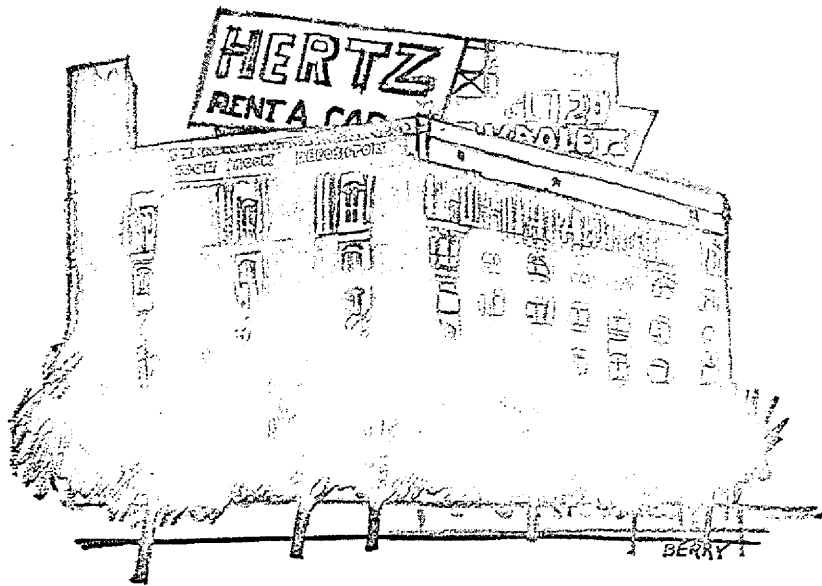


VIEWS & REVIEWS



Was It Really Like This in Dallas?

REBECCA WEST

IT HAS BEEN SAID that what Manchester thinks today the world will think tomorrow. But this does not apply to William Manchester, author of *The Death of a President*, of whom the world will think but little, tomorrow or any other day, except to wish that he had not put forward this version of an American crisis.

For were it acceptable it would be cause for despair, since the United States is one of the two great determinant forces on earth in this age.

An awful story wanders through this great doorstep of a book. According to Mr. Manchester this is what happened in Dallas after the assassination. President Kennedy, in his last agony, Governor Connally, who was badly wounded, and their uninjured and gallant wives, and Mr. and Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, a Texan Senator (insulted throughout but Mr. Manchester does not really explain why), and a *mêlée* of personal assistants, some of them

high-ranking, and secret service men from Washington and numbers of local police, were driven at high speed to Parkland Hospital four miles out of the city.

The medical staff there gave the President various forms of treatment which their experience warned them would be useless, but which were obligatory because the strong body obstinately showed signs of life which could not be disregarded; and Governor Connally was appropriately tended.

Meanwhile a technical genius named Bales, who should be remembered tenderly, the chief of the Signal Corps who always traveled with the President to establish his communications, ran around the hospital adjusting each telephone so that it went through to the Signals Board in Washington, and other technicians whom he had summoned set up a new trunk system.

Here competence disappears from the story. It is odd that, though there was a general fear that the

attack on the President was part of a rising, nobody seems to have contacted any branch of the armed forces stationed in Texas; nor did anybody ascertain, as should have been easy enough once telephone communications had been installed, that there was no rising and spread the news among the party.

By this time hospital routine had been shattered, not by its own fault but by the irruption of White House personnel and police and secret service agents, all in a state of unrestrained excitement which led a nurse to believe that the place had been taken over by an underworld gang.

THE STORY wends its way through masses of superfluous details about everything which was happening practically anywhere at the same moment.

When the President was dead, an undertaker was telephoned to bring a coffin, and preparations were made to take the President's body back to the airfield and fly it to Washington. This was unnecessary. It was necessary that the new President should be flown to Washington as soon as possible, but that consideration played a very small part in the minds of the White House personnel.

It is suggested throughout that this confusion of priorities arose because of Mrs. Kennedy's own intense desire to return to Washington with her husband's body. This is doubtful. That unhappy woman was in a state of deep shock, a beautiful grieving automaton, and she would probably have accepted any tactful suggestion which left her, as she plainly desired to be, alone with her dead.

Rather was this foolish flight the wish of the people round her. Of one agent Mr. Manchester writes:

"He did, however, want to leave Parkland. From the moment they reached the ambulance dock he had been plotting a getaway. Not only the hospital, but the entire city had become an abomination to him. . . . Dallas was a place of violence and death. Staying in it was an insane risk. Love Field [the airport] was the obvious escape hatch; they should head there immediately."

