

## Lyndon Johnson in Literature

by Larry L. King

Comparatively few books have been written about Lyndon B. Johnson and these are, withal, pretty dismal. Johnson books generally do not sell well (as do Kennedy, Roosevelt, or Lincoln books) and therefore publishers do not strain to solicit them. Too often Johnson's chroniclers have axes to grind. *The Lyndon Johnson Story* (a paean by Booth Mooney, former Johnson

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*Sam Johnson's Boy:*

A Close-Up of the President  
from Texas

by Alfred Steinberg  
(Macmillan; \$9.95)

*A Very Personal Presidency:*  
Lyndon Johnson in the White House  
by Hugh Sidey  
(Atheneum; \$5.95)

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staffer and still a friendly consultant on occasion) saw only gold, moonbeams, and Horatio Alger while ignoring some Texas-sized warts. At the opposite pole, Rancher-Rightist J. Evats Haley's *A Texan Looks at Lyndon* was shrill, hateful, and downright wrong, ascribing to Johnson moral, financial, and political mischief that not even Lucifer himself, working overtime with LBJ's energy, could have committed.

Neither the Mooney nor the Haley

book will be of value to historians, save in the most pedestrian sense or as a vintage curiosity. Rather pathetically—and because of special circumstances—both enjoyed huge sales. When LBJ ascended to the Presidency, Mooney's five-year-old sonnet (then representing the only Johnson "literature" on hand) was serialized in newspapers world-wide, translated into thirty-odd languages, and distributed everywhere by the US Information Agency. This was the book Johnson urged on associates in his senatorial days, grasping their lapels or elbows and booming that "If you want to know anything about me it's all right here in this book"; and this is the book that probably will remain the President's all-time favorite unless, God forbid, Jack Valenti writes one.

LBJ was doubtless less enthralled with Haley's devilishly sorry critique. Goldwater partisans, however, bought it in bulk in 1964 and to this day *A Texan Looks At Lyndon* is as dear to lunatic anti-Johnsonites as the New Testament is to Billy Graham. Such one-way books will be soon forgotten.

All of LBJ's Falstaffian traits—the mad hoo-hawings, the arm-twistings, the aimless goddamnings, the petty little vengeance, the boastful Alamo airs—tend to suck writers into a colorful vacuum where they spin dizzily, at once fascinated and repelled; the writer is thus driven away from cool inspection of the President's more thoughtful moments, his real accomplishments as a legislator, even some few fine moments in the White House. (I have on occasion fallen in the trap.) Robert Sherill's *The Accidental President* suffered from just such a preoccupation with the darker side of LBJ; only a rollicking prose and a biting humor kept the work from being a disaster. The blows LBJ received at the hands of William Manchester in *Death of a President* were not all above the belt: once again points were scored at the expense of LBJ's same old Falstaffian, impulsive excesses. Michael Davie's *LBJ: A Foreign Observer's Viewpoint* is a slight volume good for perhaps an

hour's mild titillation; Davie contributes only brief personal observations based on a single interview, the sketchiest of facts, and his own rather unremarkable perceptions. In Pierre Salinger's *With Kennedy*, LBJ is a supporting actor treated with a certain chariness, as if the author somehow expected Johnson to spring on him from behind a bush—should he go too far. Theodore Sorensen's *Kennedy* reduces LBJ to infrequent walk-on roles, his personality deadened by the author's grim, committee-style prose.

Theodore White's *The Making of a President, 1964* offers an excellent journalist's account of LBJ at happy political play in a time when he was at his personal apex; Norman Mailer's pop-study of Johnson in *Cannibals and Christians* is irreverent, piercingly funny, and perceptive in Mailer's mad way; Tom Wicker's recent study of *JFK and LBJ* is creditable and rancorless, and goes a long way toward explaining how President Johnson frittered away his beloved "government by consensus." Despite a certain stylistic stodginess and possibly a too-willing acceptance of LBJ's self-promoted image as a Man of Miracles, perhaps the most balanced study is *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* by Roland Evans and Robert Novak, although this two-year-old book is now weakened because it does not treat the sundry disasters that have befallen the President over the second half of his final term.

