The New York Times Book Review

APRIL 1967 SECTION 7

November 22, 1963

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT. November 20 - November 25, 1963. By William Manchester. Maps, diagrams. 710 pp. New York: Harper & Row. $10.

By TOM WICKER

AT the National Book Awards ceremonies recently, Bernard Malamud quoted Herman Melville's dictum: "To produce a mighty book you must choose a mighty theme." At first glance, it might appear that William Manchester had such a theme ready-made, and stated it in the title of his book: the death of a President.

But it is not the mere death—the most common human reality—of the mighty Ahab, or of Lear, or of Macbeth, that moves us. It is the circumstances in which they move inexorably to an inevitable downfall that call finally upon our pity and our terror. John Kennedy did not, like them, succumb to the shades and passions of his character in such a way as to provoke that awful self-destruction which is tragedy, which brings catharsis to those who witness it.

No one insists on this more furiously than William Manchester. Kennedy's death, his book asserts repeatedly, was dictated by another man's deranged mind, itself inflamed by the deranged political atmosphere of a city. Not even the Warren Report is more certain than Manchester that Kennedy's was a wanton murder, not a tragic death.

Tragedy is the greatest of themes, but it is not the only great theme. In the absence of tragedy, Manchester was by no means thwarted in trying to make a "mighty book," as he plainly did try to do. Senselessness itself, chance, hazard, the bolt of lightning from the hard blue sky—this is the stuff of life, too, as great themes must be. The dark daemonic instinct, the limitless capacity of man to destroy what he builds, to build again to destroy again—here is another. And each of them could be found in the story Manchester had to tell.

MR. WICKER heads the Washington bureau of The Times and is the author of "Kennedy Without Tears: The Man Beneath the Myth."

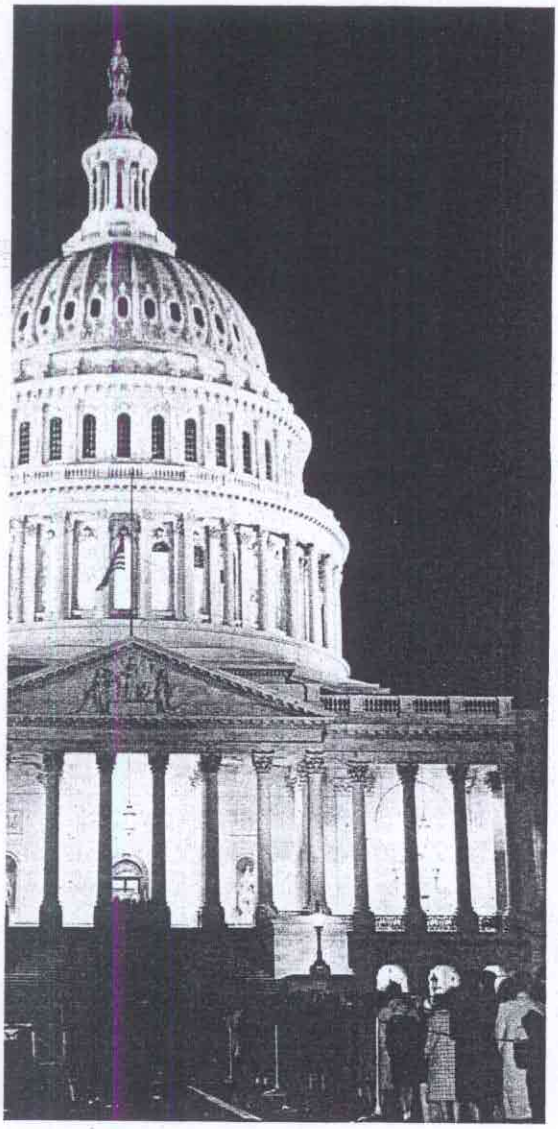
But neither of these is *his* theme. All through his book, rather, rising and falling like a symphonic motif, repeated, fully developed, is a single, central assumption—that at 1 P.M., Nov. 22, 1963, when President Kennedy was pronounced dead, all our lives were changed forever, the world was never to be the same again, a part of it was gone. Here again is a great possibility.

