

Henry J. Taylor

Pretense of History



THE YEAR'S SALES are closing now on William Manchester's "The Death of a President." Compared to the buying forecasts, the incredibly ballyhooed book turns out to be a resounding flop. In the publishing world it has descended from its claim of success with the quiet thump and easy grace of an ox falling off a roof.

Without the book clubs, the hard-cover take has been about 600,000.

"Gone With The Wind" sold one million copies in the first six months.

THE MANCHESTER book pretended that its purpose was history, and the Kennedy family stated in court that it was "unimpaired historically" by the family's belated deletions. Manchester got famous (and rich) on the Kennedy-commissioned book, proving again that it's silly to buy golden eggs when you can buy with sycophancy the goose that lays them, a constant trick of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, in turn, agains displayed his famous regard for the sanctity of law in his immortal command to Look's general counsel: "Tear up the contract with Manchester and forget the whole business."

The whole shoddy affair, and the book itself, became merely the kind of news that makes the time go faster under the hair driers. But the shoddiest thing of all was the claim on both sides that this is history.

It's commonly agreed (and required) that in a reputable history the writer does not permit his prejudices, sycophancy, or self interest to intrude.

Hemingway, no sycophant, once observed on this point that "a writer can make a nice career by espousing a political personage or political cause and making a profession of it. He may even have a million copies of his books printed by the government or any of the other rewards the boys dream about."

It was admittedly a blurb book on President Kennedy that landed Manchester the job for the Kennedy family. Both the Kennedy purpose and the Manchester product were tainted from start to finish. Again and again Manchester's so-called research was revealed to be utterly phony and selected to serve his purpose, most lately by Texas Gov. John Connally in Life magazine.

This wasn't history. It was a publicity project that backfired.

THE KENNEDYS should never have commissioned a book about the assassination in the first place. There are more acceptable ways to keep our memories active about President Kennedy. And the end result was that when more and more people who were informed read what was produced for the Kennedys, the banality of this fabricated literary chicken came home to roost.