

**Andrew Minihan Oral History Interview –8/7/1966**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Andrew Minihan  
**Interviewer:** Joseph E. O'Connor  
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**Biographical Note**

Minihan, Irish political figure and chairman of the New Ross Urban District Council from 1955 to 1967 discusses President Kennedy's 1963 visit to New Ross, Ireland including the preparations for the visit, as well as his impressions of Robert and Edward Kennedy, among other issues.

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Andrew Minihan

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Minihan's first exposure to John F. Kennedy
2	Celebrating President Kennedy's inauguration in New Ross, Ireland
2	Planning President Kennedy's 1963 trip to New Ross
4	Welcoming President Kennedy to New Ross
4	Presentation of a rock from the Giants' Causeway
6	Reaction to the assassination
6	Edward Kennedy's visit to New Ross
7	President Kennedy's personal interest in Ireland
8	Edward Kennedy's personal interest in Ireland
9	Problems with the public address system during the 1963 visit
10	Minihan's impression of Robert Kennedy

Oral History Interview

With

ANDREW MINIHAN

August 7, 1966  
New Ross, Ireland

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O' CONNOR: Mr. Minihan, when did you first get wind of John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

MINIHAN: Well, the first I heard of John Kennedy, I got a letter from a Captain O'Donnell who was writing a history of American warships and one of these ships, a destroyer, was named the *Joseph Kennedy*. This man, O'Donnell, had been in the army with a Kennedy from New Ross, an officer in the Irish army who's now in America. He wondered whether this young man was a relative of this man Kennedy and he asked me to make inquiries. So I went to the Kennedy family and I found that they were not relatives but that his relatives lived about three miles from New Ross, people whom I knew, but I never knew about relatives of the Kennedys. In fact, all I knew about the Kennedys was Joseph Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], the ex-ambassador, and I didn't know anything about his family.

Well, I went to the Kennedys in Dunganstown and there they told me, especially Jim Kennedy [James Kennedy], he remembers the President's grandfather visiting Ireland, et cetera, et cetera. They knew that.... They had been in contact with this family. Then we realized that he was a New Ross man, and naturally we were very pleased with the whole thing. So then when he got his nomination for president from the party in America we wrote to

him. We sent him a telegram – I sent him a telegram – and wished him the best of luck. Well, he was nominated and then once more we sent him another telegram wishing him the best of luck in the elections. Well, he was duly elected and the people of New Ross decided to celebrate that particular day, that particular evening. But unfortunately the Irish troops in the Congo had been ambushed that particular day, and news came through that there were about fifty of them dead. A number of boys from New Ross were in the Congo, and as far as we knew maybe some of those were involved. So I cancelled the celebrations because of that. A lot of people were annoyed because they had made arrangements, but naturally we couldn't go ahead with them. So we decided we'd have a really good one on the day of his Inauguration. So we wrote to him and we asked him would he send us a message. We invited the American Ambassador, but unfortunately at the time he had gone to America and Colonel Frank O'Brien, who was the military attaché in Dublin at the time, he came and he represented America and we had a very, very good party. We had celebrations at exactly the same hour as the President was being inaugurated – that was about 8 o'clock in the evening, but he was inaugurated I think around about 3 o'clock. And he had sent us a message, a taped message, but unfortunately the plane was grounded in New York because of snow and finally got through to Dublin about 7 o'clock that night. So they phoned the message to us. In the message he thanked us for our congratulations and he said that he hoped to be with us within weeks or months. In other words, he let us know that he would come to New Ross. That was naturally the first word that we had in Ireland that he intended to visit Ireland. Well, of course, when word finally came through that he was coming to New Ross we had all sorts of trouble and everybody was up in the air. I mean, it was a greater affair to us really in New Ross than if the Pope had decided to come to New Ross. [laughter] So we made our plans accordingly. But we found that when you invite a President not only do you make plans but a lot of other people make plans.

O'CONNOR: Oh yes.

