

## Just a Shot Away

*Reporting the Kennedy Assassination:*

*Journalists Who Were There Recall Their Experiences*

Edited by Laura Hlavach and Darwin Payne

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*By Max Holland*

The best antidote to paranoid speculation is truth in small, indisputable doses. Herein lies the great value of *Reporting the Kennedy Assassination*. All Americans sentient on Nov. 22, 1963, remember the instant they heard about the president's assassination and the reporters fated to cover that story reacted no differently. But then professional news-gatherers, unlike most other Americans, had to subsume their shock, fear and disbelief and get to work. Four arduous days of indelible, incredible memories followed. This volume mostly records what has not been set down elsewhere: telling, eyewitness accounts by men and women trained to observe. They did not flinch or embellish then and steadfastly refuse to do so 33 years later, even though there is plenty of money to be made by exploiting a tragedy that still gnaws at the American psyche.

Several young reporters who covered that awful weekend went on to prominent jobs in American journalism, in some cases on the basis of their performance in the Dallas crucible: Dan Rather, Jim Lehrer, Robert McNeil, Ike Pappas and Bob Schieffer, to name a few. Aside from Pappas, however, none of these big talents attended the 1993 conference at Southern Methodist University upon which this book is based – indeed, literally transcribed.

But little is lost by their absence. The 60 or so reporters, editors, photographers and cameramen who did participate were all from local newspaper, radio and television outlets in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. And damned if they were going to be beaten by any of the 250 media outsiders who descended on Dallas in the wake of the assassination. Precisely because it was their town, Dallas reporters made themselves ubiquitous and keen observers of all the dramas that weekend: from the shots in Dealey Plaza and the painstaking search of the Texas School Book Depository, to the agonizing wait at a movie theater and finally, of course, the first live, nationally televised murder.

The one-day SMU conference evoked a number of fascinating vignettes and what-might-have-beens as the reporters remembered. Take the story of Mary Woodward Pillsworth, a society reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*. She had no reportorial role to play that day but dearly wanted to see Jacqueline Kennedy. She decided to watch the motorcade on her lunch hour and positioned herself on Elm Street just steps from the depository. That made her the closest media spectator to the president when the shots

rang out. After she and her colleagues collected themselves, they headed back to the newsroom, whereupon long before the official announcement was made, Pillsworth insisted, “He’s dead. I know he’s dead, or else I hope he’s dead because his head’s blown open.” But front-page editors did not believe their society reporter – or perhaps just didn’t want to believe – until the official announcement.

While Pillsworth eventually wrote an exclusive eyewitness report for her paper on Friday afternoon, Bob Jackson, a photographer for the now-defunct *Dallas Times Herald*, felt he had just missed the picture of a lifetime. Jackson had been riding in a convertible assigned to the motorcade, about six cars behind the president’s limousine, when three rifle shots rang out. Jackson saw a rifle sticking out of a sixth-floor window of the depository and realized he could catch the assassin in the act. But then he remembered he had just started to reload his camera and still wasn’t finished. By the time his colleagues caught up with Jackson’s eye, the rifle was withdrawn. Two days later, Jackson was assigned to photograph the transfer of Oswald to the Dallas County Jail. He decided to focus on a spot where Oswald was likely to pass and was looking through the lens as the accused assassin approached. Milliseconds after Jack Ruby fired his revolver, Jackson fired his camera as planned- and captured the vigilante murder in one of the great spot pictures of all times – an a Pulitzer Prize to boot.

In the realm of what-might-have-been, *Reporting the Kennedy Assassination*, also shows how chance and circumstance influence history far more than the paranoid explanations so popular now in Hollywood. Darwin Payne, one of the book’s editors and a journalism professor at SMU, was the night policy reporter for the *Dallas Times Herald* in November 1963. Shortly after midnight on Sunday, Nov. 24, Payne received a call from a city desk editor. The CBS radio network was carrying a report (by Dan Rather) that Dallas police had in custody an eyewitness who could identify Oswald as the man who pulled the rifle trigger. What did Payne know about that? Nobody at police headquarters could confirm the story, so Payne reluctantly called Jesse Curry at his home at 1:30 in the morning. Exhausted and sound asleep, the police chief made little sense at first. But finally, Payne correctly surmised there was no basis to the Rather story.

More than a year later, with the publication of the *Warren Report*, Payne learned of his incidental impact on history. As threats to do Oswald bodily harm mounted through the night, Sheriff Bill Decker decided that it would be better to move the accused murderer surreptitiously. Decker attempted to call Curry to tell him that “we got to transfer [Oswald] tonight. We can’t wait.” But the telephone was constantly busy and operators finally advised Decker the line was out of order. In fact, the policy chief had taken his phone off the hook after Payne’s call, and Oswald’s rendezvous with Jack Ruby in a grimy police garage was the result.

There are poignant moments in the book too. Tony Zoppi, normally the entertainment columnist for the *Dallas Morning News*, was drafted into emergency duty like everyone else and told to get down to Parkland Hospital immediately. He made his way to the emergency dock, where he was promptly stopped by Secret Servicemen. But then an ambulance rolled up carrying a heavy bronze casket, so heavy that Zoppi’s help was

enlisted and the same agents now waved him through the door. Zoppi then spontaneously did something that to this day he finds hard to explain. “As we’re rolling that casket into the hospital, I reached underneath it and I put my fingerprints as hard as I could on the bottom of that casket ... I figured, well, he’s going to be in this casket and I want him to know that Tony Zoppi helped carry this casket in.”

If this volume has one major shortcoming, it is that the book – or rather the conference on which it was based – was all too brief. Each of the various panels was limited to only one hour, and that was not enough time.

Forty years ago, the best films and TV dramas took aim at the conformity and paranoia that gripped many Americans during the McCarthy era.

How many “Twilight Zone” parables illustrated that the most fearful human emotion is fear itself? Today, by contrast, Hollywood producers often choose to nourish the appetite for conspiracy, and Oliver Stone is invited to lecture about postwar history at American University. That’s why this book, albeit modest, is a worthwhile contribution to the literature on that tragic weekend. It tells us the way it was, and the way it wasn’t.