IN AND OUT OF BOOKS

By LEWIS NICHOLS

A Visit With Bill

MIDDLETOWN, CONN.

At a knock—tentative, because there is no nameplate—Bill Manchester opened the door of his office. "Come in," he said. The office is on the second floor of Wesleyan's Olin Memorial Library, reached by an elevator where, after the way of libraries, you press 5 to reach 2. It is quite a large room. A writing table rather than a desk and a bookcase take up one wall. A secretary—furniture, not person—is the feature of another. Chairs are scattered about; there is an ordinary steel filing cabinet beside the door, and near the desk is a typewriter on a movable stand. This was covered with its dust jacket. Bill is a tidy housekeeper.

"I'll show you my trophies," he said. He is a medium-size man, and this being a working day was dressed accordingly—cotton plaid shirt and pants that look as though they could have been slept in recently as well as worked in. The first trophy in order of display was a photograph of Air Force One, the Presidential jet, inscribed by Col. James Swindal, its pilot at the time of the assassination. Second were three maps of Germany, aids to a book he now is writing about the Krupp armament people. Third was the first copy of the 600,000 off the press of "The Death of a President." This was

to go to his son, whose picture was on a wall, near that of Bill's father, dressed in the Marine uniform of World War I. Undisplayed were letters pertaining to his book, locked in the filing cabinet, and the interviews therefor, locked in a safe elsewhere.

Asked for a bit about his own background before he began his book, he said the first Manchester came to this country in 1638. With a grin, he said he'd been told that if he had a coat of arms, he'd be entitled to a bar sinister, via a duke. His ancestors were judges, doctors, one a clipper-ship captain, his own father a social-service worker. Bill, himself, was born in Attleboro, Mass.; moved to Springfield, went to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. While there, the university boys got into a row with the Ivy League Amherst College boys—this was over putting paint on a statue of Henry Ward Beecher—and Bill had his jaw broken. While he told of this, there was a clicking noise. This was Bill clicking his jaw with a sound almost as disconcerting as when the late James Thurber used to tap a cocktail glass against his glass eye. World War II took him to the Marines, like his father, and he still has shrapnel from wounds at Okinawa. Newspaper work followed, and seven books and the job of managing editor of the Wesleyan University Press, before the day he was tapped by Mrs. Kennedy to write "The Death of a President."

"The first thing I did was go through The Times Index for November and December (1963), putting down every name that was mentioned," he said. "The interviews began in

Washington, the first with Evelyn Lincoln, President Kennedy's personal secretary. My policy in interviews was to try and see all the people who had been around a principal, then the principal himself. For example, the people who were around President Johnson at the time were Youngblood, Lady Bird, Yarborough and Jacks. They were in the car." (Rufus Youngblood was the Secret Service agent, Ralph Yarborough the Senator from Texas, Hurchel Jacks a Texas State Highway Patrolman, who was driving.)

At the same time he did his interviews, he wrote them up, in units such as that above. He writes with a fountain pen on yellow paper, each morning typing up what the fountain pen had recorded the day before. He tries to write from one o'clock to six—five unbroken hours, although while doing this book he sometimes put in a 20-hour day. The original manuscript of the book ran to 1,400 pages—he cut 200. While he was writing it there were no TV, no family life, no movies. A little reflectively he said that he was a man without hobbies, anyhow, and even at normal times just reads in the evenings.

"About the mechanics of the interviews—I have my own form of shorthand, which no one else can read and I transcribe myself. In the back of the book I list about 500 interviews, but there were that many again not listed, to protect people. The interviews took two forms. Some were by tape recorder. Public figures are used to tapes and speak freely, while those who aren't used to them tend to clam up. With these, I'd sit down and just begin chatting, without taking the pen or notebook from my pocket. When we'd reach the point, I'd get out pen and paper. Material that was off the record, I'd put in brackets, so I wouldn't use it inadvertently. It was understood that when I put the pen away the interview was over. Sometimes as we kept talking, additional things came

out. When I brought out the pen, it was understood the interview was on again."

As he talked—this pen and paper were in unbracketed view—the talk shifted to a statement he made in a letter to The Times of London, subsequently repeated in his Look article—that John Seigenthaler ("Bobby's right hand") had clipped out 111 suggested cuts in the original manuscript of the book, and Pam Turnure, a secretary in Mrs. Kennedy's office, had clipped 77. He went to his filing cabinet, drew out a folder and onto the leaf of his typewriter table there showered like confetti 188 snippets of paper. While it's reasonable to save such things, he's meticulous in another regard—he even jots down the day, hour and minute of telephone conversations.

Displaying a sheet of yellow-paper manuscript about the Krupps, he observed, "I'd never left anything before. When I started 'The Death of a President,' I took all the Krupp stuff and put it in a vault in the university. I finished 'Death' at twilight one afternoon, and didn't even tell my wife. The next morning I pulled out the Krupp documents and found it went twice as quickly as it had. I was writing about the Franco-Prussian War, and didn't care who won it. There was no involvement. In 'Death' I identified myself with everyone."

As he held his visitor's coat near the door, he was asked why so many people in his book are called either by first name or nickname.

"Everyone does this," he said. "Mrs. Kennedy is Mrs. Kennedy or the First Lady when in public, but she's Jackie to her friends. People write about me as Bill. I've lived here for 12 years. Up to the time the controversy started, I was Mr. Manchester at the filling station—now I'm Bill. When I go into a restaurant, waiters recognize me. This will all be very difficult when I move into another project, for people won't be themselves. It's too bad. I'm just a guy raising a family, hoping to turn out a book or two a year."