

6-21-1993

Good-bye to All That: The Rise and Demise of Irish America

Shaun O'Connell

University of Massachusetts Boston, shaun.oconnell@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Connell, Shaun (1993) "Good-bye to All That: The Rise and Demise of Irish America," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol9/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Good-bye to All That

The Rise and Demise of Irish America

Shaun O'Connell

The works discussed in this article include:

- The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley 1874–1958*,
by Jack Beatty. 571 pages. Addison-Wesley, 1992. \$25.00.
JFK: Reckless Youth, by Nigel Hamilton. 898 pages.
Random House, 1992. \$30.00.
Textures of Irish America, by Lawrence J. McCaffrey.
236 pages. Syracuse University Press, 1992. \$29.95.
*Militant and Triumphant: William Henry O'Connell and
the Catholic Church in Boston*, by James M. O'Toole. 324 pages.
University of Notre Dame Press, 1992. \$30.00.
-

When I was growing up in a Boston suburb, three larger-than-life public figures defined what it meant to be an Irish-American. I could not have put it that way at the time, of course; only retrospection, aided by fresh information, yields a sense of the past's design. In that sense, as William Faulkner often reminded us, the past is never over; it is still happening — still taking shape in our minds, still shaping our lives.

Cardinal William Henry O'Connell towered over Greater Boston's Irish Catholics like a colossus. A framed picture of the cardinal — stiff-backed, big-bellied, a summer straw hat set square on his large head, his face set in a characteristically grim visage, his imposing frame garbed in a black, priestly suit — stood in a place of honor in the family "front room." James Michael Curley's legendary largess and larceny, particularly while he was mayor of Boston, made him the center of many uproarious conversations when my O'Connell clan gathered. Most important, John F. Kennedy's elegance, grace, and intelligence gave young Irish Americans of my generation a new way to think of themselves. I first saw this young author, war hero, and playboy — in 1948, when he was running for his second term as a congressman — marching in a Fourth of July parade in my hometown, Marlboro. I thought then that

Shaun O'Connell is professor of English, University of Massachusetts Boston.

he was a kind of man who was entirely new, a man born and bred beyond the pale of anything I had previously known. Though I know far more about JFK now, I still see him as an exemplary figure.

In the mythic Irish-American family of my imagination, Cardinal O'Connell was a stern father figure to the Irish Catholics — in those days, to think of yourself as “Irish” was automatically to declare yourself as Catholic — who urged us to take pride in ourselves and in our faith, as did he, but also to heed our duties and responsibilities, as *he* defined them and as *he* assigned their reinforcement to vigilant nuns — elder sisters acting as doctrinal enforcers who imposed their wills on parochial school students with ready rulers! Mayor Curley was a scampish uncle figure, a man as well known for his foibles and his failures as for his achievements. Jack Kennedy required neither obedience nor forgiveness, for he was the brightest young son (our Prince Hal) who held out to us the promise of transcendence from the parochial. For Jack Kennedy, all politics and all religion were *not* local.

Cardinal O'Connell died in 1944; since then the Boston archdiocese that he molded to his own and to Rome's will has changed dramatically. Mayor Curley died in 1958; his cohesive Irish-American voting bloc even then was dispersing in its gravitation from the ghetto to the suburbs. John F. Kennedy died in 1963, leaving a legacy of permanent loss in the national psyche. Indeed, all three men — each a master at controlling his public image — have come under recent scrutiny and reevaluation.

Now, in the hands of a new generation of biographers, each figure is seen more fully for the man he was. Cardinal O'Connell, in James M. O'Toole's solid and revealing biography, turns out to have been a prince of the church with a hollow crown. Mayor Curley, in Jack Beatty's lively and enlightening biography, turns out to have been far more corrupt than popular mythology — abetted by Edwin O'Connor's sentimental treatment of a Curley alter ego in his novel *The Last Hurrah* — portrays him. Jack Kennedy, in Nigel Hamilton's flawed but still useful biography, turns out — surprisingly, after all of the scandalmongering that has surrounded JFK's dramatic life and death — to have been a dazzling figure as a young man; he is even more impressive than my youthful imagination conceived him to be when I first saw him.

Taken together, these three figures can be seen as representative men in the movement of Irish America from the immigrant ships to the presidency, from persecution and patronization to what Lawrence J. McCaffrey, in *Textures of Irish America*, calls “respectability and acceptability.”¹ These representative men mark sharp changes in American culture: the rise and incorporation of nineteenth-century ethnic immigrants into the American power elite, the development in style from narrow righteousness, personified by the focused life and vision of Cardinal O'Connell, to open variousness, embodied in the style and character of John F. Kennedy.

Irish immigrants first registered their presence in their parishes and wards — those territorial definitions of Irish-American ghettos. By the time John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, he had persuaded a slim majority of Americans that his first loyalties were neither to the papacy nor to Tammany — or to any other urban Irish political machine. Kennedy, then, took the American Irish out of the parish and the ghetto and left them on their own, without the old assurances and limitations of self-definition.

In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Daniel Patrick Moynihan — who made his own symbolic journey from Hell’s Kitchen to Harvard and then to a seat in the U.S. Senate — called Kennedy’s brief reign (not Curley’s demise) a “last hurrah” for Irish America.

On the day he died, the President of the United States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Majority Leader of the United States Senate, the Chairman of the National Committee were all Irish, all Catholic, all Democrats. It will not come again.²

It was, we might say, a very Irish story — long and hard in the making, brief in fulfillment, full of sentiment, and quickly past.

This passage from “someplace to no place,” as McCaffrey puts it, began in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1859, with the birth of William O’Connell, the youngest of eleven children born to immigrants from County Cavan in north-central Ireland.³ John O’Connell, with his wife, Bridget, had come over to the “other side” to work in the Lowell mills. As their family gained a footing, they looked for better things for their youngest son. So William O’Connell was chosen for a religious vocation by his family, just as later John F. Kennedy, after the death of his older brother in World War II, was marked for political office by his ambitious father. The Irish-American saga has been one long and circuitous climb toward the promised land of acceptance and respectability through success in public institutions: particularly in the church and the government. Only now, with the clarity of hindsight, can we both count the costs and measure the gains of this struggle.

William O’Connell — priest in 1884, rector of the American College in Rome in 1895, bishop of Portland in 1901 — sought status through identification with the will of the Catholic church’s Roman leaders, particularly the pope. O’Connell’s own inclinations to curry favor with powerful elders conveniently coincided with a movement toward authoritarianism in the Catholic church and a discouragement of “Americanism,” the local-control movement that was condemned by Pope Leo XIII in 1899. His successor in 1903, Pius X, moved against a heresy of modernism, the “higher criticism” of biblical and other sources of authority. “Ultramontane orthodoxy” became the prevailing way of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.⁴

While O’Connell — archbishop of Boston in 1907, cardinal in 1911 — looked beyond the mountains to Rome for his authority, he looked to the local to secure his power base. “The Puritan has passed, the Catholic remains,” declared O’Connell on the occasion of the centennial of the Boston diocese, October 1908.⁵ O’Connell became a celebrity in Boston, a leader of his flock and, despite his ethnic chauvinism, an honored figure among the Yankee-Brahmin class. Like John Fitzgerald and James Michael Curley, O’Connell understood his symbolic role as leader of his clan, O’Toole rightly points out. “They wrote the history of the last century; we must make the history of the coming one,” declared O’Connell.⁶ No need to explain who “they” were! Yet O’Connell established himself among the power elite of the Brahmin-Yankee class more firmly than either James Michael Curley or Joseph P. Kennedy.

