

Assassination as agony

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT/by William Manchester/Michael Joseph 60s

By Cyril Connolly

ONE OF THE phenomena of our time is the large volume, almost devoid of literary merit, which attains a financial success quite out of reach of a genuine work of art. Poverty-prone critics experience some difficulty in assessing these flibusters because they are unwilling to recognise the enormous industry that goes into their making and the compulsive element of total recall what is in itself a new kind of talent.

"Ulysses" is the forerunner of the agglutinated mass of detail we find in American reporting; "Ulysses" even provided a technique of the roving camera eye hopping from one point to another to give a picture of a city or a procession moving along a route. This technique is skilfully employed by Mr Manchester, and before we dismiss his book as ill-written (an easy temptation) we must pause to admire the masterly piece of overall planning which peoples a huge canvas with a hundred differentiated characters, busy about their affairs during the crucial five days of tragedy which brought them all together. As it turns out, the book is not ill-written. In a few places it is over-written, in many more it is not written at all. The queue of total recallers simply breaks the rope and surges forward, all remembering at once.

The reader has two protections against them which I beg him to use. The first is to keep an eye on the time-table inside the front cover, which is the master-plan enabling him to gauge what is happening and find out where he's got to; the other is to consult the list (p 742) of the 300-odd principals whom Mr Manchester interviewed. Since this gives their professions, it is the only way to discover who O'Brien, O'Leary, O'Connell (two I's here, one elsewhere) are, or to differentiate between Kelley, Kelly and Kellerman, or McCone, McCormack, McGraw, McGregory, McHugh, McNally and McNamara.

Having read every word I

can say that *The Death of a President* is a grand undertaking. It is not history, but no one will be able to write the history of this time without it. Historians are selective, in fact their powers of selection are the way in which they manifest their judgment; Mr Manchester does not like to leave out anything. Historians are unbiased; Mr Manchester comes down heavily on the side of the Kennedys. He permits himself an outburst of impotent rage against Oswald (p 325) whom elsewhere he compares intelligently to Barnaby Rudge. It would not be true to say that he denigrates Johnson or Johnson's entourage, but his enthusiasm wanes when it comes to depicting them. And I detected a complete lack of sympathy for J. Edgar Hoover.

One surprise since the assassination has been its failure to inspire any works of art (I am thinking especially of poetry) which are expressions of grief. Kennedy was the greatest Irishman since the Duke of Wellington, but he has no Tennyson. The world wept but the artists were silent (Auden's haiku were somewhat non-committal). After three years nothing has emerged but the falsetto rasp of "MacBird." Against this must be set the biographical chronicles of Sorensen, Schlesinger, Salinger and now Mr Manchester, whose book is a deeply felt memorial. It is safe to say that nothing in his earlier work prepared one for this; nor will he ever find such a subject again.

ALTHOUGH his book breathes admiration and devotion to Kennedy in every line it is, above all, a tribute to his widow and to her conduct through the four days when she became the most important person in the world. His account of her grief and impeccable behaviour is totally devoid of that *delectatio morosa* which betrays the sadistic and unfeeling purveyor of tragedy in mass media. No one could have been more

This makes her behaviour (as described by Manchester in the Sunday Times of March 26) all the more incredible. One can understand her not wishing to read the book, but to try to suppress it legally without reading it and to invoke the aid of Robert Kennedy to help shows political imprudence as well as personal injustice. One can only suppose that she panicked after realising that she had talked too freely of her own feelings.

"The Death of a President" takes the event through from the eve of the departure for Texas (Wednesday, November 20) to the aftermath of the funeral on November 25. This is in some sense an anti-climax, for the crucial events are the assassination at 12.30 on the 22nd, the agony in the Parkland hospital, the recognition of Johnson and return to Washington, the arrest and murder of Oswald, and the grief of Mrs Kennedy. The funeral itself introduces a host of new characters—Heads of State, Washington officials—and marks the beginning of the end for many of the New Frontiersmen. Passion is henceforth masked by protocol.

