

commitment; yet to understand Fox's actions we must enter this sacramental logic. Dom James saw himself as the guardian of particular promises Merton had made before God - no slight matter. Finally, these two monks had different views about the future of monastic life. Dom James's vision is presented as a relic of the past, Merton's as a new beginning. Fifty years on, their Order largely experiences the opposite of flourishing. How does this affect our evaluation of their respective monastic legacies? There are no easy answers. But I would have loved to hear an author of Roger Lipsey's stature put forward even tentative ones. He has written a very good book. Like most good books, it invites further questioning.

Fr Erik Varden OCSO entered the Trappist monastery of Mount St Bernard in Leicestershire in 2002. He made solemn profession on 2007, and was ordained priest in 2011. He was appointed abbot of the community in 2015.

We Are Already One

Thomas Merton's Message of Hope

Edited by Gray Henry & Jonathan Montaldo

Forward by Paul M. Pearson

Fons Vitae, Louisville, Kentucky, 2014

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\$26.95

We Are Already One is a collection of short reflections by Merton-inspired writers from around the world, written in honour of Merton's Centenary. If the book were not a book, it would be a huge table surrounded by many people, all gathered to tell stories and share ideas. Given the importance of the number 100 to a Centenary book, and given that there are (by my counting) 99 contributions in *We Are Already One*, it seems that the editors have made the rather pleasing decision to leave a symbolic empty chair for Merton at the table.

If I'm honest, I first approached the book with a feeling of hesitation. Reading the jacket and looking at the (very fine) portrait of Merton on the front cover, I found myself suspecting that the book might end up acting as another addition to the ever-growing pile of what you might call 'Merton-centric' essays and testimonials and talks and tapes and books and poems and so on and so on. The Merton community has been made

aware of the risk of adding to that pile in the past: Rowan Williams and Victor Kramer are amongst the luminaries who have warned us about placing Merton in a position of veneration with which he himself might well have been uncomfortable.

In his 'Introduction' to *We Are Already One*, Jonathan Montaldo helpfully touches on this state of play. Quoting an email from a friend, Montaldo briefly discusses the difference between making Merton into an 'object of admiration' on the one hand, and using Merton as a 'guide and inspiration' on the other. 'Guide' and 'inspiration' are good words to describe Merton, to be sure, but the book also makes use of another excellent one: 'friend'.

Having just completed doctoral work on Merton, that word holds a special resonance in my own mind. The Merton I have gotten to know and continued (most of the time) to love is a vulnerable, clever, driven, sometimes painfully self-centred, sometimes hilarious character. I have come away from my studies feeling that, yes, I would enjoy hearing the great writer give a lecture or sit at his feet—but I would much rather meet up with the characterful man for a drink, a catch-up, and a good dose of laughter. The same preference applies, for me, to writings about Merton. It can be enjoyable, at times, to read about why people think Merton is a great guy—but it is normally more interesting to read the reflections of those who are familiar enough with Merton to see him less as a teacher and more as a flawed companion.

Approaching the book as a collective act of reflecting on friendship, I found it to be a real page turner. The entries are a few pages long each, and the diversity of styles and attitudes from contributor to contributor helps to stop the book from becoming predictable. I was surprised, in fact, by how hungry I was to keep reading; it was like browsing Wikipedia and seeing another link, and then another, that caught the eye. I skipped some, skimmed some, read some, read and re-read others, and then turned the page. Amongst the many entries by those who love and respect Merton and his words, it was refreshing to come across a contribution that stated a dislike for the book's title (isn't it potentially misleading, potentially premature?). And I was both disturbed, and then pleased, to find an entry that put forward the view that, one hundred years after his birth, Thomas Merton is now completely irrelevant. I think Merton, who once prayed that nobody would know his name, would have liked that a lot.

One of the fruits of placing diverse, sometimes critical views of Merton side by side in this way is that the reader has much more of a

chance of coming away feeling as though the book has a small smile at the edge of its mouth. For all its love of Merton, this book doesn't take itself, or Merton, too seriously. It allows for a pinch of something that it is easy to forget when idealizing or eulogizing about someone: *irony*. There is still a fair amount of Merton-praising in *We Are Already One*, but the book also points in the direction of a discussion, in Merton's company, of all the things that the hermit-writer cared about so much: prayer, creativity, relating to our neighbours, and the struggle for peace.

Philip Seal has recently completed a doctorate on the way the shapes and forms of Merton's language can lead the reader to a state of prayerfulness. He first became interested in Merton after reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* during a trip to Rome. He currently teaches English at a Secondary School in Oxford.

In The Beginning was Love Contemplative Words of Robert Lax

Edited by S. T. Georgiou

Forward by Jonathan Montaldo

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ISBN 978-0-87243-276-5 (pbk) 134 pages

\$15.95

On the inside flyleaf of this slim volume is a photograph of Robert Lax. The face, which his friend Thomas Merton described as 'horse-like', gazes at you unsmiling. Visible is the quality Merton perceived as an 'incomprehensible woe', a melancholy laced with kindness. Merton credited Lax, whom he met while both were students at Columbia, with a greater spiritual instinct than he himself possessed and, while Merton's voice and talent certainly earned him a lasting fame, Lax (arguably the more gifted writer) nurtured a lifelong indifference to the world's attentions. His teacher at Columbia, the poet Mark Van Doren, identified Lax's recognisable 'woe' as a struggle to express fully the joy he felt in being alive - his love for the creation and the creator of existence. If Van Doren's diagnosis was even close to the truth it goes some way toward explaining the uniqueness of Lax's work.

Born to Jewish parents in upstate New York in 1915, he was brought up in a Reform Jewish household, started writing poetry as a teenager, studied English at Columbia and there met his lifelong friend and kindred