

**A week after cradling her slain husband in her lap in Dallas, Jacqueline Kennedy summoned a trusted journalist friend to her home in Hyannisport, Mass., "obsessed," to use her word, with the notion that her husband be remembered as a hero.**



## Preface

With clarity and political savvy of a master spin artist, the 34-year-old widow spoke to the writer, Theodore H. White, for four hours, urging him to tell the world -- through LIFE magazine -- that Kennedy was truly "a man of magic," that his presidency was truly special, that the era was, to use the words she borrowed from a Broadway musical, "one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."

A year after Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' death of cancer at 64, the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston made public Mr. White's notes [see next article] from that Nov. 29, 1963, interview in which the romantic Camelot myth--one that would remain fixed in the public's mind despite ensuing revelations of chinks in the Kennedy armor -- was born.

The newly released papers include Mr. White's handwritten notes from the interview and the typed manuscript of the essay -- with editing marks by Mrs. Kennedy -- that appeared in the Dec. 6, 1963, issue of LIFE. The writer donated the papers to the Kennedy Library in 1969, stipulating that they remain sealed until one year after her death. Called the "Camelot documents," they offer another small piece of the puzzle -- another glimpse into the mind and soul of a private woman who, even in death, has remained a source of endless fascination and mystery to so many.

Perhaps most important, the papers reveal the extent to which the sad, yet tearless widow had a hand in shaping the extraordinary Kennedy legacy. "She certainly wanted to take control of history," said presidential historian Stephen E. Ambrose, a critic of the rose-colored portrayals of the Kennedy years, "and in so many ways she managed to do so."

Much of the substance of the Camelot interview appeared in the LIFE essay, "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue." The magazine held the presses that November night, at a cost of \$30,000 an hour for overtime, while Mr. White talked with Mrs. Kennedy. He finally dictated his story to editors from the telephone in the Kennedy kitchen at 2 a.m., with his interview subject hovering nearby.

Mr. White, who died in 1986, revealed many more details and impressions from the interview in his 1978 memoir, "*In Search of History*," in which he admits: "Quite inadvertently, I

was her instrument in labeling the myth." The young widow chose Mr. White because, as he would later write, he had been "friendly," a journalist who wrote sympathetically and admiringly of Kennedy, especially in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book documenting his presidential campaign, *The Making of the President, 1960*.

She insisted he write the essay of LIFE, one of several magazines Mr. White wrote for, because it had chronicled the Kennedy magic before with layouts of the couple's 1953 wedding, the inauguration, the Kennedy children and even pets. Reaching more than 7 million readers at the time, the magazine played a key role in creating the images of public figures.

In the interview, the first of only a handful Jacqueline Kennedy gave soon after her husband's death, she jumps back and forth between graphic, poignant descriptions of the assassination day and Camelot, her theme for the Kennedy legacy -- all of her remarks were laced with what seems like extraordinary devotion, admiration and love for her slain husband. On the typed manuscript for the essay, which Mr. White composed in 45 minutes in a servant's room after the lengthy interview, Mrs. Kennedy scribbled in an additional line after the Camelot quote: "and it will never be that way again!" At the end of the essay, she penciled in the sentiment again: "And all she could think of was tell people there will never be that Camelot again."

Most of her discussion of Camelot appeared in the LIFE article with the famous line from the song quoted more accurately and her point that "it will never be that way again" repeated twice.

Remarkable today, but perhaps not so 32 years ago, is the extent to which Mr. White allowed himself to be used as a vehicle for historical interpretation. Mrs. Kennedy not only read over the manuscript and penciled in changes, but when editors suggested to White that he had over-played the Camelot theme, his "collaborator," overhearing the phone conversation, shook her head. And she prevailed. White wrote in his memoir that Mrs. Kennedy wanted him to "rescue Jack from all these `bitter people' who were going to write about him in history. She did not want Jack left to the historians."