When they were about to remove

the coffin, a doctor appeared, identified himself as the Dallas County Examiner, Dr. Earl Rose, and explained that by the law of Texas no corpse could be removed from the state until an autopsy had been performed, were there any suspicion of homicide. He was entirely in the right, and all the other doctors except one assured the President's staff that this was the law.

There then followed a disgusting brawl, which Mr. Manchester describes with approving relish. He is not at all displeased to record that a local police sergeant got into a crouching position and appeared about to assault Dr. Rose, on whose personal appearance Mr. Manchester finds time to pass derisive comments. He is reported as being wall-eyed and turning the color of porridge under the stress of emotion. The reader will look much the same by this time.

FINALLY, a local magistrate was sent for, and after surviving a discourteous reception he confirmed the Examiner's judgment, and in the course of his explanation had to remark that this was just another homicide case so far as he was concerned.

To that, offense was taken by Kenneth O'Donnell, one of the President's political advisers. He swore at the judge and then told his men to force the coffin out of the room through a scrimmage of local police. If this repulsive scene occurred, it would have been preferable that none of us should have heard about it.

What the unfortunate judge was trying to explain was that though conspiracy to murder a President is a Federal offense, the murder of a President by a single person is not. It ranks just like any other homicide, and has to be dealt with by the homicide laws of the state in which the murder was committed; and the law of Texas on the point of removal was as the unhappy Dr. Rose had stated.

But this is not the end of the discreditable story. Mr. O'Donnell took Kennedy's coffin to the airfield in the undertaker's hearse and, as the sortie was illegal, did not take the undertaker's assistants with him. O'Donnell's party did not

know that a coffin is fixed to the floor of a hearse, and could not find the catch, so wrenched the coffin out by sheer force.

Though it was heavy bronze, it suffered serious damage, and a handle was snapped off. This made it difficult to carry the coffin; and it had to be shoved and bounced and tilted up the ramp and through the narrow entrance of the plane.

A body which is to be the subject of an autopsy should be disturbed as little as possible. Considerable sympathy must be felt for the surgeons at the Naval Hospital of Bethesda at Washington who were later set the task of tracing the path of the assassin's bullet through the President's poor body, which had been torn by wounds, disorganized by drastic treatment, and finally exposed to this buffeting.

Had the surgeons been flown down to Dallas and done their work down there, we might have had none of the painful controversy about the manner of the President's death, which violates the dignity of the dead in its eagerness to ruin the living.

IT MAY BE ASKED what was happening in the meantime to the man who had suddenly become President of the United States. If we are to believe Mr. Manchester, he was being treated like the stray dog that runs onto the ground during a league football match.

Mr. and Mrs. Lyndon Johnson had taken no part in the deplorable proceedings at Parkland. They had sat quietly in a room with their secret service guard, doing what sensible people do in a hospital: waiting until the doctors and nurses finish their work and it can be decided what should be done.

Already the Kennedy staff had shown a peculiar attitude toward him. The agent who saw Dallas as a city of death and violence fully realized his responsibilities to the man who was either going to be President in a matter of moments or already was President, and two agents had been sent to ask General McHugh, the Air Force aide to the President, to come and speak to Mr. Johnson about arranging his immediate flight to Washington.

General McHugh refused, on the

peculiar ground that the Vice President had his own plane. In the end Mr. and Mrs. Johnson and their agents had to go to the airport and board the plane by themselves.

ONCE Mr. Johnson was aboard he put in a number of calls relating to a matter of at least ritual importance. For the last 120 years it has been the custom that when the death of the President precipitates a Vice President into the supreme office, he takes the oath of loyalty to the Constitution that his predecessor took at his inauguration, simply because "doubts may arise and for greater caution."

First of all, Mr. Johnson consulted the dead President's brother, the Attorney General, and then the matter was discussed over the wires by a number of authorities, both in Washington and in Dallas. Finally, he sent for a local woman judge to administer the oath to him on the plane.

This step gave him no advantage. He was President. The only consideration which could have moved him was the feeling that if there were a general rising, "a world plot," as he put it to Robert Kennedy, there had better be no doubts about his succession. But Mr. Manchester, for reasons known only to his Maker, considers this decision to take the oath in Dallas a revelation of Johnson's oblique character.

The Johnsons, then and at all times, seem to have been behaving far better than anybody else: like reasonable beings. Meantime, the party who had engaged in the brawl with the County Examiner at Parkland escorted Mrs. Kennedy aboard and laid down the coffin in the tail compartment.

Because the President was changing his shirt in a cabin, they did not know he was on the plane, and none of the agents accompanying the Johnsons gave them that information.

The brawling party were possessed by a fear that the Dallas authorities would pursue them and seize the coffin, and therefore they were anxious for the plane to start. That they should have put Mrs. Kennedy, in her state of distress, in such a position is incredible.

