

The Murky Story of James Earl Ray

Exploring the Past of an Accused Murderer

Reviewed by
Paul Valentine

The reviewer covered the arrest and trial of James Earl Ray for The Washington Post.

On April 25, 1967, almost one full year before Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., James Earl Ray told his brothers, Jerry and Jack, in a Chicago hotel room: "I'm gonna kill that nigger King."

So claims George McMillan in this extraordinary book. The claim, of course, flies squarely in the face of James Earl Ray's own steadfast denials of guilt in the murder and runs counter to conventional wisdom among a large segment of the public that feels Ray was framed.

McMillan says it was Jerry Ray, the most volatile member of the Ray family, who told him of the "kill King" statement and of other equally incalculable declarations by James Earl Ray.

McMillan's book could thus be an explosive breakthrough in the tangled and murky story of James Earl Ray. But it must survive certain tests of credibility first. These include veiled suggestions by Jerry Ray in recent months that he either never told McMillan such things or was stringing him along. They also include the broader question of whether Jerry Ray's cooperation with McMillan was tainted by the fact that McMillan paid him \$2,100 for the information. Such is the world of the Rays.

Regardless of one's conclusions on those points, McMillan's book is a significant addition to the millions of words already expended on the King assassination. It is significant not so much because it concludes, as have

previous books, that there was no conspiracy and that Ray was a lone racist ideologue, but because it examines in detail for the first time the origins of James Earl Ray—the cultural and psychological bedrock of poor white America in the Depression era, the isolation, closed mindedness, low self-esteem and abysmal ignorance which, McMillan says, destined James Earl Ray to kill Martin Luther King.

James Earl Ray's life in the rural outback of Missouri and later in the dingy Mississippi River towns of Southern Illinois "was a preparation for the act of King's assassination," McMillan writes. Through biography and considerable armchair psychology, McMillan constructs a plausible, if not always compelling, argument that Ray was the lone killer of King.

According to childhood chums, school teachers, neighbors and other acquaintances hunted down and interviewed by McMillan, Ray developed an insatiable hatred of blacks, embraced Nazism and even dabbled in the superman philosophy of Ayn Rand. He fell into a life of crime civilized by a supermarket holdup in St. Louis for which he was sentenced to 20 years at the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City in 1960.

It was during this period that the civil rights movement developed fully in the South, and Ray's attention began to fix on King. A generalized and almost casual idea of killing the civil rights leader in 1963 solidified into a specific commitment by the time Ray escaped from Jefferson City in April 1967, McMillan says.

McMillan, a veteran investigative writer who is from the Deep South himself, also attempts to analyze Ray's motivations in psychological terms, blaming parental deprivation for much of his troubled personality.

Book World

**THE MAKING OF AN ASSASSIN:
The Life of James Earl Ray. By**

George McMillan

(Dutton, Brown, 318 pp., \$8.95)

At one point, McMillan suggests that Ray suffered an Oedipus complex, and to carry the Oedipal myth to its conclusion, Ray substituted King for his real father and then killed him.

McMillan's book is the product of seven years of work, a lot of travel, countless interviews, criminological research and extensive consultation with psychological experts.

The book purposefully does not address itself to the physical evidence of the crime—the ballistics, the fingerprints—as have most earlier books on the subject. McMillan contends that the psychological and cultural imperatives which drove Ray to slay King make examination of the physical evidence largely academic.

Of major importance to McMillan was what members of the Ray family had to say about James' early years and his views on King. McMillan acknowledges in the book that he paid four members (including James' father) a total of \$4,350 for various in-

terviews but contends the money did not affect what they said.

In a recent interview with The Washington Post, McMillan acknowledged that he originally asked the Ray family to sign a contract giving him "exclusive" rights to their version(s) of the James Earl Ray story. In exchange, McMillan would give them \$5,000 plus 25 per cent of income generated by certain first rights to publication. The family turned him down, McMillan said, but thereafter generally demanded money for interviews.

After years of dodging and feigning with McMillan in hot pursuit, Jerry Ray finally talked directly about James' role in the King murder. McMillan said, "Why did he finally do it and in so doing breach the family loyalty to James?"

"Because," McMillan said, "he was lonely and because he identified with the crime." Also, McMillan suggested, Jerry was, in a perverse way, proud of his brother's act.

Jerry Ray has since written to The Washington Post, referring to McMillan's book as "fiction." James Earl Ray also filed a libel suit last summer against McMillan after excerpts of the manuscript of the book were published in Time magazine. The suit was thrown out of court.