MINIHAN: We found that the Department of External Affairs had made their plans to welcome him according to – protocol; we found that the American Embassy had

[ -2 - ]

made plans to welcome him according to – as the Americans would welcome him; but we had made plans to welcome him as we in New Ross would welcome a returning son. So naturally three of us fell foul of, with one another at various times. We had the platform in one place and the American Ambassador came along and decided that he was laying down the law, decided to move it to somewhere else.

O'CONNOR: This is Ambassador McCloskey [Matthew H. McCloskey]?

MINIHAN: Ambassador.... Ah, this man, McCloskey, he wanted his own way and naturally we wanted our way. When he arrived we were cleaning up the

quay – really, you know, putting our best foot forward. We had scraped the top of the quay and there was a lot of – you might say – muck lying around. It was a big mound, hill, of it. McCloskey, Ambassador McCloskey, asked me what we intended to do with this, when to me it was painfully obvious we were removing it, and he being a public works man should have known that. So in a fit of temper I told him that what we were doing is that we were bringing about another hundred loads and adding to it so when the President came he thought he was in the Alps. The Ambassador didn't like it at the time but, well, we could do nothing about it. So we found we were running into a lot of difficulties there; they were changing and chopping. I told the other members of the committee, "The best thing we can do now is that we will agree with everything they say. If they say 'Turn left' we'll say, 'Yes, that's all right. We'll turn left.' But what we'll actually do is we'll do it our own way and when they arrive the day the President arrives he'll have a New Ross welcome not an American welcome or not an External Affairs welcome, but a pure New Ross one."

O'CONNOR: Who were you fighting with here now beside McCloskey? Were there any other Americans who were trying to tell you what to do?

MINIHAN: Oh no, no, no. Our own Department of External Affairs. They're just typical civil servants talking to me – you might say – the bogmen down the country, you know. You know what civil servants are like.

O'CONNOR: Yes, but was this Mr. Aiken [Frank Aiken] or Mr. McCann [Hugh McCann] or somebody under those?

[-3-]

MINIHAN: Oh no. It was some of his minions, some of his minions. I don't know who half of them were that were coming here. They were like bees around honey. I don't know who half of them were. But that's the way we treated them. But anyway the day arrived. We decided then that we'd spread out the welcome to the President as long as we could so that every individual had his fair share because – really God – we were looking upon him nearly as God at that particular time. For instance, our local electrician who had a public recording outfit – some people thought his affair wasn't good enough; they wanted to get a Dublin firm to do it. Some of us said, "Not on your life." It was his day out as well as ours so he should have the job of putting up the public address system. It's simple little things like that. For instance, the vice chairman decided the vice chairman would meet him at the helicopter and he'd bring him to the platform, and I'd meet him at the platform and so on – everybody getting a fair share. So I was waiting at the platform for him and I wasn't – I'm not a type of individual who gets really excited but at the last few minutes I did get a bit jittery, you see, especially when there was a chief of protocol to introduce me to Mr. X, and Mr. X was to introduce me to the President. By this time the President was in sight and the people were shouting their heads off. Immediately his car arrived he jumped out of the car and he went straight forward to me and he said, "Mayor Minihan," and he, "my brother Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] sent you his kindest regards and he said he had a whale of a time with you here in New Ross." And I knew from that minute that I was speaking to a

man. He was no longer the real President of America or anything formal. He was a human being and naturally I fell for him and so did everybody else. I mean, he just had that humanity about him that – what is it Kipling [Rudyard Kipling] said? “To walk with Kings not loose the common touch.” He had the whole lot of it, you see. So we went on to the platform and I made an address of welcome. Then we presented him with various bits of Waterford glass and things like that. Prior to that he was asked by the people of Northern Ireland to go and open the Giants’ Causeway which is a rock formation in Northern Ireland which is rather world famous. Well, he couldn’t do it so I was at a library conference up there and somebody suggested that I should take him a bit of the Giants’ Causeway. So I did. I had a little model there – they have a wishing seat there, you see – a little model of this, their souvenirs they make.

[-4-]

O’CONNOR: Cut out of the same rock?

