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# An Interview With Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis on John Sherman Cooper

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**An Interview With Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis on John Sherman Cooper**

An Interview with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis  
On John Sherman Cooper

Terry L. Birdwhistell

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Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was interviewed on 13 May 1981 for the University of Kentucky Libraries' John Sherman Cooper Oral History Project. The interview was conducted in Ms. Onassis's home in New York City. The following is an edited version of that interview.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: I thought we'd begin by asking if you can recall some of your first impressions of John Sherman Cooper—perhaps how you got to know Judge Cooper and his wife Lorraine.

Ms. ONASSIS: I think I first got to know him in 1952. I was married in '53. I remember that Jack and I used to go to Charley Bartlett's for dinner—I was interested in Jack, and Senator Cooper and Lorraine were just going out together then. We had many pleasant evenings, and Senator Albert Gore was often there. So, I saw the Coopers a lot, and that's where we became friends. There were always just about six or eight of us. My first impression of Senator Cooper is the same as my present impression—his wisdom, his humor, such a fine, fine man. And over the years in the Senate—at least with Jack, who was running around the country so much campaigning—there are not that many senators who get to be your private friends as a couple.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right.

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, he was one of them, and he remained one. And afterwards, he was on the committee to figure out the kind of memorial we would make for Jack at Harvard, at the Institute of Politics. He gave so much time—he was always the wisest, I thought, of anybody at the meetings. He was a devoted friend.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Of course, in 1954, Senator Cooper was defeated by Alben W. Barkley. Then he went to be ambassador to India, and he came back to the Senate in 1956. Did you talk with them before they went to India?

Ms. ONASSIS: I suppose I did. You see, Ms. Cooper had been a friend of mine before. She used to ask me to dinner parties when I was still either in my last year in college in Washington or the year or so I worked on the newspaper.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Of course, the Coopers were married just before they went to India.

Ms. ONASSIS: What year did they get married?

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: In 1955.

Ms. ONASSIS: I know it was just about the same time that Jack and I married. We were courting at the same time, getting married at the same time.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: You were sharing a lot of the same experiences right there in Washington.

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Did you have much opportunity to talk with them or communicate with them while they were in India? No? A little far away for that, I suppose. How did you feel that they reacted to their experience in India? Had Ms. Cooper enjoyed being over there, and did you think that Judge Cooper enjoyed it?

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes, I do. I think that it was a very rewarding experience for them. I don't really remember substantive things or problems, but I was very happy they could start out their married life where she could be very useful. She would be a wonderful ambassador's wife! I was amused and charmed at the way she took to campaigning later, because she's such a—how can I say it?—sophisticated, elegant, decorative person. But, she has such a feeling for people. She was marvelous going all over Kentucky. I remember she told me that she carried little cards with her and that, whenever she left a town—she told me to do this campaigning, but I was too tired to ever do it!—right away she wrote a little note: "Dear So-and-so, Thank you for this."

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right.

Ms. ONASSIS: Because, otherwise, everything piles up, and you don't. And then she wrote a newsletter, I believe.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right. That was very popular in Kentucky.

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: It appeared in all the little weekly surrounding . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: And I remember seeing some of those. I think she even told me I should do that, too—but I think I only did one!

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: I was going to ask you about her

campaigning. Did she ever express to you any negative thoughts about campaigning in Kentucky? Was it all more or less positive?

Ms. ONASSIS: I think she liked it. Some people are made for public life, and some aren't. I think, as I've said, she loved people and seemed to respond to them. And it's nice to feel that you can help your husband.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Yes. And, when they went to India, she spent a lot of time redecorating the embassy residence.

Ms. ONASSIS: I remember she told me that she organized the embassy wives for projects—I forget what—but she contributed a lot.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Now, later you went to India, I believe. Did anyone remember that . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: Oh, yes!

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: . . . Judge Cooper had been there?

Ms. ONASSIS: Oh, yes, of course. John Kenneth Galbraith was ambassador when I was there. Obviously, nobody was going to make comparisons, but I'm sure he must have been as respected and loved. You were proud for America when Judge Cooper was wherever he would go. In my time it was always insulting when people would say to you, "Oh, one would never think you were an American." But I think of Judge Cooper and David Bruce as Americans—the finest, and yet not getting so fancied up that you'd think they were foreigners. Of really being rather Jeffersonian, in a way.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: That's good. That's a good description.

Ms. ONASSIS: And, of course, David Bruce's life wasn't diplomatic posts. But I think Judge Cooper—he had two very important ones—wherever he would have gone, he would have been superb.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: He seemed to really like that aspect of his career—the State Department, the United Nations, the ambassadorships that he had to India and East Germany. What was it, in your opinion, that allowed him to be a country judge in Somerset, Kentucky, and be an ambassador around the world?

