

# ICN

ISLAND CATHOLIC NEWS

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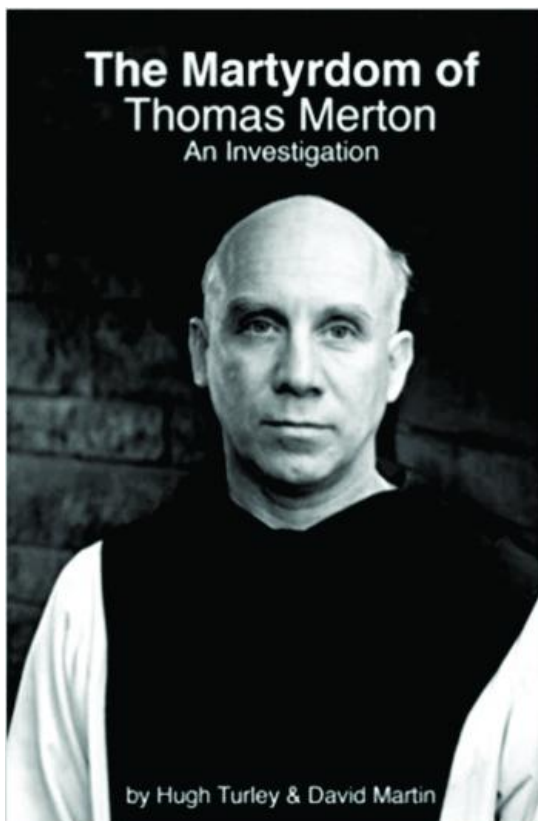
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## Authenticity of Key Letter Doubted Regarding Thomas Merton's Death



*In its ongoing coverage of developments regarding Thomas Merton's death, ICN provides this third part from authors Hugh Turley and David Martin in their close examination of how Merton's untimely demise in December 1968 was obscured as to its facticity, and recognition as a political assassination. (See also, editorial)*

Perhaps the letter addressed to Abbot Flavian Burns of Gethsemani Abbey, the home

abbey of Thomas Merton in Kentucky, should have been regarded with suspicion from the beginning. It bore the date of December 11, 1968, the very next day after Merton's mysterious death at a monastic conference outside Bangkok, Thailand, and it was said to be from the six remaining Trappists attending the conference.

Its stated purpose was to provide, "information regarding the details

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**OBITUARIES**



of [Merton's] death."<sup>1</sup> But the letter provided few details, named no witnesses, included false information, and offered only speculation as to the cause of death, saying that it could have been a heart attack or it could have been electric shock.<sup>2</sup> The letter concluded simply that it was difficult to determine the cause of death.

We make this further observation about the letter in our book, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*:

*If one looks at this letter as an attempt to provide information to a bereaved family, its shortcomings are even more obvious. The loved ones would be screaming for answers. Instead, the letter provides mainly maddening speculation, without even giving any clear idea as to what the speculation is based upon. Worse than that, it offers no avenue for learning more. In their desperation for more information, family members would want most of all to know who they might get it from. On that key point, the letter is silent, just as it is silent on the vital matter of an autopsy and the findings of the Thai police and medical authorities. The letter should be open ended, but, on the contrary, the writers give the impression that they are satisfied to accept the death as a mystery. One must wonder how they could know that the recipients of the letter would share their point of view and not react more naturally with anger and frustration.*<sup>3</sup>

One might also reasonably ask why this group of people might have thought that it was their responsibility to attempt to tell the abbey what had happened and why and how they thought it was best to do it as a collective effort, with seemingly no one person in charge.

Anyone with any experience working on committees will know how difficult it is to achieve a consensus among even a small group of people on matters that sometimes seem to be trivial. What this particular committee produced was clearly very unsatisfactory, and yet we are supposed to believe that every one of these six people signed off on it less than a day after Merton had died.

None of the six Trappists was a witness to the death scene, and none of them had any administrative responsibility for what went on at the conference or at the Red Cross conference center where Merton died. They were most likely strangers to one another, with the one thing they had in common being that they belonged to the same religious order as Merton. They were simply not the right people to be the primary source of information on Merton's death, and it showed.

The letter *did* reveal that there was a bleeding wound on the back of Merton's head, but it managed to distract readers from that possibly very important fact by saying first that there were cuts on his right side and arm. No witnesses reported seeing any such cuts, but the head wound had been widely noticed. An autopsy would have been the first order of business for any proper police investigation, with the head wound only highlighting the fact, but the ostensible letter from the six Trappists said nothing at all about any autopsy. We know now, of course, that none was conducted.

