

A Hideous Book (but very good)

John Betjeman

from The Daily Herald - 27th July, 1949

There come frightful moments to everybody, when no human being can help. You have been told by the doctor you have six months more to live. Or, worse than that, someone you love with all your heart is fatally ill.

Then what seemed important becomes unimportant; politics, promotions, and pleasure are useless. The lonely journey to be made lies ahead.

How lonely is it? That is the theme of this autobiography *Elected Silence* by Thomas Merton (*Hollis and Carter*, 15s.).

The author, a young American, has now taken a vow of silence. The only words he will say with his lips will be psalms and religious offices. He is now in a Trappist monastery in America.

His book, written in straight colloquial American, is the story of how he came to make this decision.

Merton was the son of a New Zealand father and American mother. He was educated in America, England, France, and again America.

Except that he was shifted about more than most, his upbringing is not unlike that of most people. His parents thought that you should be good to your neighbour and live uprightly, and all that sort of thing. A system of morality was enough for them. For the son it was not enough.

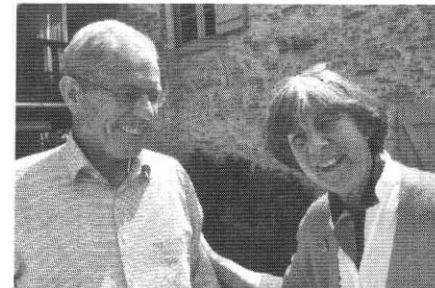
I do not think that this book is, as the foreword says, one of the 'classic records of spiritual experience'. But I do think it is one of the only books about the life of the spirit which is at once in modern slang and flattering to contemporary intelligence.

It is far from mawkish. I can see that it might well infuriate those who deny the existence of a Creator, and at the same time fascinate them. I also find it a little smug. It is certainly ignorant about the Church of England.

But it is a direct and moving personal story. What happened to Thomas Merton might happen to anyone. In telling you of the lonely terrors and hard work of monastic life, this book should finally dispel that still popular illusion that life in a monastery is an 'escape', where people just sit back and think holy thoughts and go to church a lot. This book is hideous, modern, and very good.

Sir John Betjeman (1906-1984) was an English poet, writer and broadcaster. He was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 1972 until his death. He was principal book reviewer for *The Daily Herald*, a decidedly left wing daily newspaper, from 1943 until 1950, often contributing two reviews each week. His second review in this edition follows on: 'But if it is too other worldly for you there is always *Love in a Cold Climate* by Nancy Mitford, which never takes its feet off this earth.'

Guus Franken 1933 - 2016



Sadly Guus passed away on 21st April. He and his wife Maud came to the Society's first conference in 1996, and each one thereafter until 2010. They were both enthused by the Taizé movement, and even bought a house in a neighbouring village. Guus was a dedicated member of the Dutch Merton Society, Mertonvrienden, and was one of the four members who worked on translating *New Seeds of Contemplation* into Dutch. The following lines are from the start of the first chapter, 'What is contemplation?'

Contemplatie is de hoogste uitdrukkingsvorm van het intellectuele en spirituele leven van de mens. Het is het leven zelf, volledig alert, volledig actief en zich er volledig van bewust dat het springlevend is. Het is spirituele verwondering.

(Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder.)

May he rest in peace and rise in glory.