

Merton on a Desert Island

- courtesy of the BBC

Stephen Dunhill

Works by Thomas Merton have twice been chosen by well-known people appearing on Desert Island Discs. This radio programme has been running since January 1942. Each week a distinguished guest has to imagine being castaway on a desert island with only eight pieces of music, a single book of their choice and one luxury item.

18 November 1964:

ROY PLUMLEY: Our castaway this week is the young man who has been called the Czar of Pop and the Emperor of Beat. He's the man behind the Beatles, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Cilla Black and other recording stars - Brian Epstein.

PLUMLEY: Do you think you'd be able to face solitude?

EPSTEIN: Yes, to a degree. But I would miss people. Though I wouldn't mind a bit of solitude right now.

PLUMLEY: Do you have any philosophy that would help?

EPSTEIN: No.

PLUMLEY: And one book apart from the Bible and Shakespeare?

EPSTEIN: *Elected Silence* by Thomas Merton.

PLUMLEY: What is that, a novel?

EPSTEIN: Yes.

PLUMLEY: What's it about?

EPSTEIN: It's about Roman Catholicism.

Born of orthodox Jewish parents in 1934, Epstein became increasingly secular in his outlook. He died of an overdose of barbiturates in 1967, possibly suicide.

16 November 2014:

KIRSTY YOUNG: My castaway this week is the poet John Agard. His work is studied widely in British schools. He was the BBC's first poet in residence and, along with WH Auden and Philip Larkin, he's a recipient of The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

Born in Guyana he arrived here in the mid-1970s already playing with words like some people play with musical notes. If his style is often satirical, rhythmic and teasing, his subjects provide wincing realism - examining the keloid scars of slavery or the historical myopia of a shared past judged solely through European eyes.

YOUNG: I'm going to cast you away now, John Agard. I'm wondering what will inspire you?

AGARD: Well maybe the silence. Maybe the silence because I'm not your beach type of person. I love cities. So I suppose suddenly confronted with that engulfing silence I might get to chew into the noises of the birds and that might inspire something.

YOUNG: You get the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare, and you will get to take one other book to this island. What's yours going to be?

AGARD: Well, again after long thought, I decided a little book by Thomas Merton because I feel in that island Thomas Merton will touch many sides in me. Known to be a monk, and *The Book of Hours* is laid out almost like the liturgy. You can go through the daytime, the psalms, canticles. You're getting meditation. You're getting reflection. You're getting insight. I mean he had this wonderful line where he speaks about each person being full of paradise. For the some reason that touches me. I mean you take for example when in one of his hymns in this book Thomas Merton says, 'When psalms surprise me with their music, and antiphons turn to rum, the Spirit sings.' I mean I love the idea of antiphons turning to rum. So on a desert island, even if I haven't got any rum, I can imagine the bird noises, the canticles of the air turning to rum - preferably El Dorado.

Note: *The Book of Hours* is a rich resource for daily prayer and contemplation compiled from Merton's works by Kathleen Deignan, and imitates the ancient

monastic practice of 'praying the hours'. The lines from Merton quoted by Agard form the opening of the poem 'A Psalm', originally included in *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949).

Two individuals, almost fifty years apart to the day, and from different backgrounds, religions and cultures, who have been inspired by the writings of Thomas Merton - whose writings continue to inspire countless readers across the world.

Note

Merton was aware that *Elected Silence* was Epstein's favourite book. On 28 August 1967, Suzanne Butorovich, a sixteen-year-old high school student who had started a correspondence with Merton, had written to inform him of and lamenting the death of Epstein. In his reply three days later, on 31 August, Merton replied:

... I am terribly sorry to hear about Brian Epstein. I'll say mass for him Sept. 5th. Did I ever tell you that once on a radio program he was asked to name his favourite book and named the Seven Storey Mtn., only with its English title, *Elected Silence*? I always felt closer to him after that—glad, of course, that he brought out the Beatles. Glad they are working on their meditation.

Seven of Merton's letters to Suzanne, including the one containing this quote, are included in *The Road to Joy—Letters to New and Old Friends* (London: Collins-Flame, 1990), pp. 308-315.

Stephen Dunhill is a retired teacher who lives on the Northumbrian coast overlooking Holy island. He has served on the committee of the Thomas Merton Society since 2008 and is currently the co-editor of the Merton Journal.