Though O’Connell claimed the high ground — both morally and territorially in Boston — and spoke contemptuously of politicians, he too knew how (and when) to play the game. For example, he won the day in his curious fight against child-labor

laws in the 1920s and he successfully thwarted a proposed state lottery in 1935. He opposed birth control as, in the words of the *Pilot*, a newspaper under his control, “a practice which God Almighty has forbidden,” when the Massachusetts legislature considered (and defeated) legislation allowing the sale of birth control products in 1942.⁷ However, the cardinal kept silent on other questions, like women’s suffrage (which he opposed), or he registered his position late, as he did in opposing prohibition. “In effect, his church was the ward of which he was boss,” says O’Toole.⁸ In the Massachusetts legislature, O’Connell was fittingly known as “Number One.”⁹

O’Connell, representing the Catholic church and suggesting that he spoke for the pope and even higher authority, intimidated Irish-American politicians, particularly Curley, and presided over the union of Irish-American families like the patriarch he was; for example, Cardinal O’Connell married Joseph P. Kennedy and Rose Fitzgerald in his private chapel in October 1914. The cardinal lived lavishly, in his home in the Back Bay; then he moved to Brookline in 1916; he then established himself regally in his Renaissance palazzo in Brighton in 1926. He owned a summer colony on Boston’s North Shore. He drove a Pierce-Arrow, bought with contributions from laymen. He was a member of The Country Club in Brookline, though he did not actually play golf, and he joined many other exclusive Brahmin clubs. He went to Europe so often that he was nicknamed Gangplank Bill. He also maintained a home in the Bahamas, where he vacationed for three months each winter.¹⁰ Cardinal O’Connell’s life of splendor and conspicuous consumption reflected glory on his generally poor and socially insecure followers, just as did James Michael Curley’s grand house on the Jamaica way or the Kennedy “compound” of grand summer homes at Hyannisport.

O’Connell rallied his new-model army of Catholics in an Irish-American church under his command. “The Bishop of the Church stands like a sentinel,” he wrote in a pastoral letter in 1904. “His see is a watch tower whence he scans his own peaceful camp, ever alert against aught that could work disorder in the ranks.”¹¹ His motto was *Vigor in Arduis*, and he saw his life as a “struggle . . . through storm and tempest.”¹²

O’Toole’s thorough and fair-minded inquiry has uncovered much “storm and tempest” in O’Connell’s life, which was kept secret from the members of his flock, who saw him, as I did in that front-room photograph, as the embodiment of holiness and rectitude. When he was bishop of Portland, O’Connell took for his own use over \$25,000 in church funds, which he had to pay back after he left. O’Connell’s *Letters* (1915) were fabricated to suit his image as a plain, determined, and holy man. Perhaps overgenerously, O’Toole describes them as “not really forgeries in the usual sense,” but rather, “a form of early autobiography in epistle form,” because O’Connell believed that “edification was more important than accuracy.”¹³ Less generous spirits might call the production of such letters a deceit in the service of public relations!

However, these matters were venial sins compared with O’Connell’s major transgression, when he condoned the sins of others and then lied to the pope in his effort to cover up the transgression. Father James P. E. O’Connell, the cardinal’s nephew, became his secretary, his representative, “his uncle’s alter ego.”¹⁴ In 1914 Cardinal O’Connell’s nephew was made a monsignor at the age of thirty, an appointment that came a year and a half after his secret marriage! James O’Connell led a double life —

a monsignor in Boston and a husband in Manhattan, a man known as Roe (for the roe was the emblem of the O'Connell clan).

At the same time, another priest, Father David J. Toomey, the editor of the *Pilot*, who lived in Boston with the cardinal and the monsignor on Bay State Road, married a woman in Manhattan and also led a double life. When Toomey's wife, who had not known she had married a priest (as James O'Connell's wife did know), complained to the cardinal, her silence was purchased by the cardinal's attorney. Later, Toomey, after having been excommunicated, accused James of blackmailing his uncle and accused the cardinal of homosexuality, to support which charge O'Toole finds nothing more than circumstantial evidence.¹⁵ What is clear is that when Cardinal O'Connell was asked about the case of his nephew by Benedict XV, O'Connell lied to the pope.

Amazingly, O'Connell survived as cardinal of the Boston archdiocese until his death in 1944. His image of rectitude, strongly compromised within the Catholic church, remained untarnished in the mind of the general public until O'Toole's biography revealed the cardinal to be a far more flawed, yet a much more interesting man, than he wished us to imagine him. My own mind still reels with wonder to learn the truth about the devious man behind the august image.

Cardinal O'Connell personified the uncompromised and uncompromising man of faith, an image designed to intimidate his enemies and overwhelm his followers. "There can be no true morality unless it is founded on religious principle," he affirmed, though his own morality was severely compromised.¹⁶ Though he sought respect with a passion for himself, his church, and his Irish-American kind, he did so with a closed mind and a repressive hand.

O'Connell joined the Puritan attack on indecency in stage performance and in literature, guarding his flock's morality through acts of censorship which at times became ludicrous, as when he opposed Sunday baseball and attacked radio crooners. He was set against free speculation about time, space, and the cosmos, for such intellectual inquiry was nothing but "a cloak beneath which lies the ghastly apparition of atheism."¹⁷ Only eternal vigilance and deference to his will could prevail against the enemies of doubt and heresy, which lurked without and within. Faith could be sustained, apparently, only through ignorance.

Cardinal O'Connell chose from the many modes of Catholicism the most repressive and militant of strains, one which drove many of the best and brightest of young Irish Catholics away from their smug and stifling church. In his balanced assessment, James T. O'Toole credits Cardinal O'Connell with transforming Irish Americans' "preoccupation with discrimination, both real and perceived, from the whine of self-pity into the confidence of self-assertion," but O'Connell tolerated no self-assertion against *his* will. Cardinal O'Connell, O'Toole adds, oversaw the transformation "from ghetto Catholicism, fearful of nativist hostility, to public Catholicism, eager to compete on equal terms in American society and to succeed," yet he would have his followers enter the wider world with narrow minds and closed hearts.¹⁸ At the end of the day, William Henry O'Connell excused his own immorality and confused his own self-image with reality and demanded that his followers worship that carefully created image. Now that image is shattered.

James Michael Curley. Though fortunes slipped through his quick hands and he lived — in his twenty-one-room neo-Georgian mansion (with the famous shamrocks

cut into the shutters) and on his many trips abroad — in the lavish style of William Henry Cardinal O’Connell or Joseph P. Kennedy, Curley (having served four terms as mayor of Boston) called himself the Mayor of the Poor; most of his Irish-American constituents accepted this self-serving, but still plausible, self-image. However, many other Bostonians, ranging from the outraged Yankee Brahmins to the embarrassed middle-class Irish, with equal justification called Curley a crook (a man who served two jail terms) and a damn liar (a man who undercut his own rhetorical reaches with a wink of irony and complicity). Perhaps, take him for all and all, both designations were true. Whatever he was, he was never just plain Jim (*certainly* never a folksy Jimmy) Curley.

On the other hand, John F. Kennedy was Jack until he was transmogrified through assassination. Now, in a demythifying biography by Nigel Hamilton, *JFK: Reckless Youth*, Kennedy again becomes Jack; even more, Hamilton transforms this charming and sexually adventurous young man into “Don John,” the name the young Kennedy sometimes ironically used in signing his high-spirited letters to friends.¹⁹

However, only his full name affirmed James Michael Curley: his dignity, his bravura, his pretention. He would be James Michael Curley just as Henry Cabot Lodge — Brahmin archenemy of the Boston Irish, U.S. senator, and advocate of immigration restrictions — was Henry Cabot Lodge. In Boston they used to say that the Cabots spoke only to the Lodges, perhaps a characteristic example of hub-of-the-universe hyperbole. However, it is certainly fair to say that neither the Cabots nor the Lodges spoke well of Curley, the Kennedys, or their kind.

John F. (“Honey Fitz”) Fitzgerald, grandfather of the future president, loved to tell the story of his encounter in 1897, when Fitzgerald was a member of the U.S. House and an advocate of an open immigration policy, with Senator Lodge, who was even then pushing for immigration restriction, for Lodge believed that “the lowering of a great race means not only its decline but that of civilization.”

“You are an impudent young man,” Lodge said to Fitzgerald. “Do you think the Jews or the Italians have any right in this country?”

“As much right as your father or mine,” replied Fitzgerald. “It was only a difference of a few ships.”²⁰

In Boston, of course, those “few ships” made all the difference.

“James Michael Curley and Henry Cabot Lodge: the names bracket the duality of Massachusetts’ polarized political culture,” writes Jack Beatty in his splendid and spirited study of Curley, *The Rascal King*.²¹ Each man personified his group in the passion-play conflicts between Yankee and Celt that held Boston in thrall for more than a century.²² Each man, playing the green card, sought his own political advantage by denouncing the other, thus affirming a close tribal relationship of necessary antagonism.

