

Good, quotable
commentary

Credulity Strained

Manchester Book Is Out of Focus

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By Richard Wilson

WASHINGTON — When history is fictionalized the picture is likely to get a bit out of focus. So it is with William Manchester's account of why John F. Kennedy went to Dallas and his death.

Manchester's account feeds the mythology that Kennedy's primary concern was with helping Vice President Lyndon Johnson resolve a local political feud, and that he went to Dallas reluctantly and in a bad humor.

These aspects no doubt were part of the motivations for Kennedy's visit. But it cannot be overlooked that Kennedy went to Dallas primarily to help himself, and for that reason he was accompanied by many reporters and political writers whose primary interest was to cover the President's first political foray in his bid for re-election.

To Manchester's credit, he says that the President had no choice but to go to Texas to try to reduce the factionalism there so that there would be less risk of losing the state in the 1964 presidential election. As Manchester weaves out his reconstruction of history, however, the blame somehow turns to Johnson and his "tong" in mounting resentment that Kennedy went to Texas at all to risk exposure to the hostile atmosphere known to exist there.

It was the existence of this atmosphere which caused Kennedy to go, for if he could not overcome it there was a real and present danger that the very narrow margin by which the Kennedy-Johnson ticket carried Texas in 1960 would be turned to the debit side in 1964.

Kennedy was on the downgrade politically in

1963, and he could not afford to slide far. The Gallup Poll showed a sag in his popularity. Kennedy supporters complained that the New Frontier hadn't got off the ground. The country hadn't yet got over the shock of the Cuban missile crisis, and hadn't forgotten about the Bay of Pigs. The election of 1964 was less than a year away, and Kennedy was in poor shape politically.

HE had only beaten Richard M. Nixon by 118,500 votes out of 68,838,979 cast in 1960. The margin in Texas had been a mere 46,000 out of 2,312,000 cast, in Illinois only 8,858 out of 4,757,000 cast, and in those states there were sound reasons to suspect that election irregularities could have accounted for the difference.

In fact, it is a sound premise that Kennedy would not have been elected without Johnson on the ticket to help carry Texas, and four other southern states, which could have turned the election the other way. This is to say nothing of Illinois, Missouri and Pennsylvania which could as easily have gone for Nixon as for Kennedy.

Kennedy therefore was in Texas because he had to be there if he wished to show due regard for his own prospects of re-election in the following November. He was not there just to please Lyndon Johnson or bolster up Gov. John Connally; he was there because his own political life was on the line. If Manchester is to be believed, Kennedy was concerned that his politically diffident wife look her best so that the total Kennedy effect would register as strongly as possible.

MANCHESTER is getting too much blame for what Kennedy partisans are reading into what he wrote. It is the weakness of his account, of course, that so much of it is synthesized history presented uncritically as if it were recognized fact. It would have been so much better, from his point of view, if he had been able to identify his sources and let us know upon what his many ex cathedra statements and historical constructions are based.

For example, others than Manchester place a very different construction than his on Mrs. Kennedy's journey prior to the assassination to the Mediterranean on the Onassis yacht. This was not relative to the assassination in any case but Manchester would have strained our credulity less in other more important matters if he had been more objective in some of the attending details.

This, of course, was the cloud under which he was writing. The monetary value of what Manchester wrote did not accrue from his having written it, or from his stature as a historian. It accrued from the fact that Mrs. Kennedy had given Manchester 10 tape-recorded hours of her innermost thoughts and emotions about the assassination and her relationships with her husband. Otherwise Manchester would have written just another book about the Kennedy assassination.

But when we read Manchester we do not know how much of it is Mrs. Kennedy, how much of it is somebody else, and how much of it is just Manchester. We are not likely soon to know. Meantime, the Manchester story makes very good reading, if you allow for a little fictionalization mixed with political, sociological and medical opinion of the author.

Irrelevancies Can Cloud 'Instant History'

By Bruce Bioessat 1/5/67
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The year 1967 will see spirited new debate on the value of "instant history."

The life and death of John F. Kennedy have, of course, provided the biggest spur in this century to the quick retelling of great events.

In 1965 the Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger books on Kennedy's presidency were laid down as important building blocks in the final edifice which real history — with its necessary long perspective — will erect for him.

So, in a quite different way, will William Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," begin to serve this function as the first serialized installment makes its appearance.

But no American should forget the highly preliminary nature of these works. They are not history but merely its materials.

In the case of the controversial Manchester book, interest among influential figures and average citizens is hugely compounded by the fact that it involves the martyred Kennedy, his beautiful wife with her unbounded capacity to gain the attention of millions, an incumbent President, the cruel drama of an assassination,

and the linking of many other persons of prominence to that event.

Given the status the dead president enjoys today in so many American eyes, all of this interest is both legitimate and inevitable.

It must be observed, however, that the quite agitated anticipation of Manchester's work seems to go considerably beyond this.

Highly significant is the fact that a major magazine bought the serializing rights to the story for more than six times the price paid to Sorensen and Schlesinger for their respected, well-received undertakings.

THIS huge payment would not have been made for even the most thoroughly organized, dramatically written re-rectal of the central events surrounding the assassination.

The magazine rights were bid so high because the bidders deemed the reader market great enough to bear the cost. It was judged, no doubt rightly, that the American people and millions abroad have an insatiable appetite for personal detail, for intrigue, for feuding and other conflict, indeed, for just plain gossip, as it affects the lives of high public figures — and particularly the late John Kennedy, his family, and his successor, Lyndon Johnson.

Perhaps it has always been so. Certainly, in this current instance, there should be no pretense that it is not the case.

That these intimate details will now be bootlegged or otherwise printed by foreign publishers only underscores the point. The market for such details — even when not authentic — is immense, as the so-called "movie fan" magazines discovered long ago in their unending, successful exploitation of popular interest in Mrs. Kennedy.

THIS aspect of the interest in the Manchester book should not be thrust aside merely because neither the Kennedy's nor anyone else involved in the dispute exactly covered themselves with glory as it was acted out.

Because instant history captures human recollection while it is fresh, historians believe in it, though they recognize that its writing can become an element itself in the larger sweep of real history — and sometimes create or perpetuate myths with harmful effect to persons or events.

What the Manchester work may generate is a more thoughtful concern for separating the genuinely useful materials of history from exciting private matters which have only glancing effect upon the course of events.