

Fr. Louis has performed a valuable service to his novices and to his readers – his detailed overview and insights into his own tradition are a considerable help. Patrick O’Connell’s meticulous editing of these conferences is a great gift. They reveal to us Cistercian origins and developments but even more, we hear them in Merton’s voice.

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The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation

Hugh Turley & David Martin

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In this book the authors claim that the generally accepted view that Merton died of accidental electrocution is totally false. They aim to show that this story was made up several years after the event, identifying four individuals as the primary promoters of this false narrative, this story being completely contradicted by the evidence which they examine in detail including official records, crime scene photographs never seen by the police in Thailand and the letters of witnesses; and they conclude that Merton was murdered, the most likely suspect in plotting his murder being the CIA.

This manages to be both a stimulating and frustrating book with some important material and evidence emerging in a comprehensive way, presented as never before, but combined with some rather circular and repetitive arguments and suggestions. An immense amount of research and hard work has clearly been undertaken by the two authors and they bring to the public domain, really for the first time, apparently suppressed facts and first-hand accounts of those involved at the time of Merton’s untimely death and in its aftermath. It would appear that in the course of researching the book, or perhaps even before, a narrative, which runs counter to the usual explanation of death by accident, has emerged for the authors. At times the new evidence they bring before us or the facts they discuss seem presented in such a way as to support the new narrative rather than letting them speak for themselves. Speculation

plays its part too and at times can seem rather wild — one witness ‘is strongly suspected’ of having been a victim of blackmail or even of being a participant in a CIA mind control programme as an explanation for his actions. At the last I was reminded of Johann Fichte completing Immanuel Kant’s dyad of Thesis and Antithesis with the need for Synthesis.

For decades the thesis of the cause of Merton’s death has been clear and simple: death by accident. Our present authors have presented, it seems to me, incontrovertible evidence that challenges that, and, to that end, sets out the opposite, a death that in fact was neither clear nor simple. But this antithesis is not the last word by any means — and it has been, and probably needed to be, presented in bald and stark ways both to gain attention and to gain traction against what has been the dominant narrative. What will be needed in due course, once the dust has settled, is a calmer and more objective look at the whole for some sort of more satisfactory synthesis to emerge. So perhaps I might summarise this book as comprising extensive and exhaustive research with much new material and fresh and important evidence that requires proper digestion and integration. It comes with a tightly argued polemic that is largely convincing on its own terms, but only on its own terms, and which at times is exhaustively repetitive and often insufficiently objective. But although the reader may well often be frustrated by the authors’ style and approach you will be rightly challenged and you won’t find yourself bored along the way.

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