

November 22, 1963

The Death of a President: November 20–November 25, 1963, by William Manchester (Harper & Row, 710 pp. \$10), evokes the impact that the assassination of John F. Kennedy had on the people around him, in the country, and in the world. Margaret L. Coit of the Fairleigh Dickinson University faculty is the author of an "authorized" life of Bernard Baruch which was disavowed by its subject.

By MARGARET L. COIT

WHATEVER else it is or is not, William Manchester's *The Death of a President* is an obsessive book. It presses upon you with its infinity of detail, its trivia and tragedy; reading it is an act of compulsion, no less than the death watch of the American people, their eyes fixed on their television sets through four incredible days. Not quite history, more reportage than literature, the book nevertheless is a stupendous achievement. From the chaos of the assassination to the majesty of the burial in Arlington Cemetery, moment by moment, place by place, person by person, *The Death of a President* reconstructs "the greatest simultaneous experience this nation . . . ever shared" since the funeral train of Abraham Lincoln moved across the states from Washington to Illinois.

To many Americans the death of President Kennedy was the most traumatic event in a lifetime that had already included the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, and the dropping of the atomic bomb. For this was not only the death of a man; the bright promise of an era was eclipsed and a whole nation tumbled into darkness. "We'll laugh again," Patrick Moynihan said. "But we'll never be young again."

Manchester leads off with a glittering White House party in the East Room, Jacqueline's "camellia beauty," music from *Camelot*, and a throbbing and ominous undertone: Humphrey, Fulbright, even Governor Connally had warned Kennedy to stay away from Dallas, but to JFK it was unthinkable that the President of the United States could not go anywhere. He was no man to hide. Manchester's Kennedy, the gallant "Lancer" of the Civil Service codes, with "an air of high drama about the man," is already legend, "clothed in romance." In the red

daze of high noon at Dallas, Manchester sees "the ritualistic murder of the folk hero." In America the first sacrifice was Lincoln, and—like Arthur in Britain, Siegfried in Germany, Jeanne d'Arc in France—the myth he became bears little resemblance to the man that he was.

Of a folk hero it is only asked that he have been heroic, have been loved and cruelly lost, and Kennedy filled that need. The half dollars would disappear, the letters become collectors' items, the politician vanish, the martyr become the myth, and the widow huddled over her husband's mutilated body, a national institution. So the legend was born.

The theme of this book, however, is not so much what happened to John F. Kennedy as how it happened and the people to whom it happened. Continuously and sometimes confusingly, Manchester moves his camera: from U.S. Attorney Barefoot Sanders in Texas to Lee Radziwill in London to the "sealed tube" of the Cabinet plane over the Pacific—the stunned occupants whiling away the hours in a grim poker game; from the Dallas Trade Mart to the hospital to the White House and back again.

Often the participants in the tragedy did not know as much as those who watched their television sets through the four harrowing days. Even Lyndon Johnson tuned in Walter Cronkite to find out what was going on. Seventy-five million people knew before the Kennedy party knew it that priests, the harbingers of death, were on their way to Parkland. The Kennedys did not realize that hundreds of millions were grieving with them, that flags were falling all over the world, that the House of Commons had adjourned, and services were being held at Westminster and St. Paul's, that the Russian radio was playing dirges, that all Ireland was bowed in prayer, that the youth of Berlin was moving through the streets, their torches blazing against the night.

We all know what we were doing as spectators the hour and the day of the assassination. Now, we too are participants, caught up in the Kennedys' own agony. We see the "brutal functionalism" of the trauma room at Parkland and Jacqueline battling a nurse to enter; we participate in the "dreadful time" of waiting. We live through the ghoulish, near-violent scenes in the corridors as the Kennedy team literally snatched the body of their dead leader away from the clutches of Dallas law. We are



—Karsh, Ottawa.

John F. Kennedy—"the gallant 'Lancer' of the Civil Service codes."

caught in the "vast chaos" of the inaugural in the sick and bitter Presidential plane and watch the Kennedy men making pilgrimages to kneel before the young widow, "thin and straight as a spire of smoke," and already aware that she had become a mystic symbol.

We enter the clean, grim morgue and look on the hideous autopsy table at Bethesda. We wait out the long, long night as the sleepless Jacqueline, "poised, unreal," talks and talks, somehow bracing the others as Robert Kennedy braced her. We see Reardon, Powers, and O'Donnell slip away to pick out a coffin for their President. We are at the White House, where Sargent Shriver coordinates the planning for "Jack's last campaign," and in the East Room, which William Walton is decorating with "exquisitely folded crepe." We are at the State Department, where the last copy of the funeral services for FDR is exhumed. We are on the hushed trip of the dead President back to the White House, the cars following silently; we see the flame-lit drive, the eerie crowds standing in "haunting silence," and hear the faint roll of drums and whisper of music. We see Senator Margaret Chase Smith laying a red rose on John Kennedy's old Senate desk, and are with MacNamara in the rain at Arlington, where he finds the grave site that Kennedy had said offered the most beautiful view in Washington.

What Manchester invokes is the impact upon the great majority of Americans, who felt the loss of someone very

near and dear: the telephones going dead and the cars swerving drunkenly, McCormack nearly collapsing at a rumor that Johnson too had been shot; the Joint Chiefs working on stolidly, wondering if a new war was about to burst over them; Sergeant Bob Duggan of Dallas, "a great long gallows of a man," weeping when Jacqueline thanked him for opening the hearse door; Sergeant Barney Ross of PT Boat 109 deep in stupor; the East Room and Jacqueline's face as Caroline patted her hand; "the heartbreakingly slow salute" as the Death Watch changed; Harry Truman and the dying Senator Clair Engels in his wheelchair going through the line; little John asking his nurse of his departed father, "Did he take his big plane?"

