

Hugh Fraser Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 09/17/1966
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Biographical Note

(1918 - 1984) Kennedy family friend and associate; Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Colonies (1960-1962); Secretary of State for Air (1962-1964), United Kingdom. Discusses relationship with the Kennedys in London, personal relationship with John F. Kennedy, and professional meetings with the President, among other issues.

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Hugh Fraser – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

Rt. Hon. Hugh Fraser, M.B.E.

September 17, 1966
London, England

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Fraser, could you tell us something about when you first got to meet John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] or the Kennedy family?

FRASER: Well, I really got to know them, it must have been '38 or '39. And the ones I knew best were Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] and Kick [Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish]. I went on a trip with Joe and Kick once through Spain ending up in the south of France. That must have been just before the war, I think, maybe '39, maybe '38. I can't quite recall. The funny thing was—it struck me at that time and this is just possibly why I misjudged Jack afterwards, in after life, not thinking he would be the top figure he became, maybe, and obviously as many people say they now saw—that, although he must have been much my age, he seemed much younger then. I think that's borne out by the photographs which we looked at just a moment ago. As I remember Joe—I think you'll agree—it looks as though at that time, taking those photographs in '38, although Jack must have been 21 and written this very remarkable book, as you know, *Why England Slept*—about which some rather corny jokes were made at the time—he looked very much younger than Joe.

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O'CONNOR: What sort of corny jokes were made about that book at the time?

FRASER: The first time I really got to know Jack was after the war. I'd seen quite a lot of Kick and Joe during the war over here because Joe, of course, was stationed and died from a British base, in a mission from a British base here. It was when he came over as a journalist, I think in the '45 election, and he came up and watched my election in Stafford and Stone. It was my first shot at politics, and I must have been pretty peculiar. Certainly Jack thought I was very peculiar. I remember almost the last time I saw him, in '63, when we were traveling in the presidential helicopter, he recalled it and did an imitation of me being made a member of Parliament near Stoke-on-Trent and did a perfect imitation of the chairman and introducing me.

O'CONNOR: You said you knew Joe. Though many people have commented on the fact that Joe was really the top son of the Kennedys, originally, and that he was groomed for higher political offices very, very young, rather than John. Do you have any comments to make on that?

FRASER: Well, I think, what I said a minute ago, I think that Joe looked much more mature than Jack. I think Jack looked incredibly young for his age at 21. I think he was intellectual in a bright, quick way, while Joe was much more serious, let's say, and had—it's a Latin word, quite a good one—*gravitas* about him. He was the eldest boy in the family, and I think this weighed quite a lot with the Kennedys, who were sort of hierarchical. I think this is like most large families.

O'CONNOR: Oh, yes.

FRASER: Joe was the one who was thought to be more responsible, and Jack was lighter in his approach, I think.

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O'CONNOR: You also must have gotten to know the Ambassador [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] at that time, or gotten to know him subsequently.

FRASER: I was always very fond of—very funny, he was always very kind to me, the Ambassador. He was much attacked over here, of course. When one said one liked the Ambassador, people used to turn on one because he was an extremely unpopular figure. That's no question after his reports and his attitude on our chance of winning the war—that was the attitude taken by many people—and his choosing to report back what he thought was happening.

O'CONNOR: A number of people have maintained that the Ambassador was anti-Semitic, at least in one sense or another. Do you have any comments to make on that?

FRASER: Well, I think that is probably true. He is anti-Semitic in a rather willful, old fashioned sense. I remember traveling—I don't know, it may have been from, maybe from Miami it was, up to Palm Beach with Jack and the Ambassador, and the Ambassador saying and pointing to some golf club, "They're none of them in there." And I said, "What do you mean?" and he said, "Jews, don't be stupid." The idea that the Ambassador influenced Joe's thinking, my impression was not at all. I think there was proximity of affection but a distinct difference in view.

O'CONNOR: You said Joe's thinking, you mean Jack?

FRASER: Jack's thinking. I mean Jack's yes. Jack's thinking. I think there was a distinct...I think that some of the views the Ambassador expressed—although Jack never, they were a perfectly loyal family—I think they were anti-pathetic to some of Jack's own attitudes.

O'CONNOR: Well, you mentioned that it was a very hierarchical family, though. You don't, nonetheless, feel that the father dominated John or dominated Joe or any of the others?

