

# BOOKS & THE ARTS

## History and Malapropaganda

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT: November 20—November 25, 1963. By William Manchester. Harper & Row. 710 pp. \$10.

### ELMER BENDINER

Mr. Bendiner, writer and editor, is author of *The Bowery Man* (Thomas Nelson).

There are several ways in which to categorize William Manchester's account of the five days in November, 1963, during which John F. Kennedy was assassinated, the man charged with the crime was murdered, and Lyndon Johnson inherited the Presidency. The volume can be looked upon as a merchandising marvel or as a political weapon in a factional feud, and in either case it could be hailed as a tour de force. But the author's passionate insistence that his work be regarded as history—in fact, as *the* history of the assassination, is another matter. In his foreword Manchester stakes his claim to such a monopoly, finding it "fair to assume that should any new studies of this subject appear in the near future, they must be largely based upon the [Warren] Commission's work, mine, or both."

It would be presumptuous to argue with a latter-day Book of Revelation; a reviewer can only list some of the wonders. This is not merely a retelling of the tragedy: Mr. Manchester fills page after page with facts never before reported. We discover that the White House Communications officer asked a sergeant for a roast beef sandwich before President Kennedy's last helicopter ride. At the moment of disaster in Dallas, Ben Bradlee, *Newsweek's* Washington correspondent, was browsing in a Brentano's bookstore; and the private who would later ride behind the Kennedy caisson "was stuffing his soiled uniforms into a coin-operated laundromat."

We are told here for the first time what Prince Stanislaus Radziwill was doing at the fatal moment when the clock in Rome's Eden Hotel stood at 7:21, and that in the nation's capital "half the men on the streets wore topcoats and half did not."

The book is a mine of such data and historians can only regret that when Lincoln was shot no conscientious re-

porter was available to chronicle the state of Bismarck's digestion. Though many of the readers who are clamoring for Manchester's report may not appreciate the full significance of his minutiae—which consume half or more of this monumental effort—they may trace a larger pattern.

The stature of Lyndon Johnson, for example, shrinks notably in Manchester's telling. It is not pretty to read of the stricken widow's arrival at the Presidential plane in Dallas only to find Johnson in full possession of her bedroom. Johnson's image also suffers in Manchester's description of the oath-taking ceremony and of Johnson's insistence that Jackie Kennedy appear at his side, even though she would not change the dress still drenched in her husband's blood. The circumstances of the ceremony itself are stained with controversy. Johnson quotes Robert Kennedy as his legal authority for the necessity of taking the oath immediately, but Kennedy hotly denies that he sanctioned it or that it was necessary. Similarly, Johnson's precipitate speed in moving into the White House is contrasted by Manchester with the patience of that other Johnson who waited weeks after Lincoln's murder before he took over his quarters.

The President is described as "almost alone" in offering the on-the-spot theory that the assassination was part of an "international communist conspiracy." And an investigative commission composed exclusively of Texans, according to Manchester, was frustrated only by the intervention of attorney Abe Fortas and the Kennedy "loyalists." Johnson will also have to live down the monstrous *gaffe* of Lady Bird who, in offering her condolences to Mrs. Kennedy, said: "What wounds me most of all is that this should happen in my beloved State of Texas."

The book is no *MacBird*, of course. Manchester fully endorses the most significant conclusions of the Warren Commission. And at every opportunity he carefully explains the strains borne by the new President and the allowances that must be made. Inevitably, the repetition of these apologies has the ring of Mark Antony's refrain: "And Brutus is an honorable man."

By contrast Robert and Jacqueline

Kennedy emerge as story-book hero and heroine, strong, resolute, romantic—"She was Gallic; he a Celt." The coldness of the Kennedy team to the new Chief is excused as an excess of loyalty and grief. But one cannot say that this book is designed as a tool in the Kennedy cause because we are forbidden to say so. Manchester opens his testament by commanding: "You may not conclude that I have served as anyone's amanuensis. If you doubt me you may as well stop at the end of this paragraph."

A reviewer with the temerity to disobey such imperious foot stamping could point out that Manchester was chosen by the Kennedy family, that he did come to some agreement with them, involving their right to at least review the manuscript before publication and that, however coincidentally, the work does enhance the stature of Robert Kennedy at the expense of Lyndon Johnson. The great, if abortive, legal battle between the Kennedys and Manchester resulted—again fortuitously—in a net gain for both sides. The Kennedys cannot be tagged with the book's faults and the publicity must account in part for the gigantic prepublication sale. Moreover, the Kennedy assault never discredited the book itself.

True, the evidence of political motivation is only circumstantial; but Manchester, in convicting Oswald of the single-handed murder of the President, declares a new legal dictum: that circumstantial evidence is "the very best kind." Manchester brushes aside all doubts and criticisms. The critics, in fact, do not exist; he has not heard of them. "Had any other major investigator been around I certainly would have heard the echo of his footsteps." This is odd because, though all of the dissenters from the Warren Commission Report may ultimately be refuted, there are few who would allege that they went about their work on tiptoe.

Where he touches upon the controversy he simplifies it with authoritative finality. "At that distance, with his training, he [Oswald] could scarcely have missed," Manchester declares, citing for authority his own experience on the Marine Corps rifle range. He takes no notice of those FBI sharpshooters who repeatedly missed when they tried to duplicate the shot. The argument of

those who wonder about the seconds necessary to aim, load and fire the murder weapon is dismissed as a "trick," refuted by simple arithmetic. He seems unaware that the calculations have been based not on the time lapse between first and last shot but from the moment when the President could have been visible in the assassin's gun sights to the final firing.

