

An Enemy of the Thomas Merton Society

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Introduction

ICN continues its series on the death facts of Thomas Merton.

(See editorial page 4).

This article is excerpted for space reasons. (See the ICN website for the full text.)

I still remember vividly my excitement a half century ago when I discovered Henrik Ibsen's great play, *An Enemy of the People*, in a collection of Ibsen's complete works that I had bought the year of my graduation from college. I had never before encountered such a great depiction of one of the major shortcomings of the human race, our tendency to reject the truth when strong vested interests are tied up in falsehood, and there it was, condensed into dramatic form that one could take in in a little more than an hour.

In a nutshell, the principal protagonist, Thomas Stockmann, a medical doctor in a small Norwegian town, through his research has discovered that beyond a shadow of a doubt the cause of a series of mysterious deaths that have chilled the town's tourist economy is pollution of the water supply by the other pillar of the town's economy, a tannery.

He really has it down to a scientific certainty, and he can hardly wait to share his findings with everyone. Understandably, he regards himself as a hero for what he has found and thinks that his fellow townsmen will see him that way as well. Like a doctor performing at his best, he has correctly diagnosed the illness, the first necessary step for curing it.

But how wrong he turned out to be! Instead, his experience is captured by the title of the play, with Dr. Stockmann as the title character. He had learned too much for his own good. He was lucky not to have been tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail.

Another Disquieting Discovery

Now let us flash forward to 2018. Hugh Turley and I had discovered that the almost universally believed story that the great anti-war writer and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, died by accidental electrocution in December 1968 by a faulty fan that he touched upon emerging from a shower while at a conference in Thailand is almost certainly false.

Through research, we had learned that according to all the local documentation, the death certificate, the doctor's certificate, and the police report, the cause of death had been "heart failure" and that it had also been reported that way in the Thai news organs. The police—in at least what is purported to be their



report—had concluded that Merton was already dead when he fell into a fan in his bedroom in which a faulty cord "had been installed."

The police report described how Merton was found in his bedroom lying on his back, wearing only shorts, with the fan lying across his body. The stand of the floor fan that had left burns on his body had also left burn marks on the shorts. This description of the death scene is corroborated by a diagram drawn by one of the witnesses and, most importantly, by two photographs taken by another of the witnesses.

That scene as described virtually rules out any possibility that Merton was wet from a shower when he encountered the fan, and, in fact, the only mention of a shower in any contemporary account was in the statement by the best witness that he looked like he might have been getting ready to take a shower.

The only substantive difference between the observations—as opposed to the conclusions—of the witnesses and the police report is that the witnesses saw a bleeding wound in the back of Merton's head. The police made no mention of it.

No autopsy was performed, although the Thai authorities indicated, falsely, that one had been done "in accordance with law." In 1980, Merton's secretary at his home Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, Brother Patrick Hart, told the press, incredible as it may sound, that they had been told that if an autopsy had been done in Thailand, Thai law required that the deceased would have to be buried in Thailand.

The U.S. military had hastily taken possession of the body and moved it to a U.S. military hospital, where an autopsy could have been done, but one was not done there either or when the body was returned to Kentucky.

Meanwhile, what the American public was told, and therefore what they thought they knew, was simply what was reported by the Associated Press, that is that, according to anonymous "Catholic sources," Merton had been accidentally electrocuted by a faulty fan.

Doubtless the image that almost everyone conjured up in their minds was some squalid, run-down Third World place with faulty equipment everywhere and Merton had not exercised the proper caution when handling it.

In fact, the conference was at a fairly modern Red Cross retreat center in a suburb of Bangkok with lots of amenities. But who's ever heard of a household appliance killing anyone, in the Third World or elsewhere, except maybe in one of those rare instances where a plugged-in radio or hair dryer or some such falls into a bathtub? People might even have painted into the picture a bath or a shower in their minds to get that electricity-conducting water into it.

I imagine that hardly anyone noticed at the time that there was no mention of a bath or a shower in that early news report. There would not be such mention until almost five years later when Brother Patrick wrote in the postscript to the 1973 volume that he co-edited, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, that Merton was wet from having just taken a shower when he touched the faulty fan. As I wrote in my June 7, 2018, article, "Parade of Whoppers about Thomas Merton's Death", "Brother Patrick is the man who, in effect, added water to the Merton death recipe, and he did it almost five years after the event."

He also did it without a shred of evidence to support it, and he admitted to us in a telephone message that he had none, rather, he said, the weather was "steamy" and Merton "must have taken a shower."

But that was not how he had written it, and it was not long before a shower or a bath became part of the death picture as painted by virtually every "authority" on Thomas Merton's life, by every "expert," if you will, as noted in "Parade of Whoppers" and as one can see further sampled on our web site for the book that Hugh Turley and I wrote, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*.

The story of Thomas Merton having accidentally electrocuted himself while wet from a shower or bath had been, in effect, institutionalized through repetition rather than through evidence when we came out with the book in March of 2018.