## "The Last side of Camelot"

*A week after the assassination of John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, Jacqueline Kennedy spoke with journalist Theodore H. White in Hyannis Port, Mass. The resulting article, which ran in Life magazine, became known as the "Camelot interview," as it contained the first reference to the Kennedy administration as Camelot. Mr. White donated his papers pertaining to the interview to the Kennedy Library in 1969, stipulating that they remain sealed until a year after Jacqueline Kennedy's death. She died on May 19, 1994. The library released Mr. White's notes on the interview May 26. All ellipses and parentheses are Mr. White's. Bracketed words have been inserted for clarity. December 19th [1963]*

No quiet moment until now to write up the Jacqueline Kennedy notes. Of conversation on Friday, 29, November. She was absolutely composed when I arrived (at about 8:30 in the driving rain; and stayed and worked until 2 a.m.; and then drove back in a Carey limousine).

There present were: Chuck Spaulding; Franklin D. [Roosevelt] Jr.; and Dave Powers; and Pat Lawford; and perhaps one or two others, plus service personnel. But left it that way.

The chief memory I have is of her composure; of her beauty (dressed in black trim slacks, beige pullover sweater, her eyes wider than pools): and of her calm voice and total recall.

We began by sitting down on the sofa and she leaned forward and asked (I paraphrase because it is too long ago to recall quotes) "What shall I say? What can I do for you?" It was more as if she were asking me for help than anything else. I listened and offered the thought that she continue from the fragment of conversation we had had on the telephone in which she'd said that now journalists Arthur Krock and Merriman Smith and all those people were going to write about him as history; and that was not the way she wanted him remembered.

How did she want him remembered--I suggested. But she had a series of thoughts of her own and whether she took off from the springboard I offered I don't know. This, however, is what my notes recall:

"I'm not going to be the `Widder Kennedy' (and make speeches like some people who talk about their family). When

this is over I'm going to crawl into the deepest retirement there is. I'm going to live in the place I lived with Jack; I'm going to live in Georgetown, I'm going to live on the Cape, I'm going to be with the Kennedys; Bobby is going to teach Johnny. He's a little boy without a father, he's a boyish little boy, he'll need a man. That first night Bob McNamara he said he'd buy back our old house in Georgetown. That was the first thing I thought that night--where will I go? I wanted my old house back. Actually Jack had said (when he was elected) why sell it? Maybe one day we'll go back there. But then (she's referring to the night at



Bethesda) "I thought how can I go back there to that bedroom. I said to myself--you must never forget Jack, but you mustn't be morbid.

"There'd been the biggest motorcade from the airport; hot; wild--like Mexico and Vienna; the sun was so strong in our face; I couldn't put on sunglasses and then we saw this tunnel; and I thought if you were on the left the sun wouldn't get into your eyes.

## "...the seat was full of blood and red roses..."

They were gunning the motorcycles; there were these little backfires; there was one noise like that; I thought it was a backfire. Then next I saw Connelly grabbing his arms and saying `no no no nonono,' with his fist beating--then Jack turned and I turned--all I remember was a blue gray building up ahead; then Jack turned back, so neatly; his last expression was so neat; he had his hand out, I could see a piece of his skull coming off; it was flesh colored not white--he was holding out his hand--and I can see this perfectly clean piece detaching itself from his head; then he slumped in my lap...Then Clint Hill, he loved us, he was the first man in the car...we all lay down in the car and I kept saying `Jack, Jack, Jack' and someone was yelling `he's dead he's dead.' All the ride to the hospital I kept bending over him saying `Jack, Jack can you hear me, I love you Jack.' I kept holding the top of his head down trying to keep the...that long ride to the hospital...these big Texan interns kept saying `Mrs. Kennedy you come with us,' they wanted to take me away from him. Dave Powers came running to me, my legs my hands were

covered with his brains...when Dave Powers saw this he burst out weeping. From here down"(here Mrs. Kennedy made a gesture about the level of the forehead above the eyes) "his head was so beautiful. I'd tried to hold the top of his head down, maybe I could keep it in...I knew he was dead...

"They came trying to get me; they tried to grab me; but I said I'm not leaving. When they carried Jack in, Hill threw his coat over Jack's head, and I held his head to throw the coat over it. It wasn't repulsive to me for one moment--nothing was repulsive to me--and I was running behind this big intern, I was running behind with the coat covering it.

