

After the Battle, the Book

*Meagher review of
Manchester book
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On February 4, 1964 the Chairman of the Warren Commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the assassination of the first President Kennedy, remarked to the press that for reasons of national security the full truth might not be known "in our lifetime." The very next day a writer was approached by the Kennedy family on a matter made public subsequently at a press conference, on March 26, 1964, in the office of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. The important announcement which the reporters had been summoned to hear was that the Kennedy family had commissioned William Manchester--author of a highly idealized biography of JFK published in 1962 --to prepare a "complete, accurate" history of the assassination and surrounding events. (It was almost two years before we learned that Manchester was the third or fourth candidate approached, others such as Theodore H. White and Walter Lord having valued their integrity above the honor of serving as the Kennedys' historian.)

The announcement that the Kennedys had commissioned their own book on the assassination appeared to presage a challenge to President Johnson's Warren Report by the family and the political heir of the late assassinated President. This impression was reinforced by an exclusive interview with William Manchester, "who was chosen by Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy to write an authoritative history of the assassination," published in The New York Times on May 9, 1965. The Times quoted Manchester as saying,

All the questions are not answered when the assassin is identified. Actually, Oswald is a minor figure in the story. The assassination was more than a crime, it was a huge thing. Questions must be answered about the transfer of power, about what happened to the establishment of the Federal Government, and to the American people.

It seemed from the interview that Manchester might be hinting that, far from a lone assassin ("a minor figure in the story"), there had been a conspiracy or even an attempted seizure of the Government in Dallas on November 22nd.

The Sudden Self-Assertion of a Hired Writer

Only when "the battle of the book" erupted in November 1966 did it become known that Manchester completely endorsed the Warren Commission's verdict against Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin. The battle was joined when Manchester, who had servilely submitted to alterations in his manuscript by teams of Kennedy screeners, suddenly offered resistance to further censoring. The Kennedys, seeking to impose new changes and deletions, not unnaturally were outraged when their previously tractable commissioned historian ~~manipulatively~~ rebuffed attempts to make additional ~~more~~ alterations, when he had ~~long before~~ ^{already} surrendered *in letter and spirit* ~~the principle~~ of the independence of his work. They hauled him and his publishers into court, and the headlines raged for some three months with accounts of recriminations and insults exchanged by the parties.

The news media promptly and gleefully reported every acrimonious remark (and there were many) and every controversial passage from the manuscript that could be ferreted out. Nevertheless, it never became entirely clear what the stakes were. Was it a struggle about material unflattering to the Kennedys? Or was it really a controversy about Manchester's ugly portrayal of LBJ? If the latter, did the Kennedys wish to disassociate themselves from an attack on LBJ? Or did they merely wish to make certain that the full ugliness of the portrait would not be overlooked even by those who did not read Manchester's book?

Manchester, who had a history of incontinence in manifesting blind adoration of JFK and his widow, now let fly with highly indiscreet accounts of what Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy had said on this or that occasion. The episodes he recounted were unpleasant commentaries on the arrogance, duplicity, and shabbiness of behavior of all the principals. As one reviewer of Manchester's book has astutely suggested, the commissioned writer's unexpected show of resistance to the revered Family coincided with Look's agreement to pay him \$665,000 for serialization rights. The ^{hireling} ~~appendage~~ now demanded equal rights, ^{with his masters,} with that firm ^{self-} righteousness that ^{big money} ~~negative capital~~ often seems to generate in Americans who acquire ^{it.} ~~affluence.~~

The Integrity of the Book

Ultimately the Kennedys and Manchester (and his publishers) reached an out-of-court settlement, followed by the publication of extensive excerpts from The Death of a President in Look. Culminating this glutting flow of gossip, disclosure, and scandal, the release of the book by Harper and Row on April 7, 1967 found all its titillating secrets prematurely stale. A reading of the full text can only be anticlimatic.

Deprived of its value as sensation, the book is leaden and frightfully dull, for the most part. The style is sophomoric and pretentious. Historical perspective is totally lacking, for Manchester's vision never rises above that of a public relations consultant. The book is soaked in ~~sentimentality~~ ^{sentimentality} and obsessed with trivia. In short, Manchester's book is not only hopelessly compromised as a work of managed history--it is mediocre in its vision, style, and structure. He is no more endowed intellectually and morally to write the history of the assassination than Louella Parsons to write of the decline and fall of the Roman empire.

