth*, Nigel Hamilton discusses the frontal lobotomy performed on Rosemary Kennedy. He cites in a footnote a “friend (female) of John Kennedy” as his source for speculation that Joseph Kennedy may have caused Rosemary’s retardation by sexually abusing her. That strikes me as pretty low, but at least Hamilton is a serious historian who deserves the right to decide if a source should be so quoted.

McGinniss goes crazy with this. He speculates that the lobotomy was not botched but intended to turn the girl into a vegetable. Why? Rosemary was about to reveal Joe’s sin. “In such a case, Joe’s need to silence her quickly and permanently would have been strong, especially if he was planning to send his oldest son to the White House. . . . Documentation that might resolve the question remains sealed to researchers.”

I tried unsuccessfully to reach McGinniss to ask the question, “What documentation?” I asked Goodwin if she could think of what he was referring to. She has seen the still-sealed papers of

Joseph Kennedy and Rose Kennedy in the Kennedy Library. She says there is “nothing remotely like that” in them. She had no idea what McGinniss meant.

This is about as irresponsible as it gets, made worse by the fact that, according to the reference archivist at the Kennedy Library, McGinniss was never there asking for *anything*. Why a biographer of Ted Kennedy would not be searching through, among other things, the now-open papers of Robert and John Kennedy is beyond my comprehension.

Which brings me to a third wave of criticism. The book is not what Korda proposed in 1988. It doesn’t take Ted Kennedy from some point long ago when he was thought to be a

just about Kennedy in the Senate. No Chappaquiddick. No Camelot. No throwing fully-clothed people in the pool at Hickory Hill. No boozing. No sex. No family mystique. No “color.”

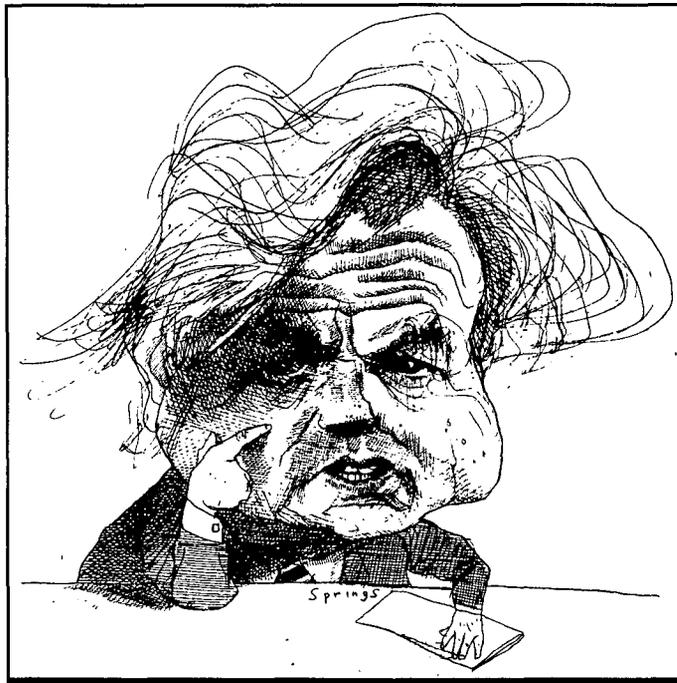
What a concept! Suddenly I was *Mister Asshole!* I got ten interviews with the senator over the next year and numerous interviews with staff and ex-staff. I concluded that Kennedy was off to a great start as a senator (good senators went slow in that long-ago era), and I wrote (in *Senator Ted Kennedy*, W.W. Norton, 1976) that were he to remain there for a long time he would likely be assessed as a great senator.

That was nearly twenty years ago. Next year Kennedy will have served in the Senate longer than any other man

from Massachusetts, longer than Daniel Webster, than Charles Sumner, than Henry Cabot Lodge Sr. Surely a biographer in the 1990s interested in writing about “the most significant aspects of Teddy Kennedy’s life,” as McGinniss says he was, would want to learn about and “ruminate” (McGinniss’s word) on Kennedy’s hours on the Senate floor in the years since 1969. (Not to mention his drunken post-divorce, pre-marriage womanizing hours on other floors; see “Ted Kennedy on the Rocks,” by Michael Kelly, *GQ*, February 1990.)

