

Dallas: Pandora's box is opened

INQUEST: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth/by Edward Jay Epstein/Hutchinson 30s

RUSH TO JUDGMENT/by Mark Lane, introduced by Hugh Trevor-Roper/Bodley Head 42s

By Cyril Connolly

LIKE many Europeans I found the official version of the Kennedy assassination hard to accept—the whole Oswald-Tip-pit-Ruby sequence of murders seemed an exercise in randomness. Like not so many other Europeans, my doubts were completely set at rest by dipping into the Report of the Warren Commission, presented to me by an American friend.

It seemed to me—and still seems to me—a wise, all-embracing and masterly compilation, a *summum theologium* about the whole drama with pages and pages devoted to the enumeration and scotching of every conceivable rumour, however grotesque, and with full biographies of Oswald and Ruby. Professor Trevor-Roper seemed rash indeed to question such authority. It was like finding fault with the Denning Report.

Well, two more people have now done so: Mr Epstein, in *Inquest*, in the interests of historical truth with what started out to be an academic thesis on how a government deals with an unusual situation, Mr Lane, in *Rush to Judgment*, as a potential defence counsel employed by Oswald's mother who found himself being hardily treated by the Commission.

"No material question now remains unresolved so far as the death of President Kennedy is concerned. The evidence of Oswald's single-handed guilt is overwhelming," wrote Harrison Salisbury in the New York Times, and this opinion is almost universally held, particularly in America, where it is also the height of bad taste to question it. Unfortunately it is now clear to me, after reading these two books, that it was the opinion of nearly everyone concerned in the investigation that the loneliness of the long-distance gunman was an article of faith, to doubt which was to be discredited. The Dallas police, the FBI and Secret Service, the Press, the public and the Commission all subscribed to it.

At this point I give my own credentials. I have read many books on Shakespeare's identity and I know that there is a process by which the author gradually passes from the plausible to the possible, from the possible to the improbable, from the improbable to the incred-

ible, and I am on the look out for it; but I have read something about the Evans-Christie cases and remember how guilty Evans seemed before Christie's activities became known—Christie, whose evidence was unquestioned because he was an ex-policeman. And I know, too, how reluctant we are to question Government Reports and White Papers and how we tend towards one-ness—Holism as Smuts called it—and prefer one assassin, one gun, one bullet, one victim, one world, one wife, one God to more complicated solutions. But Unitarians are not always right.

Mr Epstein's thesis is a criticism of the commission itself, the way it worked, the evidence it took, the evaluation

of that evidence. His case is that behind the façade of Olympian infallibility were a great many—far too many—fallible human beings, the more highly placed the more busy in other spheres, with less and less time to attend meetings, the work being more and more delegated to underlings of whom one, Wesley J. Liebeler, alone seems proof against the compulsive drive of the rest of the Commission to take—or fake—the line of least resistance. He wrote the original version of chapter VII—the Life of Oswald, and questioned some of the vital information in the assassination-chapters (II & IV).

To illustrate the weaknesses and discrepancies inherent in the structure and activities of the Commission, Epstein discusses at length the autopsy of the President and the whole question of the number of shots fired, the points of impact, nature of the weapon, opinions of eye-witnesses and ballistic experts, etc. Without departing from this one problem, he manages to throw doubt on the whole validity of the investigation. The time necessary to

aim, fire and reload the rifle during the period when the President's car was in view from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School-book depository demanded that the same bullet should have wounded both the President and Governor Connally, after exiting from the President. Any other explanation involves an accomplice.

But some of the direct evidence of the autopsy has been spirited away or locked up for seventy-five years, and Mr Epstein suggests that the earliest Parkland doctors' evidence contradicted the later and that the wounds might have been inflicted from in front. If more than three shots were fired these could have been simultaneous—from another position or from another gun in the same building. Considerable doubt was expressed (and toned down by the Commission) that Oswald was really much of a marksman or that his Italian rifle was capable of such a feat.

Mr Epstein's short book, in fact, is dynamite precisely because it exposes the human weaknesses of the Commission in the briefest and most unprejudiced terms; and behind these weaknesses may lurk an undetected murderer.

Both Governor and Mrs Connally were convinced that his first wound was not from the same bullet that hit the President—or he would have felt it at the same time. This question of the number of bullets and the nature of the wounds (Governor Connally had four) is of extreme complexity and I advise a careful reading of the Report as well as of Lane and Epstein.

It is part of Lane's theory

that the shots were fired from a mound directly ahead of the advancing motorcade and from which smoke, flashes, and the smell of gunpowder were detected. It was in fact the obvious place, even as it is more natural to fire at an advancing rather than a receding target. The terrible wound on the right side of the head could most easily be caused from this position.

Equally un reassuring are the glimpses Mr Epstein provides of the spirit of the Commission: "At this stage we are supposed to be closing doors not opening them." (Rankin to Liebler) "Liebler said that most of the Commissioners were absent most of the time." Ball said that he spent much time "talking to an empty room."

