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THE CASE FOR THE WARREN REPORT

Powerful attack on 'demonologists'

By Jon R. Waltz

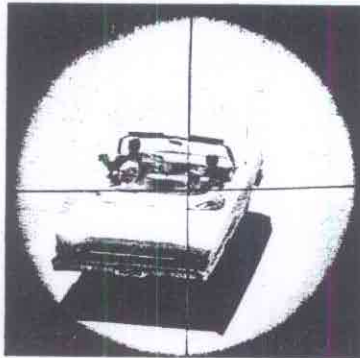
AFTER THE ASSASSINATION: A Positive Appraisal of the Warren Report. By John Sparrow. Chilmark Press. \$3.95.

When an English intellectual, given ordinarily to that understatement which typifies his kind, describes an entire group of commentators as "demonologists," it is certain that he has been badly unsettled by something. And when the English thinker is John Sparrow, warden of All Souls College, Oxford, his perturbation is cause for general concern. Sparrow's subject in "After the Assassination" is, as he puts it, the "host of crack-pots and rabble-rousing publicists, of 'patriots' with a self-appointed mission" that, in the aftermath of the Kennedy murder, produced tumultuous criticisms of the Warren Commission's report concerning the tragedy. He is right in stating that, despite the report, "The manufacture of conspiracy theories became a small-scale industry" here and abroad. Calling himself a "dispassionate inquirer," Sparrow has set out "to see if there is a needle of truth hidden in (the) haystacks of denunciation." Not a one, he decides.

The author's credentials as a "dispassionate inquirer" are impressive. He was a distinguished man of law before going up to Oxford in 1952. Unlike those whose efforts he addresses in his book, he is a scholar of international reputation. His past publications place him beyond any imputation of impulsive knight-errantry. It is evident, however, that Sparrow's inquiry generated in him more than a little passion. It has led him to abandon understatement in his labeling of the principal "demonologists."

He views the ubiquitous Mark Lane, whom he dubs

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"the itinerant demonologist," as an artful coward—"willing to wound and yet afraid to strike"—who relies not on any connected account of what he thinks may have occurred at Dallas but rather on "a steady barrage of innuendo." He charges that Lane, in his "Rush to Judgment," repeatedly suppresses and even misrepresents evidence. Sparrow emphasizes this indictment by remarking that Sylvia Meagher's "gift for innuendo and her cavalier treatment of the evidence rivals Mr. Lane's." (Mrs. Meagher, who performed a distinct service to people like me by preparing a usable index to the Warren Commission's unwieldy product, later launched a vitriolic attack against the report.)

Of Edward Epstein, author of "Inquest," Sparrow declares: "(He) has proved about himself what he sought to prove about the Commission," that is, that

an ingrained bias can lead one to distort the record and (here, in truth, is some English understatement) "facilitate misinterpretation." Prof. Richard Popkin, whose "The Second Oswald" I had always thought was an elaborate practical joke, is to Sparrow no more than a fool: "In order not to believe in the probable there is so much of the improbable he has to believe in." Harold Weisberg, who wrote "Whitewash," is "rabid"; Bertrand Russell, who hailed Lane's book as "a great historical document," is "a distinguished dotard." And so it goes.

In a way, Sparrow is kindest toward Joachim Joesten, the contributor of "Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?" His story is "extravagant and incredible, his book a compound of bad logic . . . and bad taste," but at least Joesten "has the courage of his own crazy convictions." He, unlike Lane and most of the others, attempted to detail a conspiracy hypothesis as an alternative to the commission's findings.

Sparrow devotes a short chapter to Jim Garrison, America's most garrulous prosecutor. His evidence, Sparrow says, is "very dubious." Realizing, however, that Garrison's show was supposed to go on the boards soon, Sparrow refrains from extended comment on its more grotesque aspects. He harbors the quaint notion that the proper place for criminal litigation is in the courtroom, where the accused are given a chance to defend themselves.

The foregoing characterizations of the Warren Commission's critics are, if not extravagant, at least harsh. In treating of them so unequivocally on a generalized level, Sparrow sets for himself an especially heavy burden to prove that his targets deserve such scorn. The critics' coterie excuse their often vicious characterizations of those who, under our libel laws, are virtually foreclosed from self-defense, but it is safe to predict that this bland insensibility will not be extended to Sparrow; we have

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Bold disposal of Warren Commission critics

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arrived at so Alice-in-Wonderlandish a time that a well-known personality can be deemed "rude" for too closely questioning Garrison during a recent, wildly irresponsible television appearance.

In fact, Sparrow has discharged his self-set obligation with cool dispatch. He does not permit himself the quoted opinions of the commission's critics until he has demonstrated, with sense and logic, the techniques by which the public has been hoaxed.

The genius of this book resides in its author's ability to see the large picture and see it whole. Although he supplies some specific examples of distortion and misrepresentation by the "demonologists," Sparrow is at his most effective when he is placing in perspective both the assassination itself and the conduct thereafter of its assigned investigators. He sees the one fatal flaw in the contention which is exemplified by Lane's announcement that the Warren Inquiry "may be ranked with Teapot Dome and the Reichstag Fire trial as a synonym for political cover-up." It is that the critics and

assassination hobbyists have steadfastly declined to think themselves back into the circumstances existing at the relevant times and to ask "whether it is possible to believe that the persons concerned, with the knowledge then available to them, could have decided to do the things they are supposed to have done." Simple as it is, this is the test of all the conspiracy theories and of the "cover-up" allegation. For example: Even if it be assumed that in early 1964 all the investigators — chief justice on down — were somehow susceptible to the proposal of a "cover-up" of what would then have been a conspiracy of unascertained dimensions, they would at that juncture have lacked any assurance that the existence of the "covered-up" plot might not burst upon the public soon after release of their report, destroying the investigators' cherished reputations forever. After all, as the author points out, a conspiracy that must have been — according to the Lanes and the Weisbergs — fantastically complex, involving countless participants both before and after the fact, cannot be suppressed simply by ignoring it.

Inevitably, Sparrow wonders out loud at the critics' motivations and at the public's apparent willingness to be gulled. He is subject to a charge of being merely clever in his suggestion that the critics themselves may be a band of conscious conspirators. But he is on solid ground in hazarding agreement with Dwight Macdonald that most of them had "a large, left-handed political axe to grind." It is ironic that, in wielding their ax, the "demonologists" are most resoundingly applauded by anti-Establishment, Warren-hating rightists.

Sparrow ends his essay (incidentally, is it really necessary to charge \$3.95 for a 77-page book?) on a despairing note. He fears that no light shed in future can "efface . . . a stain deeper than the crime itself: that left . . . by the gullibility of the American public, and by the recklessness with which that gullibility has been exploited." I cannot agree. History, and the good sense of equitable men, will accord a fitting place to the "demonologists" and to their intended victims. And Sparrow's brilliant little book will have helped in the process.