

## *Book Reviews*

---

*On the Trail of the Assassins*, by Jim Garrison, Penguin Books, 1992.

On the afternoon of Friday, November 22, 1963, I was sitting in my gradeschool classroom when the principal announced that President Kennedy had been shot. Today, all of my Canadian and American friends who are old enough to remember, can recall with clarity exactly where they were when they first heard that JFK had been assassinated. My cursory and grossly unscientific enquiries among Australians indicate a similar result.

The murder of the President of the United States in Dallas on that November afternoon was for many of us a watershed event. It brought home the shock and horror of random violence in a deeply personal way. If the President of the United States, the leader of the free world, wasn't safe, who could be? It was also the end of Camelot, that brief, shining and almost completely mythical period of optimism in American society, the time of the Peace Corps, of asking not what your country could do for you, but what you could do for your country. America was winning the space race, a first tentative step towards a nuclear treaty regime had been taken, the President and his glamorous wife Jackie epitomised the hope, vigour and beauty of the New Frontier. Now, she sat in the limousine with parts of his brain and skull spread over her clothes. Camelot was finished. And it got worse. Vietnam, Nixon as President, Watergate, Reagan as President, Iran Contra, Bush as President.

But, with all that has happened in the world in the 29 years since that November afternoon in Dallas, America remains fascinated with the Kennedy assassination. Of course, America also remains fascinated by such questions as whether Bill Clinton slept with the nightclub singer and by any number of reported sightings of Elvis at small town Burger Kings. But the near-obsession with the JFK killing is located at a deeper level of the American psyche. It is a crime that just won't go away. The reasons for its persistence as a phenomenon which continues to grip the popular American imagination are perhaps as complex as some of the theories which have been put forward about the assassination but essentially there are two basic explanations, each of which is linked to the position one adopts in relation to the killing of the President. In his afterword to Garrison's book, Carl Oglesby, director of the Assassination Information Bureau (only in America), puts it this way: "What is the future of democracy in a country where a President can be assassinated under conspicuously suspicious circumstances while the machinery of legal action scarcely trembles"?<sup>1</sup>

To believe in any of the scenarios put forward by the conspiracy advocates means that one must accept the innate fragility of the rule of law. If the highest office of the greatest

---

1 Oglesby, C, *Is the Mafia Theory a Valid Alternative?* (1992), at 298.

---

democracy in the world can be subverted in what, as Jim Garrison puts it, is a coup d'état, then the American dream truly is a nightmare. People can't accept conspiracy theory because they can't face the consequences of what that would mean for "America." On the other hand, conspiracy theorists can't bring themselves to accept the officially sanctioned lone assassin view because they can't accept the subversive consequences of that idea. Just think of it. The holder of the highest office of the greatest democracy in the world gunned down by some Marxist lunatic. Can the office, and by psychological extension "America", be so fragile, so contingent that one nut case can subvert the entire process of democracy? Like their mirror images on the other side of the great assassination debate, the conspiracy theorists believe what they believe because to hold otherwise would destroy what both sides hold so dearly, their conception of "America."

Moreover, what both sides in the debate cherish is not only some abstract vision of "America" or "the Presidency", but, in reality, the mythological figure which JFK has become. No matter what we learn about the reality of Camelot, the iconic power of President Kennedy and all that symbol entails continues to flourish. Both sides in the assassination debate share one predominant characteristic — the mythological JFK.

The release of Oliver Stone's new film *JFK* has brought the assassination debate once again to the forefront of American public concern and debate. In conjunction with the film, Penguin have released Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, one of the two books on which Stone's work is based. Like the film, Garrison's autobiographical account traces his attempts to get to the truth behind JFK's assassination.

Garrison, now a judge of the Louisiana Court of Appeal, was the District Attorney of New Orleans in 1963. Soon after Kennedy was shot and Lee Harvey Oswald was identified as the chief (and only) suspect, it was learned that Oswald had resided in New Orleans in the summer before the assassination. What began as a routine background investigation into Oswald's New Orleans sojourn became an odyssey through the criminal justice process which lead Garrison ultimately to the conclusion "... that Lee Harvey Oswald did not fire at anyone on November 22, 1963",<sup>2</sup> and "... that what happened at Dealey Plaza in Dallas on November 22, 1963, was a coup d'état."<sup>3</sup>

The enquiries by the New Orleans District Attorney's Office brought them to believe that renegade members of the CIA, using agency resources and connections in the anti-Castro Cuban exile community in the United States, had successfully plotted to assassinate the President of the United States. Oswald was a dupe who had been systematically set up ("sheepdipped" is the Agency term of art) to appear as a crazed Marxist who acted as the lone gunman. Clay Shaw, a prominent New Orleans businessman, was indicted for conspiracy to murder Kennedy and, in the only criminal trial ever conducted in relation to the assassination, was acquitted. Subsequent interviews with the jurors, however, revealed that while they believed the prosecution had failed to meet the burden of proof in its case against Shaw, they also felt that the DA had proved that a conspiracy to kill the President did exist.<sup>4</sup>

---

2 Id at 280.

3 Id at 227.

By now, the general parameter of the conspiracy model is well-known. Kennedy was assassinated by at least two or as many as six gunmen hired by the CIA, military intelligence agencies, the Mafia (American or Corsican), Cubans (right-wing or pro-Castro) because he was soft on communism, or had sold out Cuba, or was about to end US involvement in Vietnam or had cracked down on the Mob. After the assassination, any or all or some of these same groups participated in a massive cover-up helping the assassins to flee, or framing Oswald or destroying evidence or manufacturing evidence.

Garrison, as I said, opts for the coup d'état theory and leans towards a conspiracy lead by elements within the CIA which had extensive links to anti-Castro Cubans and the Mafia. *On the Trail of the Assassins* traces in minute detail Garrison's case for such a conspiracy and against the lone gunman theory of the Warren Commission.<sup>5</sup>

The case against the Warren Commission report is made in exquisite detail by Garrison as he reveals and studies such well-known phenomena as the President's missing brain, the chief pathologist's destruction of his autopsy notes, the national security blanket thrown around much relevant information and a generally poor investigative performance.

But what in the final analysis is important and truly interesting not only about Garrison's book and Oliver Stone's film isn't so much whether there was a conspiracy or whether Oswald acted alone, but rather the simple social impact that the whole "Kennedy assassination thing" as George Bush might put it, continues to fascinate and intrigue us although it is almost 30 years old, and no less an authority than the Chief Justice of the United States "solved" the mystery almost that long ago.

The battle over "what really happened" has taken on quasi-religious proportions. Debates over the "true meaning" of such icons as "the grassy knoll"<sup>6</sup> and "the magic bullet"<sup>7</sup> continue to rage with at least as much fervour as discussions over the ordination of women in Australia's Anglican church. What the debate reveals in the end is not the "truth", but rather that the "truth" in the context of any debate over a "crime" is as much a

4 Id at 250-251.

5 The Warren Commission was a "blue ribbon" panel appointed to investigate the Kennedy assassination by President L B Johnson. It was chaired by the Chief Justice of the United States, Earl Warren, and included among others Allen W Dulles, a former CIA director fired by Kennedy and a Congressman from Michigan named Gerald Ford. It produced a 26 volume report, *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F Kennedy* (1964).

6 The grassy knoll is an area overlooking the spot where Kennedy was shot. Numerous eyewitness accounts report that some of the shots came from the knoll in front of the President's limousine. The official Warren Commission report determined that all the shots were fired by Oswald from the 6th floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building, behind the President.

7 A home movie showing the shooting of the President (the Zapruder Film) demonstrates that shots were fired at the Kennedy limousine over a period of 5.6 seconds. The Warren Commission found that all three shots came from Oswald's gun. One shot missed, one shot hit the President in the head, killing him, and a third hit Kennedy in the neck and then went on to strike Texas Governor John Connally who was also seated in the limousine. This single shot became known as the magic bullet because, on the Warren Commission view, it was responsible for a total of seven entry and exit wounds in Kennedy and Connally. It was "discovered" on a stretcher beside Connally in the hospital and was in a virtually pristine condition. Opponents of the official version of events believe that for the bullet to have entered and exited two bodies seven times and to remain unscathed, it must truly possess magical qualities.

---

cause of the enquiry as it is a result. In other words, the meaning and interpretation which we attach to any of the facts Garrison presents — the grassy knoll, the missing rifles, the missing bullets, and so on, is determined not by an objective process of detached legal and scientific reasoning, but by a subjective process already informed by any number of factors which lead us to a result not pre-determined in a casual sense but available only within the limits of the process itself. Truth and method in any legal argument are one and the same.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, everything we know now or will ever know about the Kennedy assassination will always be coloured by everything we know about all sorts of other things. What sanctity do we give to the holy writ of the Warren Commission report? Do we believe what the government tells us? Do we trust the police? Do the revelations of a secret government in the Reagan White House during Iran Contra prove that a conspiracy existed to kill Kennedy or to cover-up after his murder? Do recent revelations about police misconduct in relation to “Irish” cases prove police misconduct in Dallas? Do rumours about the Hilton bombing prove intelligence community involvement in the Kennedy assassination? In a scientific sense, the answer is clearly no. In an experiential sense, for some, they lead at the very least to a certain mistrust over official constructions of crime and criminality. If it can happen once, it can happen again.

