

Books of The Times

Our Shining Black Prince

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF MALCOLM X. By Peter Goldman. 438 pages. Illustrated. Harper & Row, \$3.95.

Peter Goldman's biography of Malcolm X is not an exciting book to read, but it is an eminently serviceable one. And how could it have been otherwise when, in constructing his subject's life, Mr. Goldman has mostly used the facets of Malcolm's ideology instead of the flesh and blood of his emotions... when he has perforce viewed Malcolm largely through his writings, his speeches and the impressions of his acquaintances rather than through intimate personal knowledge. How could the book have been anything more than serviceable when, in recounting the hunt for and grief of Malcolm X's assassins, Mr. Goldman has purposely produced not mystery and courtroom drama, but a painstakingly analytical anticlimax to what we already knew—namely, that the men convicted of gunning down Malcolm X on that winter Sunday, in 1965, were three members of the Muslim organization that had expelled Malcolm and had come to a fever and exasperation and that with their conviction and sentencing the case was frustratingly closed. Indeed, how could any biography of the fallen black leader even approach excitement in a time when, as Mr. Goldman himself puts it, "the series of events of the sixties that we identified as the Second Reconstruction threatens to collapse as the first did, if the exhaustion of will before the stubbornness of the opposition and the complexity of the task..."

Not to Be Slighted

No, depending on one's point of view, one reads this study, by one of Newsweek magazine's white specialists on the "race beat" with bated nostalgia for a hopeful time in the history of American black people or one reads it with relief that its story is over for the time being. But one does not read it with excitement.

Yet, for several significant reasons, the serviceability of "The Death and Life of Malcolm X" is by no means to be slighted. First, and of relatively small significance, by playing down the drama of the apprehension and trial of the assassins, Mr. Goldman has forced us to attend to certain peripheral details—details, such as why confusion arose over whether one or two suspects were arrested outside of the Audubon Ballroom immediately after the shooting of Malcolm, or why it was that later set fire to Muhammad's Mosque 77 and why the New York City Police didn't bother to apprehend them, or how exactly one Leon X. Speer met his death (there are many who still believe that this marginal figure was murdered because he knew too much). And Mr. Goldman's attention to these details serves on the one

hand to dispell the theories that Malcolm X was assassinated by the C.I.A. (or by his own followers in the organizations he set up after breaking with the Nation of Islam) or by Syndicate elements aroused by his way on narcotics. And on the other hand to lend credibility to Goldman's own belief that it was higher-ups in Elijah Muhammad's Muslim organization who were behind Malcolm's death.

Second, and of more importance, by dealing with Malcolm X's life in its public, ideological aspect, Mr. Goldman goes a long way toward setting the record straight, or at least toward trimming the mythology to more manageable dimensions (manageable that is to white observers who were once so fearful of regard Malcolm with his absolute candor to all white people as their mortal antagonist). For the good part of what Mr. Goldman reveals tends to support Malcolm's image as a man of science. He was not, for instance, quite the urban warrior he advertised himself to be (Goldman was able to dig up only small potshots in going Malcolm Little's police record). His break with Elijah Muhammad (Goldman was able to dig up only small potshots in going Malcolm Little's police record) was not, as he has often claimed, at least partly brought about by Malcolm's having genuinely outgrown the hostile (to whites) sectarian views of the Nation of Islam (and incidentally, Mr. Goldman's penetrating history of Muslim doctrine will come as fresh news to many readers). And, according to Goldman's careful account of Malcolm's evolving ideology, the image he projected to many as the apostle of violence and hate is not to be understood too literally. Malcolm's appeal to arms was not to be taken literally; on the other hand, he was not merely a genius at projecting such an image through the media. That is, he had a strategy, and all around, and this book appears to grasp it.

Finally, and most importantly, reading the foregoing points by reading Mr. Goldman on the hopeful 1960's from the vantage of the late 1970's, one can begin to see how important Malcolm's message meant to all of the black men and women to be sure, when he first appeared on the scene, he was projecting new ideas to many white people and bringing it to many black. His time has passed, his time and that of the ideological antagonist in the movement, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and now Peter Goldman's conclusions seem not only apt, but not nearly so far removed from what Dr. King stood for.

Affirmation of Blackness

Malcolm's supreme gift to blacks was that he loved them, that he believed in

their beauty and their possibilities and tried to make them believe, too. He recognized the inner despair of Harlem in its drooping, its welfare lines, its miscegenated, its tempting rates of addiction and crime, he knew that white people made Harlem the underfoot that only black people and black pride could save it. The restoration of that pride that ruined another pride, the mission he made significant contributions to what is now orthodox black thought—the stresses on inner power, community control, national identity, Africanism, the right to self-defense—and his utterances on these subjects are invoked today in projects, in books, in the speeches of black leaders. But the most important legacy was his example of bearing his affirmation of blackness—his understanding that one is paralyzed in that direction one falls.