Lippmann Reviews the Manchester Book

By WALTER LIPPMANN

BY THE TIME I had worked my way through this fascinating, endless and very readable book I found myself wondering whether I had stayed with it so long mainly because of a prying and morbid curiosity.

The book embroiders with a prodigious amount of detail the well-known story of the six days before and after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. If historians handle it critically enough they will no doubt find here a mine of information about the circumstances of the President's death. For Manchester has interviewed a great number of people involved in the event.

But as a contemporary, as one who sat glued to his television set and read the news and speculation in the newspapers, I cannot think of anything in this book that throws new light on what happened.

To read the book is like scanning a painting with a microscope. It remains the same painting after the scanning is over. The President went to Texas in order to compose a quarrel among Democratic politicians, hoping to unite the party behind himself for the election of 1964.

The city of Dallas was a hotbed of seething hatred of Mr. Kennedy. The police protection afforded the president was poor. On the way back to Washington from Dallas a feud broke out between those who felt that their first and only loyalty was to Mr. Kennedy and those who were attached to Mr. Johnson or rallied to him.

The book tells again what we saw with our own eyes, Jack Ruby killing Lee Oswald, the regal bearing of Jacqueline Kennedy and the pomp and ceremony of the funeral.

The painstaking reporting after the event confirms and amplifies the original story that we all saw and heard at the time. The book makes us realize how well the country was served in those

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days by the newspapers and the networks, and we are left to wonder what American journalism could be if it were always as interested and as concentrated on the task of telling the true story as it was in those days.

BUT IF THE SPOT reporters failed to tell the whole story, if there are hidden secrets, they are still hidden now. For Manchester takes the view that the findings of the Warren Commission, to which he had special access, are the whole truth. For him, the death of the President cannot be a link in a chain of significant historic events. It was a meaningless accident perpetrated for no known reason by a trivial and disordered man.

This is the crucial judgment about the subject of the book, and it has determined the character of the book. Unqualified acceptance of the findings of the Warren Commission set Manchester to the task of describing in relentless detail what happened during the six days when a quite senseless and meaningless crime was committed.

Manchester is aware that the senselessness of the murder deprives his book of a significant theme. "I have to believe," he wrote in Look magazine recently, "that the state funeral of Nov. 25 and the wake which followed were a *redemption*, a *catharsis*, investing the ghastly futility that had gone before with meaning."

He goes on to say that "Maybe that craving for significance is a weakness. Possibly Sartre was right. Perhaps it was all an existentialist performance in the theater of the absurd."

THIS CRAVING to find significance in the ghastly futility of the murder is the reason why so many people throughout the world have been eager to believe that the Warren Commission was wrong, that John Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy. For the official verdict has been a hard one to believe, because Oswald was killed in the police station. With the human craving for significance, men have seized upon the patent incredibility of the senseless event.

For Manchester this way out of the ghastly futility was barred when he accepted the findings of the Warren Commission. He knows a great deal about the Warren Commission's work, perhaps more than anyone else, and he has written a highly persuasive defense of the commission's verdict.

He did not, therefore, turn to a theory of conspiracy to find significance in the ghastly futility. And he is not a poet who could have made the senseless death of John F. Kennedy the burden of a charge against the wantonness and cruelty of fate.

What then could Manchester do? He obeyed his own genius, which is not that of an historian, but of a dramatic novelist. He is also a reporter, and as a reporter he had to agree that the murder was a ghastly futility. As a literary artist, however, he was compelled to reshape the material to a main theme and several minor ones.

THE MAIN THEME, he chose to believe, is that John F. Kennedy was transfigured by his death and thereby became a legendary hero. In the epilogue, which he tells us he meant to make his best chapter, Manchester becomes so entranced with the theme of the transfiguration that he does not place John F. Kennedy with the presidents of the United States. He places him in a line with King Arthur, Siegfried, Roland and Joan of Arc.

At the end, Manchester's craving for significance has become so exorbitant that he seems to be saying that the genesis of a modern legend, like the legend of Lincoln, is that the hero was murdered, rather than in what the hero achieved. But surely a modern historian must not forget that Lincoln became fixed in the minds and hearts of our people not because he was murdered in Ford's Theater, but because he saved the Union and emancipated the slaves.

The Kennedy legend will flourish or will languish because of what Mr. Kennedy did, because of what he left behind him that endures. The historic foundation of a Kennedy legend will be that with him the generation born in the 20th century came to power and that under him there were new beginnings in the life of the nation.