The Great Famine of Ireland during the 1840s began what Henry James once described as “the tide of foreign immigration,” which, at the time, “had scarcely begun to break upon the rural strongholds of the New England race; it had at most begun to splash them with the salt Hibernian Spray.”²³ The intruding Irish tidal wave, which sent the Brahmins into retreat onto the high and dry ground of Beacon Hill or into the Back Bay, the swampy new landfill along the Charles River, or out of Boston entirely, declined in the 1920s — after a Lodge-inspired literacy law was

passed in 1917 and Immigration acts were passed in 1921 and 1924 — and finally spent itself during Boston's "busing" crisis of the mid-1970s. Then Irish Americans were pitted against each other and against black Bostonians in a conflict which, it is now clear, was, paradoxically, the last moment of the Boston Irish community's cultural isolation.

Boston's current mayor, Raymond Flynn, opposed court-ordered integration of the city's public schools in the mid-1970s, when he was a Massachusetts representative; at the time he said, "The sacred principles on which this nation was founded are threatened by a new tyranny, a tyranny dressed in judicial robes."²⁴ However, as mayor of the city, Flynn, a South Boston Irish American, has worked diligently to end segregation in all areas of the city.

It is not Curley — a one-term governor of the commonwealth, who liked to be addressed as Governor when he was not running for office as Mayor of the Poor — but John F. Kennedy who stands, frozen forever in midstride, preserved in a heroic statue, near the equally exalted statue of Henry Cabot Lodge, on the front lawn of the Massachusetts State House. Lodge and Kennedy, not Curley, loom over Boston, the city on a hill. Indeed, Curley has had *two* statues erected in his memory, works more fittingly located *behind* Boston's new City Hall, but it is Kennedy who has displaced Curley in the popular imagination as the primary Irish-American representative man. Though the Kennedy style, as much British as Bostonian, as Hamilton and Garry Wills have pointed out, was not noticeably Irish American (fedoras, cigars, bombast, winks, nudges, and glad hands), John F. Kennedy did embody his tribe's apotheosis.

Kennedy's election in 1960 released Irish immigrants and their descendants from a century of second-class citizenry, psychic inferiority, and compensatory aggressiveness in America, particularly in Boston, the "next parish" to the west of Ireland. The American Irish had had their hopes raised in the presidential campaign of 1928, but Tammany-produced Al Smith was defeated by Herbert Hoover and those great expectations for tribal recognition through political ascendancy had to wait for another generation, which produced an Irish-American politician in a more eclectic and gracious style.

"John F. Kennedy's presidency symbolized the Irish-American success story," notes Lawrence J. McCaffrey in his stately volume, a summing up of a long career of distinguished scholarship on Irish and Irish-American history and culture, *Textures of Irish America*.²⁵ Then, after a thousand days of Irish-American ascendancy, things fell apart. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 confirmed Irish Americans' tragic and sentimental visions of life. The coalition of voters put together for Kennedy's slim victory and held together by Robert F. Kennedy until his assassination in 1968 broke up. Many Irish Americans consoled themselves by voting Republican in succeeding elections. At least Ronald Reagan at times *acted* the part of the Irish-American president, as when he drank beer in a Dorchester pub while visiting Boston, and President Reagan spoke for a white suburban majority, a category in which Irish Americans finally felt themselves accepted, though perhaps at the cost of connection with their true history of oppression and faith in a nurturing government.

Kennedy went from Boston's suburbs to the White House; in his funeral procession from the White House to Arlington National Cemetery, he passed into legend and became his admirers. Now, however, Kennedy has become the subject of lurid revelations, ranging from Mafia molls and murderers to Marilyn Monroe seductions

and betrayals. “Has the actual as well as the literary Irish-American trek from ghetto to suburbs been a passage from someplace to no place?” asks McCaffrey.²⁶ The exemplary lives of William Henry Cardinal O’Connell, James Michael Curley, and John F. Kennedy, the three most influential Boston Irishmen in the twentieth century, hint at a complex answer to McCaffrey’s well-posed question about the significance of the rise and dispersal of the Irish in America.

The Kennedy, Curley, and Lodge families have had a long history of strain and occasional cooperation that reveals the tense but enduring relations between Yankees and Celts — a veritable “Boston marriage” of grudging, half-loving protagonists. John Fitzgerald was inspired as a boy by a glimpse inside the Beacon Hill home of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. A newsboy invited in out of the cold by an Irish servant employed by Lodge, Fitzgerald was shown the opulent children’s playroom at 31 Beacon Street; there he realized his life’s mission, according to Doris Kearns Goodwin in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*. “I stood in the doorway,” recalled Fitzgerald, “and made a promise to myself that someday, when I had children of my own, I would be in a position to give them all the toys that these children of privilege had enjoyed.”²⁷ Thus would the Fitzgerald and Kennedy children surely receive, for better and for worse, what young Fitzgerald, while still a child himself, promised them.

Fitzgerald, rising rapidly from Boston’s North End Irish ward, gained the family’s first foothold on power and prestige through his election — despite the opposition of the future president’s other grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, boss of Ward 2 — to public offices: Fitzgerald became a three-term congressman and a two-term mayor of Boston. Politics was indeed the way up, though the climb was harsh and narrow. As in the Catholic church for Cardinal O’Connell, in politics the Fitzgeralds, the Kennedys, and Curley learned that men did what they had to do to get where they got; they and their families also paid the price for their consuming ambitions.

James Michael Curley intimidated Honey Fitz from running for mayor of Boston in 1914 by threatening public revelation of the mayor’s flirtation with one Elizabeth (“Toodles”) Ryan. Fitzgerald was unwilling to pay the price of public exposure, so he was never again elected to any office. This would not be the last time sex and politics would work at cross-purposes in the Fitzgerald-Kennedy line. Nor would Curley’s affront to their family be soon forgotten.

Curley suffered his worst miseries in *his* private life, losing his first wife and four of his children to death; he once speculated, in a rare moment of introspection, that people were punished in *this* world for their crimes.²⁸ Perhaps Curley’s brooding is merely an example of Irish-Catholic Jansenism, a strain enforced by New England Puritanism, but the much-afflicted Kennedy family must also have wondered what they had done to deserve the miseries inflicted on them.

In 1916, Fitzgerald challenged and came close to unseating Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Then, in 1936, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., the senator’s grandson, beat Curley in *his* bid for the Senate. In 1942, Fitzgerald, though then age seventy-nine, decided to take on Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., in a race for the Senate, but Fitzgerald lost to Joseph Casey in the Democratic primaries.

In 1946, John F. Kennedy replaced Curley in the U.S. House of Representatives. Curley had abandoned his House seat after he became mayor in 1945, an election he

won with the financial support of Joseph P. Kennedy (who did not mind helping the enemy of his father-in-law if it advantaged his children), who paid off Curley (his debts and his campaign funds) to clear the House seat for his son Jack. Finally, John F. Kennedy beat Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., in a race for the Senate seat in 1952. Thus Kennedy triumphed over the Lodge family in revenge for the defeats of his grandfather and the denigration of his tribe. Such, such are the joys of public service!

In the summer of 1947, over a hundred members of the U.S. House signed a petition requesting President Harry Truman to grant "executive clemency" to Curley, who was then serving time in prison for mail fraud. Representative Kennedy, however, refused to sign, though he was urged to do so by his father. Again, John *Fitzgerald* Kennedy exacted his family's vengeance on the man who had humiliated his grandfather Honey Fitz.²⁹ If all politics is local, in the famous phrase of Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill — who, for thirty-two years, occupied the U.S. House seat previously held by Curley and John Kennedy, the same seat that would be occupied after O'Neill by Joseph P. Kennedy, the son of Robert Kennedy — then Boston politics is a muddy turf-war battle for survival of the fittest: inter- and intratribal strife. Vengeance and spite, coated in blarney and bombast, supply the music and lyrics for the operetta of Boston politics — no stage for the deferential or the pure of heart.

James Michael Curley was, whatever else we might say about him, a fierce battler, a man well suited to his environment. (As was Cardinal O'Connell. As was financier Kennedy.) Curley was pugnacious, a Mick who would not tug at his forelock before his "betters." Commentators, like Hamilton, who underplay the desperation of Irish Americans — a people who went from persecution by the English and the Anglo-Irish in Ireland to exploitation and patronization by the Brahmins and Yankees in Boston — blame the Boston Irish for their aggressiveness; other commentators, like Beatty, who better understand the social and psychological consequences of this pattern of humiliation (their "cosmic insecurity"), count the costs to the Irish Americans for their piety in the service of an oppressive church and their devotion to unworthy political leaders.³⁰ "Curley was good with his fists," notes Beatty, who details the mayor's various aggressions, round by round.³¹

William H. O'Connell, James M. Curley, and Joseph P. Kennedy, in the fields of religion, politics, and finance, represent the leaders of the first generation of Irish Americans to have the opportunity to seize power. "The child of the immigrant is called to fill the place" of leadership in society, proclaimed O'Connell, "and that responsibility demanded no timidity, no retiring modesty," adds O'Toole.³² Arrogance, boldness, and a loose construction of legal and moral boundaries were the only means to power and, paradoxically, respectability.

