

THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION

High profits for the investigators

BY A CORRESPONDENT

MORE THAN three and a half years after the assassination of President Kennedy, the branch of the publishing industry based on that bizarre and controversial event is still thriving expansively. Indeed, it has reached the self-propelled stage in which virtually every new theory produces a counter-theory—and both provide publicity as well as profit for their progenitors.

The shooting of Kennedy was both tragic and incongruous, and part of its fascination lies precisely in its incongruity: that a man of his stature could have been killed by a confused and shoddy assassin. It is almost equally tragic that the assassination should have spawned a profitable business in which morbidity is more conspicuous than dignity.

There are notable exceptions, of course. William Manchester's *The Death of a President* is both dignified and tasteful, though the public squabble with the Kennedy family over its publication was neither. But this painstaking work is also a prime example of the general rule that books about President Kennedy's life and death are highly profitable. Manchester himself estimates that he will make "three or four hundred thousand dollars" from the book, with another "five to ten million" going to the JFK memorial—an estimate of total profit that ranges between roughly \$2m. and \$4m.

Further printings

For Harper and Row, the publishers, Manchester's book will also be a memorable success. The firm printed 600,000 copies of the first edition and another printing is on the way. For Look magazine the serialisation earlier this year has been worth every penny of the \$665,000 it cost. Look's sale rose from 7.5m. to 9.5m., and it has held on to many of its new readers.

Along with Manchester's book, a score or so of the several hundred books about Kennedy now in print are legitimate contributions to history. But from this category of book, written from motives virtually beyond reproach, it is a steep plunge to the heart of the Kennedy industry, which relies for its living mainly on criticisms of the Warren Commission report and the accompanying 26 volumes of testimony and evidence.

Mark Lane, the New York lawyer who wrote *Rush to Judgment*, is by far the most successful deliver in this field. Lane's thesis is that the Commission failed to

interview some relevant witnesses, ignored the evidence of others, and came to the wrong conclusions. In particular, Lane is convinced that there was an assassin on the grassy knoll in Dallas.

Lane has appointed himself defence counsel for Lee Harvey Oswald, and a very profitable posthumous client Oswald has been. About 250,000 copies of the



William Manchester

hardback edition of *Rush to Judgment* were sold in the United States alone, at \$5.95 a copy. The paperback edition is still a best-seller, and the film of the book recouped two thirds of the \$60,000 it cost with one showing on BBC television.

Like Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest*, a master's degree thesis that ended up as a \$5 best-seller, Lane's book is at least persuasive enough to be taken seriously, even if it does not convince; but that is more than can be said for some other attacks on the Warren Report and alternatives to its findings.

Penn Jones Jr., editor of a Texas weekly newspaper, believes, for instance, that the deaths of nearly a score of "relevant witnesses" to the assassination and its confused aftermath need explaining. He has argued the point at length in his paper (doubling its sale), on television, in personal appearances, and in a book, *Forgive My Grief*, which he set up in type on his Linotype machine in Midlothian, Texas.

Evidence ignored

Jones has sold more than 20,000 copies of the book at \$2.95, as well as a limited and numbered edition in quarter-leather binding

at \$10. The price includes Jones' autograph, and whatever number the buyer requests for his copy: a favourite is 313, the number of the frame on an amateur movie that shows President Kennedy's skull being shattered in Dallas. One thing a buyer of *Forgive My Grief* does not get is a well-researched book. Jones frequently ignores such evidence as coroner's reports and the results of post-mortem examinations.

Harold Weisberg, a Maryland waterfowl breeder and former National Barbecuing Champion, is another rural critic who suspects conspiracy. He has written two books about the assassination, *Whitewash I* and *Whitewash II* (*Whitewash III* is in preparation), explaining his theory that the Warren Report was a deliberate falsification, based on evidence manufactured or manipulated by the FBI and the Secret Service.

While attacks on the Warren Report continue, avant garde critics are now paying more attention to a theory first developed publicly by Richard Popkin, a history professor, in *The Second Oswald*. He contends there were two assassins, Oswald and somebody who impersonated him. Another supporter of the conspiracy theory is Thomas Buchanan, a computer technician, who wrote a book that originally got more attention in Europe than it did in the United States, *Who Killed Kennedy?* Buchanan's belief is that the assassination was master-minded by a group of Texas oilmen who feared that Kennedy would reduce the special tax benefits for owners of oil wells. Barbara Garson, in the play *MacBird*, also plumps for conspiracy, pinning it—satirically, of course—on President Johnson. MacBird has made a small fortune for Miss Garson. George Thomson, a swimming pool engineer in California, has not yet made a fortune with his brochure, *The Quest for Truth*, but does have the distinction of propounding an original theory: that President Kennedy was impersonated by a double in Dallas, and was not shot at all. Thomson says Kennedy attended writer Truman Capote's famous party at the Hotel Plaza, New York, last autumn.

This mass of theory, counter-theory and counter-counter-theory has inspired Richard Warren Lewis to write *The Scavengers and Critics of the Warren Report*, a 95-cent

paperback developed from a Capitol gramophone record. The *Controversy*. Lewis delves deep into the assassination industry to find some very odd people and theories indeed. His cast includes what he calls "The Housewives' Underground," a nationwide group that combs the Warren Report and the 26 supplementary volumes for contradictions and gaps. The most ardent member of this group is probably Mrs. Sylvia Meagher, who has written a *Subject Index to the Warren Report, Hearings and Exhibits*, published at \$4, and in the autumn will publish *Accessories After the Fact*—a title that summarises her theme.

Some people, tired of theorising, prefer to talk to somebody who saw the assassination, or knew Oswald, Jack Ruby, or some minor actor in the drama. For \$500, Mrs. Marguerite Oswald, Lee Harvey Oswald's mother, will speak in public; some witnesses of the assassination now charge by the hour for interviews. So far, Mrs. Marina Porter, Oswald's widow, has been shy of publicity; but William Manchester's publishers, Harper and Row, have commissioned a book about her by Priscilla Johnson, a Russian-speaking author and journalist. Mrs. Porter will have a share of the royalties.

Garrison puzzle

Finally—though nothing is permanently final in the Kennedy affair—there is New Orleans district attorney James Garrison's prosecution of people alleged to have conspired to kill Kennedy. Several books about this are planned for publication after the case has been decided. Some writers think Garrison is a courageous fighter for the truth, and some that he is looking for headlines; the battle between these two groups is already being fought in the public prints.

Meanwhile, some disciples of the theory that Oswald was impersonated in Dallas are comparing recordings of his voice made in the Dallas police station with his voice on a commercial long-playing record called *Lee Harvey Oswald Speaks*, which consists of his views on the Cuban missile crisis, recorded in New Orleans. If the comparison does prove that the recordings were made by different men, somebody will doubtless point out yet a new possibility: that Oswald was impersonated in New Orleans, not Dallas.