

BLACK LIKE WHOM? MYSTERY MAN, JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN

BY HUGH TURLEY AND DAVID MARTIN

In our 2018 book, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*, we identified John Howard Griffin as one of four key people responsible for cementing in the public mind that the great Catholic monk and public intellectual, Thomas Merton, had died from accidental electrocution. The other three were Merton's abbot at the Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, Flavian Burns, Merton's secretary there, Brother Patrick Hart, and Merton's authorized biographer, Michael Mott. For the recently published *Thomas Merton's Betrayers: The Case against Abbot James Fox and Author John Howard Griffin*, we have delved more deeply into Griffin's background.

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The Texas-born journalist and author John Howard Griffin, is known almost exclusively for his 1961 book, *Black Like Me*. It is an account of his journey through the Deep South, disguised as a Black man. It created quite a sensation in its day and made him a national celebrity. A movie with the same title as the book, starring James Whitmore as Griffin, was made in 1964. As one can see from sampling it on YouTube, it has not aged particularly well. Its satirizing by Eddie Murphy, who captures quite a bit of the absurdity of the book and movie's premise, has been a good deal more popular than anything one might find there from the movie itself.¹

What few people know about Griffin is that in 1969 he was chosen by the Merton Legacy Trust to write the *official* biography of the Catholic monk and writ-

er Thomas Merton. Merton had died mysteriously at a monastic conclave in Thailand on December 10, 1968. The trust had been set up in 1967 to handle Merton's estate in the event of his death. Griffin and Merton had known one another since 1961.

The second of four children, Griffin was a man with a remarkable personal history. He was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1920 and raised in Fort Worth. His mother was a classical pianist and longtime piano teacher, and his father though professionally a wholesale grocery salesman was also an Irish tenor and radio personality. His artistic family imbued him with a love not just of music, but of literature. He had intrepidly gone off to France at the tender age of 15 in search of a classical education. He attended the Lycée Descartes, a secondary school in Tours, France. As his widow has written, he "completed studies in French and literature at the University of Poitiers, and then studied

medicine at the École de Médecine." As an intern at the Asylum of Tours, she reports further, he conducted experiments on the use of music as therapy for the criminally insane. He also received certificates, she tells us, in musical study from the Conservatoire de Fontainebleau, studying under renowned teachers. There he became a musicologist, specializing in the Gregorian chant. In that capacity he would later spend time as a musicologist at the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes where he did more study of the Gregorian chant.² That experience would provide the setting for his first novel, published many years later in 1952, entitled *The Devil Rides Outside*. He had become a Roman Catholic the previous year.³

World War II began while he was in France, and he purportedly worked with the French resistance

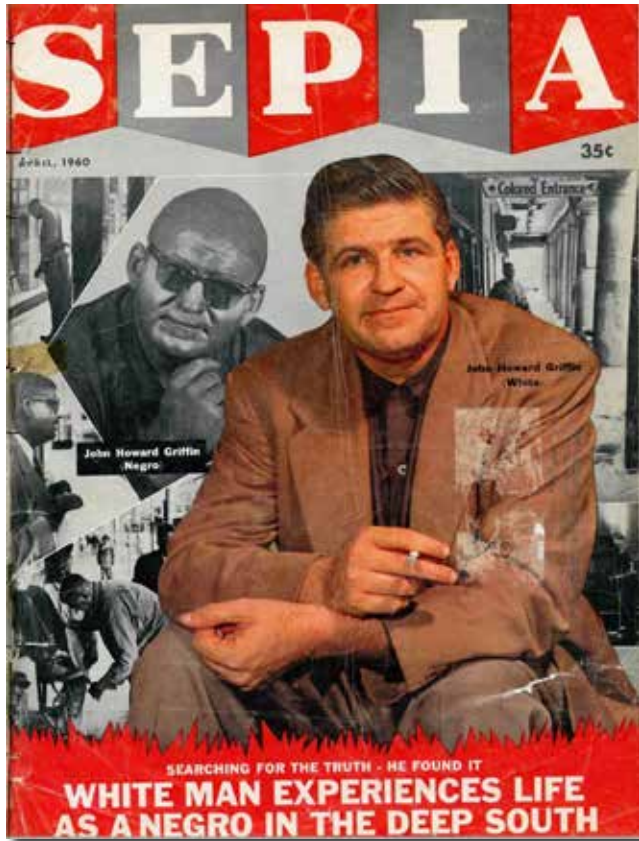


army as a medic and helped evacuate Austrian Jews. Escaping France, according to his biographer Robert Bonazzi he joined the U.S. Army Air Force in 1941, serving for four years, 39 months of which were spent overseas. He was sent to the lonesome outpost of the Solomon Islands where he worked as something of an ethnographer with the local population. The experience would dramatically affect his health in a delayed-reaction fashion. Leaving the Army in 1946, he slowly began to go blind, the after-effect, according to his authorized biographer Bonazzi writing in 2018, of a severe concussion that he had received from a Japanese bomb.⁴ He would be completely blind from 1947 until 1957, when his sight miraculously returned.⁵ During his period of blindness, however, he would write five novels, only two of which, *The Devil Rides Outside* and *Nuni*, based on his South Sea experience, were published. Like Merton, he kept a journal, which at his death in 1980 had reached 20 volumes.⁶

In 1954, Griffin would suffer paralysis in both legs and numbness in both hands. That ailment was eventually diagnosed as spinal malaria, which had an eight-year incubation period, and then it was successfully treated with small doses of strychnine.⁷