MINIHAN: Cut out of the same rock. I had this in my pocket. Now naturally I was regarded by some people as a little contrary individual and they wanted to know exactly what I’d say.

O’CONNOR: I don’t know why anyone would think that.

MINIHAN: See, I might say the wrong thing. So I didn’t tell anybody about this little piece of rock and I said to myself, “Now I’ll present it to him if he’s the type of man I think he is. But if he’s too formal naturally it might embarrass him; I won’t.” You see, but immediately I saw him I knew this is the type of man that’ll enjoy the joke as well as anybody else. So I presented him with this little bit myself. And I said we all knew that if the mountain couldn’t go to Muhammad, Muhammad would have to go to the mountain, but that I believed that if the President couldn’t go to the Giants’ Causeway, the Giants’ Causeway should go to the President. So I presented him. He enjoyed the joke immensely. I don’t know, the people in Northern Ireland enjoyed it because I saw a paper afterwards with a photograph of myself presenting it to the President and it said “a little bit of Ulster.” So – I think the thing measured about an inch and a half – so no longer than they say in Ulster “not an inch” because I gave an inch and a half of Northern Ireland to the President and he enjoyed it. I hope there won’t be any diplomatic blowups over this.

O’CONNOR: No, I don’t think so.

MINIHAN: Nevertheless, that’s what happened. Well, when he was finished there.... We had been ordered by the American Embassy not to let people shake hands with him because of his back injury. But the man, he himself, wanted to meet the people. When he came down off the platform his bodyguards were trying to push him into the car and he said, “No, I’m going to meet the people.” So they said, “Right, sir. Come this way.” And he caught me by the arm and he said, “Mayor, we go this

way,” going the opposite way. So he went around amongst the people and everybody was absolutely thrilled with him. He just seemed to exude this feeling of

[ -5- ]

genuineness, you know, and friendliness, and he seemed to be perfectly happy and perfectly at ease. That’s what we liked about him. Then afterwards, naturally when he died the shock – it just came over the television one night – the shock was something great. We decided.... I said here well.... It was a hell of a rush to get to his funeral. My attitude towards it was well, if he as President of America could come to this country and pay a visit to New Ross, when he died it was the least we could have done was to show our appreciation of what he had done and go to his funeral, and that’s why I went. That’s the whole story roughly.

O’CONNOR: You said Teddy Kennedy had been here before.

MINIHAN: Teddy had been on some tour. Ted came here. He was on a trip and he visited New Ross and he met all his relations here.

O’CONNOR: When was that now? I didn’t know that.

MINIHAN: This was prior to the President coming.

O’CONNOR: Was this while he was President or...

MINIHAN: No.... Yes, while he was President. Yes, when he was President. It was just before Ted was elected Senator from Massachusetts.

O’CONNOR: Senator from Massachusetts, yes.

MINIHAN: Just prior to that. About a week before the campaign started, he was on some trip in Europe and he came here. He also was a very, very pleasant individual. I thought rather a smaller edition – not....

O’CONNOR: Not in physical size.

MINIHAN: Not in physical size but he was very like his brother, I thought, and very, very pleasant. I must say that we enjoyed him.

O’CONNOR: What did he do here? Did he give any speeches or anything like that?

[ -6- ]

MINIHAN: Oh yes, he came here and he met.... You know, thanks – we gave him the usual – you know, blah, blah, how thrilled we were, which we were. We

had a day – it was a very, very cold day. I well remember it. I was standing waiting for him. As you see, I haven't a lot of hair on my head; it was damn cold and all I was wanting was to get him inside. But he had plenty of hair on his head and didn't fee the cold. [laughter] But we had a very pleasant time.

O'CONNOR: Well, now listen. Tell me truthfully now. What do you think, do you think they were coming here because they really enjoyed it? Or do you think they were coming here because they wanted to meet their old relatives? Why do you think they really came here?