In the quintessential Curley story, the perennial campaigner, running for mayor, interrupted his prayer — "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespassers [*sic*]" — in an address, before a rally in front of Saint Augustine's Church in South Boston, with a shouted warning to an aide who was standing in a crowd near his open car — "Get that sonuvabitch, he's stealing my coat!"; then, assured of his coat's safety, Curley continued with his prayer — "as we forgive those who trespass against us."³³ Curley assaulted his enemies, real and imagined, with combative words, complicitous humor, and occasional violent deeds. He even knocked one of his own sons to the floor for addressing his father overfamiliarly as Dad.

Curley was not a nice man; indeed, had he shown inclinations to decency or susceptibility to intimidation, as did Honey Fitz, Curley would not have got where he got. (Cardinal O'Connell and Joseph P. Kennedy were Curley's counterparts in ruthlessness, but O'Connell, a devoted *Roman* Catholic, and Kennedy, "the founding father" of a political dynasty, lived for some ideal beyond their own fulfillment, while Curley, despite his impulses to improve the lot of the Boston poor, seemed primarily obsessed with the next election.) What, then, do we make of those who had little choice but to seize their opportunities? Nigel Hamilton excoriates Joseph P. Kennedy for his social and moral transgressions; O'Toole balances compassion with judgment in his life of O'Connell, while Beatty presents a complex portrait of James Michael Curley as a man for whom commitments to his own personal advantage and to the betterment of his people were uneasily joined.

Beatty follows the lead of William Shannon in *The American Irish*: Shannon's Curley "was the idol of a cult, arbiter of a social clique, and spokesman for a state of mind." Shannon is right in suggesting that Curley, through his lifelong lust for office and his many victories, vicariously fulfilled the need of the Boston Irish for recognition and vengeance.³⁴ "Vengeful in victory, Curley was vindictive in defeat."³⁵ But Curley was more, as Beatty notes, than this. "Curley built his public life on two contradictory props: his ability to express powerful collective rancors and his capacity to care, 'even for people who really didn't deserve it,' as his son Francis put it."³⁶ Curley's own betterment, then, was inextricably mixed with the betterment of his own kind.

James Michael Curley spoke to and for the Boston Irish at a time when they needed him to give them an encouraging word and a helping hand, while they, in turn, winked at Curley's lies and ignored the graft he was grabbing up with his other hand. In *Man of the House*, Tip O'Neill recalls the time when he, then a young congressman, and Curley, then out of office, volunteered to raise money for poor families at Christmas by collecting contributions to the *Boston Post* Santa at a Boston street corner. O'Neill was surprised to see Curley passing *out* money to those in need as fast as O'Neill was taking it in!

O'Neill put the best construction on Curley's action — "When you saw the people he was helping, who could argue?" — and, like most Bostonians of his generation, O'Neill forgave Curley his trespasses.³⁷ Curley articulated one strain of Boston Irish values (Catholic, provincial, combative) and stated his people's grievances against the patronizing and prejudiced Yankee Brahmins, whose city the Irish had taken over. As did James M. O'Toole in his life of O'Connell, Jack Beatty, in writing a first-rate life of Curley nearly half a century after his last defeat, speaks to and for the American Irish community — and well beyond it to anyone interested in American ethnic politics — as we look back in anger, awe, and compassion at the world of our fathers, a world so dominated, for better and for worse, by the likes of Himself: James Michael Curley.

Like O'Toole on Cardinal O'Connell, and Hamilton on John F. Kennedy, Beatty presents a revised version of Curley. Joseph Dinneen's *The Purple Shamrock* (1949) was an effort to see Curley as "a creation of a curious society known as 'The Boston Irish,' as distinguished from all other Irish."³⁸ Curley cleverly embraced Dinneen's book and, by so doing, muted its mild criticism. Edwin O'Connor's vastly popular novel, *The Last Hurrah* (1956), drew heavily and selectively on the Curley legend for the creation of Frank Skeffington, the "tribal chieftain" of the redbrick city that

was unmistakably Boston. O'Connor, following the example of Dinneen and using in his novel a somewhat detached observer of Skeffington's final campaign to serve as the audience's go-between, utilized the Curley legend to reconcile America to the strange ways of the Boston Irish, much as John P. Marquand had done for the Boston Brahmins in his novel *The Late George Apley* (1937). (Boston, with its nurtured sense of the past and its quaint ethnic dramas, thus became something of a curiosity for the rest of rootless, increasingly homogenized America.)³⁹ As Marquand had lovingly patronized the Brahmins, O'Connor sentimentalized the Boston Irish. (John Ford's 1958 film version of *The Last Hurrah*, starring the irresistible and brilliant Spencer Tracy as Skeffington, was even more corny, making the mayor into a patriarchal Robin Hood.) Curley's campaign slogan was "He did it for a friend!" — alluding to his conviction for taking a civil service exam for an illiterate constituent — but Curley, as they say on the streets of Boston, did all right for himself as well — as his magnificent house on the Jamaicaaway, built from contractors' kickbacks and maintained by siphoned-off campaign funds (stuffed into two safes) and other shady sources, clearly demonstrates.

All of this was muted in Curley's autobiography, ghostwritten by John Henry Cutler, *I'd Do It Again* (1957), a book rushed into print to take advantage of the good feelings for Curley that had been stirred by O'Connor's novel. The Curley-Cutler book is full of self-serving blarney, but here and there, cutting through the intentionally inflated rhetoric and the pseudo-learned allusions, we can hear the true voice of the inner man, aggressive and arrogant, as when he declared, "I have been handed the hot end of the poker since memory runneth not to the contrary, to borrow a phrase from Daniel Webster, who was no less pilloried in his day than I was in mine."⁴⁰

Edward R. F. Sheehan added a qualifying note to the Curley legend in his novel, *The Governor* (1970), portraying him as a "tribal hero who squandered old scores, a crippled warrior egging on an amused mob of shanty Irish in the sacking of the Yankee Troy."⁴¹ The Curley portrayed in James Carroll's popular novel *Mortal Friends* (1976), is a master manipulator but also a culturally impoverished and ethnically defensive man. Thus fiction writers helped clear the air for a fresh, un-sentimental look at James Michael Curley.

In addition to all the books and films on Curley, the oral tradition of stories about Himself have been thick in the air of Boston for decades. Indeed, Jack Beatty, as did I, grew up hearing descriptions of the former mayor as a grand man, a delightful rogue. (If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Curley is much flattered to this day, for William F. Bulger, Massachusetts Senate president, imitates (parodies?) Curley's orotund intonations at Bulger's Saint Patrick's Day annual breakfast gathering, and Governor William Weld, though a Republican who is devoted to minimizing government's role, in a whimsical gesture has Curley's portrait hanging in the governor's office.)

So Beatty had to go a long way around the broad fields of Boston blarney to see James Michael Curley steadily and see him whole. Though, as Beatty winningly admits, elements of Curley's complex character still remain mysterious — why, for example, did he hold the love and devotion of the two women who married him and stood by him? — *The Rascal King* sets the record straight and presents Curley as a man whose likes we will not see again.

If, as Scott Fitzgerald said, “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function,” Beatty’s book functions beautifully as a presentation of the divided character of James Michael Curley.⁴² He exploited the angers of the Boston Irish, thus further polarizing his people in this already divided city, but then he helped them by building hospitals, schools, roads, bathhouses, and public housing projects — at the same time he was lining his own pockets with kickbacks! He spoke eloquently, in the high-blown fashion of the day, but he added his own turn and counterturn of humor. As Curley admitted near the end of his life, his ability to speak was “the most important thing — without it there wouldn’t have been a career — there would have been nothing.”⁴³

He moved and impressed crowds (particularly Irish-American crowds, for whom he gave voice) and he mocked his enemies. At best, Curley created a vision of the world in which the Mayor of the Poor fought the good fight against agencies of evil and oppression. At worst, he was a self-serving manipulator whose words served as a smoke screen to obscure his selfish end. Perhaps, like Cardinal O’Connell, Curley never stopped long enough to figure out the difference, for both men presumed that what was good for them was good for their devoted people.

