

# Book Reviews

**The Journey of Thomas Merton**  
Edited by Morgan C. Atkinson with  
Jonathan Montaldo  
SPCK  
London, 2009  
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£10.99

Another book on Merton! are the first words of a brief commendation by Richard Rohr found on the back of this book. It's not an uncharitable thought with which to approach this or any new volume on Merton. After all, how much more can be said about Merton—especially in a book like this one, which aims to be an introduction to his life and thinking? This particular volume is different though, in being a spin off from a documentary made by Morgan C. Atkinson, which entailed interviewing many Merton scholars as well as friends and monastic colleagues. The film lasted an hour and used a fraction of the material gathered. This is a collection of the leftovers which proved too good to leave on the cutting room floor. Neither the film nor the resulting book offer a cradle to the grave profile of Merton—they focus on his adult life from age twenty to fifty-three. 'The goal [of the film] was to create a human, living portrait of Merton

that might inspire viewers to explore Merton more deeply on their own' (p10). The book will give the reader a sense of the chronology of Merton's life, but it is less of a biography more of a tour around seminal moments, themes and issues.

The format is slightly unusual in that it consists of quotations from the 'choir' of contributors Atkinson assembled. These are placed alongside each other so that it appears that people are in conversation with one another. The 'conversations' are introduced with words from Atkinson in which he tells the story of the making of the film, but also includes personal reflections on the effect the material he gathered and the people he met, had on him. This proves to be both a strength and a weakness. It makes the book easy to dip into—almost like reading a magazine article—and points are made in a short and snappy way. The conversationalists though, do echo each other—a lot. Some judicious editing would have helped avoid what, at times, feels like careless repetition.

This drawback should not however, prevent anyone reading this book. The conversationalists are well chosen—for example John Eudes Bamberger, who was taught by Merton at Gethsemani, draws on over forty years of monastic life, and his training as a psychiatrist. Daniel Berrigan speaks from his experience of struggle

in the 1960s American peace movement, alongside and sometimes with, Merton. Christine Bochen shares some of her extensive knowledge of Merton and recounts what it felt like to have the responsibility to edit the diaries which cover the romance with his hospital nurse.

I found that even though I have read plenty of material by and about Merton, I was often being reminded of old truths and coming across new insights. Paul Pearson, director of the Thomas Merton Center, helped me realise, for example, how easy (and mistaken) it is to view Merton's Walnut Street 'revelation' as a Damascus Road moment that suddenly altered the way he viewed the wider world. Merton's change of heart, like so many, had significant moments—but was also part of a discernibly slower evolution. Lawrence Cunningham reminded me of how post-war America had a flourishing market for religious writing—usually of the self-affirming and positive thinking kind—and how distinct Merton's voice, full of asceticism and self-denial, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, would have sounded. John Eudes Bamberger gives a succinct summary of the challenge of monastic formation: 'The first thing you have to do when you enter the monastery is to do what you're told. If you don't want to do that, go someplace else.' Christine Bochen makes a wonderfully shrewd comment in reaction to Merton's spring-autumn relationship with a student nurse: 'I think as people read the account of Merton's falling in love, they respond in ways that say much more about them than about Merton.' I would be surprised if other readers don't come across similar gems, one of which is surely the conclusion, which is both low key, and moving.

Atkinson ends the book with an account of showing his film at a 'monk's matinee' at the Abbey Gethsemani. He is nervous, not surprisingly. 'There would be no audience who would know more about my subject matter than this one and none that I wanted more to approve of the program.' Less than half of the community of monks attend. 'I knew that some of the monks were ambivalent about their famous Brother Louis.' At the end Atkinson receives polite applause and a comment or two before the monks depart to Vespers. The sense of anti-climax is palpable, and yet he recognises that even in that moment he had been given a gift. 'It was a deeper sense of perspective about a project that had been nearly all-consuming. Be open to the experience, embrace what is worthwhile and then move on.'

*The Journey of Thomas Merton* is an excellent introduction to Merton's life and thinking. Its generous use of well-reproduced photographs, and chatty style, make it very accessible. It will communicate easily to those who come to Merton for the first time, wondering what all the fuss is about. Those who are more familiar with Merton would do well not mistake the book as 'Merton-lite'. The quality of contributions, means that there are many moments of real depth and insight which would enrich anyone who chooses to add this delightful book to shelves which may already be groaning under the weight of Merton literature.

Keith James works as a Vicar in Bewdley, Worcestershire. He is the author of *Mission-shaped Hermit: Thomas Merton, Mission and Spirituality* (Grove Books 2009).