And Fulbright bursting out, "God-damn it! I told him not to go to Dallas"; Joseph Kennedy struggling with his wheelchair in an attempt to go to Washington; Robert Kennedy muttering, "There's been so much hate"; General Maxwell Taylor alerting the troops; Justice White's daughter asking, "Daddy, when are we going to be happy again?"

And "Hail to the Chief" played as a dirge; and the cruel eloquence of Mike Mansfield, who, Jacqueline commented, alone "said what had happened"; Jacqueline's post-funeral reception during which de Valera recited poetry and Mikoyan trembled and wept, and she greeted Prince Philip with a smile "like a dim lost leaf."

IT is the majestic figure of Jacqueline that dominates the book. It was she who made the final decisions: that the burial place be at Arlington and the coffin closed, that there be an eternal flame; she, along with Robert, who decided upon the Irish drill team and the Black Watch and the riderless horse. "Her expression of ineffable tragedy [as she awaited the procession] was, in that flicker of a moment, indelibly etched upon the national conscience."

The people responded. They lined the road to Andrews Air Force Base; they were waiting in Lafayette Park; they surged as when Lincoln lay there towards the bronze doors of the Capitol. And it took five hours to pass the coffin. It was veneration, and it was real. Some had waited since midnight; some came by chartered bus; some had walked thirty-five miles for a moment to circle the coffin, to kneel. Jacqueline and Robert saw them, 200,000 of them five abreast; parents with children, nuns, Negroes, foreign statesmen, crewmen from the PT boat—no pushing, no shoving, all in the line.

Manchester's heroes are, of course, the Kennedys. But the surprise of the book is his generally sympathetic picture

of Lyndon B. Johnson, whom he portrays as "a man of tact and sensitivity," resentfully pushed aside by those mourning the late President. "Far from taking over too quickly," Johnson, in Manchester's opinion, "did not take over quickly enough." LBJ had thought it "presumptuous" to move into the White House, even for his own safety. He had demurred at taking the Presidential plane, but was overborne by the Secret Service, to whom staying at Parkland with the "conspiracy" unsolved was "an insane risk." The government had to go on regardless of the Kennedys' grief.

The strains between the Kennedy and Johnson people dated back to Los Angeles; now the struggle between the "realists" and the "loyalists" ripped the official family, the military, and even the Secret Service apart. Johnson was the victim. Here, basically, was the origin of his feud with Robert Kennedy, the symbol of the past he had to overcome. For the loyalists nothing would ever be the same, although some like Bundy, MacNamara, and Shriver shifted allegiance, as did Secret Service agent Emory Roberts, who saw the last bullet strike. He knew his duty was "to protect the President," and gave the order: "They got him . . . take over Johnson." It is Manchester's judgment that history may award the realists "the highest grade."

Manchester sees no conspiracy in the death of Kennedy: Oswald is the murderer. "The evidence pointing to his guilt is far more incriminating than that against Booth . . ." He may be over-imaginative when he blames the "minx" Marina's rejection of her husband's advances as triggering off the "firestorm" in Oswald's head and the assassination. But he can hardly exaggerate the atmosphere in Dallas, with its "Jewish stores . . . smeared with crude swastikas"; its "fun" game, "Which Kennedy do you hate the most?"; the bumper stickers, "K.O. the Kennedys"; the incredible hatred displayed by the Dallas *News*, and the handbills of JFK, "WANTED FOR TREASON." Manchester writes that every man's act "is conditioned by his time and his society." John Wilkes Booth, for instance, committed murder "in a city swarming with Southern sympathizers and . . . seditious talk."

The Death of a President shows the strain under which it was written, as a host of people relived "the most dreadful hours of their lives" with the author. Had the Kennedy family merely wanted to set the record straight, they should have approached some cut-and-dried academician who would have marshaled the facts with cold objectivity. Instead, their choice fell upon a highly emotional and subjective writer who identified himself with John F. Kennedy, his time, and his generation. They should have foreseen that the facts would not remain

inert under his fingers, that the whole horror would blaze forth again with compounded intensity.

Mercifully, there are long and sometimes tedious stretches between the high peaks of emotion. In general, the book is in good taste, with few lapses; however, it is occasionally confusing in its overdramatic use of the Civil Service code names and marred here and there by slang, which should have been eliminated by the editors. At times an artist with words, Manchester in other instances stumbles through them.

The advantages of recording history while the participants are alive are diminished by the possibility of error as the facts must be drawn, not from the unchanging record, but from that most undependable of recording instruments the human memory. It would be interesting to speculate whether those Kennedy partisans who so vehemently attack William Manchester for that "distortion" or this would have criticized anything at all if *The Death of a President* had remained the officially sanctioned "Kennedy book."

D.O.M., A.D. 2167

By John Frederick Nims

WHEN I've outlived three plastic hearts, or four, Another's kidneys, corneas (*beep!*), with more Unmentionable rubber, nylon, such— And when (*beep!*) in a steel drawer (DO NOT TOUCH!), Mere brain cells in a saline wash, I thrive With thousands, taped to quaver out, "Alive!"— God grant that steel two wee (*beep!*) eyes of glass To glitter wicked when the nurses pass.

A.D. 2267

Once on the gritty moon (burnt earth hung far In the black, rhinestone sky—lopsided star), Two gadgets, with great fishbowls for a head, Feet clubbed, hips loaded, shoulders bent. She said, "Fantasies haunt me. A green garden. Two Lovers aglow in flesh. The pools so blue!" He whirrs with masculine pity, "Can't forget Old superstitions? The earth-legend yet?"