

William Douglas-Home Oral History Interview – 10/28/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Douglas-Home, playwright and Kennedy associate of the United Kingdom, discusses meeting John F. Kennedy (JFK), meeting Sir Winston Churchill, and JFK and Robert F. Kennedy's relationship, among other issues.

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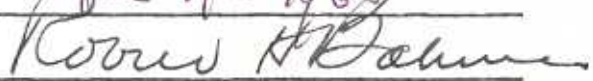
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William Douglas-Home

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Oral History Interview

With

William Douglas-Home

October 28, 1966

London, England

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: If you would begin, sir, by telling us where you got to know John Kennedy, how you got to know him?

HOME: I met him when his father was Ambassador here in Prince's Gate. I was a friend of his sister, Kick [Kathleen Kennedy], and I got to know him when he was here on his vacations from where – Harvard wasn't it? We used to play golf together. He was age 21, very young, and very

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interested in everything. I mean not only politics, but the thing that struck you about him was that he was so vital about everything.

O'CONNOR: What did he like best, what did he like to do?

HOME: When he was here, I think he liked to play golf, and he liked to meet anybody he saw from any political party and discuss politics with people and ask them their views. And he also used to go to the London School of Economics, didn't he, under Harold Laski.

O'CONNOR: Harold Laski, for a short time, yes.

HOME: The first time I ever played golf with him we went to Royal Wimbledon Golf Club, and we asked for a couple of golf balls each. The assistant professional said we could take a box each. And he gave

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us a dozen deluxe golf balls each in a box, and we were rather surprised. And when we came back, there was an ambulance waiting outside the club house to take the man away

because he'd been giving everything away that morning. I had thought he might have been rather lucky after that. [Laughter]

Then I didn't see him again until after the war. I'd been in trouble in the way, and I had been put in prison for being against an unconditional surrender and all that kind thing. When he came over in 1945 to stay with his sister, we used to have lunch together and discuss politics again. He had a very broad minded approach to everything. I mean, he saw everybody's point of view. Although he had a strong one himself,

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he was able to see everybody else's. And then I didn't see him much until my wife and I went to America when "The Reluctant Debutante" was on there. We went and stayed on Rhode Island where he stayed with his father-in-law. He was getting heavily involved in politics then, and he used to be on the telephone until two in the morning, you know, talking to somebody in Los Angeles. You could hear it going on.

Again, I saw how interested he was in everything and the way he used to question everybody. The first time we met him that year, in '56 it was, after not having seen him for a few years, he came into the St. Regis Hotel where I was sitting with my wife and Wilfred Hyde-White, the actor, on the night of

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our first night just before it started. Hyde-White was in a very highly nervous state as all actors are. And I said, "You know Jack Kennedy. This is Wilfred Hyde-White, my leading actor." And he said, "Is he up to it?" That reduced Mr. Hyde-White to a pulp from that point on, and then when he came on stage that night, he found him sitting in the second row watching him. Everything went well. But that was the way he talked to people, so vital the whole time.

O'CONNOR: Did you find him a very serious man when you first knew him?

HOME: Not at all.

O'CONNOR: Even when he was younger, I wondered if he was serious about his politics?

HOME: Well, he was interested, always interested. He didn't have a deep political discussion without jokes at the same time. He had

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a very highly developed sense of humor. Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] was probably more serious than he was.

O'CONNOR: I was just going to say you must have known his brother Joe.

HOME: He was a more serious type.

O'CONNOR: There's some question about what relationship there was between John Kennedy and Joe. Some people...

HOME: Well, I couldn't tell that really. I only used to meet them, you know, if you went out to dinner at the Embassy, they were both there. I never saw them together much. But they were very friendly. What do some people think?

O'CONNOR: Well, in effect, that John Kennedy was rather dominated and completely overshadowed by his older brother.

HOME: No, I wouldn't say that. No, I wouldn't have

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thought that was at all likely.

O'CONNOR: For example, many people have commented that—and I think Arthur Schlesinger has commented this, or at least referred to this, in his biography of Kennedy— that John would never have become president or never really gone into the field of politics if Joe had continued to live because Joe was the man who was marked for politics.

HOME: Well, he might have been marked for president, but there was room for them both, wasn't there, in politics. I mean you always read that father said that Joe is going to be president, didn't he? But whether that's so, I don't know. But he was right in the political world from the start, if only from the fact that his father was Ambassador. I mean, he met all the English politicians of

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that time. And he wrote his book, didn't he, *Why England Slept*.

