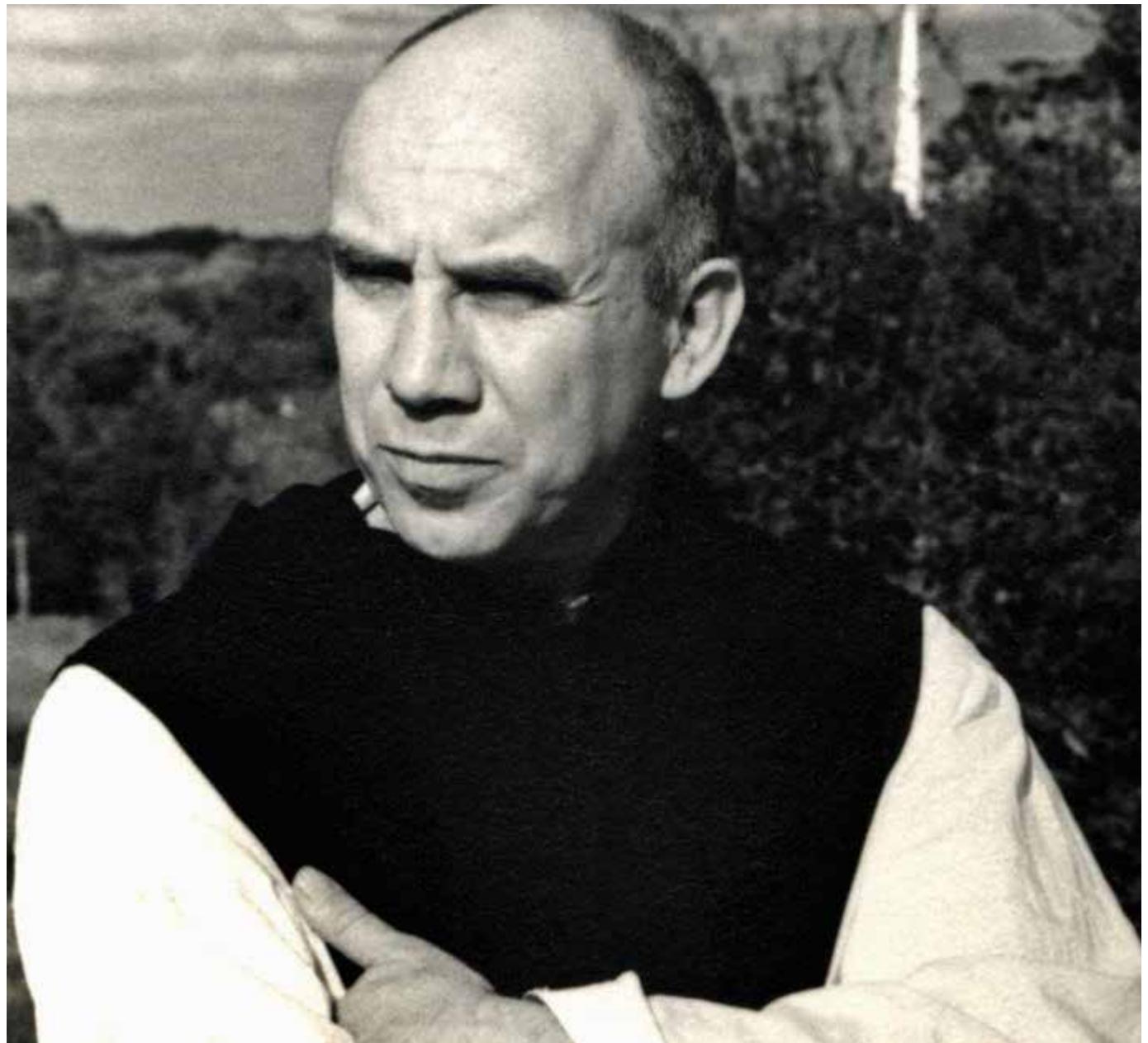


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# Culture Wars



**Who Killed Thomas Merton?**

# REVIEWS

## The Shocking Death of Thomas Merton

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HUGH TURLEY AND DAVID MARTIN, *THE MARTYRDOM OF THOMAS MERTON* (HYATTSVILLE, MD: MCCABE PUBLISHING, 2018) 309 PP., \$17.99, SOFTCOVER.

Sinful, worldly, lustful, restless, and rootless youth with a literary bent sporadically senses the call of God. Is it real? Will he respond? What does it mean to respond? And then what?

