

THE MANCHESTER BOOK: Despite Flaws & Errors, a Story That Is Larger Than Life or Death

AFTER the Kennedys invited William Manchester in February 1964 to write an account of the assassination, Bobby Kennedy thought that the author might whip through his work before the 1964 election campaign; after all, the tragic ground had already been covered by others. Jacqueline Kennedy thought the book would wind up "bound in black and put away in dark library shelves." The publisher, Harper & Row, did not dream of a first printing of 600,000, or of "the bestseller of the century," as it is now freely described. Few foresaw that *The Death of a President* would become not only a publishing phenomenon but also an emotional battleground—a book about which other books will be written.

When it finally reached the public last week—some stores put it on sale ten days before the release date—it seemed the work had been prepublicized, predigested, precriticized and prejudged beyond the point that the book itself could make much difference.

Yet, astonishingly enough, 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. Although he rather pretentiously alludes to his own gargantuan labors with Samuel Butler's classic line, "Poets by their sufferings grow," Manchester's writing falls far short not only of poetry but often of good prose. But all this is rendered comparatively irrelevant by his basic achievement, which was to assemble an overwhelming mass of detail—so much detail that the story becomes larger than life or death. For no one normally ever has that much information about any event, not even an event in one's own life.

Manchester seems to relish the lonely martyr's role and talks of himself as having been "in the arena" with his enemies. He insisted on making *The Death of a President* a one-man creation. From the workaday mechanics of transcribing his own tapes and shorthand notes to the responsibility of passing judgments on his own facts, he worked alone. He insists that he did not hire professional researchers because he wanted the force and conviction of a single viewpoint and, besides, that he

was not sure whether the book would make enough money to justify the expense.* He held 267 interviews, and the Kennedys' early stamp of approval gave him easy access to virtually all sources. Indeed, of all the major Government figures involved, only Lyndon Johnson refused to give Manchester an interview, instead wrote out answers to 18 questions.

Manchester interviewed such historic walk-ons as the presidential baggage-master, J.F.K.'s White House French teacher and a soldier who carried a wreath in the funeral procession. He examined the coffin in which Kennedy's body was brought to Washington, studied Jackie's bloodied pink dress in the Georgetown attic where it has been stored since she took it off, walked the entire five-mile motorcade route in Dallas. In the end, he molded his mountain of minutiae into a highly dramatized reconstruction of the tragedy.

The time covered in the book's 710 pages stretches from 8:45 a.m. Nov. 20, when a vibrant, if slightly testy, John Kennedy presided over a White House breakfast for congressional leaders, to midnight Nov. 25, when Jackie prayed and placed a bouquet of lilies of the valley beside the eternal flame at the dead President's grave.

The story begins slowly. The author tries too hard to achieve a sense of ominous anticipation from various people's warnings and premonitions. Manchester approaches Dallas and the underpass near the Texas Schoolbook Depository Building at an excruciatingly slow pace and with innumerable side trips. But then the horrendous drama takes hold of the reader all over again. It is not so much that Manchester's details bring new significance to the event; it is rather that the event itself seems to infuse even the most unimportant detail with meaning.

"I Couldn't Help It"

Manchester focuses microscopically on the thoughts and actions of the occupants of the presidential limousine. A fragment of Kennedy's shattered skull "rises over the President's falling shoulders and seems to hang there and then drift toward the rear, and Jackie springs up on her stained knees . . . and sprawls on the sloping back of the car, defeated." John Connally, suddenly covered with blood, thought instantly of riding as a boy in the family Model T after helping butcher cattle, then re-

* Manchester stands to make at least \$1,250,000 before taxes, but the great bulk of the book's profits—which may be as much as \$10 million more—will go to the Kennedy Library at Harvard.

alizing that he himself was hit, "fills his lungs and screams and screams and screams."

At Parkland Hospital, the President lay in Trauma Room 1—an area "as impersonal as IBM, which had actually manufactured the wall clock." Dr. Malcolm Perry entered the room and looked at Kennedy, who was undressed except for a back brace and shorts; the surgeon's first reaction was, "The President's bigger than I thought."

