

me the abbey's collection of Merton's works: 'That's what Merton did for us monks – and for all of us – he brought us back to contemplation, so he did.'

**Tom Finnigan** is a semi-retired crane dealer in Malin on the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal. Merton entered his life as a boy in Manchester, blossomed as a church-student in Rome—where he was when Merton died—faded a bit when he got married, but took over when he came to live in Malin twenty years ago. He reads Merton every day.

---

### **Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices**

Jon M. Sweeney

St Martin's Essentials, New York, 2021

ISBN: 978-1250250483 (PBK) xxix + 160 pages

£9.99

In an article in *America Magazine: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture*, author Jon M. Sweeney states that *Thomas Merton: An introduction to his life, teachings, and practices* had been 'one of those "labor of love" projects that had gestated for 35 years, since I first visited the Abbey of Gethsemani over spring break during my sophomore year in college.'

Describing Merton in the *America* article as 'the most important Catholic writer in English in the 20th century', Sweeney's book on him is an illuminating text for our times. It is appealing in its simplicity without compromising on Merton's complexities. As the author has engaged with Merton's works over decades, his knowledge and insights make this a particularly accessible text for those wanting to find a starting point for learning about Merton.

In the introduction to *Thomas Merton*, Sweeney writes on Merton's search for 'the elusive wholeness that we all know somehow lurks nearby'. He says that this is what we all want for our lives: 'wholeness, integration, vitality, growth. And the opposites of those things are what we very much *don't* want(p.xviii).' In setting the book out as essentially Merton's chronological journey of self-discovery, Sweeney gives us, as readers, the chance to come to understand him with a little more clarity. I would add that we might even come to understand ourselves with greater insight because of the light shed on Merton's journey.

Sweeney's skill in part lies in his choice of passages quoted to illuminate the text. While anyone with even a passing knowledge of Merton's catalogue of work will know what an immense challenge this will have been, the impression I was left with from his choices was just how exquisitely *disturbing* Merton can be in his quest, and therefore for our own quest as readers of Merton, for that elusive 'hidden wholeness'.

In this, *Thomas Merton* is not simply about Merton. It is also about the reader. Merton wanted to help readers find themselves, and in that quest, to find God. But we are reminded throughout of the possibility that we will never fully understand our subject. 'We are all secrets,' Merton wrote, and our search, as well as Merton's, does not end in this life (p.xix).

Whether we are seeking hidden wholeness, aiming to distinguish between the true self and the false self, or love and holiness, *Thomas Merton* helps us to carve a rich and rewarding pathway. As a 'labor of love', *Thomas Merton* has that reassuring sense of a lengthy germination, and seems wise in its choice of focus as an introduction.

Another appeal of this book is that, although it is an introduction among many on the market, it deftly explores his life and his ideas as well as his transgressions. Merton's spiritual insights are discussed in the context of living a life, which speaks, as Sweeney seems to aim to do, to those who are religiously unanchored in the twenty-first century.

*Thomas Merton* is eminently readable food for thought, whether as an entry-level text on Merton or as part of wider research. Its style is accessible, and thought-provoking. Perhaps most significantly, however, it speaks to the dramas and immense challenges of our times through the life and work of this monk living in the twentieth century, showing us that Merton remains limitlessly relevant for readers today.

**Elizabeth Holmes** is a writer and a teacher with a long-held interest in Thomas Merton's life and work.