

Andrew Hoberek, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11664>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Joseph Michael Gratale, « Andrew Hoberek, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2016-3, document 10, Online since 24 October 2016, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11664>

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- 1 John F. Kennedy served as president of the United States of America for about one thousand days. Despite the brief duration of his administration, President Kennedy's impact and legacy continues to attract discussion and debate amongst scholars and laypersons alike over half a century after he entered the oval office in 1961. What is it about him and his presidency that sustains public curiosity and appeal? Is it his relatively young age, and youthful appearance? Perhaps it is his optimism and dynamism, as some might describe it? Maybe it is the First Lady and the young children playing around the White House; or better yet, his achievements in the realms of domestic politics and foreign policy? Or finally, could it be his assassination which cut his life short and ended his presidency prior to the completion of his first term? On a rather engaging manner, *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy* addresses such matters, but clearly does a lot more for the reader. In this volume, Andrew Hoberek has assembled a distinguished group of scholars to evaluate various aspects of Kennedy's life, his career in politics, his accomplishments and shortcomings, Kennedy's "place" in American history and culture, as well as giving the reader a sense of the global historical context in which he was a part of during his lifetime. As stated by the editor, this "volume devotes itself to addressing the numerous ways that Kennedy was shaped by—and, even more importantly, shaped—the early 1960s and what came after (4).

2

The beginning of *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy* includes a chronology that assists in familiarizing the reader with key moments and developments pertinent to Kennedy's life. This is followed by an introductory section written by Hoberek. Subsequently, the book is divided into a total of sixteen separate articles or chapters. Every two consecutive articles seem to have a particular unity that is maintained almost to the end. Chapter one is titled "Kennedy, Boston, and Harvard," and is followed by Paul Giles chapter on "Kennedy and the Catholic Church." In the former, Eoin Cannon weaves a social history of the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys, and key

influences on JFK during his formative years in the Northeast. While focus falls particularly on Kennedy's experiences as an undergraduate student at Harvard College there is an analysis of Kennedy's "Boston-Irish-Catholic" identity throughout the essay. Paul Giles' article explores the topic of Kennedy and Catholicism. He notes the importance of religion in American politics, and contextualizes the challenging circumstances Catholic political figures, especially JFK, faced in the post-World War II period. Many Americans were concerned if Kennedy were to become president, he might end up in the "thrall to the dictates of Rome, thereby rendering the office liable to undue influence from a foreign power" (35).

3

The next two chapters both look at particular aspects of culture. Mary Ann Watson's article examines Kennedy's shrewdness in embracing the mass medium of television. His narrow victory over Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election might well have been decided during one of the first of four televised debates between the two contenders. As Watson points out, "Kennedy displayed far greater astuteness about the process of television production than his opponent did" (47). The author does not simply confine her analysis to Kennedy and the TV. On becoming president, Kennedy's political savvy extended into other areas, particularly in numerous facets of popular culture. The author of chapter four, Sean McCann, explores the transformations in American political culture during the Kennedy administration. He uses American literary works and intellectual tracts from the period to elucidate Kennedy's approach to public service and "take" on liberalism. McCann also incorporates the views and motivations of liberals who were part of Kennedy's team which serve to illustrate the dynamics and tensions that emerged during the 1960s relative to the American liberal tradition.

4

A key issue facing Americans in the 1960s was the civil rights movement and the status of African Americans. Douglas Field in his essay, "JFK and the Civil Rights Movement," examines Kennedy's approach to the inequalities and injustices that blacks experienced in the early part of that decade. Quite importantly, the article includes coverage of Kennedy's handling of civil rights in terms of its historiography. While many tend to assume that Kennedy viewed this issue as a priority, the second look and analysis that Field presents, offers the reader a slightly different picture. As the author points out, "historians have debated why it took the Kennedy administration nearly three years to take a strong moral stance on federal civil rights issues: campaigners would have to wait until February 23, 1963, for JFK to finally submit a legislative program on civil rights" (76-77). Some argue that Kennedy's measured approach to civil rights for African Americans might have been due to domestic political constraints and his desire to win a second term as president. While this might certainly be the case, it was in direct opposition, and even in contradiction to his efforts to gain an advantage over the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Kennedy, at the beginning of his presidency, spoke quite brazenly about "winning the Third World," and essentially deprive the USSR of allies and proxies from the emerging decolonized nation-states of Africa and Asia. He knew all too well, that winning "hearts and minds" in less developed countries could only occur if the USA treated its own citizens, (African Americans), with dignity, respect, and justice. This linkage between domestic and foreign issues cannot be overlooked, and I find it fitting that this volume has these two topics in juxtaposition. The linkages between these two chapters do not stop there. In Andrew Preston's article, titled "Kennedy, the Cold War, and the National Security State," the author makes some observations in regard to the