The best book about Lyndon B. Johnson is, of all things, *The Gay Place*, a novel published in 1961. Its author, William Brammer, wrote much of it while serving as then Senator Johnson's chauffeur, sometimes speech writer, office hand and all-round step-and-fetcher, and put his observations into the portrait of a hilarious, compassionate, and vulgar nobleman of life, one Governor Arthur Fenstermaker. Here are glimpses of Fenstermaker-Johnson floating in his ranch swimming pool while monitoring Muzak and telephoning the great bankers of the East or some claybog political crony, bouncing across the desert floor at 80-miles-per-hour while sipping Scotch and misquoting the prophets, cracking a political vertebra here, bestowing a political blessing there;

8/3/68

praising God, whooping at wild flowers, enjoying the comforts of ladies – and all the while doing his damndest to wield power, generally on the side of Good.

Lyndon Johnson claims *The Gay Place* as one of those rare books he has read. Though from the moment LBJ laid it aside Brammer was forever banished from close proximity to the Throne, this merely proves that the President rarely looks in the mirror and sees humor there. Brammer's strength was that while he got down Fenstermaker-Johnson's unholy excesses, he did not fall victim to the contagious craziness himself. Understanding his man's better instincts, he brought to Fenstermaker-Johnson depths and dimensions the nonfiction writer has yet to achieve.

All the world knows that President Johnson, gazing on a likeness of himself painted by Peter Hurd, once blurted: "That's the ugliest thing I ever saw." Should the President see these latest word pictures – by Alfred Steinberg and Hugh Sidey – he may downgrade Mr. Hurd's entry. To save you suspense, Sidey's is the more worthwhile book.

Had Johnson sought reelection, Steinberg's *Sam Johnson's Boy* might have come to prominence as the Bible of all who harbor less than love for their President. The many anti-Johnson scenes, stories, moods, and motives will unfailingly please his most severe critics whether of the Left or Right. But this fat, gossipy book contains little of interest to scholars. Certainly it cannot qualify as serious biography, though it is being advertised as such. The author has collected all possible anti-Johnson yarns (many of them likely apocryphal) and damaging accusations that too often are credited to faceless sources.

There are some truths in Steinberg's book; many of them are uglier than the Hurd painting. But there are half-truths; distortions; too much open rancor. Mr. Steinberg need not have strained himself: President Johnson, his own worst enemy, is fully capable of painting his own black self-portraits. Poor LBJ unfortunately is a man almost wholly lacking in the personal graces, a brash egotist prone to rant

and bully and given to profanities, a frighteningly-hawkish warrior in the nuclear age, often stubbornly bull-headed; an actor of outlandish postures, and on occasion given to careless or needless lies. All this has been documented to the satisfaction of possibly everyone except the Democratic National Committee.

Steinberg is not content merely to allow LBJ's clumsier brush-strokes to paint their own ugly vignettes. Ill-will seems to spring from almost every page: Johnson goes off "on another diplomatic escapade" rather than on a mission; he never speaks but "screams" or "barks" or "bellows"; on the night of John F. Kennedy's assassination the President is remembered for devouring fried chicken and gulping Scotch in the company of "exhilarated" aides while watching "a sickening rehashing" of the assassination news on TV. (Say for Mr. Steinberg that he knows how to use language like a dirk). On the day of JFK's funeral, when most Americans gave Johnson high marks for personal conduct, Steinberg depicts him "screaming" at Secret Service agents ("You damned piss-ant bastards . . .") because of his positioning too distant from the gravesite, and because they still wore the PT-109 tieclasp given them by the late President. The new President's brief chats with world leaders assembled for the funeral is interpreted as "a show" which LBJ "enjoyed" so much "his schedule collapsed," and was the occasion for various diplomatic blunders.

Steinberg appears to fudge on the facts: an attempt is made to make LBJ into the crony of Texas swindler Billie Sol Estes when, in fact, the opposite was true. As a big man in the Liberal wing of the Texas Democratic Party, Estes opposed LBJ – part-and-parcel of the ruling Conservative Establishment – at state conventions, in grassroots precinct fights, and in primary elections. The double standard is trotted out: Lyndon Johnson, Senate Majority Leader, is held personally accountable for all the wheeler-dealer tactics of Bobby Baker while Mike Mansfield (LBJ's successor as Leader) somehow "remained unaware of the enormity of the plotting and secret dealings of his young secretary for the majority." (If Senator Mansfield knew nothing of the

adroit and power-driven Mr. Baker's personal sideshow, then he should be stuffed and preserved in the Smithsonian. Everyone else on Capitol Hill knew of it.)

