

 **BOOK REVIEW****PAUL M. PEARSON**

Robert Waldron *Walking with Thomas Merton: Discovering His Poetry, Essays and Journals*. Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002. ISBN: 0809140586.

Robert Waldron is becoming a familiar name in Merton literature, with two books about Merton to his name so far, *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul: A Jungian Perspective* and *Poetry as Prayer, Thomas Merton*, as well as numerous articles in various journals, including *The Merton Journal*. His latest book *Walking with Thomas Merton: Discovering His Poetry, Essays and Journals* offers a gentle and congenial introduction to Merton's life and thought.

I was rather tentative in approaching this review having read comments Waldron makes in this book about the power reviewers possess to make or break a book. He recalls two novelists who were "dumbfounded and made physically ill by the gratuitous cruelty" (16) of the reviews their books received. However, I feel reviews are important in informing potential readers and not being honest would be a disservice to both the reader and the author.

Walking with Thomas Merton stemmed from a summer Robert Waldron spent "living" with Merton in preparation for giving the first, of possibly a number, of retreats about Merton and poetry. Over the course of a long summer vacation from his teaching work Waldron turned down various options to travel and spent the time reading a variety of Merton books, in particular his poetry, in preparation for the forthcoming retreat. The present book is a diary of that experience. It reminded me a little of books that fall almost into their own literary genre of

accounts written by people on retreat at Merton's Gethsemani hermitage—John Dear's *The Sound of Listening*, Basil Pennington's *A Retreat with Thomas Merton* and John Howard Griffin's *The Hermitage Journals*. Similarly this account is like one of these diaries or journals reflecting on Merton's life and writings, but over a longer period of time and from his home in Boston, Massachusetts rather than at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

As a journal kept whilst the author was preparing his retreat it provides a fascinating insight into Waldron's deep and thoughtful preparation. For most of his readers the thought of a summer spent reading and pondering Merton is a luxury few could afford. I found myself wondering which books I would be reading if I had such an opportunity. Which books would I take to my desert island? Waldron's style of writing in this book is very readable and it is an easy book to pick up and read a short section of at odd moments. Some passages provided new insights into Merton's thought and made me stop and think. Others, I felt, bordered on the mundane or the over-familiar. For example, abbreviating Pasternak to "P" and James Laughlin to "JL" seemed both unnecessary and confusing. Having said that, Waldron's style of writing helped to rescue some of his more mundane reflections leaving me with an overall feeling of encouragement and inspiration. Particularly insightful were Waldron's thoughts on Merton's growing awareness of the natural world around him at Gethsemani, "teach me to be so attentive that I shall hear the first flakes of the snow's fall" (34); his delight in the present moment, "The Holy Surprise of the Right Now" (48); and his comparison of Merton and Nouwen which he parallels with a

comparison of Hemingway and Faulkner, bringing both pairs of writers together and suggesting Merton and Nouwen are both fine writers on the spiritual life. They remind me, however, of Faulkner and Hemingway. Even though both novelists received Nobel Prizes, Faulkner plunged far more deeply into the human soul than Hemingway. (64)

An interesting and debatable insight into Merton and Nouwen who are increasingly referred to in the same breath in discussions about the impact of twentieth century spiritual writers.

The book concludes with a short description of the retreat day itself and an evaluation by Waldron of how he thought it had gone. I was struck on reading these comments that there must be a great deal of collective wisdom from people who have given retreats and classes on Merton and that these could be brought together to create a useful resource book.

I enjoyed reading *Walking with Thomas Merton* and accompanying Waldron on the preparation for his retreat. This is not an academic book, and it does not include any revelations about Thomas Merton or great insights into his thought but it is very reasonably priced, readable and thought-provoking.



“The little marsh pheasant
...does not ask
To be kept in a hen run
Though she might have all she desired
Set before her.
She would rather run
And seek her own little living
Uncaged.”

*The Way of
Chuang
Tzu*