Much of Kennedy's thought in his Presidential years seemed to turn toward the common humanity of the world's peoples; *"Ich bin ein Berliner,"* he cried, after seeing the Wall, and Manchester quotes an Englishman who wrote, "With the death of President Kennedy, every man in the free world becomes a Kennedy." (Why was the "free" necessary?) So it might well have been appropriate to build a mighty book about his murder on this theme—the death of a man, the loss of a part of humanity.

But this seems not to have been enough for Manchester. His dedication, rather, is to "all in whose hearts he still lives—a watchman of honor who never sleeps." And in his recent account of how he wrote the book and struggled with the Kennedy family over its publication ("William Manchester's Own Story," Look magazine, April 4, 1967), he discloses perhaps more than he knows of what his work is about.

With the peculiar emotional insistence that also infuses his book—as if he cannot tell us often enough how involved, anguished, nearly overcome he is—Manchester recalls that on "that brave Inaugural morning in 1961" he had written down (in a diary? a newspaper account? just on impulse?) a quotation from the 16th-century English martyr Hugh Latimer: "We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace . . . as I trust shall never be put out." And then Manchester confides: "Now, the light was gone from our lives, and I was left to grope in the darkness of the dead past."

Later in the same article, asserting that his chapter on the ceremonies of state following the assassination is the best part of his book, Manchester writes that he believes these obsequies "were a redemption, a catharsis, investing the *(Continued on Page 2)*



Nov. 24, 1963.

November 22, 1963

(Continued from Page 1)

ghastly futility that had gone before with meaning. Maybe that craving for significance is a weakness. . . . Yet, I doubt it."

One more note concludes this remarkable thematic revelation: "In our hour of disgrace and confusion," Manchester writes, "Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, who had lost more than any of us, held us all together, remained true to the leader we had lost, and, in kindling that Arlington flame, rekindled our national pride."

So it was not the death of a man, and not even really the death of a President, about which this talented, sensitive, personally anguished writer chose to tell us. It was not just that on Nov. 22, 1963, mankind became poorer—as it does with the death of every starving child in India and every prosperous Rotarian in the Middle West. It was not merely that the world's political arrangements and prospects were thrown into confusion and perhaps set back by the sudden absence of an able young leader of a new generation.

Manchester insists, instead, that John Kennedy was the light of our lives, and that with his going we were in the dark; that Jacqueline Kennedy rekindled the light so that his memory could hold it aloft for us all. And that is what gives meaning to "the ghastly futility that had gone before."

This is no doubt true for many of those among whom Manchester, of necessity, conducted the bulk of his immense researches, and who were in Kennedy's closest circle. It is unquestionably true for Manchester, an honest writer who is at pains in the Look article to make it clear that he was never a paid agent of the Kennedy family, despite Jacqueline Kennedy's disparaging remark about having "hired" him to write this book. In fact, Manchester discloses that one of the causes of the ultimate friction between him and the family was Mrs. Kennedy's discovery that he was going to make too much money—she thought—out of his astonishingly devoted labors. Part of the final settlement, out of court, was his renunciation of "certain sources of income that had been earmarked for the author."

So for three years of drudgery, apparently as personally painful to Manchester as it was physically exhausting and financially debilitating, he lurched doggedly through the events of those five days, first seeking in incredible detail every nuance of what had been done, said, thought, by everyone conceivably concerned, then, on a schedule he estimated at 100 hours a week, writing in longhand his extraordinary testament on the theme he had undertaken.

This supercharged effort has served Manchester both well and badly. It is unlikely, for instance, that any other coverage of the same ground will turn up as much important or interesting new detail as "The Death of a President" contains. By the use of the tape-recorder method of extracting still fresh memories from participants in those events, he is even able to set down what many were thinking as the shots were fired, as the plane returned to Washington, as the body lay in state—and without resorting to the Carl Sandburg school of imaginative "must-have-been-thinking" reconstruction. Mrs. Kennedy in particular, seems to have poured out to him, almost compulsively, a flood of recalled thoughts, emotions, words.