president's foreign policy agenda. Like Kennedy's stance on civil rights, his execution of foreign policy appears to have been plagued by ambivalence. As Preston points out, Kennedy was caught between the desire for security and the idealism that imbued his presidency. "The new president," he suggests, "wanted peace without the appearance of weakness and firmness without provoking war" (90). In the end, President Kennedy proved to be a committed "Cold Warrior" and did remarkably well in solidifying the national security state in American society.

5

The next two chapters continue focusing on issues relating to foreign affairs. In "JFK and Modernization Theory," Amanda Kay McVety turns our attention to US foreign aid programs and economic policies in the then called Third World. For economic and political insights in this arena, Kennedy relied on John Kenneth Galbraith and Walt W. Rostow, as well as other "action intellectuals." What came to be known as modernization theory appealed most to Kennedy who felt that it could serve to reorient US foreign policy in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In McVety's analysis, the aspirations of modernization theory were never fully realized, and in most cases proved untenable. As academics tended to disassociate themselves with its theoretical underpinnings by the late 1960s, it became clear to those making policy at the time that tackling underdevelopment would require different solutions. A related topic addressed in chapter eight written by Vaughn Rasberry, is titled "JFK and the Global Anticolonial Movement." In this article the author connects a number of themes addressed in previous sections of the volume including anticommunism, desegregation, and modernization. In the process, Rasberry isolates the intellectual/ideological thinking of the Kennedy administration toward anticolonialism during an intense Cold War period when developments moved with severe rapidity. The predicament that Kennedy faced was on one hand, supporting Western allies that happened to be colonial powers in the Cold War struggle, while on the other hand simultaneously representing the US as an anticolonial superpower concerned about development and modernization in the Third World. The author observes that JFK's "rhetorical support for decolonization did not always translate into equally robust policy, perhaps his forceful language constitutes his most enduring legacy in the postcolonial arena" (120).

6

The proceeding essay departs from the themes of international relations and the challenging negotiations part of domestic politics, and focuses on aspects of Kennedy's intellectual acumen. John Hellmann's article, "Kennedy and Postwar Intellectual Culture," focuses on a book Kennedy had written back in 1956 titled *Profiles in Courage*. He provides coverage of the postwar intellectual environment that shaped Kennedy's own intellect as well as his evolving affinity for aspects of the cultural scene prior to and following his assumption of the presidency. In "The Camelot Presidency: Kennedy and Postwar Style," Lee Konstantinou moves beyond the intellectualism of Kennedy and his circle and explores the representation of JFK's presidency as something out of King Arthur's mythic Camelot. The articulation of Camelot was first made by Kennedy's wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, in an interview a week after Kennedy's assassination. Clearly, the article reveals, President Kennedy made a very conscious effort to produce a public image of himself. His persona as an intellectual, his political shrewdness, his ability to "use" the mass media, and his "flirtations" with the world of show business, lead one to conclude that Kennedy was keenly aware of the workings of power. As Konstantinou argues, "Camelot-style nostalgia is not an alternative to a clear-sighted idea of government's

functioning, but—in the era of public relations, celebrity, and the pseudo-event—an instrumental part of effective governing” (159).