In all matters concerned with the assassination Manchester accepts the Warren Commission without question. As he interviewed several of their witnesses himself and was present at the hearings this is a fact of considerable importance. He even supplies some new data. He was told by Robert Oswald that when he was allowed to see his brother he found him quite unconcerned. "I was looking into his eyes, but they were blank, like Orphan Annie's, and he knew, I guess from the amazement on my face, that I saw that. He knew what was happening, because as I searched his eyes he said to me, 'Brother, you won't find anything there.'" He also describes the pigeons rising and wheeling from the Book Depository when the shot was fired (a detail new to me). His most significant footnote deals with the autopsy.

Because this material is unsightly, it will be unavailable

until 1971. However the author has discussed it with three men who examined it before it was placed under seal. All these carried special professional qualifications. Each was a stranger to the other two. Nevertheless their accounts were identical. The X-rays show no entry wound "below the shoulder" as argued by the graduate student . . . the wound was in the neck.

Although he has read Epstein (the "graduate student"), whom he refuses to mention by name, he does not appear to have read Lane.

He does suggest that Marina Oswald received far softer treatment from the Commission than that devious character deserved. But to illustrate the pitfalls of swallowing the Commission whole I will give an example.

THE CHIEF psychological stumbling-block to the Oswald-the-Loner theory is providing him with sufficient animus to kill the President. The real hate in Dallas came from the Right—"the ultra-conservatives that spread hate in the South." Oswald's ambition to get into history is vouched for by Marina, but his hatred was reserved for General Walker. Manchester solves the difficulty by making him go mad.

Nevertheless the impact of his confrontation with his wife on November 21 [when she would not take him back] may have been decisive, and it seems clear that the total eclipse of his reason occurred shortly before 9 p.m. that evening . . . Marina glanced in and saw him staring at an old film of a World War II battle. Apparently he was intent upon the flickering Zenith screen. In fact he was going mad.

To announce this as a fact, as if it were of the same order of events as Kennedy changing his shirt, betrays a marked bias towards the accepted interpretation. Yet he can write of the Commission (p. 490): "The author recalls a colloquy between three lawyers of the Warren Commission staff: X. 'How critical of the Dallas police should we be?' Y. 'We can't be critical enough.' Z. (senior man) 'That's just the problem. If we write what we really think, nobody will believe anything else we say.'" Z. won.

There are unfortunate lapses into sentimentality and facetiousness: too many football images, too many right good joes bobbing up in every walk of life, usually with Irish names, and only one or two villains—

the Dallas undertaker who made a 300 per cent. profit, the Dallas priest who gate-crashed the Parkland hospital and would not leave Mrs Kennedy alone. My private abomination was Dave Powers, who seems always to be marching the children up and down. Some of the best sayings come from Oswald's mother—"Moneywise I got took."

MANCHESTER'S sense of drama invests the whole episode with a "Götterdämmerung" quality. Siegfried receives the omens and warnings which he is foredoomed to neglect. "Dallas is a very dangerous place. I wouldn't go there. Don't you go"—Senator Fulbright. Humphrey prophesied doom, Byron Skelton (Texas Congressman) wrote frantic letters from Dallas (which Robert Kennedy took note of), Kennedy himself talked, the night before, of assassination. The FBI had Oswald on their list of subversives, but agent Hosty in Dallas did not give his name to the Secret Service, who in their turn did not think to search the building.

Legislation to control the sale of firearms has still not been forthcoming. For the revolver, as Koestler has said, is the great leveller. Kennedy and Oswald had almost nothing in common but their mortality. Oswald could look him in the eye only through a telescopic sight. But they did have something in common—a sense of historical purpose: the one as an enlightened capitalist, the other as a Marxist failure; both admired "1984." The total inadequacy of Oswald as an instrument of historical purpose is what shocks many people into the belief in a conspiracy—yet Oswald plus marksmanship plus rifle plus luck plus hate or paranoia is an avenging symbol of the envious and frustrated.

The original content, however, of Manchester's book is his account of how government goes on, how the new President took over. Given their utterly different upbringing, the two men are not so dissimilar: both have immense ambition, energy and political acumen. Both share a progressive democratic outlook. Johnson flying back in the Presidential plane (and for all he knew threatened by assassination himself) behaves with rapidly increasing confidence and dignity. This process of constitutional renewal—for a brief moment Russia could have won an atomic war—in a moment of extreme confusion is most clearly and delicately narrated.