

Meagher draft
book-review

MACCHESTER

I had not anticipated the occasion of kind words for the Warren Report, which I have criticized on these pages. Let me then hasten to say that a reading of William Manchester's book, The Death of a President, elevates one's opinion of the prose style of the earlier work. The Report, which has been called turgid and ponderous, has at least the solemnity appropriate to the events in Dallas. Manchester's style ~~is completely lacking in~~ ^{lacks grandeur} ~~quality~~ and verges on the vulgar when ~~it is~~ not merely mediocre. It is as though Louella Parsons had taken it into her head to become a chronicler of historical tragedy; however heroic her attempt to rise to an awesome theme, and however sensitive her editor, the product would still betray the ^{essential and vision} characteristics of a Hollywood gossip column.

Mr. Manchester's writing is rich in irritants and ~~incongruous~~ ^{incongruous} phrases.

At times he succumbs ~~momentarily~~ ^{inventions} to smart-alec ~~improvisations~~ of the kind usually ^{found in} Time magazine ~~variety~~: "administrative trivia" becomes "administrivia;"

General Godfrey McHugh is referred to repeatedly (by Manchester and not in quoted remarks of others) by his nickname "God;" imagine the jolt

when you read that God reached for a cup of coffee, or some such ~~homely~~ ^{folksiness,}

~~at all~~ until your ~~member~~ remember that the author means McHugh. Manchester's

fascination with the trivial is pervasive; it is not enough to tell the reader that John Smith was lunching in a Washington restaurant, at the moment of the shots on Dealey Plaza, ~~he was~~ lunching in a seafood restaurant which is, moreover, not an inexpensive seafood restaurant but a "cheap seafood restaurant." As the little boy dutifully wrote to his aunt to thank her for a book on turtles, it gives more information on the tortoise than I care to have.

But style is the least of Manchester's sins. His book fails on more important ^{levels} ~~moments~~. Even its shock value as sheer gossip, in which the entire American public can vicariously ^{look} see through the keyhole ~~the~~ at the last intimate hour which the murdered President and his wife shared in a hotel room in Fort Worth, and many other such ^{private} vignettes, has been greatly depleted by the eruption of publicity which preceded the book. The most titillating secrets have already been ventilated; the public is glutted not alone with the revelations found in the book, but with those excised by the censors only to appear ^{in the papers} under banner headlines. It is anticlimatic to read on the pages of Manchester's book that President Kennedy said to his wife before the fatal trip, "show these Texans what good taste really is," when we know from the newspapers that he really said, "show

these Texas broads....".

Petty though this deletion may be, it does bring us to the central *issue*, ~~question~~ on which Manchester's book either stands as authentic history or falls, like the Warren Report before it, as an adulterated and fraudulent account of events. The central question is whether the book is, as it claims to be, a "complete, accurate account of the tragic and historic events in Texas and Washington." A collateral question, the answer to which is self-evident, is whether any work of history commissioned by interested parties can make any claim to legitimacy as ~~injection~~ an objective factual record. It is ~~clearly~~ ^{amply} demonstrated, from the recent scandal in the press and the courts ~~in~~ ^{when} the ~~all-powerful~~ Kennedys turned upon their hired ~~man~~ historian to compel his total submission, ~~to their deputized voice,~~ that Manchester's book has been mutilated by a team of censors. However much he blusters and insists that his book is impartial and its integrity inviolate, he does admit that he deleted passages thought to be damaging or distressing to Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy. He justifies those deletions with the excuse that "these were not matters of historical importance; they were personal observations." ^{1/}

1/ "Meet The Press," NBC Television, February 12, 1967.

Asked at what point something that might hurt Mrs. Kennedy would be historically important, Manchester then admits that that would be "a very difficult line to draw." And that is the crux of the matter.

The Death of a President is hopelessly compromised by its lack of independence, commission^{ed} and censored as it was by agents for the Kennedy family, interested parties who are now obsessed with ~~plans for~~ ^{strategies and ambitions for the} ~~their~~ political future and everything those plans imply. Because they have been arrogant and inept in their machinations, it is not clear whether they hauled Manchester into court in a desperate effort to delete, or to call attention to, ^{unsympathetic} ~~an average~~ portrait of Lyndon B. Johnson. It hardly matters. The fact of manipulation is indisputable.

When the book already staggers under the handicap of ^{being} ~~intentionally~~ ^{a commissioned} ~~work~~ ^{dignity}, the author might have made an attempt to salvage what he could by meticulous research and documentation. Here, too, he failed.

