

Fifty years since Dallas

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Hugh Brogan

The most entirely satisfactory volume in this batch of books about President Kennedy is Peter J. Ling's biography (*John F. Kennedy*). The author could perhaps have done with more space, but it remains astonishing how much information he gives us, and his command of the sources is equally impressive. He is scholarly, lucid, fair-minded and up-to-date. He is not without his preoccupations and small prejudices (his allusions to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., strike me as ungenerous) but they are trifling, and will get in nobody's way. Particularly valuable features of his work are the two chapters ('Images and action', 'Remembrance') on what he calls Kennedy's posthumous period. As he says, 'The process by which Kennedy is remembered is a vital part of his biography', and although space constraint is felt even more here than elsewhere, the chapters are valuable in themselves and provide a good model for future writers. The bibliographical essay is also very useful. This is as good an academic introduction to its subject as any student could ask for, and deserves a place in every university library.

Yet it will be lucky if it gets half the attention it deserves. To judge from 2013's newspapers, publishers' lists, and television, the reading public is still, 50 years after, mesmerised by the assassination and its possible perpetrators. It is a topic for the half-baked, like the authorship of Shakespeare's plays or the record of Richard III. The controversy (if it can be dignified with the term) throws a depressing light on the mentality of our age. Given America's appalling record of gun crime ('Guns don't kill people; Americans kill people', to re-coin a phrase); given the deaths of, for example, Huey Long, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and John Lennon; given the attempted assassinations of Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, and such mass killings as those at Columbine and Sandy Hook, I see no implausibility in the idea that Lee Harvey Oswald, a disagreeable, even deranged misfit, acted alone; and as Gerald Posner demonstrated 20 years ago (in his book, *Case Closed*) the evidence for his autonomous villainy is overwhelming: those who care to study it will find a vainglorious narcissist evolving into a murderer right before their eyes (one of the failings of the Warren commission was that it excluded from its report a first attempt to analyse Oswald's character). The murder of Oswald himself by an impulsive idiot is no more mysterious.

But American and world opinion has almost from the first rejected the squalid truth in favour of a wild gallimaufry of conspiracy theories, and the 50th anniversary has stimulated a fresh outbreak of adolescent fantasy, which amounts to a single proposition, that any version of Kennedy's death may be true, except the official one.⁽¹⁾ There seems to be no limit to credulity and speculation. I myself visited Dallas a year before Kennedy did, during the missile crisis; I shan't be entirely surprised if therefore I one day join the ranks of the accused, along with the FBI, the CIA, the KGB, the John Birch Society, the Mafia, Mossad, Lyndon Johnson, Fidel Castro, anti-Castro Cuban exiles, etc. etc. I dare say I was acting on behalf of MI5 or CND or Harold Macmillan (one suggestion is that Kennedy was somehow entangled in the Profumo affair). It only remains to discover and denounce my accomplices: I must have had some since I cunningly arranged to be in Connecticut when the deed was done, on 22 November 1963.

The central historical problem, then, is why the conspiracy theories have proved so ineradicable. Initial light is thrown on the question by Philip Shenon's substantial study (at 625 pages it is much the longest of these books), *A Cruel and Shocking Act: the Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination*. In spite of its title it is primarily concerned not with the assassination but with one of its immediate consequences, the writing of the Warren report. It is in fact an authoritative history of the Warren commission, and is fascinating in every detail. Although fastidiously sympathetic to the commissioners and their staff, Mr Shenon does not conceal the fact that their work was seriously flawed; indeed his central purpose is to arrive at a critical if fair judgement of the report, as in an earlier book he assessed the work of the 9/11 commission of investigation (what next? Watergate?). A hard-working, veteran reporter, he is admirably qualified for his task, and the picture he paints is almost complete and almost completely convincing. He cannot quite bring himself to accept that Oswald had no accomplices, and thereby dissents from the thrust of the Warren report, but to a reader this is less important and interesting than his story of the arguments, discussions, insights and blunders that went to the report's shaping. It is a saga of office politics at its most intense. Lyndon Johnson bullied an intensely reluctant Earl Warren to chair the commission, saying that nuclear war might result if he didn't, and similarly drove Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, his long-time mentor, into serving: LBJ

wanted the commission to represent as many interests in American public life as possible, and cared not at all that Warren, the great liberal Chief Justice, and Russell, an unyielding segregationist, detested each other. It was much the same with the rest of the commission. It was a glaringly heterogeneous collection of men (no women) who mostly had full-time jobs which they could not neglect, and no report could possibly have appeared, let alone been any good, had they not recruited a first-rate staff – mostly ‘law school hotshots’ – brilliant recent graduates. Distinguished senior lawyers were also recruited, but they were often as busy as the commissioners (one of them after a few weeks gave up and went back to New York without ever formally resigning). So the hotshots did most of the work. None of them suffered from modesty, each had his own agenda (a universal characteristic of everyone involved in the investigation) and they were restrained in the end only by the authority of the Chief Justice, which they both accepted and resented. He was not infallible, yet his sagacity was a quality which they lacked and badly needed, and in the end a unanimous report, signed by all the commissioners, was only possible because Warren saw the political importance of unanimity, and was willing to attain it even by fudging the language of the report’s conclusions, which found that Oswald acted alone but may have had co-conspirators. This absurd self-contradiction enraged the young lawyers and eventually helped to destroy the commission’s authority, but it served Lyndon Johnson’s immediate purpose, which was to reassure a frightened America and get the whole matter behind him before he launched his election campaign in the autumn of 1964. The report was duly published in September, and has deservedly been the target of sharp criticism ever since.