[-3-]

FRASER: Oh yes, I think he did dominate. He did dominate, but I think that Jack broke away sort of completely from this. I think the old man was extremely proud of him, but then I think that in his early political life it may well have been that the old man may have intervened a bit in some of... Early, when he became a congressman in '47, I suppose, at that time I think he may have been reflecting his father's views, but he reflected them less and less, I think. Don't you? I think there's no denying it.

O'CONNOR: Well, you got to know Joe quite early. When did you really begin to know John Kennedy? You had met him earlier, in '37, '38, '39, something like that, but you said not until after the war, didn't you?

FRASER: Not really until after the war, not until he came over—did I say anything about this election up in Staffordshire?

O'CONNOR: Yes, you mentioned that.

FRASER: Then he came up for two days, spent two days with me up there, saw my election. Because of my affection for the girls, for Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] and Kick, Kick and Eunice, I spent a little time between '45 and '4, '52 I should say, in the United States, saw quite a lot of Jack then down in Washington, was his guest for three days while he was fighting his campaign against Cabot Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] in '52 up in Boston. I saw him in action then and I was surprised by some of his political shenanigans as he must have been by mine. The "tea party"

technique amazed me. He obviously was very successful in a very difficult situation, which he won hands down.

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O'CONNOR: Well, what sort of man was he? You must have gone out with him, you must have gotten to know something about his likes and dislikes and his tastes and things of this sort. He's been often called a playboy in his younger years, and this certainly was more or less in his younger years. What sort of impression did you have of him then?

FRASER: I think he liked a good time, he liked girls.

O'CONNOR: Everyone says he liked girls.

FRASER: Very healthy attitude to life. I think he—I'm not sure that, you know, when he was ill there wasn't a very big—I don't know. I didn't know him then. I really sort of lost touch with Jack between '52 and '60. I hardly saw him except when he came over here. He used to make these tours. I remember one tour when he arrived here and said—in '57, I suppose it must have been, or '58—he said, "I want to see all these people like Eden [Sir Anthony Eden] and so forth," who must have been Prime Minister then. So I layed it all on. And I think he must have been over—a friend called Macdonald [Torbert H. Macdonald], is there a Macdonald?

O'CONNOR: Torby Macdonald.

FRASER: Torb and he arrived, and they were all lined up, these Cabinet ministers. I was anxious, of course, and Jack was three-quarters of an hour late. I had to ring up, and Torb and he had gone off. I don't know what happened to them. They turned up and it all went off very well. He had enormous charm; he could charm a bird off a tree if he wanted to.

O'CONNOR: Even in his younger years?

FRASER: Well, even then. Of course that was '56—it may have been '54 I'm thinking of. I don't know which year. But he had just become a senator. It must have been '54. '54, when Eden was Foreign Secretary, that would be it.

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O'CONNOR: But I was talking about just after the war, when you knew really Eunice and Kick, you knew them very well. You expect a man who's eventually going to become President of the United States, or a man

who eventually did become President of the United States, to be a rather serious man or at least have some rather serious ambitions and serious ideas at that time. Did you have that impression of him or not?

FRASER: He was basically very serious. I'm basically very serious, or people I think I am, but it doesn't stop one from enjoying oneself, especially in one's youth. And he had enormous knowledge. I'll tell you what always impressed me, his great knowledge of American history. He got tremendous detail knowledge of American history. But I think, probably, he was—looking back on it, I think he was a much more serious character than he gave on. The impression he probably wanted to give was one of a lightness of touch, which he never lost even in the most serious matters, which was very engaging. It also, I think, was a great help to him probably in negotiation.

O'CONNOR: Well, when we were talking a little bit early, you mentioned, for example, that he was really a very good listener, very often essentially listened, didn't really say much himself. Did you have that impression of him then, or is this something, a technique, he developed later as President?

FRASER: I think he was always a great questioner. He always asked an enormous number of questions. He was very interested in things. For every one question one asked him he asked one two, I think, at least. Why? He always wanted to know why things were and how things worked, the root cause of things. I think he had an enormous interest, and inquisitive, he had an inquisitive mind. He wanted to know.

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O'CONNOR: But are you speaking—I don't know whether you can differentiate between the two—are you speaking about the man as you got to know him later on or about the man as you really knew him in the beginning, as you knew him in the period after the war? Was he like that then?