7

The assassination of the president represents a key moment not just in the mythic Camelot narrative, but also in modern American history. Peter Knight and J. D. Connor examine this event in their respective articles. In “The Kennedy Assassination and Postmodern Paranoia,” Knight explores how that event has permeated American cultural production. Not only has it been covered in books, magazine and newspaper articles, but also represented in novels, paintings, computer animations, museums and monuments, Hollywood films, and various other forms of visual art (164). This preoccupation with Kennedy’s assassination is to a large extent connected to the existence of conspiracy theories surrounding his murder, or as Knight puts it, “the mother of all conspiracy theories.” The suspicion, and as some would describe, the paranoia prevalent in the US following Kennedy’s assassination and the conclusions of the Warren Commission Report which sought to dispel any discussion of conspiracy, seem to have created an entire “culture industry” around the assassination and other similar plots involving elements of the government. As Knight suggests, there seems to exist a “clear connection between the Kennedy assassination and the desire for and distrust of knowledge” (170)—it is, as the author notes, a characteristic that is part and parcel of the postmodern condition. J. D. Connor in “An Eternal Flame: The Kennedy Assassination, National Grief, and National Nostalgia” begins his article by focusing on Jackie Kennedy’s actions after the assassination—her planning of the funeral, and various interviews she conducted with the mass media. The key theme is commemoration. Image representation and management was critical during JFK’s political career; there seemed to be no reason this would discontinue even with his passing. Magazines, particularly *Life*, played an important role through various editions in memorializing the slain president, but other avenues of cultural expression including art and architecture contributed to the construction of public memory. For Connor, these gestures “amounted to an abandonment of the Kennedy era’s willed unification of national mission and personal style through the immediate application of reflection” (192-193).

8

The concluding four chapters appear to diverge from the coupling unity of the previous chapters. In “Free the World and Your Ass Will Follow: JFK and Revolutionary Freedom in 1960s Youth Culture,” Sally Bachner reflects on Kennedy’s appeal among the youth of America with particular attention to the more politically active segment of that demographic group. Through his rhetoric, the author observes, JFK “presents himself not just as a figure of youthful energy, but as a champion of resistance to a repressive political establishment” (204). Kennedy’s stylized charisma, and the activities of key countercultural figures from the latter part of the decade are also explored by Bachner. Michael Trask in his essay, “The Kennedy Family Romance”, looks at JFK, the First Family, and the Kennedy family at large, and the role they collectively played in the evolving conception of the American family in the latter part of the twentieth century. The author considers “the possibilities of appropriating the Kennedy family to a subversive or “queer” end, at least when its presumed excesses appear to threaten the abidingly puritanical norms of American life” (211). In chapter fifteen, titled “Kennedy and the Conservatives,” Robert Mason explores the appeal JFK had for conservative leaders and figures in the USA. Interestingly enough, “Kennedy’s enduring and outstanding popularity encouraged conservative politicians to join liberals in claiming his legacy”

(225). This was particularly the case following his assassination. Aspects of Kennedy's policies relating to domestic economic issues, his stance on foreign policy matters, his approach to the mass media were in part, appropriated by conservatives. In the final chapter of the volume, fittingly titled "The Kennedy Legacy: From Hagiography to Exposé and Back Again," Loren Glass reflects on how Kennedy has been represented in historical narrative over the years. Glass's analysis reveals that at the level of historiography, there is a cyclical pattern that shifts between highlighting Kennedy's character shortcomings, and to reinforcing existing mythic conceptions, or as she frames it, seeing Kennedy's legacy "as both paranoid fantasy and idealistic aspiration" (248).

9

If one is keenly interested in acquiring an understanding of John F. Kennedy through books there are certainly numerous options. One may choose, for example, a focused study on some aspect of his life, his presidency, or his assassination. If the reader finds this too narrow of an approach, then there is always the option of selecting a biography. While biography has a range of advantages, one drawback might be that the author is committed to a particular mode of representation that is consistent throughout the study. Instead of capturing the multidimensional qualities of an historical figure, some biographies fall into the trap of explaining complex developments or decisions in an individual's life with "a single bullet." Having read Andrew Hoberek's edited volume, *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy*, it is evident to me that this book provides the reader with a number of important advantages over similar publications. To begin with, the volume contains scholarly articles that address various key aspects of Kennedy's life and legacy. These articles are neither brief nor lengthy. In addition, with numerous contributors, the reader has access to a range of opinions, interpretive analyses, and representations of JFK. In both breadth and depth, this volume, in a most impressive manner, insightfully captures the multifarious qualities of John F. Kennedy and his enduring impact from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present.

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