

Foreword

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SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF the Thomas Merton Society of Britain and Ireland we have had six major biennial conferences. Three of these have taken place at Oakham School where Thomas Merton attended from 1929 to 1932. Each conference has had its own particular theme and its own particular flavour and they have gathered together speakers from Great Britain and Ireland, as well as notable visitors from North America. There have also been contributions from continental Europe including Poland, Spain and the Netherlands.

The combination of the two sides of the Atlantic, and at times the contrast between the British and North American approach to Merton's work, has in itself been instructive. For many of us these gatherings have renewed our sense both of the strongly international nature of Merton's vision and inspiration, and also the increasing relevance of some of his deepest insights to the spiritual, political and cultural situation with which we find ourselves confronted in our new millennium.

All this seemed particularly true in the case of the Sixth General Meeting which took place in Oakham at the beginning of April 2006. The title chosen was *Beyond the Shadow and the Disguise*, words which come

from Merton's description of the profound, and in some ways, all-embracing experience which came to him on the day of his visit to the great Buddhist statues at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka on December 1st 1968. It was an experience which in a strange way seemed to prefigure the totally unexpected event which took place in Bangkok nine days later when Merton's chance encounter with a faulty electric fan caused a major heart attack from which he died.

The words of Merton's description and their unforeseen and unforeseeable relevance to what was to come, proved at once a challenge and a stimulus to our three keynote speakers. I was not alone in feeling that their presentations, gathered together here as essays, gave us unusually valuable assessments of many of the themes which lie at the heart of Merton's life and activity, as a monk and a hermit, as a poet and a writer, and as a commentator on some of the deepest themes of the twentieth and twenty-first century. The essays provide three different ways of approaching this topic but they complement each other in a remarkable way.

In Monica Weis' essay we have a profound assessment of Merton as a writer, as an artist in the use of words, through her careful and detailed consideration of one of the most memorable passages in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in which Merton speaks of the coming of the summer dawn in the woods around the monastery, and in which he takes us beyond his purely literary presentation of the subject.

For Monica Weis, Merton in this passage "captures the essence of going beyond the shadow and the disguise. He has sketched for us the first glimmer of morning and allowed that physical light to pierce the darkness of his soul. This dawn—and every dawn for Merton—becomes a true experience of contemplation."

Here in a strange way we are again brought up against Merton's growing awareness of the Welsh element in his own inheritance. Of all the seventeenth century writers, however great his love for Traherne, in the end it was Henry Vaughan who most caught hold of him. Standing behind the dawn passage in Merton's diary we can surely see the lines of Vaughan in his strangely entitled poem *Rules and Lessons*, which tells us to be present with God at the moment of dawn when all creation comes to life.

Walk with thy fellow creatures: note the hush
And whispers amongst them. There's not a spring
Or leaf but hath his morning hymn; each bush
And oak doth know I AM; canst thou not sing?

Mornings are mysteries; the first world's youth,
Man's resurrection, and the future's bud
Shroud in their births: the crown of life, light, truth
Is stil'd their star, the stone, and hidden food.

At the heart of our life, of the life of the whole creation, there is every day "the first world's youth", the clarity and promise of Eden; "man's resurrection", the glory which overcomes and transcends the darkness of our fear and despair, and "the future's bud", the opening out into the eternal kingdom in which God will be all and in all. At the end of her essay Monica Weis stresses the dailyness of this vision. "The magnificence of sunrise, yet its dailyness—its inevitability, its cyclic rhythm is stunning. The birds never tire of coming to be, they wake up and become birds—not a miracle of transforming themselves into another species, nor a mutation into some master flock—just ordinary birds waking to an ordinary day. Indeed the message of ordinariness is how truly extraordinary it is."

One of the things which surprised and delighted me about the essay by Paul Pearson, was the major place he gave to the person of Clement of Alexandria, this great second century writer. Likewise, Merton shows him to us, in his essay of 1962 as "a man of unlimited comprehension and compassion, who did not fear to seek elements of truth wherever they could be found...its partial and incomplete expression gives us already something of the great unity we desire."

