

February 1967

MANCHESTER - KEYHOLE HISTORIAN

Intimate details of the behavior of the principal actors and minor players in the melodrama performed in Dallas on November 22, 1963 embroider the third installment of Manchester's Death Of A President in the February 21, 1967 issue of Look magazine. Gossip-hungry and gossip-fed readers will find Manchester's tale fascinating, unaware of his numerous errors of fact, large and small. Brainwashed by the mass-communication media into thinking history comprises a disorderly, if not irrational and incomprehensible, series of sensational incidents created and resolved by demigod or satanic leaders, Manchester's readers can derive a vindictive satisfaction on learning from his undistinguished prose the occupants of power in the mightiest government of all were motivated in a time of crisis, like themselves, by fear, panic, egotism, vanity, arrogance, coarseness, and petty calculation, as well as by compassion, love, loyalty, devotion, duty, and responsibility. In Manchester's dramatis personae there are no gods, no giants, no heroes, only little weaklings. And all is fragmentary external description. Despite the intimacy of the thoughts and actions he describes and ascribes to them, Manchester does not penetrate even a single individual to lay bare the well sprung of his thought and deed. Motivation, except in obvious minor instances, is conspicuous by its absence. From the standpoint of prevailing American standards, Manchester's revelations constitute

brilliant journalism. Look's judgment in paying him the unprecedented and incredible price of more than \$10 a word was sound.

But Clio's judgment must be harsh. The "historian" who, like Walter Winchell and his tribe, squints through keyholes sees with only one eye. Like a news photographer's camera, he catches fleeting wisps of action frozen in abstraction from their genesis and consequence. His miniscule canvas lacks perspective in space and time. Contextual truth lies beyond his restricted field of vision. Not for him such abstract concepts as the logic of history; he has no need for a theory of objective historical development. For him the immutable, inborn imperfections of human character, like original sin, suffice to explain the little he sees.

So it is with Manchester. Absorbing and repelling is his account of the frenetic struggle in Parkland Hospital between Texas officials and the dead President's aides for possession of Kennedy's corpse. He leaves no room for doubt removal of the corpse was conscious, willful, and arrogant violation by Federal officials of Texas law stipulating local postmortem and inquest, and violation of the right of any then prospective assassin "of access to the findings of an impartial post mortem examination." Manchester's bias, it is equally clear in what he wrote, runs in favor of Kennedy's aides and against the Texans.

And also in what he did not find necessary or advisable to include. Loudly absent is mention, let alone discuss-

- 3 -

sion, of 1) the problem of Vice President Johnson's possible direct connection with the violation of law committed by Federal officials; 2) the significance of deliberate violation of state law by officials of the nation's chief law-enforcement and policy-making institution; and President Johnson's appointment of one of these officials, Lawrence O'Brien, to Cabinet rank as Postmaster General of the United States; and, of critical importance for the government's account of the assassination, 3) the crucial fact that kidnaping Kennedy's corpse in Dallas made possible the spurious report of the postmortem examination by military pathologists in Washington later that night.

Again, Manchester "saw" Dallas undertaker Vernon Oneal, "a cumbersome figure in the story of John Kennedy," exert himself at the peremptory behest of Secret Service Agent Clinton Hill to provide the best casket he had to hold the remains of the assassinated President and then to emplace him therein for transport, as he thought, to his mortuary establishment "that might have been invented by Waugh or Huxley." But when, poor man, caught in the hurricane of panic and conflict, so vividly described by Manchester, between Dallas officials and Kennedy's aides over removal of the corpse from Parkland Hospital and Texas for carriage to Washington, Oneal realized the loss of his President was compounded by the apparent appropriation by Federal officials of his best satin-lined, 800-lb., bronze casket, he "turned to (reporter) Hugh Sidey of Time and expressed concern over who would pay him." " 'Sordid', " thought Sidey as recorded

by Manchester who was assured in advance by contract of \$665,000 for his part in the journalistic exploitation of the gruesome horror of Kennedy's assassination and the pitiful conduct of the President's survivors.

A lesser historian than Manchester, paid only, let us say, \$250,000, and therefore more biased and lacking in the fine disdain of Sidey and Manchester for the fearful greed of unctuous morticians, might have observed that while the political establishment of the United States seemed enmeshed in leaderless confusion in an hour of crisis, the free-enterprise system of American capitalism, untouched by decapitation of the government, continued to function unimpaired. With mordant irony and an eye on both Marx and Krushchev, the muse of history chose an undertaker asking for his honest due to give unconscious assurance communist revolution was not afoot in the United States.

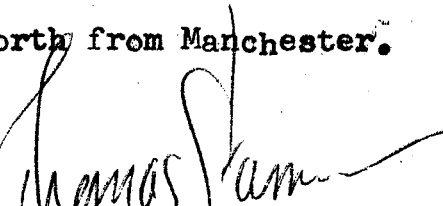
for
But/Manchester, unlike Macbeth, reassurance lay in another murder. The slaughter of Dallas policeman J.D. Tippit less than an hour after the assassination of Kennedy signified the "great crime" of slaying the President was not, as it was "logical to suppose," the work of a "great criminal, backed, perhaps, by a criminal nation" because "If that were true, the grand design would be revealed in a grand fashion, not in the petty killing of a patrolman." Tippit, dieing by Oswald's lonely hand, exculpated Castro, Kosygin, Mao Tse Tung!

Let him who can unravel Manchester's historic illogic. We note only he explains neither by reason nor example his con-

- 5 -

ceptions of great crimes, great criminals, grand designs, and grand fashions of revealing them either in history or in literature. But he purveys in passing, as though it was a subliminal television ad, the horrendous idea of a "criminal nation." It is an old idea, encountered, for example, until the ecumenical council of recent date, in the anathema pronounced by the Catholic Church, stigmatizing Jews as Christ killers. In modern dress it formed a central axis of Nazi ideology; and unfortunately it is now current in parts of the world among people who hold the entire German nation, divided though it be between capitalist west and communist east, guilty of the monstrous crimes committed by the Nazi government before many of the present generation were born. In American history this pernicious idea is to be found in justifications for the conquest of the Indians, the enslavement of Negroes, and contemporary anti-Communism.

Look got more than its money's worth from Manchester.


Feb. 12, 1967