

BOOK REVIEWS

THE MARTYRDOM OF THOMAS MERTON: An Investigation by Hugh Turley and David Martin. McCabe Publishing, 2018. Reviewed by Anthony Donovan.

At a conference center outside Bangkok, Thailand, at about 1:50 pm on December 10th, 1968 Fr. François de Grunne was seen walking with Fr. Louis (Thomas Merton) toward their cottage. Fr. Celestine Say, one of two others also sharing the cottage, saw them in the distance and arrived ten or fifteen minutes later. It had been a good morning. Merton had just completed his primary speaking engagement for the conference and was feeling relaxed and upbeat. Fr. Say and Merton had just had lunch together. Everyone was heading to take some rest in the heat of the day before returning for questions and discussion later in the afternoon. Fr. Say, his room separated from Merton's by a thin wire mesh covered with cloth, heard nothing from Merton's room that afternoon. Fr. Say tried to rest but was kept awake by footsteps pacing in Fr. de Grunne's room directly above him, and the sounds of someone going up and down the staircase twice. Some two hours later, Fr. de Grunne suddenly asked Fr. Say to come and see. Something was wrong with Fr. Louis. Over the day and week that followed, Fr. de Grunne changed his story a number of times, and then returned to his monastery in Belgium, silent on this matter for the remainder of his life.

This edifying new book by Hugh Turley and David Martin does not pretend to be the final word, but bravely encourages a long overdue process to uncover further truth. The book does have some slight drawbacks, bringing in other murder mysteries of our time and making unclear correlations with Pope Francis, but they have unearthed central documents which were unpublicized for fifty-one years. Their new evidence suggests that Thomas Merton was murdered while bravely championing peace at the height of the US war in Vietnam.

After Fr. de Grunne, the next four witnesses rushing to Merton on the floor were Fr. Say, Sr. Edeltrud Weist, Fr. Egbert Donovan, and Fr. Odo Haas. They each felt immediately that something was not right with the scene. Merton's body was aligned perfectly straight as if carefully placed. They each expected an autopsy would clarify what happened. Fr. Say immediately took two photos of Merton before anything was moved. Sr. Weist, a medical doctor, described his body from foot to head in her deposition, noting a bleeding wound on the back of his head.

Merton was pronounced dead on his bedroom floor. Dr. Nakvachara signed the doctor's certificate with the official seal and signature of the US Embassy stating that Merton's body was brought to the hospital for autopsy. But that never happened. The US military came in the middle of the night and took this civilian's corpse.

The Thai Police made their report, which is reprinted in the book. The Thai press relayed in their papers the scoop from the police that Merton died of heart failure. Merton had no history of cardiac illness and in a film of him less than an hour before his death, he appears fit, lively, smiling and energetic.

The story of Merton being electrocuted by a fan while bathing is not in any of the official documents of 1968, not in the Thai police report, not in any of the witness statements and not in the US Embassy report. It first appeared in 1973, as told by Brother Patrick Hart. Author Hugh Turley conducted Brother Patrick during his investigation. Brother Patrick left a voice message admitting that he had no proof for the story.

The evidence revealed in this book shows that Merton's body was dry. He was wearing boxer shorts when found. There was no bathtub in the cottage. The shower was not in his room, where he was found, but in the vestibule between Fr. Say's and Merton's rooms, closer to Fr. Say's. There were no signs that he had used it, nor did Fr. Say ever

hear the shower in use.

The Conference Center was a modern facility and the Hitachi fans were new. Merton had been using the same fan for a couple of days prior without incident. The police report states that a defective cord was installed in the fan, and stops there. There is no further investigation as to why, when, or how it was installed or by whom. Hugh Turley and David Martin found that all the shrubs surrounding the cottage and covering Merton's ground floor windows, were ripped out the next morning, the soil was turned over and the cottage washed down.

Despite the requirement of Thai law, that an autopsy be performed, none was, nor in the US. And the investigation was far from thorough. The justification for this was offered later by scholars and the Abbey that it seemed unlikely that Merton was the victim of foul play. Those of us alive in 1968 might have more of a tendency to question this, knowing that Merton, a highly influential, well-known figure opposing the US war in Vietnam, was visiting others in Asia who were also promoters of peace. His presentation at the conference that morning was "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives." Merton was seeking common ground and greater understanding. He was building bridges. It may have been too much of a threat for the right wing of our Armed Forces and their allies in the region. Many thousands in that region were pulled out of their hamlets, accused of being communist sympathizers, interrogated, imprisoned, tortured and sometimes executed.

The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton reviews carefully the many contradictions of the official Thai and US Embassy statements. This is a tough, unwelcome, underpublicized, uphill struggle. The book is replete with names the public has not heard and documents we've never seen, most of which passed through the hands of Gesthemani Abbey soon after his death.

Thomas Merton challenged hate and war eloquently. He was one of our deepest

seekers, infectious teachers, inspired guides and a brave soldier of peace and truth-telling who confronted the press for promoting war. In Asia those last months of his life he was experiencing deep happiness and fulfillment seeing the oneness of God in all people. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and others said they felt they were in the presence of a master teacher. This book begins to cast away the darkness of a mysterious demise, so that one day we can refocus on the ecstatic universal wisdom that he so urgently and enthusiastically shared with all in those last weeks of life. ❖

ROBERT LAX: 33 Poems edited by Thomas Kellein. New Directions, New York, NY, 2019. Reviewed by Tom Cornell

If you love Robert Lax you will want to have this book. The front cover is a photograph, by Judith Emery, of his face, the face of a Hebrew prophet or sage. If you have yet to encounter Bob Lax, he's not for everybody. He is among the least appreciated English language poets of the twentieth century. His "The Circus of the Sun," an allegory of creation, has been called "perhaps the greatest English language poem of the century," (*The New York Times*). His other circus poems are his best. This little book, 199 pages, is, as the title indicates, thirty-three poems published over decades in various periodicals, including *The New Yorker*, where he was poetry editor, and *Jubilee*, where he was roving editor. There are also some papers found in Lax's home in Greece after his death, the raw material of future, yet unwritten poems, I speculate.

Robert Lax was an experimental, minimalist poet, increasingly so as he aged. His friends, James Laughlin of New Directions and Emil Antonucci of Journeyman Books published his work in this country, though he was probably better known in Austria and Germany, due to another friend, Bernhardt Moosbrugger, of Pendo Verlag publishing house in Zurich. Much of Lax's poetry is constructed of single words or even syllables stacked one upon another in columns. So few words and so many pages is not commercially tempting.

