

# New Questions About What Happened in Dallas

SIX SECONDS IN DALLAS, by Josiah Thompson (Bernard  
Gale Associates, 323 pgs., \$9.95)

ACCESSORIES AFTER THE FACT, by Sylvia Meagher  
(Bobbs-Merrill, 477 pgs., \$9.50)

Reviewed by GEORGE H. HALL

DR. THOMPSON, an able young professor of philosophy at Haverford College, and Mrs. Meagher, a New Yorker who has been working in the field of international health, are "assassination buffs," to borrow a descriptive term from the New Yorker magazine which recently published an article about these and other persons who have immersed themselves in the circumstances of President Kennedy's assassination four years ago.

So, in his book Dr. Thompson thanks Mrs. Meagher for her help, and in her book Mrs. Meagher thanks Dr. Thompson. Which is fair enough, but does suggest a sort of ingrown quality. Both of these studies will appeal particularly to those who have followed rather closely the controversy over the report of the Warren Commission which asserted the probability that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot Mr. Kennedy and wounded Gov. Connally of Texas.

It should be said at the beginning that both Dr. Thompson and Mrs. Meagher are thoroughly familiar with their subject matter. Dr. Thompson spent more than two years interviewing witnesses, collecting photographs and restudying and analyzing the evidence, in addition to having worked with Life magazine as a research specialist. (He condensed his findings, incidentally, in an article in the Dec. 2 issue of the Saturday Evening Post). Mrs. Meagher has compiled a standard subject index to the Warren report, hearing transcripts and exhibits.

Both books deserve to be considered seriously, but neither can be read critically by a person who is not intimately familiar with the published material on the assassination. These are "third generation" books, to use Dr. Thompson's phrase — the Warren report being the first, and studies defending and attacking it being the second. The third generation takes all this material and reaches for new ground. I do not doubt that there will be a fourth, fifth and sixth generation, and so on. Certainly there is enough contradictory, inconsistent and baffling evidence to provide grist for a century of writing.

Both Dr. Thompson and Mrs. Meagher are, of course, highly critical of the Warren Commission findings. Mrs. Meagher advances the view that the "assassins" who killed the President have probably "gone free, undetected." Dr. Thompson believes there were three assassins who fired four bullets from three separate locations. Neither identifies the killers or provides a plausible framework for a conspiracy. This is a major defect in everything that has been written since the Warren report; no one has produced a single piece of positive evidence important enough to overthrow the Warren conclusions. All of the critical studies are based on inadequacies, real and imagined, in the commission report. They throw varying degrees of doubt on the Warren findings; they do not offer, in my opinion, anything better.

Let us take Dr. Thompson's theory of a conspiracy involving three gunmen, and possible get-away accomplices, which he develops persuasively from his "micro-study" of films, ballistics, wounds, eyewitness accounts, and other data. Is it reasonable that men desperate enough to kill a President and clever enough to escape would have fired only four shots? My feeling is that such men would have provided themselves with modern semi-automatic weapons that would have sent the target down in a hall of bullets. Would such men have considered bystanders, or others in the procession? It is not reasonable to think they would.

Instead we find Oswald armed with a cheap imported military-surplus rifle, accurate enough for the purpose when

equipped with a telescope sight, also cheap. It is the sort of weapon that one would imagine would be acquired by a person in Oswald's apparent mental state and financial condition, and bought as a person of this nature would obtain a weapon, by mail. Conspirators, it seems to me, would have done better.

I find in both books an excess of heat at the expense of light; perhaps this is inevitable when a writer becomes so thoroughly saturated with the subject. It is disturbing in the case of a scholar like Dr. Thompson, who weakens an objective case by occasionally revealing his bias. For example:

"If we are going to accept the Warren report as factual then we've wasted a week of time," said Judge Bernard J. Bagert. "It is fraught with hearsay and contradiction," added Judge Matthew S. Braniff. In so speaking, two New Orleans judges denied a defense motion that the Warren report be introduced into evidence in the pretrial hearing of alleged conspirator Clay L. Shaw. Thus, by the spring of 1967, less than three years after the report was published, it had become the butt of public scorn and derision."

It is simply not true that the report has become "the butt of public scorn and derision." Whether it would be admissible as evidence in a court of law has nothing to do with its validity; it did not — could not — purport to be legal evidence. Both judges quoted acted in connection with the weird conspiracy investigations of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, which I cannot bring myself to take seriously — nor do I understand the convolutions of Louisiana politics that may be involved here.

Prof. Thompson's theory is built on what some may regard as questionable eyewitness reports and analyses of happenings that can be explained in ways that do not fit his conceptions, but he has put together an unusual book. It is replete with photographs (some new), sketches, diagrams, tables, maps, mathematical calculations, footnotes and appendices. But in my opinion it does not add up to a real breakthrough, nor does Mrs. Meagher's book.

What both implicitly argue for, it sees the creation of a new commission in line with a proposal editorially endorsed by the Post-Dispatch. This would be a body composed of persons in whom the public has confidence. It would be empowered to receive new evidence and follow new leads. Its purpose would be to follow up the Warren report, so the public would be assured that no possible new evidence would be overlooked, and so that critics and writers such as Dr. Thompson and Mrs. Meagher would have a repository for their findings and conclusions. Such a commission would have an adequate staff; it could issue progress reports from time to time.

Through this means, and possibly also through constructive efforts by individuals for whom the assassination holds an abiding fascination, and perhaps through accident, facts could emerge that would demolish the Warren commission's findings and, much more important, identify and apprehend the criminals, if any. How important would this be? My own feeling is that if it were found to be a conspiracy of madmen it would mean nothing. If it were found, for example, that there was a conspiracy by a fanatic group that wanted to make Lyndon Johnson President for some fell reason, that would be important (though the idea is preposterous). If there were an international conspiracy organized to effect some international goal, that would be important.

But we have as yet no hard new positive facts, after four years, to show for all the effort that has gone into examining the assassination and the critical studies of the examination, even to the third generation. For the present I continue to think that the Warren commission conclusion was a reasonable one by reasonable men.

At the "unbiased" press!