

# The New Criterion

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## Murder in the cathedral

by *Stephen Schmalhofer*

**D**ecember 29, 2020 witnessed the eight-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

While enduring quarantines and shutdowns, we have suffered fool politicians and hypocritical experts. All alive could repeat in earnest the words of the chorus in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935): "There have been oppression and luxury,/ There have been poverty and licence,/ There has been minor injustice,/ Yet we have gone on living,/ Living and partly living."

On the recommendation of a Blackfriar, several years ago my daughter and I left London for Canterbury on December 29, Becket's feast. Walking from Canterbury station, we passed chain restaurants dressed awkwardly in half-timbered buildings. Nearing the cathedral, we saw how the streets were filled, as Chaucer writes, with "various sorts of people, by chance fallen/ In fellowship, and they were all pilgrims." The Venerable Bede records that St. Augustine consecrated an old Roman temple in 597 A.D. that stood on the nave of the current, eleventh-century Canterbury Cathedral. Three hundred and fifty years later, the cathedral was in a derelict state. After the roof collapsed, Archbishop Odo ordered the necessary repairs, praying that no rain would fall into the roofless cathedral during the three years of labor it would take. "And truly it was a sight worth seeing," writes Edmer, companion and biographer of St. Anselm, "to behold the space beyond the walls of the city drenched with water, while the walls themselves remained perfectly dry."

We were welcomed warmly by the cathedral staff and offered a front row in the choir stalls as the clergy formed ranks. A large group of Roman Catholics had already heard Mass on the vigil of the feast, so only two pink-cheeked Irish Monsignors represented the papists during these Anglican vespers. The Archbishop of Canterbury processed in, dignified but perhaps a bit bored. Or does Becket make him uneasy? Belloc writes that “in that very place, in that very See, the purpose for which St. Thomas died has been conspicuously denied, ridiculed, frustrated, and (locally) destroyed.” Comfortably established, the current Archbishop of Canterbury bides his time until the inevitable arrival of the next royal coronation. St. Thomas offers a different model. “St. Thomas died for the doctrine, the truth,” Belloc continues, “that the link with eternal things must never be broken under the pressure of ephemeral desires, that the control of eternal things cannot, in morals, be subjected to the ephemeral arrangements of men.”

We joined the pilgrim procession around the cathedral. On this feast, the choir adds recitations from *Murder in the Cathedral*. We stood in candlelight as the archbishop’s words once again echoed on the stones: “Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors!/ I will not have the Church of Christ/ The sanctuary, turned into a Fortress!”

In his “Journey of the Magi,” Eliot lets us pop the Christmas crackers before his Wise Man asks: “were we led all that way for Birth or Death?” Eliot adds in the mouth of Becket: “Not only do we at the feast of Christmas celebrate at once Our Lord’s Birth and His Death: but on the next day we celebrate the martyrdom of His first martyr, the blessed Stephen. Is it an accident, do you think, that the day of the first martyr follows immediately the day of the Birth of Christ?” At the site of the martyrdom in the northwest transept of the cathedral is a modern sculpture added in 1986. The four jagged swords resemble iron lightning bolts, suspended in the act of carrying out the foul deed. Becket’s feast follows St. Stephen the Protomartyr and the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. Evelyn Waugh best described this shocking contrast in the Church calendar: “After the holly and sticky sweetmeats, cold steel.”

My daughter and I walked out into the night air under a full moon hung like a pendant lamp above the bell tower of the cathedral. Becket's murderers left his body and fled into the same winter darkness. From that moment, Belloc writes, "the tide ran rapidly backward—within an hour St. Thomas was a martyr, within a month the champion not only of religion but of the common people, who obscurely but firmly knew that the independence of the Church was their safeguard." Popular devotion was sustained by reports of miracles. Even a Lollard leader asked to be buried before an image of Becket, despite his movement's proto-Protestant disapproval of devotion to the saints.

When Chaucer's pilgrims joined thousands on their way to seek the relics of the martyred archbishop, they could expect to find his mitre, hairshirt, belt, sandals, and chasuble. The Cambridge librarian Christopher de Hamel even sees evidence of the saint's raincoat ("*capa fluvia*") as being in the monastic inventory at Canterbury before the ravages of the Reformation. Sadly, the saint's books were stored without care in the cloister and many had been lost even before that time. Judging by the monks' record of his library, Becket was a man who sprinted through his theological education. He was ordained a priest a mere day before his consecration as Archbishop on June 3, 1162, following his resignation as Lord Chancellor. Introductory clerical reference guides helped him fill in the gaps of his education.

Now one gap in Becket's library may be filled. At lunch with biblical historian Eyal Poleg, de Hamel discussed the minimal medieval interest in Becket's books. Poleg recalled one exception, "an entry dated to 1321 from the Sacrist's Roll describing a precious but never tried manuscript among the treasures in the cathedral." By a strike of scholarly lightning, de Hamel remembered reading a similar description on a silver gilt psalter archived at Cambridge. Pulling out MS 411, the two read together a margin note that was dismissed by the Elizabethans but now deserved a serious second look. "This Psalter, in boards of silver-gilt and decorated with jewels, was once that of 'N' Archbishop of Canterbury [and] eventually came into the hand of Thomas Becket, late Archbishop of Canterbury, as recorded in the old inscription," de Hamel writes in *The Book in the Cathedral*. The leaf with the old inscription is

lost, but material analysis of the manuscript confirms that the book was undoubtedly made in Canterbury. Nail marks from the book boards are visible on the final pages. It is even possible that Becket carried the silver psalter into the cathedral after vespers on December 29.