MINIHAN: I'd say why the President.... You see, when the President.... First of all, he came here in 1947. Apparently he had a great aunt who kept him informed or spoke a lot about Ireland. He was just a phenomenon in that way. It's very seldom you could get a person three generations away from where their roots came from wanting to come back. He had just that feeling which is very strange in men. He was a historian, of course. He was a cultured man and a historian, and historians as you know are people who ask. They don't say, "What is it now?" They say, "Why is it?" And I'm sure that Kennedy must have said to himself, "Why am I as I am, and why am I Kennedy? Where did my roots come from?" Being a historian he was very interested in Ireland. Once he had started, I'd say, to read about Ireland and found that his roots came from it he became very, very interested. He struck me to have a deep love of the country. I mean, other people you'll come across and they can use you and you know they're using you. They can be very pleasant about it, and I have no objections to them at all, for some ulterior motive. But he struck me as an individual that was really enjoying himself. In other words, he gave you the impression that you were dong him a favor by being nice to him, while in actual fact it was the reverse. But he gave you that feeling, you now. He gave you the feeling that you were the only one that counted while he was talking to you. That's a great gift of humanity.

[-7-]

O'CONNOR: Oh, indeed it is. Well, do you think the same thing would be true of Teddy Kennedy when he came here? You think he was...

MINIHAN: I'd say Teddy hadn't the knowledge of Ireland, but he was very interested – I'm saying that he got a lot of it from his brother – and he was interested to see what the family looked like. Do you see? I mean, pure curiosity, if nothing else. When he got into the car after the.... He met his relatives here in the hotel and then he drove out to Dunganstown and I was in the car with him and he had a pal of his with him. Immediately they got into the car – it was the first time the two of them were together, you see – and he said, "God, so and so – one of the Kennedys here – she's the spitting" – this is what he said – "she's the spitting image of my Aunt Maggie [Margaret Kennedy]." You see? He was saying also that Jim Kennedy had the facial bone structure of his father. Immediately he got among this bunch of strangers he saw the resemblance to his own family, the different members of his own family in them. You know? And he was very thrilled about it, I must say.

O'CONNOR: Well, they often talk about how relaxed John Kennedy was when he came here and that he really enjoyed his visit here. Did you notice that or did you have any indications that that was really so?

MINIHAN: Oh, I did. I thought, as being relaxed, you might put it, he was the only member on the platform that was relaxed. [laughter] As simple as that. You see, he was absolutely relaxed. Another thing that impressed me afterwards when I went to his funeral I met Pierre Salinger and Max Kilduff [Malcolm M. Kilduff]. What really shook me, I looked upon Pierre Salinger as a hard-bitten American newsman. You know the type of fellow you gave us Europeans ideas of them in your films. I regarded him as that cigar-chewing, hard newsman. When I went into the White House, saw him, and he came forward there were tears in his eyes. That was the day after the funeral. It brought back memories of New Ross. And he said to me in the course of the conversation that he was really delighted that the President had had this visit to Ireland because it was the one time in his period of office that he saw him completely relaxed and completely enjoying himself. That was in Ireland, and he was glad that he had had that pleasure before he was

[ -8- ]

killed. So that when the like of Pierre Salinger could see it, who knew him intimately, naturally to me as just met him for such a very short time he wasn't there to impress me, he wasn't there to impress anybody. I might put it this way, I might have been the fellow that was trying to impress him. But you felt immediately at home. The very fact of I giving him the little bit of the Giants' Causeway shows how relaxed he allowed me to be to do that sort of thing. Ah, he was an extraordinary character.

O'CONNOR: Another story I heard you mention a little bit earlier was about the wire going off. [laughter]

MINIHAN: Oh yes. While we were speaking on the platform.... I had made the speech and just as I was introducing him – the loud speaker was dead. Oh. I think it was the Lord saved me from letting out a string of oaths because I could see the fellow that put it up in the audience. But I had to laugh at the time because invariably – I have a lot of jobs to do. I can organize I know quite well, but always at the last minute something breaks down. And I was running true to form; the damn thing broke down. All I could say, I turned to them and I said, "Fellows, we're in right trouble now." And we were, you see. I hadn't realized that the other television, the sound going out to the world, was on. I had forgotten all about that. So I wanted the people to hear him, you see, and I knew he had a strong voice, so I shouted out to get the pitch that he would speak to the people at the back. I said, "Can you hear me now?" You see? And a fellow at the back shouts out, "We hear too damn much of you." [laughter] And that was the feeling of the.... They wanted to hear; they didn't want to hear me; they wanted to hear John Kennedy. But everybody was relaxed. But luckily at the last.... Just as the President got up the thing came on again, you see.

