

The President and the Provocateur
The parallel lives of JFK and Lee Harvey Oswald
Alex Cox

Harpenden (UK); Oldcastle Books, 2013, £12.99, p/b

This is Alex Cox's take on the Kennedy assassination; and 'take' is apposite because this is Alex Cox the filmmaker¹ and occasional contributor to these columns. Cox presents two parallel narratives, the lives of JFK and Oswald from 1960 until their deaths in Dallas, intercut with the politics (and parapolitics), domestic and international, of the time. This creates a striking effect, which is difficult to quite put a finger on. The macro/micro contrast between Oswald's strange life, shuttling about at the behest of some intelligence agency or agencies – the *provocateur* in the subtitle being only one of his roles – within some of the hottest years of the Cold War and the rise of black America, adds a poignancy to the events: Kennedy and Oswald, heading for oblivion at the hands of wider forces. For example – and I took this at random – in three pages at the end of the chapter on 1962 Cox describes:

- * General Edwin Walker hiring a Scotsman, William Duff, as a batman;
- * Oswald at a family reunion of which his brothers spoke after his death, one saying Lee Harvey had changed so much he could hardly recognise him;²
- * Kennedy watching a movie in the White House, the Kirk Douglas-Walter Matthau (then) contemporary western, *Lonely Are the Brave*;
- * Kennedy meeting with the Joint Chiefs to discuss military budgets and apparently dissenting from the American nuclear missile targeting strategy of mass civilian deaths;
- * Kennedy touring nuclear missile bunkers in Omaha;
- * a black church being bombed in Alabama;
- * Kennedy meeting black American leaders and British PM Harold Macmillan;

1 Best known for *Sid and Nancy* and *Repo Man* but see <alexcox.com> for more details.

2 As Cox points out, this is a very striking thing to say about a sibling. Can you imagine finding a sibling almost unrecognisable?

* Kennedy addressing Cuban exiles and apparently promising another attack on Castro.

Even though much of this is familiar from previous accounts, it doesn't feel like just another synthesis of the extant material. Cox's narrative structure and his frequently unusual choices from the mountains of available data – the America neo-nazi and segregationist right get more attention than usual, for example – make it feel fresh. And because he is discussing events leading up to the shootings, the book is not laden down with details of the cover-up and the medical evidence. (Cox reminded me that most of the literature on the Kennedy assassination is about events after it.)

Cox is not a big JFK fan: he thinks he dragged his feet on civil rights (I think Cox underestimates the purely political problems this presented) and dismisses his apparently less imperialistic foreign policy directions as expressed by the Alliance for Progress (I think he is a little harsh on this).³ Even so, as Cox describes Kennedy's conflicts with most of the major lobbies in America, from the mafia to US Steel, his eventual murder feels unsurprising.

He does not suggest a solution. He asks (p. 284):

'Was there an assassination conspiracy, as Bertrand Russell and his Committee feared?....'

This is odd. Like most of the better writers on the subject, he may not be sure of the conspiracy's composition but Cox *knows* there was an 'assassination conspiracy'. All the books in his bibliography argue that and it determines his selection of material from the half century of research. He continues:

'.....Over the years, pretty much everyone Jack Kennedy offended, and everyone Lee Harvey Oswald met, has been accused of involvement: the FBI; CIA; ONI; the KGB; Cuban intelligence; anti-Castro Cubans; the mafia; White Russians; the KKK and NSRP.'

Who is missing from the list? Kennedy's vice president, Lyndon Johnson, one of the first to be suspected of doing the dirty deed, who dropped off the researchers' radar as they came to

³ See for example <www.ctka.net/2014_reviews/rakove.html>.

focus on Oswald's intelligence links. Evidently Cox isn't impressed by the accumulated evidence of the last 15 years that LBJ's gang did it. But this is a minor detail. It's an original treatment of over-familiar material, a fine book, nicely written.

Robin Ramsay