

Distorted Kennedy Profile

Star 6/19/67

By TRUMAN TEMPLE

PORTRAIT OF A PRESIDENT. By William Manchester. 266 pages. Little, Brown & Co. \$5.95.

Back in 1962 William Manchester wrote a modest little profile of President Kennedy, pulling together many of the anecdotes that were then current about his family, his political style, and his father's influence.

The President's liking for the book subsequently influenced Mrs. Kennedy to seek out Manchester to write the controversial "Death of a President." Now the publishers have reissued the original work, priced \$1 higher than the 1962 hard-cover edition and \$5.35 more than the paperback version.

For this extra money you get a new introduction and epilogue by Manchester, and frankly it's a poor bargain. Something has happened to the author in the past three years. His style and his sense of balance have been altered. He seems unable to discuss the subject without distorting matters, seeing enemies where none exist, viewing the scene through a warped lens.

This is unfortunate, for the earlier book, while not much more than an expanded magazine feature article, made pleasant reading. In a light and chatty manner it described President Kennedy's patrician tastes, his dry wit, his emotional detachment.

The prologue, written in the new Manchester style, shows how the author's original bias for his subject has been magnified under the pressure of events.

After November 22, 1963, the White House changed, the author explains. "Milton Berle, not Robert Frost, was the mansion's honored guest now. The New Christy Minstrels, not Pablo Casals, played in the East Room. . . . Because Washingtonians are servile players of follow-the-leader, Johnsonian taste became their taste."

Manchester is dismayed because daiquiris aren't served there any more. He laments that "Lucy (or Luci, as she began to spell her name)" was married in the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, a church Jackie disliked. And there are further remarks in this vein. It is all catty, petulant, depressingly unworthy of a Kennedy biographer.

The epilogue is even worse. Manchester believes that a wave of sympathy for Lee Harvey Oswald sprang up after the assassination. In his eyes, it is a significant cult. As evidence, he says a person identified only as "one of America's most eminent women" telephoned a member of the Kennedy administration to lament the shooting of Oswald as "the greatest of crimes."

From there, Manchester

sails off into a sea of philosophy about the sickness of society and the intellectuals' identification with the antihero. And so we have this passage on Kennedy:

"His words did not reach the pedants. Their hearts were too small to receive a President. But there was hardly an academic cloister—hardly a single cold-bed of antihero nonworship — which wasn't primed to sympathize with the wretched waif who was to become his murderer."

Manchester was guilty of a few irritating mannerisms five years ago. In defending Kennedy's actions in the quarrel with U.S. Steel, for example, the author referred to Kennedy's critics as "steelsympy." The author admitted the President's popularity declined in the polls after this controversy, but added, "Actually he should shed more popularity fat." Apparently too much of it slows down a politician.

But what was so minor that it could be dismissed in 1962 has gotten out of hand. Manchester's partisan distortions, his emotional reaction against the Johnson administration, his loss of professional control have become serious roadblocks to the reader where the author had tried to expand the original book.

If you missed "Portrait," back in 1962 and must read it, try to get an old copy. The new edition is pretty bad.