

## 'Manchester Unexpurgated'

Just when it seemed that maybe the succession of revelations, defenses, attacks and outraged bellows over William Manchester's "The Death of a President" was not, after all, endless, along comes "Manchester Unexpurgated."

The wave-maker, this time, is Edward Jay Epstein, author of "Inquest," the best-selling hatchet job on the Warren Report. In the July issue of the magazine "Commentary," Epstein hacks away at Manchester's authorized history of President Kennedy's assassination.

Epstein, it seems, was one of the few who read the original, uncensored, uncut and unedited manuscript of Manchester's tome. Epstein's thesis is that the book, first titled "Death of Lancer" after Kennedy's Secret Service code name, was originally conceived as a "mythopoeic melodrama" complete with a hero and a villain, Kennedy is "D'Artagnan," with a "magical quality" and an aura of "high drama" about him. Johnson is "Richelieu"—a "crafty schemer," "an octopus clutching bunches of black bananas," "an oyster who patiently converts bits of grit into

salable pearls," a "chameleon," a "creature of the moment" and—most remarkable of all—a "capon."

There is unquestionably a natural desire on the part of many contemporary historians to prick the bubble of righteousness that Manchester has inflated in his own defense and to retouch his bombastic self-portrait as "the zealous defender of the public's right to know." But aside from this questionable exercise in self-gratification, it is hard to see why Epstein felt compelled to write the article. There is, surely, nothing new in the notion that Manchester admired Kennedy to the point of idolatry, that he reacts quite differently to Johnson, that his book is something less than objective history.

No author should ever be held accountable for material deleted before publication. Otherwise, why were revised drafts and editors ever invented? And in this case, it is clear that Epstein had no need or excuse for piecing together discarded portions of the manuscript in order to discredit Manchester's book.

"The Death of a President" is quite bad enough as it stands—both as history and as literature.