The Trappists' letter also failed to say anything about any Thai police investigation, which means that it did not tell anyone that the Thai police report made no mention of the wound to the head. What is most critical, the letter did not say that the Thai police had concluded, in the absence of an autopsy, that Merton had died of heart failure and was already dead when he fell into a floor fan in his room, which, by coincidence, happened to have, as the Thai police report stated, a "defective electric cord installed inside its stand" and somehow ended up lying across his supine

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body.

The letter writers also seemed to go to special trouble not to name any witnesses by calling them, “others,” “they,” “the nun,” and by saying that Merton’s body “was found,” in the passive voice.

With all its shortcomings, this letter became, along with the early sketchy news reports, a foundation document for the widely believed story that Merton had died from accidental electrocution by a faulty fan. On December 19, 1968, the Abbey of Gethsemani sent the Trappists’ letter out to its mailing list with its own “Dear Friends” cover letter.<sup>4</sup>

More than the letter’s shortcomings that we have so far stated and the implausibility that such a committee would have been hastily formed to draft such a document caused us to begin to doubt its authenticity. There is also the letter’s curious layout. It began by stating “we the undersigned,” but there are no signatures on the letter that the Thomas Merton Center has. The letter simply closes with the italicized words, “Signed by the six Trappists delegates at the Conference.” (The cover letter from the abbey sent with the Trappists’ letter was also unsigned and closed with the italicized words, “The Monks at Gethsemani.”).

The Merton Center has no actual signed letter, and the current archivist at the Abbey at Gethsemani tells us that if there ever was such a signed letter, they don’t have it now.<sup>5</sup> One must wonder what reason there could possibly be for not retaining such an important letter, actually signed by those six Trappists. The best evidence suggests, then, that this letter with its curious “we the undersigned” closing that lacks any actual signatures, is the only letter that there ever was.

### ***The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton and the Shower***

The Trappists’ letter did not become widely known to the public until New Directions Publishing included it as an appendix to *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.<sup>6</sup>

Brother Patrick Hart, Merton’s then recently appointed secretary, is the author of a postscript to the book. Like the writers of the Trappists’ letter, Brother Patrick was careful not to name any witnesses. The most important thing about the postscript, though, is that it is the first time that anyone declared that Merton had just taken a shower before touching the faulty fan.<sup>7</sup>

Neither any of the witnesses, the Thai police, the medical reports, nor any contemporaneous news accounts were reported to have said anything about Merton having taken a shower.<sup>8</sup> The notion that an electric fan killed a perfectly dry Thomas Merton is so absurd that Brother Patrick, or someone exercising strong influence over him, apparently felt it necessary to invent the shower story in order to make it more believable.

Father Celestine Say, O.S.B., who was among the first three people to enter Merton’s room and see his body, said that he looked like he might have been getting ready to take a shower. Having entered the cottage, where his room alone shared the first floor with Merton, and with whom he shared a bathroom with a shower, in the parlor between their rooms, Say had heard no sound from Merton or the shower from the time he entered the cottage about five minutes after Merton right up to the time the body was discovered some two hours later.

Sister Marie de la Croix, O.C.S.O., who was an attendee at the conference, wrote shortly after the event in a five-page report that Merton had taken a shower, but she also says he then took a nap before touching

the fan and being electrocuted, so the shower would not have been a factor in the electrocution.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, she was not a witness and is simply wrong about a number of things. She also wrote, for instance, that the United States Army had conducted an autopsy, the results of which were not yet available.

The letter from the Trappists was likely added as an appendix to the book that introduced Brother Patrick's shower story because the letter states that Merton, "could have showered."

Brother Patrick began his shower story by stating that he had read the accounts of witnesses as well as the police and medical reports, strongly implying that he had supporting evidence, but, as we have noted, the evidence is all to the contrary.<sup>10</sup> Brother Patrick admitted to us in 2017 that, in fact, he had no actual evidence that Merton had showered, saying only that the weather was hot and steamy and he "must have showered."<sup>11</sup>

### Changing the Trappists' Letter

The version of the Trappists' letter published by New Directions is not identical to the copy that the Merton Center has. It differs in what it adds and in what it leaves out. Taking the second point first, in describing how Merton's body was found, lying on his back on the floor of his room with the fan lying across his body, it leaves out the words, "in his pajamas." This is quite obviously not a matter of inadvertence. The editors of the book, Brother Patrick, James Laughlin, and Naomi Burton Stone clearly made the conscious decision to cut those three words from the letter, thereby misrepresenting it in a very significant way.

