"Once there was a spot":

**CAMELOT AT LA SALLE**

The lives of an American president and an English novelist were entwined in 1963 and La Salle University played a major role.

In the summer of 1941 an American and an Englishman—shareers of the same birthday but eight years apart—decided how they would each confront the terrifying international situation. The choices they made that summer in large part shaped their lives. The younger man, an American of Irish descent, enlisted in the Navy and parleyed his becoming a war hero into a political career that reached the heights. The older man (evading the war by decamping from England to Doolistown, County Meath, Ireland) finished reshaping for his century the legends of King Arthur in what he called "an anti-Hitler measure." The men never met, but in a three-week period beginning on that infamous day of November 22, 1963, the legacies of John F. Kennedy and T. H. White entwined forever. On the day Kennedy was assassinated, T.H. White was scheduled to speak at La Salle University but cancelled because of illness; by the time White did speak here on December 16, his work had given a name to an epoch in American history.

Volumes containing some sections of White's classic Arthurian re-telling appeared in the late 1930s and early 1940s. But when White finished his grand epic in the summer of 1941, wartime paper shortages prevented its publication as a whole. Not until early in 1958 did *The Once and Future King* finally appear: White immediately became famous (and rich, as the book improbably made the best-seller lists).

In that year of 1958 John F. Kennedy himself was—if not yet quite internationally known—well on his way. As a Catholic senator, Kennedy was especially appropriate for La Salle to honor. In February 1958 the La Salle community gathered in the old auditorium (now the university chapel) on the lower level of College Hall to award Kennedy an honorary degree. "We need voters and politicians capable of making the hard and unpopular decisions our times require," he told us. And, writing in La Salle's literary magazine *Four Quarters*, Kennedy (narrowly elected president in the November the issue appeared) called for new ideals, the ideal especially of a "creative America . . . peopled by articulate and creative individuals. For those who cannot speak, those who cannot bring forth new ideas and put them before their fellows for judgment and action, cannot lead and they cannot be free."

One of the conundrums of the Arthurian legend, T. H. White wrote to a friend, was Arthur's struggle with himself over whether to

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T. H. White speaks at La Salle. It was his last lecture.
value the Law more than his personal love for his wife and for his friend, once Guenever and Lancelot become enmeshed in a love affair: "(Arthur) invents Law . . . and is prepared to sacrifice Lancelot & Guenever to the ideal." This central point became the focus of Lerner and Loewe's musical Camelot, based on White's The Once and Future King. Late in 1960 Camelot opened on Broadway starring Julie Andrews, Richard Burton, and Robert Goulet. The reviewer for the New York Post accurately described the new musical: "The wistful tale of an idealistic young king whose dream of bringing about a wiser and better world is shattered by mankind's frailty and stubbornness."

Of course, it now seems inevitable that White's idealistic Camelot and Kennedy's aborted presidency should fuse in the American imagination. But that linkage was conscious mythmaking on the part of Kennedy's widow Jacqueline. A week after the assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy telephoned a journalist, Theodore White, to ask him to come to Hyannis Port in Massachusetts: "She wanted me to come," the journalist recalled shortly before his own death, "because she had a message for the American people: She said that when Jack quoted lyrics they were usually classical. But, she said, 'At night, before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play records, and the song he loved most came at the end of the (Camelot) record, and the lines he loved to hear were:

Don't let it be forgot
That once there was a spot
For one brief shining moment
that was known as Camelot.

'This was Camelot, Teddy,' she told me, 'Let's not forget the time of Camelot.'"

With the press at LIFE magazine stopped to await the story, the journalist called in from Jacqueline's kitchen words that tied together T. H. White and John Kennedy and made "Camelot" (rightly or wrongly) synonymous with the era.

Shortly after this LIFE magazine issue appeared on December 9, T. H. White recorded in his journal that "one of President Kennedy's favorite discs was the cast recording of Camelot. It is an odd coincidence, because I have been told that when King George VI of England died, my book called The Gosbuck was found on his bed." And on December 16, a bright, cold Monday at the end of what had suddenly become a ghastly semester, T. H. White came to La Salle.

White found a large crowd gathered in the Union Theater: all freshmen had been required to read The Once and Future King the summer before. But the gathering was somber. Some in the audience (including me) had made the journey to Washington for Kennedy's funeral. In the last few weeks something had eroded from college students' lives; Kennedy's call for an idealistic life had for some been damaged, for others snuffed out. Despair had not yet become cynicism, but it was a near thing.

T. H. White looked us over, seemed to catch our mood, and quoted from the wizard Merlyn's words in The Once and Future King: "The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails . . . You may see the world about you degraded by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the swine's baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn . . . That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tormented by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting."

La Salle students' applause for T. H. White, he himself wrote in his journal, was "stunning" and made his "heart turn over." He did not "want to stop ever ever ever." But death stopped White a month later: the La Salle lecture was his last.

Lettering on a wall in La Salle University's chapel commemorates the place where John F. Kennedy received an honorary degree on February 11, 1958. Sixty yards away, in La Salle's Connelly Library, is preserved an outstanding special collection of T. H. White's work. La Salle University is the only place I know of that honors the American president together with the English novelist whose work (assisted by Lerner and Loewe) gave the signature to those times.

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