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, couldn't you ask that same question about Abraham Lincoln? I think if you have deeply human qualities, you have great intelligence, wisdom, compassion. You see, some people can be very intelligent, but they can put the person they are talking to—they can get their back up, because they may make them feel inferior, or that they're pressing him. So, even if he were



*Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Sen. John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky. (John Sherman Cooper Papers, Modern Political Papers Collection, University of Kentucky Libraries)*

speaking to someone whose views or ends were opposed to his, there must have been great human contact established. That's where I think his great value was.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: A feeling of concern for whoever he was in . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: A sensitivity . . .

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: . . . sensitivity . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: . . . to the other person. And then you could tell from the way he was. It's a question of character, really. If the man seems to you wise, profound, compassionate, intelligent, learned—well, you're going to look up to him. And then he was also loved. He couldn't help but be loved—if you just spend fifteen minutes with him, you're going to like him.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: It's interesting, the friendship that developed between the four of you when you were going out. And then, of course, Senator Cooper came back to the Senate in 1956 and was serving with your husband then. Although they were in different

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political parties, they worked on legislation such as aid to India and other types of bills, so, obviously, this personal friendship then carried over to a political friendship.

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes, but don't you think that a liberal Republican and a Democrat—you know, they felt the same about many things.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: So it really wouldn't have been that unusual even if they hadn't been such personal friends to have worked together on . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, now, maybe it was an anomaly. I don't really know. But I think that both of them were original enough, or not so narrowly partisan, that they could appreciate the qualities of the other. Well, you get a lot done in the Senate with bipartisan things.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right.

Ms. ONASSIS: Then, we'd see a lot of each other. We had a little house in Georgetown from, I guess, 1957 to 1960, and they'd come for dinner a lot.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: I've been told that during the 1960 campaign, as you well know, the West Virginia primary was so crucial. Someone said that President Kennedy asked Senator Cooper for some advice on how to campaign in that state? Are you aware of that at all?

Ms. ONASSIS: I'm sure he did. It would have been very smart of him, and it doesn't surprise me. But I don't remember what Judge Cooper said.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Of course, Senator Cooper was running for re-election in 1960, at the same time the presidential campaign was going on, and President Kennedy came to Kentucky and was campaigning. Did you all ever talk about that socially, or was that just sort of accepted in political life that . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, you know, things speeded up so fast that year of 1960. Then I was having a baby, so I wasn't there. Well, probably we did. It's really a shame when I sort of never wanted to—so many people, you know, hit the White House with their dictaphone running! I never even kept a journal. I thought, "I want to live my life, not record it."

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Not record it every day?

Ms. ONASSIS: And I'm still glad I did that. But I think there's so many things that I've forgotten. And I'm sure we did talk about everything you're asking me about.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right. Well, of all the things you said were going on in 1960, to pull conversations at a dinner table, when you're trying to relax to begin with . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: No, no, no. We would have talked about it, of course—everything! Of course, the conversation was political! Of course, it would be—with Jack and Judge Cooper and Lorraine and me—but I don't remember specifically any sentence.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right.

Ms. ONASSIS: To show you what good friends we were—I think I'm right in this—the first dinner party we went to after we were in the White House was at the Coopers'.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right. And that interested a lot of people—that the first dinner party would be at the home of a Republican!

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, they were just our beloved friends. We'd made the date before. I think it was for some dance or something in Washington that was sort of an occasion. We didn't go to the dance, but went to the Coopers' for dinner.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: I think there was a snow storm that night, wasn't there?

Ms. ONASSIS: Oh, yes. I guess the Secret Service ran by with so many loads of sand and everything. You know, it was meant to be rather quiet, but the press was outside. I remember thinking, "Well, I'm happy if they're surprised, because if it shows paying homage to Senator Cooper—good. Who's there more worthy of paying homage to?" But it was just a natural thing.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: I think, also, that following the election—before the inauguration—*Life* magazine did a "day-in-the-life-of" feature, and you had them over for that, didn't you?

