

NEW BOOKS

EXAMINING A MACABRE MEMORIAL

Is this 'Crawfie' really worthy of Kennedy?

WHEN THE Duke of Wellington died, the Prince Consort with his own hand designed a huge bronze carriage to bear the old corpse to its grave.

When a king of ancient Ur died, the men and women of the court were sacrificially killed and buried in all their finery with the master.

When the Pharaohs of Egypt died, vast Pyramids were built to preserve them and their glory for ever.

In November 1963 John F. Kennedy died and since that moment a new breed of tombmakers has been feverishly busy. In huge blocks the books of memoirs have been raised to the skies.

But of all the memorials one was destined from the start to be more massive than the rest. The whole world was kept informed of its progress.

Before the unweaving there were law suits and serialisations of gruelling length. Now it finally appears in Britain as a book of 784 pages—**THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT**, by William Manchester (*Michael Joseph, 60s.*).

Looking at it coolly for the first time, what are we to make of it?

Its central moment is described thus:—

"The First Lady, in her last act as First Lady, leaned solicitously towards the President. His face was quizzical. She had seen that expression so often when he was puzzling over a difficult Press conference question. Now, in a gesture of infinite grace, he raised his right hand, as though to brush back his tousled chestnut hair. But the motion faltered. The hand fell back limply. He had been reaching for the top of his head. But it wasn't there any more."

REPULSIVE

From that second onward Manchester's eye does not miss a single drop of blood or fragment of bone. All the most private or stomach-turning details of operating theatre, embalment, and funeral grief are put on display in his preserving bottles.

It is repulsive—but, of course, it is fascinating too. One of the marks of human life is that we are intrigued by human death. Even though grief stricken ourselves at the funeral, say, of a well-loved friend, we find our eyes straying to the rollers which trundle away the coffin

by
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through the cremation doors.

Even when we think we are being bored or repelled by Manchester's enormous book, we find ourselves being interested against our will. The process is almost obscene. Manchester has, in effect, produced a kind of black crape pornography.

True, by recording every second of President Kennedy's last hours, he also provides the fullest-ever picture of the centre of United States government.

For example, we read of a macabre but constant member of the President's entourage—a man named Gearhart whose code-name was Shadow:—

"No one called him by his christian name, his surname, or even by his code-name. He was 'the man with the satchel,' or, more starkly, 'the bagman.' The bag (also known as 'the black bag' and 'the football') was a 30lb. metal suitcase with an intricate combination lock."

CARTOONS

Inside were the intricate codes which would launch a nuclear attack together with "pages of close text enlivened by gaudy colour cartoons. They looked like comic books—horror comics, really, because they had been carefully designed so that any one of Kennedy's three military aides could quickly tell him how many million casualties would result. . . ."

We are told: "No one liked to think about them, much less to talk about them, and on trips the man with the football was treated as a pariah."

Yet that odd remark about the pariah with the sinister football raises another question: How will this book affect the reputation of Kennedy and of Kennedy's America?

Wellington's grandiose funeral carriage, the Pharaohs' Pyramids, even the gold buried with the sacrificed victims at Ur—all were designed to glorify not only the dead man but also his nation. Though writing of Kennedy with reverence and though obviously regarding all the trappings of the presidency with almost religious awe, Manchester conveys little glory. Indeed, without intending to, he has written what many readers may regard as a searing anti-

American tract.

Let us, for example, consider the now familiar details of why Kennedy, complete with two jet airliners, an enormous entourage, and the 30lb. metal suitcase, went to Dallas in the first place. His sole purpose, as Manchester points out, was to try to heal a ridiculous party quarrel which menaced the voting chances of the Democrats in Texas. The Right-wing Democratic Governor, John Connally, was

feuding with the Left-wing Democratic Senator, Ralph Yarborough.

But the puzzle is how the trip could have ended the feud even if Kennedy had not been shot. During the visit, Connally was planning a banquet at which he and his friends would sit with the President at a high table while Yarborough was humilatingly tucked away at a low table.

The senator was quite as petty. He refused to share a car with Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, trusting that next day's headlines would read "Yarborough snubs Johnson."

In the meantime, John F. Kennedy was making his plans. He told his wife: "There are going to be all these rich Republican broads [in the book the word is softened to "women"] at that lunch, wearing mink coats and diamond bracelets. . . . Be simple—show these Texans what good taste really is."

