

BOOKS

A Question of Taste and Something More



TWO paragraphs from the end of "The Death of a President" (Harper & Row), William Manchester tells of Jacqueline Kennedy's decision in the summer of 1964 to leave Washington for New York and spend much time in travel. "Henceforth," he writes, "the public would read of her at the Cape, on the Adriatic, in Rome, or—her preference—not at all." Though hardly sound as prophecy, thanks largely to the public brawls that preceded the appearance of the book itself, this might have been as good a place as any for Manchester to stop writing. On the title page, we are given to understand that we shall be reading of the events of "November 20—November 25, 1963," and that mark has already been overshot by almost a full year. But Manchester does not want to release us—not quite yet. He still has some unused notes, some further revelations. In a kind of *envoi* he writes, "Unknown to her, the clothes Mrs. Kennedy wore into the bright midday glare of Dallas lie in an attic not far from 3017 N Street [her last home in Washington] . . . in one of two long brown paper cartons thrust between roof rafters." They are there, he says, because some of "those closest to her had vowed that from the moment she shed them, she should never see them again." At this point, the reader who has reached page 646 of this interminable, infuriating, and sometimes majestic chronicle of suffering knows what to expect. There is only a half page left, but that is more than Manchester needs for one last karate blow. Told of the existence of that carton, Manchester, who at the outset had boasted that his diligence as a researcher was such that "I even had the damaged Dallas-to-Bethesda coffin uncrated for inspection," surely talked someone into leading him to the carton and

letting him open it up. And that is the way the book ends. He has been to that attic, opened the carton, and examined its contents—no doubt jotting down notes while some friend or member of the Kennedy family held a flashlight—and he is thus able to tell us that the once brilliantly encarnadined pink suit now has "ugly splotches along the front and hem of the skirt," that the leather handbag and shoes still have "caked dark red" blood on them, and that "rusty clots have flaked off" the stockings and now "lie in tiny brittle grains on the nap" of a towel in which they were wrapped. With such "research," Manchester, who likes to describe himself as a "zealous defender of the public's right to know," may be serving his public and his peculiar muses well—though there is at least one member of the public who is unaware of any "right to know" the approximate whereabouts and present condition of the clothes Mrs. Kennedy wore the day she became a widow and is not at

all appreciative of having the knowledge now. However that may be, Manchester has committed an outrage, an indecency. With the aid of an unidentified accomplice, and for the sake of getting into print a few utterly gratuitous bits and pieces of information, he has wrecked a well-meant plan to save a human being a certain amount of needless agony. As things have turned out, it would have been better if Mrs. Kennedy's protective friends had done nothing at all, for the truth, one can be sure, is that Manchester's description of the clothes is more harrowing by far than the mere sight of them could ever be. It is an act hardly more defensible than selling them for display in Ripley's Believe-It-or-Not Museum on Times Square.

"At times, you may find my presence exasperating," Manchester writes in a foreword. It is not his presence but his elusiveness that is—the word is too mild—exasperating. Actually, he intrudes himself rather seldom into the



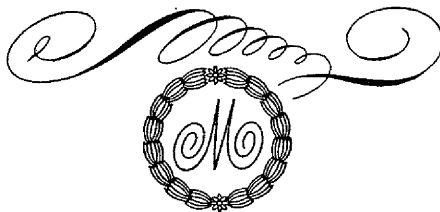
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main text, and when he does, it is usually in a quite legitimate and helpful way, as when he renders his informed judgment on the Warren Report and its critics, or draws on his experiences in the United States Marine Corps in discussing certain aspects of the life of another ex-Marine, Lee Harvey Oswald. But one has him constantly in mind, because what he has written raises so many questions about his taste, his judgment, his character. And, outside the main text, he keeps raising—and begging—such questions himself. In the foreword and in other self-serving depositions—most notably a recent article in *Look*—he says so many contradictory things that one despairs of ever finding out what he really means and thinks. “Throughout this work I was obliged to weigh questions of taste,” he says in the foreword. He does not tell us what sort of scales he used; he says only that his own judgment seemed “an inadequate safeguard against possible lapses” and that he sought advice and opinion from several other people. In the *Look* article, he says that he “decided to destroy two hundred pages of text that, on reflection, I felt were either too personal or needlessly critical of men still in public life.” In the book, he says that he excluded certain things but he says nothing about any decision to “destroy” parts of his manuscript. On the contrary, he writes, “This is not to suggest that I am suppressing anything. I am merely retaining, for the time being, material of a personal nature which serves no legitimate purpose.” In view of what he has included, it is difficult to imagine what he might have excluded—apart, that is, from those passages which last year were being ostentatiously deleted from the book and simultaneously made part of the public record in newspapers and magazines. After we have read of those clothes in the attic, after we have seen the Secretary of Defense being playfully fitted with Ethel Kennedy’s wig at a White House dinner the day before John F. Kennedy’s state funeral, what can there possibly be of a “personal” nature whose publication would “serve no legitimate purpose”? Maybe some eminent mourner was caught lifting White House silver or snatching ladies’ purses, and Manchester thinks no legitimate purpose would be served in tipping off the cops now. One begins to suspect that his standards may be just about that crude. It is hard to know what to make of a man who can proclaim, as Manchester does in the *Look* article, that “no one has the right to distort the