Manchester, who acknowledges that he submitted to a certain amount of censorship, and that he voluntarily scrapped two hundred pages of his manuscript for reasons unrelated to historical accuracy, nevertheless has the audacity to advertise his work as a "complete, accurate" history, the integrity of which stands intact. Surely it is not necessary to argue the fanciful nature of ~~such a claim~~ this claim, when Manchester himself ^{in effect} has conceded that the book is hopelessly compromised.

It comes as an added surprise that he has seen fit not to satisfy a fundamental obligation of any researcher: the documentation of asserted fact. Manchester explains,

I went to the mat with the issue of annotation. I arose with a painful verdict: no page-by-page footnotes, other than those necessary to the immediate sense of a passage. It hurt because I knew that every statement, every fact, every quotation in my manuscript could be followed by a citation.

But this is no less arrogant and specious ^{than} Manchester's claim ^{of} integrity. ^{that his book is a work of}
Before the book was even released, serious errors and discrepancies ^{came to light} with respect to his account of the flight of Air Force One from Dallas to Washington. ^{came to light} A reporter who had been present on the flight repudiated Manchester's version of the Bible which had supposedly figured in Johnson's taking of the oath of office; and a leading news magazine published photographs which gave the lie to Manchester's statement that not one of Kennedy's loyal lieutenants was present at the swearing-in. Confronted by photographic evidence that Kenneth O'Donnell was present, Manchester ~~was~~ retorted, "Photographs can lie." (Meet the Press, NBC Television, February 12, 1967)

Annihilation of "The Accused"

But it never occurs to Manchester that photographs produced as evidence against Lee Harvey Oswald also can lie, for--and here is what indicts his book as wholly fraudulent and absurd--he swallows whole the discredited Warren Report thesis of a lone assassin. He proceeds to demand that Oswald must even be stripped of his legal entitlement (since he did not have the benefit of a legal trial and was not found guilty by any court of law) to presumed innocence. For Manchester, a man is not innocent until such time as he is pronounced guilty by a jury of his peers; and Oswald may not be termed "the accused assassin" or "the alleged assassin." From the height of his ignorance, hysteria, and effrontery, Manchester insists that Oswald is the assassin, and to hell with the legal niceties. On whose authority are we to brand Oswald the assassin? On the word of a "historian" who is neither omniscient nor ^{even} as perceptive as that large segment of the American public which does not believe the Warren Report?

This is not to say that Manchester's attitude toward the Warren Commission is one of pure admiration. He has rather a patronizing and disparaging view, at times. In Look of April 4, 1967 (page 64 column 2), Manchester says superciliously that Chief Justice Warren invited him to read a first draft of the Report "and declare, as a friend of the ~~(KENNEDY)~~ family, that its findings were acceptable to the Kennedys in every respect." He explains with self-satisfaction that he demurred, because he felt it would be improper.

Yes, it was a highly improper request. Was the Chief Justice ready to comply if the Kennedys demanded changes or deletions? Was the "truth" of the Warren Report no less subject to Kennedy censorship than the "history" of Manchester's book? And is Manchester incapable of seeing the analogy between the impropriety of Warren's proposition and that to which he submitted his own manuscript?

Although Manchester disdains the improper suggestion of the Chief Justice, and ^{suggests} ~~the fact~~ that the Warren Commission glossed over the sins of the Dallas Police, the FBI, and the Secret Service (at last one can agree ~~mm~~ with him on something), he has no criticism of the Commission's case against Oswald. The Death of a President was completed in March 1966, but it includes an epilogue written subsequent to Jack Ruby's death on January 3, 1967. By that time, the muted and inconspicuous dissent by a few critics ~~from the Warren Commission~~ had swelled into an ominous national controversy about the validity of the Warren Report, with widespread erosion of confidence in its findings.

Manchester virtually ignores the controversy and the open repudiation of the Warren Report by numerous ^{institutions, publications, and} ~~personalities~~---cardinals and judges, pundits and politicians, as well as the original few who found the Report malodorous ~~and by various institutions and publications.~~ Like the Chief Justice and the members of the Commission, Manchester does not deign to "dignify" the criticism by confronting, much less answering, explicit charges against the Warren Report.