Readers may well notice that these writing activities of Griffin that we have described hardly add up to a livelihood. Indeed, his financial situation would seem to have been precarious for many years. During the period of his blindness, he was apparently heavily dependent upon his parents. We learn from his widow that in the immediate years after emerging from his blindness, 1957 through 1960, he worked as a journalist, writing syndicated features for the International News Service and King Features.⁸

His primary source of income during this period seems to have been working for the Fort Worth-based *Sepia* magazine. The magazine may be described as somewhat short of respectable. Its owner, George Levitan, a Jewish man from Michigan, had moved to Fort Worth and had made his fortune salvaging and selling used plumbing parts. In 1950 he purchased the Good Publishing Company, which had started up in 1946, from its local founder, a Black man by the name of Horace J. Blackwell. Good Publishing produced several magazines, *Bronze Thrills*, *Jive*, *Hep*, *Soul Confessions*, and *Sepia*. The magazines targeted a Black audience, publishing lewd romance stories, sexual sagas, and bawdy pictures. Titles of *Sepia* articles included: “Exposed: Men Who Dress Like Women,” “Why Hol-



lywood Stars like Negroes,” “The Inside Story of Black Pimps,” “Women Learn the Art of Teasing in School for Strippers” and “Are Chorus Girls Immoral?”

The April 1957 issue of *Sepia* had a malicious racist smear against the newly popular singer Elvis Presley under the headline, “How Negroes Feel About Elvis.” The magazine relayed a supposed rumor about something Elvis had said that was still being repeated in the 21st century. What *Wikipedia* has to say about that episode on its *Sepia* magazine page is worth repeating in its entirety for what it tells us about Griffin’s primary employer and the magazine that turned him into a national celebrity and something of a civil rights icon:

According to African American author Joyce Rochelle Vaughn in the preface of her book “Thirty Pieces of Silver: The Betrayal of Elvis Presley” an aunt who raised her had forcibly told her to never listen to Elvis Presley’s music because “Sepia” magazine had run an article in early 1957 in which he had been quoted as saying, in Boston, that the “only thing Negroes can do for me is buy my records and shine my shoes.” She then decided, forty years later, to undertake a full study and complete unmasking of falsely reported news surrounding his life and career. According to Ms. Vaughn, the truth about the invented

slur lay in white liberals making money exploiting statements and falsifying others because so many whites during the era openly made stupid remarks against black people. So when a black radio station decided to play Elvis’ music and black people started acknowledging that they listened to and bought Elvis’ records, white liberals went into panic mode and the slur was invented.

“Jet” magazine sent its most prestigious writer, the late Louis Robinson, to the set of “Jailhouse Rock” to raise the matter with the then 22-year-old Presley and, after interviewing African American musicians like BB King, who knew Presley since his teen years, as well as Presley himself, he cleared him of all charges but the damage was done, the slur continuing to be utilized as late as in the first two decades of the 21st Century.

The false story about Elvis Presley in *Sepia* deceived Black readers and promoted racial unrest. Two years later Levitan would sponsor John Howard Griffin’s adventure of “going undercover” as a Negro in the Deep South.

At this point, a more critical examination of Griffin’s background, and particularly the primary source for it, the 2018 “authorized biography” by Robert Bonazzi, is in order. As we have seen, Bonazzi’s story of how Griffin sustained the severe concussion that supposedly produced Griffin’s delayed-reaction blindness is contradicted by other sources, including, apparently, Griffin himself. We should also point out that Bonazzi’s account, while the most dramatic, also appears to be the least plausible. After the serious fighting that had taken place on the main island of the Solomons, Guadalcanal, the area where Griffin was stationed had been well neutralized by early 1943. Bonazzi tells us, though, that from his job embedded with the Solomon Islanders, Griffin was transferred in 1945 to Morotai, some 2,000 miles to the west to work as a radio dispatcher where he happened to be on patrol “during the anticipated invasion.”

At that stage of the Pacific War, the Japanese were well past invading anywhere. Their invasion of Morotai had taken place early in 1942, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Americans had retaken it with a massive attack in 1944. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bonazzi has the Army Air Force making a rather odd personnel move to put Griffin somehow in the line of Japanese fire. In fact, Bonazzi’s account of Griffin’s four years of military service is very sketchy, and when he is specific, his account is

replete with such peculiarities. According to Bonazzi, Griffin was shipped out to Guadalcanal in 1942 as a radio operator. The major naval battle at Guadalcanal did not take place until November of that year and the American authorities did not declare the island to be secure until early February of 1943. The job that Griffin supposedly had there, playing music as a sort of disc jockey for the occupying forces, was far removed from any military activity, the sort of thing that takes place securely behind the fighting lines. After a year of that, Bonazzi tells us, Griffin volunteered as a “language specialist” in 1944 and spent a year in a village on one of the Solomon Islands.

The very telling term that Bonazzi scrupulously avoids using is “military intelligence.” Griffin’s work in the village which involved, among other things, befriending grand Chief John Vutha, is classic intelligence work. It’s hardly the sort of thing that one would usually get into as casually as Bonazzi describes it. What is more likely is that Griffin was given some preparation for it before he was shipped to the Solomon Islands and that would have been his purpose for going there in the first place.

Returning to the climactic event of Griffin’s military tour as Bonazzi recounts it, the unconscious Griffin was discovered in a trench the morning after the attack, and he did not regain consciousness “until days later.” Already, according to Bonazzi, Griffin realized that he had “lost most of his eyesight.”

