

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.

For many years Merton and Lax wrote fairly orthodox letters, but a quick browse through A Catch of Anti-Letters reveals a quite extraordinary style. Where did it come from? It was in the summer of 1939 spent in a cottage on the hills above Olean (New York) that Merton, Lax and Ed Rice read Finnegans Wake. Michael Mott, in The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton tells of their excitement about the novel and the following experiments in 'Joyce Talk', 'Esperanto' and 'Macaronic'. These language games led to Burlesque forms of writing, in which old and new languages were mingled together. The friends also drew up a fantastic array of lists varying from newly invented words to adverts and personal anecdotes. Merton's journals were becoming full of biographical detail and he wanted to make use of it, but not in a conventional manner. His solution was the anti-biography with its accent on the trivial as a means to a more profound understanding of the individual. The material would form the basis of 'The Labyrinth' and later The Seven Storey Mountain. Meantime, the summer of 1941 found Merton and Lax making a pledge to 'write simply and about simple things'.

Merton was dissatisfied with the novel 'The Man in the Sycamore Tree', that followed and this effectively cut short the agreement. He returned to 'Joyce Esperanto' or 'Macaronic' for his only remaining novel, 'The Journal of my Escape from the Nazis' (1941). However, upon entering the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton found that writing fiction and using the eclectic style first developed at Columbia were no longer options.

These anti-letters see Merton and Lax returning to the tradition they made their own. They coincide with the beginning of Lax's self-imposed exile on the Greek Isles in 1962 and end in 1967, just over a year before Merton's death. Bro. Patrick Hart writes in a useful foreword,

'Throwing grammar, syntax and spelling to the winds, they write lightly - yet wisely - as two supremely free-men, free "with the liberty of the children of God"' (p vii)

This freedom enabled Merton to write about the political scene. He interpreted the zeitgeist with clarity and saw the world (as displayed in the 'Circular Letters') as a source of illusion and deception. He asked many pertinent questions but never presumed he had all the right answers.

April 5 1967 (p 113)

'... new laws for all except the Pentagon which is to itself a monstrous law of its own. Necessity the mother of conventions is making the law for inconvenience and will see to it that China gets out of order.'

Merton's desire to recover and deliver an authentic Christian message to the world brought him into conflict with a small section of the Church.

Jan 26 1967 (p 110)

'Mark my word man there is no uglier species on the face of the earth than progressed Catholics, mean, frivol, ungainly, inarticulate, venomous, and bursting at the seams with progress into the secular cities and the Teilhardian subways.'

Besides these commentaries, there are keen descriptions by the solitaries of their surroundings. Both write about encountering birds and Lax is especially struck by the beauty of the Greek isles, their inhabitants, language and customs. It is worth piecing together the series of clippings Merton sent Lax which he subsequently commented on, from 'The New Yorker' about the antics of a West Coast evangelist, Miss Velma. Friends, classmates, teachers and events at Columbia are frequently recalled. Especially moving are the passages relating the deaths of Ad Reinhardt and Dom John Slate ( pp 118 - 25). Also included are poems written by the two friends and Zen drawings by the monk which Lax often requested. These anti-letters, like the anti-biography make fun of the form and its pretences and the result is better for it. Lax addresses Merton, "Dear Doctor Moosehunter" and signs off "Yrs, Sam". Merton's riposte being 'Dear Zmano' and 'Farewell, be prudent, be joyful, up the geraniums, (pp 34 - 7), and so it goes on. There are passages which are possibly too obscure for any outsider to fully understand. This is not the point of course. Reading the book is like gaining access to the world of two soul-mates. This is a welcome re-publication of the collection, (edited by Merton in 1967) which is worth reading for the spontaneous wit, humanity, imagination and profundity of its authors.

John Wright

Peter King. Dark Night Spirituality. (SPCK. London. 1995.) pp85, paper, £8.99. ISBN 0-281-04884-3.

Dark Night Spirituality, the first book from the pen of Peter King a Baptist minister serving in Eynsham, near Oxford, examines the lives and writings of Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Etty Hillesum and traces in their work a common thread in their approach to contemplation. The author then goes on to develop their thought on contemplation associating it with developments in theology, especially in the second half of this century and, in particular, with the major paradigm shifts that have taken place. This may