That synopsis of Thomas Merton's best-selling *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a caricature that highlights several questions each reader must face: Was this autobiography written as a work of literature? Or instead as a spiritual meditation? Or both? Is it an interpretative depiction, or instead a snapshot of Merton at a specific moment? Isn't it presumptuous to write an autobiography while still in your early thirties? Was Merton honest with himself? With the reader?

Merton, born in France and educated at Oxford and Columbia, was a knowingly gifted writer with a seemingly remarkable recall for detail bordering on fabrication. After Pearl Harbor, one step ahead of the Draft Board, he joined a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, the Abbey of Gethsemani, where he was encouraged to write. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton chooses anecdotes that further his story and whose symbolism often becomes apparent as his tale unfolds. Never-

theless, the first part of the book is slow, even feeling padded, and his final wrestling over the question of whether he has a religious vocation seems overwritten.

Most famously, the book only hints at Merton's womanizing past and omits any reference to the child he fathered out of wedlock. Merton treats of spirituality and prayer and progress in the spiritual life so extensively that the reader can overlook the fact that he does not claim to be perfected: "God ... certainly beset me with graces ... of the kind that even a

discourage the reader from engaging the book on its own terms and to make one wonder why anyone, much less Merton, ever converted to Catholicism or joined the Trappists.

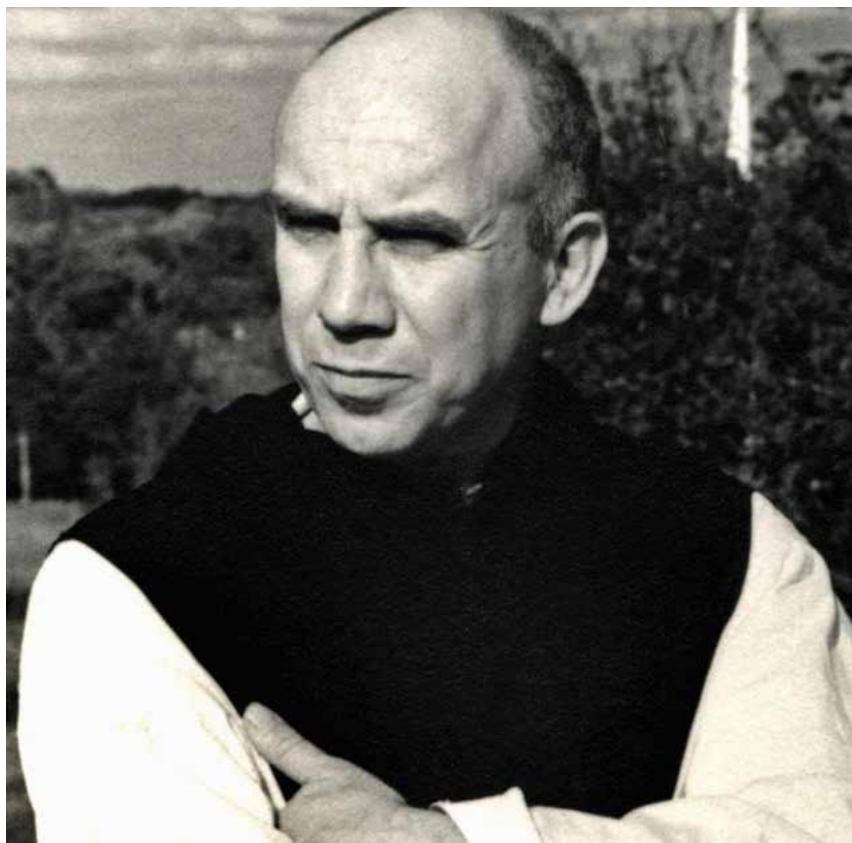
In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton expresses a deep awareness of the horror of his own personal sins and their horrible effect and also of the ameliorating merit of the Catholic Mass. This does not often come through in Michael Mott's otherwise extensively detailed authorized biography *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, which, published in 1984, also was a best seller. The Merton who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* is portrayed by Mott as an inflexible monk hard on his youthful self. Mott has an older Merton rejecting the younger Merton and "working to turn himself from the pious, rigid, opinionated young monk into a vulnerable human being for twenty years," which is ironic because, absent that autobiography, Merton would have not achieved such a large readership for his other writings or be as widely known or studied today.

