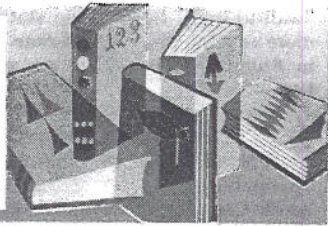


Books in Communications



Birth Pains of a Book

IN THE LIGHT of all that has followed, it is interesting now to go back to what Jacqueline Kennedy first said to William Manchester: "Are you just going to put down all the facts—who ate what for breakfast and all that—or are you going to put yourself in the book, too?" At the time, Mr. Manchester eagerly agreed to the terms of this directive. Yet what came out three years later was a book that Mrs. Kennedy had not at all foreseen. It is the discrepancy between what she requested and what Manchester delivered, I believe, that accounts for much of the trouble that followed, now documented blow by blow in John Corry's *The Manchester Affair* (Putnam, \$4.95).

Manchester, in a way that Mrs. Kennedy could not have expected, did gather up all the who-ate-what-for-breakfast detail in his remarkable reconstruction of those days, November 20-25, 1963, in *The Death of a President*. And he did put himself into the story—displaying an unfortunate tendency toward overdramatization, even self-dramatization. The writing of the book was a tremendous labor and is, undeniably, an enormous achievement; yet somehow he manages to equate it with participation in the agony of the event itself. Manchester's strenuous attempt to put in all the detail—which too often succeeds in lodging the trivial alongside the significant—and his too-evident promotion of the headlong dramatic flow of his narrative unfortunately led directly to the charges of "tasteless and distorted" that seem to have been the heart of Mrs. Kennedy's objections.

A historian friend of mine who has followed the matter with some care has a still more fundamental explanation for the book battle. He believes that in the first months following the assassination the Kennedys may have feared that John F. Kennedy would be forgotten. The young President had not even been allowed to complete his first Administration. A book would preserve the man and the legend. But by the time the Manchester account was finished, the mind of the country had enshrined Kennedy in its memory more faithfully than a book could ever do. The legend had outrun the chronicle, and the chronicle could only detract. Manchester was no longer needed.

As the Corry book demonstrates, the

Kennedys are complex people facing extremely intricate problems. Their attitude toward the Manchester manuscript appears to have changed subtly as commercial pressures for its publication built up. This is understandable. As important public figures, the Kennedys find their lives torn in two, and sometimes the private side suffers painfully. We ought to sympathize with our public idols for placing such heavy burdens on them. The assassination was a historical act that will be written about through American history. The Kennedys know this. Yet it was also an event of unthinkable personal horror to them. They feel an animal need to hold it privately, as much as they can, to themselves. Mrs. Kennedy was clearly appalled at the \$665,000 price *Look* was paying for serial rights. As Corry suggests, this was not so much that one writer stood to profit so greatly as that anyone should pay so much.

It was precisely when commercialization seemed most threatening that the Kennedy objections to the book came most strongly into the open. When it was time to take out the blue pencil, Manchester's all-inclusive method made repair work doubly hard. As Corry writes: "Many of the objections could not be met by changing a word here and a word there. They demanded major revisions. Even more, they demanded

that the author find a new orientation, a new approach to his work."

For that it was too late. Mrs. Kennedy apparently was horrified by Manchester's burning focus on the bloody detail. She missed beneath the event anything resembling the man she longed to honor and preserve. Manchester himself was trapped by the hopeless ambition of his method—to recapture every ticking second of the awful days.

Corry followed the battle of the book as a reporter for *The New York Times*. His book, similarly, is a fascinating, chronological unfolding of the story. Like Manchester, he makes an effort to retrace everyone's steps. In the end the method betrays him as it betrayed Manchester. It does not ask any of the larger questions. It does not illuminate the deeper motivations of the participants. His book, like Manchester's, is simply too close to the event.

Nast's Pen: Political cartoonist Thomas Nast has bequeathed to us some instantly recognizable visual symbols for well known standing institutions: the donkey for the Democratic party, the elephant for the Republican, the tall, top-hatted Uncle Sam, and the smiling, apple-cheeked Santa Claus. Nast didn't invent Santa, but Nast's biographer, J. Chal Vinson, in *Thomas Nast, Political Cartoonist* (University of Georgia Press, \$8.50), believes he originated the two political party symbols—and as for Santa, it is bound to be some version of Nast's jolly face that dances in our heads at Christmastime. He covered the Civil War, caricatured Boss Tweed unmercifully, held a whip of black ink over the Tammany tiger (his symbol again), and influenced voters for two decades from Lincoln through Cleveland. Vinson has put together a worthy pictorial autobiography. —STUART W. LITTLE.



"There I was, armed only with my intellect . . ."