

*Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton - His Life and Works - An Introduction* by William H. Shannon (St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA ISBN 0-86716-272-4 p/b 186 pp. £7.95 - distributed in the UK by R.P. Bookservice, Alphonsus House, Chewton Alton, Hants. Tel. 01420 88222)

I wish I had had this little book to hand a few months ago when a woman priest came to see me to say that she was writing a dissertation on Thomas Merton but found it very hard to know what to read first or what to read about him, there seemed to be so much. This book has been written to answer precisely those questions and does so in a way no other book does. It was also written to answer the unspoken question behind the reason for my friend's dissertation, because she was searching to find a spirituality for herself and her Church and was looking to Merton to give her direction. Her choice of Merton was, she indicated, unusual, for most of her colleagues were writing about mission or church management, managing (or should it be 'putting a brave face on') decline; but what she was after was something more profound, which would enable the depths of the past to speak to the present and the future in an accessible way.

These are precisely the factors which have prompted this little book, for Shannon says that he was persuaded to write it in order "to suggest that this mid-twentieth century writer can speak meaningfully to women and men on the verge of a new century ... and to suggest what one ought to read as one enters into the huge library of Mertoniana", and it does precisely that and in the most accessible style. For anybody who has read William Shannon's previous books on Merton - or even his previous books, for they are not all about Merton - will certainly prick up their ears at the sound of a new one by him and want to read it. Shannon is the founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society, a Roman Catholic priest who has devoted his life to the study of Merton and is now Professor Emeritus of Nazareth College, New York State. His writing is always so clear and makes the work of Merton accessible to the general reader in a way which no other writer on Merton has done - and all this without losing his grasp of the scholarly body of work that has mushroomed over recent years.

Let's see how he does this in this particular book. After an Introduction Shannon tells the life story of Thomas Merton, dividing it into two halves, the pre-monastic and then the monastic years. He tells a familiar story well with new insights. For instance he dwells on particularly significant moments in Merton's life, using them as doors into the depths of his personality in a somewhat Proustian manner. He also gives us details which come from the journals, both published and

unpublished, which are not provided in some of the standard biographies of Merton such as those by Furlong or Michael Mott. Shannon then goes on to ask "Is Merton for Today, or is he Passé,?" Here Shannon makes a stab at showing how Merton was somebody who is deeply relevant to us now, even though he was a monk of a particular Church and at a particular time in history, because he bursts the bounds of cultural limitation. He quotes the words of Lawrence Cunningham, who says, "Merton was capable of entering the larger world of cultural discourse while rooted in a tradition that gave a peculiar weight and a ring of authenticity to his words." Shannon then goes on to illustrate the 'larger world of cultural discourse' which Merton entered, showing how he knew and used the work of Rilke, Camus, Pasternak and so many others when these were little known, especially in monastic circles. Shannon himself then says, "many of Merton's writings have a quality of insight into the human condition that transcends his own life and his own generation, a wisdom that sees beyond the ephemeral and the superficial to perennial human values. These are the reasons why his words are able to speak today's generation and, I expect, to generations yet to come."

This is the point at which I have questions to ask. Is it really proper to claim that Merton was a figure who is 'for today and for tomorrow' just because his thinking was greater than his monastic context? I think this is special pleading. So many others of Merton's generation had horizons greater than their context, but that does not confer on them the status of genius. Shannon goes on to cite Merton's humanness, his reverence for people and his ability to articulate the human condition as being signs of his relevance for today and tomorrow. Again, I demur. Many others of his time had these qualities. What these qualities - which he certainly possessed - indicate is his greatness as a monk at the particular time and context within which he lived. He was a great monk and shows all of us who have a religious calling, monks or not, how to be religious in a better way. What we cannot do is claim for him universal significance and it is a pity that those who claim that Merton provides an answer to every problem of modern existence are, however unwittingly and to however small a degree, given a certain amount of housework in this section of the book.

The next two sections of this book are exemplary and cannot be found elsewhere. Chapter three is entitled 'The Merton Gallery - Themes to be looked for in Merton's Writings' and gives an outstanding precis of the central concerns of Merton as a writer. As Shannon says in his Introduction, writing this book also gave him a chance to "develop in my own way some of the themes that make their way through his writings" and very grateful we should be that he did take the chance, for here Shannon concentrates into a single chapter much of what he says about Merton in his book *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, which is the best exposition of Merton's mysticism available. One caveat, at times Shannon assumes that we

are all like himself and like Merton, that is seekers emerging from an arcane Roman Catholic background. In fact, some of us belong to Churches which completed such a pilgrimage a long time ago. This perhaps enables us to have a keener perception of Merton's exemplary, but nonetheless localised, witness.

The final section is 'The Merton Library - What to Read First' and again is exemplary, for so many people, like my priest friend, do not know where to start. After reading this they will have no doubt. Moreover the section is totally up to date and is able, because of Shannon's unique position in Merton scholarship, to quote from unpublished work and to point towards work that is still in preparation but which will appear in due course.

As a guide for the newcomer to Merton's work this book is unsurpassed.

Melvyn Matthews

Thomas Merton. *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*. Ed. with Introduction by Robert E. Daggy. ( San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997 ) pp.363, £19.99. ISBN 0-06-065482-1.

This, the fifth of the seven projected volumes of Thomas Merton's complete journals, covers Merton's move to becoming a full-time hermit at Gethsemani, the fulfilment of a deep desire for solitude that had haunted Merton from his earliest days in the monastery. It begins in August 1963 when Merton was living as a part-time solitary and traces the gradual expansion of the amount of time he was allowed to spend at the hermitage until, in August 1965, he was allowed to stand down as Master of Novices and take up full-time residence there. This volume concludes at the end of 1965 allowing us to see Merton's reflections on his first few months as a hermit.

Some parts of this journal will already be familiar to readers as it contains journal entries that were prepared for publication by Merton in the journal *A Vow of Conversation*, as well as his account of his visit to New York to meet the Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki and an early version of his essay *Day of a Stranger*. Having said that, I would estimate that over half of the material in this journal is previously unpublished and even those parts previously published in *Vow* can read quite differently in their unedited form. *A Vow of Conversation* leaves the reader with the impression that Merton had effortlessly made the transition to life as a full-time hermit whereas, in *Dancing*, this transition appears far from easy and a visit from