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OBITUARY

# Priscilla Johnson McMillan obituary

Redoubtable Cold War historian and journalist who knew both JFK and his assassin Lee Harvey Oswald

2.01am BST,



Priscilla Johnson McMillan, pictured in 2013, spent months interviewing Oswald's widow, Marina, for her book, Marina and Lee

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On November 22, 1963, Priscilla McMillan, a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Russian research centre, suffered two severe shocks.

The first was President Kennedy's assassination. She had worked for Kennedy in 1953 when he was a senator, and had become a friend. At one point she had rebuffed a pass from the handsome young New Englander. "I thought, 'It just couldn't be'," she said of his death.

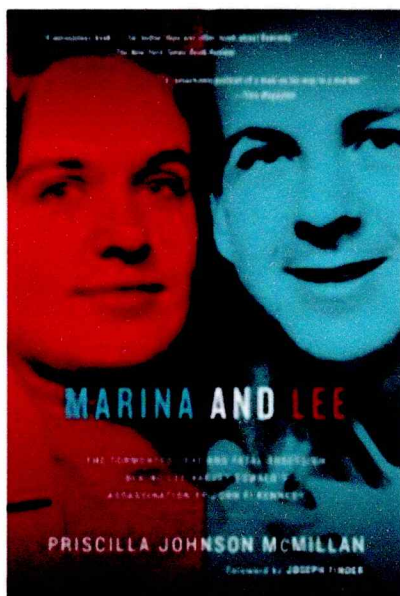
The second came as she walked across Harvard Square on the evening of that terrible day. She was told that his assassin was someone named Lee Harvey Oswald. "My God," she exclaimed to a friend. "I know that boy."

A few years earlier McMillan had been working as a journalist in Moscow. A friend at the US embassy told her about "a boy named Oswald", a 20-year-old former US marine who was staying in her hotel, the Metropol, and wanted to defect. "He won't talk to any of us here. Maybe he'll talk to you because you're a woman."

McMillan returned to the Metropol, a huge art deco building overlooking the Bolshoi Theatre. She knocked on Oswald's door and asked for an interview. He agreed, and they spent five hours talking about his conversion to Marxism and dislike of American capitalism. If he stayed in the US, he explained, "I would become either a worker exploited for capitalist profit or an exploiter or, since there are many in this category, I'd be one of the unemployed."

McMillan remembered Oswald as little more than a boy, confused, lonely and angry. She filed an article that began with him stating: "For two years now I have been waiting to do this one thing. To dissolve my American citizenship and become a citizen of the Soviet Union." She also quoted him saying: "I want to give the people of the United States something to think about."

Oswald certainly achieved that latter goal when he shot Kennedy. In doing so, he rendered McMillan the only living person who had had more than a passing acquaintance with both Kennedy and his killer, and that invidious claim to fame changed her life too.



She became an accomplished Cold War historian and writer. With the help of Oswald's widow she spent the next 13 years writing one of the best of the countless books on Kennedy's assassination, then two decades writing another acclaimed work on McCarthyism's destruction of Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb.

Priscilla Mary Post Johnson was born on the North Shore of Long Island in 1928, the third of four children of a financier who also owned a textile company. Her family was directly descended from the Pilgrims. She attended a private girls' school, Brearley, in Manhattan, and studied Russian language and literature at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, where she played for its tennis team, and then earned a master's degree in Russian studies from Radcliffe College, now part of Harvard.

After graduating in 1953 she toured the offices of congressmen and senators on Capitol Hill looking for a job. Kennedy offered her work researching the gathering conflict in French Indo-China that would metamorphose into the Vietnam War.

Her friendship with Kennedy outlasted the job. She subsequently visited him several times when he was in hospital for spinal surgery, posing as his sister to gain access. "He was always peppering me with questions — what I thought about politics, my personal life, anything," she said. He invited her out on at least one date. She refused, not least because he had recently married the socialite Jacqueline Bouvier. "I didn't love him," she said. "He was mesmerising, but he was just someone I knew."



Marina Oswald and McMillan at a press conference in 1977, the year the book was published  
RON GALELLA COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

She became a translator of Soviet newspaper articles in New York City, and in 1955 she visited the Soviet Union for the first time. She spent four months in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev, sometimes teaming up with Truman Capote, the novelist, who described their experiences in *The Muses Are Heard*.

Thereafter she took up journalism and returned to Moscow in 1958 to write for a news agency called the North American Newspaper Alliance. She met Oswald the following year, never remotely suspecting what a dramatic impact his life would have on hers.

In 1960 McMillan was one of several Americans expelled from Moscow after Gary Powers's American U2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union. Back in the US, she became a visiting scholar at Harvard.