While the doctors worked, Jackie stood in a corner with Presidential Physician George Burkley and "rested her spattered cheek" on Burkley's shoulder, then "knelt in the President's blood and closed her eyes in prayer." Later, in the corridor, Secret Service Chauffeur Bill Greer came up to her and sobbed, "Oh Mrs. Kennedy, oh my God, oh my God, I didn't mean to do it, I didn't hear, I should have swerved the car, I couldn't help it." Then he embraced her and wept on her shoulder.

Bugler's Haircut

Manchester sets up an intricate counterpoint between his story of the stricken individuals in Dallas and what he calls "the Greek chorus" of fear and mourning that quickly gripped the world in general. A stunned Associated Press operator, attempting to transmit the bulletin that Kennedy was shot, clattered the keys with a "tragic stutter" that resulted in O'DONNELL becoming "o;9,,3))," and BLOOD-STAINED became "BLOOD STAAINEZAAC RBMTHING," and HE LAY became a wailing "HA LAAAAAAAAAAAAA."

In Washington, so many people picked up telephones when they heard the first bulletins that—one by one—nearly every major exchange in the city went dead. Ted Kennedy raced desperately from house to house in Georgetown, trying to find a phone and to learn whether his brother was dead. Sergeant Keith Clark, who regularly played the bugle at major Arlington Cemetery funerals, rushed out to get a haircut. Six members of Kennedy's Cabinet and White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, in a jet over the Pacific heading for a meeting in Japan, got the words of the shooting via an AP ticker. Some immediately began jotting down notes of their personal impressions—which triggered bitter anger in others. Salinger, stricken to "a semicomma," quickly organized a poker game, played blindly and madly during the entire nine-hour flight back to Washington, wound up winning \$800 and "was appalled."

The next night, during a dinner at the White House, including the Robert Ken-

nedly, Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, there was "puckish horseplay" as the mourners recoiled from shock. Everyone knew that Ethel Kennedy often wore a wig; during the meal, it was "snatched off and passed from head to head, winding up . . . on the slick pate of the Secretary of Defense."

Orphan Annie's Eyes

Peripheral actors, too, play poignant roles in Manchester's panoply. The eight-man military casket team that carried Kennedy's coffin up the 36 steps into the Capitol rotunda on Nov. 24 was astonished at its weight and nearly dropped it. That night they were terrified at the thought of the next day's funeral procession, when they would have to carry it down again. The officer in charge ordered a coffin from Fort Myer, had it filled with sandbags, and at midnight took his team to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. There, he marched them up and down the darkened steps. Later, the officer and a sentry sat on the lid to increase the weight, while the team made the trip again and again. Next day they had no trouble during the ceremonies.

Robert Oswald, brother of the assassin, recalled how, during his last visit with Lee Oswald in the Dallas police station, he suddenly realized that Lee "was really unconcerned. I was looking into his eyes, but they were blank, like Orphan Annie's . . . He knew what was happening, because as I searched his eyes he said to me, 'Brother, you won't find anything there.'"

Manchester has no doubts that the Warren Commission's single-assassin finding is correct. He reports, however, that Jackie Kennedy's first reaction to her husband's death was to wish that it was caused by a widespread plot, for then "there would be an air of inevitability about the tragedy; then she could persuade herself that if the plotters had missed on Elm Street they would have eventually succeeded elsewhere."

No Snopesian Boor

During the height of his battle with the Kennedys, it was said that Manchester had depicted Lyndon Johnson as a kind of Snopesian boor in the hours immediately after the assassination. L.B.J.'s portrait as it now appears in the book is not all that uncomplimentary. Fewer than 4,000 words were deleted from the book's 360,000 as a result of the Kennedy intervention—but some could have made quite a difference. Besides, it is impossible to say just how much Manchester's first-draft characterization may have been softened by Harper's editors even before the Kennedys entered the dispute. At one point, Manchester had intended to start the book with an episode in which he contrasts L.B.J.'s love of hunting to J.F.K.'s "haunting" recollection of shooting a deer on L.B.J.'s ranch in 1960. The incident, which makes Johnson seem a

heartless killer while Kennedy gets "an inner scar" from shooting a deer, is still in the book, but has considerably less anti-Lyndon impact than if it had launched the entire epic. It tends to cast Johnson as a man accustomed to brutality—a gruesome and singularly unjust characterization that makes L.B.J.'s love of hunting appear to be a crude symbol of acquiescence to murder.

