

Editorial

With the environmental threat to our planet gathering pace at an alarming rate, it was intriguing to read in the 2018 edition of *Ted Hughes in Context* that the catalyst for the poet's having become a passionate environmentalist following time spent in 1960s America was Rachel Carson whose *The Edge of the Sea* and *Silent Spring* Hughes had read in a single sitting. Thomas Merton was also to be profoundly affected by what Carson had uncovered while reading an article on *Silent Spring* with its revelation of the death of large swathes of the avian population as a result of indiscriminate aerial spraying of chemical pesticides. Writing in his journal on the 11th December 1962, he expressed his concerns: 'Someone will say: why worry about birds? I worry about both people *and* birds. We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness ... I want to get this book. Why? Because this is a truth I regard as very significant, and I want to know more of it.'

In this issue of the *Journal*, Andy Lord shares the insights he gained during a sabbatical journey that took him from the UK to the redwoods of California. He writes of this time as having deepened his appreciation for Merton's encouragement for the development of 'an ecological imagination [and an ecological consciousness] that leads to spiritual practices', and speaks of the elemental stress and concern for non-human life affected by our choices.

A year on from celebrating the 75th anniversary of the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, we are just in time to mark the 75th anniversary of *Elected Silence*, the result of the *SSM* having been taken in hand by Evelyn Waugh who took issue with the 'verboseness' of the original version. In her article Mary Frances Coady elaborates on how Waugh took aim at what he considered to be Merton's questionable literary style. Stating that Merton's writing owed more to Columbia than Cambridge, he set out to edit the original of all excess and produce what he deemed a 'fine, thin volume' more suited to a British readership.

In the *Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton wrote of his year as an undergraduate at Clare College, Cambridge with a bitterness that appeared not to have been diminished by the passage of time. For him, Cambridge would perennially remain a place pervaded by a 'dark and sinister atmosphere [and] damp and foetid mists'. Thinking about the familial losses Merton had suffered from childhood right up to his first term at Clare when his beloved Aunt Maud died, caused me to wonder about what pastoral provision there may have been during Merton's time

at Cambridge. This ultimately led to a study in which the pastoral element dating back to Merton's time in the early 1930s was contrasted with that of students in the 2020s which was explored through interviews with five of the university's chaplains.

The C6th *Rule of St Benedict* endures as an unrivalled model of the monastic life 'where nothing is to be preferred to Christ'. Paul Pearson opens his discussion of the *Rule* with a quote by Merton from the *Sign of Jonas*: 'Coming to the monastery taught me how to live.' While delineating those elements of the *Rule* found in Merton's conference notes, he observes how, as Novice Master, the goal of Merton's teaching was 'not information but *formation*.' Further on, he highlights how Merton used his thought on the true versus the false self in his discussion of humility in Chapter VII of the *Rule*. New light is also shed on Merton's relationship with his then Abbot (Dom James Fox) which is convincing and which many will appreciate for the reasoned conclusion that is drawn.

Elsewhere, in her meditation on the influence of St Thérèse of Lisieux on Thomas Merton, Kerri Fox outlines the change that came over Merton once he came to recognise that the sentimental likenesses of the saint were nothing but the worst excesses of Catholic religious art. Once he had seen beneath that which was false and superficial, it was Therese's strength and authenticity which prompted Merton to entrust his vocation as a Trappist monk at Gethsemani to her.

In this issue, we also have a range of excellent book reviews by Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon, