

Passion for Peace: The Social Essays by Thomas Merton. Edited with an Introduction by William H. Shannon. Crossroad vii, 338p \$29.95 (hard cover)

I am frequently asked what I think might have happened if Thomas Merton, the Abbey of Gethsemani's famous writing monk, had had a word processor. As director of the Merton Centre, repository for his literary estate, I wince at the idea. What he left without access to a personal computer is incredible. Whether he filled journals and notebooks by hand or pounded out books, essays and letters on a manual typewriter, Thomas Merton produced an astounding amount of "paper". Had he had a PC, had he turned out floppy discs and printouts, we might have even more Merton "works" than we have. Even though he had no computer, other people do and Merton books continue, twenty-seven years after his death, to appear with amazing regularity. Over 130 titles now stand on my office shelves. One of the most recent of these is Passion for Peace: The Social Essays, edited by William H. Shannon, distinguished Merton scholar, author of the biography Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story, and general editor of The Merton Letters.

I am frequently asked two other questions. Is there an end to what Merton wrote? Or, is there anything new in what is being published? There is no seeming end to materials, but, oddly, there is often little new in the books being published. Letters, reading and lecture notes, taped lectures and other items remain unpublished. Much of this material (most of it?) should probably remain unpublished. I am reminded of a reviewer who remarked about another collection of Merton essays that we would next be seeing publication of Merton's laundry lists. The irony here is that one does not have to suspend much belief to imagine such a publication.

Merton is still popular and he is still regarded as a "popular" writer, a writer for a commercial market (so the publishers seem to think) in which readers do not want to be burdened with much beyond the basic text. Certainly that is reflected in the several collections edited and published since his death, most of them (including the five volumes of The Merton Letters) minimally edited and some of them (most prominently The Collected Poems) not really edited at all. Thomas Merton on Peace (later retitled The Nonviolent Alternative), had an excellent introduction by Gordon C. Zahn and, though the essays were presented in random order with no commentary about when or why they were written, it was definitely comprehensive. This book, possibly for obvious reasons since the Cold War has ended, was allowed to go out of print.

Did we need something on the market to replace it? Shannon thinks so. He feels that Merton's writings on peace and war (or at least a judicious selection of them) are relevant enough and important enough in the 1990s to justify a "new" collection, hence Passion for Peace. He suggests that the time is now "suitable" to move beyond minimal editing of such collections, providing at least enough apparatus to "contextualise" what Merton wrote, to place his writings within his life. He states: "In this book I have tried to supply the missing context." He also obviously feels that such a collection should offer a fresh, synthesising view, rather than merely reshuffling Merton's essays into a different book with a different title. He presents the essays in the chronological order in which they were written, or, in one or two cases, in which they were first published.

The idea was a good one, but the result is not entirely successful. The basic problem of presenting material that is not new remained, a thorny one for the best of editors. Shannon is one of the ablest editors in my experience, but even he does not manage totally to overcome the feeling of "reshuffled essays". Granted Thomas Merton on Peace and The Nonviolent Alternative may be out of print, as is another Merton book, Seeds of Destruction, from which some essays are taken, but they are available to interested readers in libraries and I see Seeds of Destruction at nearly every book fair or flea market I frequent. While out of print essays may merit republication, I think most readers familiar with Merton will be taken aback when they realise that nearly half of the thirty-two essays in Passion for Peace are in Merton books still in print. They may find \$29.95 a hefty price to pay for this.

Shannon's "contextualisation" might have given freshness to these retreaded essays, and it does at the beginning of Passion for Peace. He starts out providing interesting and rather detailed introductions to each essay. We learn when Merton wrote them and where they were originally published, as well as some of his problems in an Order which did not want him to write on such issues. He falters midway through the book after he leaves the first section which he calls "The Year of the Cold War Letters, October 1961 - October 1962." The introductory paragraphs dwindle and toward the end of the book, most of them are no more than one liners giving a bibliographic record of original publication. Such records are simply not "background knowledge [which] helps to make these articles come alive." They live for us, as they did when originally presented, because of the "passion" Merton felt when he was impelled to write them. We are, then, back to "noncontextualisation" for much of the material in Passion for Peace.

Shannon has, however, tried to take what may be an important transitional step in moving Merton publication toward a new and, I think, crucial stage - a transition from unedited and unannotated editions toward more critical and

explanatory ones which could provide a fresh, synthesising view of Merton's writings. By placing the essays in the order in which they were written as Merton developed, he has partially succeeded, as he hoped he would, in showing us something of the way in which his thought deepened and expanded from the "passion" for peace to a fuller commitment to social justice on a global scale.

Passion for Peace is not new and it is not, as the dust jacket claims, a comprehensive collection of Merton's social writings. It does bring several Merton essays back into print and readers new to Merton may be grateful for that. It is one more example of the proliferating publication that centres with no seeming end around Thomas Merton. That proliferation itself is testimony to his popularity, to the strength of his message, and to the enthusiasm and interest of scholars like William H. Shannon.

Robert E. Daggy

Thomas Merton & Robert Lax, A Catch of Anti-Letters (Kansas: Sheed and Ward, 1994) pp viii & 128, soft back, £7.99, ISBN: 1-55612-712-X.

A Catch of Anti-Letters is the title given by Thomas Merton to a collection of eccentric missives between himself and Robert Lax. The pair met at Columbia University in 1936 and became firm friends whilst working together on a student magazine. They were alike in a number of ways, both connected to Catholicism (Lax was a witness at Merton's baptism), wrote poetry and became solitaries: Merton at Gethsemani and Lax on various Greek islands. In 1941 while they helped at Baroness Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem. Merton decided to join the Trappists. Eight years later Lax attended Merton's ordination, commenting that he looked younger than ever he did at Columbia.

The autobiography which brought Merton to the public's attention was accompanied by an ever-increasing mail-bag. Given the time available for writing of any kind, and that Trappists do not have a letter writing tradition as such, Merton was a generous correspondent. He took to the task thoughtfully and with great facility. His letters display a breadth of learning and a sagacity in spiritual and social matters that left the diverse recipients with the feeling of having been personally attended to. Evelyn Waugh suggested that Merton 'put books aside and write serious letters and to make an art of it'. However Merton would sometimes end a letter with a complaint that he was either too busy or didn't have enough time to complete all the things he wished to do. There was no such ambivalence in his letters to Robert Lax.