But one's credulity is strained a

little further. When General McHugh was finally told that the President was on board the plane and they could not start until he had been sworn, his reaction was strong and strange, particularly as he was no child but a man over fifty years of age:

"McHugh flushed. Pointing toward the tail compartment he cried, 'I have only one President, and he's lying back in that cabin.'

"It was a dramatic remark, and the plane was small enough so that his words were quoted to virtually every passenger before they landed at the capital. Ken O'Donnell heard them and was proud of the General. 'This morning you were this tall,' he said, holding his hand a few inches from the floor. Then he raised it as high as he could reach and said, 'Now you're up here.'"

IF THESE ill-bred nonsenses occurred, Mr. Manchester had no right to record them as if ordinary Americans would find them acceptable. It would be too much to hope that the two-and-a-quarter-hour journey from Dallas to Washington would bring an end to these extraordinary manifestations, and indeed even the funeral was not to be safe from desecration.

When the Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral was over, Cardinal Cushing and the other prelates entered the first car, and Mrs. Kennedy and her brothers-in-law entered the second. But the cars could not start. There was an inexplicable traffic block in front of them.

The afflicted family had to sit helpless, with the worst of the day still before them, the actual interment in Arlington Cemetery, for a quarter of an hour. In fact, the prearranged order for the procession had been jettisoned. This was the work of another of the inexhaustible supply of Washington gnomes, Jack McNally, the Special Assistant in charge of staff at the White House.

"The White House staff had bolted. . . . the unruly Jack McNally was to blame. . . . To McNally the precedence was plainly unfair. The staff members had loved the President more than any foreigner, he reasoned. Putting them at the end was wrong; they might miss the graveside service. Therefore he had

slipped away during Communion and reconnoitred Rhode Island Avenue's three lanes. . . . The third lane was vacant. Chief Stover of the White House police told him it was reserved for an emergency. . . . He found the nineteen White House limousines parked a block away and ordered them into the emergency lane. Then he posted a White House sergeant in front of lane two and told him to block the foreign presidents and royalty until the staff had been threaded into the cavalcade. . . . All semblance of order collapsed."

It did indeed. The order of the cortège was broken, and at this solemn moment the greatest men in America and the foreign chiefs of state had to run about hitchhiking lifts from the few lucky people who had found their cars.

"Charles de Gaulle declined to use his thumb. He looked down

upon the *mélée* and arched his brow at the American chief of protocol."

For once President de Gaulle's capacity for arching his brow was used for a purpose of which we can all approve.

THIS is a regrettable book. It is a mystery how the friends of the Kennedy family who read the book on their behalf could not have seen that it is damaging to the reputation of the United States. It tells one shocking story after another, either as if they were funny or could be taken for granted. Particularly is it displeasing that gratuitous discourtesies to the President of the United States should be recorded without apology or justification.

This is a tale that should not have been told save in sackcloth and ashes. Yet certainly Mr. Manchester wrote this book in all innocence.

Dark Deeds And Evil Books

WERNER L. GUNDERSHEIMER

ON INIQUITY, by Pamela Hansford Johnson. Scribner's. \$3.95.

The Moors murder trial, which attracted international attention last spring, resulted in the convictions of Ian Brady, twenty-seven, a clerk, and Esther Myra Hindley, twenty-three, a shorthand typist. The three known victims, aged ten to seventeen, were brutally manhandled, sadistically attacked, and sexually assaulted. Two had been buried on a bleak moor in the county of Chester, England, the third was still in the killers' house, and two missing children from that region are still undiscovered. The guilty couple possessed a small collection of sadistic, pornographic, and Nazi writings, photographed some of their triumphant moments, and recorded on tape the tortured agonies of Lesley Ann Downey, ten. It is a story of horrible, in parts unspeakable depravity. Miss Hansford Johnson attended portions of the trial, on an assignment for the *Sunday Telegraph*.

This dreadful experience prompted some searching reflections on the general nature of our "increasingly permissive society," in the hope of discerning "some compost-heap of rotteness out of which such ugly weeds could flourish and grow lush."

The result is a conservative, indeed almost atavistic, and sometimes rather crotchety indictment of some features of modern urban societies. Her critique is presented in strongly persuasive and often emotive language, and in parts it is argued rather well. The author's commitment and good will, and her belief that she is saying things that need desperately to be said, are beyond question. Her judgment is not.

THE BOOK revolves around two major problems, which Miss Hansford Johnson regards as closely related. The more general of the two is that of the West's drift toward an "affectless society," a world of ruthless disregard for others, of *sauve*