Manchester has relieved himself of the obligation to document his facts, except in ^a ~~the~~ most general and unsatisfactory way. Under "Sources," a section which precedes the index, Manchester lists his interviews with ^{various} ~~a long list of~~ persons, giving the data or dates of his interviews with each individual and brief descriptive data ("Howard L. Brennan...Pipefitter ...23.9.64"). He says that these interviews constitute one of two chief

sources of fact behind the book. The other source consists of "the notes of participants, written or taped at the time of these events or soon thereafter." He says further that he explored carefully but seldom relied upon or utilized the Warren Commission's 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits. But since Manchester does not footnote specific items, we are left to conjecture which of his sources furnished the information. In some instances, it is easy enough to make an educated guess; in others, not at all easy. Apparently Manchester, unabashed at having accepted a commission ^{which has been} declined by at least two other historians as compromising or unethical, has the audacity to require his readers to take on faith that which he ~~is able to~~ ^{and which any} document, ~~as a minimum~~ serious researcher regards as obligatory and indispensable. Manchester explains: "I went to the mat with the issue of ~~annotation~~ annotation. I arose with a painful verdict: no page-by-page footnotes, other than those necessary to the immediate sense of ~~the~~ a passage. It hurt because I knew that every statement, every fact, every quotation in my manuscript could be followed by a citation." Then, in his largesse, Manchester confides that he is considering depositing in the Kennedy Library the volumes of transcribed interviews and the portfolios of documents on which he relied, for the edification of qualified scholars after the death of all direct

descendants of the murdered President who were living at the time of the assassination. Under those conditions, it appears that no critic of his book will survive long enough to check his sources.

Indeed, the inaccuracies in this "history" began to emerge even before the book was released, ~~on the basis of the~~ⁱⁿ excerpts published in Look. Photographs were unveiled to give the lie to Manchester's assertion that no one of the loyal lieutenants to the murdered President was present at the swearing-in of President Johnson. They showed that Ken O'Donnell was present. Caught in the inaccuracy, Manchester's retort was, "Photographs can lie."^{1/} But only those photographs which incriminate his scholarship. Nowhere in the book does the author betray any ~~suspicion~~^{awareness} that ~~other~~^{other} photographs (presented as evidence by critics of the Warren Report to be suspect, against Oswald and considered ^{on} internal or circumstantial grounds) ~~can~~ also lie.

See, for example, how Manchester disposes of the scandalous problem of the autopsy photographs and X-rays which have been excluded from the Commission's evidence and suppressed even from a U.S. Congressman.

^{1/} Ibid.

In a footnote (one of those "necessary to the immediate sense of a passage," on pages 156-157 of the book), Manchester defends his statement that a bullet had entered the back of President Kennedy's neck (as opposed to entry several inches below the neck, as much evidence suggests) on the claim that "the issue is resolved by the X-rays and photographs...the author has discussed it (the photographic and X-ray material suppressed "until 1971") with three men who examined it before it was placed under seal. All three carried special professional qualifications. Each was a stranger to the other two. Nevertheless their accounts were identical. The X-rays show no entry wound 'below the shoulder'...the photographs... reveal that the wound was in the neck."

Now we are supposed to take on faith not only Manchester's word for this or that, but the pronouncements of three unnamed experts with whom Manchester conversed! This asks a lot more faith than a commissioned historian should have the cheek to solicit.

Other of Manchester's assertions are verifiable, ^{and often} ~~but~~ they are not accurate. He refers (page 32) to the "five-man Secret Service office" in Dallas. In fact, it is a seven-man office consisting of the agent-in-charge and six agents working under him. ^{1/}

1/ Warren Commission Hearings, 13 H 57 (Forrest V. Sorrels).

He says (also on page 32) that FBI agent James P. Hosty, Jr., had known since November 4, 1963 that Oswald was employed at the Book Depository. Hosty, in actuality, learned this from Ruth Paine on November 1, 1963.^{1/}

And he gives the precise moment at which Lee Harvey Oswald, seemingly intent on a television movie, "in fact...was going mad." The Warren Commission, which did give us footnotes (although they did not always fulfill the function of a reference) and shared with Manchester a certain disrespect for fact, never went so far as to certify Oswald as insane.

Where, one wonders, does Manchester get such temerity? One reads in the press that he himself has suffered episodes of emotional disturbance. For this, ~~which~~ ^{But one should also} one must have compassion, ~~while~~ [^] recalling that a patient is not ex officio qualified to serve as a diagnostician.

The Death of a President, compromised from the outset by the terms under which it was conceived, labors under the dead weight of the author's caprice, carelessness, and irresponsibility. Manchester has

^{1/} Ibid., 4 H 450 (James P. Hosty, Jr.).

not only incorporated the discredited findings of the Warren Report but gone beyond them, to flog Oswald's carcass with a savage satisfaction and fury which I leave to the Freudians to interpret. He has managed to reduce an epic event of world significance to ^{an incident} ~~an happening~~ which took place ~~in the same circumstances~~ ^{against} a background of ~~an~~ tuna fish sandwiches, visits to a hairdressing salon, and the furnishings of hotel suites. He has given us bric-a-brac in place of a monument, and has managed to be rather a bore about the whole business. But we are in America, and no one should be surprised if The Death of a President outsells Gone With The Wind or even the Bible, and so enriches Manchester that he can afford to thumb his nose at his critics and patrons alike, even at the ~~future~~ President-to-be. In America, it does profit a man to lose his soul.