Curley was a man of mixed, unresolved character. “The mayor who was famous for winking after making a moving speech mirrored life in its hopelessly alloyed state.”⁴⁴ Yet he was an unreflective man who took his moral instructions from the Catholic church without question. (In any case, it would not have been politic to cross Cardinal O’Connell!) Curley was a speaker first, a reader only for pleasure and for cultivation. His rhetoric was shot full of mock-heroic intonations and exaggerations (traits mimed beautifully by Edwin O’Connor in his novel), a style designed to grieve his enemies and to amuse his friends. Curley, agreeing with O’Connell, insisted that “the Puritan is passed; the Anglo-Saxon is a joke; a newer and better America is here,” with the arrival of the Irish! While O’Connell had to maintain the dignity of his office, Curley could indulge in low mockery. “What we need in this part of the world is men and mothers of men, not gabbing spinsters and dog-raising matrons in federated assembly.”⁴⁵

Curley was an extravagant rhetorician, yet he was also a prissy man, big on decorum, who once ordered Babe Ruth from his table for saying “bullshit” in front of Curley’s family. Ultimately, Curley was a loner, a majority of one. “James. M. Curley was not a party man. He was a James M. Curley man.”⁴⁶ He was an “urban populist” who learned to thrive in the smothering environment — bounded by Cardinal O’Connell’s hierarchical Catholicism on the one hand and Brahmin discrimination on the other — of Boston. William Shannon saw Curley as “a self-crippled giant on a provincial stage,” but Beatty adds a necessary qualification to Shannon’s indictment: “On that stage he *was* a giant.”⁴⁷

Beatty’s bountiful book gives detailed accounts of Curley’s involvement in election after election — ultimately a tedious litany that forces the reader to ask the point of all this striving. Frederick W. Mansfield, who ran against Curley in the mayoral election of 1930, asked in his campaign slogan, HASN’T CURLEY HAD ENOUGH?⁴⁸ The answer was clearly *NO!* Such hungers that gnawed at Curley and his kind could not be easily assuaged. George Washington Plunkitt, Tammany pol, had as his motto, He Seen His Opportunities, and He Took ’Em.⁴⁹ So, too, did James Michael Curley see and take. Given the opportunity, he’d do it again, and again . . .

Like Lyndon Johnson in our own time, James Michael Curley was a man ever on the move, his actions unchecked by fear, self-doubt, or conscience. "I have never been afraid to make the bold move," said Curley late in life — a fair-enough self-assessment. "I think that is why my life has been such an adventure."⁵⁰ Indeed, Curley's life was one of the great adventures in American political history, though his obsession with elections illustrates his spiritual narrowness and the unslaked neediness of the addict. He was his own first constituent and beneficiary. "Nobody is through with politics who has ever tasted it," he revealingly said.⁵¹ Furthermore, politics was the best way to achieve identity and acknowledgment for the Irish in America.

In *JFK: Reckless Youth*, the first of his projected three-volume biographical study of John F. Kennedy, Nigel Hamilton creates a dramatic revisionist myth of a divided hero that will serve as a controversial reference point for discussion of the former president — in the manner of Robert Caro's biography of Lyndon Johnson — for some time to come. (However, unlike Caro, who loathes LBJ, Hamilton views JFK as a hero.) No longer the brightest son of a large and loving family, Jack Kennedy, in Hamilton's reconstructive case history, is "nothing less than an abused child," in the words of Roger Morris, whose enthusiastic review in *The New York Times Book Review*, served, as did many other rave reviews, as an uncritical stamp of approval of Hamilton's thesis.⁵²

No longer the mere child of privilege, Jack Kennedy is now presented as the damaged product of what Hamilton calls the "almost psychotic drama" between, in Morris's admiring summary, JFK's monstrous parents — "these instantly decadent parvenus, the 'dotty mother' and the lecherous father who 'could not resist the temptation to manipulate his own emotionally deprived children.'"⁵³ That is, John F. Kennedy has now been reimagined by a British biographer (the official chronicler of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery) who has researched his subject with undiscriminating diligence and has, at times, recklessly recast JFK's life; Hamilton's reading is influenced by psychological models derived from the currently fashionable notion that all the most interesting people are survivors of dysfunctional families — abused children in recovery.

Hamilton's JFK is a flawed hero, and heroes, by definition, overcome obstacles; therefore, Hamilton insists that the first and greatest obstacles in young Jack's struggle to fulfill his destiny were set by his cold mother and his overbearing father. In Hamilton's romantic, revisionist myth, JFK was destined to pull the sword from the stone, but he did it on his own.

The surviving members of the Rose and Joseph P. Kennedy family — Jean Kennedy Smith, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Patricia Kennedy Lawford, and Edward M. Kennedy — took strong exception to Hamilton's portrayal of their parents in a letter to *The New York Times*. All the Kennedy children, they insist, owe their successes to their parents, despite what Hamilton says.

The book's repeated allegations of abusive family relations are outrageous falsehoods. It is grotesque to compare our father to Stalin. It is preposterous to call any of us "abused" children. Our parents gave us love, support and encouragement throughout their lives. Contrary to the malicious portrayal in this book, they were devoted and caring parents who lavished affection on all of us.⁵⁴

Hamilton, for his part, has accused the Kennedy family of caring more for public relations than for “history.”⁵⁵

Certainly Hamilton is correct in insisting that the private papers relating to JFK, particularly those letters which remain in the control of the Kennedy family, should be made available to historians. Hamilton’s biography offers ample evidence that the more we learn of JFK, particularly from his own words — after he worked past the style of adolescent smuttiness evident in his letters, he was a compelling writer — the more we are impressed by him. Jack Kennedy shines like a bright light in his family, in his community, and in his age. The Kennedy family’s understandable desire to protect the memory of their slain brother should not obscure the true life, public and private, of JFK, a figure who belongs to all Americans.

On the other hand, Hamilton’s charge that a Washington lawyer was “ordered by the Kennedy family to put pressure on the author to amend his portrait” omits the fact that Hamilton, in turn, tried to put his own counterpressure on the Kennedy family by promising that he would reconsider his findings (if the letters so warranted) if the Kennedy family granted him permission to examine sealed letters from JFK.⁵⁶ Hamilton can hardly be as surprised as he affects to be that the Kennedy family is not eager to help him after the portrayal, in *JFK: Reckless Youth*, of their parents as monsters! As the surviving children of Rose and Joe put it, “Any so-called biography that tries to take our parents from us, that gets this basic fact about our family wrong, is not worth the paper it is printed on.”⁵⁷

One of the problems Hamilton faced in making his case is that Jack, a loving son, always spoke respectfully, though occasionally ironically, about his father, and Jack showed, at worst, minor annoyances with his proper and pious mother. At his inauguration, as his limousine passed the reviewing platform, JFK stood up and saluted his father; Joseph P. Kennedy, in turn, stood up and saluted his son, the president. Film of this scene served as a dramatic high point of the recent Public Broadcasting documentary on the Kennedys. Was this salute by JFK an expression of affection and respect for his father? “No,” said Hamilton in a television interview with Christopher Lydon; such a reading of the incident, Hamilton insists, derives from the more “sentimental” construction of JFK’s life shaped by Doris Kearns Goodwin in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*. Hamilton believes that JFK pitied his father, but offers little supporting evidence, and Hamilton has, of course, no way of knowing *what* was in JFK’s mind when he saluted his father.⁵⁸

Goodwin’s John F. Kennedy emerges from a tightly knit, supportive family and a rich world of Irish-American culture, overlaid by the finest schools and best social connections his mother’s drive for acceptance and his father’s money and influence could buy. That is, her JFK is the product of the forces, familial and cultural, that shaped him, while Hamilton’s JFK is, like the lone wolf of folk legends or the ugly duckling of fairy tales, someone who composes himself anew by going against the grain of the Kennedy family and the Boston Irish.

In passing, Hamilton also grants his approval to Kathleen (“Kick”) Kennedy, JFK’s sister, who set herself against her family’s wishes and her cultural tradition by marrying a titled Englishman who was, of course, a member of the Church of England. Hamilton reveals his own cultural prejudices when he discusses Rose Kennedy’s futile efforts to deflect Kathleen’s interests away from courting English gentlemen. “How Rose Kennedy could imagine that Kathleen, after exposure to such an array of suitors in a Protestant country, would dutifully settle for a Roman

Catholic defies ordinary understanding.”⁵⁹ In Hamilton’s “ordinary understanding,” the attractions of his sceptered isle are, despite competing claims of religious and family loyalties, self-evident. Robert Frost told President Kennedy in 1961 to “be more Irish than Harvard.”⁶⁰ Clearly, Nigel Hamilton admires only those Kennedys who he imagines were more British than Irish.

