

Book Reviews

When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature by Thomas Merton
 Edited by Kathleen Deignan,
 with drawings by John Giuliani
 Sorin Books, Notre Dame, Indiana.
 ISBN 1893732606.
 £8.99

This beautifully designed and produced book is a compact collection of Merton's thoughts on nature culled from his journals and essays. A foreword by Thomas Berry suggests the significance of Merton's all-pervasive concern with nature for our time. Ecological movements that are not rooted in a sense of the sacred will not provide an adequate response to the cosmic crisis, since 'we will not save what we do not love' and 'we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred' (p. 18). This is where Merton's mystical sensibility of the cosmos as divine can make a significant contribution. Deignan's introductory essay expands on this theme. Noting Merton's identity as a 'landscape painter's son' who took his first lessons in close attention to the natural world from his father, Deignan describes Merton as one with a 'Franciscan soul', a 'Cistercian heart', a 'Celtic spirit' and a 'Zen mind', all of which were united in his quest for 'the recovery of paradise' and the revela-

tion of Sophia, 'the diffuse shining of God in creation'. She sees Merton as a 'creation mystic' whose "'seeds" of a vibrant creation spirituality' are scattered throughout his writings.

After an initial chapter gathering Merton's thoughts on the mystery of approaching and knowing living things, Deignan has arranged these 'seeds' thematically in chapters that take the reader through the four seasons, the four elements, the firmament, creatures, 'festivals' (rain, flowers and trees), 'presences' (mountains) and 'sanctuary' (forest) before closing with a brief affirmation of the presence of holy Wisdom in the natural world. On every page one confronts Merton's exquisite artistry as a poet and a writer, as well as touching the sense of wonder and gentle compassion for the living things of the earth which permeate his spirituality. Who can write like Merton about rain, for example? I found some of my favourite passages here in which Merton celebrates the 'festival of rain', evoking the simplicity yet also the miracle of that outpouring which not only quenches earth's thirst but at the same time creates its own mysterious sound - and landscape. There is a freshness, an immediacy without sentimentality in Merton's approach to nature which few other contemporary writers or mystics have

matched (though one might think of poets such as Mary Oliver and Denise Levertov, perhaps, as exceptions) - what Berry in his foreword describes as a 'post-critical naiveté' (p. 15) which respects the otherness of the natural world yet also insists on a vital, saving connection between the natural world and human beings: a saving connection which goes both ways.

It is good - perhaps essential - to be reminded of these things, and this little book does so, ably assisted by John Giuliani's quiet and graceful line drawings. If I have a hesitation about this anthology, it is one that pertains to the making of any such collection. Merton's observations and reflections on nature have necessarily been taken out of their original contexts in order to be gathered and concentrated into one volume whose focus is on that one topic; and there is both gain and loss in that process. The gain is precisely in the intensity of the focus on the natural world, and the raising of the question of humanity's relationship to the natural world within Merton's spirituality and writings. The loss is in the de-contextualisation of Merton's relation to the natural world from the wider arena of his life and his other, theological, spiritual and political concerns. This has the effect sometimes of lessening the impact of his comments on nature rather than strengthening them. In reading Merton's journals, one of the things the reader experiences is the extraordinary juxtaposition of daily minutiae, issues, people and concerns that made up the tapestry of Merton's life and spiritual universe. What he had for breakfast, the books he is reading, the people he has heard from and is writing to, the manual

work he is employed in doing, his reaction to the US government's latest policy, his sense of God in prayer - these are all mixed up alongside acute observations on rain, flowers, mountain, birds, cows in the pasture. It is precisely their juxtaposition and interrelationship that creates the theological perspective and the mystical awareness that is particular to Merton. Without the specificity of the sausages for breakfast, the letter from a friend, the Aquinas he is reading, the brother who sang out of tune in Vespers, his notes on nature are in danger of becoming sentimentalised and sanitised.

So, for me, this anthology has most value if it drives the reader back to a wider, larger reading of Merton, in which one might recapture his idiosyncratic and complex spirituality, in which the painterly aestheticism and mystical awareness join hands with the voracious intellectual appetite, the vast capacity for friendship and the wide-ranging spiritual sympathies - as well as with the struggles, restlessness and woundedness of the man.

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Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton

Roger Lipsey, foreword by Paul Pearson
 New Seeds Books, Boston, Mass.
 ISBN 13 9781590303139 (paper)
 ISBN 10 159030313-x
 £19.99

Dr Lipsey has succeeded remarkably in producing this illustrated text providing both artistic insight and spiritual con-