

Books of The Times

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

The Battle of the Book; or, a Case of Other Commitments

THE MANCHESTER AFFAIR. By John Corry. 223 pages. Putnam. \$4.95.

NO battle in the history of book publishing was as sensational as the one that last winter blew up around, and nearly engulfed, William Manchester's "The Death of a President."

On one side were Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy and a phalanx of friends, aides, advisers, sycophants and lawyers. On the other side were Mr. Manchester, who had been given the assignment by the Kennedys back in February, 1964, to write an authorized history of the assassination of John F. Kennedy; his agent, Don Congdon; the Cowles Communications empire, which had contracted to serialize the book in *Look* magazine; the book's publishers, Harper & Row; and another phalanx of lawyers.

Most of the principals knew each other at least somewhat, and most of the non-Kennedys admired the Kennedys; relationships by marriage abounded, political alignments were in order, and everyone assumed that everyone else was intelligent, sophisticated, professional, reasonable and capable of being sympathetic to everyone else's point of view. The assumption, of course, turned out to be wrong—to a tragic degree, if one were involved, to a nearly comic degree if one were not.

Much Money Involved

Moreover, the dispute involved huge sums of money and, as John Corry writes, "a splendid collection of rumors, touching on two Presidencies and possibly a third." It focused national attention once more, in a rather undignified way, on the trauma of the assassination; it jeopardized the public image of Mrs. Kennedy and the political future of Robert Kennedy, and raised at least four issues of principle—the right of privacy, the right of an author to publish his work, the sacredness of contract and the integrity of "authorized history"—plus a fifth, if you think (as many did during the dispute) that good manners can also be a matter of principle.

John Corry's "behind-the-scenes" rehash of the battle of the book does not, as his publisher asserts, tell all, but it does tell most that is relevant. Mr. Corry, who was assigned by *The Times* last December to cover the dispute, probably had as much access to what went on as anyone, and his blow-by-blow (or hurt-by-hurt, or rudeness-by-rudeness) account displays the kind of empathetic understanding that seems to have been largely missing then. Because of its sense of balance, it is the best account so far.

(Two quicky paperback books on the affair were published last spring: Lawrence Van Gelder's "The Untold Story: Why the Kennedys Lost the Book Battle" and Arnold Bennett's "Jackie, Bobby & Manchester: The Story Behind the Headlines"—neither as bad as the rank commercialism of their titles and timing indicated.)

It must be added that Mr. Corry's book seems virtually unedited. It is surprisingly suspenseful, but also surprisingly repetitive. At the same time, it is by no means as inclusive as a truly serious and less hasty account might have been; it is neither annotated nor indexed. "The Death of a Presi-

dent" itself was amazingly lacking in proper references, so maybe Mr. Corry can be excused.

Yet the matter of excusing people is at the heart of Mr. Corry's book. Who was to blame? Nearly everyone; nearly everyone acted badly at one time or another, including the reporting press. Also, no one; nobody set out to do harm or be vicious. Mr. Congdon and the executives of *Look* emerge from this account as those whose professionalism was perhaps least compromised by emotional involvement. The Kennedys and certain of their advisers—especially Mrs. Kennedy and the ubiquitous Richard N. Goodwin—emerge as very difficult people indeed. Yet the Kennedys' emotional involvement is the most obviously comprehensible.

Mr. Manchester himself is almost a minor figure in the drama, certainly the most apparent victim, primarily of startling insensitivity on the part of the Kennedys and of less-than-professional loyalty on the part of Harper & Row (which, being also the Kennedys' unofficial publisher and chosen by the Kennedys, not Mr. Manchester, to publish "The Death of a President," was caught in an unenviable bind).

Yet Mr. Manchester seems a victim mostly because he was shuttled to the sidelines, because he was fatigued, ill, demeaned and harassed to approve endless changes, and because he was perhaps the wrong person for the job. The real losers were the Kennedys and, according to Mr. Corry's estimated profit figures, the Kennedy Library, which received less money under the final settlement than it would have if Mrs. Kennedy had not sued.

Aura of Sensationalism

In the end, the Kennedys failed to kill either the book or the serialization. They did force certain changes in the text and prevented Mr. Manchester's acknowledging their or anyone else's help (except his wife's). But this was at an enormous price. Some of the suppressed passages found their way into print anyway, and the aura of sensationalism was only assured. The Kennedys' peculiar attitude toward Mr. Manchester's income not only sounded mean, but also backfired—as did their staid aloofness, their system of dealing almost exclusively through intermediaries. Things got so tangled that, at more than one point, nobody could say what was bothering whom about the manuscript. "None of the Kennedys or their advisers seemed to know what was in and what was out of anyone else's copy of 'The Death of a President.'"

"One truth that emerged from the great book dispute," Mr. Corry writes in polite understatement, "is that the Kennedys are really not very good in dealing with people who have other commitments; they are, in fact, vulnerable to them." It was probably this vulnerability or blindspot or arrogance—call it what you will—that more than anything else led to the incredible series of misjudgments and misunderstandings that Mr. Corry documents.

"The Death of a President" has now sold over a million copies. From a distance, the dispute that surrounded it seems an old, gossipy and slightly sordid tale. Yet it also seems at least as historically interesting as the book and, if not as moving or as profitable, very likely more consequential.