

THOMAS MERTON:
PROPHECY
AND RENEWAL

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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THOMAS MERTON'S DEATH

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of his authorized biography in 1984, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Michael Mott's explanation of how Merton died has been treated as the standard reference. Yet his conclusions are highly equivocal. "What seems like the most likely reconstruction", he writes, "is that Merton came out of the shower either wearing a pair of drawers or naked". Hardly anything could be less likely than that one would emerge from a shower in his shorts, but Mott was probably forced to introduce that possibility out of fear that the death scene photograph – which we were able to locate, along with a companion photo – showing Merton in his shorts might become public. He takes further insurance against that possibility by falsely stating that the photograph was taken after the scene had been disturbed. That is only the beginning of the disingenuousness of Mott's "most likely reconstruction".

The state of knowledge of Thomas Merton's death can best be described as highly unsatisfactory. Michael Mott's 1984 authorized biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, has been taken as the last word on the subject. Everyone who has written about Merton's death since then – and there are many – has apparently accepted his explanation of how Merton was electrocuted by a defective fan, departing from his description on occasion only with their own embellishments, based solely upon imagination rather than new research.

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This is unfortunate, because Mott leaves a lot of loose ends in his section on the death, pp. 564-569. First, he quotes directly from the just-then revealed conclusion of the Thai police report, a document that only a few people had previously seen and of whose full contents few are even now aware:

However, the Investigating Officer questioned Dr. Luksana Narkvachara, whose views were that Reverend Thomas Merton died because of:

1. Heart failure.
2. And that the cause mentioned in 1. caused the dead priest to faint and collide with the stand fan located in the room. The fan had fallen onto the body of Reverend Thomas Merton. The head of the dead priest had hit the floor. There was a burn on the body's skin and on the underwear on the right side which was assumed to have been caused by electrical shock from the fan.

Therefore the cause of the death of Reverend Thomas Merton was as mentioned. There were no witnesses who might be suspected of causing the death. There is no reason to suspect criminal causes.

Mott softened the blow of that revelation by preceding it with a quote from the report that said that a "defective electric cord" had been installed inside the fan's stand that caused an "electrical leakage" sufficient to kill a person who touched the metal part, but that's not what the attending doctor said killed Merton, hence the "however".

"The police investigation had not inspired much confidence", writes Mott, and who could be surprised that it hadn't? "Many felt electrocution was deliberately played down to protect the reputation of the conference center. It may have been so".

What Mott has just told us, using nice language for it, is that the official investigation of Merton's death amounted to a cover-up. This is a very poor beginning for learning what the actual cause of death was. Then Mott provides us with only one possible motive for the cover-up, to protect the reputation of the local conference center. But that center was run by a large, powerful international organization, the Red Cross. It would sound like a big scandal if one were to say that there was a cover-up to protect the Red Cross, so Mott says essentially the same thing, but in different words.

But there is another big, powerful organization involved here. If a family has a member killed by a defective fan in a public facility, a product liability lawyer would advise the family to sue whoever might be responsible, and the deeper the pockets of the responsible party the better. That would not just be the Red

Cross, but it would be the maker of the fan. Mott doesn't say who that was, but according to several witnesses, the fan was made by Hitachi.

Now we're looking at a major scandal involving a big multinational corporation. Might the Thai authorities have performed their cover-up on behalf either the Red Cross or the Hitachi Corporation? Merton's home abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky was, in effect, his surviving family. One might well ask why the abbey did not bring suit for damages against either the Red Cross or Hitachi, or both. Does that mean that the abbey privately accepted the verdict that Merton actually died of natural causes and that they were willing to do so in the absence of an autopsy?

That's right. There was no autopsy, even though the official doctor's certificate stated, "a post-mortem examination has been done in accordance with the law". Mott offers a variety of weak excuses for the absence of an autopsy but says nothing about the statements by the Thai authorities that give the unmistakable impression that there was one. He also fails to tell us that the police report made no mention of the curious bleeding wound in the back of Merton's head. Mott, himself, does mention that injury, employing the passive voice: "Little attention seems to have been given to a wound on the back of Merton's head that had bled considerably. The obvious solution appears to be that it was caused when his head struck the floor".