There is lots more in the book that shows that there was never a trace of what one might call "analysis" behind

the seemingly confident assertions of Merton "experts" on how the man died, but what we have briefly presented here at least begins to tell the story.

The International Thomas Merton Society

On the eve of publication, we found ourselves in what one might call "Dr. Stockmann territory." Merton might not be as well known as two other violent death victims of questionable origin in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, but at least in one quarter he is very well known and admired. This is from page 2 of the book:

"The International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS), formed in 1987, has 46 chapters in the United States and there are 19 chapters and affiliated societies in other countries. The ITMS has four-day conferences on a biennial basis at various sites. Two of the first 13 conferences were in Canada; the rest were in the United States."

What a perfect natural audience for the book, we thought. How eager should they be to discover that the death of the man they admire was not the fluke, the almost ridiculous occurrence that we had all been led to believe it was all these years! A big reason why we expected our book to be well received by the ITMS is reflected in the following poem, which I thought up later, and in the book's title:

Thomas Merton's Martyrdom

They say his death was meaningless.

That's what they want us to swallow.

But in light of all the evidence,

Their argument rings hollow.

His life was full of purpose,

But we must to the world confide:

His words had no more meaning

Than the things for which he died.

Unreported in the book is the fact that the ITMS also puts out four publications a year called *The Merton Seasonal* as well as *The Merton Annual*. What perfect venues they would be, we thought, for getting out the word!

In fact, our book has been well received. One can see it from the customers' reviews on *Amazon* and particularly from a number of articles that have been written about it, noted at the book's web site. For a book that has received no publicity from the media, including the major Catholic media, sales have been good and steady.

Turley and Martin as Dr. Thomas Stockmann

From the ITMS, though, it has been the Dr. Stockmann treatment for us. To date, we know of only one

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review in a regular publication that one might characterize as negative. That was in the ITMS's Winter 2018 edition of *The Merton Seasonal*, its 50th anniversary volume on Merton's demise. One may gather something of its flavor by reading my response to it entitled, "Befuddled Juror in Thomas Merton Book Verdict." Another ITMS stalwart, Professor Greg Hillis, a Merton authority at Bellarmine University, panned our book to his Twitter followers. One can read my defense against his assault in "Professor Secretly Trashes Merton Book."

Our attempts to penetrate the pages of ITMS publications have, up to now, been rebuffed. We submitted "New Directions' Misdirection in Thomas Merton's Death" to *The Merton Annual*. (see ICN Winter 2018/19, page 7) We also submitted an article to *The Merton Seasonal* on the subject of the official Thai documents about Merton's death and did not even receive the courtesy of a response from the editor.

The requirements for presenting papers at the biennial meeting of the ITMS are, as is usually the case for such academic gatherings, somewhat less stringent than for publication in the limited space in journals. Consequently, we had high expectations for our presentation proposal for the ITMS's 16th meeting, which took place at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, this past June.

We followed the proposal requirements to the letter and submitted it well before the deadline. It was 264 words in length with the title, "The Epistemology of Thomas Merton's Death." The concluding sentence was, "We propose to examine how the false bath/shower story has persisted for fifty years."

How could people who claim to care about Thomas Merton not want to hear what the leading authorities on his death have to say? Our book was out, and even if they might have discovered something with which they think they could take issue, the occasion of our presentation of the paper would have presented the perfect opportunity for it. Our proposed paper, however, was rejected without explanation. We even followed up with a polite protest, but the rejection held firm.

Macbeth in California

As it turned out, though, our presence at the grand ITMS meeting was almost palpable. It took the form that one might compare to Banquo's ghost. The opening presidential address on June 27 by Mark C. Meade was a scant eight paragraphs in length. The title is taken from a quote from Merton, "The Reality of Personal Relationships Saves Everything," giving little clue as to what it is really about.

As it turns out, it's mainly about us and our book, and it borders on the

slandrous. In fact, our work, one gathers, is something from which the assorted scholars and other professed Merton admirers meeting there at "The Jesuit University in Silicon Valley" must be saved.

The title sentence of the sixth paragraph reads, "We are living through a time of low trust in institutions." That sets the stage for the key following paragraphs:

"In this atmosphere of low trust, there is a rebellion against the intellectual authority formerly vested in institutions. There is a distrust of the media and the scientific community. The average Google user is deemed an expert because information of all quality levels is so easily acquired.

"When we banish the experts, we fuel the flames of conspiracy. Most academic studies seem to conclude that conspiracies are not new and not particular to this point in history. Like the revolt against experts, no political party has a monopoly on conspiracy. Yet, given the troubles social media giants like Facebook have had in preventing the rapid spread and wide popularity of untruths in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I find it difficult to think this is not having a detrimental effect on our collective grip on reality.

"Though conspiracy theories have existed in Merton studies concerning his death from the beginning, we have witnessed the appearance of two books on the subject just since the last conference. I am all in favor of fact-finding in good faith and in working to seek the truth together responsibly. If the goal is a more accurate narrative of the events surrounding Merton's last day, I am supportive only if it does not serve to overshadow the overarching meaning of the 99.9 per cent of the rest of his life. However, if in the end, conclusive findings remain elusive while some writers employ variant details of the last day of Merton's life to disparage the reputation of trusted scholars of Merton's life, please count me out."