FRASER: Yeah, he was always, always a sort of probing mind. And the thing that impressed one once one got in a serious conversation was he was prepared to take a very radical view about things starting off from a fairly conservative premise to end up with a pretty radical solution. I think this was borne out when he became leader of the United States. And his premises were essentially conservative premises. He wasn't a natural radical, I should say; his mind moved into radical situations.

O'CONNOR: Well, I've heard a number of people comment that they really were amazed at John Kennedy's extraordinary self-control. Did you ever see him angry about anything?

FRASER: No, I don't think I ever did. I saw him being sort of forceful, in the sense of saying things which he meant. And the only sort of row I've had with him in politics was over the MLF [Multilateral Force]. I thought the MLF was nonsense and a non-starter, and he took the view that, far from it being that, it was the essential to prevent the Germans riding ahead on their own on an atomic program.

O'CONNOR: When did he say that?

FRASER: I think this must have been '63, the last time I saw him, which must have been June or July of '63.

O'CONNOR: And he really felt the Germans would go on ahead by themselves?

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FRASER: Well, this was a ten minute conversation on an airplane. We had many other things to think about.

O'CONNOR: Sure, but I wondered if he really expressed himself strongly that the Germans would go on ahead.

FRASER: He did. That's one time I've heard him express himself very strongly. I remember we were discussing things like British Guyana, on an official level. He was purely in a listening stance, I mean, just saying, "What would happen if this was done?" But here he was categorical. That was his view at that time.

O'CONNOR: Okay, you said you hadn't had much contact with him really in the fifties, but perhaps you had some contact with him later on, when he became president or before he became president. Maybe you'd talk about that a little bit.

FRASER: I didn't see him in America—I didn't get to America, I don't think—between '52 and '60, or '61 even. I talked to him on the telephone once when I was in America in '60 or '61. Then after he'd become—I'd see him, you know, when he came through Europe, like this time I... He always rang up or ate a meal or something like that, or we got together for a drink when he came through Europe. It must have been two or three times during this period. And I saw him three times, I think, when he was president: first of all, just as an old friend; secondly, on a question of British Guyana which I thought the Americans were making a—he was being misinformed about and it was being puffed up into far bigger a situation for America than it really was; and thirdly, when I was there with the Air Minister he kindly took me down to a big parade at—what do they call the Springs?

O'CONNOR: Colorado Springs.

FRASER: Colorado Springs in his own plane. And they were the only three times I saw him.

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O'CONNOR: I wish you would elaborate on those a little bit, if you could. Do you recall any specific things about the first instance, when you met him then?

FRASER: No. The first instance it was just his amazing, his memory for things one's done together.... I remember once he recalled a fact that must be eight, ten years back. We'd been late up one night in New York and gone to a late movie. It must have been one of those movies that begin at 2 a.m. And we had gone to a shooting match, you know, one of those booths down Broadway where you're talking about trying to shoot horses. And he recalled this instance. Now this showed an incredible memory of just a purely social occasion. The fact that he was President of the United States seemed to make no difference at all in his recollection of really unimportant friends.

The second time was on British Guyana—Guy-anna, I think you call it—which I thought you were really looking at it through... I was down there negotiating with Jagan [Cheddi Jagan] and Burnham [Forbes Burnham], and we were getting nowhere on the question of independence. And I'd had a sort of four day session with them. The CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], I thought, at that time were not being very bright. Anyhow, the American policy was making this really far more important than it should have been because it was really nothing but a mudbank.

O'CONNOR: Let me stop you right there. You said the CIA was not being very bright. Can you elaborate on that a little bit? What do you mean exactly, the CIA was not very bright? What were they doing, or what were they doing wrong?

FRASER: Well, I think what they were doing wrong was making interference in local politics which vexed us as we were the government. And the British government was finding the CIA as sort of trying to stir things up a bit.

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O'CONNOR: Well, why? What was their...

