

Book Reviews

The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Volume VII of the Merton Journals, edited with an introduction by Patrick Hart. pp. xix, 348, San Francisco CA, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, £19.99.

The seventh volume of Merton's journals, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, is full of energy and movement. Edited by Patrick Hart, the general editor of the journals and the editor of volume one, it covers the final period of Merton's life from October 1967 until Merton's last entry in his journal on December 8th, 1968. A substantial portion of the material in this volume has been accessible to readers over the years through *Woods, Shore Desert* and through Merton's *Alaskan* and *Asian Journals* - though this volume lacks the fascinating appendices and other supplementary materials contained in those volumes.¹ The period covered in this volume is also well documented in Michael Mott's official biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. The sections of this journal already published trace the three major journeys Merton undertook in 1968. *Woods, Shore Desert* is the journal Merton kept on a visit to Our Lady of the Redwoods in California and to the monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico in May 1968. *The Alaskan Journal* covers his visit to look at possible sites for a hermitage in Alaska immediately prior to his visit to Asia which is recounted in *The Asian Journal*.

Having accompanied Merton on his journey over the three thousand plus pages of these journals my feeling was that with *The Other Side of the Mountain* they ended with a whimper. There is a sense of anti-climax like when someone tells you the conclusion to a brilliant thriller. Over the course of Merton's journals there has been some wonderful writing but, with so much of the final months of this volume already in print in *The Asian Journal*, the ending is too familiar. After the preceding volumes, especially volume five, I found this volume a disappointment.

Merton comes across as disparate and the pages read more like a diary than the entries in a spiritual journal to which readers have become accustomed. His life at Gethsemani appears to have become almost dissolute. The frequency of his visits to Louisville and other places increases in this volume, especially as he prepares for his trip to Asia, and frequently the visits would involve social elements which he would later complain about in his journal: "got home tired at 10 after sitting around drinking bourbon I didn't want in dull places" (6.) or again "we ate curry and drank daiquiris and listened to calypso music." (162.) When Evelyn Waugh visited Gethsemani he was shocked at how different it was from the regime described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* - he would hardly recognise the Merton of these final years! Merton himself comments, whilst listening to jazz and drinking sherry on the rocks at the hermitage that "things ain't what they used to be." (144.)

Merton also complains about outside intrusions into his solitude and receives the Abbot's permission to explore sites away from Gethsemani -

Alaska and the Californian coast - where he could pursue the eremitical life. This lack of solitude, I feel, was part of his paradoxical nature and, as such, it would be a problem wherever he went.

As with Merton's other journals this volume gives fascinating insights into the books, people, places and events which were influencing him at this time. The materials he is reading in preparing his poem *The Geography of Lograire*, along with his enjoyment of writing that work, feature prominently in this journal. He also returns to William Blake and James Joyce for the first time in many years and decides that "Blake would be my desert-island book now." (64.) Also notable is Merton's discovery of Basho's travel notes:

Completely shattered by them. One of the most beautiful books I have ever read in my life. It gives me a whole new (old) view of my own life. The whole thing is pitched right on my tone. Deeply moving in every kind of way. Seldom have I found a book to which I respond so totally. (18.)

A number of events effect Merton in this volume. The death of his Aunt Kit, one of the last of his relatives with whom he had kept in touch, in a ferry disaster in New Zealand strikes him forcibly and he returns to it a number of times in the journal. Dom Flavian Burns' election as the new Abbot of Gethsemani after "two momentous days, heavy with snow and heavier with happenings," (40.) occupies many entries in the early part of this journal both as the community prepares for the election and subsequently as things begin to change after the election.

One particularly notable feature in Merton's entries in this journal is a greater awareness of his surrounding geography and his place within it. This applies not just to some of his entries at Gethsemani but also to many of the entries he makes on his travels. He writes, for example, of the incredible beauty of "bare trees against the metallic blue of the evening" (44.) at Gethsemani and of the "calligraphy of snow and rock" seen from the airplane. (94.) But it is his entries in Asia that truly abound with this awareness and express in great detail the richness and the colour of the places he is visiting and the people he is seeing and meeting:

We drove through Chinatown with its clutter of shops and wild, dirty streets. Crowds. Motorbikes. Taxis. Buses. Trucks fixed up to look like dragons, glittering with red and chrome. Dirt. Camp. Madness. Enormous nightmare movie ads. And lovely people. Beautiful, gentle people. (211.)

This volume concludes with Merton in Asia where his paradoxical nature is, as ever, evident. He complains of the continual movement of his journey and of not wanting to be merely a tourist and yet, all the while, he is altering and

extending his itinerary. There are though, a number of episodes in his final journey which stand out, particularly his audiences with the Dalai Lama, his experience in front of the carved statues of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa and other moments when his inquisitive and questioning spirit stands out.

With the publication of volume seven it is good at last to have these journals but they will appeal more to the scholar than the general Merton reader. This is largely, I believe, because they lack the craftsmanship Merton brought to the material he himself prepared for publication and which made the journals published in his lifetime so popular. *Paul M Pearson.*

1. *Thomas Merton in Alaska* contains over ninety pages of conferences Merton gave to various priests and religious during the time he spent in Alaska and *The Asian Journal* contains talks Merton gave in Asia, including his final talk in Bangkok, along with an excellent glossary and other material.

John O'Donohue, *Anam-Cara, Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*, Bantam Press. ISBN 0593 042018. Hardback £15.00.

This book begins with a poem and ends with a Blessing. The poem and Blessing are by the author John O'Donohue. Each of the six chapters have intriguing titles, *The Mystery of Friendship; Towards a Spirituality of the Senses; Solitude is Luminous; Work as a Poetics of growth; Ageing; the Beauty of the Inner Harvest and Death, the Horizon is in the Well.* Each of these chapters also end with a Blessing. It is almost as if the author cannot prevent the poetry bursting out of his prose. I have to confess that it was this that drew me to read through this book and to delight in its contents.

John O'Donohue in the Prologue gives us a flavour of what is to come. "It is strange to be here. The Mystery never leaves you alone. Behind your image, below your words, above your thoughts, the silence of another world waits. A world lives within you. No-one else can bring you news of this inner world. Through our voices, we bring out sounds from the mountain beneath the soul. These sounds are words." He then introduces his main themes, the Celtic mind, the Celtic imagination and the Celtic understanding. "The Celtic mind was neither discursive nor systematic. Yet in their lyrical speculation, the Celts brought the sublime unity of life and experience to expression. The Celtic mind was not burdened by dualism." He explains the meaning of 'Anam Cara' as . . .

'Soul Friend', a person to whom you could reveal the hidden intimacies of your life. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an Anam Cara your friendship cut across all convention and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the friend of your soul. (p.16)

He goes on ...