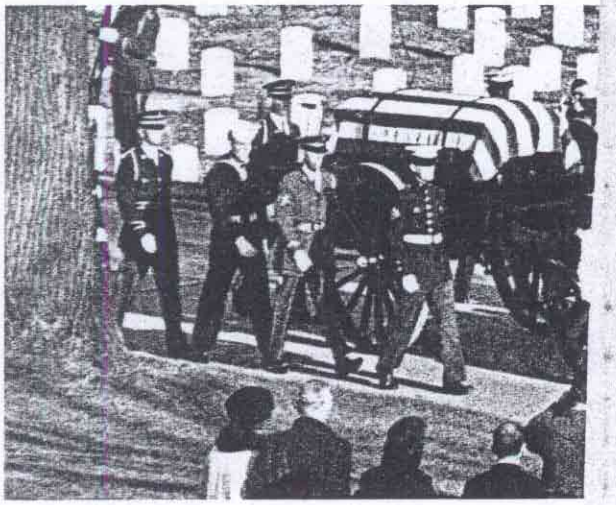
On the other hand, a shocked memory plays tricks (as Manchester points out himself, his persistent research disclosed conversations that weekend that the participants do not remember; sometimes, he writes, a person who remembers talking to a specific friend actually was talking to another). For instance, here is a passage describing the reaction of Rep. Henry Gonzales of Texas when he heard the shots in Dealey Plaza: "Gonzales, who had been in Congress when Puerto Rican Nationalists opened fire from the gallery, thought: *Can this be another Puerto Rico?*"

Gonzales is an honorable man, and Manchester is an honest writer, but the fact is that Gonzales was elected to Congress in 1961 and the Puerto Rican attack was in 1954. Similarly, Charles Roberts of Newsweek (in his "The Truth About the Assassination") has challenged Manchester's account of how Lyndon Johnson was sworn in in a ceremony that made use of a Bible that Kennedy had read every night aboard the Presidential airplane; Roberts, one of two reporters aboard the plane on the return flight and one of the ablest in Washington, saw the ceremony and establishes the fact that Johnson took the oath over a new missal, still wrapped in cellophane.

TIME magazine has printed Cecil Stoughton's photographs of the ceremony to disprove Manchester's statement that no Kennedy aide witnessed the swearing-in. Roberts, whose eyewitness testimony has to be ranked at least equally with Manchester's postmortem research, rather flatly challenges the whole idea—to which much of this book is devoted—that the flight from Dallas was a time of bitterness, controversy and rudeness between Johnson men and Kennedy men.

But in any fabric so vast, one could undoubtedly pick many unimportant holes (although the alleged incidents aboard the plane, in sum, are by no means unimportant). Manchester's method has not been the reporter's approach, seeking the significant and meaningful detail that illustrates cleanly and accurately; rather, he has sought *all* details, adding them one upon one until a towering mass looms above the hard-climbing reader. Stoughton did not merely use a camera; it was a "super-wide Hasselblad single-reflex 38-mm. lens with a 90-degree angle."

This research method is invaluable, at times. Manchester writes in Look, for instance, that such diligence led him to hundreds of viewings of the Zapruder film of the assassination, so that he finally was able to see and



thus to write about the confused responses to the shooting on the part of the Secret Service men in charge of the Presidential limousine. Even the Warren Commission did not report this "detail."

But the endless accumulation of detail also has its problems—first among them, the highly increased chance of such errors or questionable facts as have already been mentioned. Beyond that, given the inherent drama of its events, "The Death of a President" sometimes becomes strangely stupefying. One plunges on through a gripping passage grateful for the totality of the scene Manchester has been able to reconstruct, only to emerge into a long, equally detailed, equally emphasized account, for instance, of what people far away were doing and thinking in response to the news. This is certainly a part of the story of the weekend — a remarkable part — but here and elsewhere the mass of detail only creates impatience to get on to whatever will happen next at the center of the story.