O'CONNOR: Well, when did you see him after that? By the way, did he ever talk about his war experiences at all to you? You saw him, not during the War, but after the War.

HOME: Not really.

O'CONNOR: Because he really had some extraordinary experiences in the Second World War.

HOME: Yes. I read about the, you know, the boat being cut in half, and he always had trouble with his back and all that. He didn't talk about it much. When I saw him next... My wife and I stayed with him in the South of France

just after he'd been beaten by, who was it, Senator Kefauver [Estes Kefauver], wasn't it, for the vice presidency.

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O'CONNOR: Vice Presidency in '56.

HOME: And we had his brother-in-law over, Mike Canfield [Michael T. Canfield]. Have you interviewed him?

O'CONNOR: No, I have not.

HOME: He's a publisher. He's over here now. I mean, he lives here. And Jack used to talk about politics there a lot. And I used to talk about plays. And he always used to say, "Let's get it straight. What are we talking about now, my politics or your plays?" We both talked about each, so it was quite friendly.

O'CONNOR: Was he very interested in your plays? Was he very interested in the theaters?

HOME: He used to read them and all that, and attend the first night—well, that was the only one that he could attend

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because it was the only one that was in New York. He was interested in everything, that was the thing – I mean, in what everybody did.

And then Mr. Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] came to the South of France and was staying somewhere, and there was a lot of talk as to whether he shouldn't ring Stevenson up and say, "Should I come to tea with you?" or whether Stevenson would ring him up. That kind of thing. He was getting right into the presidential intrigue at that point.

O'CONNOR: When he was talking about whether he should ring up Stevenson, was the question ever decided?

HOME: I think Stevenson rang him, and everything worked out all right. Mike Canfield said to him, once, on Eden Rock, I

[-10-]

remember, "Why is it you want to be president?" He said, "I guess it's about the only thing I can do." It's rather an accurate statement. It may not be the only thing, but he did it well. There was an actor called David Torbinson there, I remember, and he swam out to that raft – you know, on Eden Rock – and Kennedy was lying in the sun there. He talked to him about the stage for about an hour and a half. He didn't realize

that he was with a potential president. He seemed to be pretty certain he would be by then.

O'CONNOR: John Kennedy did?

HOME: What year was it, about 1959?

O'CONNOR: Well, '56 is the year he was defeated for the vice presidency.

HOME: Right, it must have been '58. The last

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time I met him was when he came over after he'd been to see Mr. Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev], and there was a cocktail party at his sister-in-law's house, you know, Princess Radziwill [Caroline Lee Bouvier Radziwill]. And I remember he said he was very nervous with Khrushchev because he was so rough at the first meeting. And he repeated what he had often said to me, on previous occasions about Pitt [William, the Younger Pitt] and Fox [Charles James Fox] that you must be as strong as Pitt and a negotiating type like Fox at the same time, which is always a problem. But he did manage to achieve it himself.

O'CONNOR: Yes, he did, quite well. What do you think were his strongest characteristics? You've talked about his curiosity, for example. What view do you feel he had

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toward religion? He was a Roman Catholic, of course.

HOME: I remember he was saying good-bye to Lord Harlech's [William George Arthur Ormsby-Gore] wife at the door at this cocktail party and she said, "I don't know whether to kiss you or say 'good-bye, Mr. President.'" And he said, "You're a good Catholic, Cissy, you can kiss my ring." There were about eight journalists standing around and it made me laugh. I never discussed religion with him really at all.

But he did have a great breadth of vision. He read an awful lot. He knew all about the history of England and as I've said, was a great admirer of both Pitt and Fox. And Sir Winston [Winston Churchill] of course, he admired immensely, although, my own theory about Sir Winston was that

[-13-]

he was very much Mr. Pitt and not a great deal Mr. Fox! Of course, the perfect example of Kennedy's Pitt-Fox approach was his dealing with the Cuban Crisis.

O'CONNOR: Certainly.

HOME: Whereas, Sir Winston you might think of having a good fight with somebody and then being magnanimous afterwards. But Kennedy went one stage further, and he was prepared to be magnanimous without having the fight, which was a great advance in politics. Nobody could really go back after what he did in Cuba.

O'CONNOR: No, I don't think so.

HOME: I mean all these things in America like, you know, these Senate committees with Senator Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] and all this discussion about the Vietnam War – you could never have had it before Kennedy,

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I wouldn't have thought.

O'CONNOR: Well, you would have had something like it. Kennedy, I think has made, I mean Kennedy has made a partial opening up of...

