

Manchester Book 'An

The following review of William Manchester's controversial book on the assassination of President Kennedy was written by Merriman Smith, UPI White House reporter who was covering the late President when he was killed and who later won the Pulitzer prize for his account of the assassination. He was one of only two reporters who accompanied President Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy back to Washington aboard Air Force One.



MANCHESTER
Still some errors

By MERRIMAN SMITH

WASHINGTON — (UPI) — The controversial William Manchester book, "The Death of a President," is much better than the build-up.

The book was preceded by a highly publicized wrangle with the Kennedy family, critical challenges and awkward errors in the advance magazine serialization.

The hard-cover product, however, is a gripping, incredibly detailed and reasonably authentic account of the assassination of President Kennedy and the immediate aftermath.

Because of remaining errors of fact in some passages, there will be those who regard Manchester's book as slightly less than definitive history.

But such are the wages of serialization sin. An author sees a pot of gold at the end of the magazine rainbow and rushes into truncated print before he really is ready. This seems to be the case with Manchester's magazine installments.

They did serve an important role, however. The condensation brought to light some important errors and Manchester was able to correct most of them before hard-cover publication.

'AMAZING'

To pick at Manchester's mistakes is to ignore the true stature of his book. In balance, it is an amazing piece of work. Laborious reading, perhaps, but with the exception of the Warren Commission report, there is nothing else on the subject to compare with it.

Knowledgeable readers

who take it apart page by page may founder in enormous waves of detail, repetition of names and titles. They may find themselves wandering bewilderedly through annoying flash-back sequences. But net results far outweigh occasionally lumpy reading.

ALL OR NOTHING

Approaching the Manchester book is not unlike accepting a fundamentalist religion — take it all or nothing. A serious scholar, however, would have to compare the Manchester text with other and differing documents of matching validity such as Charles Roberts' current "The Truth About the Assassination" and some of the very books in Manchester's bibliography.

The author told me a few days ago that less than 1 per cent of the original text was excised for one reason or another. There were some changes quite expensive to his publishers, Harper & Row, after the Look serialization.

DEFENSIVE

For a number of complicated reasons, Manchester is

Amazing Work'

offensively defensive. This may relate to his row with Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy and others over certain expunged passages, to say nothing of assorted legal actions, pending or possible. But the attitude is there.

In his first paragraph, Manchester mixes pomposity and whining to say to the reader, "If you doubt me you may as well stop at the end of this paragraph." His publishers should hope that not too many bookstall browsers spot this paragraph and decide not to risk \$10, the book's list price, on faith.

ONE-SIDED

The book is expectedly one-sided. After all, he was picked by Mrs. Kennedy as the author of what was to be the definitive account of the assassination. While the former First Lady later had differences with the author, the 647 pages (plus appendices) provide an incredibly detailed account of a terrible episode of history written from a largely Kennedy viewpoint.

Mrs. Kennedy should not object to the book in its present form. She comes off magnificently if one allows for some rather strange and petulant requests during the worst of the tension that followed the shooting of her husband.

CULTURE MEDIUM

Manchester is hellishly cruel about Dallas as a culture medium for hatred. There was hatred of Kennedy, to be sure, but it is highly questionable whether this encouraged Lee Harvey Oswald to pull his trigger.

Manchester does tell of a few preachers and some private citizens who berated those in the town called "Big D" who tastelessly expressed pleasure over Kennedy's slaughter. But I got the impression that Manchester faulted the community heavily, particularly after the assassination and for the slaying of Oswald by Jack Ruby.

WILLING BRUTUS

He pictures Dallas law enforcement officers as publicity hounds and many a local leader as a willing Brutus. He speaks more of local haters than of those less biased.

At this distance in time from the actual event, my interest turned more to Manchester's Kennedy viewpoint of President Johnson than to some of the actual assassination details. My feeling is that Johnson comes off poorly in the book.

Manchester's Johnson, when it came to official action, performed excellently during the dreadful interregnum between gunfire and burial. But the new President could not help making boor-

ish personal gaffs in the eyes of the Kennedy crowd and the author.

'THEIR WHITE HOUSE'

The JFK staff regarded Johnson as a clumsy, heavy-handed usurper. They would have regarded only one man in creation any differently — and that would have been their slain leader. It was Kennedy's White House and therefore, their White House forever.

Manchester captures the Kennedy staff bitterness vividly. He is on solid ground here for I heard red-eyed stenographers call Johnson the vilest sort of names simply because he had succeeded their fallen idol. I heard some of Kennedy's ranking assistants imitate Johnson's Texas drawl acidly and accuse him of "trying to push Jackie out of the House" which, of course, was ridiculous and untrue.

NOT BALANCED

Manchester notes that Johnson did not deserve this sort of treatment, but he did not balance this judgment

with easily available excerpts from earlier history.

When Harry S. Truman succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt who died suddenly in his fourth term, the FDR staff too was quite resentful of the plain people from Missouri. The Truman staff complained with much derogation about the time Mrs. Roosevelt took to move out of the White House and spoke darkly of her "cleaning out the place."

OUT OF FOCUS

The book's picture of Johnson at the time of Kennedy's fateful Texas trip also is slightly out of focus. Manchester makes the then Vice President a pitiable figure ("He was entitled to only one White House extension" at home, as if to say Johnson needed many more government telephones).

Manchester also says that in 1963 "his real difficulty was that there was so little for him to do . . . three years of relative inactivity seemed to have sapped his vitality."

Kennedy certainly would not have shared this view.

Johnson would hoot at it for he was about as active, perhaps more so, than any Vice President in history.

TEARFUL DAYS

Kennedy's family and those closest to him should be pardoned for almost any sort of behavior in those confused, tearful four days of November. (Manchester captures this period splendidly as the funeral was planned and Mrs. Kennedy prepared to face life without her husband). They would have been robots had they behaved much differently. As it was, they were generally magnificent. And human.

Johnson faced a difficult task of being deferential and sympathetic to their rubbed-raw feelings and still keeping the government in operation. He, too, should be forgiven for blundering into areas temporarily sanctified by grief, worrying too much about where he stood or sat, barking complaints over truly unimportant matters and failing at times to delegate authority sufficiently.

On the other hand, the new

President could not have possibly conducted himself to the satisfaction of the Kennedy clan. Unfortunately this does not come across too strongly in the Manchester account. The mere fact that Johnson had been Vice President and came from Texas was enough to condemn him beyond any chance of redemption in the eyes of the grieving New Frontiersmen.

Never before has there

been such an intimate picture of grief as that painted by Manchester of Mrs. Kennedy and her two puzzled children, Caroline and John. Perhaps Mrs. Kennedy will regard some of this as outrageous.

If so, it should be remembered that the entire matter was thrust into the public domain by an act by Oswald that was even more outrageous.