

Book Reviews

Living with Wisdom

A life of Thomas Merton

Jim Forest

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Reviewed by Christine Stones

This revised and third edition of Jim Forest's biography was published to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of Merton's death. The biographer, a founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, first encountered Merton through his autobiography and was to become a close personal friend.

As someone who has dipped spasmodically into Merton's writing and had some awareness of the outline of his life, this biography portrayed Merton vividly and left me eager to read more of his works. Two key factors, in addition to the clarity and structure of Forest's writing, are the illustrative photographs and the extensive use of Merton's writings. The pages are enriched by images of Merton, significant people in his life, important places plus photographs taken by Merton himself. The wealth of quotations from Merton allows the subject of the biography to speak directly to the reader.

The author is clear that he is not presenting a flawless man and acknowledges Merton's contradictions and inconsistencies. He admires his determination 'after each fall to get up and make a fresh start' (p.xvi).

At the beginning is a helpful seven page chronology of Merton's life. The opening chapter describes his arrival at the door of the Abbey of our Lady of Gethsemani and points out that the silent, austere life and one of prayer and worship did not provide anonymity. 'Exactly twenty-seven years later he would die, on the other side of the planet but still a monk of this abbey, by then not only famous but also controversial' (p.3).

The book then traces Merton's life both chronologically and thematically. It begins with the early experiences of Merton, the devastating loss of both his parents by the age of 16 years. We learn of his encounter with God in Rome which is followed by the bleakest year at Cambridge, which Merton described as 'an incoherent riot of undirected passion' (p.35) and included fathering a child.

In the subsequent chapters, alongside the facts of Merton's time at Columbia, his employment as a University teacher and his voluntary work in Harlem, we witness his gradual development of faith and his growing but sometimes faltering conviction of a call to monastic life.

The remaining two thirds of the book provide illuminating detail of the second half of Merton's life after entering the monastery. The chapters chart the significant outer events and the accompanying inner journey revealed in his writings.

We are provided with a sympathetic account of this man of paradoxes: his persistent and often restless search for solitude and his staggeringly profuse communication through letters and publications; a man who focused on the inner life of the spirit and engaged with critical issues in the outer political world; a man who withdrew from society into a tradition centuries old and yet continued to penetratingly address twentieth century preoccupations and dangerous misconceptions; a hermit who experienced an epiphany on a crowded street; a man for whom Christ remained the pivot of life and faith whilst seeking and offering wisdom and friendship across the divide of religions.

We are given a sensitive picture of a man of humour and compassion who battled throughout his life. We see how residence in a monastery provided no protection from opposition and temptation: the frustration of obedience when the Abbot General forbids the continuation of his writing on peace and war; the irritation with censors who edit his work and delay publication; the joy and heartache of a loving relationship and the unavoidable agonising choice between marriage and continuing his vocation as a monk.

So the list could go on for this is a biography that paints Merton as a spiritual writer whose insights are hewn out of contemplation which has serenity but also knows the depths of human travail. No wonder he is a man whose writings con-

tinue to inspire those who glimpse the transcendental as they struggle on their earthly journey with feet of clay.

The strength of allowing Merton's writings to portray the man could have been enhanced in places by greater authorial comment or analysis e.g. in exploring a link between the catastrophic loss of both parents before adulthood and his turbulent year at Cambridge.

The sources of the extensive quotations from Merton can be traced through the notes and a brief list of resources and web links is provided. But this book, that aspires to encourage its readers to seek out Merton's writings, disappointingly fails to provide a bibliography. This is an absorbing introduction to the man and his writings, it is accessible rather than academic and I would recommend it to anyone wishing to learn about Thomas Merton.

Christine Stones is a member of the Bristol Spirituality Network planning group, a Methodist local preacher and has recently joined the Thomas Merton Society.

**Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding
Merton's *Conjectures*
and the Value of Work**

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Reviewed by Melynn Matthews

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