

Reviews:



THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT by William Manchester. New York: Harper & Row. 710 pp. \$10.

Reviewed by Léo Sauvage

ON MARCH 26, 1964, William Manchester announced at a press conference in Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy's office that he had been commissioned by the Kennedy family to prepare "an extensive account describing the events of and surrounding the death of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963." The reporters were also given a written statement signed by the widow of the slain President: "These arrangements were made with Mr. Manchester," the statement explained, "in the interest of historical accuracy and to prevent distortion and sensationalism."

Why William Manchester? I don't know, and it appears that nobody else, with the possible exception of Pierre Salinger, is ready to suggest an answer.

Salinger, by the way, ambivalently likes *The Death of a President*. According to a Washington Post dispatch from London where the former White House press secretary was promoting his own *With Kennedy*, Salinger considers Manchester's book "a great book, and as far as I know, a fair historic picture." But after confirming that he—not Jacqueline Kennedy—picked Manchester for the assignment, he admits that he regrets his choice and states, according to the dispatch, that "my judgment wasn't very good." He then gives us what remains, as of now, the only available public explanation for the selection of Manchester: "In retrospect, it was pure idiocy."

Even the New York Times' Eliot Fremont-Smith, who feels *The Death of a President* is "an extraordinarily impressive, fascinating and absorbing piece of work," admits that Manchester's "achievement" is "unexpected": "His previous work has consisted of four rather crassly commercial novels and four interesting and rather sensitive, but also somewhat obsequious and slick profile-biographies."

The fact is that nothing in Manchester's earlier work pointed him out as a writer particularly devoted to "historical accuracy" or particularly opposed to "sensationalism." And nothing in *The Death of a President* should have come as a surprise to those who commissioned it and provided the author with the material to write precisely this book, and only this book.

I do not intend to dwell more than absolutely necessary on what the American press has called "the battle of the book," a distasteful episode which, literary or even ethical in form, proved to be—unwittingly, I am sure—a commercial boon: it allowed the publisher to set the first printing at 600,000 copies and will probably permit *The Death of a President* to become one of the biggest money-makers in the history of publishing.

Without the "battle," we perhaps could have told ourselves that while the Kennedy family "hired" the writer, it did not supervise his writing and thus left the final responsibility to the author. Having threatened a lawsuit if Manchester didn't conform to their wishes, and having withdrawn that lawsuit after he did, the Kennedys have now implicitly approved and endorsed the remaining material, published without further objections, i.e., with their consent.

In an unbelievably bumptious and overweening foreword where Manchester presents himself ("I had to immerse myself in this subject until I knew more about it than anyone else") as the final authority on the assassination, though a scholarly, modest one ("In time I myself shall merely become a source for future historians"), William Manchester tells his readers that "among other judgments you will find a partial assessment of the Warren Report."

There is indeed a moment in his book when he complains that Oswald, or rather "his ghost," is "mugging, upstaging, and hogging the limelight with, regrettably, the cooperation of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy." When he adds that this was "unavoidable" because "under the terms of its mandate the Commission had no choice," it seems that his "partial assessment" is going to be very harsh on the Commission's Report. This impression grows even stronger when he concludes that "the Warren Report might be subtitled 'The Life of

Lee Harvey Oswald' " for—and on this point I certainly agree with Manchester—"it is largely a biography of him."

But having said so, the author makes it quite clear that this literary—or let's say philosophical—criticism of the Commission does not imply any disagreement with the Commission's conclusions concerning Oswald's lone guilt. What he really complains about is that "among those who keep faith with the myth that murderers are more fascinating than their victims, Oswald was eventually assigned the star role in his own existentialist extravaganza."

Exactly like the Warren Commission, and perhaps because he also had "no choice" under the terms of his "mandate," historian William Manchester has accepted as fact, from the beginning, that it was Lee Harvey Oswald who killed President Kennedy. In his turgid and inflated prose (there are pages which remind us of the Birch Society's Professor Revilo Oliver who had been carried away, though by hatred, not love for President Kennedy), philosopher William Manchester can then go on explaining that "the barbarous obligato he (Oswald) played that Friday measures, as Tomas de Torquemada and Lazarillo de Tormes measured in other ages, the potentialities of human depravity."

