

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL: FILM, PLAY, BOOK

by Andrew Hoellering

George Hoellering was interned in the war on the Isle of Man. In this period he was lent the play of *Murder on the Cathedral* by Karl Maurer, a friend and lecturer in German at the University of London. He also met the artist Peter Strausfeld who, over the years, went on to create a wonderful series of posters for the Academy cinema, including one for the film of *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The play made a huge impression on my father and he resolved one day to film it. His release from internment came sooner than expected. The Department of Information (DOI) found out that he was a filmmaker and, at some point, he either volunteered his services or they offered him work in their production department.

One of the shorts he made was about the dangers of picking up an attractive-looking object like a hand-grenade – I should know because I was the boy who had to pick it up. Nobody told me that the hand-grenade wasn't for real, and I remember wondering whether it would explode in my hand.

As a child I was in my father's film
Warning kids not to pick up delights
Such as green hand-grenades. I felt ill
And I still don't feel quite right.
I was told to pick up an oval shape
Nestling in the grass like an Easter egg.
My hands and knees shook but
I turned bold and did as I was told.



The criss-crossed Cyclop's eye
Appeared to wink.
The birds stopped singing;
It occurred to me that I was about to die.
Nobody told me the grenade was safe, or why.
The minutes that followed came as a surprise-
Birdsong returned,
Sunshine filled the skies.*

George Hoellering followed his series of short propaganda films for the DOI in 1944 with *Message from Canterbury*, made with Archbishop William Temple, whom my father got to know and admire. *Message* is very much of its time, with its optimistic vision of a future that led to the founding of the NHS in the UK and, internationally, of the United Nations.

After making *Message from Canterbury*, George Hoellering resumed his regular job, taking over as managing director of the Academy Cinema. Ever the filmmaker, he was unable even to take a holiday without sending for his cameras, as my poem relates:

My Father on Holiday
For András Székfű

Leaving his beloved Academy Cinema
A wrench, an act of trust in others,
He drives us in his Chrysler shooting brake
Through winding Scottish roads
Past sparkling lochs and bracken hills,
Cold springs and clear sandy streams;
The long-horned Highland cattle
Peering at us through matted forelocks;
The ferry chugs and ploughs towards Skye.

The welcoming cup at the island hotel.
Comfortable room. Good simple food.

Walking, relaxing. Starry frosts on pools,
Cuckoos calling across water,
Fishermen hauling in gleaming salmon
From the sea. Lads and lassies
Dancing in the evenings, clapping
To the rhythms of a kilted bagpiper.

Boredom sets in.
Holly, the spectator, an audience of one
Watching a slow-moving film.

Face suddenly aglow,
Mood transformed, he phones for
His cameras. Spectator no longer
His fingers mimic a viewfinder .
The cameras arrive.

He films sunrises and sunsets.
The Highland dancing,
The shaggy Highland cattle.
We sleep rough with fishermen
In an old stone building with no roof.
With daylight we share their boats,
Film them drawing up nets, lobster pots,
In the evening drinking, talking, laughing.

The holiday is over, the real work already begun.*

Soon he began to look for a subject that would allow him to combine word and image in the same way that he had previously combined image and music. In the book of the film of *Murder in the Cathedral*, published in 1964, my father wrote:

My attention very soon turned to poetic drama, as it is only there that one can find dialogue which also partakes of some of the qualities of music, and my choice finally fell on Mr Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Hoellering learnt how the play came into being – that it was George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, former Dean of Canterbury and founder of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, who invited T S Eliot to write the play for the 1935 Canterbury Festival.

The length, theme – martyrdom and the sacrifice of self – number of characters and a deadline were all specified and agreed between Bishop Bell and T S Eliot for this, his first full-length verse play. Eliot, of course, was already famous as the poet of ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922).

In the tradition of Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Murder in the Cathedral* shows the priest-king slain for his people, and celebrates the cult associated with a sacred spot, in this case Canterbury.