But again, this really doesn't get to the heart of the issue. It is true that some of us are more trusting of official versions of the truth when it comes to the criminal justice system while others tend to think, for example, that the police always lie. All this worry about official versus unofficial versions of the truth, of conspiracy and cover-up versus a lone gunman caught and killed is really irrelevant. The important lesson of the Kennedy assassination is a truth from everyday experience writ large — truth is no longer important. What matters is not reality but the appearance of reality. John Irving gets it right when he says:

What we witnessed with the death of Kennedy was the triumph of television; what we saw with his assassination and with his funeral, was the beginning of television's dominance of our culture — for television is at its most solemnly self-serving and at its mesmerizing best when it is depicting the untimely deaths of the chosen and the golden. It is as witness to the butchery of heroes in their prime and of all holy-seeming innocents that television achieves its deplorable greatness. The blood on Mrs Kennedy's clothes and her wrecked face under her veil; the fatherless children; LBJ taking the oath of office; and brother Bobby — looking so very much the next in line.<sup>9</sup>

JFK was the first television President and for us he remains etched as an image on the TV screen where we first saw the Zapruder film of his brains exploding in the Dallas sunshine. The reality of JFK is the reality of television — that is, it isn't real in any of our traditional understandings of the concept of reality. It is the reality of Baudrillard's simulacrum where the only thing that is real is that which can be reproduced as an image.<sup>10</sup> The power and strength of the Kennedy assassination in the popular imagination is exactly that, it is a crime of images not of reality.

---

8 For a more subtle, detailed and complex analysis, see Gadamer, H G, *Truth and Method* (1975).

9 *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) at 459.

This postmodern spin on the Kennedy phenomenon is confirmed and strengthened, I think, by the creation of Kennedy's mirror image — Lee Harvey Oswald. The killer and the victim are intimately and inherently combined; without one, there can't be the other. Garrison details the construction of Lee Harvey Oswald through the subterfuge of the CIA — trucks purchased at a car dealership for use by Cuban exile guerillas in the name of Lee Oswald while the "real" Oswald was living in the Soviet Union; pictures of Oswald at the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City seeking a Cuban visa — pictures that even the FBI refused to identify as being Oswald; Audio tapes of Oswald at the Embassy which the FBI stated later were not those of the Oswald arrested in Dallas; Oswald, the suspected killer of the President of the United States, interrogated for 12 hours by the Dallas police and the FBI with no notes of the questioning kept by anyone. Here's a switch, he wasn't verbed. He wasn't verbed because there was, according to Garrison's account, a campaign to destroy any written record of Lee Harvey Oswald. Lee Harvey Oswald was not created in writing, but in photographs, images of him at the Soviet Embassy, images of him holding a rifle, wearing a gun and showing a "Communist" newspaper. But the most important image of Lee Harvey Oswald is the one I remember as the moment I fell in love with television. It is the image of Jack Ruby stepping out of the crowd at the Dallas police station and gunning Oswald down in front of dozens of police and millions of television viewers at home. It was the first really live television murder.

He and Kennedy were partners. The figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history. This sustained Oswald in his cell. It gave him what he needed to live.<sup>11</sup>

Kennedy — Oswald — Ruby, the most powerful triangle of images, of murder in America. Live on TV. This is why there has been such a vehement outcry over Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Even before it was released for public viewing, American newspapers were full of articles attacking the film, based on a leaked and incomplete script. Gerald Ford, he of the Warren Commission, condemned the film without having seen it.<sup>12</sup> The critics of *JFK* have unwittingly revealed an important truth about the Kennedy assassination — it's just a movie. But because Americans live in the world's most advanced society, that is exactly the point. Truth and reality exist on the screen — big and small. The movie, the images create the American imagination. What we see is true and one three-hour Oliver Stone movie is stronger than all 26 volumes of the Warren Commission report or even one Jim Garrison autobiographical account. Stone's film is true because it is a film. Garrison's book is published by Penguin under its "fiction" category. But when it comes to the construction of the Kennedy assassination, all categories of truth and fiction lose their importance.<sup>13</sup> No matter what we learn about Marilyn and no matter how many Kennedy relatives are tried for rape, JFK remains fixed for us by television — his imaginary image cannot really be tarnished, "Lee Harvey Oswald", "Jack Ruby" and television have made

---

10 See Baudrillard, J, *Simulations* (1983).

11 DeLillo, D, *Libra* (1988) at 435.

12 This is hardly surprising and perhaps mild when compared with Jim Garrison's experience. He survived death threats, an attempted police entrapment in a public toilet, a corruption trial and tax evasion charges.

13 See Foucault, M, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) at 21-30.