

## BOOK REVIEW

*Survival or Prophecy?: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq.* Edited with an introduction by Patrick Hart; foreword by Rembert G. Weakland. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. ISBN: 0374272069.

READERS of *The Merton Journal* need no introduction to Thomas Merton, but Jean Leclercq, his correspondent in this volume, will be a less well known figure for many readers. Yet, both Archbishop Rembert Weakland in his foreword and Brother Patrick Hart in his introduction, point to the important contribution both Merton and Leclercq made to reinterpreting the monastic life for the twentieth century and for subsequent generations.

Leclercq, the Benedictine monk, and Merton, the Cistercian monk, are very different figures. Merton hardly ever leaving Kentucky until his final year whereas Leclercq, the globe-trotting teacher and writer, was rarely in his monastery—teaching in Rome for many years, traveling in Africa and Asia. But both figures, as we see in this collection of correspondence, influenced each other and were a part of many of the reforms of the monastic life that took place in the second half of the twentieth century.

The first extant letter in this collection of almost one hundred letters dates from January 1950. Their letters for the first years they were in correspondence were mostly concerned with their common interest in early monastic sources, especially the writings of St. Bernard and, paralleling the developments in Merton's own life and interests, their correspondence gradually becomes broader and broader.

In the sixties, building on their strong and deep monastic foundations, their correspondence expanded to discuss a variety of interests including the future of monasticism and issues

concerning inter-faith dialogue. Leclercq was very involved in A.I.M., (Aide à l'Implantation Monastique) an organization which was concerned with assisting monastic communities in developing countries and kept Merton abreast of his travels in connection with this and the monastic encounters he made in various parts of the world. Leclercq was also fundamental in Merton's invitation to address A.I.M.'s first major conference in Asia which was held in Bangkok, Thailand in December 1968. It was whilst attending this conference of Asian monastic superiors that Merton was electrocuted shortly after delivering his address on December 10th, 1968.

Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq's love of life and love of learning well up continually in these letters. It was this love, and his love of the monastic life, which led Merton to write in his final, short letter to Leclercq the words from which the title of this book is taken:

Those who question the structures of contemporary society at least look to monks for a certain distance and critical perspective, which, alas, is seldom found. The vocation of the monk in the modern world, especially Marxist, is not survival but prophecy. We are all too busy saving our skins. (p.175).

A collection of letters between two monks might not sound the most gripping collection of Merton's correspondence to read, yet I found it difficult to put this short volume down. Through the course of this correspondence, which covers the greater part of Merton's life as a monk, the story of Merton's monastic life unfolds, and the reader discovers a unique perspective on Merton.

The volume is carefully and unobtrusively edited by Brother Patrick Hart of the Abbey of Gethsemani who also edited *The School of Charity* where some of Merton's letters to Leclercq were first published.

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*Advent and Christmas with Thomas Merton.* Compiled by Judith A. Bauer and John J. Cleary. Liguori, MO.: Liguori Publications, 2002. ISBN: 0764808435.

A NUMBER of titles have appeared over the years aimed at encouraging the use of Merton's work for prayer and meditation, volumes such as McDonnell's *Through the Years with Thomas Merton*, Blattner's *Mornings with Merton* and Gozier's *15 Days of Prayer with Thomas Merton*. The latest of this genre is, in my opinion, the best available yet. *Advent and Christmas with Thomas Merton* provides a short, loosely structured format for each day of the Advent and Christmas seasons. Each day begins with a brief, well-chosen passage from scripture, followed by a longer, equally well-chosen, quotation from Merton and concludes with a simple prayer that ties together the themes that have been explored. The length of the meditations provided for each day was ideal, I thought, neither too long nor too short. The final section of the book provided two longer, more structured forms of evening prayer in which the preceding meditations could be incorporated by the reader if so desired or used by a group who wished to use them more formally in praying together.

*Ferrytale: The Career of W. H. 'Ping' Ferry*  
James A. Ward

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

ISBN: 0804741573.

*Ferrytale* is a biography of Merton's friend and correspondent W. H. "Ping" Ferry. Readers of *The Merton Journal* are probably somewhat familiar with Ping Ferry from the various biographies of Merton, Merton's letters to him published in *The Hidden Ground of Love* or from the smaller collection, published by Ferry himself in 1983,

*Letters From Tom.* However, I never really knew much about him until I read this book and learned of his wide-ranging interests as a businessman, thinker, activist, government advisor and, in his final years, as a philanthropist. His life story is fascinating, though sadly poorly told by James Ward, in this biography.

One entire chapter, "Father Louis and Doctor Ferry," is devoted to his friendship with Merton, though references to Merton appear in a number of places throughout the book. What really intrigued me was the similarity of interests between the two men—nuclear proliferation, the war in Vietnam, technology, the growing abuse of language and environmental issues. The question I kept asking was "who influenced who" in their relationship. So many of the issues Merton was concerned about in the sixties were also issues with which Ping Ferry was concerned. Maybe they were simply drawn together because of their common interest. Although, at one point, Ward suggested that Ping saw Merton as both a "philosophical mentor" and found in him a "father figure" (118) the question of "who influenced who" was one that the author never addressed fully. It was, however, a question I pondered on many times over the course of this book as time after time Ward explored issues Ferry was involved with which equally concerned Merton.

Ward had a fascinating subject to work with in the person of Ping Ferry, but sadly his biography fails to rise above a mundane account of Ping's life and he never really manages to breathe much life into his subject.

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