FRASER: At that stage I think they wanted to see that Jagan was discredited and that.... Really I don't know what their background though—it may have been that they wanted just to keep us with British rule there

permanently. And I think that the CIA objective was, and the American objective was, simply that the British should remain and not grant Jagan independence. Now this was a policy which simply couldn't go on and would only lead to British troops being there to a major commitment. It struck me that we must get off this hook. I could see the American point of view, but it was exaggerated. I thought there was a solution to this in what's called the proportional representational system of election, which meant that Jagan would not be in power. And it would've put Burnham and D'Aguiar [Peter D'Aguiar] in. I couldn't say this, naturally enough, to Burnham and D'Aguiar, or to Jagan, when I was down there, but I did consider it wise to fly up and see the President and put this point to him. And I said, "You're trying to ask us to remain here forever, which means keeping four or five British battalions, maybe, in the place. This isn't on. And you must see the proportion of risk here is very small. Fundamentally, British Guyana is a mudbank, and really hasn't any contacts with the rest of Latin America (which is true). It's surrounded by forests and mountains with no natural communications, except by air, and, after all, Moscow's got good communications by air with Latin America. And I think we're going." We held one of these probing talks with McGeorge Bundy and the President, and I think he saw the point. I think it has worked out fairly well there in British Guyana. I think that it's a problem which isn't a major problem. And it's certainly no longer a problem as far as British troops are concerned.

O'CONNOR: Well, it's often been said, though, that the American position on Cheddi Jagan and on Forbes Burnham and others was gotten from

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the United Kingdom, was gotten from talks with British representatives. Have you ever talked to anybody else about this problem? Anybody else in the American government or the American foreign policy establishment aside from the President?

FRASER: No, I just talked with officials there and McGeorge Bundy, and then with the President.

O'CONNOR: Well, I wondered if the American point of view regarding Cheddi Jagan, or regarding Forbes Burnham particularly, was gathered from what you might have said about Forbes Burnham and the others.

FRASER: No, I...

O'CONNOR: Actually, the United States was very much against, it seemed, very much against Forbes Burnham initially and actually thought Cheddi Jagan might be a better ruler. At least, this is my impression. And I thought possibly because of what you might have said about what sort of ruler Forbes Burnham might be, this had contributed to the American point of view.

FRASER: Well, I don't know. I think the American point of view really was that they didn't want us to leave. That was all. And everyone else was, I think, a pawn to this object as far as they were concerned. And I made quite clear that we had to leave and that we could, through proportional representation, sort of hold the Indian majority, which we did.

O'CONNOR: Let me stop you right here before you go on to your final meeting with the President and ask you. You knew him as a rather younger man, and you also knew him as president. Did you see any change at all in the man? Many people talk about his development or lack of development.

FRASER: I think the fascinating thing about him was the enormous way he could flatter people who were his friends, and still seemed to remain

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his friends, and his recollection of some quite extraordinary, little tiny things, of the shooting booth and some jokes. You know, he could recall my first address to the electorate of Stafford and Stone, to the electorate of Stone in this instance. And I think underneath his weight of responsibility, the enormous power which sort of emanates from the President of the United States and the gravity which he had assumed.... And, genuinely, I was tremendously impressed suddenly realizing, traveling up the White House lift, that this man was President of the United States and clearly was President of the United States and there by no fluke, and it suddenly came to mind having thought in the early days, you know, "Well, I hope Jack makes it," [Laughter] but not with great hope.

O'CONNOR: Well, do you think he himself developed? You were kind of amazed by this; you speak as though you were amazed. Do you think he himself developed at all? In other words, you expect a President of the United States to be a rather serious man, to be *un homme responsable*. Was he by that time, do you feel?

FRASER: Oh, yes. Obviously, I think, obviously. I don't know, you see, I didn't see enough of him between.... I think it really happened—there must have been something tremendous that happened to him between '50 and '60, don't you? This was a tremendous period of development, a tremendous period of development. I wonder about his illness, you know. Quite often this does a tremendous thing to a man. If you're really ill, you've got to think profoundly about profound things, final things. The book he wrote, a good book, and the amount of reading during, what, those twelve months, fourteen months of illness, off and on. And I think that had a tremendous.... But yet to meet, you see, he would immediately restore the relationship of eight years gone. You'd feel you were meeting a very old friend. And this is deceptive in taking the measurement. So I'm not really being very helpful, I'm afraid.

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O'CONNOR: No, you really are being very helpful. That's a very interesting comment, though. I guess many people have commented, and some favorably and some unfavorably, on his informality, really on his personality, on his ability to meet friends. But you feel he was just as friendly, apparently, just as warm.

FRASER: Just as warm, yes, just as warm. He made one feel that this was a very special thing, to have one's friendship. I think he did this to many people.