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, they were coming for dinner. You know, *Life* hangs around, and I must say the two people who were doing it were Don Wilson, who lived in Washington, who was a friend of ours, and then Mark Shaw, the photographer they assigned to it, sort of became a friend. So, what they do is hang around and photograph whatever is happening. And so, maybe I asked the Coopers—I can't remember if they were coming for dinner anyway, and I said, "Oh, God, *Life* magazine's doing it, so I have to have . . . would you come?" But I remember they came to the first dinner party I ever had when we were married. The first year we were married we lived in a rented house, and it was just rented from January to June because in those days the Senate was in session then. I remember the Coopers came, my mother and

stepfather came, and I'm sure Bobby and Ethel came. I don't know, maybe there were ten or twelve people. And I had some records on the record player, and I think my mother was quite nervous about—you know, I'm not sure I had it all together then. Suddenly, she said, "Jackie, isn't the record player broken?" And I said, "Oh, no, Mommy, it's just Fred Astaire tap dancing."

Lorraine thought that was very funny. She used to remind me of it from time to time. So, you see, for so many sorts of firsts, they were just—. Maybe we had four couples who were really close friends before the White House. After the White House, another one would have been the Harlechs, from England, who came as British ambassador. But before, the Bartletts—well, anyway, the Coopers, you know, they were just our really close friends.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Yes. And I think it shows that you remember the first time you did this or that, and those are the people that you would want there. I've talked to other people who lived in or worked in Washington, and sometimes people don't develop that type of friendship.

Ms. ONASSIS: You always hear about Washington—all this going out and party circuit. We never did that; we didn't like it. Then Jack would be traveling a lot, so we just liked to stay home. And there were a couple of houses that you'd go to for dinner or else you'd have your close friends over rather informally. It was fun to go to the Coopers. It was fun to go to Joe Alsop's, the columnist, because he'd always have rather stimulating dinners, and if some foreign political figure or whatever was coming, that was always rather stimulating. You work hard all day, and then you like to be with a few—at least that was the way Jack operated, and it's the way I like to live, too.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Senator Cooper recalled a story. He was talking about soon after you all moved into the White House, that there were some films being shown at the Indian Embassy, and President Kennedy didn't want to go by himself. Do you remember that night?

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes, I do. That was very shortly after the inauguration. Again, it was a date we'd made before, I think. I know that I had lived in Washington during the Eisenhower years, I'd lived there since I was thirteen, except for going away to school. I wanted to do something for the arts. So there was this film, by this wonderful Indian film maker, and Jack said he would go. Well, then I was really terribly tired when I got into the White

House. I couldn't get out of bed for about two weeks! After the birth of my son, and the campaign—I mean you don't do anything. You know, you just sort of collapse.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Well, I think you deserved a little rest, probably.

Ms. ONASSIS: He was born prematurely, because of all the excitement. He was sick. I was sick. One just wasn't able—and yet, the Indian ambassador, all of that, it was set to go! So, anyway, Jack went with the Coopers.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Senator Cooper recalled that after they came back that President Kennedy insisted on giving them a tour of the White House, and he remembers they even woke you up!

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes, and that was in the beginning! That shows how early it was, because they were painting the quarters that we lived in, and we were in the far end where you live in the Lincoln Room and the Queen's Room. It's sort of like a big, vast, drafty hotel. It didn't seem very cozy! And I remember he brought them up, and I was so happy. You know, so that you could sort of share the evening and the laughs at the end and whatever.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: And, I guess, it again points to President Kennedy's and Judge Cooper's friendship. Senator Cooper recalled when President Kennedy was showing him around so enthusiastically, about all of these quarters and rooms, and this big new house that you were in. I suppose by necessity, though, that your contacts with the Coopers probably lessened a little bit during the White House years. It was probably more formal.

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, did they? I don't know. Of course, you had many more obligations in the evening, and many more evenings when you had to do something. There weren't those Georgetown evenings where you could just have your best, your dear friends, your old pals over. But it seems to me that we saw each other. I'm sure they came, you know, sort of in and out.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: When President Kennedy took office and his legislative program came up, of course Senator Cooper was supportive. One area, though, where he was openly critical—and it made the newspapers, I suppose—was in the Kennedy civil rights program. Cooper apparently thought it was going too slowly. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ms. ONASSIS: I don't remember any talk about that. He thought it was going too slowly? Isn't that marvelous—for a Southerner? You know, you would have thought he might have to say the

opposite.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: That's one of the interesting things about his career. I was reading a campaign speech he made in 1948, when he opens his campaign in Kentucky, and he was advocating civil rights in Kentucky. And you don't see that too much from a Kentucky politician in the 1940s.

Ms. ONASSIS: He would have been such a wonderful Secretary of State—wouldn't that have been wonderful? You can have so many brilliant people, but where can you get that wisdom, and that common sense?

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Apparently, before the inauguration, President Kennedy did send Judge Cooper to Russia on a mission. Do you recall that at all?