Putting it bluntly, they have violated the Ninth Commandment against bearing false witness. The publishing company itself, New Directions, must also bear some responsibility for this historically crucial excision. The death scene photographs taken by Father Say confirm that Merton was wearing what appeared to be the bottom half of summer "shorty" pajamas, virtually ruling out the possibility that he had just stepped out of a shower. That short prepositional phrase, "in his pajamas," clearly had no place in a volume in which the shower story was introduced, and so it was cut out.

We can't be as completely certain about the circumstances around what the editors added as we can be about what they left out. We can only say that it is different from the copy available at the Merton Center in that it lists the names of "the six Trappists" at the end, though it does not show their signatures. Those names would have been easy to obtain from a published list of the attendees at the conference, and one must wonder if that is where New Directions got them, instead of from the original letter. It is also a misrepresentation in its heading, because there were actually seven Trappists remaining at the conference after Merton's death. The name that was left off was that of Marie de la Croix.

That de la Croix's name in particular should be left off is another reason to question the document's authenticity. One of the supposed signatories could not have failed to see that it was wrong for them to call themselves "the six Trappists" at the conference. That is Mother Christiana, the abbess of de la Croix's home monastery in Seiboen, Japan. They happened to be the only two Trappistines at the conference and the only two people on the list from the same abbey. Mother Christiana could hardly have failed to notice that de la Croix was not included among the letter's supposed signatories.

### Trappists Not Acknowledged

After the publication of our book, we noticed another possibly important omission from *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. New Directions, like most publishing companies, is very legalistic and fussy about the matter of acknowledgements. We had wanted to use the long passage from Brother Patrick in which he told in a very authoritative manner how Merton had showered before encountering the fan, but the fee that they demanded—which is optional in any case—seemed higher than the usual going rate, so we went with a paraphrase instead.

In the acknowledgements of *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New Directions Publishing is meticulous in giving credit to everyone who gave them permission to use copyrighted material, but the six Trappists are not mentioned. Also, James Laughlin in the Editor's Notes for the book also expresses appreciation to a long list of individuals and copyright owners. The six Trappists are not mentioned there, either.<sup>12</sup> It occurred to us, then, that New Directions had, in effect, commercially capitalized upon the supposed letter from these six Trappists without having obtained the permission of any of them to do so.

We wrote to New Directions and asked them if our assumption was correct. We also took the opportunity to ask them where the list of six names came from when there were actually seven remaining Trappists at the conference and what they might know about the apparent removal of the “in his pajamas” passage from the original letter.

Mr. Christopher Wait, permissions editor at New Directions, in a response, agreed that we had made some interesting points, but since this happened “so long ago” and because they were really a very small operation that kept few records, he simply had no way to answer any of our questions.<sup>13</sup>

One may take this response at face value or one may not, especially in light of what the editors working for New Directions did to that “in his pajamas” passage. The publishing company, founded in 1936 by Laughlin, who is one of the book's editors, is well respected, and it seems to us that it would be routine for them to have such records in their filing cabinets, but perhaps not.

However, were they really serious in answering our questions they might have made an inquiry to one of the three surviving editors of the book, Brother Patrick Hart, who still resides at the Gethsemani Abbey.

One might well suspect that the normal procedure of obtaining permission for the publication of someone else's work was not followed because the folks at New Directions either knew, or suspected as we do, that the letter was not authentic and there was therefore no reason to obtain the permission of people who had not created it in the first place.

Furthermore, they would have hardly wanted to alert any of these Trappists that they were publishing a letter in their name that they either knew or strongly suspected that they did not write.

### More Suspicions

There are a couple of more important reasons to regard the letter as a carefully crafted fabrication, originating at the U.S. Embassy in Thailand and designed to sell the accidental-electrocution story. There's that matter of avoiding the naming of the witnesses who discovered the body.

They could well have known that these were witnesses who were so incredulous at what they had seen that they photographed the scene and then withheld the photographs from the Thai police when they became

convinced that the police were engaging in a cover-up. The police, for their part—or whoever translated their sketchy report at the U.S. Embassy—concealed the witness names by wildly and improbably misspelling them.

The Trappists' letter also has this passage: "Not long after [Merton] retired a shout was heard by others in his cottage but after a preliminary check they thought they must have imagined the cry."