At this point Bonazzi’s narrative turns really bizarre. For some reason, Griffin withheld this information from his doctors, and the doctors remained ignorant of Griffin’s loss of sight. One might well conclude that that Japanese bomb had also blown away some of the man’s ability to reason. Doctors are there to cure our ills. If Griffin, upon regaining consciousness, found that he had lost a good deal of his vision and it was getting worse daily, would he not have been greatly alarmed and would he not have had every reason to let the doctors know in hopes that they might do something about it? Instead, Bonazzi tells us, Griffin “played the role of the fully-recovered man.” Then Bonazzi contradicts himself, telling us that the doctors released him, even though they didn’t believe him, upon Griffin’s assurance that he would see a civilian eye specialist, although he had just finished telling us that Griffin had successfully concealed his vision problems from the military doctors. Bonazzi also leaves the

impression that they released him from the Army by telling us in the very next sentence that, “Griffin’s separation papers were dated December 15, 1945, and he was shipped out to San Francisco.” No one there in the South Pacific would have had the authority, least of all military doctors, to release him from military service before the appointed time.

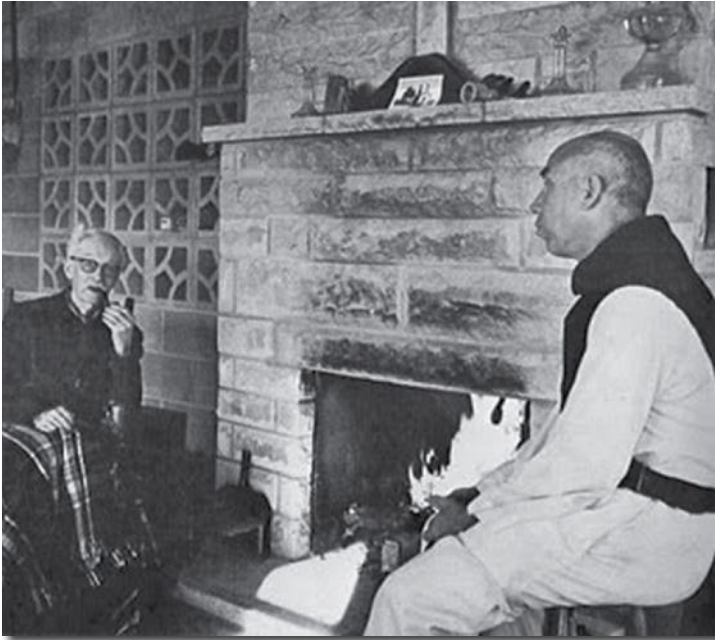
Griffin’s subsequent actions, per Bonazzi, are even more incredible. But first we must note another contradiction. “He lived most of 1945 at his parents’ home in Fort Worth,” he tells us in the very next paragraph. Something’s wrong here. That was supposedly the year of all his major military action in the Pacific, and Bonazzi just got through telling us that Griffin, “shipped out” from there in the middle of the last month of 1945. He also tells us that Griffin never claimed the medals that he had earned nor filed for any service benefits, having rejected war, and declaring himself to be a pacifist.

The locals in the Fort Worth area did not take very kindly to Griffin's portrayal of white Southerners.

Pacifist or not, these actions make absolutely no sense for a war-wounded veteran who might be facing a lifetime of disability as a result. Besides the Veterans’ Administration hospital attention that he supposedly passed up on, Griffin also eschewed the very generous education benefits of the GI Bill, which went into effect in 1944. His studies in France had been interrupted by the war. His widow’s article for the Texas State Historical Association notwithstanding, he was not even close to having a college degree and his career prospects would appear to have been bleak, especially if he was losing his sight. According to Griffin’s authorized biographer, Bonazzi, though, he decided to return to France to study the Gregorian chant at a Benedictine monastery there, relying completely upon the generosity of his parents, who were not exactly wealthy.

These seem to be very much the actions of a person who was little concerned about where his next dollar was coming from. The impression that this is someone whose career skids had been greased for him by powerful people beyond his family is greatly enhanced by the over-the-top article that appeared in his home-

Jacques Maritain Visits Thomas Merton, 1966



town newspaper a month before the publication of his first novel in 1952. Right off the bat they tell us, “*The New York Times* had declared, ‘...It’s our bet that the book out of Texas that will make history this fall is one by a young, blind war veteran, John Howard Griffin, whose novel, ‘*The Devil Rides Outside*,’ has mightily impressed everyone who has seen advance proofs.” They tell us that no less a personage than the New York critic Clifton Fadiman writing in the Book-of-the-Month Club News called it, “A staggering novel...Griffin’s intense psychological analyses...recall Dostoyevsky or Pascal. The pure doctrine of asceticism has rarely been so effectively demonstrated in 20th Century fiction. Griffin’s baroque excesses are easy to ridicule, but—at least to this reviewer—they seem the excesses of an intense temperament and possibly of a notable literary talent.”¹⁰

After writing that four motion picture companies had requested copies of the manuscript to consider bidding on the rights to make a movie of it, the article continues in this gushing tone for column after column.