Was Merton honest with himself? With the reader?

person without deep spirituality can appreciate as graces; and that is the kind of person I was then and still am." Recent editions include A Note to the Reader by William H. Shannon, Founding President of the International Thomas Merton Society, that seems written to

Mott is more interested in Merton the writer than Merton the Catholic or Merton the Trappist, and Merton wrote incessantly: journals, poems, letters, articles, books. "Merton's writing was more of a compulsion than either a vocation or a job." Mott's approach is un-

## Thomas Merton



derstandable: if he had not been a writer, Merton would be an unlikely subject for a biography. But Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* is subtitled "An Autobiography of Faith." Mott's biography of Merton could be subtitled "Mentioning Matters of Faith Only Out of Necessity." Merton's Catholicism and Trappist spirituality are necessary backdrops for the biography, but that's all they are. They weave themselves into the story, but their depth is never plumbed, so Merton is left adrift, even though Merton keeps insisting on and returning to them while also skirmishing with and violating them. The exception to this is Mott's treatment of Merton's fascination with Zen near the end of his life; here some aspects of Catholic mysticism are explored to prove a similarity to Eastern mysticism.

Merton's life was a search or rather many searches: a search for self;

for God; for home; for approval; for love; for women; for rest; for fame and recognition; for nothingness; for companionship; for solitude. He seemed to flit from interest to interest, often deciding he had found what he sought only to be off again. With much substantiation and insight, Mott thus suggests there were many Mertons, a suggestion Merton himself made in his writings. This is captured by an early reviewer, Frederick J. Blouinogen, writing in 1985 in *Reflections*:

While Mott gives the reader a wealth of information on every aspect of Merton's life, he is especially insightful in his discussion of the major tensions Merton experienced in his life. The tension between Merton the poet and writer and Merton the contemplative. The tension between Merton the extrovert, the man who loved peo-

ple, and Merton the introvert, the man who desperately needed solitude. The tension between Merton the political activist, the man who felt a deep responsibility to address the social problems of the world, and Merton the mystic, the man who renounced the world to seek God in silence and prayer.

As there are many Mertons, there are also many reactions to Merton and his writings. Merton believed himself special ("On one point Merton could make no concession. He thought himself extraordinary and his fate extraordinary."), and he often comes across as selfish, self-centered, and self-important in Mott's book. Mott also describes at much length Merton's dalliance with a betrothed student nurse in her early twenties (Mott coyly does not use her name but it is now public) when he was about fifty, which Merton saw as a deeply meaningful even sacred love rather than the soap operatic tragic-comic stumbling of a self-absorbed middle-aged priest, monk, and author flirting with the *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s. Ah, the romance of bonding over Peanuts cartoons and *Mad* magazine.

No wonder many find Merton an enigma. "Everyone sees him differently," writes Flavian Burns, the abbot of Merton's monastery, and that perhaps should be the subtitle of *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*, a book that collects the views and reminiscences of 20 people "who knew him best"—including several who met him only once. The collected views vary widely, even contradicting each other. This is the book's charm as it helps the reader see the complexities and contradictions Merton embodied. For example, Merton "had no al-

## Robert F. Kennedy, 1968, shortly before his assassination



lergy whatsoever to alcohol," says James Laughlin, but Joan Baez recounts a story Merton told her of getting sloshed at a party with nuns, and Jim Forrest says Merton "had difficulties" with alcohol. "He certainly isn't a saint," says Robert Giroux. "I think he would be horrified to be spoken of in that way." Says Flavian Burns: "I think he was a saint." Ernesto Cardenal implies that despite Merton's emphasis on nonviolence, Merton's talks to him and other novices inspired his involvement in the Sandinistas' armed revolution in Nicaragua. Joan Baez takes Cardenal to task for the way he interprets Merton. John Eudes Bamberger believes Merton's "earlier writings will stand up much better than the later ones," but Jean Leclercq identifies two books as "the best he wrote," one of which was "published after his death." Robert Lax comes close

to suggesting Merton was gnostic, though several others take pains to emphasize his Catholicism despite his fascination with Eastern mysticism, while James Laughlin implies Merton became Buddhist, writing that "it was Buddhism, and the art of Buddhism, that brought him this long-sought [great mystical] experience, and not something in the monastery or in the Catholic faith." Whew! At least Merton didn't get wrapped up with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and transcendental meditation.

Even Pope Francis has chimed in with his view of Merton, telling the U.S. Congress: "Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions."

Thomas Merton died at fifty-three years of age on December 10, 1968 in a cottage at a Red Cross conference center in a suburb of Bangkok, Thailand. The accepted version is that he accidentally electrocuted himself by grabbing a defective fan while wet from showering, a possible but highly unusual and unlikely scenario. Just as there are many questions and views about Merton and his life, the circumstances of his death are surrounded by confusion, contradiction, and controversy. In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, Paul Elie even makes the unsourced claim that "A Trappistine nun gave him the last rites" and uses unnamed "others" to suggest Merton "had attained nirvana."