The finishing touch appears in a paragraph which manages to be one of the most crude, uninhibited and shamelessly prejudiced statements ever printed under the cover of "history":

"Lee Harvey Oswald has been repeatedly identified here as the President's slayer. He is never 'alleged' or 'suspected' or 'supposed' or 'surmised';

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he is the culprit. Some, intimidated by the fiction that only judges may don the black cap and condemn, may disapprove. The managing editor of the New York Times apologized to his readers for a headline describing Oswald as the murderer, and four months after the appearance of the Warren Report the Washington Post continued to refer to him as 'the presumed assassin.' But enough is enough. The evidence pointing to his guilt is far more incriminating than that against Booth, let alone Judas Iscariot. He is the right man; there is nothing provisional about it. The mark of Cain was upon him . . ."

So, the question is settled—not, of course, as to Oswald's guilt but as to Manchester's qualification as an investigator. In fact, those who expected from his family-commissioned investigation the "historical accuracy" promised on March 26, 1964, should have known better.

As far as the "facts" of the assassination are concerned, William Manchester follows closely the unproved affirmations of the Warren Commission, adding here and there some elements of pure fiction which go much farther than the

Report. But there are also some startlingly cynical distortions which go far beyond simple fiction.

The Warren Commission, for example, had rejected the testimony of a young man named Arnold Rowland which contradicted its "findings," using its familiar method for unwelcome witnesses, that is, disparaging his credibility. According to Rowland, he had seen a man holding a rifle on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, but in the southwest corner window. In the southeast corner window, where William Manchester as well as the Commission locate "Oswald's sixth-floor perch" (Manchester "sat" in it, to make sure), Rowland saw a different man, whom he described as "an elderly Negro." One understands why the Commission was displeased by such a deposition, especially since Rowland at no moment identified even the man in the southwest corner window as Oswald. Quite the contrary: while describing the rifle "the man" was holding, and the way he held it, Rowland also said "the man" was wearing "a light shirt, a very light-colored shirt, white or a light blue or a color such as that." Oswald, we know, wore a dark brown shirt.

Here, now, is what William Manchester has to say about Rowland's testimony: "A youth named Arnold Rowland . . . saw Oswald silhouetted in the window, holding what appeared to be a high-powered rifle mounted with a telescopic sight. One of Oswald's hands was on the stock and the other was on the barrel; he held the weapon diagonally across his body at port arms, like a Marine on a rifle range . . ." Oswald, Manchester imperturbably even puts him inside Rowland's mind: Rowland, he says, was "assuming that Oswald (*sic*) must be protecting the President." History, thus, had to wait for William Manchester to do the trick the Warren Commission had considered impossible: turning Arnold Rowland into a witness *against* Oswald. But historian Manchester has explained in *Look* magazine how "an individual, responsible only to his own conscience, can overcome obstacles that baffle collective wisdom."

Toward the end of the chapter headed "SS 100 X" (childishly excited by the discovery of the code terms used by the Secret Service and the White House Communications Agency, Manchester

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now uses them as titles for his chapters, and "SS 100 X," according to the "glossary" provided, means "Presidential automobile"), *The Death of a President* offers us this piece of living but strictly fictionalized history: "Howard Brennan, open-mouthed, saw Oswald take deliberate aim for his final shot . . . Crooking his arm, Oswald drew a fresh bead with his Italian rifle. *Ready on the left, ready on the right, all ready on the firing line*, his Marine Corps instructor had shouted on the San Diego range, signaling the appearance of rapid-fire targets. He was ready now. They had also told him to hold his front sight at six o'clock on an imaginary clock dial. It was there, and steady. His target, startlingly clear in the cross hairs of his telescopic sight, was eighty-eight yards away. He squeezed the trigger . . ."