With Mr Lane we enter the area which might be described as special pleading. His whole book is the kind of defence he might have put up if Oswald had survived to stand trial. For instance in his desire to acquit Oswald of the murder of Kennedy and of Patrolman Tippit (for if he had not murdered Kennedy why should he shoot Tippit?) he indulges in the *suppressio veri* dear to Shakespearean identifiers: that is to say he omits the account of Oswald's arrest in the cinema when he drew a gun on the police, and caused three to require hospital treatment before he was overpowered.

Oswald could have been a fellow-conspirator or appointed as the "fall guy" by other conspirators or a loner acting with another "loner" as in Capote's "In Cold Blood." All the suspicions of Mr Lane point to Ruby as Oswald's "Christie" and it is clear that he is a much more formidable character than the Commission disclosed, a man of great physical strength and extremely prone to use it. Mr Lane believes that Ruby was at the scene of the assassination (and could have fired from the mound) with a twenty-minute gap in his alibi, even as he was apparently round at the hospital afterwards (though he denied this).

The very full picture of Ruby in the Report describes him as a kind of Leopold Bloom engrossed in his petty affairs with his nightclubs, horrified by the assassination and going about his business in Dallas without ever quite meeting Oswald, his Stephen Dedalus, Mr Lane, however, produces evidence that Ruby was involved with anti-Castro Cuban gunrun-

ners, that he held a two-hour meeting in one of his clubs with Tippit, the murdered policeman, and Weissmann, author of the black-bordered anti-Kennedy advertisement in the Dallas Morning News of November 22. He implies that Ruby could have murdered Tippit and laid a train of suspicion leading to Oswald, over the Kennedy assassination, and he suggests that he was intimate with an enormous number of Dallas police. The evidence of Mrs Rich, which he quotes, is a feast in itself. There is also evidence that he was deliberately allowed in to the basement room which Oswald was about to be transferred and therefore could have been tipped off by the Dallas police as to the postponement. Mr Lane has great misgivings about the FBI's "processing" of its witnesses, even graver ones about the Dallas police.

Many other witnesses suffered threats or worse after November 22. One witness was shot through the head. One hanged herself to death in the Dallas jail. After one witness had been visited by independent investigators, her son was arrested and was injured when he fell from a window in an alleged attempt to escape from the Dallas police. Two reporters visited Ruby's apartment just after he had killed Oswald. One was later found dead in his Dallas apartment, the victim of a karate attack, the Dallas police were unable to find his killer. The other was shot to death in a California police station... his killer was a "local police officer."

Powerful influences certainly did exist tending to discourage testimony that did not conform to accepted interpretations.

If Oswald did not act alone "to get into history" what was the purpose and nature of the conspiracy? Kennedy's death was an advantage to the whole Communist world and presumably especially welcome to those who felt humiliated over Cuba. Besides Castro and the Kremlin this could also include anti-Castro Cuban expatriates who were sacrificed over the Bay of Pigs and who could blame Kennedy for letting them down. Then there was the extreme Right, who thought Kennedy had sold out to Communism.

But all must have known that the deed would crown Johnson, not Goldwater. What is the use of a political assassination which cannot lead to any political action? Ruby's real name was Jacob Rubenstein, hardly a tool of the extreme

Right, one of whose leaders, General Walker, had been narrowly missed by a bullet from Oswald (unless he was lying). As Ruby said of a poster proclaiming "Impeach Earl Warren" (the Chief Justice who was later to head the commission): "This is the work of the John Birch Society or the Communist party or maybe a combination of both."

The libellous "Wanted for Treason" handbill with two photographs of Kennedy and a series of inflammatory charges was the work of a printing salesman "closely associated with General Walker for several years in his political and business activities."

Three conclusions:—

1. Epstein: "If the Commission had made it clear that very substantial evidence indicated the presence of a second assassin, it would have opened a Pandora's box of doubts or suspicions. In establishing its version of the truth, the Warren Commission acted to reassure the nation and protect the national interest."

2. Lane: "If the Commission covered itself with shame, it also reflected shame on the Federal Government. The readiness with which its findings were accepted I believe to have been symptomatic of disease. Perhaps it was like that collective illness which anthropologists have observed to afflict tribal societies after the death of the chief. Then too the law is suspended and traduced."

3. Connolly: As with Shakespearean identification, any solution other than the accepted one ends by creating more difficulties than it can solve. Perhaps two quite unconnected assassinations took place simultaneously. Lane's book is the more sensational, his conclusions the more questionable, but the impact of both on the Warren Report is sufficient to justify a further examination—second-by-second, of the events of November 22, 1963, and the discrepancies and contradictions among the eye-witnesses—by some completely unprejudiced and fearless body.

Lincoln

Anatomy of an Assassination by John Cottrell (Muller 30s). Inevitably there are similarities between the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy and Mr Cottrell is at pains to point them out. Both were shot in the back on a Friday by people with fifteen-letter names and succeeded by Southerners named Johnson. More important, both assassins were killed before they could testify. The most interesting chapters in this book are devoted to an evident dissimilarity: the possibility that Lincoln's death was engineered by his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton.

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