Being a senator today is somewhat different from what it was a generation ago. Teddy exemplifies the new Senate—the good, the bad and the ugly

of it. He is no bit player under the Capitol dome. Consider just a few of the things he has been centrally involved in that McGinniss ignores. In 1974, in small but not insignificant part thanks to Kennedy staff snooping, Congress chased a president from office. In 1980, in very large part due to Kennedy, another president became the first incumbent to lose a re-election bid in forty-eight years. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s and now into the 1990s, Congress has increased its power over the executive branch to the point that it is probably more influential, relatively speaking, than at any time since I first set foot in the Senate press gallery in 1961. →



potential political star to Korda’s “bit player” in Atlanta in 1988. It takes him only to 1969. The theme is the overworked one of the 1970s and early 1980s to the effect that Ted Kennedy was an unhappy failure. Only eight of the book’s pages deal with Ted Kennedy post-Chappaquiddick. Where’s the Rest of Him?

Now, it so happens that in early 1974 I called on Dick Drayne, too. I said I was going to write a book about Ted Kennedy and wondered about interviewing him and his staff. “I get some damn asshole in here every week wanting to write a book about the senator,” he said. “Why should we deal with you?”

I told him I was going to write a book

And it is, I believe, because Ted Kennedy and his ilk have become so powerful. He and other senatorial liberals who have learned to play the game, mastered the rhythms and rules and mores of life on the Hill, now dominate Washington. They do so by accruing power—through seniority and through clever alliances with senior moderates and even, on some issues, conservatives. No one does it better than Teddy. He has had several joint triumphs with such conservative Republicans as Orrin Hatch and Strom Thurmond. The last Republican vice president's greatest legislative achievement when he was a senator was known informally as "the Quayle-Kennedy Training for Jobs Bill."

Richard E. Cohen of the *National Journal* recently assessed Kennedy's status in the Senate and concluded that he will be on "Washington's center stage" in the next few years, "gatekeeper for President Clinton's social policy agenda." Such gatekeepers make life hell for Cabinet officers and their top aides. Ask any of them how much deference they have to pay to senior members of Congress. Even Al Gore now calls congressional "micromanagement" of the executive "a very serious problem."

The executive branch is not the only element of the national government that has lost power to Congress in the past two decades. Ask any governor how federal mandates are denying states the right to decide on their own priorities and wrecking their budgets. Medicaid, civil rights laws, crime laws, the list goes on—and behind much of it is the decision by liberals in Congress who, having been denied federal funding for pet projects by the debt crisis, just pass the bill along to the statehouse. ("Quit mandating what Louisiana has to do! If you're not going to provide us the money, let us decide," Gov. Charles Roemer exploded a few years back, speaking for his peers.) A lot of this policy is crafted in Chairman Kennedy's Labor and Human Resources Committee.

Federalism has even been assaulted by the Senate's designs on the judiciary. Remember Robert Bork? Ted Kennedy attacked him within minutes of his nomination, and he got him. Kennedy was also a prime mover (with Strom Thurmond) for sentencing guidelines, which most federal judges hate as handcuffs on their traditional independence.

The assault on federalism is even seen on the Hill. House and Senate have long been antagonistic, but I have never seen representatives so frustrated and angered by senatorial imperialism.

McGinniss may believe that for a Kennedy, not being president means failure. That's

silly, but in that case he should have reported on Teddy Kennedy's refusal to seek the presidency in 1976, 1984, and 1988 against Republicans—and his decision to seek it in 1980 against a Democratic incumbent. Apparently, the problem for McGinniss was that there are no existing Kennedy biographies for that period to draw upon. □

THE LETTERS OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS, 1945-1959

Edited by Oliver Harris

Viking / 472 pages / \$25

reviewed by THOMAS MALLON

The one time I saw him, eight years ago at a publication party for a novel he'd written three decades before, William Burroughs looked less like the "connoisseur of horror" he once called himself than someone's terribly frail grandfather, so stooped and skinny I swore I could see his ribs through the back of his jacket. The party at Mary Boone's art gallery was a freakish mix of the old downtown and the glossy new eighties version.

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The young people clinked their glassware and flashed their teeth, while Allen Ginsberg, full of energy and good will, scampered about, snapping pictures of everyone, including that bewildered-looking old Beat, the guest of honor. Jack Kerouac had been the movement's road correspondent; Ginsberg had taken care of the politics and bliss; and Burroughs was safely enshrined as its visionary of drugs and violence. That he lived to attend the party, much less be around even now, seems a sort of medical mystery. His just-published letters record the fifteen years of struggle that preceded the suc-

