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Review of From Whence I came: The Kennedy Legacy, Ireland and America Brian Murphy and Donnacha Ó Beacháin (Editors) Published in 2021

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Review of

From Whence I came: The Kennedy Legacy, Ireland and America

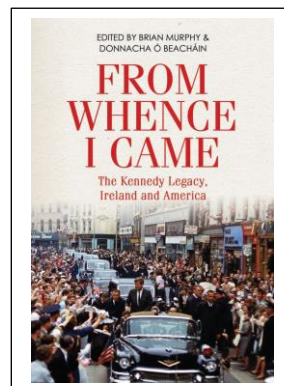
Brian Murphy and Donnacha Ó Beacháin (Editors)

Published in 2021

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Paperback, 276 pages



Reviewer

EAMON MAHER, Director of the National Centre of Franco-Irish Studies, TU Dublin.

This excellent collection, co-edited by Brian Murphy, Director of the Kennedy Summer School and lecturer in TU Dublin, and Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Professor of Politics in DCU, is an important addition to the ever-expanding publications dealing with the strong links that have existed for centuries between Ireland and America. The quality and diversity of contributors attest to the appeal of the subject matter and the standing of the Kennedy Summer School in New Ross – all of the chapters are adapted version of papers delivered at that venue. Historians, a former speech writer for President Barack Obama, a family member of the Kennedy dynasty, a media consultant, a former librarian, academics of all hues, each the contributors brings their own unique expertise and knowledge to the unravelling of the special mystique surrounding the Kennedy legacy. And it is some legacy, especially when one considers that John F. Kennedy was only in power for one thousand days before his fateful assassination in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, a mere five months after his historic visit to Ireland. The title of the book is taken from the opening words of the President’s speech to the 30,000 people gathered to greet him in Wexford during that visit: ‘I want to express my pleasure at being back from whence I came.’

The Introduction charts the various stages of the 1963 visit, where the President made several references to his impoverished great grandfather’s crossing of the Atlantic and his hopes of making a better life for himself in America. He emphasised two things he brought with him: ‘a strong religious faith and a strong desire for liberty.’ His Irish-American progeniture held on to these values and

continued to cherish them. Life in America in the 19th century was not all plain sailing for the Irish, even in a city like Boston, where there was a large Irish community. They were resented because of their willingness to work for low wages and their Catholicism, which was viewed as an alien religion. But perseverance and a strong work ethic ensured that the Kennedys survived and ultimately prospered in their adopted Boston. Politics was key to that success. JFK's grandfather was to become a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and his father Joseph combined success in banking (by 1914, he was the youngest bank president in America) with a burning desire to see his eldest son rise to the very top of the political ladder in America – an ambition that was realised in large part through the liberal use of the family's massive wealth. Joseph had himself served as United States Ambassador to Great Britain during the late 1930s, but it soon became apparent to him that he did not possess the background or political exposure to make a successful bid to win the Democratic nomination for the Presidency. Michael Kennedy traces Joseph's period as Ambassador and reveals that de Valera's attempts to cajole him into working on Ireland's behalf during the Anglo-Irish negotiations largely fell on deaf ears: 'London trumped Dublin in American eyes and America would stay out of Irish affairs.' Subsequently, all Joseph's efforts went into grooming his second son (he lost his first son during military service in 1944) for what would be an amazing ascension to the position of America's first citizen.

Unfortunately, space does not allow discussion of each of the 15 chapters of this book, so I have decided to concentrate on a few that particularly caught my attention. Ó Beacháin's chapter, 'Electing Kennedy', provides an illuminating analysis of the campaign that brought a Catholic of Irish ancestry to the White House. In an interview given to *Time* magazine on the 18 November 1957, Kennedy observed: 'Nobody is going to hand me the (Presidential) nomination. If I were governor of a large state, Protestant and fifty-five, I could sit back and let it come to me. But if I am going to get it, I'll have to work for it – and damn hard.' And work he did, to great effect. Realising that his Catholic faith was viewed with suspicion in certain circles, Kennedy was astute enough to declare publicly: 'Contrary to common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate who happens also to be a Catholic.' This is a distinction that is often used by writers who wish to mark a distance between their Catholic faith and their literary output. Ultimately Kennedy's election was determined by his victory in the swing state of Texas, due in no small part to his running mate Lyndon Johnson, and edging the African American vote. Interestingly, although the already cited fears about a dimming of the separation of church and state in the vent of JFK's election, it was his father Joe who particularly worried certain people. Harry Truman memorably put it: 'It's not the Pope I fear, it's the Pop.'

Brian Murphy's chapter on the final months of Kennedy's presidency illustrates how they were among the most action-packed of any President at any time. Although he was very much a 'Cold Warrior' prior to his election, the Cuban Missile crisis persuaded Kennedy of the need to cultivate warmer relations with Communist states, and particularly the Soviet Union. The accommodation that was finally reached avoided a devastating nuclear war and ensured that Kennedy's 'presidentials' were established for posterity. Even Fidel Castro offered a positive assessment of his legacy: 'He made mistakes..., but he was an intelligent man, sometimes brilliant, brave and it's my opinion ... that if Kennedy had survived, it's possible that relations between Cuba and the United States would have improved.' There is much musing on what type of world would have emerged had Kennedy lived to spend a second term in the White House. In terms of the Vietnam war, JFK was quick to assert to CBS News' Walter Cronkite that he had no wish for the war to be 'Americanised': 'In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as their advisers, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam, against the Communists.' Murphy asserts that Kennedy had determined not to commit combat troops to Vietnam, a policy that would subsequently be abandoned by his successors in the Oval Office, and with tragic consequences.

Mary Daly points out that Kennedy did not press the British government in relation to the partition of Ireland, but that he may well have done Ireland a greater service by persuading Harold Macmillan, the then Prime Minister, that it was in Britain's interest to join the EEC. Daly also observes: 'Irish-America was changing; the traditional Irish-American communities were dissolving as people moved to the suburbs and by the late 1960s the impact of the civil rights movement and emphasis on integration would destroy many traditional Irish schools and parishes.' Larry Donnelly notes the impact the move from their traditional home in Boston city for the suburbs. The uprooting was particularly hard for his father: 'While we were raised only a brisk half-hour walk from his old stomping grounds, it was a world away in some respects and we will eternally wonder at how our lives would be different if we had stayed there. And there are tens of thousands like us.'

There is a lot more I could say about this collection and it would nearly all be positive. I did notice at times, however, a tendency among many contributors to quote extensively from secondary sources, which in my view could easily have been summarised and/or paraphrased. Equally, certain facts and episodes are recounted in more than one chapter, albeit in a slightly different context, and that leads to repetition. One also has the impression that there is a pro-Kennedy tenor (especially when it comes to JFK) in the various chapters, which is wholly understandable when one considers the close ties between the Kennedy family and Ireland. I was struck during the online launch of the book at how

warmly An Taoiseach Michael Martin spoke of JFK's visit to Ireland and his acknowledgement of the role played in the Peace Process by his brother Ted and sister Jean Kennedy Smith.

The editors have done a fine job in assembling the essays into a coherent and attractive volume which will more than survive the test of time and will be consulted in years to come by scholars and anyone interested in the Kennedy legacy and its influence on Irish-American relations. I warmly recommend people to secure a copy if they have not already done so.
