

Books by and about Thomas Merton continue to appear without any sign that interest in his life and work has peaked. As Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University I receive copies of new publications and translations from all over the world. Most noteworthy is the growing interest in Merton in the countries of Eastern Europe and Asia, especially China with three new translations into Chinese in the last year. The months since the Advent issue of *The Merton Journal* have seen the publication of a number of items with many more to follow in the coming months including *The Inner Experience*, a collection of essays in honour of Robert Daggy, and books exploring Merton's interest in Hesychasm, Judaism and the Shakers.

Recent publications have been a bit of a mixed bag and hopefully the following, fairly brief reviews, will assist readers of *The Merton Journal* in selecting items which they might wish to explore.

When the Trees Say Nothing: Writing on Nature. Thomas Merton, edited by Kathleen Deignan; drawings by John Giuliani, with a foreword by Thomas Berry. Sorin Books, 2003. ISBN: 1893732606.

READERS OF THOMAS MERTON, especially those familiar with his personal journals, poetry and meditations will have been all too aware of Merton's appreciation of the natural world. This awareness was no doubt inherited from the artistic world vision of his parents, and was made all the more acute by the effect on him of the monastic life. Kathleen Deignan has brought together a comprehensive selection of Merton's writings on different aspects of nature – seasons, elements, creatures, firmament – in this short and beautifully presented volume.

Thomas Berry's foreword clearly places Merton's writings on nature within the Christian ecological movement. Kathleen Deignan's introduction masterfully traces Merton's interest in the natural world and is clearly the fruit of a deep and broad knowledge of Merton's life and thought. The book is delightfully illustrated by John Giuliani's line drawings, reflecting his interpretation of the selected quotations from Merton.

This volume is beautifully and simply presented, expressing in its presentation the directness of Merton's appreciation of nature. I expect that Deignan's

approach to Merton, drawing together selected writings on a highly specific theme, will be the first of many such approaches to his work. A number of selections have been published bringing together Merton's thought on a particular subject, generally on issues related to peace and violence, but not drawing, as this volume does, on the various genres in which Merton wrote—poetry, journals, letters, as well as his essays and books.

Seeds. Thomas Merton. Selected and Edited by Robert Inchausti. Shambhala, 2002. ISBN: 1570629307.

S*Seeds*, in contrast to *When the Trees Say Nothing*, is a more general collection of readings from Thomas Merton. The majority of these readings are relatively short, not whole essays as in *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master* edited by Lawrence Cunningham or Christine Bochen's excellent collection, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* but, as Inchausti describes them in his introduction to *Seeds*, just "paragraphs." Inchausti has divided *Seeds* up into four sections which he suggests parallel Merton's own development—the distinction between our true and false selves, Merton's view of the "state of the modern world," his "antidotes to cultural illusion" and finally, a section exploring "the existential difficulties

BOOK REVIEWS

that emerge once one truly begins to engage in the struggle for justice and true sanctification." (xv-xvi) Within these four sections Inchausti has broken his subject matter down further and highlights topics such as silence, solitude, monasticism, vocation and God.

Robert Inchausti has done a valiant job of selecting the most appropriate texts for his themes from the whole vast spectrum of Merton's writings. I think this book would serve as a good introduction to the depth and breadth of Merton's thought for a reader who had only read one or two things and wished to read more. The shortness of the quotes also make it a great book to dip in and out of, or to locate apposite quotations on an area of specific interest.

The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage. Paul Elie. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. ISBN: 0374256802.

PAUL ELIE, senior editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, has attempted in this volume to give an overview of the vast contributions of four prominent Catholic literary figures to the American consciousness over the course of the last century—Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Walker Percy. As Elie says they were 'four Catholics of rare sophistication' who overcame the narrowness of the Church and the suspicions of the culture to achieve a distinctly American Catholic outlook. (x)

In recent years a number of books have evaluated the Catholic contribution to American society from a variety of perspectives, books such as Fisher's *The Catholic Counterculture in America 1933-1962* and Massa's *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team*, both of which included in their evaluations the contributions of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day. Paul Elie's approach in this book is to examine the four major

Catholic literary figures of the twentieth century and, from this perspective, his book is a fascinating contribution and a good introduction to these four figures.

