



Persuaded by Reason: Joan Kennedy Taylor and the Rebirth of American Individualism

Jeff Riggerbach

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Author, editor, journalist, and libertarian Jeff Riggerbach is probably the most likely person to weave the biography of Joan Kennedy Taylor into an authoritative and thorough history of American individualism in the twentieth century—Joan herself having been a writer, editor, artist, and participant in the social movements that identified individualism with libertarian politics.

Riggerbach is nothing short of brilliant in his choice to tell the story of American individualism by stringing key players, movements, and philosophies together through the central character of Joan Kennedy Taylor. As Charles Murray indicates in his foreword to Riggerbach's *Persuaded by Reason*, "In terms of her body of published work and her degree of fame, Joan may have been a minor figure," but the touchstones of her life that punctuate the changing social and political climate give this book a clear and sympathetic perspective.

Throughout the book, there is a hypnotic tension between the telling of Joan's story and the dense historical context Riggerbach creates. Particularly during Joan's younger years, before her contributions began to be recognized, Riggerbach takes the opportunity to flash back and develop an entire history of individualism in American, beginning with the divide of the independent and Eurocentric settlers in the first colonies. He touches on Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and the American identity of self-reliance. With a country dealing with the Great Depression and World War II and Joan dealing with an overbearing mother and a tendency to argue with her teachers, both the young girl and the country she lived in were ready for change and independence in the 1950s.

Early chapters do feel disjointed as the focus skips, often abruptly, between elements of Joan's personal life and the interplay of key social and political thought leaders. At this point, the division of chapters might have served to better contextualize the history and biography separately rather than trying to force them into a common referential time line.

As his writing explores the '50s and '60s, Riggerbach hits his stride. During her first marriage, Joan struggles with the excitement and disorganization of the bohemian lifestyle she lived with Donald Cook, much the way America was struggling with the Beat Generation and writers like Jack Kerouac. Joan's life merges with Riggerbach's study of individualism, and the writing is noticeably more cohesive throughout the remainder of the book. The author frequently cites scholarly references and quotations as well as thoughtful interviews with Joan's son, Michael, and many of her contemporaries.

Riggerbach has developed a rich and insightful look at the evolution of individualist thought in the twentieth century through the lens of an accomplished woman.

SARA BUDZIK (October 6, 2014)

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