Despite the best efforts of the national tub thumpers, nothing much came of the book. No movie was made of it, and to anyone who has taken the time to read it, it’s easy to see why. The book is wordy in the extreme, lacks dramatic tension, and seems to go nowhere. Usually, in the case of books written in the first person as this one is, the reader naturally comes

to like the narrator and to identify with him. It’s difficult in this instance. The young American man who first lives at the monastery for a few cold and miserable months while studying manuscripts and observing the daily routine comes across as rather shallow and sex obsessed. At the first opportunity, he has a liaison with a local matron, and because he later boasted about it, the scandal got around the small town and the talk forced her to leave the community. Later, when she surprisingly returns to seek medical attention, he fears that it is because she is pregnant, so we surmise that the sex they had was unprotected. He seems almost relieved to learn that her medical condition turns out to be terminal cancer. In another instance, when he is asked to escort to the train station a flirtatious Parisian woman nearer his own age with whom a couple of the local ladies have set him up for a group dinner, he arranges for the town’s licentious and talkative cab driver to drive them around while he has sex with her in the back seat.¹¹

Griffin's work in the village which involved befriending grand Chief John Vutha, is classic intelligence work.

The central character of the book, other than the narrator, is a rather haughty and complicated upper-class woman who is his hostess after he escapes the physical ordeal of the unheated monastery. Her concerns—indeed her obsessions—seem to be so uniquely Catholic and small-town French that one must wonder what anyone could have possibly seen in the manuscript that could interest a general American movie audience for more than a minute.

In short, there seemed to have been something very artificial about the big build-up that *The Devil Rides Outside* was given. Griffin’s second novel, *Nuni*, based upon his Solomon Islands experience, was even more boring, and although the major publisher Houghton Mifflin put it out, it went nowhere. Like his first novel, *Nuni* is semi-autobiographical, but the protagonist, the sole survivor of an airplane crash living among primitive South Sea islanders, doesn’t actually marry

one of the native women as Griffin did, but he does purchase a pre-pubescent girl.¹² Griffin was 32 years old when he began to tutor his future wife, his mother's prize piano student Elizabeth Ann Holland, who was 17 at the time.

GRIFFIN'S CLAIM TO FAME

Griffin's big splash came after he had miraculously regained his sight in early 1957. Supposedly, the strong medication that he had been given to clear up his malaria-induced paralysis had had the delayed beneficial side effect of clearing up the artery blockage that was responsible for his blindness.¹³

In his famous book, *Black Like Me*, Griffin described how, in 1959, he met with his "old friend," George Levitan, the owner of *Sepia* and convinced him to fund a daring project in which Griffin would darken his skin with drugs, dyes, and a sunlamp. He would then travel for four weeks in the South as a "black man" to experience life as a Negro. In 1960, *Sepia* published the series of seven articles about Griffin's "experience." That series would eventually elevate Griffin's status to that of a civil rights hero.

CBS Television got wind early of the series and on March 23, 1960, broadcast an interview of Griffin with the newsman Mike Wallace. The program aired at the same time as Griffin's first installment in *Sepia*, (April 1960) was available at newsstands. Griffin became an instant celebrity and interviews with others soon followed, including Dave Garroway, the original host and anchor of the NBC Today Show. The first three articles were titled, "Life as a Negro: Journey into Shame." The seventh and last installment was titled, "White Man Turned Negro Is Praised and Damned."

Once the national opinion molding apparatus declares something to be reality, all critical thinking is suspended. From the moment Griffin's story was anointed by the national press, it was accepted as true and, before long, the book, *Black Like Me*, became assigned reading in school classrooms nationwide.

Americans have never questioned the veracity of Griffin's *Black Like Me* story. It is hard to verify because he names hardly anyone. One person he *does* name in the book is Sterling Williams. Williams was a Black shoeshine man in New Orleans who allegedly gave Griffin advice on how to change into being a Negro. The dermatologist who gave Griffin dangerous medications that could have harmed his health was

anonymous. During the days it took for Griffin to transform into a Black man in New Orleans he stayed at the home of an anonymous friend. These people and others who took part in the noble experiment to advance civil rights never received any credit.

Griffin's description of his transition into a Negro is reminiscent of Lon Chaney, Jr., in his role as Larry Talbot, *The Wolf Man*. Griffin said that when he looked at himself in the mirror for the first time, what he saw was a total stranger, an angry looking "very dark Negro" who resembled the previous John Howard Griffin "in no way."¹⁴

For Griffin to state it hardly makes it true. How could he "in no way" resemble himself in a mirror? The truth is that he would have looked like his old self in every way except for the color of his skin and his shaved head. Facial recognition software would have identified him with no trouble. Griffin's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth would have still looked the same. The shape of his head, chin, cheeks, eyebrows, and forehead wouldn't change. It is hardly credible for Griffin to say that he did not resemble himself in any way by simply darkening his skin and shaving his head.

Griffin was able to get away with his story because he got so much help in selling it by the national molders of public opinion. In the beginning, his story about the process to become a black man took four days using medication and a sunlamp. Later in his book, he could change from white to black almost instantly. All it took was an isolated place, in a dark alley or behind a bush, damp sponge, cleansing cream, and some Kleenex for making himself white again and just dye for making himself black. He could be a Negro by day and a white man by night.¹⁵

Griffin could change his appearance as if he were Clark Kent changing into Superman in a telephone booth. One might think that in applying and removing dyes while in an alley or in some roadside brush Griffin might miss a spot on his neck or behind his ear. What originally took Griffin days with a sunlamp, suddenly could be done in minutes with some dye, cleansing cream and tissues. Could Griffin emerge from an alley or some bushes in blackface and pass himself off as a black man? But people believed Griffin because CBS, NBC, *The New York Times*, and all the other voices of authority said that it was true.

