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World of Books

Manchester's Ideas After Publication

William Hogan

Today's column is by John Barkham, Saturday Review

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TO THE naked eye William Manchester bore few scars of the extraordinary professional, critical and emotional experience he had undergone in the writing and publication of "The Death of a President."

The AFF-AIRE, however, had not been without its compensations. Taking into account a book club edition, the first hard cover printing had run into well over a million copies, the largest in many years. First critical receptions had been mixed. Manchester was relaxed and philosophical about it all when I saw him.

What were his reactions to hostile reviews? "I knew from the start that if I could recreate the feelings of that weekend, I might also recreate the irrationality it engendered, and this is what has happened in some cases."

Is he going to divulge all his sources? "I can't, at least not for a long time. I have a mass of papers far bigger than the manuscript, in which every fact is cited and annotated. In some cases there are several versions of the same events, and I have given my reasons for selecting the ones I did. I came across many eyewitnesses all giving different versions of the same event. One man, who handled mortars in the Army, even swore that a mortar shell had been fired at the President. I



intend to place all this material in the National Archives under seal, to be made available to the Kennedy Library when it is built."

Does he intend to destroy any of the more sensitive material? "Certainly not. No one has the right to destroy material of historical importance. It will all be placed under seal, perhaps for a hundred years."

Has the investigation by the District Attorney in New Orleans caused Manchester to revise any of his opinions? "No. So far nothing of substance has emerged. All of us who have worked as newspapermen are familiar with D.A.' who make headlines."

After all that has happened, what are his feelings about the Kennedy family? "They're not what you'd expect. I feel no bitterness, only a deep sense of sadness that a project which began so nobly should have degenerated, so tragically and needlessly, into a public brawl. The important thing to remember is that everyone in this affair was motivated by principle. The difference between Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy and myself, for instance, was a fundamental one of outlook. She was thinking of John F. Kennedy as a husband, while I was thinking of him as a President."

Why, after the serialization in Look Magazine, did Manchester write that scathing article of explanation? "During the litigation the 'unfriendlies' said all kinds of things about me, and I felt that I had to reply. Now that I've published it, that's all. There'll be no more."

If he had to do it all over again, would he follow the same course? "It's a hard question to answer . . ."