

Sunday after - April 9, 1

Manchester's Book: An Exer

By NEWBOLD NOYES

Editor of *The Star*

The question before the house is: Why is this such a bad book? It is bad—very bad—much worse than anyone would suspect on the basis of the excerpts published in "Look." There is a cumulative effect to its badness. As you get along toward the end of its 647 pages, progressively assailed by feelings of distaste, you must literally struggle to keep going.

Why? Manchester's subject, surely, is one of the great tragedies of history, filled with personal meaning for us all. Lord knows he has researched it exhaustively. The writing is not all that bad—not good, but adequate. What accounts for the disastrous result of this monumental effort?

In the first place, there is a question whether any book so conceived and commissioned could have succeeded. "The Death of a President," it seems clear, grew out of a remarkable illusion on the part of the Kennedy family—the illusion that there was a danger that people would forget. Of course there was no such danger. For all who lived through it, the memory of November 22, 1963, and the days immediately following will always be painfully green. Manchester's book will add nothing to the memory. And it cannot reproduce the feel and spirit of that experience in a reader of the future who did not live through it.

Manchester has not merely failed to fix the memory of those Kennedy days. For most readers, he will pollute it.

The Minutiae

One pollutant the book is sure to add to the memory is boredom. Manchester is a great man for the minutiae, and for a while the minutiae serve his purpose well. As the narrative builds toward the moment of the assassination, his close-up, slow-motion technique develops tension and a sort of anticipatory pathos. The level of interest is sustained, roughly, through the return of Air Force I to Washington; thereafter the going becomes progressively sticky. The sheer weight of morbid particulars becomes oppressive. The effect is not elevating, not purgative, but merely enervating. Eventually you find yourself not really caring any more about, let us say, the trouble Chief Justice Warren had locating his car after the funeral—or

why the generals did not offer Secretary McNamara a coat—or the endless difficulties of soldiers carrying the coffin—or the minute personal reaction at every stage of Arthur Schlesinger, Pat Moynihan, "Bunny" Mellon, Ben Bradlee, Ken Galbraith and "Stas" Radziwill.

Manchester is a name-dropper, and his view is shockingly snobbish. He focuses on a coterie of twenty or thirty insiders, and tells his story through their eyes. With the exception of the widow, however, there was nothing really remarkable about the behavior of the people closest to Mr. Kennedy. When anybody dies in unexpected circumstances, the effect on those closely associated with him is apt to be devastating. Mr. Kennedy was an immensely attractive person and President of the United States to boot; it was hardly to be expected that his immediate circle of friends would react casually to his

murder. Yet Manchester seems to think he can establish for the rest of us the dimensions of this historic tragedy by dwelling on the sadness, bitterness and frustration of the inner White House circle.

It is quite the other way around: What *was* remarkable, what did establish the dimensions of the event, was the fact that this personal response was shared by the whole nation. It is much more important that the milkman in Omaha wept for Mr. Kennedy than, let us say, that the President's relatives did. The thoughts of the people who waited in line all night to walk by the casket in the Rotunda are far more significant to the mystery under study than are the thoughts of the members of Mr. Kennedy's staff. To Manchester, the outsiders are "they." They appear now and then, as a faceless background blur or a statement that a poll showed that sixty-some percent had

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT. By William Manchester. Harper & Row. 647 pages. \$10.

967 'cise in Demeaning History

this or that reaction at some point in the proceedings. It is not enough.

While focusing on too small a cast of characters, Manchester also focuses too much on one aspect of their behavior during this crisis period. All that is divisive, contentious and demeaning floats to the surface of his narrative—the rest too often sinks un-noted to the bottom. A principal thread of this account, it must surely be known by now, is the conflict that developed, in the assassination aftermath, between the Kennedy and Johnson staffs, and even between “loyalists” and “realists” in the Kennedy following. It is impossible for one who is even slightly acquainted with the persons involved to escape the suspicion that this conflict has been cunningly sharpened in the telling. It is not merely a question of selecting among numerous available details—some of the details selected are suspect. The case of Ken O'Donnell and

the swearing in provides an insight into the Manchester technique of handling facts. O'Donnell remembered that he attended the swearing of President Johnson, yet others said they saw him pacing the airplane corridor, his hands over his ears, during the ceremony. Manchester did not hesitate to accept the latter version, and must have been embarrassed when photographs showed O'Donnell firmly wedged among the spectators at the oath-taking.

Manchester too often tends to let themes that appeal to him run away with his concern for accuracy. He has, for example, a pet idea that Kennedy friends, in shock, became impervious to the effects of alcohol on November 22. “Mary McGrory,” he reports, “tried to get drunk with Teddy White.” The Star's Miss McGrory had a cup of coffee with Teddy White that day, and did not try to get drunk with anybody. She worked late

into the night—a fact personally noted by the present writer as he circled her desk, waiting for the copy.

The major, recurrent theme of the book is even harder to support with fact, and Manchester ends up simply asserting and reasserting it, as if saying so will make it so. He wants with all his heart to turn the story of the assassination into a sort of civil-rights morality play, in which the hero is felled by the forces of “hatred” and reaction. Manchester accepts and argues convincingly for the Warren report conclusion that Lee Oswald, acting alone, shot Mr. Kennedy. But he cannot bear the thought that the deed was one man's aberrant whim. That makes the death too meaningless. Since there was no right-wing plot behind the assassination, more intangible influences must be ascribed to Oswald. And so we are told again and again that the atmosphere of Dallas is to blame, or Texas, or people who hated Kennedy because he had helped the Negroes. This is a thesis which seems to comfort many intelligent people, and perhaps it would be good for us all if we were to believe it. Unfortunately it has nothing to do with what happened to John Kennedy. And, unfortunately, Manchester simply cannot let the idea go—he worries it to death.

