

Manchester's Foreword to 'The Death of a President'

Following is the forward by William Manchester to his book, "The Death of a President," scheduled to be published in 1967 by Harper & Row:

On February 5, 1964, Mrs. John F. Kennedy suggested that I write an account of the tragic and historic events in Texas and Washington ten weeks earlier. Neither Mrs. Kennedy nor anyone else is in any way answerable for my subsequent research of this narrative. My relationships with all the principal figures were entirely professional. I received no financial assistance from the Kennedy family. I was on no Government payroll. No one tried to lead me. I believe every reader, including those who were closest to the late President, will find here much which is new and some perhaps, which is disturbing. That is my responsibility.

Mrs. Kennedy asked but one question, before our first taping session. She said, "Are you just going to put down all the facts, who ate what for breakfast and all that, or are you going to put yourself in the book, too?" I replied that I didn't see how I could very well keep myself out of it. "Good," she said emphatically.

The Kennedy family had not been eager to have any book written about the President's death. Understandably, they needed time to heal. But shortly after the burial in Arlington it became apparent that volumes would appear in spite of their wishes. Under these circumstances, Jacqueline Kennedy resolved that there should be one complete, accurate account.

I had not been among those who approached her. At that time I had not even met her. However, her husband had told her about me, and she had read a book I published about him the year before his death. Other members of the family agreed with Mrs. Kennedy that it would be wise to have a book written by an author whom the President had known and in whom he had expressed confidence.

My first calls were upon Bill Moyers at the White House, and Chief Justice Earl Warren. It was essential that the new President know what I proposed to do. It was equally imperative that the commission which the Chief Justice headed understand the exact nature of my inquiry. He was unfailingly polite and recognized that while the lines of the two investigations might occasionally intersect, they certainly did not run parallel. The commission was conducting a criminal probe. I was exploring the full sweep of events during what were, in some respects, the most

extraordinary hours in the history of our country.

Because I have been at this task longer than anyone, I have not only felt entitled to record my opinions, I have an inescapable obligation to do so. Withholding them would be shirking a grave duty, and among other judgments, you will find my assessment of the Warren Report. I shall not publish my files. It would be a formidable undertaking. (Mrs. Kennedy's answers to the commission's questions occupy two and a half pages; my tapes with her run ten hours.)

In my inquiry, I approached every person who might shed light upon his complex of events. I retraced President Kennedy's last journey from Andrews Air Force Base to San Antonio, Houston, Fort Worth, Love Field at Dallas, Dealey Plaza, Parkland Hospital, back to Love and back to Andrews, over the ambulance route to Bethesda Naval Hospital and then to the White House, the great rotunda, St. Matthews and Arlington. I went over every motorcade route, searching for men and women who had been spectators. Every scene described was visited: the rooms in the Executive Mansion, the Presidential hotel suites in Houston and Fort Worth, the Houston Coliseum, the Fort Worth parking lot and ballroom, Marguerite Oswald's house, Oswald's tiny room in Dallas, Parkland's major surgery and minor surgery areas, Bethesda's basement morgue, the pavements

of Washington, the pews of St. Matthews.

I was led back and forth through the Presidential aircraft. I crawled over the roof of the Texas School Book Depository and sat in Oswald's sixth-floor perch. I rode his Dallas bus, watch in hand. Taxi driver Bill Whaley picked me up at the spot where he had picked up Oswald, drove me over the same route in the same taxi at the same speed, and dropped me off at the same curb.

I stood where Officer J. D. Tippit died. I darted over the last lap of Oswald's flight to the Texas Theater. In Dallas police headquarters, I sat where the assassin had sat, and took notes on the underground garage while standing where he was shot.

With a Secret Service agent and Dallas eyewitness, I went over the stretch of Elm Street where the President laid down his life. I even had the damaged Dallas-to-Bethesda coffin uncrated for inspection, and I have visited the hillside below Custis Lee mansion in every season.

Research, of course, is no substitute for wisdom. Nevertheless, all these trips were necessary. I had to immerse myself in this subject until I knew more about it than anyone else and could reconstruct the past with confidence.

We had not recovered from the catastrophe of November, 1963. I cannot pretend to be aloof, though I have certainly tried to be objective. Nor do I offer this study as a definitive work. In time, I myself shall merely become a source for future historians as yet unborn. Yet it was imperative that this chronicle be laid before the generation of Americans who suffered

through those days. I believe President Kennedy would have wanted them to know precisely what happened.

I should like to pay tribute to the host of people who relived the most dreadful hours of their lives with me. None of the interviews were easy. I could not dilute my questions and still be faithful to my task, and over half the subjects experienced moments of emotional difficulty. Often, I found that a principal figure had thrust his memories into a remote corner of his mind. Bringing them out was agonizing, almost unendurable. President Johnson is an example. Twice, in May, 1964, and April, 1965, the President agreed to receive me and go through everything. Then he found he could not do it. We ultimately solved the dilemma by written questions and written answers.

Thanking everyone who helped me during two years of investigation is impossible. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge my great debt to several of those without whom I should never have come to the end of this long journey. They are Mrs. John F. Kennedy; Robert F. Kennedy; Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson; Eunice Shriver; Richard Cardinal Cushing; Theodore C. Sorensen; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.; Richard N. Goodwin; McGeorge Bundy; Maj. Gen. Chester V. Clifton USA (ret.); Edwin O. Guthman; John Seigenthaler; Evelyn Lincoln; and Evan Thomas, who edited Profiles in Courage and now this book.

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—William Manchester
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