

Report of the Society's Celebration at Rydal Hall

Paul Pearson

The 2024 Celebration of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland was a gathering of new and old friends after a very long gap with the 2020 and 2022 conferences cancelled due to the pandemic. Due to increasing complications with using Oakham School we met at a new location, Rydal Hall, a residential conference and retreat center in the Lake District. Its beautiful location, close to Ambleside and Lake Windermere, with its stunning scenery and literary connections, was certainly a place where Thomas Merton would have felt at home, as did all the conference attendees. The theme of place was picked up in an exhibit by Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon, available throughout the conference, featuring her photographs of places associated with Merton's childhood in France.

Our gathering began on Friday afternoon with two excellent presentations beginning with Fr. Dan Horan, a familiar name at our gatherings and to readers of *The Merton Journal*, who spoke on "The 'Humble God' of Thomas Merton: Christ, Kenosis, and Salvation in the General Dance." Dan was followed by Anne Pearson, making her British conference debut as a presenter, exploring Merton's thinking on racism with a paper entitled: "Enter into a Providential Reciprocity: Thomas Merton's Thoughts on Racism Through a British Lens."

After dinner in the evening, we gathered together with Miggy Scott to remember David Scott, the moving force behind the founding of our society with his 1993 Merton anniversary gathering at Winchester. David served as the first chair of the Society and was a frequent contributor to TMS conferences and to *The Merton Journal*. Miggy shared some recordings of David reading his own poetry, interspersed with her own memories related to the poems.* The floor was then open - as was the bar - for attendees to share their own memories of David, his poetry, and other poems pertinent to our gathering. It was a wonderful evening and recalled many of the poetry evenings from past conferences with David and numerous other poets including Pdraig Daly, Selima Hill, Patrick O'Brien, Angus Stuart, Bonnie Thurston, and Michael Woodward.

Saturday began with opportunities for yoga and meditation. The morning conference sessions included a presentation by myself on the Merton Center's resources and some of the key artifacts among its manuscripts, recordings and other memorabilia. This was followed by an

audiovisual workshop by Paul Pynkoski, vice-president of the International Thomas Merton Society, entitled "Invitation to the General Dance: A Call to Joy and Resistance." After a coffee break that "Invitation to the General Dance" led into a practical introduction to circle dancing expertly directed by Miggy Scott.

After lunch participants had some free time to explore the vicinity with the opportunity for a guided local walk or just time to quietly enjoy the grounds of Rydal Hall with time to ponder the rich banquet of the conference. We gathered back together later in the afternoon for a presentation by Kathleen Tarr on "Merton, Mountains & the Spirit of Place" exploring Merton's travels in Alaska in September 1968. The evening concluded with a celebratory dinner and a very challenging "Thomas Merton Pub Quiz" organized and researched by Stephen Dunhill.

Our final sessions together on Sunday morning began with Gordon Oyer presenting on "Wandering the Mönchweg: Personal Reflections on Merton, Menno and Margins," a beautifully integrated presentation on his own encounter with Merton in the light of Gordon's Mennonite tradition. I then gave the concluding presentation of the conference, an exploration of the centrality of *The Rule of St. Benedict* to Merton's life and thought - "Dancing with St. Benedict: Thomas Merton's Embrace of the Rule." Our all too brief time together concluded with prayers and meditations led by members of the TMS Committee followed by lunch and departures.

I am sure I am speaking for all the conference participants when I say we all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the committee for all their hard work in bringing us all back together. And I am sure I am not alone in eagerly looking forward to future gatherings of this unique community.

* Some of these recordings can be found online at: <https://soundcloud.com/davidscottpoetry/sets/davidscottpoetry>

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