Hamilton’s JFK is a mixed man, a hero-in-the-making who attempted but who did not wholly succeed in reinventing himself by distancing himself from the destructive element of Kennedy family life and values. It is as though Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* — a work which centered upon another well-off, isolated, and troubled New England, Irish-American family — had become the informing parable of the Kennedy saga. Joseph P. Kennedy assumes the role of domineering James Tyrone (actor, land-hungry skinflint); Rose takes on the part of the detached Mary Tyrone (addictive, devout Catholic, socially pretentious); the eldest Kennedy boys resemble the doomed Tyrone sons: Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., the self-destructive James Tyrone and JFK the sickly but brilliant Edmund Tyrone. Hamilton’s Kennedys are every bit as much a compositional construct as O’Neill’s Tyrones.

However, Hamilton might have learned some humanizing and qualifying ambiguity by thinking more deeply about the Kennedys in relation to O’Neill’s Tyrones. Both the Kennedys and the Tyrones (who were based on the O’Neills) were Irish-American strangers in a strange and hostile land — introverted families who were desperate for success and recognition. Both families were shaped by strong fathers who did questionable things because they were determined to make a new life for themselves and their families. “What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth . . .” asked James Tyrone, in a moment of self-realization in O’Neill’s play.⁶¹ (Did Honey Fitz ever wonder at the cost of those “toys” for his descendants or did Joseph P. Kennedy ever ask himself what the hell it was *he* wanted to buy?) O’Neill here reveals the destructive element in Irish-American ambition, but he also presents the domineering father figure, as well as the pious mother figure, in a compassionate light, as the products of forces beyond their comprehension. The play reaches for mercy rather than judgment. Hamilton’s portrayal of the Kennedy elders, however, makes little effort to understand (and thus to sympathize with) the social and psychological forces that made Rose and Joe what they were. Rather, Hamilton levels charges, labels the Kennedy parents, and makes them serve as mere obstacles to the growth of their potentially heroic son.

Hamilton’s Rose Kennedy alternately beat her children with wooden coat hangers and withdrew inside a cocoon of Catholicism. He neglects to mention that parents in her day — long before Dr. Spock encouraged tenderness in child rearing — were urged by the best authorities to impose discipline upon their children, for their own good. Hamilton also blames Rose for limiting her children’s access to certain films.⁶² Should he not, rather, praise her for so concerning herself with her children’s moral education? Hamilton also sees Rose’s Catholicism as her defense mechanism, not as her sincere expression of faith, though Goodwin has chronicled Rose’s stay in convents, her election as a Child of Mary, and her sincere devotion to God. For Hamilton, however, Rose was only “a pathetic figure” who hid her pain and social ambition behind a dedicated Catholicism and a lust for jewelry.⁶³ Presumptuously, Hamilton describes Rose, on her way to her son’s funeral in 1963, as “having flown to Washington with thoughts only of what she would wear at the funeral and bringing extra stockings for her daughters.”⁶⁴ How he can claim he knows Rose Kennedy’s

“only” thoughts is not explained, nor is her alleged concern for her own and her daughters’ attire seen in a compassionate light — Rose’s way of focusing attention on manageable details as a way to get through a staggering experience. Rose Kennedy, like Joseph P. Kennedy, is damned if she did and damned if she didn’t, in Hamilton’s blunt eyes.

Hamilton is curiously much easier on the “old-fashioned” grandfather, Honey Fitz — though he prevented his daughter from attending Wellesley (her life’s greatest disappointment, she later told Goodwin), tried to block her marriage to Joe, and then made her return to a loveless marriage — than he is on Joseph P. Kennedy.⁶⁵

Hamilton’s Joseph P. Kennedy was often away from home, obsessed with making money, seducing women, and gaining political recognition; when he was home he drove his children mercilessly to compete and to succeed. Between them, the Kennedy parents, in Hamilton’s eyes, were little better than prison guards in a gulag — the Kennedy “compound.” As Elizabeth Hardwick put it, in a mixed review of Hamilton’s book, “We are not to settle for the Kennedy men as driven by caprice and will, but as formed by a conjunction of parental and maternal infirmity — a sort of Mendelian double dose.”⁶⁶

Garry Wills, in *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, offered his version of a family trapped by a dream of success that became a nightmare: the sins of the founding father devolving onto his children. “Joseph Kennedy, a man of strong will and low tastes, passed on both traits to his son. . . . It is difficult to become an American prince.”⁶⁷ Doris Kearns Goodwin, in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, portrayed these Kennedy children as “natives of the Kennedy family, first and foremost, before any city or any country.”⁶⁸ However, no previous biographer has imagined a Kennedy family so driven, so isolated, so riven, and so deranged as has Hamilton. The Kennedys presented themselves as an ideal family — as illustrated in the many photographs in which the parents and children appear as handsome, smiling, affluent, and close — but Hamilton offers a reverse image of these photographs: what once was white, the picture of sweetness and light, now is as black as night. Indeed, Hamilton’s gothic portrait of the Kennedy family derangement strains credibility.

In order to build JFK into a complex, “rounded” character, Hamilton makes the elder Kennedys — Joseph P. Kennedy, Rose Kennedy, and even Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. — into callous, cold manipulators of the first order. Hamilton’s portraits of these characters descend into caricatures and his reach after psychological explanation exceeds his grasp. However, for all that, Hamilton’s portrait of JFK has value, for young Jack turns out to be a man of greater substance than most of us had previously imagined. Hamilton has conducted thorough research into the Kennedy papers, particularly into JFK’s own writings: his journalism, diaries, and letters — though Hamilton has not received access to sections of JFK’s papers still under the control of the Kennedy family.

Hamilton has conducted exhaustive interviews of those who knew JFK and has included commentaries which, though often redundant and trivial, do expand and enrich JFK’s character. Hamilton relies particularly on young Jack’s letters to his schoolmate K. LeMoyné (“Lem”) Billings and Jack’s lover, Inga Arvad (implausibly cast by Hamilton in the role of mother substitute). Other casual acquaintances of JFK get prominent treatment when their testimony bolsters Hamilton’s case. Henry James, a friend from Stanford, for example, stresses JFK’s lust to conquer women. Former British tennis star Kay Stammers is included because she said that JFK was “spoiled

by women. I think he could snap his fingers and they'd come running. And of course, he was terribly attractive and rich and unmarried — a terrific catch really. . . . I thought he was divine." Another lover asked him if he had ever been in love. "No," he replied, then smiled and added, "though I've been *very* interested."⁶⁹ Movie star Gene Tierney was stunned by Jack's eyes. All of this is trivial chat, of course, though it also lays the groundwork for Hamilton's case — which will no doubt be fully documented in succeeding volumes — of JFK's destructive addiction to sexuality.

However, the ample record of young JFK's interests and achievements assembled by Hamilton calls into question the accuracy of Hamilton's accusatory title, *JFK: Reckless Youth*. "Young Kennedy," as JFK ironically signed himself in a letter to a friend in the midst of World War II, turns out to have been, despite his near constant illnesses and pains, an immensely attractive figure. He was indeed charming, to men as well as to women, intelligent, and handsome.

As well as being one of the children of the famous financier and ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy (son of ward boss Patrick Kennedy) and his wife, Rose (daughter of mayor Honey Fitz), JFK quickly became famous in his own right by publishing a best-selling book, *Why England Slept*, in 1940, and by becoming a war hero in 1943: the *PT 109* commander who, after being rammed by a Japanese destroyer, risked his life to save his crew. Indeed, by the time he was only twenty-eight, JFK had traveled the world — from Hitler's Germany in 1939 to the UN conference in San Francisco in 1945 — and had arrived at a stoic vision that he could express in an elegant, laconic prose style which shows grace under pressure, as he does in a 1943 letter from the South Pacific, in which he reports on the ramming of his boat but understates his own heroism.

