

L A T I T U D E S



THE CASE IS NOT CLOSED

Ronnie Dugger

(A review of ten books concerning the assassination of President Kennedy)*

November 11, 1966

The facts about the assassination of President Kennedy have not been established. The case is not closed.

Whether or not its main conclusion is eventually accepted, the Warren Report is a disgrace to history. To read it critically is to catalogue its deficiencies. It is an exercise in the selection and presentation of evidence to make a preconceived conclusion sound as plausible as possible to those without the time and resources to study the evidence for themselves.

From the first night after the murder the spokesmen of government were declaring that Oswald acted alone and had no accomplices. Those of us who were there well know this, and can prove it any time we need to. It is also a manifest fact that no investigation could have conclusively established the complex facts of that historic crime before the weekend was out. Yet it was the government line from the very first that Oswald acted alone. It was therefore a shock to thoughtful Americans as it became clear that the Warren Report is not only a brief for the prosecution of Oswald, but also a slanted argument against the possibilities that he had accomplices.

Precisely because this is true, the first of the assassination books that have had a conclusive impact has been Jay Epstein's Inquest. It seems clear to me that Epstein could not have written his book without assistance, sotto voce, from dissatisfied persons within the Warren Commission's inner circle. Epstein establishes, to the satisfaction, in my opinion, of any reasonable person who had studied copiously in this literature, that the Warren Commission, faced with a choice between a responsible and open-minded investigation and an investigation designed to preserve the image of the country and its challenged government agencies, chose, by various processes, the latter course.

The second book on the assassination which has a conclusive value, I am surprised to say, is Mark Lane's Rush to Judgment. Lane's role in the post-assassination events was, in my judgment, dubious. I remember pressing him one time for his source for a startling declaration of "fact" he had made in a piece in the far-left rag, National Guardian, and after hemming and hawing a few days he said he'd forgotten and couldn't find it. His articles on the assassination were full of holes, like most of the skeptics' articles have been. But his book is another matter.

Rush to Judgment is just as conclusive against the Warren Commission's preconception as the Warren Report is conclusive for that preconception. Lane has written one of the longest book reviews in history (and how else can you review 26 volumes of detail and one volume of synopsis that is much too often mere glossing over?). He demonstrates that a lawyer for the defense can make mincemeat of the government's case. That is a very serious fact. He avails himself of the best of the arguments of the critics, and a few of the worst, as well, he exposes some of the report writers' gross deceptions, and again and again he does what every thoughtful critic has done: he demands to know why the commission failed to so much as talk to so many witnesses and others whose testimony was of critical, pivotal importance. Lane is to be commended, not for his earlier role and not for his magazine work on this subject, but for Rush to Judgment.

We have now run out of books, among those on the assassination, in the first rank. Others are worth perusal, but are not to be mistaken for conclusive contributions to the subject.

The Texas editor, Penn Jones, Jr., wrote a series of comments, in bulk mostly excerpts from the volumes of evidence, in his paper, the Midlothian Mirror, and then expanded them somewhat and published them as a paperback, Forgive My Grief. Jones does not trouble to conceal his suspicion that President Kennedy's death was a plot that involved important people. He makes contributions in specific areas of the evidence and the non-evidence, and he asks questions that demand answers. His most distinctive contribution to the literature, from the point of view of historians who will comb through all this for later centuries if we have any, is his origination of information about the death by violence and apparently natural causes of witnesses and others involved with principals in the case and in the post-assassination matrix. In the most dramatic of these originations, one must rely on Jones' assertion that during a certain meeting involving persons since killed or deceased, something dramatic must have been said, perhaps by George Senator, Jack Ruby's roommate. (Lane picks up this work in Rush to Judgment. Ramparts magazine features it currently.) In general, Jones' work suffers from his tendency to state a suspicion as a belief. While a suspicion can also be a belief, it is more accurately stated as a suspicion.

But remarks on Forgive My Grief would be incomplete without appreciation of Jones' courage. Believing what he does, living a short drive from Dallas, he goes right ahead. Once I told him he was a brave man. He said hell, man, what was I talking about - he was scared. I told him I hadn't said he wasn't scared, but that he was brave. He is.

The Oswald Affair, by French reporter Leo Sauvage, is a good, but outdated examination of the Warren Report. Specializing in the assassination is an esoteric business. Sauvage, one of the early skeptics of the official government doctrine, also made some of the early mistakes. It was the price, and a heavy one, that had to be paid by those who continued to publish before the evidence was fairly well jelled. In return for this penalty, they received the satisfaction of knowing they forced both explanations and changes of stance out of government spokesmen. The press has interacted with the government in countless ways; the case is a still-tangled weave of this very interaction. Sauvage has played a strong, honest, sometimes mistaken role in this interaction.

Sylvan Fox's The Unanswered Questions About President Kennedy's Assassination is also a necessary book for anyone who intends to know about the case. Fox, a New York reporter, did what any intelligent person can do. He read (or read in) the 27 volumes and asked some of the questions that cry out for answers. This is a pretty good book. The Second Oswald, Richard Popkin's thought that a double for Oswald might make much of the evidence less perplexing, is potentially an important contribution.

One member of the Commission, the Republican leader, Gerald Ford, evidently wasn't entirely satisfied personally with the Report. He wrote, ("with" his assistant John Stiles, field director for Nixon for President in 1960), his own Portrait of the Assassin. One naturally notices the use of the article, "the," and the singular form of the word, "Assassin." Apart from being in doubtful taste, Portrait of the Assassin would have been almost without excuse as a book (although OK as soap opera) but for Ford's revelation in the opening pages that Atty. Gen. Waggoner Carr and Dallas D.A. Henry Wade precipitated a quivering crisis in the Commission.