The authors of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation* spend little effort to introduce the reader to Merton, his writings, or his views on any subject. Turley and Martin don't buy the accepted story about how Merton died, and their book substantiates their position, even if one discounts some of their conclusions and speculations. Their Merton is the Catholic pacifist peace advocate Merton, opponent of the military, nuclear weapons, and war, particularly the war in Viet Nam, and, according to them, therein lies the reason for his untimely death.

Turley and Martin's "catalyst" for writing the book was James W. Douglass's *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*, which is well-researched, well-documented, well-written, and very persuasive. Its central thesis: facing the horror of nuclear war, President John F. Kennedy had turned from global war to peace, which put him at odds with the

cold-warriors of the CIA, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the military-industrial complex, so the CIA, viewing him as a traitor, coordinated and carried out his murder, and other parts of the Government, including LBJ, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, the military, and the Warren Commission, helped cover up and suppress the ugly truth. The Kennedy assassination was a horrible event in American history, even more horrific than most people suspect. *JFK and the Unspeakable* can't but help to improve one's view of and estimation of JFK while ruing both the ever increasing and secret power of the national security state and the constant war footing this country now is on.

Calling Merton his "Virgil," his "guide," Douglass drew the term "the Unspeakable" from Merton,

and anything else they can obtain relevant to the circumstances of Merton's death while trying to unravel the errors, confusion, and contradictions. Was there an autopsy? Why not? What was the time line surrounding the death? Who was in the vicinity of the death, what were they doing, and how did they react? What was the body's position when it was discovered? Had Merton showered? Was he clothed? Did he grab a fan? Why were so many changes made so quickly to the site of his death? Why was that site scrubbed so thoroughly and quickly? Were the circumstances of his death covered up? By whom? Though they ran into some dead ends in their investigation, by and large the authors do an often masterful if somewhat repetitive and slightly

Mott. In late 1969, a year after Merton's death, Abbott Flavian introduced the idea that Merton may have showered to Moffit, who insisted that the best evidence showed he had not. Moffitt also objected in 1973 to putting that story out publicly because the evidence showed otherwise, but Brother Patrick Hart nevertheless included a postscript to *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* asserting that Merton accidentally electrocuted himself after showering. For his part, Moffitt never reported publicly on the contrary evidence, instead "he suppressed this information," once writing to Abbott Flavian that "he wanted to tell the truth based on the facts," but also "did not wish to state anything that would go against his [Abbot Flavian's] wishes."

*The Asian Journal* also included a purportedly verbatim copy of a December 1968 letter from six Trappist conference attendees to Abbot Flavian that speculates about the cause of death and mentions a possible shower. Turley and Martin point out, however, that the copy of the letter had "an obviously intentional omission of three important words": Merton's corpse was found clad "in his pajamas," which is inconsistent with the theory that he was wet from showering. And, in response to Turley and Martin's inquiry, Brother Patrick "admitted that he had no actual evidence for his shower story."

who used it to point to "a kind of systemic evil that defies speech." Turley and Martin, "surprised" to learn from *JFK and the Unspeakable* "what a powerful force that Merton had been for peace, both before and during the Vietnam War," asked themselves: "Would not the same people who marked John F. Kennedy for death have marked Merton, as well?"

Turley and Martin doggedly track down documents, past interviews, witnesses, written accounts,

