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A Torch Kept Lit



BOOK REVIEW

A Torch Kept Lit, Great Lives of the Twentieth Century by *James Rosen*

2016 CROWN FORUM, 336 PAGES

Reviewed by Mary Bebout

John F. Kennedy, concluded William F. Buckley, Jr., in his eulogy of Number 35, wanted Americans to keep the torch lit; to work – according to their own lights – so that the United States remained strong and free. Buckley penned two tributes to President Kennedy for the magazine he founded, *The National Review*, both of

which are included in “A Torch Kept Lit, Great Lives of the Twentieth Century,” edited by James Rosen, and published by Crown Forum, a subsidiary of Penguin Random House.

Buckley and JFK were handsome, yacht-loving Catholics who shared great passion for the country despite disparate

visions for its future. JFK, the Harvard grad from Massachusetts, confounded Buckley with his ability to seem conservative whilst amassing a liberal voting log. Buckley, the Connecticut, author of “God and Man at Yale,” and architect of modern American conservatism, remained unbeguiled. Nonetheless, Buckley acknowledged both the fairy-tale nature of JFK’s presidency and its monstrous end. JFK possessed universal charm; his “personal radiance warmed the whole nation.” Buckley praised JFK’s “courage, dignity, fortitude, toughmindedness, independence,” but pointed out the dissension his policies caused on the left as well as the right. Buckley adhered to his credo that while one’s personal weaknesses should be buried with the body, a public figure’s positions on civic issues must stand eternally exposed.

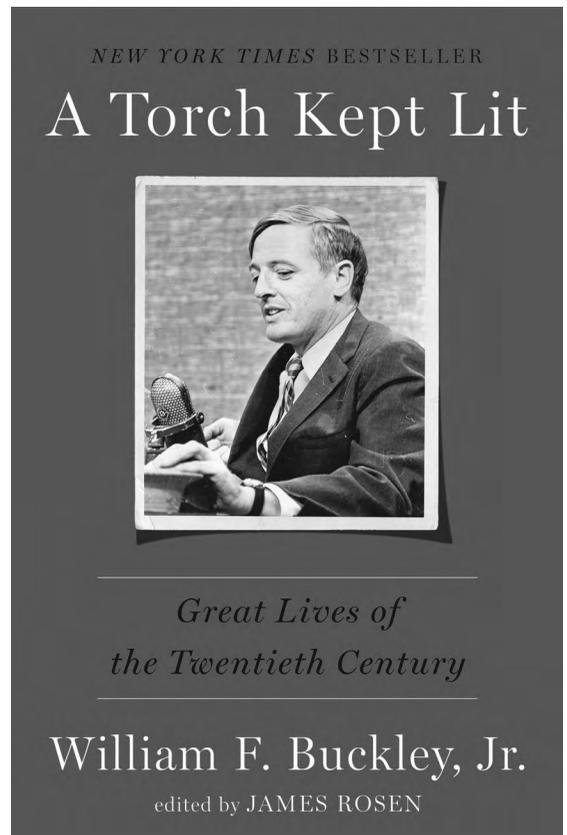
The collection of 52 eulogies is organized by theme beginning with presidents, extending to statesmen, family members, friends, and finally, foes. Buckley wrote about Jackie Onassis, Elvis, Vladimir Horowitz, John Kenneth Galbraith, Johnny Carson, David Niven, Eleanor Roosevelt, Truman Capote, Golda Meir, John Lennon and Diana, Princess of Wales.

Buckley expressed bitter disappointment with Eisenhower and Churchill for what they failed to accomplish. He ripped Nixon and Johnson alike. He worshipped patrician wife, Pat, and his father, a Texas-born self-made oilman. He heralded classical pianist and harpsichordist, Rosalyn Tureck, “the greatest living interpreter” of Johann Sebastian Bach. He hissed about Alger Hiss.

Buckley’s essays are flooded with reflections and introduced with pertinent

background information. Readers realize the equalizing effect of his military service and that his professional career launched at the CIA. The collection contains at least a half-dozen obituaries about spies and spymasters. Readers are reminded of Buckley’s ill-fated run for mayor of New York and are introduced to those with whom he sailed the globe or frequented his Swiss chalet for sophisticated apres ski.

Evident throughout is Buckley’s wit, civility and trademark cheerfulness. Many of his dearest friends were card-carrying liberals. Buckley held no litmus test for friendship. For decades he and Alistair Cooke lunched regularly at the Carlyle. His transideological alliance with Norman



Mailer sparked in Chicago at a sold-out debate over American right-wing politics. And Abe Rosenthal, the Pulitzer Prize-winning executive editor of the New York Times, invited Buckley to join a small club of “decisive voices in American journalism” to meet for lunch five to six times a year.

“A Torch Kept Lit” is a refresher course in cultural events over a half-century to be

enjoyed by readers no matter their political perspective. Certainly, Buckley fulfilled his father’s wish that he become a courteous, hard-working, God-fearing conservative. The book offers a glimpse of Buckley, the man, as he fulfilled his role as “the principal obituarist” for the National Review.

Mary Bebout is an attorney with Dean Mead & Dunbar in Tallahassee.