



Early Comment on Manchester's Book

William Hogan

EARLY REVIEWS of William Manchester's "The Death of a President" have been generally favorable, although in some cases its appearance has given critics a chance to air their own feelings about the Kennedys, the "Kennedy myth," the Kennedy - Manchester battles, Democratic politics, "instant history," Manchester's limitations as historian, or reporter, and regrets that the work is not literature.

Some have been excessively long critical essays, such as Tom Wicker's in yesterday's New York Times Book Review. The Times' Washington bureau chief finds this "a book to be quibbled over for the ages," a "monument" which tends to perpetuate the "Kennedy myth." Wicker agrees that Manchester is a "talented, sensitive, personally anguished writer," but one "whose loyalty and devotion to the late President inevitably bob to the surface; indeed, he makes little attempt to hide them . . ."

In the Los Angeles Times, the Washington reporter Robert J. Donovan found the book "powerful, dramatic . . . a work whose strengths outweigh its weaknesses." Donovan found the quality of writing uneven, "at times strong and taut, at other times flighty, florid, sentimental." On

the whole this "epic book" seizes the reader with its narrative force and is "one that will be read for a long time."

Book Week (New York World-Journal-Tribune) carried essays by both Alistair Cooke, American correspondent for the Manchester Guardian of England, and the novelist and political commentator Gore Vidal. Cooke's piece was the most negative I have seen. "Manchester's method," he observed, "is what you might call non-selective documentary, an assembly line of infinite ingredients whose monotonous movement is teased, for the lack of suspense, by stoppings and startings and flashbacks . . . a best-seller written for the snooper's world that Marshall McLuhan calls 'the global village' . . ."

In a fairly non-committal review, Gore Vidal saw the book "very much a work of love, even passion." He describes Manchester as a "starry-eyed" writer who, in spite of the bickering, "did pretty much what the Kennedys wanted him to."

My own view was that Manchester had written a powerful and moving pageant, a glowing piece of historical writing marred only by what seems to be interminable detail.

In the daily New York Times, Eliot Fremont-Smith wrote the most enthusiastic review of all I have seen: "An extraordinarily impressive, fascinating and absorbing piece of work." This was not to say the book is without flaws of fact, emphasis and taste, but to say that these are not lethal. "Given both the traumatic nature of its subject and the circumstances of its writing, it is remarkably clear, penetrating and emphatic . . . In toto, a far more impressive work than it seemed in partial serialization . . ."

