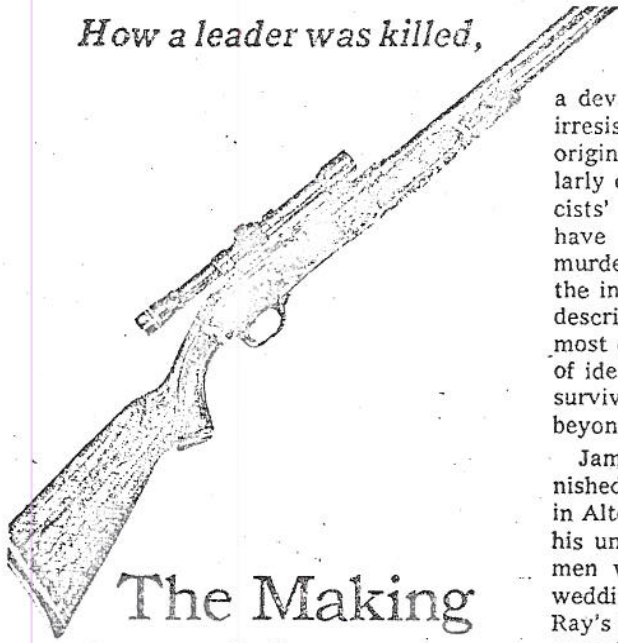


How a leader was killed,

KING
an A-bomb made, a corporation acquired

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The Making Of an Assassin

The Life of James Earl Ray.

By George McMillan.

318 pp. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
\$8.95.

By ANTHONY LEWIS

When President Kennedy was killed, the early talk of conspiracy came largely from abroad; the Warren Commission Report was scarcely out before such a figure as Professor H. R. Trevor-Roper of Oxford was denouncing it. In those days—how far-off they seem, how simple—instinctive belief in conspiracies was said to be an European habit of mind. Americans would accept the more painful truth that their history had been changed by the warped mind of an individual acting alone. So I and others thought. We were wrong.

Since the three terrible assassinations of the 1960's, most Americans seem to have become believers in conspiracy. Their suspicions have been fed by an extraordinary number of assassination books, more than a hundred by now. These books generally start from the premise that the official version of the crimes is untrue. Accordingly, the authors have devoted themselves to constructing new theories and have done almost no research on the three declared assassins: research, that is, that might show why and how Lee Harvey Oswald could have shot John Kennedy, James Earl Ray shot Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sirhan Sirhan shot Robert Kennedy.

George McMillan has now done the first serious piece of work on one of the three. The result is a powerful,

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a devastating book. It brings to life—irresistibly, appallingly—a man whose origins and motives have been singularly obscure. It destroys the conspiracists' claim that this man could not have conceived and carried out the murder of Dr. King. And in exploring the individual and his crime, the book describes an America unknown to most of us, one below the lowest level of identified economic class, its people surviving in wretchedness and squalor beyond any concern for law.

James Earl Ray was born in a furnished room in a neighborhood of vice in Alton, Ill. That day, March 10, 1928, his uncle went to prison; and the two men who had witnessed his parents' wedding were arrested for a holdup. Ray's father and his two brothers have served time. His grandfather was an itinerant bartender. His great-grandfather was probably Ned Ray, a Western bad man who was hanged in Bannack, Mont.

Genealogy or sociology: In either view Ray began life in the most unpromising circumstances. His father tried trucking, auto-wrecking, farming—but mostly did not work at all. His mother was a person of borderline intelligence who could scarcely communicate. They were living on a run-down farm outside Ewing, Mo., when Ray began school at the age of 7. McMillan has found teachers who remember how the boy was that first day: barefoot, wearing ragged pants and a man's greasy suitcoat, smelling of urine. In the space on the report card for "attitude toward regulations," his teacher wrote: "violates all of them." He flunked, although his I.Q. was later measured as 108, slightly above average. And he had a terrible temper, raging at his family even at the age of 7.

Ewing, Mo., during the Depression years, was a town without a water or sewage system, without paved streets or a bank or a doctor. Most important, it was a poor white town: settled by Southerners, disliking blacks, without a single black family. And McMillan leaves no doubt that racial feelings took a pathological form in James Earl Ray. A friend and sometime partner in crime, Walter Rife, told McMillan: "Jim . . . was unreasonable in his hatred for niggers. He hated to see them breathe. If you pressed it, he'd get violent in a conversation. He hated them!"

His feelings were not confined to blacks. During World War II he expressed admiration for the Nazis. His brother Jerry has said: "What appealed to Jimmy . . . about Hitler was that he would make the U.S. an all-white country, no Jews or Negroes. He would be a strong leader who would just do what was right, and that was it. Not

try to please everybody like Roosevelt."

From the many threads of Ray's life that he traces, McMillan tries to construct the psychology of a man without social norms, a violent man of the underclass. The attempt is inevitably less convincing when it moves from facts to psycho-biographical suppositions about Ray's desire for a strong father-figure. But McMillan is admirably modest in his manner; most remarkably, he manages to write about Ray, his family and his world with understanding and even sympathy.

On the two central issues of Ray's relationship to the assassination, McMillan is totally convincing. Ray had an obsession about killing Dr. King. And he had the means to do it.

Ray was in the penitentiary in Jefferson City, Mo., when Dr. King became the country's outstanding black leader and began appearing often on television. Ray's prison friends described to McMillan how Ray reacted when he saw Dr. King on the screen—raging and saying such things as: "Somebody's gotta get him. . . . If I ever get to the streets I am going to kill him."

As for the means, Ray was a major dealer in contraband during his seven years in Jefferson City prison; for a price he supplied smuggled drugs, beer, even eggs. And he regularly sent money out, secretly, to his brothers. By the time he escaped in 1967, McMillan says, they had \$7,000 for him—almost exactly the amount he is known to have spent in his strange travels in Canada and the United States before the assassination and in England afterward. The way he bought the gun and the ammunition and the car—it is all here.

Will this brilliant piece of hard reportorial work end the attempts to find a conspiracy in the murder of Martin Luther King Jr.? Of course not. No proof can exclude all hypothetical alternative explanations; the criminal law itself requires only proof beyond a reasonable doubt for conviction. A new Congressional investigation of the assassinations of Dr. King and President Kennedy is just beginning. As long as there are people unwilling to accept the pain of such deaths without some more satisfying reason—a political reason—the search will go on.

And, I have to add, as long as there are self-appointed "investigators" who make an industry of finding conspiracies. The day I sat down to write this review, a newspaper carried a story about the latest theory of a man who got into the business in 1963. (I omit his name because publicity is gratification in this ghoulish business.) The headline said: "Was Dr. King Set Up to Die?" ■