We have been having a difficult time for the last two months — lost our boat about a month ago when a Jap can cut us in two & lost some of our boys. We had a bad time for a week on a Jap island — but finally got picked up — and have got another boat.⁷⁰

Certainly neither in this testing incident nor in his measured response to it can JFK be justly called "reckless." Thus Hamilton deserves praise for presenting, with clarity and drama, telling scenes from his subject's life, but Hamilton also leaves himself open to criticism when he exaggerates his conclusions to suit his insistent thesis. ✓

Hamilton makes his theme clear immediately, when he opens his book with a curious prologue, loaded and portentous, titled "The Birth of Camelot." He then credits Jacqueline Kennedy with brilliantly stage-managing JFK's funeral services on November 25, 1963; then Hamilton hints that her triumph was motivated by a tinge of vengeance. "Unable to tame her husband's rampant sexual appetite in his lifetime, she was determined to shape his memory in death." Thus, for Hamilton, stand in stark relief the issues of JFK's "sexual appetite" — the emblem of his "recklessness" — and his widow's desire to "tame" him in a death pageant. All is clarified, dramatized, simplified — Hamilton's muckraking biographical intent clearly foreshadowed. At the core of his study lies the plot of a soap opera!

As a result of JFK's assassination and Jacqueline's artfully contrived ceremony, "myths were spun that would take historians decades to defuse."⁷¹ (Why would one have to "defuse" a "spun" myth? Here and elsewhere, Hamilton's habit of hyperbole leads him to overreach the logic of his own metaphors.)⁷² These myths invite

revision, which Hamilton is ready to supply. "Perhaps it is only now, a quarter of a century since his death, that a truthful accounting can be made that is both scholarly and fresh."⁷³ Nigel Hamilton arrives to pull the sword of truth from the stone of myth surrounding the dead president! *JFK: Reckless Youth* is all of that — a massive undertaking and a "fresh" (in several senses) reading of the Kennedy family — but it is also a book that insists on a narrow and at times even a lurid thesis which stresses greed, power, and sexual obsession as the keys to interpreting the dynamics of family life and the mysteries of character.

Nigel Hamilton — in his overwrought, overwritten, and thematically reductive book — has grossly distorted the picture of young Jack's family, his Irish-American community, and his Boston. It passes my ordinary understanding to imagine that John F. Kennedy, Hamilton's hero, would be anything but appalled by such a portrayal. As am I.

In at least one interview, Hamilton revealed a defensiveness about his treatment of Joseph P. Kennedy as a moral monster and manipulator. Though "people in Irish Boston," he suggests, might suspect Hamilton's harsh portrayal as an act of revenge upon the elder Kennedy's anti-British stance while serving as U.S. ambassador to Britain in the early stages of World War II, Hamilton denies the charge, a charge that no one has made in print.⁷⁴ Having said that, I find it interesting to note that Hamilton does often identify Joseph P. Kennedy with his city of origin: he is a "Boston-Irish braggart" and a "jumped-up Boston Irish Catholic," as though these were well-known local character traits.⁷⁵ Amazingly, Hamilton claims that the Boston Irish — a people "noted for gregariousness, sentimentality, and willingness to undertake hard labor" — did not "make great entrepreneurs" just before he goes on to recount Joseph P. Kennedy's amazing entrepreneurial successes!⁷⁶

Indeed, Hamilton approaches his story with a dismissive, denigrating attitude toward the Boston Irish. On the other hand, Hamilton stands in awe of the Boston Brahmin class, noting that "these descendants of great professional, mercantile, and textile families" had produced three presidents, the nation's first public school and college and, in all, "nearly fifty universities in the Boston area."⁷⁷ It comes as no surprise, then, that Hamilton's winning JFK is more English than Irish. "His sense of fun might be Irish, but his deeper emotional coolness accorded with Anglo-Saxon society."⁷⁸ Later: "Fun was still Jack's leimotiv [*sic*], and in his increasingly English way, this meant hard work, hard play, and hard socializing."⁷⁹ Presumably Boston Irish Americans had fun in other ways, those lazy, yet jumped-up braggarts and bigots!

Hamilton's charges against the "founding father" are various and seemingly limitless.⁸⁰ He accuses Joseph P. Kennedy, then a bank president, of cowardice in avoiding service in World War I and mocks his wartime role as assistant manager of the Fore River shipbuilding yard — though Hamilton eventually grants that the elder Kennedy's work was "vital" and his was the most productive yard during the war.⁸¹ Hamilton charges that Joseph P. Kennedy was guilty in the 1920s of "financial larceny on a vast and unseen scale, manipulating share prices with other hands in secret stock pools designed specifically to hoodwink investors," though Hamilton does not claim that he did anything illegal.⁸² Nor does Hamilton discuss the business ethics of the day, which reveal Kennedy only to be better at the game of stock manipulation that many played. In any case, as Hardwick notes, "it is not altogether easy for those who have lived through the past two decades in American finance and who know of

the previous 'robber barons' and their interesting accumulations, to summon the proper moral indignation about Joe's ruthless dealings."⁸³ Hamilton's outrage at Joseph P. Kennedy seems feigned for effect, contrived for dramatic ends and thematic purposes.

Hamilton also charges that Joseph P. Kennedy "raped" Gloria Swanson in 1927, though he quotes Swanson as saying, "I had known this would happen," an admission that would suggest to others, if not to Hamilton, her complicity in the act.⁸⁴ Hamilton sees a pattern of enterprises, in which Kennedy invested himself, which "always ended in flight or ignominy," an exaggeration that ignores his many successes.⁸⁵ Hamilton's Joseph P. Kennedy was "a disappointed man" who could not curry sufficient favor with FDR or ever become president.⁸⁶ Hamilton's FDR barely tolerates Kennedy. The president "had no illusions about the Boston-Irish braggart," but Hamilton does not note, as does Beatty, that FDR, a Dutch patrician, was suspicious of *most* Irish-American politicians.⁸⁷ Hamilton — again making a damning judgment and ignoring the context of his observations — just assumes that FDR's attitude toward Joseph P. Kennedy was a fair appraisal. Hamilton then makes little of the fact that FDR *did* trust Kennedy enough to appoint him as the first chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, a job he performed admirably.

Joseph P. Kennedy's role as ambassador to the Court of St. James's is the occasion of Hamilton's greatest disapproval. There the elder Kennedy became "the arch-appeaser of the Nazis."⁸⁸ Kennedy at the time urged a policy of American isolationism, a position that elicits a frenzy of name-calling from Hamilton: the ambassador was a "sniveling defeatist."⁸⁹ But Hamilton neglects to add that isolationism was a prevalent American view until Pearl Harbor. In retrospect the issues of "The Good War" seem clear, but they did not seem so clear to most of those who lived through the late 1930s. Throughout his book, Hamilton is guilty of "presentism," a mind-set that judges the past by the values of the present.

Hamilton's thesis is so narrow that it ignores or dismisses qualifying evidence. For example, he praises young Jack for persuading his father not to oppose Lend-Lease to Britain in 1941, but Hamilton gives no credit to the elder Kennedy, who was "embittered by his fall from grace," for changing his mind. The surviving Kennedy children are correct in calling Hamilton's portrayal of their parents "grotesque."

Nigel Hamilton has renewed interest in the life of JFK, thus deflecting attention from the president's lurid death. That life was exemplary in many respects, ranging from acts of intelligence to acts of courage. Hamilton attempts to make his hero into another Jay Gatsby, one who composed himself anew, but Hamilton's own evidence shows JFK struggling with his identity as a Boston Irish Catholic. When Jack was asked to conduct Bible classes in the Navy, he wrote to his mother and asked, "Would you say that is un-Catholic?" Anticipating that her answer might be that such an activity would indeed be "un-Catholic" — not, I think, "ridiculing her bigotry," as Hamilton suggests — JFK went on:

But don't good works come under our obligations to the Catholic Church? We're not a completely ritualistic, formalistic, hierarchical structure in which the Word, the truth, must only come down from the very top — a structure that allows for no individual interpretation — or are we?⁹⁰

Here, in words of gentle persuasion to his pious mother, JFK takes exception to the Irish Catholic religious character of docile obedience, promulgated by Cardinal

O'Connell and absorbed without question by his and by most Irish-American mothers of the day, just as he would expand the style and character of the Irish-American politician, as embodied in the figures of his grandfather Honey Fitz and, most particularly, in James Michael Curley. In his own gracious and thoughtful ways, JFK was releasing himself and his fellow Irish Americans from their confining and self-defining ghettos and parishes.

