

An arsenal of myths fired by a nonentity

DOUBTS and rumours persist about the identity of the killer — or killers — of President John F. Kennedy.

Books on the subject have multiplied and a rash of documentaries and discussion programmes has broken out on television.

That this should happen almost 15 years after the assassination in Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, needs some explanation.

A new lease of life was given to this Kennedy industry by the Freedom of Information Act in the United States, whereby any citizen can require agencies of the federal government to supply information — including documents — provided these are not on classified lists affecting national security.

Since it is difficult to argue that events surrounding the assassination of a President more than a decade ago constitute "national security", writers and journalists in the United States have had a rich harvest of documents from all sorts of archives in Washington D.C., and beyond. The results are now appearing in full spate.

The central question continues to be whether the Commission of Inquiry appointed by Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, arrived at the truth when it concluded that Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, alone, unaided, and with no other persons involved, at home or overseas. An assassination — especially of a head of state and even more especially, of so alluring and youthful a President as John F. Kennedy — always attracts conspiracy theories.

Such theories can go all the way from the notion of a local political conspiracy, to one involving collusion by local, or State police, to grander theories involving the CIA, the FBI, and beyond that to the KGB in Moscow, or Castro's agents operating in the United States.

Untidy report

One book which appeared in 1976, by a former London solicitor, Michael Eldowes, argued that when Lee Harvey Oswald defected to Russia in 1959, he was killed by the KGB, then a substitute resembling Oswald was trained, and returned to the United States (complete with Russian bride, Marina "Oswald") for counter-intelligence activities.

The author did not explain the



President John F. Kennedy: alluring, youthful head of state whose death was probably bound to generate more conspiracy theories than most.



Lee Harvey Oswald, a picture said to have been taken before the assassination with the rifle he was to use.

astounding ability of the Russians to manufacture a twin for Oswald, complete with Texas drawl, who could fool even Oswald's mother, his elder brother, and other relatives who had known Lee Oswald since birth. But at least it illustrated the attraction of conspiracy theories for those looking for them.

That said, there are certainly some untidy features of the official Report of the Warren Commission into the assassination of President Kennedy, despite the impressive array of Senators, Congressmen, and legal counsel assembled to sift the evidence presented to it under its chairman, Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. As it stands, the Report — first published in 1964 — reads like a brief for the prosecution against the dead Lee Harvey Oswald, rather than a pursuit of the truth. No alternative explanation other than the "lone assassin" theory was considered with any seriousness.

Throughout the Warren Report there is a conscious attempt not to inquire into any leads that could compromise that single explanation. Yet experienced lawyers with no particular axes to grind, and very distinguished scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, have been very critical of the handling of the evidence

presented to the Warren Commission, even the handling of witnesses who came before it.

The main conclusion of these critics has been that the Warren Commission found it expedient, for either reasons of state or more simply, to close a case which stretched in a hundred different directions, to find Oswald guilty as a solitary assassin. And since he was not alive to testify to any alternative explanation, the official book was closed on the Kennedy assassination.

But some questions persisted. Oswald must have had a motive. What was it?

There was plenty of evidence that he admired Kennedy, that he wished the President and his family no ill, despite Oswald's openly expressed Marxist views.

Perhaps he was capable of shooting some of the extreme Right-wing politicians who poisoned the political debate in Texas — the Birchites and racists who flourished in Dallas among the rich oil tycoons and elsewhere among the poor whites. But why Kennedy, who did not belong to those factions? Again, apart from the "Why" there was the "How?"

How was it that a confessed Marxist — known to the FBI, under continuous surveillance by that Agency, and also by the Secret Service, could install himself in view of hundreds of onlookers at an

open window directly above the President's motorcade with every member of the Dallas police force on special alert and the President's bodyguard scanning every building above and about the motorcade. How could it happen?

Beyond these questions, there lies the continuing enigma of Lee Harvey Oswald — whether he killed the President, if so how, and why? Two books appearing this week seek answers to these questions.* One deals primarily with Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union in 1959, his activities there until his return to the United States in 1962, and his life up to the day of the assassination. The other concentrates on the courtship and marriage of Lee Oswald and his Russian bride, Marina Prusakova.

