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Mrs. Kennedy on Slaying Information Puts Lid

L.A.T. - 9/19/66

Less than three years after President Kennedy died in Dallas, a succession of books has raised nagging new doubts about how he was shot and whether the accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, had an accomplice. Now the anguished widow has added to the uncertainty by withholding information from all but her favorite writer, William Manchester.

Jacqueline Kennedy, an iron-willed woman beneath the fragile beauty, has shut up everyone close to the Kennedys. Obedient to her orders, they have talked to Manchester but won't breathe a word to anyone else.

She has even tried to persuade other authors not to write about the tragedy, thus seeking to restrict the history of the assassination to her authorized version. When persuasion has failed, Sen. Robert Kennedy (D-N.Y.) has brought pressure upon publishers.

All this has stirred rumors that Manchester's forthcoming book, "The Death of a President," has been censored by the Kennedys. Last week, he attempted to scotch the rumors by declaring in an advertisement that neither the slain President's widow nor brother has tried to edit the manuscript.

Mrs. Kennedy

However, this doesn't square with a letter in Mrs. Kennedy's own handwriting, which this column has seen, declaring firmly that she "hired" Manchester and would control what was published.

She wrote this amazing letter on Sept. 17, 1964, to Jim Bishop, author of "The Day Lincoln Was Shot," who had planned to write a similar account of the Kennedy assassination.

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She begged Bishop "to please not go ahead with your intended book, 'The Day Kennedy Was Shot.' The idea of it is so distressing to me, I can't bear to think of seeing—or of seeing advertised—a book with that name and subject—one that my children might see it or someone might mention it to them."

Then she told Bishop bluntly: "I hired William Manchester — to protect President Kennedy and the truth. He was to interrogate everyone who had any connection with those days—and if I decide the book should never be published—then Mr. Manchester will be reimbursed for his time. Or if I decide it should be known—I will decide when it should be published . . .

"All the people he (Manchester) spoke to were asked not to discuss those days with anyone else," she wrote, "and they have all kept that faith, and will continue to. So that leaves nothing but the Warren Commission report—which will be public anyway—for an author like yourself to base a book on."

Bishop replied that many books "would be written about that tragic day in Dallas. They will be written, whether you stand in the doorway to history or not. They will be written whether I die this day or not . . .

"You have asked Bennett Cerf of Random House not to publish my book. Robert Kennedy has spoken to two executives of Random House and asked them not to publish it . . .

"To say that one man may write history, but another may not, amounts to a personal copyright . . . If you want to deny me any personal assistance, I will respect your wishes, but I ask, in fairness, that you reopen the doors to the other parts of the story."

Back came a stern reply from Mrs. Kennedy; this time it was typed, not handwritten.

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"I would like to reiterate that I meant exactly what I wrote you earlier," she declared. "None of the people connected with Nov. 22nd will speak to anyone but Mr. Manchester. That is my wish, and it is theirs also . . .

"I will not discuss those events with anyone else—nor will I 'reopen the doors to other parts of the story' . . .

"I have no wish to decide who writes history. Many people will write it—but the serious ones will wait until after Mr. Manchester's book appears. This book will be the one the historians will respect . . . What I am dedicated to is the accurate history of those days and that will come from Mr. Manchester."

If there was any doubt that the lovely Jacqueline could enforce her gag rule, it was dispelled by almost everyone Bishop approached.

Meanwhile, Manchester's authorized history has become an embarrassing financial success months before it will hit the bookstands. Look magazine has paid a record $650,000 for the first serial rights, and the whole Kennedy camp is in a tizzy over who should get the money.

In order not to exploit the President's death, both Manchester and his publisher, Harper & Row, agreed to turn over all profits after the first printing to a charity of the Kennedys' choice, presumably the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library.

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