O'CONNOR: You don't know what it was that caused...

MINIHAN: I blamed the press men for it. I said it at the time that one of them had stepped on the wire. We had a great time with a lot of the press men, but a few of them had given me a pretty rough time and I was getting my own back at them. But actually what happened was they had a cat walk, so to speak, around the platform and one of the security

[-9-]

men – a newsman threw his coat over some batteries which were working this public address system – and he saw this and he pulled back the coat to see what it was. He was afraid there might be a bomb in it, you know. I don't know where they'd get a bomb in New Ross, but anyway he thought there was and in doing so he disconnected the wires, and that's all that happened. They had a lot of precautions that were around naturally.

O'CONNOR: Did you see any of the other people? Was Mrs. Condell [Frances Condell] or any of the others down here or around here at all?

MINIHAN: Oh yes, we're building a swimming pool and a recreation center in his memory and we're collecting money. We brought Mrs. Condell down and she's a very, very pleasant woman altogether.

O'CONNOR: Yes but she wasn't anywhere around here when he was here in New Ross?

MINIHAN: Oh no, no. We kept it purely – as much as we could – purely New Ross and the area, you know, because he was going to different parts of Ireland, you know.

O'CONNOR: Well, I guess you got him off without any other incidents or any other obstacles.

MINIHAN: Nothing else happened. But we were in the world picture for about a half an hour. As I've often said we took over from Rome as the center of civilization for a half an hour and then we went back to where we were at the beginning. And we're still there, thanks to God.

O'CONNOR: Well, you've met Robert Kennedy as well as Teddy Kennedy and the other Kennedys.

MINIHAN: I have yes. I...

O'CONNOR: And I've wondered if you'd compare the two, or the three of them. I want to remind you that you can speak as freely as you want to because not even

[-10-]

Robert Kennedy can listen to these tapes. If you want to say anything kind or unkind you're quite welcome to.

MINIHAN: Well, I couldn't say anything unkind because he was very.... He introduced me after the funeral to Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], the President's widow, and he was very, very pleasant to me. But he's a different type of man, I'd say – put it that way – from the President. He's not as effusive guy. He's very pleasant but I would say a very serious-minded young man, you know. Ted and the late President were very much alike but whereas he's got the look of the President and in his smile, the way he nods his head, you'd certainly recognize him from the President. Nevertheless he's not.... I'd say you couldn't be as free with him. You couldn't be as free with him or you couldn't get on the same terms with him as you would with the late President. I mean, you have the feeling that.... A very sound, sensible type of man but you.... Put it this way, you could be frivolous, maybe, with the President, but I wouldn't personally feel that I could be frivolous with Robert Kennedy.

O'CONNOR: You might not have given Robert the little chair, the part of the causeway.

MINIHAN: I doubt if I would. No, I mightn't have, you see. But that doesn't take so much. We can't be all the same types of personality.

O'CONNOR: No, it doesn't. Just a difference in personality, that's all. That's right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-11-]

Andrew Minihan Oral History Transcript  
Name List

**A**

Aiken, Frank, 3

**C**

Condell, Frances, 10

**K**

Kennedy, Edward M., 4, 6, 8, 10, 11

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 11

Kennedy, James, 1

Kennedy, John F., 1-9, 11

Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 1

Kennedy, Margaret, 8

Kennedy, Robert F., 10, 11

Kilduff, Malcolm M., 8

Kipling, Rudyard, 4

**M**

McCann, Hugh, 3

McCloskey, Matthew H., 3

**O**

O'Brien, Frank, 2

O'Donnell, Captian, 1

**S**

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 8, 9