HOME: He's made it possible to discuss international politics without a man who's going against the official line being branded as unpatriotic, hasn't he? He's opened up the discussion of international politics. Johnson's [Lyndon B. Johnson] policy in Vietnam about being tough and conciliatory at the same time comes directly from him.

O'CONNOR: I just don't believe that President Johnson's means exactly what he says it does.

HOME: I don't know about that, but that new approach in foreign politics you get from

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the English politicians too. They all say we must be strong and we must also conciliatory at the same time. They used to say, "We're going to be strong," or "We're going to be conciliatory." Either of which is a mistake. But that was the last time I saw him, at that cocktail party.

O'CONNOR: You did see him, though, he and Jacqueline [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], I guess, came to be in Cannes when you were there. Do you remember anything about that? I remember in Schlesinger's book...

HOME: That was when we stayed with him in the South of France. We stayed for a fortnight with him and Jackie. And that was when he was planning his next approach.

O'CONNOR: That was also when he met Sir Winston Churchill, wasn't it?

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HOME: Yes, we went down to Mr. Onassis' [Aristotle Onassis] yacht one evening, and Sir Winston wasn't recognizing people that evening much. And as we left, Mrs. Kennedy said, "I think he thought you were the waiter, Jack." That's about as far as it went. He was his hero, and it was rather sad to think that that was the first time he'd ever met him.

O'CONNOR: Did you know Jacqueline Kennedy very well at all?

HOME: Well, I knew her from meeting her in America when we were out there and also in the South of France that time. I have seen her since; she's been over here once or twice.

O'CONNOR: There's been a lot of talk about whether or not their marriage was a very happy

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marriage; whether it was slated for the rocks long before John Kennedy became President or not.

HOME: No, I wouldn't have thought it was. They got on very well together here.

O'CONNOR: Well, after he became President, it seems that was so. I wondered what sort of relationship they had before he became President.

HOME: They always seemed to get on all right, even before. But, be that as it may, his sense of humor was the thing that got me. I mean he had a terrific sense of humor.

O'CONNOR: Do you remember any incidents?

HOME: No political pomposity about him at all.

O'CONNOR: That's true.

HOME: I don't remember anything specific but

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his general approach was – well, he looked at the human angle about politics. I remember him saying he had seen Stevenson at a Turkish bath in New York or something, and he didn't think that he would be much of a rival to him!

O'CONNOR: That was before, obviously, he became president.

HOME: That was when we were in the South of France at Cannes. And he had terrific charm that was absolutely a hundred per cent charm. Anybody who met him, male or female, whoever they were... Which all the family had and have really. I mean all his sister had, too.

O'CONNOR: You knew his sister Kathleen, you said, fairly well?

HOME: Yes. She had tremendous charm, as well as being very, very lively.

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O'CONNOR: Were you very close to her during the period when she became married and shortly thereafter her husband...

HOME: Well, she got married in the War. I saw her before and after the War. But I didn't actually see her in the War much. And Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] is a very lively girl. She went up to Mr. Nehru once in Washington at a party when he was being difficult, you know, and everybody had to be nice to him, and she said, "So that's what you look like, you old rascal, you." And he was delighted by it. Nobody else but a Kennedy would have spoken to him like that.
[Laughter]

O'CONNOR: No, I think the Kennedys did get away with that sort of thing and not very many people would be able to.

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HOME: But how many times could he have been president? He could have done his next term, too, couldn't he?

O'CONNOR: Well, he could have had a second term, but that would have been the end.

HOME: Then he would have been 53...

O'CONNOR: Yes, he was, what, 46 when he died, I guess.

HOME: He would have been about 53, yes.

O'CONNOR: So, he would have had about six more years to go – 52. Do you recall where you were when you heard about his death?

HOME: Yes, I was at home. My wife's aunt arrived from the station for the weekend and said he'd been shot. That was the first we knew.

O'CONNOR: Did you get to know Robert Kennedy very well?

HOME: I do know him, but not as well as I knew

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the other one. I missed him last time he was here. I saw his wife, but I didn't see him.

O'CONNOR: I was wondering what you think about the two, or the relationship between the two of them. What is different about one compared to the other?

HOME: Well, I should think Bobby is much – I shouldn't think he's quite got the humor that his brother had. He might have, I don't know. I mean, he's been a bit harassed, hasn't he, in the last few years. I can't really tell. He's a very efficient organizer. He organized his brother's campaigns always, didn't he? But he's got the same charm, hasn't he, when you hear him speaking. I mean, when you're talking to him or when you see him on television.

O'CONNOR: Yes, he's got a good deal of charm, there's no doubt about that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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