

Holmes Alexander

Death of a President

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WASHINGTON — Dr. Sam Johnson, probably the most-rounded man of letters in our literature, enunciated the parable concerning books, saying that a man needn't eat the whole of an apple to find out if it were rotten. The converse of that maxim is that several large bites into William Man-



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chester's 600-page tome, "The Death of a President," are sufficient to prove its worth.

It is a book that deserves a favorite accolade of Kennedy. While not flawless, it is a book of excellence. The Harper & Row publication, after so much bad publicity and a bit of compromise, still remains a literary event. It still represents a prodigious feat by its author. It is a treasury of expressive phrases, of artful contrasts in the presentation of minor figures. It gives vivid and intimate, glorified but essentially valid, word-portraits of the hero and heroine, John and Jacqueline Kennedy.

The flaws can't be overlooked. This is, or started out to be, an authorized biography of a royal family, and that's the

worst kind. But Mr. Manchester's very honesty lost him the family seal of approval, and that's much to his credit. A fellow-writer of mine was tentatively commissioned to do a biography of the Duchess of Windsor, but backed out when she insisted, as he said, on being portrayed as a "Rebecca of Sunnyside Farm" type. Mr. Manchester didn't back out when the royal widow and brother flew at him in a temper tantrum, although he did make some few adjustments as a concession to their feelings.

This is a fault, for a biographer-historian should accept no dictation whatever. But it's a small fault and does not appreciably mar the work. Other faults are petty, irritating and, more seriously, the result of the author's compulsion to dramatize at the cost of accuracy.

There is pictorial proof that Mr. Manchester erred several times in fact and interpretation when describing the history-making, heart-rending scene of Lyndon Johnson's taking the oath in the presence of the blood-spattered widow. The author committed a discrediting absurdity in his maudlin comment that Mr. Johnson was sworn in on a treasured Bible which President Kennedy brought along on trips and piously read each night before

going to sleep. We know now that it wasn't a Bible, but a misal or prayer book, and that the cellophane wrapping hadn't been broken in Kennedy's lifetime.

One reason I didn't get through the Manchester volume during the leisure allowed by the Easter vacation of Congress is that I attempted some parallel reading. But I'm able to recommend the method to anybody who cares to give this book its due. I bought a paperback of Manchester's earlier, lifetime biography of JFK. I needed to know if the guy could write. He can indeed, and his genuine worship of the royal couple is not graveside bathos.

These are reasons, I have felt, that somebody should speak up for it as a work of creative reproduction of history. Its mistakes of fact are deplorable. Its distortions, as in its spiteful characterization of Gov. John Connally, are excusable only as dramatic license—for even the historian needs his villains.

But this big book about a big subject rises, it seems to me, above its failures. If it goes into extra editions, Mr. Manchester can and should make corrections and deal with reevaluations in a fresh introduction. If he does so, this book will outlive its author and its generation, which is the test of literary immortality.

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