Never having interviewed or psychoanalyzed Oswald, Manchester does not shrink from flat assertions about Oswald's emotions and alleged psychopathic condition, in the same manner as he relates the emotions and actions presumably confided in him by persons he did interview. He specifies the exact moment when Oswald felt desperate, when he felt rejected as a husband and a male, when he "went mad," when he fired a last shot--even that he slept soundly in his jail cell after the assassination. Here speaks a charlatan, not a historian. He exceeds even the Warren Commission in readiness to wrest incriminating "fact" from inimical evidence, in doing violence to logic, in unconscionable and malicious departure from objectivity and simple fairness. What are Manchester's forensic qualifications, that he ventures to pinpoint from vague, negative, or non-existent data the very instant at which

Oswald "went mad"? Decorum should have compelled Manchester to be more discreet than to diagnose Oswald as paranoid, or to charge (as he did in his article in Look of April 4, 1967) that Robert Kennedy acted in a completely irrational manner during the campaign to ~~MM~~ suppress the book, or parts of it: after all, Manchester is the only one of the three who is known to have been under psychiatric treatment.

He takes cognizance of the ~~discrediting of~~ ^{disrepute into which} the Warren Report, ^{has fallen} only once, indirectly, in a footnote. Defending the autopsy finding that a bullet struck Kennedy in the back of the neck (despite a large body of evidence suggesting that the wound was actually several inches below that alleged point of entry), Manchester says blandly that the issue is resolved by the autopsy x-rays and photographs. Did he see those x-rays and photographs? No; but he "discussed them with three men who examined them before they were placed under seal." Manchester does not name the three men, but assures us that they had "special professional qualifications." Each was a stranger to the other two; but they all said that the x-rays showed no entry wound below the shoulder and that the photographs revealed that the wound was in the neck.

Apparently we are asked to take on faith not only Manchester's word for this or that, sans annotation, but also the pronouncements of three anonymous experts with whom Manchester conversed on an unspecified date.

The historical record ~~may~~ ^{must} not rest on the unsupported word of the historian, especially when he is indentured to interested parties, and when he is demonstrably careless and unreliable on questions of simple fact.

For example, Manchester persistently refers to Charles Brehm, an eyewitness to the assassination, as "Charles Brend." He says that the seven-man Secret Service office in Dallas is a five-man office. He asserts that FBI agent James Hosty learned on November 4, 1963 that Oswald worked at the Depository, when Hosty himself testified (as did Ruth Paine) that he learned this on November 1st.

No, I am not about to take Manchester's word for anything that depends on ^{his} conscientious scholarship or ^{his reasoned} ~~objective~~ judgment. It is rather silly for him to excoriate the ~~Dallas~~ coroner who tried to prevent the illegal removal of the President's body from ^{Dallas} ~~proper jurisdiction~~, on the ground that the doctor ^{should} "should have realized that an assassination without a scrupulous post-mortem was unthinkable." Before the book was issued, or its epilogue written, Dr. Thornton Boswell, one of the Bethesda autopsy surgeons, ^{had} admitted that he had made an unfortunate diagram error during the autopsy, and that he would have been more careful if he had realized at the time that the diagram would become a part of the public record. It is scarcely becoming to Manchester to ridicule as "unthinkable" a lack of scrupulousness to which is not only quite "thinkable" but has been admitted by the perpetrator.

All of Manchester's pronouncements about the criminal evidence in the assassination and about Oswald's guilt must be discarded on grounds of his irresponsible, uninformed, and uncritical adherence to the Warren Report. Anyone who has studied the evidence embodied in the official record will find Manchester's portrait of Oswald so recklessly wide of the mark, so deformed by a paroxysm of ~~Manchester's~~ rage and venom, that it verges on sheer fictionalization. Indeed, it illuminates only the artist, who has substituted a creature of his own disturbed imagination for the real human being who emerges, incompletely and mysteriously, in the testimony and documents published by the Warren Commission.