Many of the critics lacked all sense of proportion. There was more to the report than its conclusions, and much of the commission’s basic work was sound. But the report’s weaknesses were fatal to its reception, and meant that eventually the whole affair had to be re-investigated. Not that those weaknesses were precisely what were alleged. For example, the report was among other things undoubtedly a cover-up, but not of a gigantic, sinister plot. President Kennedy had relied on his country’s services to protect him, and they had all let him down. Naturally they wanted to conceal the fact as much as they could. J. Edgar Hoover realised, almost as soon as he got the news from Dallas, that the FBI was at fault: the agent who was tasked with keeping an eye on Oswald had failed to realise that he was a danger to the President, and therefore failed to warn the Secret Service about him. Hoover disciplined the agent, who was demoted and exiled to Kansas City, and then did all he could to re-establish his agency’s reputation, even if it meant collaborating with Warren (whom he too loathed). He overwhelmed the commission with documentation; in fact it would not be too much to say that without the FBI the commission would have discovered very little. And although Shenon does not mention the matter, it is fact that Hoover had been manoeuvring for some time to get the job of protecting the President away from the Secret Service into his own hands: after Dallas this scheme was hastily dropped. Hoover was the wiliest of Washington operators: by the time that the report was published his position was as strong as ever. The commission’s criticism of the FBI was unemphatic, and essentially it accepted what had been Hoover’s position from the first: there had been no conspiracy, so the FBI was not to blame for failing to detect it. From Hoover’s point of view the cover-up was a great success. The Secret Service and the hapless Dallas police department could not say the same: their failure had been too glaring; but the CIA got away unscathed. It had had the duty and every opportunity to investigate Oswald and keep him under surveillance, and had failed entirely; but it managed to conceal this fact, and also its web of intrigues with both supporters and opponents of Fidel Castro. The dark world of espionage in which it moved created much of the doubt and suspicion which led to the rejection of the report; it was not even competent at its own dirty work. Yet it seems to have fooled the Warren commission completely.

Where the commission was not fooled was over the essentials of its problem. For example, one of the most sensible and conscientious of the commissioners, Gerald Ford, then the Republican leader in the House of Representatives, saw that there had been far too much chance – too many accidental occurrences – in bringing Lee Harvey Oswald and his gun to the sixth floor of the School Book Depository on 22 November for a conspiracy to be credible. No-one had known that Kennedy would come that way when Oswald got his job (thanks to one of his wife’s friends) in October; no-one had known that Kennedy was coming to Dallas until 9 November; his route through Dealey Plaza was not announced until 19 November. Oswald was improvising, as he always had. He had defected to the Soviet Union on impulse; returned to the United

States on impulse; and in the autumn of 1963 was trying to get back to Russia, or at least to Cuba, having once more found the world unappreciative of his talents. Meanwhile he filled in time with buying a rifle by mail-order and trying to assassinate General Edwin Walker, a leading right-wing resident of Dallas. He was miserable and angry with everyone, including his unlucky wife, whom he regularly knocked about. Then he discovered that Kennedy was coming past his window... All this the Warren investigation established conclusively, though it got no credit for it. Hoping to profit from the investigation, Ford rushed out a book, *Portrait of the Assassin*, in 1965, as soon as possible after the publication of the Warren report, but even at that early stage its contentions were too unsensational for the public: it did not even earn back its advance.

We return to the same old problem of customer resistance. The world's initial assumption, that so mighty an event as a president's murder must have an equally mighty cause, is understandable enough: Kennedy could not just be the victim of a psychotic gunman and police incompetence. This response was reinforced outside the United States by widespread anti-Americanism, and inside by certain well-established national traits and traditions. Americans, as a nation, have always had a tendency to run scared. The legend of the Gunpowder Plot travelled to New England in the 17th century, as did the fear of witches. In the 18th century suspicion of home-grown conspiracy coloured the early phase of the Revolution: at least one leading revolutionary believed, or said he did, that the Stamp Act was secretly concocted in Boston, not London. In the early 19th century the Jacksonians attacked the Second Bank of the United States as an anti-democratic Monster, while the slavery interest denounced the abolitionist conspiracy and the abolitionists denounced the Slave Power. After the civil war there were competing panics about the Money Power and anarchists, and a Red Panic followed the First World War (which had already generated ferocious xenophobia). In 1947, in order to get the Marshall Aid programme through Congress the Truman administration set out to terrify the American people all over again with warnings of the communist menace, which was already being puffed by elements in the Republican party, for reasons of their own. As a result, the Americans were a frightened people throughout the Cold War: that is, until Nixon went to China. Fanned now by Senator Joe McCarthy and now by the Cuban Revolution, the flames of fright never went out; and it was this picture of a dangerous, treacherous world that any theory of the Kennedy assassination had to confirm, if it was to be believed either by the Left or the Right. The Warren report did not meet this requirement.