Yet, we find here the minute—it has to be minute—explanation of how Jack Ruby got into the garage of the Dallas Police Station as Oswald was about to be moved to the County Jail. A patrolman assigned to guard the entrance Ruby used was forced momentarily to step to the street and stop traffic. Why? Because a last-minute change in poorly conceived Dallas police plans required another vehicle to be brought through the traffic into the basement. In the 10 seconds that the patrolman was away from his post, Ruby strolled in unchallenged, and by chance.

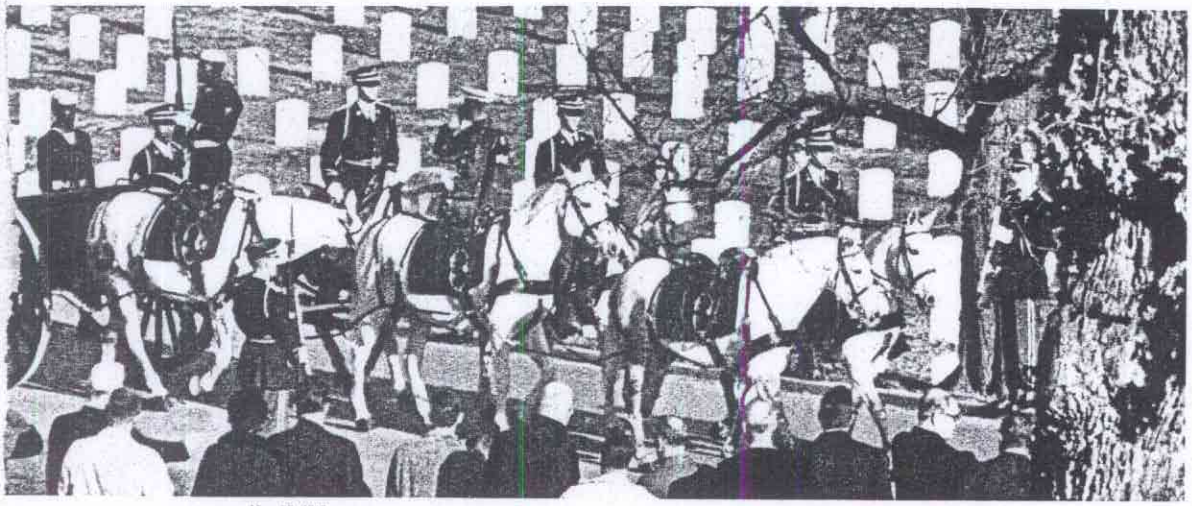
But again—Manchester has already changed the book to eliminate his assertion in earlier versions that Gen. Chester Clifton, Kennedy's military aide, had instructed White House signalmen to call and reassure his wife before asking for any intelligence information or ordering any security steps. Manchester wrote the first version on the authority of Gen. Godfrey McHugh, the Air Force aide who overheard the conversation. McHugh didn't lie, nor did his memory slip. He simply did not know that he was overhearing a *second* call to Washington, and that Clifton had made a previous, more official call.

The point is that Manchester's passionate quest for details, even those as much out of the mainstream of the story as Clifton's concern for Mrs. Clifton, can lead to error as well as to the important fact of how Ruby got into the basement. And the net effect is to raise troubling questions about other details, the truth of which is not easily judged, as in the case of the Clifton phone call.

Truth, in any case, is not necessarily the sum of ascertainable facts. Manchester devotes many pages of excellent reporting and writing to the construction of a picture of a disturbed, resentful, incompetent Oswald failing at everything including intimate relations with his unpleasant wife; an Oswald who had already tried senselessly to kill Gen. Edwin Walker, and who was ready to strike out again at something, anything, in a gesture that would make of him a man among men; an Oswald rebuffed once again by Marina on the night before the murder, slowly "going mad" as he watched an old war movie on television.

