

## Book Reviews

*The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton, His Life from His Journals*. Ed. Patrick Hart & Jonathan Montaldo, pp. 448, Oxford: Lion, 2000. ISBN: 0 745 94435 3.

*The Intimate Merton*, as its subtitle suggests, tells the life of Thomas Merton using his own words taken from his complete journals. Readers of *The Merton Journal* have been aware over the last four years of the publication of Thomas Merton's complete journals, a vast project covering almost three thousand pages. In *The Intimate Merton* we are presented with what the editors believe are the essential entries of those journals reduced to a very manageable single volume.

In four hundred and fifty pages the reader is taken on a journey with Merton from one of the earliest entries in his private journals from October 1939, when he was living at Perry Street, New York City, through to his final entry on December 8th, 1968 as he was preparing to leave Bangkok for the conference at the Red Cross Centre where he was to die two days later.

In reducing Merton's seven volumes of complete journals to one volume a vast amount of material has been omitted. For instance, from the first section of *Entering the Silence*, the second volume of the journals, one hundred and fifty pages has been reduced to just two pages in *The Intimate Merton*. But, on looking at this section of *Entering the Silence*, I must say there is not a single passage extra I would have included if I had been preparing this volume and, generally, this was the case through the whole book. The great danger with a compilation of this kind is that the natural bias of its editors can more easily detract from the original work than enhance it. This volume enhances the seven volumes of Merton's journals and that is down to the skill of the editors and their familiarity with Merton's work and thought.

*The Intimate Merton* is edited by Brother Patrick Hart, general editor of Merton's complete journals, at one time Merton's secretary and editor of numerous other volumes by and about him, along with Jonathan Montaldo editor of volume two of the complete journals and currently Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville. This volume has been divided into seven chapters that correspond to the seven volumes of the complete journals, and for the chapter titles the subtitles of each respective volume have been used and these described well the content of each of the chapters.

In their introduction the editors outline the editorial policy they have followed, selecting passages that would "produce a powerfully written, chronological presentation of his journal's major themes." (13.) Among the

themes they highlight are Merton's desire to be more than a writer in becoming a monk, his search for a monastic identity, for wisdom and for the "perfect place," and his awareness of the natural world. As well as these themes many of his prayers and dreams have been included along with other important themes from Merton's life. In editing this volume the editors also "deeply edited Merton's text to present him as favorably and faithfully as we could" (15.). The extent of this editing varies from omitting Merton's "too-frequent use of *And* to begin sentences" to deleting anything that they judged weakened Merton's style.

On reading *The Intimate Merton* I think the editorial policy has worked extremely well. There were some themes which I felt could have done with greater attention, in particular Merton's paradoxical nature and some of the writers, events and movements that influenced him. For example, many of his references to Rilke, the Shakers, and Blake are missing and his decision to become an American citizen, the visits of the Hibakusha and Sidi Abdesalam to Gethsemani and his reference to the trial of Adolf Eichmann are totally omitted. Having said that, the editors have created a most readable volume which will serve to introduce the essential content of Merton's complete journals to Merton aficionados who have been put off by the size and the price of the complete journals and will also introduce a whole new generation to Merton's life and thought.

Except for some very penetrating epigrams at the beginning of each of the chapters the editors are totally unobtrusive providing no footnotes or textual notes. In many ways I felt this book would have benefited from more input from the editors, perhaps just a few paragraphs at the beginning of each chapter, in a style similar to that used by Merton in his introductions to the chapters of *The Sign of Jonas*, would have been enough to provide readers with a few biographical and contextual details which would make a real contribution to their reading of this book.

In their introduction Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo sum up very succinctly the value of Merton's journals and one of the key reasons why they continue to attract so many readers:

His writing operates for readers as both a window and a mirror. In Merton's journals readers catch a glimpse of their own "infinite possibilities" for "contemplation and praise." As he struggles with his life's contradictions, readers are self-examined in the mirror of his autobiographical art. By hearing Merton's literary voice, readers are seduced into listening to that still quiet voice within themselves, one that longs to become incarnate in some outward gesture uniquely their own. (15.)

This quotation gets to the very core of Merton's literary work and in *The Intimate Merton* we have the essence of those journals in one volume. If you like to read Thomas Merton and you have not read his complete journals then this book is a must.

*Paul M Pearson.*

*Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story.* Edited by Rob Baker and Gray Henry. pp. 340, Louisville, KY. Fons Vitae, 1999. ISBN: 188775207 2.

The appearance of *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* marks a long overdue development in the plethora of materials about Thomas Merton. Much has been written on Merton as a leading figure in the field of inter-faith dialogue but this has largely concentrated so far on his writing and thought about Zen Buddhism. This has been due to the fact that Merton saw three books relating to this area into print in his own lifetime and also that his final journey ended in Asia. But Merton's inter-faith dialogue was far broader than that and this book provides an excellent introduction to another equally important aspect of Merton's thought - his appreciation and dialogue with the Sufi mystics of Islam.

This book brings together in a well presented volume articles about Merton and Islam, Merton's own writings on Islam and the Sufi mystics, some transcripts of talks he gave to the Gethsemani community about Sufism, and a variety of other pieces. It provides a real kaleidoscope on this area of his thought. Some pieces are reprints whilst others appear here for the first time. As in most collections of this kind the quality varies though all make a contribution to the portrait they paint of this aspect of Merton's thought.

The first three articles by Burton Thurston, Bonnie Thurston and Sidney Griffith examine, respectively, Merton's reflections on Sufism, his interest in Islam and Merton's contact with Louis Massignon. These chapters provide an excellent introduction to this area of Merton's thought and if readers read no more than these three chapters their understanding of Merton's wide horizons will have been broadened. Bonnie Thurston begins her essay with a most apposite quote from a 1962 letter of Merton's to Abdul Aziz which, as she points out, is as relevant today as it was then:

It seems to me that mutual comprehension between Christians and Moslems is something of vital importance today, and unfortunately it is rare and uncertain, or else subjected to the vagaries of politics. (40)

These three writers make it clear that Merton undertook this task himself so that "Merton's knowledge of Sufism had reached a point where a non-Muslim