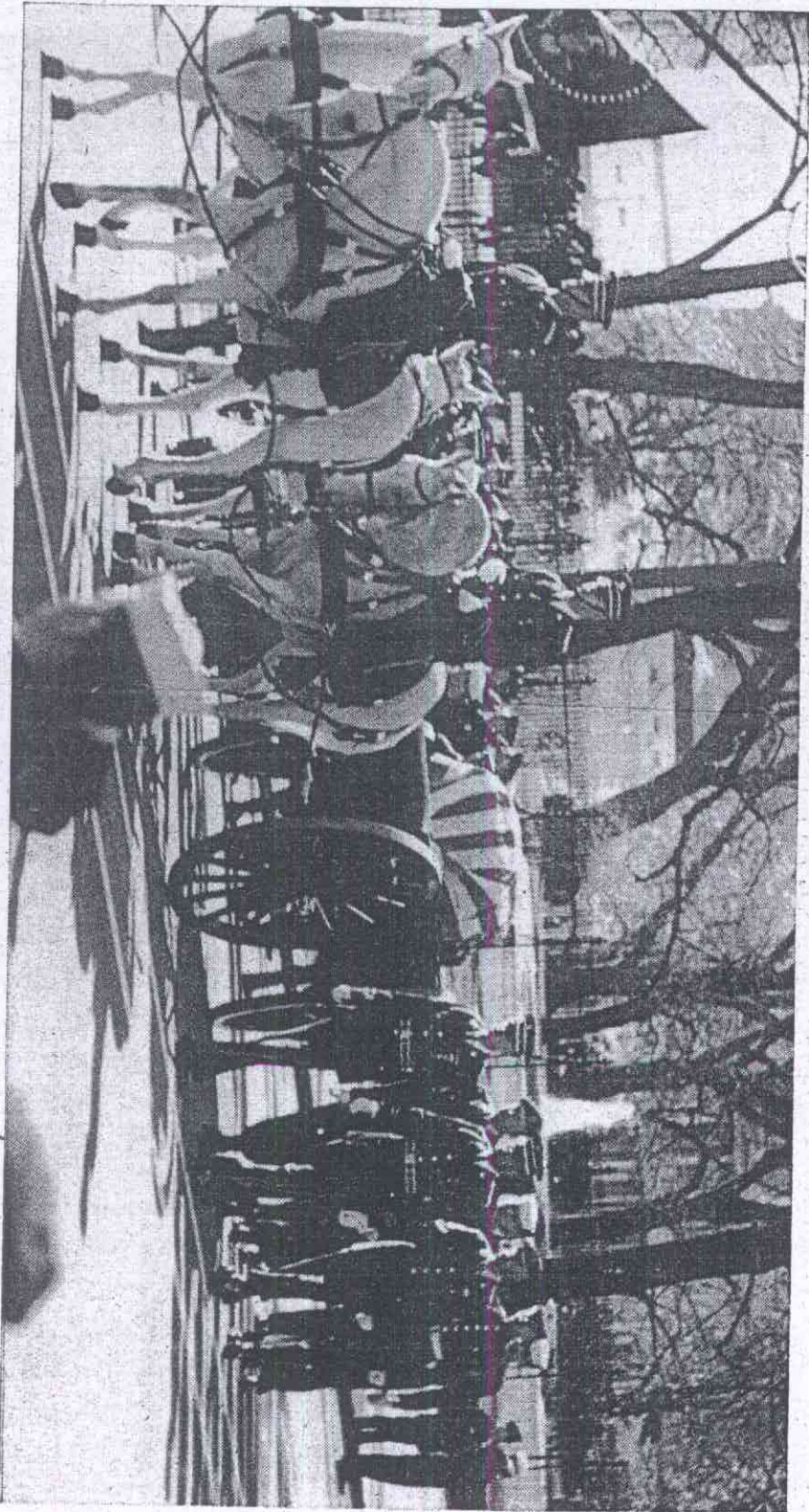
As Morality Play

President Johnson does not come out of the book as badly as the advance publicity might lead one to suppose. The thrust of the criticism of him, which of course comes through with unmistakable emphasis, is that Mr. Johnson moved in on his new responsibilities too fast, hurrying the swearing in, his takeover of the Oval Office, his address to Congress and so on. While dwelling cheerfully on every expression of resentment by the Kennedy people, Manchester does several times personally disavow any such judgment. Here is how he does it:

“To those who loved John Kennedy, the transition of power seemed needlessly cruel. Certainly it was harsh. It couldn't be otherwise; the brutal murder had guaranteed that. . . . Aspects of Johnson's behavior in shock may have proved exacerbating, but . . . Johnson was not himself that afternoon. In Dallas the national interest required strength, not elegance and it is arguable that Johnson, far from taking over too quickly, did not take over quickly enough.”

This is, of course exactly right. The effect of such statements, however,

Continued on Page D-2



President Kennedy leaves the White House for the last time.

-Star Photographer Ken Helms