This is convincing. But Manchester devotes as much time and excellent reporting to establishing in Dallas, before and after the assassination, an atmosphere of vicious hatred for Kennedy and anything else to the left of the John Birch Society; of callous disregard for his safety; of incitement to murder before, and of concern only for the city's "image" after, the death. This, too, is convincing—and among the most shocking passages in a book replete with them.

But Manchester's conclusion that Oswald was a deranged killer, that Dallas was a deranged city, and that the *combination* resulted in murder,



Nov. 25, 1963.

is not really a truth as the author asserts. It is a possibility. It is a possibility that Oswald would not have acted as he did had he worked in Kansas City and had Kennedy come to town. It is a possibility that the right-wing atmosphere of Dallas influenced him to shoot at the right-wing Walker as well as at Kennedy. It is a possibility that only in that city could that man have vented his miserable life in that way.

Yet, Manchester's Oswald clearly is a coiled and venomous rattler waiting to strike; Manchester's Dallas is a vicious city that needs no tormented human failure to act for it; but only Oswald did act, and it is hard to escape the impression—which Manchester's picture strengthens—that he would have acted anywhere he got the sort of chance the Texas School Book Depository gave him; that he was a killer and Dallas was only a loud-mouthed Texan.

Manchester's account of the plane ride back to Washington, with the seething animosities he depicts, is too important and probably will be too disputed to permit any hasty judgments. Again, the very accumulation of detail, the placing of the insignificant in such juxtaposition with the significant, may have misled him; on paper, cold fact and recollection may have given him a ratiocinative sense of a total atmosphere that did not really exist, despite details that suggest it did.

"Recapturing what has gone," Manchester writes in Look, "is a feat, an achievement of craftsmanship, and to a larger degree than the reading public appreciates, it is also an achievement of will; for first the author himself must relive it." In fact, no author, no one, can do that without danger of inventing an unreality. On the other hand, no single eyewitness has had the access to the minds and memories and secrets of those aboard the plane to the extent that Manchester has had, even if it was only in retrospect.

Despite Manchester's idolizing of John Kennedy, however, it cannot really be said —as has so often been charged—that his book is "anti-Johnson." To some extent, it is inevitably so, given the fact that Manchester makes the open assumption (he is not capable of any other) that Johnson was a man inferior in every way to Kennedy. Thus Johnson "lumbers" where Kennedy "strides"; Johnson gossips with his "tong" while Kennedy confers with "aides"; Johnson is frequently described in the pejorative, which sometimes is accurate enough, but Kennedy gets only the best of verbs, adjectives and similes. Thus, a certain day was "as clear and crisp as a Kennedy order"; this may be an allowable descriptive, but not to those who tried to decipher a large part of the Kennedy syntax as recorded at many news conferences.

NEVERTHELESS, the book is not in substance anti-Johnson. Indeed, it is persistently charitable to the new President and to those around him and, if anything, in Manchester's account of the plane controversy and the days immediately following, the tong looks somewhat more level-headed and considerate than the aides. It would not be surprising if this were so, given the magnitude of the shock the Kennedy circle had had to absorb. Manchester quotes Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for instance, as confessing months later, "The Government would have been paralyzed if everyone had behaved like me and Ken O'Donnell."

Manchester's own loyalty and devotion inevitably bob to the surface; indeed, he makes little attempt to hide them. When Malcolm Kilduff tried to explain one of Johnson's orders to McHugh aboard the plane, McHugh cried dramatically: "I have only one President, and he's lying back in that cabin." In that exchange, Manchester says, Kilduff "had laid claim to a job in the new Administration, while the General had forfeited his hope for another star." This might as easily, and more accurately, have been written: "Kilduff was trying to serve the cause of continuity and national stability, while an Air Force General had forgotten that military men serve the nation and not a personal master."

