

'The Death of a President'

Fleshing the Facts Defeats Mr. Manchester

William Manchester wrote in a recent magazine article that when he was working on his book about the Kennedy assassination he had never considered the volume a potential best seller. It would, he anticipated, be treated as a work of scholarship and stashed away in dusty stacks as a source for later historians. The subsequent interest in the book and magazine serialization took him by surprise.

The statement was remarkable. Could Mr. Manchester have truly been so naive? His assignment, to chronicle the events surrounding the murder of John F. Kennedy, had been made by none other than Mr. Kennedy's widow. The Manchester account would be the only "authorized" account, and this fact had been duly reported. The nation's almost total involvement in the events of those November days assured that any book about those days would be eagerly bought and read. Any book about President Kennedy, indeed, was guaranteed a healthy sale.

The Manchester book will be no exception. It probably will run away from the pack. A reading of the book, though, makes Mr. Manchester's magazine statement seem less remarkable. The same kind of innocence pervades the pages of *The Death of a President: November 1963*. Time and again the author expresses astonishment and wonder at events that were not astonishing at all. The writing often resembles that of a young amateur on his first big assignment, overwhelmed by his subject and not sure what to make of it all. Most notably, the opinions and conclusions he draws from his monumental collection of facts are shallow and commonplace. This, and not the fact that he opines and concludes, is the book's great fault as history and as literature.

Reliving the November Days

The book sets out to chronicle almost every minute of the days surrounding the murder of John F. Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. The idea is to allow the reader to live again through almost every minute of those days, as if once weren't enough. In that, the book succeeds.

The author has done a prodigious research job. His list of interviewees totals 266, from Bess Abell, personal secretary to Mrs. Johnson, to Abraham Zapruder, Dallas manufacturer and the man whose movie camera recorded the assassination. His list of source documents runs eight pages. The volume includes a chronology of events that leaves barely an hour unexamined from 8:45 a.m. on Nov. 20 to midnight Nov. 25. Charts and maps depict the Dallas motorcade route, the site of the assassination, hospital floor plans, the interior layout of Air Force One, the flight of Air Force One back to Washington, and the funeral route.

Mr. Manchester's text recounts the

movements and conversations of almost every major figure in Washington and Dallas during those days. The amount of detail is staggering. Some of it, perhaps unavoidably, is wrong. The author was compelled to make some factual corrections between magazine serialization (which accounted for only a small part of the total manuscript) and the publication of the book. Other corrections surely will follow.

Putting Flesh on the Facts

But most of the facts, the quotations, the times, the places, the statistics, the measurements, and all the rest of the minutiae are undoubtedly correct.

It is putting flesh on these facts that has defeated Mr. Manchester. A mere recitation of detail, he rightly believed, wouldn't do. So he had to endow the events of that week end with a great unifying meaning.

What is the meaning? That hate, pettiness, crudeness, greed—all the failings that can be found in human nature—killed John F. Kennedy. The conclusion is almost theological, like the concept of universal sin or the doctrine that the faults of mankind crucified Christ.

Nothing profound in this. Many people came forth with the same analysis in the hours and days after the assassination. "We are all responsible," was a favorite pulpit theme. Some would get a bit more specific. The Chief Justice of the United States blamed an "atmosphere of hate" in the land. Others got even more specific. Hate was found in places like the South; Texas was in the South; Dallas, especially, had a better than average atmosphere of hate; Lee Oswald lived in Dallas. We were all responsible, but Dallas was most responsible, with Texas and the South coming in second and third.

Mr. Manchester buys it, almost all of it. He does insist that Oswald acted alone, that there was no conspiracy. He also insists that Oswald was mad (he went mad, Mr. Manchester has decided, while watching a war movie on TV the night of Nov. 21). But for the author, it was the "atmosphere of hate" in Dallas that triggered Oswald's madness. Whether Oswald was a Marxist or a Bircher, a left-winger or right-winger, made no difference.

It probably didn't. Oswald's ideology wasn't highly developed, to say the least. To blame Marx or communism for Kennedy's death would be absurd. But to blame the "atmosphere" of Dallas isn't much better. Mr. Manchester's problem is that he has succeeded so well in recreating the irrationality of those days that he himself still embraces some of it. Twice he quotes a Kennedy aide who

said: "And the hell of it is, they'll blame it all on that 24-year-old boy." Mr. Manchester agrees with that sentiment.

Texans, naturally, come off poorly. First there is the superficial treatment of Texas politics, the reason for the Kennedy trip. The heavy is Gov. John Connally, and even as he lay in the Presidential car, seriously wounded by Oswald's bullets, he was resented. "... No one was ignoring the governor. They couldn't; even if they had been indifferent to his suffering, the stark fact remained that he was in the way."

Mr. Manchester seems disturbed because Mrs. Connally, not knowing whether her husband would live or die, failed to offer consolation to Mrs. Kennedy when the two stood in Parkland Hospital.

"Both knew that the President's injuries had been mortal," he writes, "and if there is such a thing as decorum in these circumstances, the governor's wife should have been the first to speak. She wasn't. Jackie gently inquired about Connally."

The point Mr. Manchester intended, of course, was that a Kennedy could overcome grief and rise to extraordinary heights. By implication, most Texans were incapable of that.

Then there was the Dallas newspaper publisher who posted a notice praising his staff for the job they did on assassination coverage. Editors and publishers all over the nation were posting similar notices, but for the Dallas man it was a "singular exhibition of complacency."

'Oswald Was a Cipher'

What bothers Mr. Manchester most was what bothered the Kennedy family that week end, and what bothered most of the world: Oswald was a cipher, and there was no explanation for his deed beyond his own derangement.

"He didn't even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights," Jacqueline Kennedy gasped when she was told Oswald, a Communist, had killed her husband. Yet throughout the book John Kennedy is called a "martyred President," implying that he died in defense of some cause or on behalf of some great principle.

Mrs. Kennedy's reaction was natural, and so was the reaction of most of the nation. What makes the Manchester book amazing is that the author is still thinking that way, after all these months and after all that research.

—JAMES MEAGHER

[*The Death of a President: November 1963*. By William Manchester. Harper & Row; New York City. 710 pages. \$10.]