The writing of *Black Like Me* is so different from the writing in the two novels that one is tempted to believe that it is not the work of the same person.



The people come across as cardboard characters, with the whites universally blinded by their racial prejudice, without redeeming qualities, and the Negroes painted as the purest blameless victims. But then, consider who his initial audience was, the average reader of *Sepia*. The writer of that series could hardly have been thinking of producing a work of art meant for sophisticated readers. Furthermore, it could hardly be clearer that *Black Like Me* was intended to be a political polemic.

Hardly surprisingly, although Griffin's *opus* was heavily promoted and well-received in most of the country, the locals in the Fort Worth area did not take very kindly to Griffin's portrayal of white Southerners. In the late summer of 1960, Bonazzi tells us, Griffin moved his young family and elderly parents to Morelia, Mexico, "to avoid the racist threats."

By Bonazzi's account, Griffin, as an American, was a passive victim of the anti-American sentiment that swept over Mexico in the wake of the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, although he does say that the U.S. Embassy did ask him to report on the political activity in his area. The previously cited *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* obituary paints a somewhat different picture, and the relevant passage bears repeating in its entirety:

When Communist student riots shook Mexico in 1961, Griffin was asked by the American Embassy there to research the incidents in Mexico, where he had lived since writing *Black Like Me*. He learned the riots were planned and financed by the Russian Embassy there. He published the names of the embassy officials, the amounts they paid

students, the hotels where they stayed, and the license number of their car.

As a result of the attacks on his family resulting from his work, Griffin and his family returned to the United States.¹⁶ It goes without saying that such actions by a private American citizen, performed presumably without remuneration, would have been highly unusual.

As much as Griffin and Merton would seem to have had in common, we can see from this brief profile of Griffin that there was one very important difference between them. In our previous book we wrote:

Merton's peace activities alone probably would not have targeted him for assassination. The combination of being a moral authority and critical of the news media in a way that was far ahead of his time made Merton a genuine threat. More than anything else, it was Merton's love of

The false story about Elvis Presley in *Sepia* deceived Black readers and promoted racial unrest.

the truth that brought him into confrontation with powerful enemies.¹⁷

As we have seen, Griffin's entire career was very closely aligned with the most powerful elements of the society, particularly those engaged in the molding of American public opinion. Griffin even tells us that as he embarked upon his big venture as a fake Black man in the Deep South, he had a lunch meeting with three FBI men from the Dallas office.¹⁸ Even though, as his biographer Bonazzi wrote, Griffin left military service as a pacifist, we have seen nothing in his writing, public or private, taking issue with the country's prosecution of the very unpopular Vietnam War.

We have also found that when it comes to important facts about Griffin's life, even regarding how and when he lost his sight and how he regained it, the truth seems to be quite elusive. There are competing stories for both strange phenomena.¹⁹ We should ex-

pect the most comprehensive and recent source of information on Griffin's life, that is, the work of his biographer Bonazzi, to be the most reliable, but in what we have examined so far, that doesn't seem to be the case. It gets a lot worse for Bonazzi when we compare his account of Griffin's military experience with the official Army Separation Report.

We have noted that Bonazzi's account of Griffin's military career is extremely sketchy. We learn from Bonazzi only that Griffin spent most of his time in the Pacific in the Solomon Islands, first at Guadalcanal, then for a year on the island of Nuni among the primitive natives, and then was sent west to the island of Morotai in Indonesia where he suffered the serious concussion from the Japanese bombing that eventually resulted in his blindness.

Here is what we find in the "Battles and Campaigns" block of his discharge report: Bismarck-Archipelago, Central Pacific, Eastern Mandates, New Guinea, Northern Solomons, Luzon, Western Pacific, Air Combat Borneo. The Solomons are there, but lots of other places are there as well. Morotai, where Griffin supposedly suffered his blindness-inducing concussion, isn't listed. Although in Indonesia, it was a staging area for the assault on the Philippines, so it could possibly be subsumed under Luzon as part of that campaign, though.

We had observed that it seemed odd for Griffin to have been shipped so far away from the Solomons near the end of the war, but Borneo and Luzon, in the Philippines are even farther. We just don't know when he was there and what he was doing there. For a mere radio operator or mechanic, it looks like he really got around, and Bonazzi gives us no clue as to what he might have been doing in those places.

Bonazzi does state quite confidently that Griffin spent 39 months overseas.²⁰ Doing the subtraction on his arrival and departure dates for his overseas service, we come up with just a few days more than 32 months. He says that Griffin spent four years in the Army, but his entry date was March 9, 1942, and his discharge date was October 27, 1945. That comes to a little more than three years and seven months. And remember, Bonazzi stated that Griffin's separation papers said he left the Army on December 15, 1945. He is not so specific about Griffin's entry into the Army except to report erroneously that it was in 1941. We might wonder about what Griffin might have been up to in that unaccounted for time between his re-

turn from France and his entry into military service. Bonazzi strongly implies that Griffin mustered out of the Army in San Francisco, but we see from his separation papers that it was at Fort Sam Houston, which is in San Antonio.

