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BOOKS IN GENERAL

The Life and Death of Kennedy

CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

In Britain one is, I suppose, either a politician or not; in America the line is not so clear. There, the cabinet-member or trusted adviser of one government does not usually go into opposition on the fall of that government; he goes back into private life, often with hope of returning to politics when the government changes again. Normally, such hopes hinge on the alternations of the parties in power. At present it is not so much a question of Democrat or Republican; there is an air of *fin de république* around; a dynastic loyalty stirs; the servants of the murdered Caesar have much good to say of young Octavian. John Kennedy, Mr Schlesinger\* tells us, 'was particularly proud of his brother, always balanced, never rattled, his eye fixed on the ultimate as well as on the immediate.' 'Bob's unique role,' says Mr Sorensen† in his first chapter, 'is implicit in nearly every chapter that follows.' And Mr Sorensen also reminds us of a pertinent observation made by John Kennedy in his senatorial days: 'Just as I went into politics when Joe died, if anything happened to me tomorrow my brother Bobby would run for my seat.'

We can hear him running now, if we listen; Schlesinger and Sorensen are listening. Nothing in either of these important and valuable books is inconsistent with the hypothesis that both authors expect to serve, before long, in the administration of President Robert Kennedy. I believe that this expectation exists, is reasonable and honourable, and is a limiting factor on the candour, and therefore the value to the public, of both books. Mr Sorensen has written a dry book, even a dull one; he could certainly produce a blaze if he chose, but his fires are banked; there is nothing in these sober pages that could embarrass or hamper a future Secretary of State. Granted the length of the book, the subjects treated, and the considerable amount of information conveyed, this feat is in itself a proof of Mr Sorensen's formidable talents.

Mr Schlesinger, on the other hand, is entertaining, easy, sometimes witty; there is a touch of Pepys, of Boswell, even of Pooter about him, as he revels in it all. He is too much the writer, the don, even the ham, to be capable of Mr Sorensen's iron discretion. So much the better Mr Schlesinger's book, so much the more remote, I suspect, Mr Schlesinger's person from the future throne. Happy consequences, both.

*A Thousand Days* has been much condemned, in America, for its 'indiscretions', notably for disclosing that Kennedy planned to drop Dean Rusk. ('Drop Rusk on Hanoi,' said one of the peppier placards at the last Washington march.) All indiscretions are indiscreet - 'if he did it once he may do it again' - yet some indiscretions have an in-built teleological discretion at their core. This particular disclosure is a flaming indiscretion in the view of the Johnson administration since it diminishes what is called the 'credibility' of an already sufficiently improbable Secretary of State. But what is scandalous under Johnson, damaging to Johnson, may be helpful to the second Kennedy, and pardoned by him, with the obvious reservations? In any case, entertaining as the book is, it certainly could have been much more entertaining: there are moments when one seems to hear the muffled struggle as some lively anecdote is suppressed for the time being. Nothing is here that could hurt any Kennedy candidature, no scarves are plucked from Caesar's images.

Not that that particular Caesar had any real need of scarves. Both these books on Kennedy, which complement each other, record the emergence of an unmistakably great man: a powerful mind and indomitable will at work, steadily divesting themselves of the inherited and unnecessary, and beginning, towards the end, to master the multiple, unruly energies of the greatest power in history. The natural momentum of this power-system is towards world-domination: throughout the world 'power-vacuums' 'have' to be filled, dependents advised or admonished, potential enemies bought, besieged or destroyed. This sheer momentum dragged Kennedy through the Bay of Pigs and left him, on the far side, a sadder, dirtier and very much wiser man.

That salutary fiasco shattered, as these books show, all the idols of the Establishment - the Joint Chiefs, the State Department, and especially the CIA - and led Kennedy to depend increasingly on his own judgment, and on those whom he chose to consult informally. The momentum remained; he sought, with increasing success, to control it. That the attempted installation of Russian rockets in Cuba was answered not by invasion but by selective blockade, is proof of the degree of control he had won. What the

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