The next chapter is headed "Market" (Dr. George Burkley, according to the "glossary"). The first page is printed in italics, for emphasis, and another paragraph reads like this: "*Lee Oswald, watched by the stupefied Brennan, steps back into the shadows in the deliberate lock step of a Marine marksman retiring from the range . . .*"

Even if one accepts blindly—as William Manchester does—Howard Brennan's so-called "eyewitness testimony" which the Warren Commission at least pretends to have accepted only with qualifications, and which several of its lawyers have now publicly rejected, there is nothing in Brennan's deposition concerning the alleged assassin's "deliberate lock step" in the shadows behind the window. Nor, of course, is there anything in Brennan's or anybody else's deposition concerning the view the alleged assassin had in his telescopic sight and especially the reminiscences he had in his mind from his service with the Marines four years before. Since the Kennedy family's complaints, during the "battle of the book," never mentioned this aspect of *The Death of a President*, one unhappily has to conclude that as far as the assassination itself is concerned, the Manchester book satisfies the Kennedy family's requirements for "historical accuracy."

I have not much to say about the other aspects mentioned, except that, even when the details and descriptions are true, History could have done without them.

At best, it is slick, clever, conventional

mass journalism: "Before breakfast on Thursday, November 21, the President of the United States drew on his back brace, laced his shoes, the left one of which had a quarter-inch medical lift, slipped into the clothes his valet had selected, anchored his conservative tie with a bright PT boat clip, and pocketed a black leather wallet containing \$26 in bills, a gold St. Christopher medal which was clipped to it, and Massachusetts driving permit 053332D . . ."

Mostly, it's cheap literature: "Madness is not a virus. It does not strike all at once. Lee Oswald's disease had been in process all his life . . . It seems clear that the total eclipse of his reason occurred shortly before 9 p.m. that evening, a few minutes after Jacqueline Kennedy had finished her brief Spanish speech in Houston . . ." Or: "In the wake of the funeral every principal figure except Marguerite Oswald was troubled by physical discomfort of some sort. The complaints ranged from Lady Bird's persistent chills to Dave Powers' headaches—violent pains which were confined to the back of his skull, where he had seen the last bullet strike the President . . ."

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Some of it, to be sure, may unwittingly carry valuable information. All of it, however, is ridden by clichés and by some of the most pedestrian platitudes ever heaped upon a reader in the name of "uncanny destiny": "People can absorb just so much, no more . . ." Or: "Despite obvious differences in temperament and style John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson shared one grand passion—politics . . ."

Speaking of Lyndon Johnson and politics, William Manchester seems to score a few points, though there have already been a number of denials and one has to be cautious about anything stated by a "historian" like Manchester. Even here, moreover, he affirms his tendency to mistake History for *la petite histoire*, that is, the anecdotal, gossipy side of it. I am willing to admit, for example, as part of the record the fact that the Democratic party in Texas was "riven by factionalism" and that "Governor John Connally and Senator Ralph Yarborough were stalking one another with shivs." But I do not believe that History requires us to know what Larry O'Brien thought during the funeral of John F. Kennedy, when he did not rec-

ognize Haile Selassie next to General de Gaulle. Historian Manchester will tell us anyhow, in italics: "*If that isn't just like de Gaulle*, he thought, *bringing a midget as his aide*."

There are moments when William Manchester goes beyond slick journalism, goes beyond gossip and third-rate melodrama, goes beyond even the cheapest sort of literature, to offer us gory helpings of the very sensationalism the Kennedys, it seems, hoped to prevent by hiring him:

"The First Lady, in her last act as First Lady, leaned solicitously toward the President. His face was quizzical. She had seen that expression so often, when he was puzzling over a difficult press conference question. Now, in a gesture of infinite grace, he raised his right hand, as though to brush back his tousled chestnut hair. But the motion faltered. The hand fell back limply. He had been reaching for the top of his head. But it wasn't there any more."

The title of the last chapter of *The Death of a President* is "Legend." The chapter serves as epilogue, and the title, therefore, has not been borrowed from the Secret Service code. The following quotes are from the two concluding paragraphs.