The big story here, though, is that an investigating police force that Mott has virtually acknowledged engaged in a cover-up should pay absolutely no attention to the bleeding wound in the back of Merton's head. Merton fell upon a level floor. Mott notwithstanding, it's not the least bit obvious that the floor caused such a wound. How deep did the wound go? Did it reach the brain? If the wound were probed might one find a projectile of some sort? An examination on the spot – even without a full autopsy – might have provided an answer to some of these questions, but the Thai police failed even to acknowledge the wound's existence. At this point one must begin to ask if they conducted their cover-up on behalf of someone even bigger and more powerful than the International Red Cross or the Hitachi Corporation.

The police report also said nothing about Merton having been wet from a shower when he came into contact with the fan. Mott, on the other hand has this passage: "What seems the most likely reconstruction is that Merton came out of the shower either wearing a pair of drawers or naked. His feet may have been wet still from the shower".

Does that not also suggest that the police are covering up for those responsible for the faulty fan that killed Merton? At this point, readers may be surprised

to learn that it is the police and not Mott who are on the firmer ground. In fact, speaking of the loose ends in Mott's explanation of the event, it's really very hard to say what ground Mott is on. Notice that he doesn't even say for certain that Merton was wet from a shower, though he even leaves open the possibility that Merton donned his shorts while still wet from the shower, something that is even less likely than a Hitachi fan shocking someone to death.

The police, in this instance, had good reason to make no mention of Merton having taken a shower. That is because he didn't. He left lunch at the main building of the conference center at around 1:40 p.m. in the company of Father François de Grunne, O.S.B., of Belgium to take a break from the conference, which was to resume at 4:30. The cottage where they were staying was a 10 to 15 minute walk away. Father Celestine Say, O.S.B., from the Philippines, followed about five minutes behind them, and he could see them far ahead of him in conversation. By the time Say arrived at the cottage, de Grunne had gone upstairs to his room and Merton to his room on the first floor. Say's room was also on the first floor. John Moffitt, the poetry editor of the Jesuit *America* magazine was the fourth person in the cottage, with a room upstairs, but he had joined a group for a short sightseeing trip into Bangkok for the afternoon.

The doors with their frames for the private rooms seem to have been more or less permanent structures, but the walls were not. They were nothing but a wire mesh, with bed sheets hung next to them for privacy. Air could pass through, an important feature in the tropical climate with no air conditioning, and so, too, could sound. A shower room was accessible from the parlor between the two private rooms. The fan that was found lying on Merton was in his room, which was some distance from the shower.

Say said that he could even hear Merton when he was walking barefooted in his room, but from the time that he arrived at the cottage, he never heard a sound from Merton. He could even see that Merton was not lying in his bed, but thought that he might be reclining on the floor, either because it was cooler or for penance. Say was awake the whole time from when he arrived at the cottage shortly before 2:00 p.m. until de Grunne came downstairs and told him to come have a look into Merton's room at around 4:00 p.m. Say even took a shower himself when he was unable to take an intended nap because of the noise that de Grunne was making pacing up and down upstairs directly above him. At no time after his arrival at the cottage did Say hear or see Merton take a shower.

The testimony that de Grunne gave to the police was included with the police report when it was sent to the Gethsemani Abbey in 1969, but it seems to

have disappeared. De Grunne wrote several letters to Moffitt in that year, and he makes no mention of Merton having showered, either. The shower was absent from contemporary news reports, as well.

A few weeks after the conference, Sister Marie de la Croix, O.C.S.O., who was at the conference, prepared a 5-page report in French whose English title is "The Last Days of Thomas Merton". In that report she wrote that the first thing Merton did upon returning to the cottage was to take a shower, but then, she says, he took a nap before his encounter with the fan, so the shower would have been immaterial to the supposed electrocution. At any rate, she was not a witness, having been on that same excursion into Bangkok with Moffitt and was probably just repeating erroneous scuttlebutt.

One other early document makes mention of a shower. That is a letter sent on December 11, 1968, the day after the death, purportedly from "the six Trappist delegates at the Conference" to Abbot Flavian Burns at the Gethsemani Abbey. There were actually seven remaining Trappists in attendance at the conference after Merton's death. If there was ever such an actual signed letter, it has also disappeared. Whoever wrote the letter merely speculates, saying only that Merton might have taken a shower, but none of the Trappists would have been in any better position than Sister Marie de la Croix to testify to the fact since none of them were witnesses, either.

Mott is bad enough with his hedging and equivocating, but he is most unreliable when he is most definite. Right at the beginning of his narrative of what happened at the cottage he says, "At some time before three o'clock Father de Grunne heard what he thought was a cry and the sound of something falling. There were noises at all hours in the area around the cottage, but this sound seemed to come from below".