The really big news in the separation papers might well be in that box #34, "WOUNDS RECEIVED IN ACTION." The entry says "None." Similarly, in #33, DECORATIONS AND CITATIONS, there is no Purple Heart. One can do the research online and discover that there is some controversy as to whether a concussion qualifies a soldier for a Purple Heart, but one would think that a concussion of the severity described by Bonazzi in his Griffin biography would certainly have measured up. As we have seen, though, several different explanations have been offered as to what caused the concussion or concussions (as Griffin wrote) that brought on the blindness, and even without the official military records, Bonazzi's seems the least likely. It might not be the least likely explanation for what caused the blindness, though. The BBC reported in 2009 that "illness struck him blind" and a 2021 YouTube presentation says in an authoritative voice that "shrapnel caused him to go temporarily blind."²¹

THE PENN JONES CONNECTION

Chapter 18 of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton* is entitled, "Penn Jones: Covert Agent?" Griffin, in his role as Merton's chosen biographer, sent his friend and near neighbor in Texas, Penn Jones, Jr., to look into the matter of Merton's death. We concluded our chapter this way:

As noted, we have found no evidence that Jones ever did anything in the wake of Merton's death that is worthy of being called any sort of an investigation. There is only the unwarranted inference made by Robert Bonazzi and second hand by James Douglass that if Jones, the JFK researcher, found no evidence of murder that alone "proves" that Merton's death was an accident.

Few people ever suspect journalists would act as agents to cover-up state-sponsored secret assassinations. One of the few people who was astute enough in 1968 to have suspected such things would have been Thomas Merton.²²

In his review of our book, the noted scholar of the JFK assassination, Phillip F. Nelson, told the public a lot more about Penn Jones:

The person Jones was arguably closest to was Gary Mack (born Lawrence Alan Dunkel) who had started out as conspiracy theorist but eventually became a “debunker” of some theories, finally settling in as a “conspiracy-light” advocate who believed that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin but believed that he did not act alone. Yet, after that conversion, he would spend the rest of his life refuting any and all suggestions of evidence pointing toward conspiracy. That movement was cemented when he joined the staff of the Sixth Floor Museum, located in the Texas School Book Depository Building in the early 1990s, eventually becoming the director of the museum.

Among Penn Jones’ other close friends or associates were Hugh Aynesworth, a Dallas reporter and strong supporter of the Warren Commission’s most ludicrous findings, and many other similarly-deluded researchers including Dave Perry, also a close associate of Gary Mack, who tried, unconvincingly, to discredit Dr. Charles Crenshaw’s testimony about having received

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a telephone call from the new president Lyndon Johnson while attempting to save Lee Harvey Oswald’s life. Jones was also similarly connected to Bud Fensterwald, who many truth-seeking researchers believe was a CIA operative. Another associate of Jones was Gordon McLendon, a Dallas-based wealthy owner of major radio stations in some of the largest cities in the country, whom many researchers have connected to CIA operative David Atlee Phillips and wealthy oilman (and suspected financier behind JFK’s assassination) Clint Murchison and Bobby Baker, Lyndon Johnson’s conduit to Mafiosi throughout the country. McLendon had also known and associated with Jack Ruby.

Moreover, Jones was also very closely connected to Mary Ferrell, whom researcher Harrison Edward Livingstone described at length in his 1993 book *Killing the Truth: Deceit and Deception in the JFK Case*. Livingstone summarized his opinions (with which many other long-time researchers agree) by calling her the “gatekeeper” and the head of a “sophisticated private intelligence operation ... a *de facto* secret society in Texas, run by powerful people there, to protect the

name and reputation of Texas and to protect those who were involved in the murder of John Kennedy.” (Livingstone, pp. 386–396).²³

Griffin wrote the preface to Volume I of Jones’s early Kennedy assassination book *Forgive My Grief*. In that preface we find the following passage:

Why had they been so eager to drop all of the loose ends, to declare within hours of his death that Oswald was guilty, guilty alone; and then slammed the doors on the historic tragedy?

One investigates the simplest crime far more profoundly than that.²⁴

And why, we might wonder, was Griffin so eager to tell the world that his “friend,” Thomas Merton had died from accidental electrocution—the conclusion of the early AP report based only on anonymous “Catholic sources”—when he was in possession of evidence that so clearly contradicted that conclusion? The answer to that question might

best be found by examining how it was that they became friends.

In October of 1961, Merton’s essay “The Root of War” was published in *The Catholic Worker*. The essay

gained Merton the attention of a lot of people, including the activist priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan. During the following year Merton wrote one hundred letters opposing nuclear war. Merton felt it was the duty of Christians to oppose war. The intelligence community would almost certainly have taken note.

Griffin, who was getting lots of publicity as the author of *Black Like Me*, first visited the abbey as he put it, “to spend a few days in a Trappist silence” in 1962. According to Griffin, some of the monks suggested that he meet Thomas Merton, and they met briefly for a few minutes. Griffin wrote that at the time that he met Merton, they “had read one another’s books.”²⁵ Merton confirmed that he read *Black Like Me*, in March of 1962.²⁶ It is interesting that Griffin seems to go almost out of his way to make it appear that the fact that Thomas Merton happened to be living at the abbey, more than 800 miles from his own home, where he had chosen to spend his silent time was little more than a coincidence. He would have us believe that he was content upon that first visit only to meet and talk with Abbot James Fox.