The "Legend" which Edward Jay Epstein seeks to uncover is the secret world of Lee Oswald, and, in particular, Oswald's relations with the intelligence services of three nations — the United States, Soviet Russia, and Cuba. Each of those agencies had a close interest in Oswald's activities between 1959 to 1963. The real interest of Epstein's book is not so much in any attempt he makes to unravel the secrets of Oswald's mind, and his political convictions. On both those counts it seems to fail to add anything new or substantial to the existing accounts. The interest lies rather in the author's ability to take his readers into the intricate, endlessly convoluted world of espionage and counter-espionage.

Fans of John le Carré and his thriller "The Spy Who Came In From the Cold" will find in Epstein's book that truth is just as strange as fiction — sometimes stranger. For instance, when a leading Russian official in the Soviet delegation at the Geneva disarmament talks defected to the United States early in 1964 — a matter of weeks after the Kennedy assassination — was he a genuine defector, or was he planted by the KGB as a "disinformation" expert, designed to draw attention away from the possible fact that Oswald had

been recruited as a Soviet spy?

The permutations of form of psychological cold-warfare are endless, and the merits of Epstein's book are that he has gone into the world of espionage and counter-espionage with great thoroughness. So much so, in fact, that he becomes immersed in wider questions and all but forgets the title of his book.

Priscilla Johnson McMillan is an experienced American journalist and

author who has specialised in Russian affairs for many years now. She is fluent in Russian, and spent three years in the Soviet Union during the time when Oswald defected. She has spent the last 13 years researching her book "Marina and Lee" and she had the immense advantage of gaining the confidence of Marina Oswald in the years that followed the death of Lee Oswald and then the publication of the Warren Commission's Report in 1964.

Here, the author is concerned to take us into the stormy, love-hate relationship between Lee and Marina Oswald, against a backdrop that moves from Moscow and Minsk to the bizarre world of expatriate Russians — some of them related to the Russian nobility — in the upper echelons of Dallas society.

Sense of failure

It was a society in which Lee Oswald had no part when he brought his bride and a baby daughter back from Minsk in 1962. But for Marina — a very beautiful young Russian who could neither speak nor understand English — it added a new and dangerous dimension to her world.

Marina was always attractive to men, and she enjoyed, even basked in their admiration at home in Russia, and then in Dallas and New Orleans, where she tried to settle with the young, insecure, penniless Texan she had married, and whose inability to hold down a job was only partly due to his dishonourable discharge from the U.S. Marines, following his defection.

Oswald emerges from this study as a violent, jealous, emotionally dependent man, with no prospects, deeply resentful

of Marina's capacity for attracting admiration from both men and women. Perhaps here, somewhere in the recesses of Oswald's resentments and his personal sense of failure, lies the explanation for what happened in Dealey Plaza in November, 1963. By then, Oswald's marriage was practically in ruins: he had no prospects whatever, and he was taking steps to return to Russia, by way of Cuba.

When visas were refused, and when Oswald found himself balked on every side by the combined bureaucracies of two super-powers, did he seek revenge on both systems because he began to suspect the truth — that neither side had any use for him, and that he was exposed as a useless nonentity? Perhaps somewhere there, in Oswald's private humiliation, lay the seeds of a futile gesture, the enormity of which was beyond his comprehension as he tried to face his own bitterness and despair.

These two books are not the last word on the Kennedy assassination and the strange events which surrounded and followed it. There will be others, because the tragedy has moved from the level of historical event to that of myth — a myth peculiarly suited to our time, with its sense of banished hopes, its cult of violence, its voyeurism, and the seductions of irrational doctrines. All of these came together in the contorted personality of Lee Harvey Oswald, who was ultimately a figure of tragedy, not of evil.

We still lack certainty, beyond a reasonable doubt, of how and why John Fitzgerald Kennedy was murdered in Dallas in November, 1963.

Edward Jay Epstein, *Legend: The World of Lee Harvey Oswald* (Hutchinson, £5.30). Priscilla Johnson McMillan, *Marina and Lee* (Collins, £7.5).

As the 'who killed Kennedy' controversy reaches another climax, EDMUND IONS, Reader in Politics at York University, reports on two studies of Lee Harvey Oswald which look at his secret life before Dallas in 1963