When pushing JFK's larger bills through Congress after ascending to the White House, LBJ somehow merely "created the impression" he was working for this legislation. Then, in an about-face many biting pages later, LBJ becomes the complete ogre in bludgeoning Congress with "pork-barrel grants, threats, bribes, persecutions, and a barrage of barnyard Johnsonese." Mr. Steinberg, in trying to have it both ways, ignores the fact that Congress is historically a foot-dragging institution that any President worth his salt has always found necessary to bludgeon with all available weapons – if he cares a whit for his legislative ambitions.

If *Sam Johnson's Boy* has any real relevance to 1968, it may be that section stressing how completely Hubert Humphrey is the creature of Lyndon B. Johnson: beholden to LBJ for being ushered into the Senate's ruling circle, for choice committee assignments, for being permitted to act as floor leader of politically helpful bills, for his position as Senate Majority Whip, for the Vice-Presidency and for his head-on crack at the Presidency itself.

As one who remembered Hugh Sidey's weekly presidential features in *Life* magazine as sometimes overly-admiring (or even downright saccharine) I approached *A Very Personal Presidency* expecting more of the same. Happily, I was wrong. Sidey is not blind to presidential shortcomings; his controlled understanding of them, however, plus his reasoned explanation of *how* LBJ came to be the creature that he is – and his willingness to bestow credit when due – leaves the author's credibility intact. Pro-Johnson partisans likely will find Sidey's scalpel more painful than Steinberg's hatchet.

Sidey bolsters the theory that despite LBJ's thirty-odd years on the national political scene he remains very much the small-town boy from Johnson City, his outlooks and decisions irrevocably shaped by his early experiences in a land where brute strength was often

THE NEW REPUBLIC

necessary to survival and generally was more prized than any virtues save – possibly – cunning. Young Lyndon Johnson observed that the fittest survived: "The banker was king. The image was one of 'the man who lived in the big white house up on the hill.' Curiously, Johnson did not seem to resent the possession of economic power. He just wanted to be the one to have it." (He got it, too. At last count the LBJ fortune was around \$15-million.) The President's yarns glorifying the Texas Rangers or martyrs at the Alamo may be translated into his hero-worshipping shilling of "my boys" in Vietnam, or account for his determination not to be chased out of that country. When LBJ wars on poverty, he thinks of hoary ranchers at the mercy of rainless summers or of "his first shock at seeing the Mexican-American children of Texas rummaging through the garbage cans of a roadhouse looking for grapefruit rinds." LBJ – Sidey writes – "is quite convinced that adequate water in the areas of shortage and control of the waters in the areas of surplus could do more for peace than just about any technological breakthrough. The world is simply Johnson City in megatons."

The President's predilection for "consensus government" may be traced to

his experiences in what was long a one-party state, politically, where the survivor found it necessary to woo in tandem the banker, rancher, main-street merchant, or courthouse boss. Dissent rocked the boat, periling success. The successful Texas politician put useless partisanship aside, cozying up to the establishment and working to bring everyone under his own personal banner; he looked with suspicion on college professors or others who spoke of some vague idealism or felt compulsion to fight for obviously lost causes. In such surroundings, one did not suffer fools. Lyndon Johnson would never learn to suffer foolish dissent, intellectuals, or idealists in the White House or Congress anymore than he had in Blanco County.

"This is a book of glimpses," Sidey writes in his opening notes. "None is a total by itself, but it is my hope that when put together in the reader's mind, much like the frames of a motion picture, they will leave a full and fresh impression, perhaps even bring new understanding, of Lyndon Johnson's Presidency." Mr. Sidney did not miss his mark by much. He has made good use of his experience as a longtime White House correspondent, and his book is a helpful addition to the poor world of Johnson letters.