The task that Elie has undertaken is enormous, it is a vast task to examine these four figures in one book. When such a huge body of literature already exists about each of these figures Elie has had to rely on the already existing biographies and to limit himself largely to these secondary sources with little evidence of original research. For example, in describing Thomas Merton he has relied mainly on the biographies by Michael Mott, Monica Furlong and Jim Forest. However, Elie retells their stories powerfully and with great insight into the literary, political, religious and philosophical aspects of their lives and work. For example, he writes that the goal of Merton's pilgrimage in his early years was 'a world ordered toward God both inwardly and outwardly, medieval in character and French in accent,' (124) a world he found at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Insights such as this by Elie are perceptive and succinct.

Integrating the four into one book is also a most challenging task as the author needs to find a way of bringing four separate biographies together in one book. Elie's approach to this is to examine the four writers against their pilgrimages as Catholics—"the narrative of a pilgrimage, a journey in which art, life, and religious faith converge." A pilgrimage marked by the literature they read and the literature they themselves wrote,

four individuals who glimpsed a way of life in their reading and evoked it in their writing, so as to make their readers yearn to go and do likewise. (x)

There were moments in reading this book when I felt Paul Elie had not managed this integration, and *The Life You May Save* felt like four separate biographies as Elie moves back and forth between each of the figures. Having said that, Elie's eloquent synthesis in this hefty volume provides a fascinating introduction for

BOOK REVIEWS

the general reader to these four Catholic literary giants of the twentieth century.

The Death of Thomas Merton: A Novel. Paul Hourihan. Vedantic Shores Press, 2003. ISBN: 1931816018.

THIS BOOK BEGINS with a 'note of caution' to potential readers, suggesting that this 'novel' may 'seem overly provocative to many' and 'may offend Westerners comfortable in their religious beliefs—especially warm admirers of Thomas Merton.' This caution really does not go far enough.

Paul Hourihan in this book portrays Thomas Merton having a long dialogue with himself in the days and hours leading up to his accidental death in Bangkok in December 1968 about the value of his life, especially his monastic life, questioning whether or not he had got it all wrong. The author's standpoint is clearly that he had, suggesting that the traditional Christian paths to God are mistaken and that Eastern religions, especially India's Vedanta philosophy, was the path that Merton should have followed. He suggests that Merton was subconsciously drawn to the electric fan in his Bangkok room as a way out of the dilemma in which he found himself—either continuing in a way of life he no longer believed in or, alternately, starting again in an Eastern religion and disturbing the "simple faith" of so many of his loyal readers.

Under ordinary circumstances I would not have finished reading this book, it is badly written, tedious and Hourihan is basically using Merton as a vehicle for his own anti-catholic polemic from a Vedantic perspective. Readers of Merton will see all too quickly the falsity of his arguments. Merton's inter-faith dialogue was based on his deep grounding in his own tradition, a tradition he was clearly committed to right up to his final days as is evident from the final entries in his personal journals—celebrating the

Eucharist, lunching with the apostolic delegate and attending the monastic conference at which he was to die. PMP

Monksript: Literature, Arts & Spirituality Edited by Bernadette Dieker & Paul Quenon. Fons Vitae Press, 49 Mocking Bird Valley Drive, Louisville, KY., 2002. ISBN: 188775248X

THE COVER TELLS US that *Monksript* offers the thoughtful reader poems, fiction, essays, art, meditations and interviews, written from the ambiance (sic) of monasticism, eastern and western, by those who live inside and outside of monasteries.

Contributors include Seamus Heaney, R.E. Sherwin, Bonnie Thurston and Robert Lax, as well as our very own Chris McDonnell, and the pages are full of good and unusual writing, interspersed with drawings and photographs. It is the product of a team of editors who have worked well together. It is set to be an occasional publication, and contributions are invited that are reflective of monastic life and contemplative living. The content and clean design is somewhat let down by the production standards of the book itself; the pages of the review copy are busy escaping from the glue on the spine and the cover is too flimsy. But you will be moved and surprised by the many good things inside. Here is a poem by Joe Zarantonello as a taster:

Pure Joy

each
moment

minus
your

opinion
of it

Fons Vitae are to be congratulated on an enterprising innovation. May it live long and prosper. mw