

that commemorate and honor John Paul's service, and "The Rest of the Story," chapter 14 (126-28), identifies the outcomes of those connected with John Paul. The paragraph-long "Epilogue" (129) reminds readers that Meegan's focus is to acknowledge the working of grace in John Paul's life: "He lived his law of love from his earliest days until his final day" (129).

One can only be inspired by reading this short account of Thomas Merton's brother and reach tearfully for the poem appended to the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943" (SSM 404). Meegan has offered us more than a biography of John Paul Merton, with its tale of the terror and futility of war; he has tendered a portrait of an inspiring young man who discovered the importance of always reaching out with love.

Monica Weis, SSJ

TURLEY, Hugh and David Martin, *Thomas Merton's Betrayers: The Case against Abbot James Fox and Author John Howard Griffin* (Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2023), pp. 265. ISBN 978-0-9673521-6-9 (paper) \$16.95.

Columnist Hugh Turley and writer/activist David Martin renew their argument, first made in *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation* (2018),¹ that the United States government was responsible for the murder of Thomas Merton, abetted by leaders at Merton's home abbey, Our Lady of Gethsemani and the wider Catholic Church, along with the press and scholarly world generally. In this book, they name Merton's principal betrayers – Gethsemani Abbot James Fox, Merton biographer John Howard Griffin and Brother Patrick Hart – and others who have misled concerning the truth of Merton's death.

The subtitle of *Thomas Merton's Betrayers* highlights the focus of this book. On page 73, Turley and Martin identify Abbot Fox as a principal creator of the official statement that Merton was accidentally electrocuted by a faulty fan in a letter dated February 1, 1969 addressed "To the Gethsemani diaspora."

Turley and Martin condemn the "treachery" (81) and "deceitful actions" (82) of Abbot Fox and John Howard Griffin, who had been appointed to be the authorized biographer in 1969, a task he never completed. They review three documents – the doctor's death report and death certificate along with a report on the Death of an American Citizen – sent

1. Hugh Turley and David Martin, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation* (Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2018) (subsequent references will be cited as "Martyrdom" parenthetically in the text).

by the U.S. Embassy in Thailand to Abbot Flavian Burns, who succeeded Fox after his resignation in early 1968. These official papers, published in their first book, certify that “acute cardiac failure and electric shock” were the cause of death (*Martyrdom* 285).

Who else has failed Merton? In a chapter on “lesser betrayers,” Turley and Martin name Jim Forest, author of *Thomas Merton, A Pictorial Biography* (1980; updated, 2008);² James Laughlin, Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart – the co-editors of *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*,³ which included Brother Patrick’s postscript (257-59) that is a source of the electrocution story of Merton’s death; John Mof-fitt, then associated with *America* and *The National Catholic Reporter*; Bonnie Thurston, a founder of the International Thomas Merton Society and frequent contributor at ITMS gatherings; and *The Merton Annual*, whose co-editors Joseph Quinn Raab and Deborah Kehoe declined to publish an article on Merton’s death submitted by Turley and Martin on the grounds that the content appeared elsewhere.⁴

In their first book, Turley and Martin marshaled weighty documentation for their claim that Merton was murdered. Their investigation has found wide support, including from two noted songsters: Joan Baez, who visited Merton and wrote the song “The Bells of Gethsemani,” and Judy Collins, who made a case for assassination in “Thomas Merton,” on her *Spellbound* album (both are available on YouTube). In an interview, also referenced by Turley and Martin, Collins cited Merton’s opposition to the Vietnam War as the reason why he was killed (9).

Turley and Martin attribute the following motives for his murder:

To use the language of law enforcement, Merton continued to be a flight risk. From the moment he put his signature on that trust agreement [generating sizeable royalties for the Abbey] just looking at the matter from a cold, hard economic standpoint, he became worth a lot more to the abbey dead than alive. As long as he was alive, the proceeds for the abbey of his production would remain constantly in doubt, a bird in the bush, if you will. Were he to die, it would be a bird in the hand. (15)

2. James H. Forest, *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973).

4. I should acknowledge that Turley and Martin also include me as a “lesser betrayer” (193).

Turley and Martin provide no evidence supporting such a claim. Among the documents included in the appendices of *Thomas Merton's Betrayers* are an article by Patricia Lefevere entitled "The Strange Case of the Monk in the Shower – Questions Surrounding the Death of Merton" (221-25) and one by David Martin entitled "Seventeen Techniques for Truth Suppression" (257-60) (which also appeared in *Martyrdom* 277-80). Neither supports the assertion that Merton was murdered.

