A Historian and Her Sources

BY Bo Crader

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IN 1993 HISTORIAN Doris Kearns Goodwin complained that Joe McGinniss had borrowed extensively for his "The Last Brother" from her 1987 book "The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys." "He just uses it flat out, without saying that it came from my work," Goodwin told the Boston Globe. "You expect that another writer would acknowledge that," Goodwin continued. "It's inexplicable why it wasn't done."

Now, it's Goodwin's use of source material that requires explication.

Two weeks ago in this magazine, Fred Barnes reported on the striking similarities between Stephen E. Ambrose's "The Wild Blue" and Thomas Childers's "Wings of Morning." Subsequently, The Weekly Standard received a letter pointing out that Goodwin's "The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys" borrowed with insufficient attribution from three earlier works by other authors.

An examination of the works in question confirmed the correspondent's allegation.

One source for Goodwin was Hank Searls's 1969 "The Lost Prince: Young Joe, the Forgotten Kennedy." Searls describes Joe Kennedy's disappointing last game on the Harvard football squad:

"Joe had shivered on benches from West Point on the Hudson to Dartmouth in the mountains of New Hampshire." (p. 101)

Eighteen years later, Goodwin writes that Joe Kennedy was

"shivering on benches from West Point on the Hudson to Dartmouth in the mountains of New Hampshire." (p. 507)

Searls describes the scene after the 1937 Harvard victory over Yale:

"He turned helplessly to his old classmate Campbell, then fought his way blindly through hysterical fans to the field to comfort his son." (p. 105)

Here's Goodwin:

"[He] turned helplessly to Tommy Campbell, then fought his way through the hysterical fans to provide solace to his son." (p. 508)

Searls writes that
"Naval pilot training held coldly to the premise that it was better to remove the accident-prone early, before too much time and money had been wasted on him." (p. 178)

Goodwin changes a few words:

"Naval pilot training held coldly to the premise that it was best to remove those who couldn't conquer the tensions of flying early, before too much time and money had been wasted on them." (p. 622)

In an interview, Searls acknowledges the similarities. There's "a certain amount of license," he says. "She changed a few words, which seems to me to be within bounds of journalistic ethics, although I myself always tried to give credit to authors I used."

In another instance, Goodwin's prose mirrors that of Rose Kennedy's 1974 autobiography, "Times to Remember." Kennedy writes:

"I ran upstairs and awakened Joe. I stood for a few moments with my mind half paralyzed. I tried to speak but stumbled over the words. Then I managed to blurt out that priests were here with that message. He leaped from the bed and hurried downstairs, I following him. We sat with the priests in a smaller room off the living room, and from what they told us we realized that there could be no hope, and that our son was dead." (p. 301)

The corresponding passage in Goodwin's book differs mainly in changing perspective from the first to third person:

"Rose ran upstairs and burst into her husband's room. Waking him, she stood for a few moments, her mind half paralyzed, trying to speak but stumbling over her words. Then she managed to blurt out what the two priests had said. Joe Senior rushed down and escorted the priests into a small room off the living room. There he and Rose heard the story which made it clear that there could be no hope. Their eldest son was dead." (p. 689)

BUT THE MOST striking borrowing is from Lynne McTaggart's 1983 "Kathleen Kennedy: Her Life and Times."

McTaggart, for example, writes that

"her [Kathleen's] closest friends assumed that she and Billy were 'semiengaged.' On the day of the party reports of a secret engagement were published in the Boston papers. . . . The truth was that the young couple had reached no such agreement." (p. 65)

The corresponding passage in Goodwin's book differs by just a few words:

"her [Kathleen's] closest friends assumed she and Billy were semi-engaged. On the day of the party, reports of a secret engagement were published in the Boston papers. . . . The truth was that the young couple had reached no such agreement." (p. 586)

McTaggart:

"Hardly a day passed without a photograph in the papers of little Teddy, taking a snapshot with his Brownie held upside down, or the five Kennedy children lined up on a train or bus." (p. 25)

Goodwin:

"Hardly a day passed without a newspaper photograph of little Teddy taking a snapshot with his camera held upside down, or the five Kennedy children lined up on a train or bus." (p. 523)
McTaggart:

"Mrs. Gibson gave a tea in her honor to introduce her to some of the other girls--hardly a routine practice for new recruits." (p. 130)

Goodwin:

"Mrs. Harvey Gibson gave a tea in her honor to introduce her to some of the other girls--hardly a routine practice for new recruits." (p. 666)

There are dozens more such parallels in “The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys.”

The treatment of McTaggart's work as a source changed after the first edition of Goodwin's book. The changes were not accompanied by any acknowledgment of defects in the earlier edition. And to this day, the borrowed passages are not placed in quotation marks, though they are now footnoted.

The 2001 edition of “The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys” contains 40 endnotes citing McTaggart that were not in the first edition. And the preface to the latest edition of Goodwin's book includes the following paragraph: "In the preparation of this work, I was grateful for Lynne McTaggart's biography, "Kathleen Kennedy: Her Life and Times," which is the definitive biography of Kathleen Kennedy and which I used as a primary source for information on Kathleen Kennedy, both in my research and in my writing." McTaggart was not mentioned in the preface to the first edition. Yet the dateline of the preface in both editions reads "November 1986," as if nothing had been added.

McTaggart, in a phone interview, says that she is unable to comment on or discuss the matter.

David Rosenthal, a spokesman for Simon & Schuster, publisher of "The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys," says that an "understanding" was reached between Goodwin and McTaggart. "In the original book there were some mistakes made," he says. "Those mistakes were corrected. Doris acknowledged the mistake to McTaggart, and they reached an understanding on how those mistakes should be corrected. The error was inadvertent. Back then, Doris kept notes on long legal pads and some papers got shuffled. It was corrected as soon as she became aware of the error."

IN RESPONSE to my questions, Goodwin explains, "I wrote everything in longhand in those days, including the notes I took on secondary sources. When I wrote the passages in question, I did not have the McTaggart book in front of me. Drawing on my notes, I did not realize that in some cases they constituted a close paraphrase of the original work."

She confirms that McTaggart contacted her shortly after the book appeared in 1987. "I acknowledged immediately that she was right, that she should have been footnoted more fully. She asked that more footnotes be added and a paragraph crediting her book. This was done in the paperback edition."

Goodwin continues, "This was brought to a satisfactory conclusion 15 years ago. And learning from this, I have made it a constant practice to use quotations in the text itself and to have the original source directly in front of me when I am writing."

Why weren't the passages ever put in quotation marks? "Had she asked for more quotations in the text," says Goodwin, "I would have done it."

Professional norms in the crediting of source material are not, however, matters of lawyer-like negotiation between authors and their sources. There is a right way and a wrong way to do these things. As Goodwin put it in her 1993 complaint against McGinnis:

"There's nothing wrong with an author building on material from a previous book. That's the way history is built, as long as you credit the source. . . . I just don't understand why that wasn't done."
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UPDATE: The January 22, 2002 Boston Globe reports that Doris Kearns Goodwin has disclosed the settlement with Lynne McTaggart.