I was also struck by the similarity of Merton's views of Clement to those of the Welsh poet and theologian David Gwenallt Jones, who, in a wartime essay (1943), also salutes Clement as a great witness to an all-inclusive Christian humanism, seeing the recognition of God's truth and beauty as breaking in on us in a great variety of ways throughout the whole of creation. We see how vital it was for Gwenallt, who was himself an artist, with all the keenness of perception which goes with that calling, that the bodily senses should be known as God-given with a potential for transfiguration into the divine likeness, so that in this way

the bodily senses may become Spirit-bearing. The true joy which we have in this world, the true joy which the body brings to us, points us beyond this world to the mystery of the transfiguration of the senses, to the strange promise of the resurrection of the flesh. This is not only an all-embracing Christian humanism, it is a dynamic sacramental vision of the glory of God manifested throughout creation.

It is very striking that this bodily apprehension of the divine glory on the world around us is a major theme, not only in Paul Pearson's presentation of Merton, but still more in the complementary presentations of Monica Weis and Kathleen Deignan. Paul Pearson stresses the quality to be seen in the work and craftsmanship of the Shaker communities of nineteenth century North America. It is interesting too to see how Merton, when he speaks of this Shaker craftsmanship in his lectures, given to his Community in 1961, also speaks of the importance of the Eastern Christian contribution to this sacramental vision of the world. He refers particularly to the teaching of Maximus the Confessor. In Merton's judgement, "Maximus has the broadest and most balanced vision of the Christian cosmos of all the Greek Fathers and therefore of all the Fathers." It is a powerful tribute to one of the greatest monastic theologians of the whole Christian tradition. Merton's appreciation of him needs further exploration if we are to come to see how he makes Maximus' particular yet all-inclusive vision his own.

Kathleen Deignan's essay is in some ways the most personal and the most original and yet at the same time it incorporates vital elements of the two earlier presentations. However, it is important to notice that in her title she has adjusted Merton's own words which he used to describe the Polonnaruwa experience. This lecture is entitled *Within the Shadow and the Disguise: Thomas Merton's Sacramental Vision*.

Kathleen Deignan refers us to Merton's inheritance from his father as a painter who looked at the world in terms of "natural contemplation", and she goes on to consider how this theme is developed in the Byzantine and Russian theologians in particular. She quotes Merton: "There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious unity and integrity is Wisdom. The Mother of all, *natura naturans*."

In the essay she follows this sacramental path also through western

Christendom, through Benedict and the early Cistercians and the Franciscans who influenced Merton so deeply before he came to Gethsemani. She also points towards Merton's growing sense of identity with the Celtic world and his growing sense of his Welsh inheritance.

The essay ends with a consideration of the ecological urgency of our times. "Deep ecologist that he was Merton knew that the cause and cure of earth's degradation lay in the human soul: 'We destroy everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally, in every way'. Kathleen Deignan reminds us that nearly a half century ago Merton talked about ecological thinking needing to be the hallmark of the new millennium. "He also challenged us to revolutionise our prayer... 'all you do is breathe and look around...'" We find at the end of this striking essay a mysterious interaction of the apophatic and cataphatic ways which Merton's vision celebrates.

The three essays in this small volume are, as we have said, powerfully different in their style and in their way of approach. But these differences, far from diminishing the strength and importance of what is said, in fact confirm and clarify the central message of all three writers. It is not too much to say that we who were present at Oakham, we who had the gift of hearing the three texts directly in their original presentation, felt deeply moved by the way in which they complemented one another and spoke of the all-inclusive nature of the vision which Merton received and passed on; not only in the last days of his life but all through its course, through times of darkness as well as light, times of conflict and confusion as well as clarity and vision, until indeed that final passing "beyond the shadow and the disguise" which so unexpectedly took place in Bangkok on December 10th 1968.