

Book Reviews

Thomas Merton. *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*. Ed. with Introduction by Lawrence S. Cunningham. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) pp.406, £19.99. ISBN 0-06-065478-3.

Thomas Merton. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*. Ed. with Introduction by Victor A. Kramer. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) pp.360, £19.99. ISBN 0-06-065480-5.

Last year saw the appearance of the third and fourth volumes of the seven projected volumes of Merton's complete journals. Volumes one and two (reviewed in *The Merton Journal* vol.3 no.2) covered Merton's life from his pre-monastic years in New York, through to his entry to Gethsemani in 1941 and concluded at the same point as his previously published journal *The Sign of Jonas*, in the summer of 1952.

Volume three of the complete journals - *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham - follows on from where volume two ended with an entry dated July 25, 1952 and concludes in May 1960.

The title given to this volume does not reflect the turbulence Merton was experiencing in the years covered by this journal. "Searching for Solitude" and "Pursuing the Monk's True Life" were not easy tasks for Thomas Merton. In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton battles with his dual vocations of being a solitary and a writer and, by the end of the journal, having discovered solitude both through writing and through his work as Master of Scholastics, the impression Merton gives in his masterful epilogue to *Jonas*, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952", is that his problems over his vocation have been resolved. As Michael Mott and William Shannon have made clear in their biographies of Merton this was certainly not true. As Shannon notes, "*The Sign of Jonas* ends when the struggle is just beginning to warm up"¹ for Merton's "most serious crisis of stability yet"² and this is where the third volume of journals begins.

Beginning with July 1952 this volume goes up to March 1953 where there is a break up until July 17, 1956 when the journal begins again. Cunningham provides no explanation for the missing three years simply stating Merton "kept rather brief journal entries in the last months of 1952 and in 1953, with a hiatus in 1954-1955" (xiii) and remarking that in this period Merton gave up his position as Master of Scholastics to become Master of Novices. My major criticism of this

volume is that no attempt at an explanation is provided for this hiatus. Brother Patrick Hart, General Editor of these journals, has pointed out elsewhere that the policy decision was made to publish Merton's journals in their entirety and that the publishers did not wish them to have more than the bare minimum in the way of footnotes so as to avoid them appearing like "a German doctoral dissertation with more footnotes than text."³ The lack of comment on Merton's hiatus of the mid fifties is taking this policy to an extreme and does not help the reader.

From biographies of Merton it is possible to fill in the events of these "missing years" and to find the reason for the hiatus. In early 1953 Merton agreed to a request of Gabriel Sortais, Abbot General of the Cistercian Order, that he cease keeping a journal⁴ and the lack of journal writings from 1953 through to 1956 suggests that Merton was obeying Sortais's wishes.

In the fifties Merton experienced three major periods of instability, two of these, in 1953 and 1959 are covered in *A Search for Solitude* the other, from 1955 falls into the period when Merton was not keeping a journal but it can be clearly traced in Mott's biography. These periods of instability show Merton's struggle with his vocation and with self doubt, struggles which are not found in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*⁵ The instability Merton writes of in his own life is an instability which has come to characterise the final decades of this century. Merton's writing in this journal serve as a witness to the qualities which sustained him through these profound periods of instability, especially a deep sense of obedience and a commitment to his search for God and for truth.

In the late summer of 1952 Merton mentions three options he is considering as possibilities for greater solitude - the Carthusians, the Camaldolese or the possibility of a separate scholasticate. As Merton's crises in *The Sign of Jonas* had led to opportunities for greater solitude at Gethsemani - the rare book vault, position of forester, the attic of the barn - so, in response to his 1952 crisis Dom James allowed Merton to use a disused toolshed in the Gethsemani woods for limited periods of time. Merton called the toolshed St. Anne's and his reaction to it is reminiscent to his discovery of places he associated with solitude in *Jonas* writing that "St. Anne's is what I have been waiting for and looking for all my life" adding "everything that was ever real in me has come back to life in this doorway wide open to the sky!" (32)

