

embarked from San Francisco for New York on May 23, 1903, with a mechanic named Sewall K. Crocker in a one-cylinder Winton touring car. Axles broke. Tires blew. Getting up steep grades or through deep mud required a block and tackle or a team of horses. Gasoline often proved hard to come by. So, sometimes, did food. But they persevered. At 4:30 a.m. on July 26, 63 days after setting out, Jackson and Crocker, along with a stray dog that had joined them in Idaho, pulled up before the Holland House on Fifth Avenue. They were the first to cross the continent in an automobile.

Others followed, often cutting the time of the trip. Manufacturers such as Winton, Oldsmobile, Packard, and Franklin used the publicity to demonstrate the endurance and power of their automobiles. Speed became all-important. In 1906, a team of relay drivers running their car around the clock completed the trek in 15 days. One intrepid driver crossed the country three times and served as a guide on a fourth voyage.

All of these facts come from *Coast to Coast by Automobile*. McConnell, the author of *Great Cars of the Great Plains* (1995), has studied his subject exhaustively. In addition to sifting through *Scientific American* and *Motor Age*, he has consulted such obscure sources as the *Harney Valley Items* of Burns, Oregon, and the *Daily Hub* of Kearny, Nebraska. From them he has carefully culled stories about the various trips, correcting common misconceptions and constructing detailed itineraries.

Occasionally, McConnell recounts the trips in such detail that the narrative gets a little bumpy, as when he tells us three times that a driver was stopped for speeding in Buffalo. At other times, we might wish for a larger perspective. What were Americans reading and thinking between 1899 and 1908? What other stories were reported in all those newspapers that McConnell read? But these are minor quibbles about an important, amply illustrated work. Anyone who has read accounts of early automobile travel knows how difficult it is to separate fact from fiction. Because of McConnell's meticulous research, we at last have a reliable guide to the first decade of cross-country automobile travel.

—TOM LEWIS

**ROBERT KENNEDY:
His Life.**

By Evan Thomas. Simon & Schuster.
509 pp. \$28

Of the making of books about Robert Francis Kennedy (1925–68) there seems no end. After *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector* (1997), *The Last Patrician* (1998), *Mutual Contempt* (1999), and *In Love with Night* (2000), to name just a recent few, comes this biography by a *Newsweek* journalist. Thomas believes he is the first writer since historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kennedy's friend and admiring biographer, to gain access to important closed papers at the Kennedy Library. Thomas also has mined other resources, conducted interviews, and read the literature.

The result will not supplant Schlesinger's masterly *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (1978), but it does shed additional light here and there, offering appraisals from a more detached yet still fair-minded perspective. Of the futile, "more silly than sinister" plots by the CIA-cum-Mafia to kill Fidel Castro, for instance, Thomas writes that Kennedy's involvement, if any, was probably "peripheral," and that RFK himself later became the real victim, growing "very fearful" that the plots might have sparked his brother's assassination. The author finds Attorney General Kennedy more culpable for the Federal Bureau of Investigation's extensive use of electronic listening devices. Kennedy later insisted that he had not known about the practice, but "the evidence strongly suggests that RFK was not speaking truthfully," writes Thomas. "At the very least, [he] displayed a notable lack of curiosity about the source of the FBI's intelligence on the mob."

Under pressure from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Kennedy did authorize the wiretapping of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose adviser Stanley Levison was alleged to be a secret Communist and Soviet agent. The wiretapping seems to trouble Thomas much more than it did Levison, who, while denying the allegations against him, told Schlesinger that he understood the political necessity for the Kennedys to avoid any scandal, given their support for the civil rights movement. Though later remorseful about Hoover's "grotesque

smear campaign” against King, Thomas notes, Kennedy was “not personally sympathetic” to the civil rights leader. After movingly addressing an Indianapolis crowd the night King was slain in 1968, Kennedy remained dry-eyed while some of his staffers wept. “After all, it’s not the greatest tragedy in the history of the Republic,” he told one aide, perhaps thinking of another assassination five years earlier.

Haunted by his brother’s death, Kennedy turned to displays of physical courage—climbing mountains, shooting white-water rapids, plunging into piranha-infested waters. There may have been an element of political calculation in some of those displays, a point that Thomas oddly relegates to a footnote: In a 1966 memo, adviser Fred Dutton recommended “at least one major, exciting personal adventure or activity every six months or so,” which would help move Kennedy “into the ‘existential’ politics that I believe will be more and more important in the years ahead.”

Alas, there were few years ahead for Kennedy. Had he lived, it is by no means certain that he would have won his party’s presidential nomination and then the election. Nor can we know what sort of president he would have been. But, writes Thomas, “he would have surely tried to tackle the problems of poverty and discrimination, and . . . to end the killing in Vietnam long before President Nixon did.” For many who were young then, and who look back yearningly on the imagined path not taken, that is enough.

—ROBERT K. LANDERS

THE MYSTERY OF COURAGE.

By William Ian Miller. Harvard Univ. Press. 346 pp. \$29.95

Miller first intended to write about cowardice, a subject that most of us intuitively understand. We can identify with the Confederate soldier’s response to flying bullets and exploding shells at Antietam: “How I ran! Or tried to run through the high corn. . . . I was afraid of being struck in the back, and I frequently turned half around in running, so as to avoid if possible so disgraceful a wound.” More difficult for us to grasp is the captain in Vietnam who, as described by an infantryman,

“charged a Viet Cong soldier, killing him at chest-to-chest range, first throwing a grenade, then running flat out across a paddy, up to the Viet Cong’s ditch, then shooting him to death.” Later, the captain says to the infantryman: “I’d rather be brave than almost anything. How does that strike you?”

Miller kept finding himself drawn from the Confederate to the captain, from natural self-preservation to seemingly unnatural valor, and so he decided to write about courage. A law professor at the University of Michigan and the author of *An Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), he attempts to cover the entirety of the vast topic, including moral strength, civility, chastity, and the courage of the terminally ill, but it is his battlefield ruminations that prove the most compelling.

The fortunes of war depend on how troops handle the uncommon stress of combat, stress that turns out to be cumulative. During the intense Normandy campaign of 1944, one study found, troops’ “maximum period of efficiency occurred between 12 and 30 days, after which it decayed rapidly through stages of hyperreactivity to complete emotional exhaustion, ending in a vegetative state by day 60.” Those few men (two percent) who could keep fighting, week after week, were found to have “aggressive, psychopathic personalities.” That is the great difficulty for soldiers—performing fearlessly in battle, yet managing to temper warlike impulses in ordinary life—and it arises frequently in literature and history. Norse sagas speak admiringly of heroic warriors but warn against “uneven men” who pick fights, “exercising their courage by testing that of others.”

Aristotle maintains that the truly courageous man is virtuous in all ways, an assertion that strikes modern sensibilities as a bit too neat. Indeed, one admires those less-than-courageous soldiers who nonetheless get the job done. Some, though practically paralyzed by fear, pick themselves up and advance. Others act bravely because they fear court martial (though the author cites numerous examples of soldiers coming up short and receiving little or no punishment) or the goading of fellow combatants. Then there is the courage of the average soldier who, the author writes, “charges ahead assisted, but only in part, by his tot of rum.”

Tales of bravery, Miller observes in a brief, somewhat wistful postscript, can elicit uneasy