

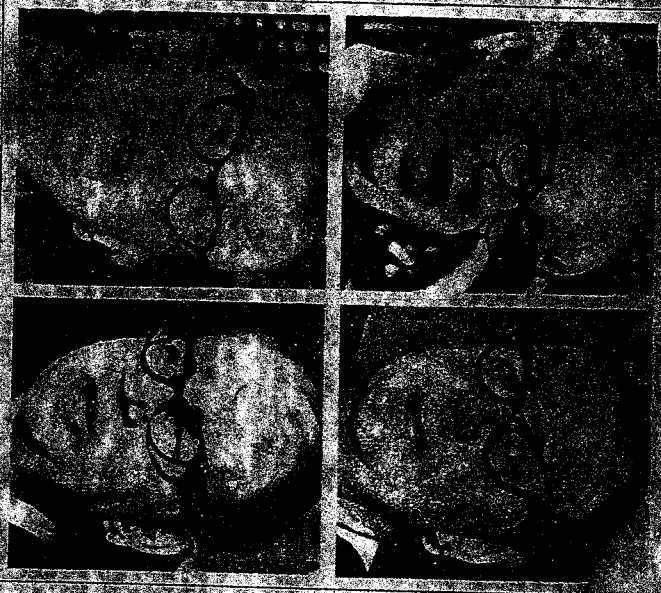
# Woman behind the gun

By Marya Mannes

IN HISTORY, By Jean Stafford, Farrar, Straus & Co. \$3.95.

Six months ago the major portion of Miss Stafford's review with the mother of Lee Oswald appeared in McCall's Magazine. The compelling interest of the portrait—for the writer let Mrs. Oswald herself—was equaled only by the damage of her reaction to the piece. Letter after letter repeating words like "disgusted," "shocked," "A Congressman wrote a long diatribe in which he accused both the magazine and Miss Stafford of sensational journalism," expressing shock at exposing the "almost incoherent fanaticism" of the "almost incoherent mother," and charging McCall's with giving Mrs. Oswald a platform from which she spouts a sick-dirty son was involved with the Secret Service in a "killing" conspiracy" to remove an incurably illident from office.

were more surprised at this storm of protest as Stafford herself and the editors at the time. For what she had done was—and is—a valuable analysis of a woman sick with a spiritual malady. Like a good analyst, Miss Stafford hardly speaks at all, letting the wild in-



ferable view alternately deluged and chilled, outraged and cosy. It turns the woman's lips into a tape recorder as she generates herself and her son from all blame, and condemns fingers at a shifting host of "They," and heaps scorn on the official establishment and its glib public alike. Those mostly from other lands who still persist in claiming that the assassination of President Kennedy was a conspiracy, and that it is the product of this small book. For Lee Oswald was not a simple victim and product of that conspiracy of genes and circumstances joined in the person of his mother. He looked no different for the making of a destroyer.

What is in Stafford's great skill is manifest in the precise negotiations between Mrs. Oswald's copious

statements in which she addresses the question of her own life. She is not a "biographer" who objects to the woman's own words and her family of all sorts; she observes the woman's own words and her family of all sorts, and her own words and her family of all sorts, and her own words and her family of all sorts. She manages to say what she means of her own involvement with this woman without ever raising her voice.

Not only is she far too good a writer to have done so, but her subject did it for her. Matching Mrs. Oswald's parade of incredible statements and admissions which these words were engraved, "MY SON—LEE HARVEY OSWALD—EVEN AFTER HIS DEATH HAS DONE MORE FOR HIS COUNTRY THAN ANY OTHER LEADING HUMAN BEING—MARGUERITE C. OSWALD. Matching this was Mrs. Oswald's suggestion that "On Mother's Day let's come out and say that I am in the service of my country." (Carmichael's *Woman in History* could be nothing less than a book on the life of her past behavior and continuing presence, for attention is understandable. What is disturbing is that so many readers should have construed this report as a tasteless "expose," as an exploitation of Mrs. Oswald and an affront to Jacqueline Kennedy's feelings, as a gross invasion of privacy for the sake of publicity and profit, as a desecration of a beloved young president's memory.

Obviously, it is a public duty of obscuring reason and comprehension for nobody reading Miss Stafford's closing chapter, reliving that November day in 1963, could doubt for a moment that her nerve was as raw as theirs that wound as easily opened. This small book is a triumph of control not only over material but over the writer's emotions. Those who misconstrue it are apparently unable or unwilling to face the reality of Marguerite C. Oswald, mother of Lee. \*