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The Kennedy he forgot

ALISTAIR COOKE reviews William Manchester's
"Death of a President," published in Britain
this week by Michael Joseph at 60s

All the world has a view, questioning or adoring, of Mrs John F. Kennedy. And most of the English-speaking world has, alas, also a vague, small picture of the man she commissioned to write this book. Few authors, not even Rousseau or Brendan Behan, have bared their bosoms in such expiatory frenzy as Mr Manchester in telling us how he came to write his magnum opus, what emotional storms he weathered, what injustices he bore, what agonies he endured to set down nothing but the truth. Mr Manchester has said that through the bruising episode of the threatened litigation he learned a lot. But he did not learn that continuous self-justification invites the very misgivings the claimant is anxious to allay.

To anyone who followed (or, worse, had to report) the backings and fillings of the Kennedy-Manchester row, this book carries over its desperate confessional mood. It is unfair to all parties that it should be so, and may be the wise thing would be to hand over this book for review to a Tibetan Buddhist. In his absence, however, your correspondent must do his best to forget the raging self-righteousness of the contending parties and try to judge the book as a new revelation, as the first complete and exhaustive account of the four days surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy, written by a man who fortunately had access to the recollections of the Kennedy family and to hundreds of lesser men and women on the periphery of the hero's assassination.

Mr Manchester starts with the thesis, which he caricatures in sobbing prose at the end, that this was a classic tragedy, a deeply and permanently moving example of the untimely taking-off of a superior man that left a whole nation, and indeed the world, bereft of its best destiny. Granting Mr Manchester a theory of tragedy that denies Aristotle's (and O'Casey's and Miller's and, for that matter, Pinter's) belief that good men destroy themselves and that small men can be pitiable for their failing good intentions, we still need to have some convincing evidence that the actual Kennedy and his post-mortem legend are one and the same person, and that we are not being asked to absorb, in however exhausting detail, the record of a sheer and wanton accident, like the gunning down of somebody's beloved baby.

To avoid such a distressing thing, Mr Manchester must at least maintain that Kennedy was a genuine hero and that he was doomed by evil forces that saw their historic opportunity at Dallas. What are these evil forces? They are the city of Dallas itself, represented here with dinning ferocity as a specially sick community and the agent of everything in America that denies the liberty of man. Burke could not see how you can indict a whole nation. And I cannot see how this belief, no matter how sternly held by sophisticated Europe, is anything but one of the more childish and noisy pieties of the New Left.

To have written a prologue to the book which summarised the general debate about Kennedy's

character and Presidential worth before he was shot would have been a serious and fascinating thing to do. But it would have made embarrassing nonsense of Mr Manchester's dramatic flair, which is that of a first-rate reporter undertaking a juicy bit of fiction, a James Bond movie script on an historical theme.

So in spite of Mr Manchester's considerable gifts as a sleuth, a collator of documentary detail about thousands of incidents and participants, what we have is a melodrama which must, for its force and poignancy, stay tethered to its preconceptions: that Kennedy was St George, that Dallas was the successful dragon, that the actual assassination by a warned and lonely Oswald will not bear questioning. Mr Manchester insists that his single-minded aim is the historical truth, come what may, let the chips and the tears fall where they may. But how about the Kennedy that the British press condemned as a proto-fascist in Cuba, until Khrushchey's bluff was called? How about the frustrated chief executive whose impotence before the leaders of Congress left him, in the autumn of 1963, the victim of books with such titles as "The Democratic Deadlock"? How about the second son chosen for political fame by the ruthless Joseph P. Kennedy? It would all ruin the basic preconception: that in Kennedy's death we suffered "all our woe and loss of Eden."

As it is, the Manchester book remains a huge documentary contribution to the cifted infantilism of "Oh, what a lovely war," "US," and "MacBird."