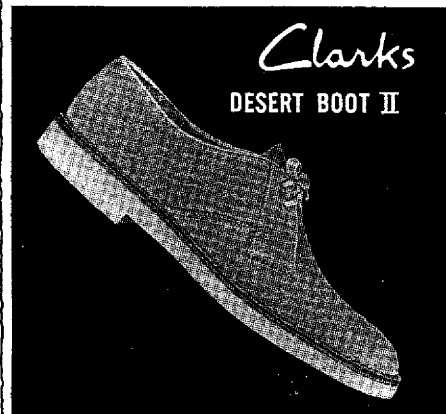
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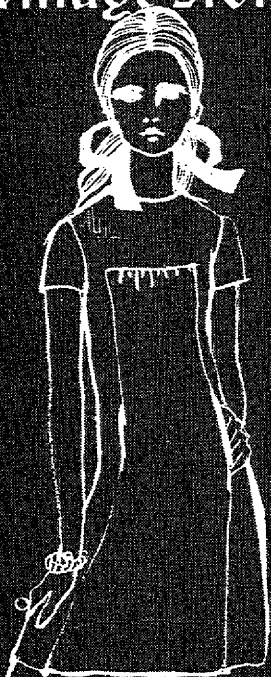
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past; no fact, however disagreeable, may be expunged from the record" and then, a few pages further on, quote approvingly from a letter he wrote—to Mrs. Kennedy—in which he declared, "Unquestionably, some things should be left unsaid; I, for one, am becoming an expert with the eraser."

In literature, good taste is not a major, or even a minor, virtue; many great works lack it altogether. Also, what may give offense to some members of this generation of readers will seem wholly inoffensive to members of later generations. Bearing this in mind, one is tempted to put aside questions of taste, and even of complete truthfulness, and say that, whatever its faults, this is a great book. Reading it now, one can easily understand how it was that, in those embarrassing days of controversy over it last year, many otherwise sensible and dignified people seemed to be saying uncharacteristically irrational and cruel things about it and its author and one another. It is a book that provokes extreme responses. Its power is such that the events it describes are more anguishing now, in Manchester's reconstruction of them in words, than when they were actually happening and most of us were watching certain of them on television. Living through this book is even more painful than living through that awful weekend. To a degree, of course, this kind of affecting power is easy to explain. What we saw on television or read about in newspaper accounts were mostly the events and non-events and pseudo-events that public officials and network managers contrived to have us see—except for Jack Ruby's murder of Oswald, and we cannot yet be sure that there wasn't some element of contrivance about that. As viewers, we were kept at a proper—and welcome—distance from Trauma Room No. 1 in Parkland Memorial Hospital, and there were no television cameras aboard Air Force One when it flew two Presidential parties from Dallas to Washington. But as readers we go everywhere. Manchester takes us into the hospital and aboard the plane and keeps us in both places until we want to get out as badly as any of the 1963 participants did. He moves us along to Bethesda Naval Hospital, to the residential quarters in the White House, to a dozen other houses in Washington, and even to the bedside of the mute, invalided Joseph P. Kennedy in Hyannis Port. He transfers us from Air Force One to a plane carrying members of the Cabinet and White House staff to Japan; aboard that plane, we peer over the shoulders of

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the players in a wild poker game, set up after the news from Dallas had been received and a new, eastbound flight path charted, and we do not leave until after Pierre Salinger is eight hundred dollars in pocket. But Manchester's accomplishment is no mere triumph of access, doggedness, and callousness. It is the triumph of a writer who knows a great deal about the world and people and death and grief. The prose, though faulted in minor ways, is almost always eloquent, and often poetic. The total effect is shattering, and it seems not at all inconceivable that we have here an American contribution to the great literature of the death of kings.

