

A Six-Year Trail on James Earl Ray

By Jeremiah O'Leary

THE MAKING OF AN ASSASSIN. The Life of James Earl Ray, by George McMillan. Little, Brown & Co. \$8.95. 318 pages.

Reflecting on the tidal wave of assassination books that erupted after the murders of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, it is a professional pleasure to encounter a volume that reflects a solid six years of original research instead of ivory tower thumb-picking.

It is especially timely that George McMillan is now in the book stores since a House Select Committee on Assassinations is about to embark on a full-scale investigation of the murders that shook the world in the 1960s. McMillan, unlike most of the assassination authors, did not rely almost wholly on the investigative work of such entities as the Warren Commission, the FBI and various police departments.

McMillan immersed himself in the lives of the family and friends of James Earl Ray, certainly no pleasurable enterprise considering the skid-row/Tobacco Road milieu of the suspicious and amoral background of the man who killed America's foremost black leader.

Instead of analyzing the official reports and the newspaper clippings and then coming up with startling theories, spread wholesale as if they were facts, McMillan plunged into the world of James Earl Ray and stayed there with little surcease for years. The result is a sensitive and immensely revealing story of the Midwestern background that spawned Ray and how he came to his fateful meeting with King in Memphis, Tenn. in April, 1968.

THE BOTTOM LINE, McMillan concludes, is that Ray acted alone in committing the assassination of Dr. King, that there was no conspiracy except in the mind of the smalltime criminal who pulled the trigger. McMillan has found more than enough witnesses to the fact that Ray was consumed with racial hatred and determined long before the final act that he committed in the conviction that it was his mission in life to kill the "Big Nigger," as Ray called King.

An important part of McMillan's exhaustive reporting was to discover persuasive reasons for

believing that Ray's year of wandering and his getaway from Memphis were financed by funds he had available to him from his activities as a "merchant" of contraband in the last prison he was in before the murder. McMillan has managed to demonstrate persuasively that Ray had enough money to finance his pre-assassination odyssey and his escape to Canada and Europe without being bankrolled by anyone.

But it is the psychological protrait of Ray and his antecedents that is so chilling. McMillan found Ray to be a product of the poor-white culture of the Mississippi river towns in which he grew up and an almost predestined fate to be outside the law from his earliest youth. McMillan found Ray to be a moderately intelligent man but one whose perceptions of society were warped by the Jukes-Kallikak family to which he belonged.

HIS FATHER, "SPEEDY," and his mother, Ceal, were hopelessly in the grip of their urban hillbilly environment. His siblings and other relatives were and are almost completely alienated from the mainstream of life. Given a windfall of money, the Ray family members preferred the sleazy slums or rural shacks in which they lived. Freed from prison, a Ray family member more often than not could barely stay at large any longer than it took to think of the next crime.

Ray knew prisons all his life and he knew how to survive in them. He seems to have enjoyed the outside life of whores, cheap bars and slums in which he moved yet he always managed to get caught again as if the only real security for him was inside prison walls. Yet, Ray was not a stupid man. He was a sucker for the pipe dreams that came to him: his fascination with the Nazis, even when he saw them humbled in post-war Germany, and his attempts to improve his knowledge of law, bartending and even ballroom dancing are cases in point.

In retracing Ray's movements in the year he was at large before the slaying of King, McMillan proves that Ray was a cunning and resourceful man. Ray, it seems, could have actually made it in the straight world if he had really tried but he appears to have become overcome with the obsession to kill King while he was in that most racist of prisons, Jefferson City, Mo. state pen.

THIS IS NO STUDY of the manhunt and worldwide investigation that led to Ray's capture in London airport. This book is really a John Guntherine attempt to get inside Ray and learn what made him tick from the moment he was born. McMillan succeeds admirably. He incontrovertibly places Ray in a fringe of society that most of us do not even see and terrifies the reader with the knowledge that there are so many people in the U.S. to whom jails, violation of the law and squalor are a way of life.

The appalling thing is that Ray contained within himself enough assets of intelligence and ambition to have crossed over into the straight world. I am no psychologist and therefore cannot entirely subscribe to McMillan's idea that, in killing King, Ray was really committing parricide against his own Jeter Lester-like father. I feel, on the basis of the McMillan dissection of James Earl Ray, that he was a lawless bigot to whom it was a natural thing to plan and execute the murder of the civil rights leader.

The House Select Committee, among others, should take the reporting of George McMillan into account when it begins probing the murder of King. McMillan has done a good deal of the committee's work already when it comes to deciding whether the world knows all there is to know about Ray and why he set out to kill Dr. King and did so with nearly as much skill as the fictional "Jackal" of screen and novel.

This is a most important book, and incredibly timely, since the King assassination will soon be probed by a committee which does not have six years in which to reach a conclusion.●

| WANTED BY THE FBI | |
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| CIVIL RIGHTS - CONSPIRACY INTERSTATE FLIGHT - ROBBERY JAMES EARL RAY | |
| FBI No. 44-382-C | |
| | |
| Photograph taken 1968 Photograph taken 1968 Photograph taken 1968 | |
| Aliases: Eric Starvo Galt, Dr. C. Herman Harvey, Lawrence, James, McBlair, James O'Connor, James Patton, James Watson, John Wilton, "Jim." | |
| DESCRIPTION | |
| Age: | 41, born March 18, 1928, at Quincy in Illinois; first diagnosed by birth records |
| Height: | 5' 10" |
| Weight: | 145 to 175 pounds |
| Build: | Medium |
| Hair: | Brown, possibly cut short |
| Complexion: | Fair, olive tawny, tanned |
| Scars and Marks: | Small scar on crown of forehead and small scar on side of right head |
| Remarks: | Notably protruding left ear, reportedly is a lone wolf; allegedly attended dance instruction school, has reportedly completed course in bartending. |
| Fingerprint Identification: 15-43-10-000-12 W. A. W. 101 | |
| CRIMINAL RECORD | |
| Ray has been convicted of burglary, robbery, forging U. S. Postal Money Orders, armed robbery, and operating motor vehicle without owner's consent. | |
| CAUTION | |
| RAY IS SOUGHT IN CONNECTION WITH A MURDER WHEREIN THE VICTIM WAS SHOT. CONSIDER ARMED AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS | |
| A Federal warrant was issued on April 17, 1968, at Birmingham, Alabama, charging Ray on Eric Starvo Galt with conspiring to murder with a Constitutional right of a citizen (Title 18, U. S. Code, Section 238). A Federal warrant was also issued on June 20, 1967, at Jackson, Mississippi, charging Ray with Interstate Flight to Avoid Prosecution for the crime of Murder (Title 18, U. S. Code, Section 1071). IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE NOTIFY ME OR CONTACT YOUR LOCAL FBI OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES OF ALL FBI OFFICES LISTED ON PAGE. | |
| DIRECTOR FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON, D. C. 20535 TELEPHONE, NATIONAL 4-3117 | |
| Form 1 (Rev. 10-6) April 18, 1968 | |