Ms. ONASSIS: Now, it rings a bell.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: It wasn't public at the time, I don't believe, and he came back and gave a report to President Kennedy about the situation there.

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, that shows how much Jack would have valued his judgment—did value his judgment.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right. So you would say, then, that you felt the Coopers enjoyed the social life, the political life in Washington? I know Ms. Cooper is a very well-known hostess in the city there.

Ms. ONASSIS: You know, I never like to say "enjoy the social life," because I think that sounds trivial and frivolous. If this is being done for history, as if the social life is an important. . . . I don't know, everybody rushes in. Who's in? Who's out? Dinner parties. You know, he's too profound for that silly treadmill I have no esteem for. But, yes, they loved people, and, after all, all the people you saw in Washington that you saw in their house, whose houses they went to, are involved in shaping policy. All the big receptions, the cocktail parties—forget that. I think I may have been to one in my life—or the big embassy dinners, even. I'm not sure that anything of substance is really accomplished there. But, there are very few people civilized enough—or were—to give a "twelve this and that" kind of dinner. And then it's awfully valuable, because the men can talk to each other afterwards. In those days, it used to be quite segregated! The men would absolutely split!

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: No pretense!

Ms. ONASSIS: The French know this—anybody knows this—if

you put busy men in an attractive atmosphere where the surroundings are comfortable, the food is good, you relax, you unwind, there's some stimulating conversation. You know, sometimes quite a lot can happen. Contacts can be made, you might discuss something, or . . .

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: An understanding . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes. Or, you know, you could be talking about a whole lot of things. You might have different foreigners there and then say, "Gosh, that's an idea. Maybe we ought to see each other next week on that," or whatever. So it can be valuable that way. I always felt that going to the Coopers' house . . . it was joyful, but it was never frivolous.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: I see.

Ms. ONASSIS: So, social life, where it's used, is part of the art of living in Washington.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Another person who mentioned going to a dinner party at the Coopers' noted that the most fascinating thing was the people who were there, and the selection, and the talk that transpired. Now, others have said that Judge Cooper was always late for his own parties.

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, if he was, Ms. Cooper was such a marvelous hostess that you never really noticed.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: He was able to ease right on in there . . .

Ms. ONASSIS: And why shouldn't he be? Practically every senator—they're always up there for a vote. Sometimes half the dinner table doesn't get there until dessert!

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right. Because of your close personal friendship, what was your reaction, then, to Judge Cooper's being named to the Warren Commission? Any reaction at all to that?

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, I suppose I . . . well, I mean, obviously his wisdom. . . . But, to tell you truth, everything that happened that caused the Warren Commission to exist—you know, I don't think I really sat and thought, "Hmm. Let me look at the make-up of the Warren Commission. Let this, that, you know."

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right.

Ms. ONASSIS: Somehow I had this feeling of, what did it matter what they found out? They could never bring back the person who was gone. Obviously, I knew it had to be done. But, of course, I would have thought that his being on it was—any commission he's on will be better for having him on it.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Right. Well, then, as you said earlier about

his work on the memorial, and the committees he served on, the people that talk about his work on the Warren Commission talk about how much effort he did put into it, you know, working many, many longer hours, to go to the meetings and do the reports—and just the manner in which he approached it, I suppose.

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes, that's exactly what I noticed about Senator Cooper at these meetings that we would have in Boston. There'd be maybe two or three a year. You know, Robert McNamara was on it, Robert Lovett, Douglas Dillon, Lord Harlech—all these wise, wise people would come. And before, there'd be briefing books *that* big or, you know, material you'd have to digest, and it was very hard to see which way the Institute of Politics . . . what it was going to be like. Would it be swallowed up by Harvard? What should it do? And always, I'd notice I'd be so amazed at his absolute, thorough knowledge of the five pounds of paper that he had in front of him, and everything you say. And the real heart he put into it, and how—oh, Senator Jackson was on it—and how often when there was a point that was being hotly argued, or a bind you couldn't see your way out of, how often his voice was listened to, and usually was the path that turned out to be obviously the right one.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Have you maintained contact with the Coopers over the years?

Ms. ONASSIS: Yes. When did I last see him? I saw him this winter some place.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Oh, did you?

Ms. ONASSIS: Sometimes I've seen Ms. Cooper when she comes to New York. Whenever I see him I am just so happy.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Well, that's all the questions I have prepared. I appreciate your taking the time to do this today, and to talk about Judge Cooper and your friendship with him.

Ms. ONASSIS: Well, I envy the person who writes a thesis on Judge Cooper, because I can't think of anything more rewarding than studying him.

Mr. BIRDWHISTELL: Well, thank you again.