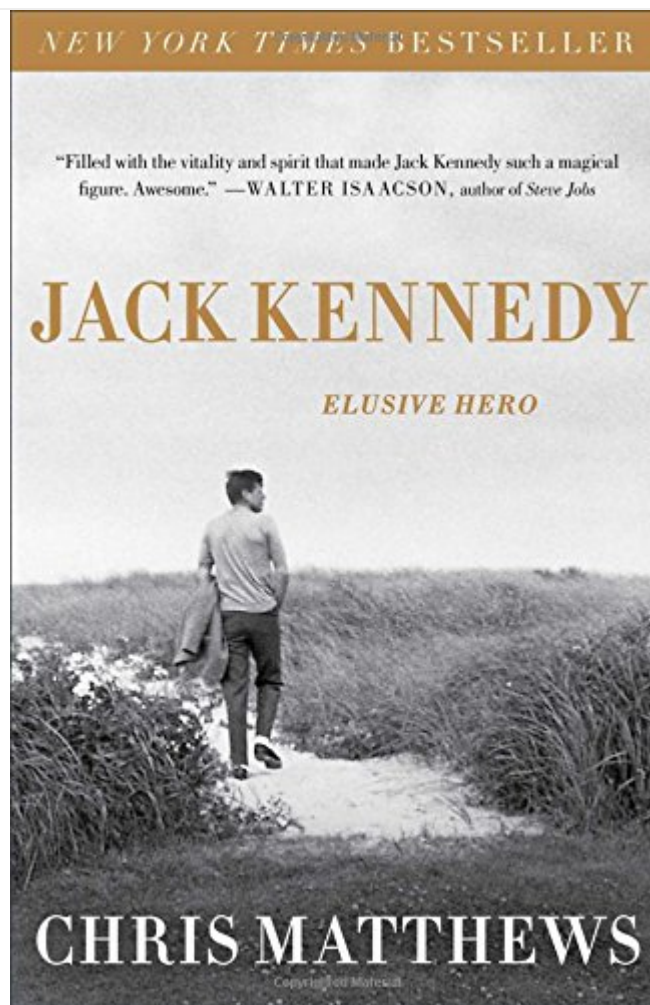


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

Jack Kennedy: Elusive Hero



Volume 45 (2012)

Reviewed Work(s)

Jack Kennedy: Elusive Hero. By Chris Matthews. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011). Pp. 496. Cloth, \$27.50.

The subtitle of Chris Matthews' book on John F. Kennedy derived from Jacqueline Kennedy's description of her husband whom she called "that unforgettable, elusive man" (x). He was at once mischievous, sickly, well-read, political, professional, and human. He was also the hero who pulled the world back from the precipice of nuclear holocaust by successfully ending the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and the man whose perception of war, learned from his own experience, kept the "disaster" that was the Bay of Pigs "from becoming a calamity" (335). Matthews' tale of the "two Jacks"(25)— the description he gives the dichotomy between the sickly boy who loved history and aspired to be like the heroes he read about and the detached spectator watching events unfold before him—is also the story of the hero and the mere mortal.

Matthews set out to answer the question Jack Kennedy himself offered as the reason people read biographies: what was he like? (10) Using a plethora of the most noted secondary works on Kennedy, interviews with close Kennedy associates, oral history recordings from the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program and the recorded interviews of loyalist Kenneth O'Donnell, Matthews learns that Jack Kennedy faced adversity despite his privileged life. His glorious older brother Joe, Jr. was to be the family standard-bearer, the one his father envisioned would break down the social prejudices against Irish Catholics by attaining high political office. Less was expected of the sickly second son, who, according to Matthews, faced a "Hobson's choice: to fail to match what's gone before guarantees disappointment; to match it guarantees nothing" (14). Jack spent many days confined to a sickbed due to unexplained illnesses. He would later be diagnosed with Addison's disease. Additionally, the malady of a chronic back condition as a result of one leg being shorter than the other meant that he spent much of his life in pain. He never complained of his ailments and would present himself to friends and the voting public as robust and healthy; any appearance of infirmity was blamed on injuries sustained while serving in the Navy during the Second World War.

The experience of grave illness imbued Jack with a sense of his own mortality. He lived vicariously through the heroes he read about in history books while bedridden and then lived each moment of his own life as if it were his last. His solitary confinement also instilled in him a lifelong need for companionship, and Jack had the personality and charm, what Matthews characterizes as “a lightness...a wry Irishness” and a “crossover appeal,” that made him instantly likeable to everyone (15, 28). The mischievousness of his youth as a “Mucker” at Choate gave way to the seriousness of a young man hardened by war and concerned with world affairs. Matthews argues, with supporting statements from Kennedy’s friends, that the notion that Jack was forced into politics as a result of young Joe’s death in the war is a myth. He cites as evidence that Jack majored in government, his reading interests were in history and current events, and his Harvard senior thesis on Britain’s reluctance to go to war in 1938, which all point to his natural transition to a political life (67).

