

## BOOKS OF THE TIMES

*Opening the Door to Conspiracy Theories*

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAAPT

Of the three major political assassinations in the United States in the 1960's, that of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, in Los Angeles at 12:15 A.M. on June 5, 1968, seems the least likely to have involved some sort of clandestine conspiracy. Unlike the killing of President John F. Kennedy five years earlier and of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, the shooting of Senator Kennedy occurred at close quarters in a confined space before the eyes of a multitude of witnesses.

Yet, as Dan E. Moldea, an investigative journalist, makes clear in his carefully reasoned and ultimately persuasive new book, "The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy: An Investigation of Motive, Means and Opportunity," the evidence against a single assassin was stronger in this case than in either of the other two.

As Mr. Moldea sums up the contradictory evidence, there was the woman in the polka-dot dress and her male companion who were reported by two separate witnesses to have hurried out of the Ambassador Hotel shortly after Senator Kennedy's death, saying gleefully: "We shot him! We shot him!" Of greater significance to the author were the powder burns on Kennedy's skin and clothes, which could have resulted only from a gunshot fired inches away, and the contradictory fact that none of the many witnesses saw Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, later convicted as the lone assassin, shoot from closer than several feet.

Finally, many reports of bullet holes in the walls of the pantry in which Kennedy was shot suggested that more bullets were fired than Mr. Sirhan's eight-chamber .22-caliber pistol would have allowed. To add to the confusion, police experts disagreed with one another, evidence disappeared mysteriously and in the eyes of its critics at least, the Los Angeles Police Department looked as if it was engaged in some sort of cover-up. Only one conclusion would resolve the apparent conflicts and puzzles, and that, as Mr. Moldea reports it, would be the existence of a second gunman.

In reporting his investigation, Mr. Moldea begins by reconstructing the assassination from various pivotal points of view. This section comes across as barely organized chaos, with too many characters and too much happening, which of course

was part of the reason the police had such difficulty trying to control of events. The author then meticulously dissects how the various disputes arose and how critics were drawn into the orbit of the case.

Finally, he describes his own involvement, beginning in the summer of 1985. He says he was a "mob reporter" who had written "The Hoffa Wars: Teamsters, Rebels, Politicians and the Mob," among other books, and was approached by people who were trying to have the investigation reopened and wanted him working on it too. He reports that he ended up interviewing dozens of people involved in the case who had never been questioned before, many of them members of the various investigating teams. He even befriended the man suspected of being the second gunman and arranged for him to take a lie-detector test. Finally, he talked at length to Mr. Sirhan himself.

What is curious about Mr. Moldea's dramatic account is that it brings the points of dispute into sharper focus, leading the reader to believe that the author is on the verge of a major discovery. For instance, Mr. Moldea talks with and seems to believe police officials and members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who insist that bullets were removed from the wood panel next to the pantry doorway, which would prove that more than eight shots were fired. Yet at the same time he somehow leaves you with the faint suspicion that these witnesses are only repeating hearsay.

One naturally hesitates to withhold Mr. Moldea's conclusion, which is ultimately consistent with the evidence he turns up yet comes as a surprise. To treat such a momentous subject as if it were entertainment seems in questionable taste. On the other hand, to sum up the book's conclusions out of context would provide an excuse for strong partisans to reject what the author has to say. The cleverness of his strategy in the book lies in his playing so effectively the devil's advocate.

Some readers will be unhappy with "The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy" and will dismiss its conclusion as a cave-in, which will not be entirely unfair considering the suddenness with which Mr. Moldea arrives at what he finally thinks. Yet his book should be read, not so much for the

**THE KILLING  
OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY**  
An Investigation of Motive, Means  
and Opportunity

By Dan E. Moldea

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irrefutability of its conclusions as for the way the author has brought order out of a chaotic tale and turned an appalling tatter of history into an emblem of our misshapen times.