

# The Critics Are Saying...

## THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT.

By William Manchester. Harper & Row. 647 pp. \$10.

Time Magazine: "Nothing so far written about the book has stolen its sense of immediacy or muffled its sound of authenticity. Not even the remembered massive coverage—from the first unblinking TV hours to the 888-page Warren Commission report—can diminish the power of Manchester's all-encompassing narrative.

"It is, nevertheless, a flawed book. Although Manchester considers himself a historian, it is not truly history, for the events of Nov. 22, 1963, are still too recent and Manchester's emotional trauma much too evident . . .

"The dry-eyed historian and tragic poet will come later."

New York Review of Books (Elizabeth Hardwick): "What was the purpose of this book? A close reading of the text—and a considerable chore that undertaking is—suggests that the work, as it went along its entirely undistinguished way, grew aimlessly fatter and fatter, feeding on any sort of snack that turned up . . . Manchester has written a sentimental book, often



JOHN F. KENNEDY

mean about Johnson—and lo, the light shone on the wrong side somehow and Johnson had reason to chuckle at his ill-treatment and the Kennedys to wonder at the perils of adoration."

Tom Wicker (New York Times Book Review); "As for

us, the living . . . what is the Kennedy myth but a narcotic, an escape, a romance? 'Once upon a time, when the world was young and golden, there was a handsome prince who lighted our way and all was well.' And if we only had him back the world would not be so dark and so cruel and so baffling. Yet, the essence of Kennedy's thought was that man lived a twilight struggle in which, if he fought well, there would be neither victory nor defeat; and I believe that the glory of man is not that he erects myths of triumph but that he endures without hope of triumph, and prevails because he insists on living in spite of death's certainty . . .

"Above all, in Kennedy's case or any other, I refuse to deny the harsh reality of death—that life goes on anyway, not unchanged, for the death of any man must diminish the sum of humanity, but undaunted, unabated in all its glory and misery. That is the meaning of the 'ghastly futility' at Dallas. That is what the Kennedy myth distorts. And that is what, in the end, William Manchester's monument obscures."

New York Times (Eliot Fremont-Smith): "Extraordinarily impressive, fascinating and absorbing piece of work—far better in nearly every respect than many of us have probably expected . . . by far Mr. Manchester's best book." However, "Mr. Manchester's style verges on the lush-flowery-exotic" and when he writes about Mrs. Kennedy and her children he "turns some of the pages of this book to pulp."

Book Week (Gore Vidal): "The Death of a President" is very much a work of love, even passion . . . That love, however, did his writing little service, for the prose of the book is not good—the result, no doubt, of the strain under which the author was compelled to work. Certainly the style shows none of the ease which marked his first book on Kennedy, nor is there

any trace of that elegance with which he once portrayed H. L. Mencken. Yet the crowded, overwritten narrative holds."

Book Week (Alistair Cooke): Mr. Manchester was—for all the memorandum of agreement and the protestations of minimal censorship—an employee. He was employed to write the Authorized Version and he found, at some point, that he had a 'Gone With the Wind' in his future. Whatever that point was (it appears to be more or less agreed that it was Mrs. Kennedy's shock at the price of the magazine serialization) it released Manchester not from his prior Kennedy compact but from his sense of dependence on the Kennedys. When all the raw material was in, which he couldn't have gathered without them, he saw himself a free man . . . soon a famous one . . .

"Prudence, taste, the stability of the government, the better part of wisdom and all those other square attributes notwithstanding, the tape recorder is with it, man, and will carry us along by the sheer availability of the instant image, the instant sound, the instant news. It is a best seller written for the snooper's world that Marshall McLuhan calls 'the global village.'"

National Observer (James Meagher): "The writing often resembles that of a young amateur on his first big assignment overwhelmed by his subject and not sure what to make of it all. The opinions and conclusions he draws from his monumental collection of facts are shallow and commonplace."

Nation (Elmer Bendiner): "This is not merely a retelling of the tragedy; Mr. Manchester fills page after page with facts never before reported. We discover that the White House Communication officer asked a sergeant for a roast beef sand-



WILLIAM MANCHESTER



## Mysteries

The Man Who Killed Himself  
—Julian Symons—VERY  
GOOD

Sladd's Evil—Philip McCutchan—VERY GOOD

wich before President Kennedy's last helicopter ride . . .

"It is hard to say whether William Manchester will ultimately be known as the pioneer collector of the crumbs of history or the single-handed destroyer of the English language."

Wall Street Journal (A. L. Rowse): "When one accumulates so much irrelevant detail, what is really significant is swamped. It does not appear that among Mr. Manchester's talents a sense of humor is one, and sense of humor is closely allied to sense of proportion. He might think humor inappropriate; it never is: Men like Disraeli or Tallyrand, Charles II or Sir Thomas More could joke even in the face of death. The last 200 pages, prolonging the agony through all the funeral services, are positively ghoulish. In short this book of 700 pages would have been infinitely better if it had been 500 pages, and better still if it had been 400 pages."

Philadelphia Inquirer (James A. Michener): A book that will be used by historians for the next 2,000 years. If this sounds exaggerated, consider how gratified we would be to have a similar account of the death of Julius Caesar.

New Yorker (Richard R. Rorty

vere): "Manchester's description of certain events aboard Air Force One has been seriously challenged by a respected reporter who was aboard the plane — Charles Roberts, of Newsweek — in 'The Truth About the Assassination' (Grosset & Dunlap) . . . Meanwhile, Defense Department officials are insisting that Manchester is wholly in error in saying that Lyndon Johnson had never been briefed on some of the most dreadful of the responsibilities that became his on November 22, 1963. Much of the power of this book rests upon our acceptance of the author's accuracy on points such as these. If this is a book shot through with departures from the truth, then our emotions are being played upon in a shameless way."

Merriman Smith (UPI): Gripping, incredibly detailed, reasonably authentic. "To pick at his mistakes, however, is to ignore the true stature of his book . . . It is an amazing piece of work. Laborious reading, perhaps, but with the exception of the Warren Commission Report, there is nothing else on the subject to compare with 'The Death of a President.'"

Dallas Morning News (Lon Tinkle): "I do not recognize Ralph Yarborough in this portrait of a corn-belt politico yelling 'Hi, thar.' I do not recognize the courageous and intelligent Sarah Hughes in this portrait of a giddy, harum-scarum woman judge."

Austin American-Statesman (Oscar Collier): "The writing is full of slurs on Texas and Texans," who shouldn't contribute \$10 to this author and his pretentious book.