COOL

The President's wife duly chose her wardrobe—but on the assumption that the weather in Texas, according to predictions assembled by the President's aide, Brigadier-General Godfrey McHugh, would be cool. But, Manchester tells us, "God had blundered badly." His reference is not to the Deity but to the brigadier. As punishment for a weather prediction which would force the First Lady to sweat under hot sun in a warm, simple, good taste suit, Brigadier God was exiled from the President's plane and forced to sit with the journalists in the plane which followed.

Well, as we know, it turned out that it did not matter what poor Jackie wore. Oswald fired and, as Manchester reveals, the most astonishing chaos ensued. The assassination of a beloved leader is enough to daze even the toughest official temporarily. But the effect on those around Kennedy was hardly temporary. In the hospital to which he was rushed there was an orgy of hysteria among male and female alike. One of the few men who, though dazed himself, seems to have behaved with dignity was Lyndon Johnson. One of the few officials who, sensibly enough, tried to preserve some kind of routine was the Dallas County Medical Examiner who is represented as a foolish and pedantic clown by Manchester because he insisted that, since there had been a homicide, there should be an autopsy.

IRONY

The federal secret servicemen charged with the coffin right through the Medical Examiner and the local police in order to get the dead President back on his plane. On that same plane the new President was trying to find out what was happening by watching a television set. No one knew. Manchester remarks:

"There are certain situations in which the fitting of grooves can begin at once. That is the job of intelligence, and it would have been possible if the assassination had occurred in the White House, with its magnificently equipped Situation Room. In Dallas, however, there was no Situation Room, only the situation itself."

That, when you look at it, is a comment of quite preposterous naivety. How much more satisfactory it would have been, exclaims Manchester, if the murder had occurred in the up-to-date White House! Yet the remark underlines the irony of the whole tragic episode. Here was the mobile power house of America, arranged with fantastic American efficiency so that every soul in the President's party had a special code name (solemnly listed by Manchester).

Yet all these high-powered aides were sent half-dotty by

the kind of emergency which they should have been anticipating any hour. One wonders how they would have managed if Shadow's terrible football had had to be unlocked.

What seems most strange of all is that none of them fully realised, until hours had elapsed, that Lyndon Johnson had actually taken the place of the pathetic corpse. When he ordered the plane to return to Washington they tried to countermand the order. On the plane Brigadier God decided to show that his loyalty was to the occupant of the coffin:—

"I want the record to show," he said, pounding the table, "that Ken O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien, Dave Powers, and me spent this flight in the tail compartment with the President—President Kennedy."

The curious thing is that William Manchester, though half-seeing the nonsense of all this, suffers from the same defect. In a published interview he has said:—

"I doubt if I'll ever be a guest at the White House again. The last time I was there, visiting Mrs. Johnson, she offered me a drink. The waiter came up and I asked for a Daiquiri—that was President Kennedy's drink. But they didn't serve it any more. So I said I must be trotting. . . ."

Over some issues Manchester is almost astonishingly sensible. He is the first writer to make it quite clear that Lee Harvey Oswald's Russian-born wife had left him in order to live with another woman—Ruth Paine,

who in a letter written at 2 a.m. had written to her: "I love you Marina, and I want to live with you. . . ." Manchester stows that it was just before Kennedy's Dallas trip that Oswald begged Marina to return to him (promising her a washing machine as a reward) and had been faced with the ultimate humiliation of hearing that she preferred to stay with her woman friend.

OUTDATED

Even his key-hole details about Jackie Kennedy's grief can be illuminating. He shows that she insisted on narrating the details of her husband's death again and again. I was recently at a funeral when a brave young wife did exactly that.

Yet there is something grisly about it all. We read endlessly not only about poor Kennedy's good taste but also about his physique on the mortuary slab ("like a Greek god"). We read about one of his Cabinet Ministers who, on a plane above the Pacific, wrote: "I just completed a little cry, hanky under glasses. . . ."

All right then. There were millions in Britain who must have felt like weeping for Kennedy. No shame in it. The only shame is that this particular pyramid should have suffered from the kind of royal hagiographic writing which is outdated even in British women's magazines. It is a shame that Kennedy's memorial should have been left to a Presidential Crawler.