But this paper chase for Becket's book cannot compare to the high drama of that dark night, when as Chesterton writes, the king's word "sent four feudal murderers into the cloisters of Canterbury, who went there to destroy a traitor and who created a saint." Englishman Robert Speaight was the first actor to play Becket in Eliot's play. The play was commissioned to help revive the local arts community in Canterbury as part of a new festival of music and drama held in and around the cathedral. On the morning Speaight departed for Rome to witness the canonization of Thomas More and John Fisher, he received an invitation to play Becket, despite being painfully aware that he "had neither the physique nor the years of Becket." He would spend the better part of his career locked in "the crypt of St. Eliot's."

Speaight and cast first performed the play in the chapter house of the cathedral, and many of the characters entered the stage through the audience by opening the heavy oak doors, which created an unforgettable memory for all "when the Knights thundered upon these for their last murderous entry." Speaight had keys to the cathedral and could take friends inside after dark, often in conditions matching the night of the murder. "For some of my visitors the effect was too eerie," he writes in his memoir, *The Property Basket*. The radio executive Moray McLaren's Scottish nerves "quivered in response to it. 'Take me out of this,' he muttered, 'I can't stand it any longer.'"

Speaight reveals that Eliot thought the best chorus for *Murder* was in Dublin, "where the Irish brogue conveyed an unforced impression of the 'folk'" that was "useless for English actresses, young or old, to attempt." When the play debuted at the Mercury Theatre, Speaight regretted that the man who first made Notting Hill famous was unable to attend. G. K. Chesterton was invited to opening night, and his wife dutifully came to inspect the seats before declining graciously. Alas, there was no seat big enough to hold the great man. Later W. B. Yeats approached

Speaight to compliment his acting. “Long before I saw you act I divined that you were important.” But then he continued, “Because your acting was derided by all the people I most dislike.”

During the play’s London run, Speaight was introduced to Wallace Fowlie by Jacques Maritain. As a Harvard student, before he became a Roman Catholic, Fowlie was a server at the early morning Anglo-Catholic liturgy offered by the Cowley Fathers at their Charles River chapel. One Tuesday morning in 1933, Fowlie and the priest heard a heavy thud on the chapel floor and turned to see T. S. Eliot laid flat on his stomach with arms outstretched in a mystical vision. “What shall we do?” asked the priest. “Let’s finish up here first,” Fowlie replied. Final prayers complete, they turned to help Eliot up from where he still lay with his face pressed to the floor. “Never, in subsequent Wednesday teas, did he refer to that episode,” writes Fowlie in *Memory: A Fourth Memoir*.

“With respect to ecclesiastical matters, the jurisdiction asserted by Henry II in the Constitutions of Clarendon was never asserted again until the English Reformation of the sixteenth century,” writes Harold Berman in his magisterial *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*. In 1538, Henry VIII ordered the destruction of Becket’s shrine, and West Country devotions to the Saint were quickly renamed for St. Thomas the Apostle. Twenty-six carts dragged away the offerings of pilgrims, including the treasure left by Richard the Lionhearted upon his return from the Third Crusade. “Where all was gold and jewels and draperies is a vast empty space,” writes Margaret Babington in *The Romance of Canterbury Cathedral*. Under more protective guardianship during the Second World War, all 1,008 panes of ancient stained glass in the cathedral were removed and safely stored away.

Speaking in this eight-hundred-and-fiftieth year after the martyrdom, the current Archbishop of Canterbury said that “Becket’s cause is not our own. We do know better than him in some areas. But, too often, his courage is not our own either.”

Asked recently whether statues will again be taken down in Canterbury Cathedral in deference to secular enthusiasms and destructive political fads, he passed the responsibility off to unnamed authorities.

His successors may conduct coronations, but Becket received the martyr's crown. "To put it bluntly, he saved the Church," writes Belloc, who could more reliably discern whether modern or medieval minds knew better. "He came, he was raised up, he was murdered for God, just at the moment which might have been the turn of the tide towards secularization. He checked it for four hundred years."

The actor who played the Archbishop of Canterbury knew best of all. "Even as I write these lines," writes Speaight in his 1949 biography of Becket, "we learn that the Cardinal Primate of Hungary has been arrested, and a world, which can hardly bear the strain of memory, is on the way to forgetting that Archbishop Stepinac is languishing in a Communist gaol." The Hungarian was József Mindszenty, of whom Bishop Fulton Sheen would write in 1957, "The West has its Mindszenty, but the East has its Kung."

Cardinal Ignatius Pin-Mei Kung was the first native Chinese Bishop of Shanghai. "To bolster the Catholics of Shanghai, Bishop Kung composed a traditional eight Chinese character banner, hung in the churches: Neither Fire nor Sword Can Take Away My Faith in God," writes the church historian Monsignor Stephen DiGiovanni in his definitive biography. Unlike Becket, Kung was spared the sword, but spent thirty years in a Chinese prison.

Cardinal Kung's family name, Pin-Mei, means "the character of a flower that blooms in the bitter winter." The English priest poet Gerard Manley Hopkins writes of the God "who, with trickling increment,/ Veins violets." On this eight-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of that bitter winter night, we are forced to bear witness with all the martyrs to Becket's blood in trickled veins of violence on the stones of Canterbury.

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Stephen Schmalhofer is the author of *Delightful People*.