

Time

4-9/67

Literatu

Readers May Now Judge the Controversial Book

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT. BY William Manchester. Harper & Row. \$10.

By CHARLES A. FERGUSON "Research," says William Manchester in the foreword to his book, "of course, is no substitute for wisdom. The sum of a million facts is not the truth."

Alas, for author Manchester, such is the case. For instead of a monumental history, he has produced a monument of minutia.

Mr. Manchester says he cut 200 pages from the original manuscript. But the density of detail that remains is such that one is left to wonder just what the author excised.

Having amassed a mountain of facts in a prodigious effort of research, the author obviously was loathe to part with any of them, as irrelevant as they might be. Despite this and his access to material hitherto unavailable to others, the author sheds no new light on the assassination.

Mr. Manchester's inability to separate that which is important from that which only serves to satisfy the public hunger, however, is but one of the book's major flaws. The author also displays an appalling weakness for categorical statements.

For example, he declares: "By daybreak the morning after the crime conviction was an absolute certainty. The possibility of a reasonable doubt simply did not exist."

Objectivity also is lacking. Thus, the author's hate for Dallas boils over in such scarcely supportable statements as "The reputation of Dallas as the center of American fascism . . ."

Yet even though he castigates Dallas, leaving the reader with the impression that the crime could only have occurred there, he affirms the Warren Com-



WILLIAM MANCHESTER Amassed mountain of facts.

mission's finding that the President's death was the random act of a lone assassin, driven beyond the brink of sanity only hours earlier by the cumulative weight of his own failure.

But of all the flaws which mar the book, by far the worst is the author's inability to control his own feelings. The reader, thumbing through the book's turgid pages, chokes in the brine of the author's emotion, which becomes an intruder, detracting from what otherwise might have been a totally compelling narrative.

Admittedly, there are some moving scenes in the book, but these scenes are moving in themselves and not because the

author made them so. For only occasionally does the writing rise above the level of daily journalism.

One thing the book is not and that is anti-Johnson.

Of Mr. Johnson, the author says:

"Nothing he did Saturday morning would have pleased everyone. His obligations were to his country and it should be remembered that he met those obligations handsomely." What is more, the author makes clear that Mr. Johnson, while crude by Back Bay Boston standards, acted with nothing but kindness and compassion toward the Kennedy family during the events of those terrible days.

While as adulatory as the two other major works on the late President, Mr. Manchester's book lacks the redeeming qualities which the others possess—scholarship and style, if scholarship is defined as more than building a pyramid of facts and style as more than overblown prose.

This is not to say the book is without merit, only that it falls so short of the goal the author set for it. It strongly evokes the ambiance of the time. And this alone may lead some future generation of scholars who were not privy to the events to find much that is valuable in it.

Mr. Manchester says that President Kennedy would have wanted the story told this way, "truly, clean and straight." But the chances are the President would not have liked the book. For if there was one thing he disliked, it was maudlin sentimentality.