So to understand the assassination and its sequel it is not enough to address the criminal facts. The psychological, political, sociological context must be examined. This point is well understood by Bill Minutaglio and Steven L. Davis in their *Dallas, 1963: the Road to the Kennedy Assassination*. This is a narrow but complete account of the reactionaries who dominated Dallas in 1963 as they had done ever since the city's foundation. It was they – religious, civic, political and business leaders – whose loudly aggressive conservative propaganda (which sometimes expressed itself physically, as when a demonstrating woman hit Adlai Stevenson over the head with a placard) gave Dallas such a bad name that everyone's immediate assumption, when Kennedy was shot, was that the right wing must have done it. No-one, I suppose, will ever want a more complete account of the subject, but it is difficult to read merely for such light as it throws on the assassination. It is probably unnecessary to remark that, while the past does not change, our perception of it does because of the mere passage of time (among other factors). *Dallas, 1963* forces its reader to reflect on much more recent religious politics. The fanatics of Dallas *then* strikingly resemble the Tea Party of *today*, and perhaps even more today's Islamists in their passion, their dogmatism, their recklessness, their inability to accept or even discuss criticism, and the large quantity of pure fantasy in their opinions. Readers have no choice but to turn sociologists, trying to discern common factors to explain common phenomena.

As to Islamism, two things leap to the eye: oil money and sudden social transformation. Texas and the kingdoms of the Persian Gulf became oil states at roughly the same time, and the consequence in both regions was a sudden surge of personal wealth on a stupendous scale that accelerated as the 20th century went on. It was a huge, uncovenanted bonus paid by nature to societies which had previously seemed at best marginal to the modern world. Money brings its own transformations, and the modern world's demand for oil made itself felt not merely by the irruption of thousands of strangers to man the machinery and organise the economic institutions which the oil industry demanded, but to supply the consumer goods which the

newly-rich oil-magnates hurried to buy (in Dallas the most conspicuous monument to this impulse is the great Neiman Marcus department store). But whether in Texas or Saudi Arabia, conservatives implacably resisted many of these tendencies. Change came too fast to be accommodated easily, or, for years, at all. Yet the story of Dallas has some encouragement for those who are worried about Riyadh. 50 years have passed, and Dallas is perceptibly a saner place than it was in 1963, though Minutaglio and Davis scarcely say so. Perhaps in another 50 years the same will be true of the Gulf.

On the other hand it is not clear that Dallas was ever as purely crazy as our authors make out. On the morning of 22 November Kennedy remarked to his wife, in words no-one can resist quoting, 'We're heading into nut country today', and so they were, but it was not a right-wing nut who killed him (it is striking how often Oswald is referred to in the documents as 'a nut'). And the citizens of Dallas were for the most part as much in love with Jack and Jackie as the rest of the country. They turned out in tens of thousands to welcome them, in spite of the odious propaganda which had been continually directed against the President from the moment that he ran for office. They were all enjoying themselves that sunny morning, which partly explains why the cops and the Secret Service lowered their guard. And it is of course significant that Jack Ruby always gave as his reason for shooting Oswald the need to spare Mrs Kennedy the horror of having to testify in court. (Equally concerned, Earl Warren did not ask her to testify to the commission).

After 50 years, liberals and progressives seem to be much weaker in Texas than they were in 1963; still, they deserve scholarly investigation, and so do ordinary, non-political citizens. It is too easy to investigate the John Birch Society. Oswald was hardly a representative Leftist (when he applied to join the Dallas branch of the Trotskyist organisation, he was told that there wasn't one); in his fondness for guns he seems rather typical of the South from which he sprang; but no more than the Dallas right-wingers can he be understood out of context, and that context, of energetic but fragmented and almost impotent radical leftists – it is difficult to find a term for them – properly explored, could be as illuminating, and of more than Lee Oswald, as Minutaglio and Davis's exploration of the Right. And beyond both lies the huge majority, the mass of ordinary citizens into whose placid lives a tragic melodrama one day exploded.

There is still work to be done!

Notes

1. I have been sent three recent specimens of the conspiracist genre. Two are reprints by Pinnacle Books: Hugh C. McDonald, 'as told to Geoffrey Bocca', *Appointment in Dallas: the Final Solution to the Assassination of JFK* (New York, NY, first published 1975), and Charles A. Crenshaw and others, *JFK Has Been Shot: a Parkland Hospital Surgeon Speaks Out* (New York, NY, first published 1992); the third is new without being fresh: John Hughes-Wilson, *JFK. An American Coup d'Etat. The Truth Behind the Kennedy Assassination* (London, 2013), whose author is said by his publisher to be a former colonel in British intelligence. These works are of merely pathological interest, if that.

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