

The Shining Wilderness a selection of daily readings made by Aileen Taylor. D.L.T. £2.50.

Thomas Merton on Prayer by Tony Castle. Marshall.Pickering, £1.50.

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At first sight the two books under review might seem to be of a similar nature: they both belong to series' which are concerned with Christian Spirituality. This fact alone is not sufficient to warrant any comparison between the two, they are, it seems to me, very different books!

Tony Castle, after a short biographical note, presents us with some sixteen different themes which he draws from the works of Merton. He takes us through each theme with a degree of clarity which is rare in a book of this size. We are presented with some sound teaching about the theology of Merton and about his approach to prayer; we are presented with what Castle tells us is, "The core of Merton's teaching on prayer". This said, I would not find it difficult to use this book for the purpose of meditation. Tony Castle is to be commended for the way he has managed to capture in a few short words, something of the man, Thomas Merton.

Aileen Taylor, on the other hand, presents us with a selection of pieces written by Merton which are intended for meditation. Monica Furlong has written an introduction which is in her, by now familiar style; reading it, I have the feeling that she knows about Merton but never truly got to know the man. She talks of Merton feeling alone and miserable but I am not at all sure she has it right; she makes far too much of these feelings. Anyone who has read 'A Vow of Conversation' will know that it was whilst he was in his hermitage, alone and sometimes, no doubt, miserable that Merton was able to find a great peace; so much so that he was able to confide to his journal that he had come to terms with death which he no longer feared.

So, what of the daily readings? I hope that anyone buying this book has the stamina to read beyond the first of the selections: 'The Key to the Meaning of Life'. I read it through twice, went to the source (The Asian Journal) and read it in context and was still left in a state of total confusion; I would venture to say that, read as it stands, it is virtually un-intelligible. What an unfortunate choice of quotations for the start of, what turns out to be, a quite useful and 'inspiring' collection of readings. Often we find Merton at his most profound, drawing us towards a questioning of those things we so frequently take for granted. As is so often the case with the writing of Merton, we find ourselves being reminded of the relationship we have, or should have, with God: creation with its Creator!

If asked to recommend one of these two books I would have to say that 'Thomas Merton on Prayer' is the best buy, certainly for those who are perhaps not too familiar with Merton's thought.