

Stumbling Blocks and Tenterhooks

Review of
Thomas Merton's Betrayers:
The Case against Abbot James Fox and Author John Howard Griffin
 By Hugh Turley and David Martin
 Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2023
 265 pages / \$16.95 paper

Reviewed by **Gray Matthews**

Reading *Thomas Merton's Betrayers* was troubling to me, but not as troubling as writing a review of the book. The book became a stumbling block to the review. I found a way forward, however, after rereading Jan Zwicky's essay on "The Ethics of the Negative Review" (in his book *Once Upon a Time in the West*), in which the Canadian philosopher-poet raised a question about the very meaning of reviewing: "Re-view: To take a second look; or a third. To look again. But to what purpose?" It can be trying to review works that one prefers not to dwell on, she says, but a reviewer could be, nevertheless, "trying, at all times, to do their best to cultivate the appreciation of books and of literature in general, to help the rest of us listen with enthusiasm, delight, puzzlement, and insight." This review is about reading over stumbling blocks.

Thomas Merton's Betrayers is a follow-up to the authors' first book on the subject of the death of Thomas Merton. Turley and Martin's previous book, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation* (2018), focused their research on a puzzle of facts, allegations and various narrative accounts surrounding Merton's death in Thailand in December of 1968. In their second book, they shift focus from Thailand to Kentucky to remark on an array of conjectures and speculations about a cover-up regarding Merton's death. The subtitle of *Betrayers* singles out Abbot James Fox and John Howard Griffin, both of whom Merton had known for many years, for what the authors allege as primary role-players in a systematic operation of public disinformation and deception.

Like their first book, arguments are advanced by stringing together an assemblage of facts, suspicions, allegations, gossip and innuendos in an exercise in theoretical sleuthing. No questions or issues are resolved, no arguments proven, but only a submission of reasonable grounds for keeping matters open until certainty dissolves mystery. And like a good "cold case" TV program, both books are entertaining for all who may be curious as to what really happened. Neither book, unfortunately, satisfies that curiosity.

Turley and Martin's second book, however, shifts in tone as much as geography, from fact-finding in Thailand to fault-finding in Kentucky. Along with Fox and Griffin, the Abbey of

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Gethsemani, including its current abbot and brethren, as well as The International Thomas Merton Society, are criticized for complicity in forming a “united front” to perpetuate a widespread cover-up, and disparaged for their refusal to pay due honor to the investigative work of Turley and Martin on what they consider to be the critical issue of Merton’s legacy: his cause of death. The authors take ample space in their second book to provide critical commentary on the negative reviews of their first book (both books were self-published) and to chastise Merton scholars in general for being unreceptive to requests by Turley and Martin to share their perspectives at ITMS conferences or chapter meetings.

The tone of *Betrayers* is both defensive and acerbic. Most disturbing is the authors’ indefensible attack on the reputations of people they identify as betrayers of Merton, especially Fox and Griffin, on merely thin bases of dot-to-dot assertions without sufficient proof or even substantial logic. It was never clear to me in reading the book, for example, why Fox and Griffin were so rough-handed; the authors’ motivations or rationales were never clearly expressed, which left me riddled with more questions than the authors themselves were raising.

The most fascinating and revealing part of the book is the final section of nine appendices (covering topics such as Merton’s “death shout,” his “stage prop fan,” “Griffin’s military discharge” and “seventeen techniques for truth suppression”), all of which served to provide more seeming insight into the author’s intentions in contrast to the book’s thicker rambling and redundant text. Most striking of the nine was the sixth appendix that featured a copy of a letter from Hugh Turley to Br. Paul Quenon in 2019 in which Turley gives his account of feeling unwelcomed as a guest at the monastery he is accusing for profiting from Merton’s life and death. The letter struck me as deeply querulous and, more than any other statement in the book, as most illuminative of the weakness underlying both books by Turley and Martin: neither book appears to follow Merton’s example about *writing in and through* a toxic communication climate.

Merton wrote in *Seeds of Destruction* that “a definitive refusal to participate in those activities which have no other fruit than to prolong the reign of untruth, greed, cruelty and arrogance in the world of men” (xv) is what a monastic withdrawal from the world really means. To me, it is fruitless to compound allegations about other people and circumstances, especially those people that Merton loved and lived with, about which one has only fragments of scant information. Turley and Martin’s first book provided a service in displaying the complex relations between information and misinformation, but their second book contributes too much disinformation to be fruitful for readers.

Even if we learn conclusively someday in the future that Thomas Merton was murdered and did not die by accident, I imagine that we will still be more interested in his life, his writings and his spirit in the very way that we still remember and draw inspiration from the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero who was assassinated with bullets in 1980. Like many readers of Merton, I’m open to facts and truths about life and reality that transcend my limited experiences and perspectives, which is why I am willing to wait for something more than conjectures from investigative bystanders on tenterhooks.

I hope the authors of *Betrayers* will move on to find new topics to investigate that will cultivate more fruitfulness for their readers.