But the real point about this kind of thing—a point Manchester makes, but which could have been reinforced by a more dispassionate man—is that on that day of shock and horror and unreality, nobody really ought to have been held to later account, either by Johnson "realists" or Kennedy "loyalists," for what they might have said or done. It was not a time of cool reason. No one knows this more sadly than those who were in Dallas and have their own irrationalities to answer for.

But "The Death of a President" demands more than a Kennedy-Johnson debate. It deserves to be considered in a context quite beyond the question whether Johnson or McHugh or Ken O'Donnell or anyone else was at his best that day, or whether Bob Kennedy's recollection of certain events is clearer than someone else's.

For Manchester is offering us more than a monumentally detailed history of Kennedy's death and funeral, more than an account of the Johnson takeover. All of this is in the book, to be quibbled over for the ages. But in the largest sense it is secondary, despite its bulk. Foremost here is the Manchester theme—the idea that Kennedy was somehow so far above ordinary mortals, and his era was so golden, that at his going the world went dark —not just for one of its own but for want of something that could not be replaced; and that his widow could rekindle this glow for us all.

It is avoiding the real question to argue this proposition politically—to inquire whether Kennedy was all that great, whether his time should be all that hallowed, whether he achieved more or less than Johnson. It avoids the real question, too, to inquire how much the Kennedy family, with its gifts and ambitions, has been responsible for such glorification.

These considerations avoid the issue because, whatever the facts, there *has* been a gigantic American elevation of John Kennedy, a man, into something beyond the mortality which—in life, as at the end—he so demonstrably shared with the meanest bootblack; and while it may be true that the process started when Jacqueline Kennedy refused to change her blood-stained clothing on the plane from Dallas (Manchester reports: "'No,' she whispered fiercely. 'Let them see what they've done' "), millions of people have had to acquiesce in it.

Therefore, the real question is whether what has been done to John Kennedy in death reflects what he most truly was in life, and what we are. The real question is one of truth, and in that great context it makes little difference whether he, unlike Johnson, would have kept us out of the Vietnamese war or whether the Kennedys are building a dynasty on his image. And now that in his agonizing labor and devotion William Manchester has laid the myth of the life as well as the story of the death fully and forthrightly and finally upon history, the question ought to be faced.

As for us, the living, so far from Mrs. Kennedy or anyone else having relit the glow of life, what is the Kennedy myth but a narcotic, an escape, a romance? "Once upon a time, when the world was young and golden, there was a handsome prince who lighted our way and all was well." And if we only had him back the world would not be so dark and so cruel and so baffling. Yet, the essence of Kennedy's thought was that man lived a twilight struggle in which, if he fought well, there would be neither victory nor defeat; and I believe that the glory of man is not that he erects myths of triumph but that he endures without hope of triumph, and prevails because he insists on living in spite of death's certainty.

Not even *(Continued on Page 28)*

November 22, 1963

(Continued from Page 3)

the majesty of a child's death by fire in London could cause Dylan Thomas to "murder the mankind" of her going:

Nor blaspheme down the
stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and
youth. . . .
After the first death,
there is no other.

And, Donne tells us, "when a whirlwind hath blown the dust of the Churchyard into the Church, and the man sweeps out the dust of the Church into the Churchyard, who will undertake to sift those dusts again, and to pronounce, This is the Patrician, this is the noble flower, and this the yeomanly, this the Plebian bran."

So for my part, I reject the myth. I refuse to deny John Kennedy's humanity. I refuse to grieve for anything more than one of us. I refuse to believe that any but a particular light went out. I refuse to believe that there is not, perhaps even now, in some schoolroom, on some playing field, in some bunker in Vietnam, at work in some remote corner of the world, someone who will light another glow—even, it may be, more intense than the one that burned so brightly after Jan. 20, 1961.

Above all, in Kennedy's case or any other, I refuse to deny the harsh reality of death—that life goes on anyway, not unchanged, for the death of any man must diminish the sum of humanity, but undaunted, unabated in all its glory and misery. That is the meaning of the "ghastly futility" at Dallas. That is what the Kennedy myth distorts. And that is what, in the end, William Manchester's monument obscures.