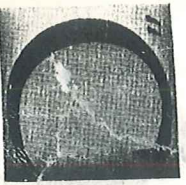


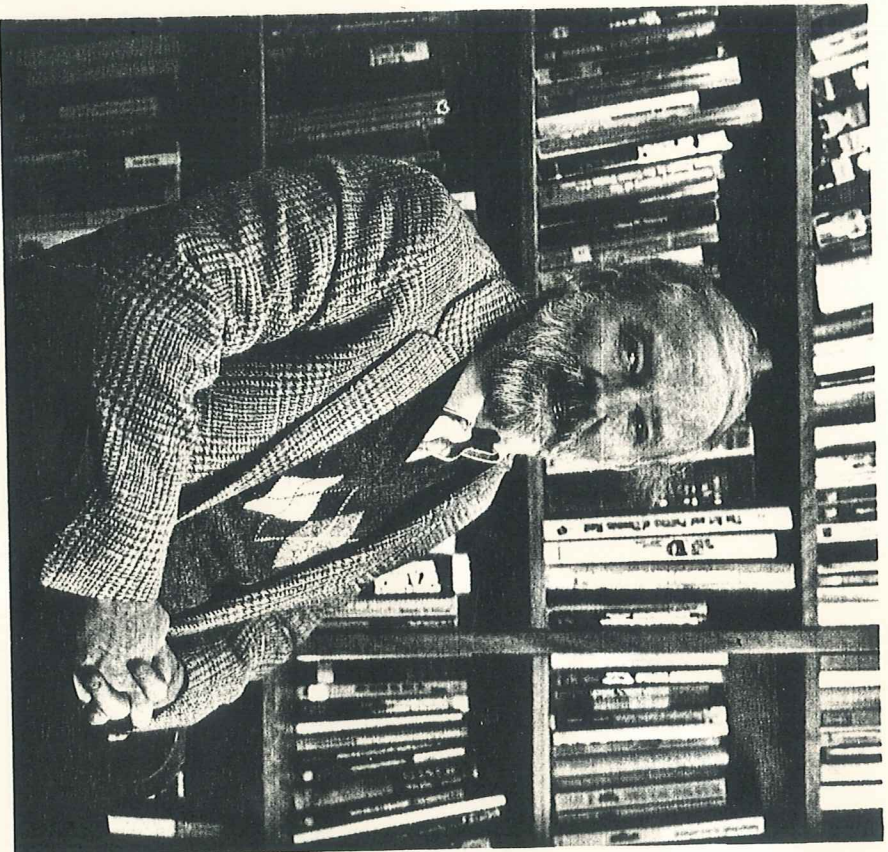
Touching History as It Was Happening



crisis is the true test of a democracy," says Gerald McKnight, Hood professor and chair of the Department of History and Political Science. "And there is much to learn about our own democracy by studying our government's reaction to one of the great crises of the 1960s: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy."

Did the country learn the truth from the report of the prestigious Warren Commission that was appointed to investigate the assassination? Each year at Hood, students in Professor McKnight's popular seminar on the Politics of Assassination use the tools of history to develop their own answers to this disturbing question. For many, the answer is no.

The "textbook" for this seminar is the mass of letters, notes, and other documents — numbering more than 100,000 pages — that the Warren Commission considered or produced in the course of its investigation. Professor McKnight, in his own work as a historian specializing in the assassinations of the 1960s, has pored over much of this material, now among the special collections on file at the Hood library. To this day, the professor continues to grapple with the many puzzles and inconsistencies, persevering with the patient detective work that leads to a better understanding.



Among Hood students, Professor McKnight is known as a dynamic lecturer and enthralling storyteller. But the historian also encourages his students to learn the techniques of scholarship first-hand: "As they delve into original documents and primary materials, many of which were kept secret until recently, my students are touching history as it was

happening. And their work," he points out, "is not just a classroom exercise. Sometimes a student will raise a question that opens my eyes to an entirely new interpretation of the material." In this way, McKnight's students are contributing to important scholarly work: the professor writes and speaks frequently about the politics of assassination.

As Hood students learn more about the Kennedy assassination and its investigation, they are typically disturbed by the evidence that the Warren Commission saw its job not as determining who killed the President but as proving that Lee Harvey Oswald did. According to some historians, the government at the time may have wanted to put a quick end to the fear and questions surrounding the assassination, in order to calm the



country. The simple explanation given by the Warren Commission was just what was needed. Under the pressure of a crisis, the truth may have been distorted — a troubling realization but an important lesson for Professor McKnight's students.

*Gerald McKnight, professor and chair of the Department of History and Political Science, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Maryland and joined the Hood faculty in 1971. A contributor of reviews and articles to *Mild America Journal of American History* and *South Atlantic Quarterly*, McKnight has been active in gaining the release of historical documents under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act.*

"Professor McKnight's lectures are so stirring I sometimes find myself forgetting to take notes. But no matter. In his classes you have access to all the written materials you'll need: the Warren Commission Report, newspaper articles, and secret government documents obtained by means of the Freedom of Information Act."