O'CONNOR: This is really an extraordinary characteristic, though, of a president. He's got many, many other things on his mind, and the idea that he would....

FRASER: Yes, I know. Many other things. On these little meetings like on the very complicated meeting on British Guyana and all the various things which were—the political movements, the various wings of the various parties—well, he was extremely, extraordinarily well briefed up on it. I mean, he'd got it at his fingertips. And, really, this was a piddling problem for him. And, again, these probing questions about the roots of the matter. This was his—as a young man it came out, his capacity to get to the root of a thing, usually using the old Greek method of the thesis and antithesis, the question, the dialectical method of the Greek peripatetic philosophers. And this was his.... And I guess Laski [Harold Laski] had quite a lot to do with it. I think Laski was quite an important formative influence. He was very un-American in a sense. You'll excuse me saying it, he was very much...

O'CONNOR: That's quite alright. Many other people have said exactly the same thing.

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FRASER: ...very much of the world or of Europe. He was very much involved, one felt, in things outside America. He was a European very much, and one felt he was a European or one felt he's got a cultural touch. He was enormously well read in American history and literature, I mean to me staggeringly so, infinitely better read—the average politician is very badly read, incredibly badly read. They read too many newspapers; they don't read enough books. He read an enormous number of books. And he knew a lot about Europe, a great deal about Europe and a great deal about this country. That's not a rare American characteristic. If you go into an American lawyer's office, they know much more about English law than many lawyers here.

O'CONNOR: That's funny. Many people have made much of his Irish ancestry; but I've heard, by the same token, more people talk about—his views of Irish problems, for example, were really more English than Irish. And

so, perhaps, that indicates that he does have, or he did have, quite a European frame of mind in many respects.

FRASER: Well, I think so. I think he was here at a very, very important period in his life, wasn't he after all. I think, frankly, it was a very formative time, for a boy between...

O'CONNOR: Just becoming a man, really.

FRASER: Yes, a man, you see, between sort of 17 and—he must have been here between sort of 18 and 21, wasn't he, which is a frightfully important epoch, I'd have thought, in a chap's life.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we can move on then to your final meeting with him. You said you went to Colorado Springs and you had some talks with him then.

FRASER: Yes, he very kindly flew me down in his aircraft. And we talked, we had this talk about the MLF.

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O'CONNOR: This is when he said...

FRASER: Was when he felt—the only time I'd seen him really feel—he came out. Rather than the usual sort of drawing one out into a position, he came out. He didn't let one deploy one's argument at all. He just said, "This is a thing which has got to go through. And if it doesn't go through, I feel that the Germans will take the bit between their teeth." This was the attitude, and I said, "I can't agree." And he really turned quite nappy, to a certain degree [Laughter], and said, "I can't agree."

O'CONNOR: Nappy, I think, is a word we'll have to translate into American English.

FRASER: Nappy. He turned and said, "I believe this with..." you know. I don't want to get the words wrong because I can't recall the words. All I can recall is the attitude, and the attitude was that I regard this as a central part of my policy. I'd seen Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] on something else at the same time, and Rostow, I think, was a great man for this, wasn't he, at that stage, I think. Then we talked about the American supersonic aircraft.

O'CONNOR: What did he have to say about that?

FRASER: Well, I think his attitude—“We’ve just got to have it. We’ve got to do it. This is what’s coming. You’re doing it. We all ought to do it.” But we didn’t discuss that, not the rights or wrongs with all those technical performances and capacities the problems of getting into a new barrier, the heat barrier, which, of course, the proposed American aircraft will. It’s not just a question of the sound; it’s the heat problem and the metals.

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O’CONNOR: Okay. Another question, and we can wind this up pretty quickly, but do you recall where you were, what you were doing, when you discovered John Kennedy had been assassinated.

FRASER: Yes, I was in a call box. I had lost my way on the night of his assassination. It must have been about 8 o’clock in the evening and near Reading. And I rang up my host to say, “I’m lost.” And he said, “The President has been assassinated.” I went, “Lord, it couldn’t be.”

O’CONNOR: Okay. We can shut this off then unless you’ve got any other comments on the President, or on his family, that you’d like to have read into this thing.

FRASER: Well, I think it is a wonderful thing to have known him, to have known all them. They’re a wonderful family.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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