

Peace Smiles: Rediscovering Thomas Merton

Bishop Fintan Monahan

Veritas, Dublin, 2020

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This is a short book. Fintan Monahan, Bishop of Killaloe in the west of Ireland, reverts to his seminary days in Maynooth where he discovered Thomas Merton's autobiography. The book's title comes from *The Sign of Jonas* where Merton speaks of his delight in walking to the old barns at Gethsemani Abbey, so overcome by love of his solitude that 'peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones (p.15).' This smiling monk is 'an ants-in-your pants' sort of man according to the Bishop, humorous and irritating (p.16). Had he lived longer, the author speculates, he may have become a peritus in the synodal world of Pope Francis or even an aged cardinal. It is this man of contradiction whom Bishop Fintan wants us to see through a summary of his life and a selection from his writings.

The first three chapters cover Merton's life up to the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* — familiar territory for aficionados but useful for new readers. Chapter Four explores the artistic side of his character with attention to his friend from Columbia, Ad Reinhardt. Zen calligraphy is discussed and Merton's fondness for photography. The author says that he finds it difficult to understand abstract art and labours to illuminate this side of Merton's character. When he claims that 'Abstract art does what it says on the tin,' I began to skip ahead (p.54).

Chapter Five looks at writers who influenced Merton including William Blake, James Joyce, Boris Pasternak and Rainer Maria Rilke. It is a brave man who explores literary influences on a reader as voracious as Merton but the author gives a taste of the breadth of his subject's reading. He goes on to discuss Merton's literary output, starting with the autobiographical works that came after the *Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas* and *The Secular Journal*, though he makes no mention of the seven volumes of the collected journals. Then there is a section headed 'Monastic Topics' where Bishop Fintan confesses that Merton's biography, *The Last of the Fathers*, 'is among my favourite of Merton's works (p.60).' There is mention of works of biblical studies followed by a longer section in which the author discusses Merton's poetry. In his poems, the Bishop says, Merton 'breathed the naked air of heaven as his inspiration (p.66).'

Next comes a survey of books written about 'The Spiritual Life'. These

works, the author maintains, take us to Merton's 'greatest contribution to the spiritual quest of the modern person ... to be contemplatives (p.67).' Then the Bishop turns to 'Eastern Thought', glancing at Buddhism and mentioning *The Asian Journal* and other Eastern-influenced works. He concludes this, his longest chapter, with a brief section headed 'Reaction' in which Merton's 'interaction with people like Evelyn Waugh was a considerable help to him in establishing his own unique style (pp.73-4).' Also three recent popes, John XXIII, Paul VI and Francis, are cited as his champions whose support 'might go some small way to softening the cough of Merton's most ardent detractors (p.74).'

The sixth chapter discusses Social Issues and how Merton's views on war and racism brought him trouble within and without the monastic walls of Gethsemani. In the penultimate chapter, headed 'Living with Merton', Bishop Fintan raises the question: 'Has this man any relevance to the world as we know it today (p.84)?' The books, he writes, are 'an enduring constant' leading to contemplation (p.86). Agreeing with Karl Rahner, he suggests that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or nothing at all. In talking about Merton as a 'Role Model', the Bishop digresses and speaks of his own childhood to conclude that 'male spirituality needs some form of revival, the beginning of which might be an exploration of Merton's life and work (p.94).' He admits that a rereading of *The Seven Storey Mountain* has renewed his hope in the human spirit and recalls the words on Merton's ordination card: 'He walked with God and was seen no more because God took him (p.97).'

The final chapter, 'Reading Choices', includes a selection of quotations, poems and prayers from across Merton's oeuvre. The book ends with a selected bibliography and 'A Poem for Merton' in which the author refers to 'Tom of the Anawim', using a term from the Hebrew meaning the humble and meek (p.120).

This book is clearly no rival to more substantial biographies, such as those by Monica Furlong and Michael Mott. It is brief, describes the man and his works and, despite some oddities of expression and opinion, serves well as an introduction to a fascinating saint. It is good that despite the contradictions of 'an ants in your pants' character, Bishop Fintan sees contemplation as the defining point in Merton's life and writing. In Chapter Eight of *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* Merton writes: 'But in actual fact, true monastic perfection consists above all in the union of all three vocations: that of the penitent, the active worker (in the care of souls above all) and the contemplative.' As Brother Columba of Bethlehem Abbey in Northern Ireland whispered in my ear as he showed

me the abbey's collection of Merton's works: 'That's what Merton did for us monks – and for all of us – he brought us back to contemplation, so he did.'

Tom Finnigan is a semi-retired crane dealer in Malin on the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal. Merton entered his life as a boy in Manchester, blossomed as a church-student in Rome—where he was when Merton died—faded a bit when he got married, but took over when he came to live in Malin twenty years ago. He reads Merton every day.

Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices

Jon M. Sweeney

St Martin's Essentials, New York, 2021

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£9.99

In an article in *America Magazine: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture*, author Jon M. Sweeney states that *Thomas Merton: An introduction to his life, teachings, and practices* had been 'one of those "labor of love" projects that had gestated for 35 years, since I first visited the Abbey of Gethsemani over spring break during my sophomore year in college.'

Describing Merton in the *America* article as 'the most important Catholic writer in English in the 20th century', Sweeney's book on him is an illuminating text for our times. It is appealing in its simplicity without compromising on Merton's complexities. As the author has engaged with Merton's works over decades, his knowledge and insights make this a particularly accessible text for those wanting to find a starting point for learning about Merton.

In the introduction to *Thomas Merton*, Sweeney writes on Merton's search for 'the elusive wholeness that we all know somehow lurks nearby'. He says that this is what we all want for our lives: 'wholeness, integration, vitality, growth. And the opposites of those things are what we very much *don't* want (p.xviii).' In setting the book out as essentially Merton's chronological journey of self-discovery, Sweeney gives us, as readers, the chance to come to understand him with a little more clarity. I would add that we might even come to understand ourselves with greater insight because of the light shed on Merton's journey.