

Notes on Poems David Scott

Bob Lax's friendship with Merton reaches back to Columbia days, and it was to Lax that Merton entrusted the 30 Poems in December 1943 that became the first published work of Merton with New Directions. Bob Lax is still writing poetry, in Patmos where he lives, and Stride Publications (11 Sylvan Road, Exeter, Devon, EX4 6EW) have produced Psalm and Rooster "a lightweight book of poems about hens". The forthcoming volume by Lax is called 27th and 4th and Rupert Loydell, editor of Stride publications, promises a "vast tome about Lax next year: The ABC's of Robert Lax, a kind of festschrift-cum-celebration-cum-critical work."

The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Verse (Oxford 1994), edited by Ian Hamilton has an entry for Merton. The misprint/error will have to be rectified in further editions, "In 1941 Merton entered the Cistercian Trappist monastery...where he remained for six years". The general conclusion of Martin Seymour-Smith, who wrote the article, was this, "It is likely that his best poetic work has a proper place in any anthology of modern catholic or mystical verse".

We still remember with a sort of stunned excitement the poems of Padraig Daly which he read at the Winchester celebration. His poem about Merton from his book Out of Silence (Dedalus Press, 1993) is printed below. He wrote another one on the train coming over from Dublin, that is also printed below. Selima Hill's reading of Merton's own poems at the same event was extremely memorable, not least for her having to compete with a brass band outside the church. The tape recorder we set up for the occasion didn't work and so we have only the memory. She read, with particular power arising out of a personal experience of a barn fire, the poem Elegy for the Monastery Barn. This poem was written after the cowbarn at Gethsemane burned down one August evening in 1953, during the evening meditation. It was published in The Strange Islands (1957). Its eschatological tone and the irony (now) of its concern with death by fire makes it a central poem of Merton's:

Laved as in a Sacrament
The brilliant walls are holy
In the first-last hour of joy.

Mark Van Doren, in his introduction to the Selected Poems (New Directions, 1959), talks about this poem at some length, and concludes, "All is real; nothing is made up; this, we instantly believe, is the true content of the subject, which like any other subject starts on earth and gets in its own natural way to heaven".

Selima Hill's own books of poems contain occasional references to Merton. In My Darling Camel (Chatto & Windus, 1988), two poems have a direct reference

to Merton. The first A Girl Called Owen describes the relationship between herself, her own father, and Owen Merton. Both Selima's father and Owen Merton were artists, and that was the reason for them meeting and becoming good friends. The second poem Natural Wonders 11, refers to Merton's death and his secret love affair. In Selima Hill's latest book, A Little Book of Meat (Bloodaxe, 1993) Merton is mentioned in the Acknowledgments. "I would also like to thank the late Thomas Merton and his friends and correspondents Thich Nhat Hanh and Flannery O'Connor. Their books include: Thomas Merton The Seven Storey Mountain, Thich Nhat Hanh The Sun of My Heart, Flannery O'Connor Wise Blood and A Good Man is Hard to Find.

Thomas Merton

What is to be said about silence
Except that it is;
And you sought it out diligently in your woods,
Living alone with your books,
In the company of birds;

Walking to morning prayer on a snow carpet,
Nothing there before you
But the marks of the monastery cat
On the white ground;

Or the form where deer slept
Close to your window,
Rhythmically heaving with your sleep's heaving?

And there is little you can send us out of your silence
Except to say that it is;
And it cries louder than our clamour.

Padraig Daly (from Out of Silence)

Merton in Advent

You move with chilblained hands,
In coarse overalls and woollen cap,
Doggedly following silence.

In the Winter monotony of the woods,
Waiting, learning merely to wait.

Padraig Daly