

Rise and Fall Of a Texas Star

IN HISTORY'S SHADOW An American Odyssey

By John Connally with Mickey Herskowitz
Hyperion. 386 pp. \$24.95

ON THE ONE HAND it's a pity that John Connally, who died four months ago at the age of 76, didn't live to see a finished copy of this, his as-told-to autobiography. On the other hand it's probably just as well that he isn't around to read the reviews, for in these pages he spends more time begging *questions* than answering them.

Connally was one of the more electric and enigmatic figures of postwar American political life. He was a by-the-bootstraps son of the Texas cow country who easily mastered the manners of power and affluence and who doubtless lit up any room he happened to enter; as was commonly said of him, he looked like a president, or perhaps more accurately he looked like a movie actor playing a president. Yet though he achieved high office both by election and by appointment, he managed to keep his real self, whatever that might have been, entirely secret; it will come as no surprise that no secrets are violated in this book.

Connally's method is to disarm the reader with false modesty and self-mockery. Toward the end he quotes an old friend as saying, "John has mellowed after all these years," to which his wife Nellie immediately replies, "Oh, no, he hasn't. He's still vain, arrogant and conceited . . . the three things I always wanted in a man." That's funny, and by telling the story on himself Connally steals a march on the reader (not to mention the reviewer), who has been wanting to say more or less the same thing for 350 pages. But he also deflects one's attention from the more troubling questions about himself, which have far less to do with superficial matters of personal style than with important ones of personal probity and political

conviction.

"I helped elect three presidents," Connally writes, "watched from inches away the murder of one of them, experienced the bloody madness of war, lost a beloved daughter, was tried and acquitted on a criminal charge, went broke, watched my wife defeat breast cancer, and endured. I have witnessed more history than any school can teach." This last as it happens simply is not true, either as fact or as metaphor. Although it certainly is the case that Connally was witness to a great deal, as participant he was more on the sidelines than in the action.

The crucial event in Connally's public life—and probably in his private life as well—occurred when he was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald as, presumably, a secondary or accidental target in the assault upon John Fitzgerald Kennedy. As Connally himself puts it, "I understand that I will be identified forever as the man who was wounded by the gun that killed John Kennedy." No doubt that explains the title of this book; in Dallas in 1963 as elsewhere in his long career,

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BY FRANK JOHNSON—THE WASHINGTON POST

John B. Connally at the National Press Club in 1979

Connally was usually in someone else's shadow—most often Lyndon Baines Johnson's, but also at various times Richard Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's, not to mention those of the various Texan oilmen whose interests Connally served so pliantly and faithfully.

On the subject of Johnson, Connally writes with authority and zest. The relationship between the two was long, intimate and fractious, and the affection between them was deep. Johnson was mentor and Connally protégé, but the differences between them were such that Connally was constitutionally incapable of becoming Johnson's true heir. Whereas Johnson was a man of genuine if rough conviction, Connally was all manner and method. Though he expresses both puzzlement and perverse pride at so often being identified as a Texas wheeler-dealer, it remains that the characterization was accurate. Not merely was Connally uncommonly gifted at wheeling and dealing, but he ran no deeper than that; though he points with obligatory pride to his accomplishments as governor of Texas and sec-

retary of the Treasury, the record shows little enduring achievement, no doubt for the simple reason that style counted far more with him than substance.

"I had always told myself," Connally writes, "that to achieve big goals it is necessary to take big risks." That was his style, which explains why the presidential look he so carefully cultivated was only a shade removed from the riverboat gambler look. He was at least as much swagger and bluster as he was action and consequence, and as such he was far from dislikeable. His public manner was often more amusing than offputting, and by many accounts—his own of course included—his private manner radiated charm and empathy.

There is a modest amount of both in *In History's Shadow*. For the most part, though, it has all the charm of an annual report, written as it is in the reserved, statesmanlike, sanitized prose favored by the as-told-to mills in which Mickey Herskowitz labors; often it is difficult to distinguish Connally from Dan Rather or Bette Davis or any of the other luminaries whose places in the firmament Herskowitz has helped determine. Yet every once in a while something peeks through that gives a hint of what might have been the "real" Connally, as when he irreverently notes that "people believed what they thought [Ronald Reagan] was saying" or when he calls George Bush "a man who left few footprints." In the privacy of the inner sanctum, chewing things over with LBJ, he must have sounded like that; it's a pity that, in his eagerness to secure his place among the sainted few, he mostly quashes this earthy voice in favor of the corporate one favored, apparently, by the keepers of the gates.

Apart from the occasional dismissive remark about a political rival, Connally reserves this voice for his accounts of the intramural, internecine struggles of the Texas Democratic Party in which he labored before seeing the light and joining Richard Nixon's chosen few. These accounts, though far too brief, are spirited and incisive; readers who have forgotten the enmity that flourished between, say, Lyndon Johnson and Ralph Yarborough will find their memories entertainingly refreshed. But to reach those accounts they must struggle through vast seas of assembly-line prose; whether they will deem the enlightenment worth the labor is, at the least, problematical. ■