But this is only 1967, and we cannot be indifferent to the book's treatment of people and events in 1963. Manchester does not offer "The Death of a President" as poetry or myth. He offers it as history, as scholarship, as verified and verifiable truth. He does not cite all his sources, but he says that "every statement, every fact, every quotation in my manuscript could be followed by a citation," and that he is "considering" making all his source material available to scholars. Again, he goes too far. He has not, for instance, hesitated to tell us what was going on inside the mind of Lee Harvey Oswald. Moreover, a hundred citations would not convince this reader that John F. Kennedy began sentences with exclamations like "Gosh!" and "Terrific!" Manchester's ear, usually a very delicate instrument, now and then turns pure tin. While these are marginal matters, there are some that are central. We read this book with the disturbing knowledge that it was compromised at the start, that it was tampered with many times, and that Manchester's insistence, in the *Look* article, that



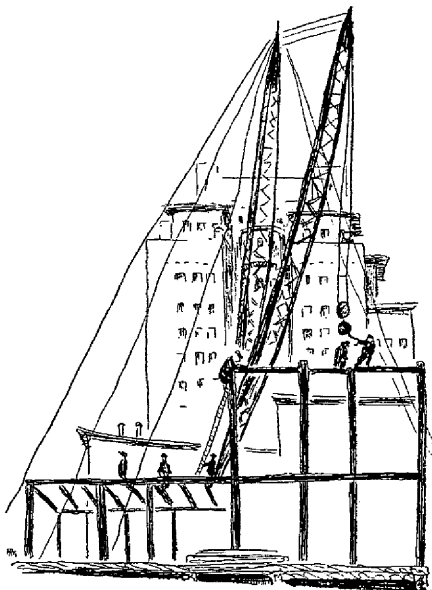
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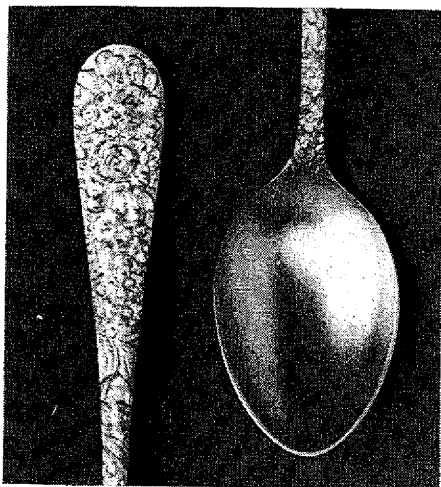
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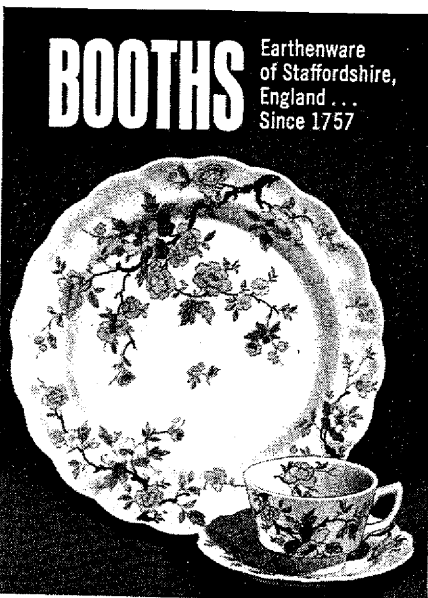
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"the integrity of my work was not negotiable" must be disregarded, since he himself goes on to describe the negotiations that did take place and were followed by reluctant concessions on his part. Furthermore, it is known that before the present version of the book took shape there was another version in limited circulation, that some highly qualified people read it, and that they were appalled to find it largely an attack on Lyndon Johnson. "The main proposition of the book when I read it was that Lyndon Johnson had a heavy personal responsibility for the Dallas climate that, according to Manchester, made the assassination possible," one of them has recently said. If that is so, then the published version differs in fundamental ways from the earlier one. Lyndon Johnson is here treated with almost unflinching sympathy, and often with admiration, which is more than can be said for Manchester's treatment of many other people. It is one thing to touch up or tone down an anecdote; it is another to reverse an entire argument. If that is what has happened, the whole work becomes suspect. Controversies about this and other matters are now ominously in progress. Manchester's description of certain events aboard Air Force One has been seriously challenged by a respected reporter who was aboard the plane—Charles Roberts, of *Newsweek*—in "The Truth About the Assassination" (Grosset & Dunlap), a brief but cogent account of his own experiences that day and of his reactions to several of the books that have appeared on the subject. Meanwhile, Defense Department officials are insisting that Manchester is wholly in error in saying that Lyndon Johnson had never been briefed on some of the most dreadful of the responsibilities that became his on November 22, 1963. Much of the power of this book rests upon our acceptance of the author's accuracy on points such as these. If this is a book shot through with departures from the truth, then our emotions are being played upon in a shameless way.

—RICHARD H. ROVERE

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