

Church could make its teachings alive to the laity, future Franz Jägerstätters would no longer give their witness in solitude but would be the Church as a whole reasserting the primacy of the spiritual,' a spiritual life, as both Merton and Forest demonstrate, that permeates every aspect of the Christian life.

Two added bonuses to this volume are the photographic illustrations and the availability of a study guide for the book made available by the Catholic Peace Fellowship. It is an exceptional resource for either individuals or groups who want to delve deeper into this important volume, available at:

<http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org/wp/wordpress/resources/study-guide-for-the-root-of-war>

A hundred years after the end of the First World War, and fifty years after Merton's premature death, his thinking, as expounded in this book, remains most prescient, unfortunately so. The superpowers continue to pour ever-greater resources into new and 'better' weapons, blindly ignoring the teachings of Pope John XXIII, the Vatican Council, and Merton's own warnings, one of them used by Forest as an epigram for his timely book:

There is one winner, only one winner, in war.  
The winner is war itself.  
Not truth, not justice, not liberty, not morality.  
These are the vanquished.

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### **We Are All Poets Here**

Kathleen Witkowska Tarr  
VP&D House, Anchorage, Alaska, 2018  
ISBN 978-57833-691-3 (pbk) 400 pages  
\$24.95 / £19.15

In this engaging book the author weaves the story of her own journey of spiritual growth with the writings of Thomas Merton and in particular with his brief visit to Alaska in 1968. The author moved in her early twenties to the remote Alaskan settlement of Yakutat, but she only discovered Merton's writings in her forties whilst she was a mature

student at Pittsburgh University, when she was captivated by reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and related to Merton's 'stupid younger self ... to his pride, arrogance and drive to be a big somebody' (p. 13).

Shortly thereafter she discovered that Merton had visited Alaska principally to search for a site for a hermitage, and included Yakutat on his itinerary. Many local Catholics she spoke to were not even aware of his visit. Which is not surprising, as this visit is little known even in Merton circles. Mott briefly covered it in two pages, and *The Alaskan Journal of Thomas Merton* was not published until 1988, by which time scholars were focused more on his trip to Asia. To date there has been little scholarly interest shown in this visit.

So we can be extremely grateful to the author for helping us to explore with her, not only the places Merton visited, but also Alaska's spiritual geography. It is only in the last third of the book that she actually explores Merton's Alaskan visit. Before that she unfolds her own gradual immersion in the spiritual life, with Merton as her guide, exploring many aspects of Alaska's history and culture along the way, including the native Tlingits, the Russian Orthodox Church, the US military presence, and the role of Western missionaries. She also recounts the visits she made, following in Merton's footsteps, not only in Alaska, but to New York, Gethsemani, and many of the places Merton visited in Northern California. At times she 'felt like a Merton groupie' (p. 271). In the chapter headed 'Pasternak's Tree', the author writes movingly about her visit to Pasternak's house near Moscow with a Russian friend. In Pasternak, Merton had 'discovered a kindred spirit - a defender of inner freedom'. As did the author, who memorably writes: 'Life makes sense, as Pasternak believed, only if you look at it as *mystery*' (p. 216).

The book is shot through with beautiful descriptions of the natural world, Alaska with its dramatic mountains and glaciers being 'a good place for restless women' (p. 78). Dominating Yakutat, though rarely seen clearly due to rain clouds, is Mount Saint Elias. The author discovered in Merton's hermitage an icon of Elias (Elijah) ascending to heaven in his fiery chariot, and quotes from the important poem of that name that Merton wrote in the late 1950s. On her first clear view of the whole mountain, the author wrote: 'Mt St Elias is the most beautiful mountain I have ever seen. Petty ambitions will die on mountainsides' (p. 73). So too must the name have resonated with Merton. As he records in his journal: 'The clouds opened over Mount Saint Elias and after I was overwhelmed by the vastness, the patterns of the glaciers, the burnished copper sheen of the sun on the bright blue sea' (p. 156).