First: "Unknown to her, the clothes Mrs. Kennedy wore into the bright mid-day glare of Dallas lie in an attic not far from 3017 N Street." Manchester has found there "two long brown paper cartons thrust between roof rafters," one of them marked "Worn by Jackie, November 22, 1963." Thorough investigator that he is, he has opened it: "Inside, neatly arranged, are the pink wool suit, the black shift, the low-heeled shoes, and, wrapped in a white towel, the stockings . . . There are ugly splotches along the front and hem of the skirt. The handbag's leather and the inside of each shoe are caked dark red. And the stockings are quite odd. Once the same substance streaked them in mad scribbly patterns, but time and the sheerness of the fabric have altered it. The rusty clots have flaked off; they lie in tiny brittle grains on the nap of the towel . . ."

One cannot repress, here, one appalling thought. Before making it the best-selling conclusion of his bestselling *The Death of a President*, the author had to be allowed—if not invited—to visit the "attic not far from 3017 N Street." Out of the 600,000 first buyers of the book,

"There is no better book on the subject. No other book can go as far in clarification of the confusion. The authors have done a service to the whole discussion."

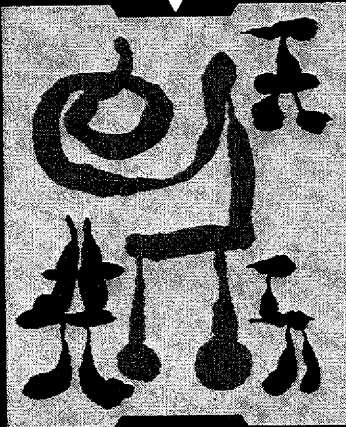
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Léo Sauvage has been American correspondent of *Le Figaro* for the past 18 years, and has written for *The New Leader*, *The Reporter*, and *Commentary*.



THE COMPLETE MEMOIRS OF GEORGE SHERSTON (*Incorporating Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, Sherston's Progress*), by Siegfried Sassoon: *Giniger-Stackpole Books*. 656 pp. \$8.95.

Reviewed by Thomas Flanagan

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of conquest and aggression. . . . On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised upon them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

—From the Statement to his Commanding Officer of Second-Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon, Military Cross, Recommended for Distinguished Service Order, Third Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers, July 1917.

It is obvious that soldiers, even if they have reached the exalted rank of Second-Lieutenant, cannot be permitted to decide

when the time has come for them to discontinue fighting.

—*Army and Navy Gazette*, August 1917

WHEN WAR broke out in 1914, Siegfried Sassoon was 28. Born into a distinguished Sephardic family, he was an enthusiastic cricketer and golfer, an expert and daring rider to hounds, and the author of a small body of wan and derivative Georgian verse. Like other young men of his class and temperament, he accepted military service with the heedless exhilaration of a point-to-point rider, and conducted himself on the front with that nonchalant bravery which in the language of those far-off days was described as "conspicuous gallantry." He earned his Military Cross by rescuing a wounded lance-corporal under heavy fire, but his specialty was one-man bombing raids upon the enemy trenches. By the summer of 1917, however, he had become thoroughly disillusioned. The war, he was now persuaded, had become meaningless slaughter, sustained by politicians and profiteers who refused to consider a negotiated settlement.

When he was invalided home, he determined to do something. In his own faintly self-mocking phrase, he decided upon "independent action." With the assistance of Bertrand Russell ("Tyrell" in these *Memoirs*), he prepared a letter to his depot commander which, they were both certain, would automatically lead to his court-martial. In effect, the specialist in one-man raids had declared a one-man peace. His plan was partly frustrated by a fact of which he had momentarily lost sight—the massive, negative strength of English good manners. The colonel sent a message asking him "most earnestly to dismiss the matter from your mind." Sassoon, gazing fixedly at the orderly room floor, asked: "Hadn't you better put me under arrest at once?" "I'd rather die than do such a thing!" the adjutant cried in horror. Sassoon persisted, however, questions were raised in Commons, and the matter was taken up by the press.

Sassoon had planned a mutiny against the authorities, but being no less a gentleman than his colonel, he had not thought to embarrass them. But this was the effect of his action. A subaltern known in the trenches as "Mad Jack" could scarcely be suspected of cowardice. But neither could an intense dislike of