The play was written for a performance in the chapter house of the cathedral – ‘but to my mind,’ my father wrote,

it was just as far removed from the ordinary stage as from the screen, and it was this that attracted me about it. Had the play been written with the requirements of the theatrical stage more strictly in mind, I would have far less of an incentive for transferring it to the screen: I could only have spoilt something that was already perfect in its way.

When they finally met, in 1945, T S Eliot overcame his reluctance and agreed to let my father make the film because he liked him, because of his enthusiasm and knowledge of the play, and because he, Eliot, in turn was greatly impressed by *Hortobágy* (1936), which my father screened especially for him at the Academy Cinema.

Eliot agreed to make a recording of the entire play in his own voice, to serve as a guide to the rhythms and emphases of the verse; for my father, the actors and László Lajtha. My father found Eliot’s recording very useful, and it suggested to him the possibility of using Eliot’s voice for the words of the Fourth Tempter, after he had the happy idea of presenting the fourth temptation merely as a voice proceeding from an invisible actor.



Martin Browne, the play's original producer, suggested to Eliot visits or temptations from various people who wanted to influence Thomas: a crony from his days as Chancellor, who offers sensual enjoyment; a politician who promises temporal power, if he will rejoin the king's side; a baron who wanted him to overthrow the king; and, finally, the Fourth Tempter, who offered him martyrdom as a way of gaining a lasting spiritual hold over mankind. It was this last temptation – 'the right act for the wrong reason,' as Eliot put it – that Thomas found hardest to resist. These four temptations were intended to show how Thomas reached the state of mind indicated in the sermon, whilst also conveying the history of the conflict between church and state.

In drafting his scenes, Eliot moved from these visitors as figments of Becket's imagination – internalised projections – to actors on stage incorporating the conflicts in his hero's mind. Ironically, the disembodied voice of the Fourth Tempter reverted to Eliot's own original idea as a voice of conscience – a fine example of the understanding that existed between the producer/director of the film and the twentieth century's most famous and profound poet which showed clearly that they were on the same wavelength.

On my father's suggestion, T S Eliot wrote a new court scene in which the nature of the dispute between the King and the Archbishop was made clear to the audience.



He also wrote a new women's chorus, as well as the Prior's speech to the people of Canterbury, announcing the Archbishop's departure into exile.

Hoellering realised, when watching stage productions of the play, that the final speeches of the knights had the effect of amusing the audience, whereas Eliot had intended to shock them, and accordingly he made several crucial changes.

Hoellering then completed the film script, sent it to T S Eliot and settled down to wait for his reply. When the answer came, after a week, it was, in my father's words, 'the most beautiful letter I have ever received.' After expressing his complete satisfaction, Eliot said:

I am now convinced, as I was not, you will remember, before you began, that *Murder in the Cathedral* can make a fine film and a very unusual one; and I am also more certain than ever that I could not have entrusted the filming of the play to anyone but yourself.

My grandfather was a theatre producer and director in pre-First World War Vienna and, perhaps because he worked with his father, George Hoellering was very clear in his own mind regarding the differences between theatre and film. He was aware of the paradox that everything on screen is in a sense an optical illusion, yet that film is the more realistic medium of the two. This belief in the realistic properties of the medium influenced the film in various ways:

- He was granted permission to use Canterbury Cathedral as a set but changed his mind later. He told me that it looked too worn out, both inside and out, to be convincing as representation of the way the cathedral would have looked c.1164. Instead, he obtained permission to build his studio in a disused church in London's St John's Wood where the entire film, apart from exteriors, was shot in six weeks in 1951. He cast well-known actors from the Old Vic, such as LeoMcKern, Paul Rogers, Mark Dignam and Michael Aldridge, with Jill Balcon, Kay Astor and Diana Maddox in the chorus. The music by László Lajtha was recorded by the London Philharmonic, conducted by Sir Adrian Bolt, with the Renaissance Singers conducted by Michael Howard, and with Diana Maddox singing a medieval song.

- My father was drawn to choosing a real priest rather than an actor for the key role. More than once he went to hear Father John Groser preaching in an East End church and became convinced that this priest, who had never acted professionally, was his man..
- Hoellering felt setting and costume for a historical film had to be accurate. His concern here took the form of ensuring that the costumes, hand-loomed for the film, were woven with the same materials and in the same way and even with the same folds as in the twelfth century.