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IN THE BYPASSING of the substance and the significance of John Kennedy's work as President lies the root of all the troubles that this book has caused everybody involved with it, the family, the publishers, the author. In thinking about how Manchester wrote a 600-page book on the death of the President without writing about what John F. Kennedy did as a President, I learned something from reading Manchester's earlier "Portrait of a President."

That book was, so to speak, a sketch from life, and it is said that because President Kennedy liked the book, Pierre Salinger proposed Manchester to the Kennedy family as the author to write the story of the President's death.

Like the present book, the earlier book is very readable and full of entertaining detail. But reading it one would never understand how the wry, witty, rich Boston Irishman with his beautiful and fashionable wife was the man who played a leading role in the turning point of the cold war, who opened the way—not himself understanding it too well—to the new economics, who gave a mighty push to the second reconstruction and drew into office a new generation of public men.

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IT GOES WITHOUT saying that in the attempt to tell the whole story as if it were a complete and ubiquitous newsreel of those six days, Manchester has slipped up and made some mistakes. I would not dwell on them here were it not that in the mistakes I know about there is the same pattern: always the mistake is a fiction which intensifies the drama of the story.

The first mistake is of no importance, but I noticed it because it is about myself. Manchester was telling where various people were and what they did when they heard the news of the murder. According to Manchester, I "reached the Washington Post and collapsed." In truth I reached the Washington Post, heard that the President was in the hospital, but still alive, thought the crowd was too noisy around the tickers and the television sets and rushed for a taxi to go home to hear the rest of the news.

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IN THE TAXI on the radio I heard that the President was dead. The mistake is of no importance except that the truth is much less dramatic than the fiction.

The second mistake concerns that excellent soldier, Gen. Clifton. According to the first Manchester version, which has since been corrected, Gen. Clifton lost his head and, forgetting his sense of duty, first telephoned a message to his wife before he telephoned about security matters which were his special charge. The story was not true at all, but the spectacle of a gallant and efficient soldier losing his head made it a better story than the prosaic facts.

The third mistake is that at the swearing in of Lyndon Johnson aboard the airplane the ceremony was boycotted by the Kennedy men who were on the plane. The story is not true. Lawrence O'Brien and Ken O'Donnell were present, though their faces do not show in all of the photographs. O'Brien was hidden by Judge Hughes who was swearing in President Johnson. O'Donnell was to the left of Mrs. Kennedy and was not caught in all the photographs. Again the mistake is one which hots up the truth and intensifies the drama.

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MISTAKES OF THIS sort can and no doubt will be corrected. In spite of them the book remains a dedicated effort to tell with relentless detail the story of the six days of the murder. But in the telling of it Manchester has become so obsessed by a passion for detail that his book is pervaded by a dumb and ruthless realism which engulfs the hero.

Only when I read the whole book in all its appalling detail did I feel I understood why Mrs. Kennedy was so revolted by it and denounced it as

tasteless. I cannot believe that her revulsion was due solely to the passages she cited as especially objectionable to her, personally. Those passages have been deleted, and I have not seen them or wanted to see them. But I have a fair notion of what they were like.

They were not scandalous. There was no taint of malice or prejudice in them. There is no break in Manchester's love and admiration for Jacqueline Kennedy. But the objectionable passages did make sharper the dominant fault of the whole book. For the family and intimate friends of John F. Kennedy, the book stains the white radiance of eternity in which John F. Kennedy dwells.

THE TROUBLE is that the book as a whole shows in horrid and painful detail the mean and sordid reality in which the epic story of the hero's death was enacted. That the death of the young and brilliant President was senseless was an intolerable event; it was bearable only if it was extricated from the muck in which it in fact took place.

It was terrible that the President was dead. It was injury added to injury that the hero was on a trivial mission among inglorious Texas politicians. For the Kennedy family, to have brought Camelot down to this has been Manchester's transgression.

As the story develops in Manchester's pages it has neither elegance nor grandeur, and the author's gluttonous appetite for anecdotes does not spare the family or the reader the horror of the carnage inside the automobile, the insufferable insensitiveness of the clowns and mountebanks and louts at the Dallas hospital or the macabre details of the autopsy at Bethesda and of the undertakers' work. Thus, the search for the significance of the senseless death wallows on in a flood of noisome detail.

IT IS NO SERVICE to John Kennedy's reputation, historic or legendary, to put together an infinite number of tidbits and to dwell not on his historic achievements, but on the glamour that emanated from him and his family and on the trivial facts surrounding his murder. For this belongs to what the French call "petite histoire," the little stories that are the small change of history.