

Books of The Times

How Oswald Happened

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

A MOTHER IN HISTORY. By Jean Stafford. 121 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$3.95.

LAST spring Jean Stafford went to Fort Worth, Tex., to interview Mrs. Marguerite Oswald. She wanted, she says, to get more of a feel of the background of Mrs. Oswald's son, Lee Harvey Oswald—to somehow understand more profoundly what made Oswald an assassin. There may also have been an element of therapy in Miss Stafford's trip: President Kennedy's death, she recalls, had stunned her and her husband, the late A. J. Liebling, who then himself died shortly afterward leaving unfinished a "Wayward Press" column (for The New Yorker on the Dallas killing. So in a way, perhaps, the trip was a rounding-out of two terrible personal shocks that were linked in the author's mind. In any case, Miss Stafford went to Fort Worth and interviewed Mrs. Oswald on three successive days, twice in Mrs. Oswald's home, and once on the way to the cemetery, to Oswald's grave—the day being Mother's Day.



Carl Fischer

Mrs. Marguerite
Oswald

If Miss Stafford had an inkling of what to expect from Mr. Oswald (and she must have), she does not indicate it in this shocked and shocking book. Perhaps we are always surprised when what we hear about a person, especially what's bizarre, is verified in direct experience. What we have known or suspected about Mrs. Oswald is verified in this book to the point of nausea. I suppose it has some value, this painful, embarrassing verification, this obvious psychological evidence of how Oswald happened—but it is wounding all the same.

The whole absurd obscenity of the Dallas killing and its lunatic circus aftermath is contained in this portrait—self-portrait really—of Mrs. Marguerite Oswald. One doesn't know quite what to do with it, I suppose because the grotesque inappropriateness of everything Mrs. Oswald says and does in these pages is no more grotesque or inappropriate than what others said and did in actuality—the police, the cameramen, the boys with the contracts from Life, Jack Ruby, lawyer Melvin Belli, Judge Whatsizname, the Dallas boosters, on and on. It is exhausting, this sense of black humor in reality; it insults an event and hurt that none of us will forget.

Mrs. Oswald, a compact, determined, coolly composed woman of 58 has dedicated herself "to history." She claims her son is "innocent" and that she has the proof—some mysterious photographs and other data she

plans eventually to reveal in a book to be called "One and One Make Two" or "One and One Do Not Make Two" or "This and That." "I've got some real dynamite and some real exclusives," she told Miss Stafford, and then suggested they could work together. "I tell you we could make millions."

At home, Mrs. Oswald works on her data. In front of a tape-recorder she apparently talks non-stop. She seems equally matter-of-fact about everything she says, whether it is disjointed reminiscence or about the killing or an esoteric quote from Freud or an invitation for more ice tea, "Sweetheart."

Most of the time it is about herself. "Tomorrow is Mother's Day," she said in the second interview, "and I will go to Lee Harvey Oswald's grave, but I will be a mother alone, a mother in history alone on Mother's Day" (whence Miss Stafford's title). The rhetoric here is typical. "Actually, I have suffered a great deal," is the constant refrain, often in reference to the greater press attention and money her daughter-in-law Marina got. (Mrs. Oswald suspects that Marina is really French.) She denies she is herself a "mental case"—"believe me, if anybody's in their right mind, it's Mrs. Marguerite Oswald."

Elsewhere, on her son's truthfulness: "Now, I want to say this in defense of my son—let's have some defense of Lee Harvey Oswald and his mother! How many boys at age 13 that play hookey from school would come home from school and tell his mother that he did so?" "Lee Harvey a failure?" she asks near the beginning, "I am smiling. . . . I find this a very intelligent boy, and I think he's coming out in history as a very fine person."

Shocking Theory

Miss Stafford must have registered surprise at this. Mrs. Oswald explained: "Now maybe Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin. But does that make him a louse? No, no! Killing does not necessarily mean badness. You find killing in some very fine homes for one reason or another. And as we all know, President Kennedy was a dying man. [The claim here is that he had 'Atkinson's Disease,' presumably meaning Addison's Disease.] So I say it is possible that my son was chosen to shoot him in a mercy killing for the security of the country. And if this is true, it was a fine thing to do and my son is a hero."

And then, finally, at the grave: "And let me tell you this, if you research the life of Jesus Christ, you find that you never did hear anything more about the mother of Jesus, Mary, after He was crucified. And really nobody has worried about my welfare."

Well, there it is, Miss Stafford's book: Mrs. Oswald is indeed the mother of her son. Miss Stafford's shock betrays itself in occasional little cruelties of thought and tone. What else is one to do? It is all so stupefying, this harangue, this compulsive, addled monolog, so unspeakably monstrous and pathetic. "A Mother in History" may have some point—certainly relevance—but one reads it constantly assaulted.