These biographies of three major figures show how far Irish Americans have come — from obscure Lowell and Boston wards and parishes to a central place in the American mind. Each biographer weighs the cost of the climb upward in church and state politics and asks whether the game was worth the candle. "Today," writes McCaffrey, "the best and brightest Irish Americans are neither in the church nor in politics. Many are applying their political instincts and skills in corporate boardrooms."⁹¹

Which is another way of saying that the successes of William Henry O'Connell in the Catholic church, Joseph P. Kennedy in finance, James Michael Curley and John F. Kennedy in politics, have released their kind into mainstream America. (James M. O'Toole and Jack Beatty are Irish-American writers who now are free to cast a cold but not unsympathetic eye on their ancestors. Nigel Hamilton, unfortunately, brings a tone of British smugness toward the Irish to his study of the Kennedys.) Irish Americans have been released, as well, into schools, hospitals, labor unions, and all other aspects of American life, for the old signs that said IRISH NEED NOT APPLY have long since become collectors' items. These bold men helped make certain that the Irish *did* apply in America. ■

Notes

1. Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 178.
2. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Irish," in Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press and Harvard University Press, 1964), 287.
3. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America*, 176; James M. O'Toole, *Militant and Triumphant* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 9–10.
4. O'Toole, *Militant and Triumphant*, 59.
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 88.
7. *Ibid.*, 136.
8. *Ibid.*, 127.
9. *Ibid.*, 129.
10. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
11. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
12. *Ibid.*, 79.
13. *Ibid.*, 100.
14. *Ibid.*, 103.

15. Nigel Hamilton, with far less caution, gives more credence to the charge that Joseph P. Kennedy "might have sexually abused Rosemary," his daughter. His source for this serious allegation is anonymous, identified only as a "close female friend of JFK." Nigel Hamilton, *JFK: Reckless Youth* (New York: Random House, 1992), 411, 842.
16. O'Toole, *Militant and Triumphant*, 138.
17. *Ibid.*, 247.
18. *Ibid.*, 155.
19. Hamilton, *JFK*, 155.
20. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 101–102.
21. Jack Beatty, *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992), 130.
22. Beatty notes that Lodge has been judged by history as a statesman, while Curley "tends to be thought of as a cross between a clown and a crook." *Ibid.*, 135.
23. Henry James, *Hawthorne* (London: Macmillan, 1967 [1879]), 95.
24. J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 316.
25. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America*, 173.
26. *Ibid.*, 176.
27. Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, 56–57.
28. Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 326.
29. Hamilton, *JFK*, 21.
30. Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 19.
31. *Ibid.*, 97.
32. O'Toole, *Militant and Triumphant*, 88.
33. Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 144–145.
34. William Shannon, *The American Irish: A Political and Social Portrait* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 163; Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 501.
35. Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 434.
36. *Ibid.*, 41.
37. Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., with William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill* (New York: Random House: 1987), 29–30.
38. Joseph F. Dinneen, *The Purple Shamrock: The Hon. James Michael Curley of Boston* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 9.
39. Dealt with at length in Shaun O'Connell, *Imagining Boston: A Literary Landscape* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
40. James Michael Curley, *I'd Do It Again: A Record of All My Uproarious Years* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 4.
41. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America*, 91.
42. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up," in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1963), 69.
43. Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 58.
44. *Ibid.*, 205.

45. *Ibid.*, 170.
46. *Ibid.*, 248.
47. *Ibid.*, 151–152.
48. *Ibid.*, 264.
49. William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics, Delivered by Ex-Senator George Washington Plunkitt, the Tammany Philosopher, from His Rostrum — The New York County Court House Bootblack Stand* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963 [1905]), 6.
50. *Ibid.*, 83.
51. *Ibid.*, 400.
52. In his review in the *Boston Globe* (November 22, 1992, B36, B39), for example, Michael R. Beschloss, like Roger Morris in the *Times*, accepts, with minor reservations, Hamilton's biography on Hamilton's terms. However, the *Boston Globe* printed (December 13, 1992, "Focus," 75) my own op-ed page complaint about Hamilton's book, "Reckless Youth'? No, Reckless Book."
53. Roger Morris, "More Than a Rake's Progress," *New York Times Book Review*, November 22, 1992, 36.
54. Jean Kennedy Smith, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Patricia Kennedy Lawford, and Edward M. Kennedy, "A Grotesque Portrait of Our Parents," *New York Times*, December 3, 1992, op-ed page, A-25. Martin F. Nolan, using a term coined by Benjamin C. Bradlee, calls their response "a non-denial denial," but the Kennedy children were, after all, in a position to know their parents and Hamilton has only secondhand sources on which to base his own assessment. Martin F. Nolan, "The Kennedys Attempt to Reburnish a Legend," *Boston Globe*, December 4, 1992, 1, 12.
55. From a television interview by Christopher Lydon with Nigel Hamilton, *Christopher Lydon and Company*, WGBH, Boston, December 4, 1992.
56. Hamilton's "Notes and Sources" comments cited in Nolan, "The Kennedys Attempt to Reburnish a Legend," 12. Nolan notes Hamilton's excesses in comparing Joseph P. Kennedy with Joseph Stalin, but Nolan also grants the legitimacy of Hamilton's charge that the elder Kennedy was a bigot. Hamilton's discussion of his counteroffer to the Kennedy lawyer was made at a reception on the publication of *JFK: Reckless Youth*, hosted by the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, University of Massachusetts at Boston, December 1, 1992.
57. Kennedys, "A Grotesque Portrait," A-25.
58. Lydon interview.
59. Hamilton, *JFK*, 234.
60. Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 250.
61. Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 150.
62. Hamilton, *JFK*, 47.
63. *Ibid.*, 51.
64. *Ibid.*, xx.
65. *Ibid.*, 649.
66. Elizabeth Hardwick, "The Kennedy Scandals," *New York Review of Books*, January 14, 1992, 7.
67. Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 26.

68. Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, 366.
69. *Ibid.*, 714.
70. Hamilton, *JFK*, 613.
71. *Ibid.*, xix–xxiv.
72. *JFK: Reckless Youth* also suffers from hasty or inattentive editing. The dust-jacket copy, usually approved by the author, inaccurately identifies John F. Kennedy as “America’s thirty-sixth president.” Massachusetts Republican governor Channing Cox is hilariously misidentified as “Canning Fox” on page 53. Years are miscounted by a decade on page 27. On page 492, two curiously similar sentences appear: “However, as Jack had feared, the divorce did not release her from J. Edgar Hoover’s tentacles.” “As Jack had predicted, divorce from Fejos — who was later found to be completely innocent of anything resembling un-American activity — had not brought Inga release from Hoover’s nefarious tentacles.” The reader can only wonder how the image of Hoover’s “tentacles” of the first sentence was clarified by the modifier “nefarious” in the second sentence. These and other gaffes suggest that *JFK* was driven through production to meet a commercial deadline: the anniversary of JFK’s assassination and the Christmas book-buying market.
73. Hamilton, *JFK*, xxiv.
74. Peter Kadzis, “JFK: Redefining the Legend, An Interview with Nigel Hamilton,” *Boston Phoenix*, November 20, 1992, 28.
75. Hamilton, *JFK*, 97, 103.
76. *Ibid.*, 3.
77. *Ibid.*, 4.
78. *Ibid.*, 199.
79. *Ibid.*, 258.
80. Richard Whelan, *The Founding Father* (New York: New American Library, 1964). In the same accusatory vein, see Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: The Life of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Free Press, 1991).
81. Hamilton, *JFK*, 39, 40–42.
82. *Ibid.*, 51.
83. Hardwick, “The Kennedy Scandals,” 6.
84. Hamilton, *JFK*, 65; Doris Kearns Goodwin, in a letter to the *New York Times Book Review*, convincingly refutes Hamilton’s charge that Joseph P. Kennedy “raped” Gloria Swanson. Though Hamilton used Swanson’s memoir as his source, Swanson’s description of the event “contains absolutely no suggestion, not even a hint, that she was not a willing and even delighted partner in an act of making love. ‘Since his kiss on the train, I had known this would happen,’ [Swanson] wrote. ‘And I knew as we lay there that it would go on.’” Doris Kearns Goodwin, *New York Times Book Review*, “Letters,” January 17, 1993, 34.
85. *Ibid.*, 66.
86. *Ibid.*, 98.
87. *Ibid.*, 97.
88. *Ibid.*, 218.
89. *Ibid.*, 289.
90. *Ibid.*, 493–494.
91. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America*, 124.