The lessons learned from experience are also a central theme in Matthews’ narrative. He describes the knowledge Jack acquired from his first run for Congress in 1946 for the need for a “Kennedy Party” separate from the traditional Democratic organization. His successful efforts on the hustings, made all the more admirable when considering his debilitating back problems, cultivated a circle of supporters loyal to him personally. To these people, he was more than simply the Democratic Party’s candidate. He utilized the Kennedy Party in every one of his campaigns for office, including his run for the presidency in 1960. It was at once novel but also in keeping with the tradition of the old pol-style politicking that was his heritage. Matthews describes the Kennedy Party as comprised of workers who “[made] a personal investment in the candidate’s future,” yet ironically, the Irish and other ethnic groups needed to transcend “a certain kind of old politics” connoted in the word “Boston” (136, 140). Although Jack despised the antiquated campaign mechanism, his “secretaries” were his generation’s vernacular for professional political operatives and ward bosses (127). During campaigns, patronage was doled out, votes were bought and the organizational structure of the Kennedy Party was similar to the Irish-American political machines of the late nineteenth century.

Along with Jack's "metamorphosis from dilettante to professional" (210-211) comes a change in Matthews' perception of him. By the time he addresses the presidency, one of the two "Jacks" is gone: the sickly boy with the love of history who learns how to become a professional politician through hard work. The Jack that emerges is the hero with the cool detachment who has compartmentalized the various facets of his life and often appears as a spectator to the historical events unfolding before him. Matthews is an obvious admirer of JFK and his treatment of the Kennedy presidency is almost one of hero worship. This extreme bias taints Matthews' objectivity in analyzing key events in the Kennedy presidency. For example, while Matthews questions Kennedy's rationale for believing his advisers that an invasion of Cuba by 1,500 Cuban exiles would ultimately be successful, he extols Kennedy's accomplishment in keeping the Bay of Pigs from "becoming a calamity" and finds merit in the decision to let "those men meet their fate on the beach rather than commit his country to possible direct confrontation with the Soviet Union" (335-336). With Kennedy's firmness in defending West Berlin, the accomplishment of a Limited Test Ban Treaty, his commitment to civil rights, strong-arming steel executives into resolving the steel price crisis, and saving the world from the perils of nuclear war, the Bay of Pigs appears to be the only blemish on his record. Matthews even forgives the coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem using Jack Kennedy's own words: in a dictated memo on Monday, November 4, 1963, Kennedy assumes a considerable amount of the responsibility for Diem's overthrow and for the lack of discussion preceding the signing of the order to initiate such an action. He regretted giving the go-ahead without having made clear his intentions that Diem was to be deposed, not murdered (391). But even heroes have their flaws and Matthews tends to downplay Kennedy's.

Matthews treats lightly Kennedy's short-comings, those characteristics that make him appear imperfect and human as opposed to a faultless demigod, an image that seemed to emerge immediately following his assassination. While he does touch upon the fact that Kennedy had at times hurt his wife by excluding her (269) and through his immediate absence following the birth of their stillborn daughter (212-213), he chalks up Kennedy's infidelities, "girling," (357) to his being his father's son. He claims that Jackie "knew what she was getting herself into when she married Jack" (162). He recounts that when Jack heard the substance

of a conversation between his lifelong friend, Lem Billings, and Jackie on her wedding day regarding his worldliness, he was “pleased because he felt it would make her better understand him” (166). Similarly, Jackie’s friend Rachel “Bunny” Mellon believes she possessed “old world views of men” and that “[i]t was her fault to marry Jack Kennedy” (358).

Matthews’ seemingly blasé treatment of this aspect of Kennedy’s character undermines his stated effort to determine what Kennedy was like. Kennedy possessed some less than admirable traits and these faults were part of his overall make up, but Matthews, like Kennedy, chose to compartmentalize these blemishes.

The public splendor of the Kennedy marriage masked the stark reality in yet another example of “the two Jacks.” Matthews, like so many others, prefers the Camelot image of John F. Kennedy proffered by Jackie Kennedy following her husband’s assassination. This mythologized Kennedy is lauded for his strong points while his failings are seemingly dismissed. The hero image offers a viable coping mechanism against the very violent and public nature of his death. He was a martyr to the cause of public service, a presidency unfinished. He was like his own hero Raymond Asquith, “[d]ebonair and brilliant and brave” (39).

The events in Matthews’ book are well known to those familiar with John F. Kennedy and his administration. Matthews’ journalistic approach to storytelling condenses the longer trials and anecdotes encompassing the full Kennedy biography. Historians do tend to raise an eyebrow when journalists dabble in historical biographies, and while Matthews’ narrative is entertaining, well written and factual, it does not enhance existing scholarship by revealing something previously unknown about Jack Kennedy. On the contrary, Matthews’ deep admiration for his subject is evident in his cherry-picking only the most flattering turns of phrase from major secondary works on Kennedy. His use of oral histories and interviews with close Kennedy associates brings an additional biased, albeit personal, tone to the narrative. He said he set out to discover what Jack Kennedy was like, but as longtime aide and special counsel Ted Sorensen opined, “different parts of [Kennedy’s] life, work and thoughts were seen by many people—but no one saw it all” (159). Because no one saw it all, Matthews portrays a sickly boy who loved history, who became the master politician in spite of physical ailments and assumed the presidency, saving the world from nuclear

war. His character sketch of Kennedy is that of a hero with minimal flaws, hardly a fair assessment of such a complicated individual. In this vein, Matthews' JFK remains elusive.

Shannon E. Mohan

American University



Published by



[View all posts by](#)

Book Reviews

20th century, Politics

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