Merton's second major crisis of the fifties began in the early summer of 1955 and, though not covered in *A Search for Solitude*, it is worth mentioning briefly in this review as it highlights a pattern in Merton's life, a pattern very evident in this volume of Merton's journals. A visiting abbot had complained of a "hermit

mentality" in the community and swept away some of the privileges Dom James had arranged to provide Merton with more solitude. This led to Merton's application for a transitus to the Camaldolese in June 1955. As Merton looked into the possibility of finding solitude away from Gethsemani Dom James was seeking permission for Merton to lead a more solitary life at Gethsemani. Paradoxically when Dom James had obtained permission for Merton to become a hermit in a fire tower on the monastery's land Merton offered himself as novice master. Following on from this crisis there followed a period of stability for Merton until in 1958 he began actively looking into opportunities once again to become a hermit and in November 1959 he applied for an exclaustation to go to Mexico to become a hermit near the Benedictine monastery of Cuernavaca. When Merton's request was turned down he accepted the decision with "relief that at last the problem had been settled" (358) and writes the next day of "a very great peace and gratitude at knowing that I have really, at last, found my definite place and that I have no further need to look, to seek, except in my own heart." (360) As with Merton's earlier crises of stability this crisis led to changes in his position at Gethsemani. In March 1960 Merton was given a quiet cell of his own in the monastery and plans were also begun for a cinder block building, originally to be built for ecumenical conferences, that would later become Merton's hermitage.

Merton's relentless "search for solitude" is central to this third volume of his journals. Other themes found in the earlier two volumes are present as well as many new themes. A good part of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* was written in the period covered by *A Search for Solitude* and so the development of Merton's thought can be seen through comparing this journal with *Conjectures*. Events and themes which would later be worked up for inclusion in *Conjectures* are here in their raw state. In particular Merton's expanding horizons over the latter years of this journal are striking. As Merton searched for a solitary life he was also asking questions about the monk's relationship to the world, realising that his solitary vocation was not merely "cuddling in self-love" (298) but involved a "responsibility to be in all reality a peacemaker in the world." (149) These years also saw the great expansion in Merton's correspondence and the influence of his correspondents upon him is profound. Of particular note in this journal is Merton's reflections on his contact with Boris Pasternak and his correspondence with Latin American writers. Merton's correspondence has been published elsewhere but the shockwaves from it permeate the second half of this journal. Reflecting on the effect of this correspondence upon him Merton writes:

Like Dick Whittington turning again at the sound of Bow bells, because London was his life and vocation and fortune. I have "turned again" at the voice of the Andes and of the Sertao and of the Pampas and of Brazil. (169)

Merton concludes this journal saying "I *know* you are leading me, and therefore there is *no conflict with anyone*. Nor can there be" (394) and yet, having accompanied him on his "search for solitude" and his pursuit of "the monk's true life" through these pages, having shared with Merton his struggles and his solaces, we know all too well that his search will continue along with his struggles.

The fourth volume of Merton's journals - *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, edited by Victor A Kramer - covers the period from May 1960 when Volume Three ended up until the end of July 1963. In his introduction Kramer describes this volume as "the basic documentary record of [Merton's] movement from cloister toward world, from Novice Master to hermit, and from ironic critic of culture to compassionate singer of praise." (xix)

After the crises of stability in volume three *Turning Toward the World* is a radically different journal. At the end of *A Search for Solitude* Merton vows to "find solitude outside geography." In volume four we find Merton no longer searching for solitude elsewhere but finding it where he is, "instead of making plans, anticipating and doing other futile things, I am really going to simplify my own life here" (27) and Merton ask for the mercy he feels he needs to do this:

Have mercy on my darkness, my weakness, my confusion.
Have mercy on my infidelity, my cowardice, my turning about
in circles, my wandering, my evasions. I do not ask anything
but such mercy, always, in everything, mercy. (28)

- a mercy which had frequently been a theme over the course of Merton's monastic life.

The Mount Olivet Hermitage provided Merton with the opportunity for greater solitude even though the time he was allowed to spend there was only very limited. Over the course of this journal Merton is allowed to spend greater and greater amounts of time at the hermitage but it is not until the summer of 1965 that he is finally allowed to resign his position as novice master and become a full-time hermit and, even then, Merton is obliged to keep up certain commitments in the

monastery such as giving a weekly conference to interested members of the community.

The years covered in this journal are well described as pivotal years for Merton - much was coming to fruit for him as Kramer points out in his introduction. But underneath this there is a new found sense of stability, a stability which is rooted in Merton's time in solitude, especially at the hermitage and in the Gethsemani woods.