In my assessment of their earlier book,⁵ I summarized the argument of Turley and Martin. I acknowledged that they had provided fresh documentation regarding Merton's death and rightly set the alleged murder of Merton in the social and political context of the sixties. With this fresh volume the authors again surface important questions that make it difficult but not impossible to accept that Merton died by accidental electrocution. By contrast, the Abbey's website continues to state, as follows: "Merton died by accidental electrocution in Bangkok, Thailand, while attending a meeting of religious leaders on 10 December 1968, just 27 years to the day after his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani."⁶

In explaining "why it [the truth about Merton's death] matters" (209), Turley and Martin note,

A very common reaction that we have encountered among professed Merton admirers to our revelations about Merton's death has been that they are far more interested in Merton's life and work than in how his life ended, because it is so much more important. A main reason why Merton's works are important, though, is that they so much embody a Christ-like pursuit of the truth. It greatly dishonors Merton's memory and legacy for the widely believed story of how he died, perpetuated by his own home abbey, to be the precise opposite, the purest embodiment of falsehood. (209)

While acknowledging that I am among those more interested in Merton's life and work than in how his life ended, I question the authors' attribution of the reason for which he had to be killed. I also find disturbing their attacks on John Howard Griffin, James Fox and, to a lesser extent, Brother Patrick Hart.

I am grateful for Turley and Martin's dogged effort to expose the truth about Merton's death. That said, I doubt if we can ever know for sure how Merton died, especially since no autopsy was performed at the time. Merton's voice in the nineteen sixties on social issues such as interfaith

5. Paul R. Dekar, "A Challenge to the Standard Account," *The Merton Seasonal* 43.4 (Winter 2018) 37-39.

6. See: <https://monks.org/monks-pages/thomas-merton/>.

relations, race and war was of such significant concern that at one point his own order ordered him to stop writing on such issues. Fortunately, Merton did not. But were Merton's public pronouncements of such importance that he had to be murdered, as was President Kennedy, his brother Robert, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other prophetic figures?

Whatever the circumstance, Merton's death did not silence him. His writings continued to be read, enhanced since the 1990s with publication of his personal journals and letters. Merton's enormous literary output continues to inspire countless readers who derive wisdom and inspiration in living a full Christian life. In a secular world at a time of unprecedented challenges engendered by climate change, global migration, social injustice and war, Merton's spirituality, monastic practices and writing matter.

Paul R. Dekar

DE WAAL, Esther, *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey*, Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2023), pp. 136. ISBN 979-8-4008-00035-1 (paper) \$22.95.

Esther de Waal cautions the reader that her book *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey* "is not a book about Thomas Merton" (21). Rather, "It simply shows the succession of steps taken by one woman in trying to draw closer to God with Merton's help" (21). De Waal's book is a refreshing embrace of Merton's insistence, "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!"¹ She invites us to begin alongside her, by offering her own prayerful musings along with excerpts from Merton's writings, a selection of his photographs and wisdom from earlier monastic voices and the psalms.²

Taking days or a full week away for a formal retreat may be logistically or economically difficult, but that does not mean that a retreat is out of reach. Rather, de Waal encourages her readers to recognize that "time apart is essential" and to pursue solitude in creative yet realistic ways (17). She suggests a few possibilities: "whether by setting aside perhaps an hour or so every morning for a week or alternatively one whole morning a week over a couple of months. . . . Perhaps one corner of a room can become a small place of prayer, marked out with pictures or an icon. A lighted candle is always good. Perhaps there will be some objects such as

1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 43.

2. This book is a reissue of Esther de Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1993), with a new Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston, accompanying the earlier Foreword by Henri Nouwen.