Initially Eliot thought such fastidiousness was excessive, but he changed his mind once he saw the rushes. He was equally impressed by my father's subsequent willingness to sacrifice several visual effects, 'magnificent in themselves, because he was convinced that the audience in watching them would cease to attend to the words.'

'Film,' George Hoellering also wrote in the fine book of the film, 'as the more flexible medium can lead the spectator from a total view to the smallest detail (in close-up) and back again. The actor does not need to speak to the gallery, he can use his natural voice. And, whereas on the stage, he must address himself to the entire audience, to many eyes and ears at the same time, in a film his words and gestures are directed at individual persons (in other words, in film we can, for instance, be in long, medium or close up, whereas when watching a play we have to settle for a fixed viewpoint).' He continues, 'the camera and the microphone are the eyes and ears of each individual spectator (for example, an actor looking straight into the camera looks, from the screen, as *you personally*, not at the audience in general).'

This insight influenced George Hoellering in his depiction of the knights. My father adapted their speeches (an 'ingenious rearrangement and abbreviation,' Eliot wrote) so they are spoken first to the crowd at the cathedral and then directly to the audience.

I think it is worth quoting the new speech written especially for the first knight by Eliot as, for my father, it makes the main point of the entire film:

If you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step.

You accept our principles; you benefit by our precedent; you enjoy the fruits of our action. Yet we have been dead for nearly 800 years and you still call us murderers. In a moment you will see the Archbishop laid before the altar and acclaimed as a martyr.

Then ask yourselves, who is more representative of the thing that you are: the man you call a martyr, or the men you call his murderers?

The knight addresses us in close-up. His assumption is that as citizens we too will subordinate the interests of the church to those of the state. Are we not being tempted by specious argument and analogy as was Thomas Becket? The speech does indeed take us to the heart of the play. Becket's main qualification to be archbishop in Henry's eyes was his proven worldliness as friend and chancellor. We know that the king made his best friend Archbishop of Canterbury because he wanted him to put the church in its place.

The sea change in Becket was not understood by the King but it was clear to T S Eliot, whose work from 'Prufrock' to *The Elder Statesman* (1958) is centred on the loss of self in a higher purpose.

When, at Clarendon, Henry demanded assent to the 'customs of the realm' Becket knew that this meant royal control over the clergy and ordered total resistance. (Sir Thomas More, was to take a similar stand against Henry VIII and, like Becket, paid with his life.) But unlike More, Becket fled to France fearing for his life – a pusillanimous act he clearly resolved never to repeat. Hence his order to unbar the doors of the cathedral, even though he must have known that he was courting almost certain death.

What were the Archbishop's motives? Had he resisted the Fourth Tempter, or was he intent on martyrdom? The historical record here is fascinating. According to the historian Simon Schama, the four knights enter the cathedral crying 'where is the traitor Becket?' Becket replied, 'Here I am, not a traitor to the king, but a priest of God.' To John of Salisbury, his words were, 'my mind is made up. I know what I have to do.' 'Please God, you have chosen well,' John replied.

John's remark is splendidly ambiguous. Did he mean, 'please God that you have chosen well' – not knowing what Becket had chosen? Or had Becket already confided to him that he was prepared to die? Or did John merely assume this to be the case? The last two would accord with T S Eliot's reading. There is all the difference in the world between actively seeking martyrdom, and being prepared to suffer for one's beliefs.

The central issue is a lot clearer than it was as on 29 December 1170. Is the church subordinate to the state, the individual to the temporal power, or vice versa? The struggle between secular and religious power, between authority and the conscience of each individual must needs be re-enacted, as was for Becket, as it is with each one of us, in every generation.

In this sense Thomas is both Saint and Everyman.

* The two poems here are taken from *Conflict and Empathy* by Andrew Hoellering (2014)

Andrew Hoellering has taught English at secondary and further levels in Canada, Italy and the UK. He was also a *Guardian* art correspondent for the south-west of England.