Merton's expanding horizons are clearly evident in this volume. His thinking on the monks relationship to the world along with his thinking on issues such as war, nuclear weapons and racial issues is found throughout this volume and illustrates the manner in which his thought regarding these and other issues developed. Writing in November 1961 Merton says:

Yesterday afternoon at the hermitage, surely a decisive clarity came. That I must definitely commit myself to opposition to, and non-cooperation with, nuclear war. (182)

From this period Merton's most outspoken writings on issues of war and peace developed, including the "Cold War Letter". In many of the areas Merton was exploring he was ahead of his time. Much of his thought on monasticism, ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue, war and peace, race, and environmental issues was not current in church circles at the time and only began coming into fashion in the years after the opening up of the church which came with the Second Vatican Council.

An interesting insight to Merton can be gained through looking at the index for this volume. The index is by no means completely comprehensive and, this is true for other volumes of the complete journals as well, cannot be relied upon in ways that scholars might wish. But the index still illustrates the range of Merton's interests and thought in the early sixties and it is hard to comprehend the extent of it. Merton reaches beyond purely the boundaries of east and west or north and south and reaches out to all times and places. At one point he refers to the fundamental thought of people of other ages and other countries citing "Latin America - Greek Patristic period - Mt. Athos - Confucian China - T'ang dynasty - Pre-Socratic Greece" and laments his inability "of ever beginning truly to know and understand, to communicate with these pasts and these distances" yet feeling a "sense of obligation to do so, to live them and combine them in myself, to absorb, to digest, to 'remember.'" (42) In passages such as this we can see the background

to the work of Merton's final years and, in particular, his final epic poem *The Geography of Lograire*.

Underneath Merton's developing universal vision in this volume there lies a new stability and simplicity which will mark Merton's final years. Early on in the journal he writes:

Sat in the cool woods, bare feet in the wet grass, and my quails
whirling near me for my comfort, and wrote a poem about a
flower. (16)

Over the course of this journal Merton frequently refers to nature and his surroundings with a simplicity not present in earlier journals. There is a sense of wholeness and unity and central to this is the extra time Merton is allowed to spend in solitude at the hermitage. There are many passages which I could quote to illustrate this but one will have to suffice. In a passage in which Merton combines his natural surroundings and the solitude of the hermitage to give a sense of having, at last, found a home he writes:

Lit candles in the dusk. *Haec requies mea in saeculum saeculi* - the
sense of a journey ended, of wandering at an end. *The first time
in my life* I ever really felt I had come home and that my waiting
and looking were ended. A burst of sun through the window.
Wind in the pines. Fire in the grate. Silence over the whole
valley. (79/80)

In passages such as this Merton's talent for prose poetry leads the reader into stillness. The hermitage was a sacred space for Merton and, through the new sense of solitude he discovered in it, he gained a new unity and stability from which he could reach out to the whole world.

Simplicity, mercy, stability and compassion all feature strongly in this journal. It is the most readable of the journals published so far and lacks some of the convoluted arguments of earlier volumes which made them much harder reading than this volume. Merton's writing in this volume has a new clarity and yet, he is frequently dealing with more profound issues than previously.

1. William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) p.152
2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London, Sheldon Press 1986) p.270
3. *The Merton Annual* Vol 9, 1996, p.315
4. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, ed. Patrick Hart OCSO (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990) p.53
5. The earliest entries in *Conjectures* date from 1956 and so cover Merton's 1959 crisis of stability.

Other references - numbers in brackets - refer to pages in the two books under review.

Paul M Pearson

Peter France, *Hermits, The Insights of Solitude* (Chatto & Windus, 1996 h/b £16.99 ISBN: 7011-6296-1) (Pimlico, August 1997 p/b £10 ISBN: 07126 7363 6)

Peter France has written a delightful book. Anyone familiar with his work for the BBC (Kalaidoscope, Everyman etc.) will not be surprised to discover that it is elegantly written, thoroughly researched and very readable. It should appeal both to people who are encountering the hermits described for the first time and to those to whom they are old friends.

In the limits of eight main chapters we can only examine a few lives (one can only applaud Peter France's decision to concentrate on a few "case histories" and go into quite a lot of detail). The hermits chosen are mainly, but not exclusively, Christian monastics and are generally familiar - though there is a delightful "excursion" to visit some of the ornamental hermits of the 18th century! His selection does not include any Celts or women, and his only representative of a relatively modern non-Christian tradition is Ramakrishna.

We start with the development of ideas about the individual and society by Greek philosophers which were to have so much influence of subsequent European monastic and eremitical theory and practice.

France's chapter on the desert fathers inevitably covers well worn territory, but I would not hesitate to recommend it as a good introduction to the