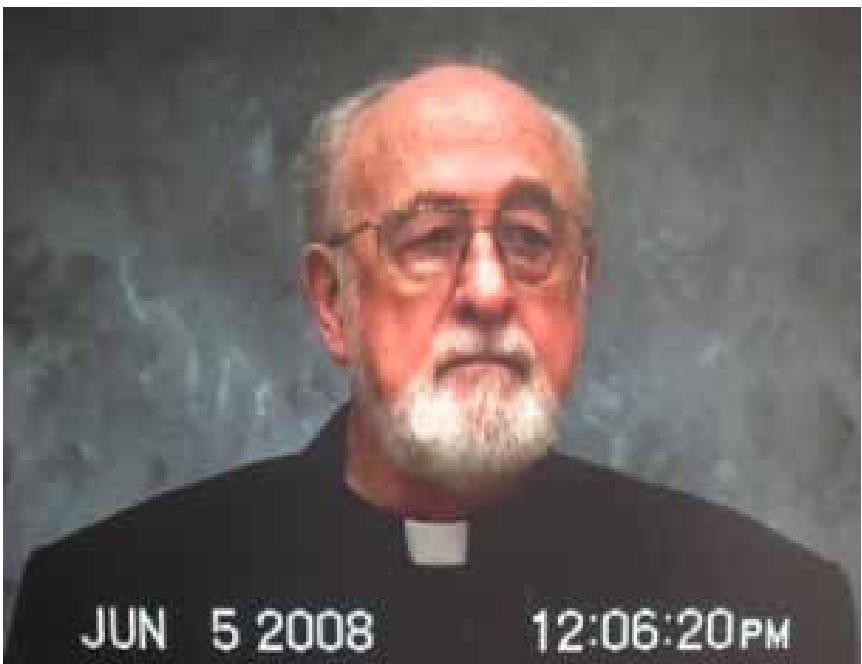
confusing job answering these and other questions, concluding "that it would be more accurate to say that his death has been wrapped in falsehoods."

Those primarily responsible for the misleading tale are John Moffit, an editor of *America* and conference attendee, Abbott Flavian Burns of Merton's monastery, Brother Patrick Hart, Merton's friend, secretary, and custodian of Merton's papers, and biographers John Howard Griffin and Michael

Mott and Griffin, though, receive much of the authors' venom, and deservedly so. The abbey appointed Mott as Merton's official biographer in 1978 after the original choice, John Howard Griffin of *Black Like Me* fame, became too ill to continue. Conference par-

**Merton's corpse was found  
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## Rembert Weakland, Deposition photo



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ticipant Fr. Celestine Say, O.S.B., had taken two photographs of Merton's body exactly as it was found. Griffin arranged to obtain the photos and negatives from Say and then suppressed them with the aid of Abbott Flavian and Brother Patrick. "Griffin told them that the photographs and negatives *should not be published for a very long time, in all probability never.*"

Turley and Martin discovered the original negatives among Griffin's papers at Columbia. They, however, do not reproduce the photos in the *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton*. The Abbey of Gethsemani, which owns the photos, denied them permission to include even an artist's rendering of them in the book. Turley and Martin, therefore, painstakingly describe the photos at length, referring to the condition and position of Merton's body, the clothing he was wearing, the placement of the fan, and many more details, concluding that "Say's pictures flatly contradict the authorized and popular stories about Merton's death."

In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Mott's "most likely reconstruction" suggests that Merton died of accidental electrocution, showering and then slipping while wet and grabbing the running fan. He also wrote that Merton was "either wearing a pair of drawers or naked." Yet Mott had seen the photo of Merton's corpse dressed in shorts and knew the fan's position when the body was discovered was inconsistent with the accidental slip and fall thesis. So Mott also wrote: "Father Celestine had taken several photographs as a record in the dim and, by now, disturbed room." Mott thus, in Turley and Martin's words, made Say's photographs "seem unimportant" by "purposefully and with obvious malice aforesight" rearranging the order of events to make it seem as if the photos were taken not as the body was when it was discovered but after the room had been disturbed. Turley and Martin note that if Mott's chronology were accurate, there would have been no need to suppress the photos. Their

criticism of Mott's chronology and other fabrications and inaccuracies in Mott's account of Merton's death is devastating.

"While there are some grounds for the rumor [Merton] was murdered, they do not seem persuasive," wrote Mott. "It's a simple fact that the average person is far more likely to be murdered than to be killed by an electric fan, and Merton was no average person," write Turley and Martin. With varying degrees of insight and certitude, they posit that Merton was murdered, possibly by Thai police at the instigation of the CIA, and that the murder was covered up by a widespread conspiracy involving the CIA, the media, the Thais, the American military, many of those at the conference, and those in Merton's monastery. In addressing these matters and the question of whether Merton may be a martyr, they are not always as convincing as when debunking the conventional narrative that surrounds Merton's death. And they readily admit that "Solving the crime completely to learn the identity of the killer(s) without all the powers of the state at our disposal [is] beyond our capacity."

Merton did not receive the last rites from a nun, but from Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., a homosexual who ran the conference at which Merton died and who was later consecrated archbishop by another conference participant, Archbishop Jean Jadot, O.S.B., later apostolic delegate to the United States. Did Merton attain nirvana? Perhaps instead God used Merton's shocking death to prevent him from finally going completely off the rails, even losing his soul.

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JAMES G. BRUEN, JR.