



Life of a Book

MAX LERNER

The trouble with life, as with an unruly child, is that the more you struggle to control it, the more it gets out of control. This is true even of those who have prestige and power, perhaps especially of them, since so much more happens to them that needs controlling.

Jacqueline Kennedy has had enough happen to her to fill a dozen lives, and she has striven gallantly to hold it within a frame, to live her life as privately as anyone can live it who is probably the most charismatic figure in the nation. Yet when she tried to control how a book would be written about the death of the man who was her husband, but who was also the people's President, she found how hard it is to draw the line between the private domain and the public, and the result has been a lot of trouble and pain about the book.

* * *

Whatever happens to the Kennedy-Manchester book battle, whether in the end it goes to trial or not (probably not), one fact has emerged strikingly from it: that there is no real code governing the relations between a writer and a family that entrusts a book project to him.

I don't mean a legal code, since legally the problem comes under the law of contracts which every first-year class studies at law school. I mean a craft code. The press has a good craft code on the question of what a public figure tells a newspaperman—on the record, off the record, for indirect attribution, or for background use only. A good newspaperman takes pride in holding to it. But let him turn into a book writer, especially if he has a sense of history, and all the boundaries get blurred.

When Jacqueline Kennedy commissioned William Manchester to write about the death of the President, she brought into being something that was bound to take on a life of its own, the life of a book. She knew vaguely about Manchester that he had written a portrait of Kennedy which she had read and liked. She did not know perhaps that an earlier book of his had been a life of H. L. Mencken, called "Disturber of the Peace," which had glorified the irreverence and iconoclasm of the Baltimore sage, and his passionate hatred of censorship.

She poured out, to the tape, her memories and deepest feelings about her husband's death, with what now seems to her an unwarily credulous trust that the writer would give her a final chance to prune and delete before the words went irretrievably into print. But the death of a President had gone into history, and the life of a book recounting that death now took over, with a law of its own, and with a loyalty to history—to how it had actually happened—that transcended questions of taste and of private good faith.

* * *

Anyone who has worked at a book for years, pouring brain and sweat into it, knows how in the end it becomes a daemonic thing and takes possession of you. It is something you feel you must protect against everyone, even at the risk of inflicting wounds: what you tell yourself is that the wounds are transient, but that the story you have told is forever, and your primary loyalty is to how it actually was, because that is how it must stand forever.

Maybe I am wrong about this. Maybe there are private values

and virtues in me—good faith, taste, honor, friendship, condences given and received—that override the commitment to history, the passion to get everything down as it happened and exclude nothing, not even what is bound to cause hurt and may perhaps make mischief.

But a writer is what he is, and if he is not driven by some passion other than the big stakes and the sight of his name in print, there will be a deadness at his center. In the case of the Manchester book the stakes have become astronomical, and the battle over the book has only served to make them soar higher still. Yet one does not have the impression that this is what counts with Manchester. Rather what seems to count is the fact that, in coming so intimately in touch with the events of that November day in Dallas, he has himself been wounded by an arrow tipped with fire, and it has cleansed everything else out of him, including a vague memory of a word once given to a woman who talked and talked.

* * *

I don't doubt that in future cases people will be wavier about talking, and a memorandum of agreement will be drawn more tightly. But the social stake in having the story told exactly as it happened— that stake will remain, overriding the hurt to privacy. That is perhaps all that the author means when he pleads, as Manchester does, to give his book a chance, and read it before judging it.
