


Saturday Review

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The Perils of Hasty History

MOST of the books on the late President Kennedy have created something approaching a furor. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s masterful *A Thousand Days*, for example, raised an interesting question: To what extent should a historian take advantage of his position as a Presidential assistant to write about events-in-process so promptly that this affects the ability of men still in office to deal with these events? But the Schlesinger controversy has none of the poignant and tragic aspects of the clash between the Kennedy family and the author and publishers of *Death of a President*, a book originally commissioned but then rejected by Mrs. John F. Kennedy.

Mrs. Kennedy's legal attempt to stop publication of William Manchester's book has had the paradoxical effect of bringing out in force the sensation-mongers and curiosity-prone whom the book was supposed to silence. What is most unfortunate about the entire episode is that it brought about a confrontation between responsible and good people on both sides. It would be difficult to find a more distinguished group of citizens than magazine publisher Gardner Cowles, book publisher Cass Canfield, and Mr. Manchester on the one hand, and on the other hand the Kennedys and the prominent lawyers who represent them.

What divides these compatible people, of course, is the ancient, unremitting brush-fire war between author and patron. If the Kennedys had been a business firm interested in having its

corporate history written up, or had been a doting family out to commission a "campaign biography" of Uncle Hector, there would have been no problem. They would simply have summoned one of the cold-eyed writing technicians with whom our age abounds, they would have set his dials, and he would have typed out a bland, perhaps slightly soporific, but certainly unexceptionable account of that day in Dallas and its aftermath.

But the purpose of the Kennedys was quite different. What they wanted, naturally, was to retain a responsible author and turn the pertinent materials over to him in full confidence that there would be no conflict between the private interest and the public interest. The private interest, of course, was Mrs. Kennedy's desire to give the facts without hurting her children or precipitating political storms, and without allowing her story to fall into the hands of commercializers and exploiters. The public interest called for an authoritative and responsible account of the event.

WHAT the family did not bargain for was the fact that authors—good authors—inhabit a world of their own. No matter how sharply defined or contractually limited the serious author's original conception of a book may be, he usually finds as his work proceeds that his conceptual template has constantly to be adjusted and reshaped. He discovers that what artistic truth demands be included, tact and punctilio suggest should be excluded. Though this compulsion to include all the relevant material is meta-

physical, the author feels it as keenly as he might a hunger pang. This, to the Kennedy family's great distress, is what appears to have happened to Mr. Manchester.

It may be said that both the President's widow and the notable author should have foreseen the unfortunate contretemps. But a common symptom of the author-sponsor relationship is that everything is rosy and trusting right up to the big blowup. At the very least, however, Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. Manchester, when they drew up their agreement, should have had in mind the Rockefeller family's jolting experience during the early Thirties, when it commissioned the Mexican painter Diego Rivera to do a fresco for Rockefeller Center. The fresco that Rivera produced was indeed brilliant, but it reflected the painter's political sympathies, which were distinctly radical—Rivera worked in a depiction of Lenin. The subsequent dustup, which ended with the mural's removal, prompted E. B. White to write his wry, priceless poem, "I Paint What I See," which is recommended reading for all creative types and their patrons. The poem runs, in part:

"It's not good taste in a man like me,"
 Said John D.'s grandson Nelson,
 "To question an artist's integrity
 "Or mention a practical thing like
 a fee

"And though your art I dislike to
 hamper
 "I owe a little to God and Gramper,
 "And after all,
 "It's my wall"

"We'll see if it is," said Rivera

If and when the Manchester book appears, it may well turn out to be a mild entry indeed in the what-should-an-author-include controversy. As a temperature-raiser, it will probably be nothing like William Henry Herndon's iconoclastic three-volume study of Lincoln, or the slashing evisceration of Woodrow Wilson by Sigmund Freud and William Bullitt, which was withheld from publication for many years and has only recently been brought out.

The tragedy of the Kennedy-Manchester story is that people have been hurt even though the story has no malice-mongers. So far as the outsider can tell, what happened is simply that a group of highly civilized, well-disposed people, by an almost Dostoyevskian circumstance, were forced into bitter contention with each other. Whatever the ultimate outcome of that contention, everyone involved—Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy above all—will feel for many years to come the wounds inflicted by this public tragedy.

—HALLOWELL BOWSER.

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