Merton Celebrating Mass for Jacques Maritain



In 1963, Griffin wrote Abbot Fox and asked permission to begin “a photographic archive of Merton’s life and activities,” explaining that he had already done that on a number of people, from the unknown to the famous, including in the latter group the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain and the Belgian Nobel Peace Prize winner Dominique Pire. To his considerable surprise, Griffin reports, not only did Fox agree to it, but he asked Griffin to take photographs of Merton that could be used for publicity, including Merton’s “official” portrait.²⁷ Griffin eventually bought Merton a camera and cultivated his interest in photography. More than their common American, French background and social and political interests, or even Griffin’s interest in the Catholic monastic life and the fact that they were both converts to Catholicism, photography became the big link between them.²⁸

We might wonder how Griffin became such a skilled photographer. The biographer Bonazzi provides more questions than answers. In his forward to Griffin’s *Follow the Ecstasy* he simply states that Griffin was both a professional photographer and musicologist, famous for his portraits of a number of notable people.²⁹ We admit that it is speculation on our part, but his photographic skills might have been a part of specialized military training. In support of this possibility, we offer the following passage from a recent book by the son of another WW II veteran who worked in the same South Pacific theater of operations as Griffin:

We have seen how Tom [O’Loughlin] kept two kinds of photos from the war; a set printed on thin paper and probably done by an official ship’s photographer, and some much nicer prints, which may have come from a camera Tom had, or at least had the use of, during the Nashville’s cruises, photos he would have had printed in Sydney or elsewhere.

We also know that Tom had attended Bomb Disposal School in Southeast Washington, D.C., before graduating from Midshipmen’s school at Columbia. It is possible that he also received additional training, which was connected to intelligence. The Naval Photographic Laboratory was within walking distance of the DC Fire Academy where Tom trained. MacArthur and other commanders needed photographic interpretation experts. Tom would be assigned to the Seventh Fleet where aerial photography would become crucial in preparing for landings on enemy held islands.

A second indication is found on Tom’s separation affidavit when answering the question, what would be the most appropriate assignment would you be re-activated in a national mobilization? He answered 1. Afloat: Officer on a Cruiser or 2. Ashore: Intelligence officer.³⁰

If Griffin’s photographic skills had a similar origin it would explain all those different places he turned up during his period of service and much else, and it would be just the sort of thing that Bonazzi would have wanted to avoid mentioning.

The plot thickens with the “Notes on Photography” section of the 2009 posthumously published Griffin book that Bonazzi edited.³¹ There, Griffin tells us that his interest in photography greatly intensified just at the time in 1947 when he was going blind, aiming his camera based upon sound alone, and even continuing to practice the art to a degree even after he had gone completely blind, as unbelievable as that might be. Perhaps the most telling part of that section, though, is when he informs us that his interest in photography began when he was the subject of stories (plural) by military magazines or was photographed for articles by other magazines. He mentions Jim Hansen of *Look* and Shel Hershorn of *Life* as two photographers who had been generous with their assistance. We can gather that the Hershorn encounter came from a series of 1958 articles about Griffin by *Life* alluded to in a frontispiece Griffin family photograph by Hershorn. Since this was even before Griffin’s Deep South adventure that resulted in the *Sepia* series that became

Black Like Me, this outsized interest in Griffin suggests as does the press promotion of his books that there was more to Griffin than meets the eye. That Griffin should have been the subject of military magazine articles only adds to the mystery surrounding the man. At the very least, it suggests a longtime coziness with the same molders of public opinion who were in the forefront of the planting of the “accidental electrocution” explanation for Merton’s death.

From our review of John Howard Griffin’s career, and particularly from his performance during the period that he was Thomas Merton’s authorized biographer, which we flesh out in detail in *Thomas Merton’s Betrayers*, we find it difficult to escape the conclusion

Tom would be assigned to the Seventh Fleet where aerial photography would become crucial in preparing for landings on enemy held islands.

that Griffin’s friendship with Merton was an assignment.

ENDNOTES

- 1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_LeJfn_qW0.
- 2 Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi, Texas State Historical Association, January 1, 1995, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/griffin-john-howard>. From the account of Robert Bonazzi, his biographer and later Griffin’s widow’s husband these educational claims are great exaggerations. He tells us that Griffin “audited literature classes at the University of Poitiers and attended the École de Médecine de Tours in 1938.” He would have been only 18 years old at the time. He says nothing about any study at or certificates from the Conservatoire de Fontainebleau. See Bonazzi’s *Reluctant Activist: The Spiritual Life and Art of John Howard Griffin*, TCU Press, 2018, p. 39.
- 3 Bonazzi, p. 74.
- 4 Bonazzi, pp. 43-44. Curiously, other accounts say his wartime concussion was suffered in an “accidental bomb explosion.” See William Jolesch, AP writer, “Blind Novelist Watches Supreme Court Session,” *The Herald Sun* (Durham, NC), October 21, 1956. Another AP story without a byline is more specific about the supposed accident, saying, “He suffered a concussion when a B24, loaded with bombs, exploded.” “Once Sightless Author Seeing World with Awe,” *The Pomona (CA) Progress Bulletin*, January 11, 1957. In still another

account, the B24 is there, but it’s the airplane’s crash landing that caused Griffin’s injury leading to his loss of sight. See Irvin Farman, “Mansfield Veteran’s First Novel Attracting Widespread Response,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 12, 1952. A 1980 obituary says he was injured in an “air accident” and then again when the hospital in which he was recuperating was bombed. See Jordan Sollitto, “Author’s Journey Tested Racial Climate,” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1980. In his own account, Griffin wrote only that “bomb concussions (plural) had damaged my vision.” “Now I Can See,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, May 19, 1957.