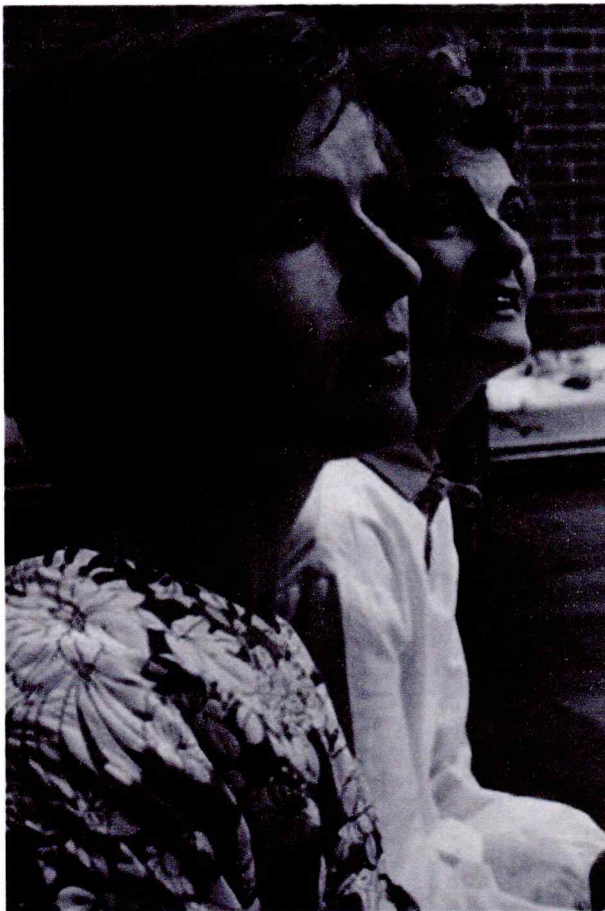
The Soviets moved Oswald to Minsk, capital of Belarus. There he worked in an electronics factory and married Marina Nikolayevna Prusakova, a pharmacology student whom he met at a dance in the Palace of Culture.

Within three years he had grown so disillusioned with the Soviet Union that he returned to the US with his wife and infant daughter. He struggled to find work and moved from Fort Worth, Texas, to New Orleans, then to Dallas where he took a job at the Texas School Book Depository overlooking Dealey Plaza. From there he fired three shots at Kennedy's passing motorcade. Two days later he was shot dead himself by Jack Ruby, a nightclub owner.

The night before Kennedy's death McMillan had written to him, asking for help to free Boris Pasternak's girlfriend from a Soviet labour camp.

Within a couple of months McMillan decided to write a book about the assassination. "I wanted to understand for [Kennedy], why somebody would assassinate him," she said. Her publisher contacted Marina's lawyer, requesting an interview. Several months after that, the lawyer told McMillan's publisher: "Tell her to come down here." McMillan agreed to pay Marina two thirds of her advance, plus some of the royalties.

She moved to Texas and spent seven months talking to Marina, but the book took 13 years to complete due to the sheer volume of research. She testified before the Warren Commission, which President Johnson set up to investigate the assassination.



Oswald and McMillan. The book did not sell well because it contained no conspiracy theories



In 1966 she married George McMillan, an author and journalist. They divorced in 1980 without having had any children. In 1967 she translated *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, the memoirs of Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, who had stayed at the Long Island estate of McMillan's father after defecting to the US that year. Alliluyeva had taught McMillan at Moscow State University during her first visit to the Soviet Union in 1955.

The book was finally published in 1977. *Marina and Lee: The Tormented Love and Fatal Obsession Behind Lee Harvey Oswald's Assassination of John F Kennedy* attracted glowing reviews but did not sell well, primarily because it offered no conspiracy theories. McMillan concluded that Oswald was working for no one and was merely a troubled, celebrity-seeking fantasist who was quite incapable of conspiring with others and believed that he could destroy capitalism by killing the president. Years later Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the president's sister, asked McMillan at a Washington dinner party why Oswald hated her brother so much. "He didn't," McMillan replied. "Oswald liked him. And he liked Jackie, too."

Following the Oswald book, supporters of Oppenheimer asked McMillan to write an account of how he had had his security clearance revoked and career blighted at the height of Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist witch-hunts in 1954. She received rare access to Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, where Oppenheimer had led development of the atomic bomb, and her work was published in 2005 as *The Ruin of J Robert Oppenheimer and the Birth of the Modern Arms Race*.


### Modern Arms Race.

McMillan was by then an associate at Harvard's Davis centre for Russian and Eurasian studies. Having never remarried, she used her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to entertain visiting students and scholars, support Russian dissidents, and press for the declassification of Cold War records.

**Priscilla Johnson McMillan, author and historian, was born on July 19, 1928. She died on July 7, 2021, aged 92**

United States

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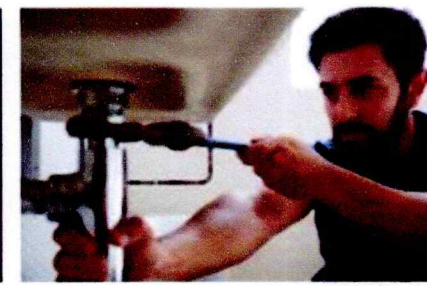
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