Heroes, Goddesses, and Betes-Noire

Manchester's Oswald is a spurious portrait. How, then, is it possible to accept his portraits of Jacqueline Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, or even John F. Kennedy? Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy emerge ~~manipulated~~ ^{as} virtually ~~we~~ pure and perfect--as of March 1966. We know already that later in the year Manchester added a few touches that made his portraits

more human in terms of fallibility, and perhaps a little monstrous. Which Mrs. Kennedy, which RFK, is to be regarded as the authentic portrait?

Lyndon Baines Johnson is another major character-portrayal by the creative Manchester. ~~of which~~ It can indeed ^{be} said that ^{LBJ} ~~he~~ is damned with faint praise. Manchester does not editorialize about LBJ except for some ~~consideration~~ lip-service to his occasional virtues and a half-hearted defense of ^{the manner of} his assumption of the powers of the Presidency in an hour of catastrophe and consternation. But by no means does the book launch the calculated attack on Johnson which seemed to be ~~the better~~ ^{cause} of the Battle of the book. Whether the published innocuous portrait of LBJ coincides with, or is different from, the original is problematical. Manchester may have toned down his treatment of LBJ at one or another stage of submitting to Kennedy censorship but, in any case, if we read between the lines of the ~~unenthusiastically respectful~~ LBJ projected in the book, he still emerges as ruthless, vulgar, oily, hypocritical, monstrously vain, arbitrary, cruel, and lusting for power. One wonders --is Manchester trying to tell us something? Is he trying to hint that Johnson was the prime mover of events in Dallas? Or that the Kennedy lieutenants (who proclaimed on the flight back to Washington that for them the only President on board the plane was in a casket) thought LBJ was implicated? Certainly the extreme bitterness they manifested, as Manchester describes the flight, legitimizes (even compels) such a speculation.

When he turns to the city of Dallas, Manchester has no inclination to soft-pedal or dilute ^{its dangerous and frightening mood,} ~~the atmosphere of frightening~~ ~~fantasy~~ as did the Warren Commission. He lets his disgust pour out, for the uncontrolled ^{rightists} ultra- and their maniacal political doctrines, and their affinity to Hitler's storm troopers. Yet he does not see this ^{primarily} ~~as much~~ as the product of

an unrestrained cold war, or a calculated demonology invented and promoted by powerful forces working toward specific ends--he sees it ^{mainly} ~~primarily~~ as an evil directed against his personal Hero, the already-legendary JFK, all but deified through the clever application of public relations techniques and the genuine nostalgia of admirers who loathe his successor. Dallas hated Kennedy with a murderous energy, before and after his death. To Manchester, that is an ultimate personal affront. Yet he believes, and wants us to believe, that Oswald, ^a ~~one~~ man totally antithetical to the climate of Dallas, killed ^{another} ~~the other~~ man ~~whom~~ whom the Dallas ultras cursed and wanted to tear limb from limb.

For Manchester, the assassination is essentially a personal tragedy. He sees himself, as well as the murdered President, as a martyr. ~~one~~ His pity for himself is almost as great as his pity for the victim and the bereaved. The political setting of the crime, the forces at work in

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~~should do much to console him.~~

→ this country which led inexorably to the ~~same~~ crime and the subsequent murders, these have all but escaped Manchester's child-like preoccupations. How can anyone understand the assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963, if he does not give thought also to the assassination in Saigon on November 1, 1963? If he does not see any connection between the two events, or between those events and the present carnage in Vietnam? When we progress from the murder of a head of a country to the murder of a country, the historian should at least ponder the possibility of a connection.

When the real history of the assassination is written, it will perhaps become apparent even to Manchester that it was not a random lunatic individual act but a logical piece in a large mosaic that is not yet complete. The Death of a President is not that history. It is an anachronism already, grandiose but hollow, and essentially a personal catharsis. One hardly can wait to

be rid of the taste of it.

The two million dollars or more that Manchester will earn from this colossus of a book should do a lot to console him for his suffering in writing it and his ordeal with formidable tormenters who tried to obstruct its publication. For his bad, careless, and untrue book, he will become a very wealthy man. No one will denounce him as a "scavenger," since he preaches the gospel of the lone assassin according to Warren--and that buys immunity. With two million in the bank, Manchester will not need to fret about the scorn with which his book is being received in reviews from orthodox spokesmen for the academic and literary Establishments. He will not even need to fret about the displeasure he has incurred from this President, or the next.

In America, it does profit a man to lose his soul.

Meagher

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