There you have it. We are nothing but "conspiracy" mongers whose main purpose, it seems, was to lessen the prestige of august authority figures in Mark C. Meade's world. Against all the evidence that we have assiduously collected, it is those "experts," those "trusted scholars," that Meade's listeners must continue comfortably to believe, never mind that they have, either knowingly or unknowingly, repeated for half a century what we have shown to be clear falsehoods.*

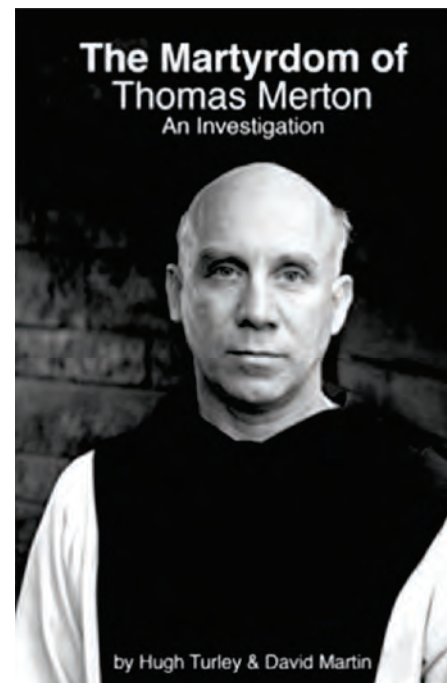
And consider the logic of Meade's penultimate sentence. Could he be suffering from Turley-Martin derangement syndrome? Why the big fear that what we have found about the nature of Merton's death might overshadow his life?

So, harking back to the title of the address, how, exactly, are the good members of the ITMS to be saved

from the irreverent and disrespectful likes of Turley and Martin? Continuing the metaphor, as we have pointed out, we politely knocked at the door but were told, in so many words, to go away. We have been eager from the very beginning to have a frank and open dialogue with any person in the International Thomas Merton Society that we can find, but, as you can see, we have been rebuffed at every turn.

The problem to which Meade fails to face up in his address is that any genuine dialogue with independent truth seekers like Turley and me about the cause of Thomas Merton's death is, in itself, a threat to his cozy community. The veritable face of that community graced the cover of the Summer 2019 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, Brother Patrick Hart, the fabricator of the shower story.

Brother Patrick died this past February at the age of 93, and the summer issue of the *Seasonal* was largely given over to eulogizing him. The only mention that we see of Merton's death in that issue comes in



Judge for yourself. ICN has a fresh supply of copies of the *Martyrdom of Thomas Merton* available to readers upon request. (email: pjjamie@telus.net. (See related editorial, Page 4.)

a fond recollection of a tour of Gethsemani Abbey conducted by Brother Patrick.

The narrator is Mary R. Somerville, former president of the American Library Association and a member of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust. The tour was conducted for a group of Somerville's Protestant friends, though she does not say when the tour took place. Brother Patrick gladly fielded questions from the group:

Then from a savvy questioner, "Did the CIA kill Merton?" Brother Patrick: "Merton was always a klutz, never to be trusted with machinery. He was accident prone. His death was just that, an accident."

Thus, Brother Patrick continued to sully Merton's memory while appearing to exalt him throughout

his own long life. Mark Meade similarly undercuts Merton's legacy with the first of our two quoted paragraphs in his presidential address. He adopts an almost reverential attitude toward our precious institutions like the news media. He seems almost to be pining for the day when CBS's Walter Cronkite was "the most trusted man in America" and almost everyone took the conclusions of the Warren Commission as gospel.

Nothing that Meade said in his address would have made Merton spin in his grave more than that. Consider the Merton quote with which I begin my essay, "Is the American Press the Enemy of the People?"

My "Seventeen Techniques for Truth Suppression," published 20 years ago, is aimed primarily at the national news media, but one can recognize Meade's use of nos. five, six, and seven is his speech. They are, respectively, "Call the skeptics names," "Impugn motives," and "Invoke authority." Elaborating further on number five, we say, "You must then carefully avoid fair and open debate with any of the people you have thus maligned."

When it comes down to choosing truth or "personal relationships," outgoing International Thomas Merton Society president, Mark C. Meade, unfortunately, has demonstrated a clear preference for the latter. In that, from our experience, he has been completely representative of the organization as a whole. It would not have surprised Henrik Ibsen.

*The other book to which Meade refers is more than likely Jerome Donovan's *Thomas Merton Meets the Unspeakable: Rendezvous in Thailand*. Meade's critical comments, though, one can easily see, are primarily directed at our work.

David Martin, October 31, 2019

ICN Books Available: *Victoria Demers to De Roo – 150 Years of Catholic History on Vancouver Island, 1997*; *The Lacey Land Saga – The 'Vindication' of Remi De Roo – Political Sea-change in the Catholic Church, 2010*, both by Patrick Jamieson

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