

THE DAY KENNEDY WAS SHOT. By Jim Bishop. Funk & Wagnalls. 713 pp. \$7.95.

By asking William Manchester to write the definitive history of the assassination of President Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy had hoped to discourage Jim Bishop — author of *The Day Christ Died*, et cetera — from writing a book he planned to entitle *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*. Even though Mrs. Kennedy pointedly informed Bishop that she had “hired Manchester . . . to protect President Kennedy and the truth” and that persons involved in the tragedy had been specifically asked not to discuss the assassination with any writer other than the chosen author, Bishop went ahead and wrote his book. And it is, in my opinion, a far more accurate and straightforward account than the authorized version.

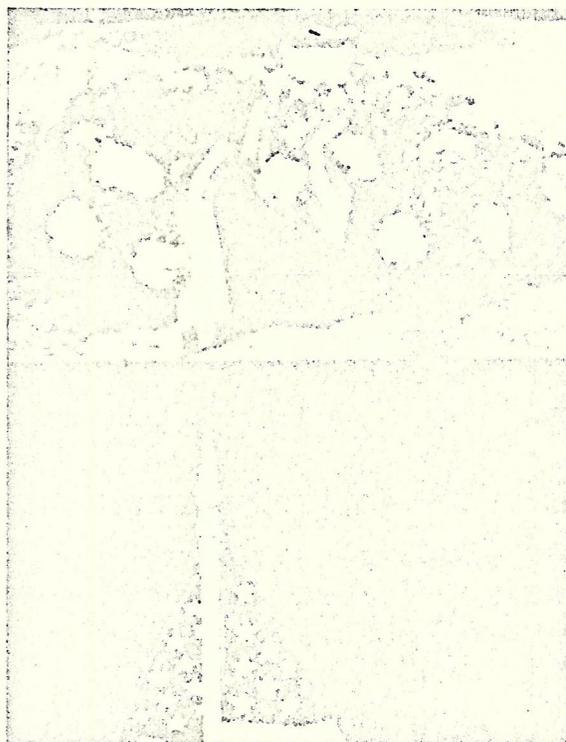
To give significance to the plethora of data he had collected, Manchester attempted to rework it into a myth for our time — a monumental struggle for power between the Kennedy and Johnson forces which ends, after a good deal of thanatopsis pageantry, with the transfiguration of the murdered President into a legendary hero who takes his place alongside King Arthur, Jeanne d'Arc, Roland and Balder the Beautiful. Sometimes data had to be altered to make it conform to the mythic structure; to cite only one of many examples, Manchester describes a dramatic boycott by Kennedy aides of Johnson's swearing-in despite the fact that official photographs show them to be present at the ceremony. At least a dozen major actors in the drama — including J. Edgar Hoover, Lawrence O'Brien, Kenneth O'Donnell, Richard Goodwin, General McHugh and Clifton, Robert McNamara, Mayor Earle Cabell and Governor John Connally — protested that Manchester's description of events, which they were directly involved in, was erroneous. Moreover, as Walter Lippmann pointed out in his perceptive review of the book, the mistakes always followed the same pattern: they tended to be fictitious which heightened the drama. The authorized book turned out to be something less than a definitive history of the event.

Rather than attempting to integrate the minutiae surrounding the assassination into dramatic themes, Bishop, on the other hand, structures the data chronologically: each of the eighteen chapters represents an hour in the day that Kennedy died. Bishop's primary source was the twenty-six volumes of evidence and testimony published by the Warren Commission which, with the help of his wife and two daughters, he patiently cut up and pasted in eighteen loose-leaf notebooks —

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## The assassination of J. F. K. as non-fiction

By Edward Jay Epstein



one for each of the hours of the day. He filled in the notebooks with what interviews he could obtain in the face of the Kennedy embargo, and the other material he assiduously collected. The task took two years. The final product is a remarkably clear hour-by-hour description of the events, or at least those that are reported by the Warren Commission.

The underlying assumption of the book is that the Warren Commission's investigation was sufficiently thorough to assure that all the relevant evidence had been uncovered. I for one cannot share Bishop's confidence in the Commission's work: I found its investigation had been severely constrained both by bureaucratic pressures exerted from within and by limits of time imposed from without and, at certain crucial points, was little more than an exercise in the clarification of superficial evidence. Consider, for example, the

eight-millimeter film taken by an amateur photographer which shows the fatal shot exploding the President's head. Since the Warren Commission had evidence that some of the shots were fired from behind the President, it assumed this shot also was fired from the rear. No attempt was made by the Commission to determine, by use of the film, the direction from which the shot came. Recently Josiah Thompson Jr. analyzed this micro-second of film in great detail, and argues in his book, *Six Seconds in Dallas*, that the film reveals that the President's head moved backward when it was struck by the bullet and that therefore this shot must have been fired from in front of the President rather than from behind him. One need not accept this argument — in fact, Stephen White in his book *Should We Now Believe the Warren Report?*, which is perhaps the most intelligent defense of the Report's conclusions to date, shows that a number of Thompson's assumptions are at least questionable — but it suggests that there are crucial questions about the evidence that were not satisfactorily resolved by the Commission.

Furthermore, the X-ray and autopsy photographs, which are the most basic evidence in the case, remain sequestered and unexamined. After the autopsy was performed in Bethesda on the evening of November 22, the photographs were turned over to a representative of the Kennedy family. The Warren Commission for "reasons of taste" decided not to examine this evidence, and it was only after the controversy over the Warren Report became heated in 1966 that the Kennedy family deposited the evidence in the National Archives under the condition that it not be examined for five years by any individual and thereafter only by persons properly qualified to evaluate such medical evidence. Not only critics of the Warren Commission, but also some leading forensic pathologists have raised serious questions about the validity of the autopsy findings. One of them, Dr. Cyril Wecht, recently wrote: "The official autopsy report contains two omissions which cast a shadow over the whole proceeding." The confusion over the autopsy will probably continue until the photographs are properly analyzed by medical experts, and this may not be before 1971. Until then, questions will remain about the wounds, and the bullets, and the direction from which they came.

Although Bishop provides no answers to these vexing questions, he succeeds in what he set out to do — to reconstruct the tragedy of November 22 from the known facts. The narrative is clear, fast-paced, and extremely readable (in other words, it is unhampered by analysis, evaluation of evidence, or tentative constructions). Admirers of Bishop's previous books will no doubt find this one a moving and complete rendition of a momentous event. Unfortunately, reality has a more contingent nature.

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