For Manchester there are no grassy knolls, no bullet holes that need explaining. He is above sleuthing. Nonetheless, he has unearthed the curious fact that two hours before Oswald was shot, three trauma rooms had been prepared at Parkland Hospital "against precisely this calamity." He explains that the Dallas police expected some attempt to be made against Oswald while en route to the county jail but, curiously, not before. Dallas is like that, he says.

The impounded X-rays of the President cause him no anxiety at all. "Because the material is unsightly it will be unavailable until 1971," he reports in a footnote. It may be true that some small segment of the medically minded public would be able to tell a sightly from an unsightly X-ray, but in any case no film could equal the harrowing, tasteless, clinical detail with which Manchester loads whole chapters. Here the wounds, the blood, the flying bits of flesh and the surgical interventions are minutely detailed. If the American people and the Kennedys can stomach that, they probably can stand any X-ray ever made.

It should be pointed out, in all fairness, that there are chapters of genuine interest: the flight of top Cabinet members to Washington, the mood of Dallas, the bumbling, grotesque mechanics behind the funeral. Even though these sections contain little that the newspapers and television have not already reported, Manchester might be credited with a neat compilation in handy format. Unfortunately, even this information appears in his lofty prose.

William Manchester does not command language; he defies it. Rarely has the English tongue been so elegantly tortured. He refers to fine weather as "a golden lacuna of a day." He calls haze "aoristic." The Eastern seaboard, seen from a plane, is "vermiculating." President Kennedy's body is carried in an "apopemptic ride." Oswald is depicted (by inspired divination) as withdrawing after the final shot "in the deliberate lock step of a Marine marksman retiring from the range"—a feat comparable to a lone performer singing in unison.

Mrs. Malaprop would blush at Man-

chesterisms that leap out of the volume. Even when he uses words with some faint regard for their meaning, he is so grandiloquent that the reader is left in baffled awe. Mrs. Kennedy does not enter a room, for example, she "debouches" into it. She also withdraws into a "candle of privacy." Galbraith does not fall asleep; he "induces insentience." Oswald is shown "combing his hair like an oarsman sculling." And the Kennedy and

Connally families, during their vigil at the hospital, are outrageously described as "entangled in their abattoir."

It is hard to say whether William Manchester will ultimately be known as the pioneer collector of the crumbs of history or the single-handed destroyer of the English language. This reviewer's guess is that he may make an obscure footnote in the record of our time—if not a "golden lacuna."

## Half & Half Equals Two

### E. R. von FREIBURG

*Von Freiburg is a pseudonym for a bilingual East-West writer team of two who have lived in both Germanys for many years.*

A curious thing happens when one is asked about the literature of East Germany. Immediately one starts thinking about the literature of West Germany. But if one is asked to discuss the literature of West Germany, one's mind inevitably wanders to the literature of East Germany. They are two separate literatures, but only superficially do they constitute two separate phenomena. The one cannot be understood without the other.

It is easy enough to complain that contemporary German writers cannot be compared with the prewar giants—Brecht, the Mann brothers, the Zweig non-brothers, Lion Feuchtwanger, Anna Seghers. There are potential giants: Günter Grass (West) and Peter Hacks (East). The question is, why have they remained only potential? The difference between the older and the younger generation of German writers is probably not one of native gifts but of native land—of wholeness as against halfness.

All German writers today, East, West and in exile, are suffering from a split psyche. Kaiser Germany and Hitler's Third Reich, and the impotent Weimar Republic sandwiched in between, may not have been the most reassuring native land—with its amoebically, cannibalistically fluid borders—but it was a whole. It had one past, one present and presumably one future. Its culture, despite all the inner contradictions, belonged to one people. It was not a happy people. The number of writers it drove to suicide, insanity or exile is an appalling statistic. Yet Germany's exiled writers had no peace; they kept returning, spiritually or physically, to the scenes that had tormented them and driven them away.

It was Heine who wrote from Paris:

*When I think on Germany at night  
I toss and turn till morning light*

Peter Weiss in Sweden finds himself doubly exiled. Unable to identify himself with either East or West Germany, he cannot write about contemporary Germany at all. On the other hand, his "Ten Theses of the Writer in a Divided World," a soul-searching analysis of contemporary political alternatives, could have been written only by a German today—a divided German. In it he floated in spirit, like Heine's ghost, over the two halves of his native land, in each half preferring this and rejecting that, and finally floating away again to his haunted homelessness.

The dilemma of the halved German writer was keenly described by dramatist Peter Hacks in a spoof aimed at Günter Grass and the guitar-playing East German bard Wolf Biermann who, like Hacks, emigrated from West to East Germany out of political conviction, and who has been in the doghouse in that country for about a year. In a letter in the West German magazine, *Theater heute*, describing the plot for a new comedy, Hacks wrote that his hero, "a German petty bourgeois" named Wolf-Günter, was accidentally divided in two when the Berlin Wall was built, and has since then existed in two separate halves. Wolf (East) and Günter (West) are absolutely identical; both have "the most comfortably demonic walrus mustache," considerable talent and an enormous need to make an impression; both represent every opinion one can possibly have, and its opposite; and both suffer from unrequited love for the same Fräulein, the government of the half-country in which they respectively dwell. The letter continued:

No one can be more progressive than Wolf when he happens to fall among the capitalists, and no one more reactionary than Günter with the Communists. . . . They do not realize that