But it is the people whom the author brings to life who are most memorable. She tells us of her friend Jennie Pavlik, one of eight children, who taught her to gradually slow down and take time to listen. But most memorable is Jennie's elderly father, Mike Pavlik. The family was Catholic, but in such a remote community with perhaps a priest visiting once every two years, the Pavliks 'practiced a kind of do-it-yourself Catholicism' (p. 88). I think Merton would have got on well with old Mr Pavlik. Could he have penned a better description of being alienated from God than Mr Pavlik's? 'There is a hell. Live the way God wants you to live. If not, that is hell' (p. 92). And the author herself writes so perceptively of this old man:

Maybe he wasn't an exemplary Alaskan citizen but in this irascible, hunched-over man, I saw something else. Physically and spiritually, he had found an *inner alignment*, a wholeness, and a grounding and unity that felt right, something I had only experienced traces of (p. 107).

The brainchild behind Merton's visit to Alaska was Archbishop Joseph Ryan, who hoped to encourage more monks and nuns to come to the region. For some of the time Merton stayed at the Precious Blood Convent where he spent several days giving talks and leading Days of Recollection with the contemplative nuns and local clergy. Merton also travelled widely through the region, travelling by small plane, searching for a possible site for a hermitage. Indeed the journal comes across as a series of days filled with breathless activity. Not all of the local Catholics were welcoming, seeing Merton as 'a monk on a junket' (p. 290). A local Catholic is reported as having said: 'For a monk who had taken a vow of silence, Merton sure had a hard time keeping his mouth shut' (p. 290). One can also wonder if Merton would have liked being a cold, rain-soaked hermit. Locals very much doubt whether he would have coped in such an extreme environment. As Jennie's brother Rudy put it: 'Merton might be a Trappist monk, but he don't know a damn thing about trapping' (p. 89). Given his desire to connect with people, if he had settled as a hermit in Alaska, I personally don't think he would have stayed the course.

The author saves the best two chapters until last, in which she writes so perceptively about Merton, and also about herself, about how in her own life, with all its pain and contradictions laid out with heartfelt honesty, she eventually finds that 'I was no longer adrift. I found the solid

deck beneath my feet' (p. 391). She also found that she had been drawn by God 'to that faraway place to quiet me, to give me time to scrape off the hardened crust of my false self' (p. 391).

Throughout the book the author demonstrates her deep immersion in Merton's works through her wide range of quotations; but she does not go into the details of the conferences he gave in Alaska. The text of those can be found in the expanded volume of his Alaskan journal, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, published in 1989. The conferences have much to teach us. In Bonnie Thurston's excellent article, 'I spoke mostly of prayer', which looks at their content in detail, she considers that they form 'one of the richest sources for Merton's mature teaching on prayer'.\* Alas *We are all poets here* has no index but does include details of Merton's itinerary, a brief bibliography and a generous selection of photographs, many taken by Merton himself whilst in Alaska. This is a book to cherish, one that bears eloquent testimony to how Merton, fifty years after his death, continues to inspire and challenge his readers.

\* Bonnie Thurston, 'I spoke mostly of prayer', *The Seasonal*, vol. 35:3, Fall 2010, p. 12.

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### The Spirit of Simplicity

Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OCSO

Translated and annotated by Thomas Merton

Ave Maria Press

Notre Dame, Indiana

ISBN 13-978-1-59471-781-9 (pbk) xviii +139 pages

£10.88

This new edition adds a succinct and useful preface and a timely afterword by Abbey of Gethsemani Abbot Dom Elias Dietz, OCSO to the first 1948 anonymously published version. The former provides a context for the genesis of 'this unique little book' (p. vii); the latter offers updated information on the original sources from which the spirit of simplicity of Cistercian monasticism flowed, and replaces Merton's own suggestions, many of which are now out of date. The book comprises two parts: the first is Merton's translation from the French and notes of 'an official