With this passage, he has planted in the mind of the reader that that was the moment of Merton's fatal encounter with the fan. On this point Mott seems to be close to agreement with the police report. "At 3:00 P.M., on the same day, Reverend De Grunne who stayed in an upper room over the scene, while walking into the bathroom, heard a loud noise coming from the lower story which sounded like a heavy object falling onto the floor", they say.

Notice that the cry is missing from the police report. Perhaps Mott got that from Father Say, who he implies failed to hear the noise because he was brushing his teeth at the time and the water was running.

Say did, indeed, report that de Grunne came down and asked him if he had heard a "shout", and Say was brushing his teeth at the time, but the time of his

experience is quite different. According to Say, the first thing he did upon returning to the cottage was to take off his habit and to go brush his teeth. It was at that moment, which would have been around 2:00 p.m. that de Grunne came down, knocked on the bathroom door, and asked Say if he had heard a shout, which Say said he had not. Say later reported in a letter that it would have been an easy matter for de Grunne to look into Merton's room and see his condition, but he did not. He simply went back upstairs and paced the floor.

What one would never gather from Mott, or from the police report, for that matter, is that de Grunne behaved a great deal more like a suspect than a reliable witness. It looks like he was inviting Say to make the discovery of Merton's body, but Say only noticed upon returning to his room that Merton was not lying in his bed, looking no further, out of respect for Merton's privacy.

De Grunne interrupted his almost two hours of pacing around, according to Say, to leave the cottage for a short time and then to come back. After coming down that third time at around 4:00 p.m., either to ask Merton to go for a swim or to ask him for the key to the cottage, depending upon which of the two mutually exclusive reasons de Grunne has given, he made his "discovery" and then invited Say to come look into Merton's room. Neither of de Grunne's reasons for going to Merton's room at that time is plausible. He had already gone out and come back into the cottage, either using the key to regain reentry or without needing a key for an unlocked outer door, and it was too late to go for a swim. The conference was set to resume at 4:30.

Say then saw Merton lying in his shorts on the floor of his room with the fan lying across him. The door was latched from inside (though later gaining entry without breaking the door proved relatively simple). De Grunne left toward the main building, ostensibly to go for help. Upon encountering two abbots, Fr. Odo Haas, O.S.B. and Fr. Egbert Donovan, O.S.B., his first words were to ask them if they had had a good swim. Even Mott thought this pleasantry odd, but he dismissed it on account of de Grunne's "nervousness". Say later wrote that de Grunne's manner generally had given him "the creeps". Donovan wrote that de Grunne told them that he had come down and discovered Merton because of the noise that he had heard. Now we have a third possible time for the crucial noises from down below that de Grunne claims to have heard.

In July of 1969, in a letter responding to John Moffitt, de Grunne took it all back. In that letter he said that whatever noises he might have heard must have been coming from the nearby neighborhood.

There is another source for the 3:00 p.m. time. An unsigned statement, purportedly to be from Fr. Haas, says, "We met Rev. Fr. Grunne [sic] and he told us that about 3 pm he heard a cry and the fall of a heavy object in or nearby the house. After some time he wanted to go look in the room where Fr. Merton was, off on the right".

There's the 3:00 p.m., but now we have a third reason for de Grunne to have come down and look into the room, and after a long, implausible delay, at that. Because it has a number of clear errors, however, we have concluded that this document cannot be authentic. Mott has seized upon the biggest error, though, apparently because it is essential for the lethal-fan argument. Haas, Donovan, and Say were the first people into Merton's room. The Haas statement says that when he tried to remove the fan from Merton's body, he got a strong electric shock and could not free himself from it until Say rushed to unplug it. Say reported, however that Haas recoiled from the shock and when asked, said that the shock was not too strong. Even the police report said that Haas "jerked away from the fan". For Mott that turned into Haas dramatically being "jerked sideways and held to the fan" until Say could unplug it.

Finally, the reader may have noticed that we say that the witnesses found Merton in his shorts. Say even photographed the scene. Mott, however, purposely neutralized the photographic evidence by writing that the photograph was taken after the scene had been disturbed and that the body by that time might have been dressed for modesty's sake. He had to have known that that was not true, because he had seen the same letters from Say that we have seen and he knew that Say's purpose in taking the photograph was precisely to preserve the death scene as the witnesses had seen it, because they thought it was so peculiar. Mott also fails to explain how there could have been a burn on the underwear – as he quotes from the police report – if the body had been found naked.

In summation, the widespread trust in Michael Mott's account of Thomas Merton's death has been very badly misplaced.

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