"I remember this narrow corridor. I said, 'I'm not going to leave him, I'm not going to leave him, I'm not going to leave him'...was standing outside in the corridor...in ten minutes later, this big policeman brought me a chair...and I watched them going in, with saline solutions, with other things...I thought maybe he isn't dead maybe he's going to live. I always remember when Ambassador Kennedy had his stroke Jack said, don't let that happen to me when I go...I saw them going in and maybe he would live...and I said to myself, 'I thought: I'll take care of him every day of his life. I'll make him happy, but I knew he was dead'...I just wanted to be with him when he died. Doctors are so bossy, they boss you around. I remember his operation at Columbia when I was supposed to be with him, we promised each other, and they took him away and I didn't see him again for hours and hours...and I said: They're never going to keep me away from him again.

So I saw them going in and so I thought he's still alive...then Doc Burkeley came towards me just shaking (with sobs)...he said, 'Mrs Kennedy you need a sedative'...I said, I want to be in there when he dies...so Burkeley forced his way into the operating room and said, 'It's her prerogative, it's her prerogative...' and I got in, there were about forty people there. Dr. Perry wanted to get me out. But I said 'It's my husband, his blood, his brains are all over me.' Perry is a very tall, bald man. But some of the doctors were gentle. The priest. This priest. They kept trying to get a priest...there was a sheet over Jack, his foot was sticking out of the sheet, whiter than the sheet...I took his foot and kissed it. Then I pulled back the sheet. His mouth was so beautiful, his eyes were open. They found his hand under the sheet, and I held his hand all the time the priest was saying extreme unction.

"You know when he was shot. He had such a wonderful expression on his face. You know that wonderful expression he had when they'd ask him a question about one of the ten million gadgets they have in a rocket; just before he's answer; he looked puzzled; and then he slumped forward.

I saw them put him in a coffin...he was naked...I guess they just put his little body in...Burkeley was clutching me, shaking me. I called Kenny O'Donnell...I said, you just go to get me in there alone before they close that coffin. When we were married I gave him a St. Christopher's medal, like a coin clip. But Jack loses everything. When Patrick died last summer, when the time came that we had to put him in the coffin we had to put something that belonged to both of us...Jack said put in the Saint Christopher's medal...but I couldn't put this medal in because it hadn't been with us long enough, I'd just got it for the tenth anniversary of our marriage to replace the other one, I couldn't put anything in. So I said to Kenny O'Donnell you've got to get

me in. By this time my gloves had stiffened with his blood. I gave one hand to this policeman and he pulled the gloves off. And then I went in to say goodbye: there was no one there but Kenny O'Donnell and I and a couple of white-coated men and females in white...but I'd pulled off my gloves...and the ring was all blood stained...So I put the ring on" (Jack's finger) "and it just went down to here" (she points to her finger joint)... "and then I kissed his hand...then I went outside into the hall and I said to Kenny do you think I did the right thing...and Kenny said you leave it right where it is and Kenny said yes. He brought me the ring back later from the Bethesda Hospital.



This is the closet thing I have to a memory of him--it's a man's wedding ring" (a plain gold band that she was twisting I think?). " He bought it in a hurry in Newport just before we were married. It wasn't even engraved to me when he gave it to me, I had to put the date in later.

"That baby" (Patrick) "was so beautiful. You know Jack's Irish mystique. When we buried him" (the baby) "I asked Jack, 'Just give me something for Patrick, to remember him; so he found this one.'" She held out her hand (there was a ring with emerald chips on it);"and so I have one for Jack and one for Patrick.

"Everytime we got off the plane that day, three times they gave me the yellow roses of Texas. But in Dallas they gave me red roses. I thought how funny, red roses--so all the seat was full of blood and red roses. Dr. Burkeley brought out the two roses and said 'I want you to have one.' At Bethesda I gave him back one-- and Dr. Burkeley said -- this is the great treasure of my life.