That passage establishes in the mind of the reader that that was when Merton encountered the lethal fan and met his death. In fact, there were only two others in the cottage at the time, Father Say on the first floor with Merton, in a room separated from Merton's by a small parlor, and Father François de Grunne, O.S.B., who was in a room on the second floor over Say's.

Actually, the rooms, at least on the first floor, were only temporary affairs separated by netting with sheets hung for a modicum of privacy. Only the doors and doorframes were more or less permanent. De Grunne was the only one who claimed to have heard a shout or a "loud noise," as the Thai police reported.

This occurred, according to Say, shortly after his arrival at the cottage, when de Grunne came downstairs, knocked on the door of the bathroom off the parlor where Say was brushing his teeth and asked him if he had heard a shout. Say had not. De Grunne then simply went back upstairs, and neither man checked on Merton.

The best evidence is that there was no such shout from Merton. In 1969, in a letter to Moffitt, the fourth occupant in the cottage, de Grunne wrote that the only sound he had heard was from nearby houses and that he had not been particularly concerned about it.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the "shout," as de Grunne initially responded to and the Trappists' letter passed on, and the Thai police's "loud noise," coming almost an hour later than when Say said de Grunne reported it to him, became the sound of Merton's death throes in the public imagination, and it has remained so ever since.

*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* was only the first of a series of books taken from Merton's journals that have been published posthumously and edited by Brother Patrick Hart. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, Volume 7 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, was published in 1998.

In the introduction to that book Brother Patrick repeats almost verbatim what he wrote in that earlier postscript, with one important change. Earlier he had written that one of the monks discovering the body, Father Odo Haas, O.S.B., had experienced a "severe" shock when he tried to move the fan from Merton. This time he changed the word from "severe" to "slight." In making that change he greatly weakened the case that Merton had died from the shock of that fan. But what he also did was to make the story consistent with the report of the best witness, Fr. Say, and with the Thai police report, as opposed to what is found in another very suspect document.

Say, upon seeing Haas recoil from the shock asked him how strong it was, and Haas said that it was not very strong.<sup>15</sup> The Thai police report, for its part, says that Haas "jerked back" from the fan.

The only source for the shock being a strong one is a typed, unsigned document purported to be the statement of Haas given to the investigating police. In that statement Haas says that, not only was the shock a strong one, but it also "kept [him] from getting free of the fan" until Say could unplug it.

The full Haas “statement” is so full of inconsistencies with what was observed by other witnesses, indeed, with the known facts, that we have an entire chapter on the subject entitled “The False Document” in our book.

By changing the shock description from “severe” to “slight,” Brother Patrick also established at least a small precedent for making his writing accord more closely with the best evidence available.

Now, in the 50th anniversary year of Thomas Merton’s death, Brother Patrick and New Directions publishing should go the full way in repairing the damage that they have done to the truth by taking back the perniciously influential story originating in 1973 that Merton had taken a shower before encountering the fan and by acknowledging that there is no reason to believe that the Trappists’ letter is authentic.

The New Directions website should also be corrected to remove the wholly unsupported statement that Merton was, “the victim of an accidental electrocution.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Monks of Gethsemani letter to Dear Friends, unpublished, December 19, 1968, the Thomas Merton Center.

<sup>2</sup> Six Trappists letter to Flavian Burns, unpublished, December 11, 1968, the Thomas Merton Center.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Turley and David Martin, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*, McCabe Publishing, 2018, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Monks of Gethsemani letter to Dear Friends, unpublished, December 19, 1968, the Thomas Merton Center.

<sup>5</sup> *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton*, p. 261.

<sup>6</sup> Six Trappists letter to Flavian Burns, December 11, 1968, Appendix VIII, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New Directions, 1973, pp. 344-347

<sup>7</sup> Brother Patrick Hart, Postscript, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 257-259.

<sup>8</sup> *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton*, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> “The Last Days of Thomas Merton,” <http://www.merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/28/28-4Croix.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton*

<sup>11</sup> Brother Patrick Hart, voicemail to Hugh Turley, May 31, 2017, 2:14 pm.

<sup>12</sup> *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. vi-xix.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Wait, Permissions Editor, New Directions Publishing, email to Hugh Turley, May 7, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> François de Grunne, Letter to John Moffitt, July 6, 1969, Moffitt papers, University of Virginia

<sup>15</sup> Say, Letter to John Moffitt, December 11, 1969, Moffitt Papers

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ndbooks.com/author/thomas-merton/>

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