- 5 His widow dates the commencement of his total blindness, however, to 1946. See Griffin-Bonazzi, Texas State Historical Association. But Griffin still had some vision in the spring of 1947 according to his own *San Francisco Examiner* series and to the biographer Bonazzi, p. 61. To show how slippery the facts about Griffin’s blindness can be, the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas that houses many of Griffin’s documents, says that the blow to the head that he suffered in the war caused him to be “struck blind while walking down the street one day in France.” <https://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingaid.cfm?eadid=00050&kw=john%20howard%20griffin>.
- 6 Griffin-Bonazzi, Texas State Historical Association.
- 7 Bonazzi, p. 91.
- 8 Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi.
- 9 Justice Payne Publishing, 2017.
- 10 Irvin Farman, “Mansfield Veteran’s First Novel Attracting Widespread Response,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 12, 1952.
- 11 Like the author himself, his first-person character is a chain smoker, as we gather from the frequent mention of his enjoyment of or craving for cigarettes, but at least Griffin doesn’t have him lighting up after his backseat conquest. The character, also like Griffin, has a relapse from a previous bout with malaria. Although the story is derived from Griffin’s experience at the monastery in 1947, the young man has no problem with his eyesight, though.
- 12 Griffin-Bonazzi tells us in her Texas Historical Association article that the Vatican gave him permission to marry a second time. We have not seen the question addressed as to whether that second marriage was legal in the eyes of Texas law or if they even knew of the

existence of that other wife. Apparently, Griffin simply abandoned her.

13 Ernest Sharpe, Jr., "The Man Who Changed His Skin," *American Heritage*, February 1989. <https://www.americanheritage.com/man-who-changed-his-skin#5>. Curiously, in his biography of Griffin, Bonazzi makes no mention of this medical explanation of the sight restoration. He tells us only that after the first glimmering of sight return an unnamed specialist prescribed a blood-circulation stimulant, but without any particularly hopeful prognosis, since the cause of the initial loss of sight was unknown. Bonazzi does tell us that the miraculous return of Griffin's sight was covered by the national press, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the AP and Griffin fulfilled other requests to write about it himself. Bonazzi, pp. 109-110. Further complicating the story of Griffin's sight restoration, one Griffin obituary suggested that it resulted from "a series of treatments to relieve scar tissue from the nerves of his brain" in 1956. That article also said that Griffin's diabetes was a contributor to his blindness. See Donna Darovich and Doug Clarke, "John Griffin FW Author Dead at 60," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 9, 1980.

14 *Black Like Me*, New American Library, 2003, p. 10. *Black Like Me* was first published by Houghton Mifflin in 1960. This and subsequent page references are to the New American Library version.

15 *Black Like Me*, p. 126.

16 Darovich and Clarke. Bonazzi went a bit farther in describing Griffin's cooperation with the U.S. authorities in tying the agitators to Soviet agents in the 2009 book that he edited, *Available Light: Exile in Mexico: Essays and Photographs of John Howard Griffin* (Wings Press), than he did in his 2018 biography. In that account as with the obituary, Griffin's sleuthing skills come across as quite extraordinary for a mere civilian.

17 Hugh Turley and David Martin, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*, p. 215. For a survey of Merton's critical writing on the American press, see David Martin, "Is the American Press the Enemy of the People?," January 18, 2018. <https://www.dcdave.com/article5/180118.htm>.

18 *Black Like Me*, p. 4. That FBI Dallas office would play a crucial role in "investigating" the assassination of President John F. Kennedy some four years later. In contrast to Griffin, Merton was under surveillance by the FBI and by the CIA. See Robert Grip, "The Merton Files: Washington Watches the Monk," *The Merton*

Seasonal, Vol. 11, Winter 1986.

19 It is also of some interest that in most of the photographs we have seen of Griffin during his blindness period he is wearing what we can best describe as opaque welding goggles. They would appear to turn even one with 20/20 vision into a sightless person.

20 In *Available Light: Exile in Mexico*, Bonazzi wrote that it was three years and that he was wounded. p. 45.

21 Kevin Connolly, "Exposing the Colour of Prejudice," October 25, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8318628.stm>; Yesterday in History, "What Happened When a White Man Became Black in Mid-20th Century America," December 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfcBxGpuBhY>.

22 Turley and Martin, p. 242.

23 Nelson, "The Mysterious Death of Thomas Merton," March 22, 2018, <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2018/03/phillip-f-nelson/the-mysterious-death-of-thomas-merton/>.

24 Penn Jones, Jr., *Forgive My Grief, Volume I: A Critical Review of the Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, Midlothian Mirror, Inc., 1966, unnumbered preface page, https://archive.org/details/ForgiveMyGriefPennJonesJr/Forgive_My_Grief_01/.

25 John Howard Griffin (Robert Bonazzi, editor), *Follow the Ecstasy: The Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton*, Orbis Books, 1993, p. 1. The year of the first visit comes from Bonazzi, *Follow the Ecstasy*, p. 263.

26 Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, March 24, 1962.

27 Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin, *Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970, p. 36.

28 Merton's father, who was from New Zealand, and mother, who was from the United States, had met in art school in Paris. Merton was born and spent most of his formative years in France, later going to a boarding school in England before going one year to Cambridge University and then completing his education at Columbia University.

29 *Follow the Ecstasy*, p. viii.

30 John O'Loughlin, *McDuff Lives! The Life and Untimely Death of Thomas F. O'Loughlin, Jr.*, Screaming Ospreys.com, 2021, pp. 30-31.

31 *Available Light: Exile in Mexico*, pp. 103-109.