I have not meant, in this remark, to get into the evidence. However, an exception: For several months after Nov. 22, 1963, I investigated the assassination in Dallas, sending reports to the Washington Post and to the Observer. I was in and out of the city, but lived a lot of time in hotel rooms. At one point an official told me that Oswald had been an FBI employee and had had a certain pay number, which my source gave me. He would not give his source but said it was solid. I at once relayed this to the Post. Journalistically, the source would have had to have been so masked, the story would have seemed fishy if printed without confirmation, and

FBI sources said it wasn't so. So that, for the time being, was that. Ford opens his book saying Carr and Wade brought this report to a full meeting of the Commission. Lane argues with sickening persuasiveness that the Commission decided it could not just take J. Edgar Hoover's word for it, and then did.

Who Killed Kennedy? by Thomas G. Buchanan and Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy? by Joachim Joesten are beneath serious attention as to the facts, although not, necessarily, as to theory.

There has been one recent important development. The Kennedy family have given to the national archives the X-rays and photographs of the late President that are the best evidence about the direction and number of the shots. It is not yet clear whether access to these vital documents will be limited to approved government specialists or will also be open to critics of the assassination under controlled, responsible conditions. If only government people are to see them, there should be a court test. The import of these documents belongs to the people and we ought not to have to wait until 1971 to have non-governmental access to them.

The next important book on the assassination will be Harland Manchester's. Manchester has been understood to be Jacqueline Kennedy's (and thus the Kennedy family's) trusted person in the post-assassination investigations. He has, I am told, worked himself mercilessly in preparing this book; he had access to the Warren Commission's inner sanctum; he has done a meticulous and in countless ways startling book. Without, so I am also told, invalidating the basic thrust of the Warren Report's conclusion that Oswald was the only assassin, his work will have profound reverberations. It should begin to appear in serialized form in Look Magazine before long.

In my opinion the time has arrived in the post-assassination period for the matter to be advanced to a new stage, if it can be. The Warren Report is not convincing, and neither are any of the theories that run contrary to the Warren Report's conclusion. The legitimate doubts about that conclusion continue to be merely preliminary in the absence of evidence that there was a conspiracy and who the conspirators were.

The government should re-open the investigation. Whether it does or not, the time is right for the active renewal of inquiries. I discontinued my daily work on the subject when, several months after the event, I saw that what I was finding out was being twisted here and abroad to serve speculations I knew to be false and conclusions I thought to be unjustifiable other than as suspicions; while I have continued to make inquiries sporadically since then, I have not written anything more for the reason I just mentioned and also because the matter is too complex to be dealt with as a spot news story. But I would like anyone who might be interested to know that my work is continuing, as I hope is also the work of others who, declining to be weakened by suspicions in any direction, rigorously distinguishing reports, rumors, and theories from facts, and refusing to accept explanations that the plainest operations of the mind discredit, want the truth.

The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, Report and 26 volumes of evidence, Government Printing Office, 1964. Inquest, by Edward Jay Epstein, Viking, 1966. Rush to Judgment, by Mark Lane, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966. Forgive My Grief, Volume I, by Penn Jones, Jr., 1966. The Oswald Affair, by Leo Sauvage, World, 1966. The Second Oswald, by Richard H. Popkin, The New York Review of Books and Avon Books, 1966. The Unanswered Questions about President Kennedy's Assassination, by Sylvan Fox, Award Books, 1965. Portrait of the Assassin, by Gerald Ford with John Stiles, Simon and Schuster, 1965. Who Killed Kennedy? by Thomas G. Buchanan, Putnam, 1964. Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy, by Joachim Joesten, Marzani & Munsell, 1964.

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LAKE AT TWILIGHT

Circle of silence,
Smooth burnished sheet of metal
Polished to rose-gold.

FLOWERING LOCUST

Blue-green parasol,
Sudden-white tassels dangling,
Pale scented windbells.

Two Haiku by Jane McCoy.

MACK THOMAS IN RESIDENCE / UPDIKE AS SECRET FRIEND / ND # 19

Robert Bonazzi

For years I have looked past Cavalier magazine. Now, because of one article by Mack Thomas ("The Death of Edge" in the November, 1966 issue), I look to it.

Thomas, author of Gumbo, was asked by a "New School" in Florida to be their writer-in-residence. He was to stay a while and engage in talks with the "bright" students. Everything was fine until the hierarchy (those with the school's money) discovered Thomas had once spent five years in a Texas jail for possession of narcotics. And so Mack Thomas' short tenure of writer-in-residence ends. And the story begins. The story is an autobiographical dissent against bigotry and phoniness in our educational system. It is one man's futile battle against the system. The story will seem familiar at times to those in education. Also horrifying. I asked my freshman students to read the article. Most of them thought it was a "sad" story, but thought it was just another lesson in "the facts of life." Well it is that. I just feel it is more drastic than this. It seems that if we are to have integrity anywhere in this country, we might have it in our universities and colleges.

Robert Shea, Editor of Cavalier, kindly sent me extra copies of the issue free. Then he promptly sent me copies of the December issue, equally inviting. So it is not that Cavalier is just doing exciting and important things, but that they are also stretching out their hands without expecting one to drop money in.