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'A FIRST CLASS TEXAS JOB'

John Arden



Rush to Judgement, by Mark Lane
Inquest, by E. J. Epstein

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Somebody once said that "the man on the Clapham omnibus" was the sort of typical figure of average commonsense whom judges, juries, lawyers and the like ought to have at the backs of their minds as a point of reference when considering complex and over-technical legal problems. If this anonymous traveller does not have the expert knowledge and confidential sources of information possessed by the police or the pathologists or the psychiatrists, at least, so runs the argument, he may have some degree of intelligent objectivity that can enable him to distinguish wood from trees and thus come a little nearer to a just understanding of the truth. He seems to have been referred to very infrequently during the inquiries concerning the death of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. Now I myself do not often travel to Clapham, and I have not personally consulted "the man on the omnibus." The nearest I got to him was perhaps "the man at the Dublin dinner party," the evening of the day upon which it was announced that Oswald had been shot

Jack Ruby shoots Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas jail.

by Ruby. The conversation turned naturally upon the news from Dallas; indeed, it did more than turn, it was obsessed by it. "Who do you think did it?", "What's your interpretation?", "Is any of the official story likely to be true?", etc. Then this man said:

"Whoever did it, and for whatever reason, there is no doubt in my mind that the whole thing is a first class Texas job."

I asked him exactly what he meant and he replied, in effect:

"You go to the cinema, don't you? You enjoy Western films? Well, Dallas is a great modern city, as far as its material way of life is concerned; but spiritually it is still more or less a wide-open cow town of the 1880s, and the murders of Kennedy and Oswald and Tippit belong to that period of history. Whatever their subsequent effects upon the history of our own time, they must be viewed through the appropriate retrospective lenses, which in this case are the lenses of a film camera. It doesn't have to be a good film, even. The Wild West in its own time saw itself as a mythological age and dramatised itself in exactly the same way as the cinema has done ever since."

Let me give one example of this self-dramatisation which I found out about later: a civilian motorist in Texas is apparently permitted, as a matter of law, to

carry a gun in his map compartment on the grounds that "saddle holsters" are a necessary provision for self defence when making a journey across the desert; nobody knows when rustlers, Mexican bandits, Injuns, or Billy the Kid might not suddenly turn up. And turn up they did, with a vengeance, in Dallas, in 1963.

Wild west scenario

So let me, being a dramatist by trade and not a lawyer like Mr Lane nor an academic like Mr Epstein, set out a few notions for a film sequence of just such a "first class Texas job." We are in Texas, around 1880, and an important person, much loved and much hated, is about to arrive in town. He does not have to be the President; he need be no more than the fearless, hard-hitting editor of a newspaper who has been exposing a number of local financial scandals involving large scale cattle transactions and various dubious deals with the Apaches. He is believed to be interested in examining the causes of a recent and nearly disastrous Indian rising, and he is known to be anxious to find ways and means of coming to some sort of accommodation with, say, Geronimo, the scourge of the south-west. He has expressed the opinion that the said scourge

has been unduly provoked by the US Cavalry in alliance with the Texas Rangers and, more important, he is being listened to in Washington. He is played by Spencer Tracy.

As the stage coach swings into the dunc-covered main street, a volley of shots ring out and Mr Tracy falls back into his seat, dead. Confusion in the street. Everyone runs backwards and forwards and guns go off all round the compass. From the Sherriff's Office emerges the Sherriff (Dean Jagger) yelling, "Some renegade's shot the Editor!" The cry is taken up from end to end of the town, and after having utilised about thirty seconds of sound track it becomes, rather strangely, metamorphosed into a shout of "That half-breed's shot the Editor!" Immediate rush of persons to a shack on the edge of the desert in which dwells Anthony Perkins, half-breed and generally disreputable character. When the posse, or lynch mob, or whatever it is, gets to the shack, it is to discover Mr Perkins standing, bewildered, over the corpse of the Sherriff's Deputy (Lee Marvin). A smoking gun lies beside the porch, and the half-breed's redskin wife (Jean Simmons, for some reason) grovels in the dust, screaming hysterically. Perkins is hauled off to jail, and the Sherriff, his thumb in his waistcoat,

expresses to a gentleman your opinion

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A FIRST-RATE TEXAS JOB

...the Warren Commission in its report on the assassination of President Kennedy. The Commission's report is a masterpiece of evasion and self-deception. It is a work of art in the field of obfuscation. The Commission's report is a masterpiece of evasion and self-deception. It is a work of art in the field of obfuscation.

And that the arrested man was in fact the guilty man. Thus, the evidence brought forward into the Commission's report is a masterpiece of evasion and self-deception. It is a work of art in the field of obfuscation.

...inconsistencies, contradictions, and downright lies were allowed into unquestioned, the Commission's report is a masterpiece of evasion and self-deception. It is a work of art in the field of obfuscation.

...the general tenor of Mr. Epstein's book. This work is not based, indeed, upon an objective study of the actual workings of the Commission itself, and those members who professed to know by their information, but by the author with his information, based on the Warren, it has been argued, is a brilliant famous judge, whose services have been innumerable. His fellow conspirators were men of proven integrity and great care was taken to exclude "controversial" figures from the Commission, whatever that means, by Mr. Epstein's word that it was done.

Mysterious deaths

...we then believe that such an account... The Commission's report is a masterpiece of evasion and self-deception. It is a work of art in the field of obfuscation.

...the greater part of their work, and if any group of young and ambitious lawyers should be a little embarrassed and more than a little deferential in the face of the mighty J. Edgar Hoover, FBI chief, then we should be neither surprised nor aghast. There may have been in fact a certain efficiency, there was certainly no haste, but there was no villainous collusion. Besides, anyone can make a mistake, and the interests of public order were well served. The Commission, it may be claimed, is vindicated by its results: Oswald was found to have done everything he was supposed to have done. None, and nothing else, and there were no race riots, insurrections or further assassinations.

...that is not quite true. If we refer to Mr. Lane at this point, we discover that afterwards, in Dallas, there were one or two mysterious deaths and assassinations in Dallas, where map compartments in a motor car are saddle holsters on a horse, and it might happen to anyone, down there. But why did it have to happen to Mr. Lane's particular list of people, who had a list of names, that is, in some way and on...

...the Commission's report is a masterpiece of evasion and self-deception. It is a work of art in the field of obfuscation.

Handwritten initials "MAD" in the bottom right corner of the page.



Mark Lane is that rarity today, a campaigning lawyer. He's seen here lecturing on aspects of Kennedy's assassination, using a blown-up illustration of the relevant area in Dallas. (Photo: Bodley Head.)