Manchester still details some brusque actions by Johnson or his aides that could have been handled with more polish. Yet he also reports that when one L.B.J. aide pressured him to move immediately into Kennedy's oval office from his vice-presidential suite in the Old Executive Office Building because it would "give the people confidence," Johnson barked back: "People will get confidence if we do our job properly. Stop this. Our first concern is Mrs. Kennedy and the family." When an anxious assistant tried to talk Johnson into riding in a car instead of endangering himself by walking in the funeral procession, he snapped: "You damned bastards are trying to take over. If I listen to you, I'll be led to stupid, indecent decisions. I'm going to walk."

Because of his unlimited admiration for the widowed First Lady, Manchester was also supposed to have created a mawkish, Camille-like Jackie Kennedy. Yet, she is presented fairly objectively in this version of the book—overcome by her loss, but not immersed in bathos. From the coffin she took a lock of Kennedy's hair, writes Manchester, and as she left the East Room she was "swaying visibly." She righted herself and, "beyond consolation, wrenched by a torsion of pain," she managed to retain "the sense of purpose which had kept her going for two days."

The Black Hats. Manchester does have an unfortunate tendency to create white-hat heroes and black-hat villains. The Kennedys and their friends are generally courageous, strong and tasteful. The Secret Service, Marguerite and Marina Oswald, the undertaking profession and nearly all Texans are cast in black (or at least dark grey) hats. Manchester paints a miasmic portrait of Dallas, writing that the city suffered from a "disease of the spirit." He even describes the city's skyline as "phallic." Texans, he writes, disliked Kennedy because he "refused to give the world a kick in the old kazzazza," and because his "*Weltansicht* was entirely lacking in yippee." This typifies not only the summary judgments but the book's stylistic atrocities.

The book's major flaw may well turn out to be its very essence: Manchester's swift-moving dramatization of his own research. Throughout the book, he has used the "omniscient author" technique of the novelist, confidently relating the inner thoughts of nearly everyone in his immense cast of characters. Manchester says he "quotes" thoughts only when people later told him what in fact went through their minds, but this is still a

risky technique in a book that deals with an enormously complex historical event and with historical figures who are still alive and extremely sensitive.

His insistence on working without a researcher even to double-check name spellings was also perilous. Already, Manchester is being accused of errors. No sooner had the first reviews appeared last week than the Pentagon retorted that Manchester was wrong in saying Defense Secretary McNamara had declared a "red alert" for all U.S. military commands when he learned Kennedy was dead. Manchester claims he has a copy of McNamara's order. The Defense Department also charged he erred in saying that, as Vice President, Lyndon Johnson had never been briefed about the "football"—the 30-lb., black metal suitcase containing codes to launch a nuclear attack. Manchester says his information came from five different sources, including then J.C.S. Chairman Maxwell Taylor.

Honest & Herculean

Despite Manchester's painstaking description of the Bible on which L.B.J. took the presidential oath aboard Air Force One ("tooled leather" cover and inside "the tiny sewn-on black initials 'JFK'"), some of those who were there claim it was a Catholic missal still wrapped in cellophane. At one point in his reporting, Manchester phoned a White House correspondent, who had been a member of the press pool aboard the flight from Dallas to Washington, and asked him about some small point not related to the flight. The correspondent reminded Manchester that he had been on the plane, but the author coolly replied that the manifest did not list the newsman as having been aboard and hung up the phone.

These and other errors known so far are minor, even trivial, considering the thousands of facts that Manchester had to deal with. It is far too soon to tell whether the cumulative effect of even small mistakes will undermine the overall credibility of the book—or whether major ones will yet appear. There is no question that Manchester did an honest and herculean job, handicapped by his self-imposed lack of assistance, the fact that he was not in Dallas on the fatal day, and perhaps his inevitable emotional involvement. In the tendency he has sometimes shown in relating himself to the late President, Manchester evokes a line from a famous Kennedy speech: "*Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen* [Let them come to Berlin!]" Addressing potential critics of his book, Manchester paraphrases the line in bastardized German: "*Lass' sie nach das Buch kommen.*" Without question, readers will come to the book, and keep coming. They will relive the horror, the sadness and the waste of the occasion, with the aid of a guide who at times obviously would rather weep than write. The dry-eyed historian and tragic poet will come later.