

Observer: The Spin-Offs of History

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, May 24—In the present issue of *Esquire*, Gay Talese writes of the agony that John Corry underwent during his efforts as a New York Times reporter to write of the agony that William Manchester underwent in writing and publishing his account of the Kennedy assassination.

What is omitted from *Esquire* is the account of Talese's sufferings while preparing his account of Corry's sufferings. Fortunately, history will not be denied this footnote to tragedy.

Mercurial Talese

Ralph Murdstone, a free-lance writer, is even now putting the finishing touches on his account of Talese's agony. It has been a soul-grinding task. Talese, a man of mercurial temperament, has made demands that often seemed to threaten Murdstone's integrity as a writer.

After granting Murdstone a fourteen-hour taped interview, for example, Talese insisted on the right to edit the tape. He also threatened to take legal action if Murdstone used taped interviews that he (Talese) had conducted with Corry about

Corry's taped interviews with Manchester about Manchester's untaped interviews with Senator Robert Kennedy.

After two weeks of living with Talese's harrowing experience, Murdstone, normally a three-pack-a-day cigarette smoker, noted that he was up to four packs a day. We can imagine his demoralization, then, when Clarence Caulfield, a writer of instant history, appeared at his home early one morning and announced that he had been assigned by one of the nation's richest publishing houses to write a book on the agony of Ralph Murdstone.

Murdstone by now was close to the breaking point. His first inclination was to pitch Caulfield down the steps, but he realized that by doing so he would be denying the legitimate demands of history. Moreover, he reasoned, an act of violence would merely whet Caulfield's appetite for the story by giving him a bang-up opening chapter.

What was worse, he concluded, Caulfield might suffer a broken leg, which would inspire *The Ladies Home Journal* to assign Lorna Dune to write an article on Caulfield's agony dur-

ing his reporting of Murdstone's agony. And so he accepted Caulfield's presence. This proved to be a mistake.

To begin with, Murdstone at this time was still traveling close to Talese in order to record every jot and tittle of suffering which Talese underwent in preparing his article on Corry.

The Agony of It All

When Murdstone showed up at Talese's office with Caulfield in tow, Talese took an instant dislike to Caulfield. Talese began complaining that Murdstone was so preoccupied in agonizing for Caulfield's benefit that he (Murdstone) could no longer keep his mind on the suffering Talese was undergoing in reporting Corry's agony.

One day Talese smoked eight cigars—an unmistakable sign of spiritual crisis in a man who had formerly limited himself to one cigar after dinner—and Murdstone failed to make a note about it. Talese became incensed at this evidence of Murdstone's distraction, and made cruel, devastating remarks to Caulfield.

News of the incident raced through the New York publish-

ing world. The next morning, Lorna Dune appeared at Caulfield's apartment to announce that she had been assigned by *The Ladies Home Journal* to write an article on Caulfield's agony.

As fate would have it, Talese was scheduled to meet Corry at lunch that day for a subjective agony scrutiny. Murdstone went along to observe Talese. Murdstone, of course, was accompanied by Caulfield, who, accepting his obligation to history, brought along Lorna Dune.

Five Writers Locked Up

During the fish course the proprietor, making a snap judgment after studying the expressions on their faces, notified the police that a "little Apalachin meeting" seemed to be going on under his nose, and all five writers were locked up for two hours and a half.

Matters were soon rectified, but not before the news reached the papers. Next morning, Lorna Dune's telephone rang. "I've been assigned," said the voice, "to write an article about the agony you are suffering while reporting Clarence Caulfield's agony. My name is William Manchester. . . ."