

Ray's Origins — The Basis for the Murder of King

THE MAKING OF AN ASSASSIN: THE LIFE OF JAMES EARL RAY. By George McMillan. Little, Brown and Co.; 318 pp.; \$8.95.

*Reviewed by
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GEORGE McMillan never seems to have seriously considered the possibility that Martin Luther King was the victim of a conspiracy. In eight years work on "The Making of an Assassin" McMillan found



JAMES EARL RAY

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nothing to make him doubt Ray's guilty plea (which Ray has recanted). Ray did it and did it alone, McMillan believes. The question is how and why.

James Bradford Huie, who also wrote about King's assassination, had "little interest in Ray's miserable early life." But to McMillan, Ray's origins and his special education are the basis for the murder.

McMillan charts an unfamiliar area of American life — a family hovering between the criminal world and the lower-lower class. But James Earl would be different. He was the smart one (with an I.Q. of 108) and with a temper that awed his parents. Ray's hatred of blacks developed in a Missouri town that had none. ("No nigger's ever spent the night in Ewing.")

The locals were Democrats who liked Roosevelt. Ray, as a

teenager, was a Republican who liked Hitler. After the war he enlisted in the U.S. Army with the idea of getting to Germany and helping revive Naziism. He was always an idealist.

But he found the Germans demoralized — and white women with black soldiers. He got into the black market and the stockade, beginning a career of small-stakes crime and ludicrous captures. Ray was thrown out of the Army for "ineptness," and he made a lousy criminal.

He was a successful prisoner, however. It is McMillan's contention that Ray was a "merchant" in prison; that he dealt eggs, splash (amphetamines), homemade brew, even books — with a system for sending the profits to his family until needed for his task. The task: "If I ever get to the street I am going to kill him."

Even in prison, where many whites fantasized killing King, Ray had a special anger. And he wasn't just dreaming. He was planning.

MCMILLAN'S Ray is a strange and complex figure. Having escaped prison and prepared for his and King's moment, Ray was learning skills for a new life: ballroom dancing, locksmithing, bartending, how to film pornography. This portrait is not incompatible with news accounts at the time of the killing or with revelations now that Ray has succeeded in giving the law another "arm twist." At various times Ray and his lawyers have claimed: 1) he was paid to kill King, 2) he was a paid decoy, 3) he was framed by Communists and Jews.

McMillan's study is not the final argument against conspiracy theories, but it has much to tell about the assassination syndrome and racism in America. McMillan's prose is plain, not elegant. He is sometimes preachy, and occasionally he lapses into amateur psychology (Ray as Oedipus and Huckleberry Finn).

McMillan never met James Earl Ray. But through sifting the stories of family members, friends, townspeople, inmates and wardens, McMillan seems to have understood him. And demonstrated that he had means and motive.