



Remembering Gene McCarthy

[by James Kilpatrick]

A good rule for columnists is to soft-pedal the First Person Perpendicular. Let me break the rule long enough to voice an affectionate remembrance of Eugene McCarthy. He died Dec. 10 of Parkinson's disease. He will add a good Irish voice to the choir of angels.

Most of the obituaries dealt almost entirely with Gene's political career, especially with his quixotic run for the presidency in the Democratic primaries of 1968. On March 2 of that chaotic year, he unhorsed Lyndon Johnson in New Hampshire. Suddenly he was Big News.

A few weeks later, in Newark, N.J., I met McCarthy for the first time. I was then covering the campaign for National Review and writing a syndicated column for the old Washington Star. Haynes Johnson was the Star's senior political correspondent. I must caveat you: To borrow from Dr. Johnson, in writing their memoirs, old reporters are not upon their oaths.

Together we tracked McCarthy to the Military Park Hotel, where he was scheduled to speak to his fans at a campaign dinner. As I recall, the dinner itself was nothing much. McCarthy discarded the speech his aides had prepared for him and spoke impromptu for maybe half an hour. He could be the most charming of men when he felt like it, and that night in Newark he was still radiating the New Hampshire glow. About 10 o'clock he pleaded fatigue, shooed away his aides, and — memorably — invited Haynes and me to come up to his suite for a toddy.

The three of us accordingly adjourned sine die. For the next two hours, we political junkies sat on the rump-sprung sofas and talked mostly about — poetry. It was McCarthy's abiding passion. His hosts had thoughtfully furnished the suite with a large bottle, maybe two large bottles, of excellent Tennessee whiskey. I cannot speak for Haynes Johnson,

but the candidate and I began to treat this commendable juice with the deference it most certainly deserves.

Thus inspired, we began to quote our favorite passages. We started with Shakespeare. I launched into Sonnet XVIII. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" They hooted me down for banality. Our host recalled Sonnet XXVII, "Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed." We said it was much too early to retire. We lassoed Gray's lowing herd. With Wordsworth we wandered briefly, lonely as a cloud. I recall nothing of Keats or Byron or Shelley. The only Browning who made the cut was Elizabeth, "How do I love thee, let me count the ways." We solemnly agreed with Kipling that Gunga Din was a better man than any of us in the room. We rode with Tennyson's doomed brigade.

As the clock moved on and the booze went down, Haynes and I began to fade. McCarthy was only warming up. He recalled the shooting of Dan McGrew. He cremated Sam McGee. He led us through most of the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." We vowed to wear the bottoms of our trousers rolled. I was suddenly inspired to launch into Yeats' tale of Leda and the Swan:

*A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape ...*

Whereupon I ran out of steam and headed for bed. Without missing a single iambic beat, McCarthy picked up the sonnet:
... her nape caught in his bill,

*He holds her helpless breast upon his breast
...*

And so on to the burning roof and tower and Agamemnon dead.

After Nixon's victory in 1968, McCarthy moved to Rappahannock County, Va., up in the Blue Ridge mountains. We became neighbors, so to speak. He and his beloved companion, the late Marya McLaughlin, entertained quietly. Gene and I wrote a book of political satire, "A Political Bestiary," and drafted cartoonist Jeff MacNelly to illustrate it. The book never sold worth a tinker's dam and was soon remaindered, but I cherish it as a reminder of big guy with a wry wit, a loving heart and a lively mind. It's hard to believe he's dead.

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