## **"...don't let it be forgot that for one brief shining moment there was Camelot."**

But there's this one thing I wanted to say. I'm so ashamed of myself. Jack...everything he ever quoted was Greek or Roman...no, don't protect me now...one thing kept going through my mind the line from a musical comedy. I kept saying to Bobby, I've got to talk to somebody, I've got to see somebody. I want to say this one thing. It's been almost an obsession with me. This line from the musical comedy's been almost an obsession with me. At night before going to bed...we had an old Victrola. He'd play a couple of records. I'd get out of bed at night and play it for him when it was so cold getting out of bed. It was a song he loved, he loved 'Camelot.' It was the song he loved

most at the end...on a Victrola ten years old...it's the last record, the last side of 'Camelot,' sad 'Camelot.'...'don't let it be forgot that for one brief shining moment there was Camelot.'

"When I came home I looked for it again. I wanted to say, 'There'll be other great presidents; and the Johnsons have been



simply wonderful to me. Do you know what I think of history. The more I used to read of history, the more I

thought -- when something is written down, does that make it history? -- the things they say? But Jack loved history so. But history to me was about Jack. But history made him what he was...this lonely sick boy.

History made him what he was...he sat and read history...scarlet fever...this little boy in bed so much of the time...all the time he was in bed this little boy was reading history, was reading Marlborough, he devours the Knights of the Round Table and he just liked that last song...and then I thought I mustn't think that bad way...if history made Jack that way, made him see heroes then other little boys will see...men are such a combination of bad and good...and what is history going to see in this except what Merriman Smith wrote, that bitter man...then I thought history is what made Jack; he was such a simple man; he was so complex too. He had that hero idealistic side but then he had that other side, the pragmatic side; his friends were all his old friends; he loved his Irish Mafia.

"...History..., everybody kept saying to me to put a cold towel around my head" (and wipe the blood off: she is referring to the swearing-in scene at the plane, when Johnson is sworn in at the plant at Love Field and she was beside him)... "later, I saw myself in the mirror; my whole face spattered with blood and hair...I wiped it off with Kleenex. History. I thought no one really wants me there" (HERE MY NOTES ARE UNREAD-ABLE). " Then one second later I thought, why did I wash the blood off? I should have left it there, let them see what they've done...If I'd just had blood and caked hair when" (they took pictures of swearing in). "Then later I said to Bobby what's the line between histrionics and drama. I should have kept the blood on.

"McNamara changed the name at the Cape [Canaveral]. Jack was so interested in the Saturn booster. All I wanted was Jack's name signed on the side of the nose of the booster somehow no one would even notice. McNamara said that wasn't dignified. But then he changed the name of the Cape itself so

that everything that goes to the sky goes from there.

"But I can't see changing the name of something like Sixth Avenue [in New York City]. I don't want to go out on a Kennedy driveway to a Kennedy airport to visit a Kennedy School -- that's what Ethel said. And besides: I've got everything I want, I have that flame [in Arlington National Cemetery] and I have the Cape. Those were the only two things I cared about. I care about the flame. Sometimes you drive across that bridge and see that Lee mansion all lit up, that's one of the first things Caroline learned to recognize. I wanted that flame and I wanted Cape Kennedy. I don't care what people say. I want that flame, and I wanted his name on just that one booster, the one that would put us ahead of the Russians...that's all I wanted.

I'm never going to live in Europe. I'm not going to 'travel extensively.' Why that's a desecration. I'm going to bring up my son. I want him to grow up to be a good boy. I have no better dream for him. I want John-John to be a fine young man. He's so interested in planes; maybe he'll be an astronaut or just plain John Kennedy fixing planes on the ground.

"I'm not going around accepting plaques. I don't want medals for Jack. I don't want to be seen by crowds. The first time I minded the crowd was when I went out with the Irish Mafia to the grave. The new president is interesting. The new 1st lady is interesting -- that's who they should be paying attention to her now.

"Caroline -- she held my hand like a soldier, she's my helper; she's mine now. But he (John-John) is going to belong to the men now. Caroline asked me what kind of prayer should I say? And I told her to say either 'Please God take care of Daddy' or 'Please God be nice to Daddy.'"

"Let the skeptics snort about Camelot, but there was something during the Kennedy years that was magic. Jackie was more of that than anyone admitted for a long while. She smoothed the rough Kennedy edges. As much as anyone in those heady days, she grasped the epic dimensions of the adventure. No small portion of the glamour of the Kennedy stewardship that lives on today came from her standards of public propriety and majesty."

**Hugh Sidney, 1994**

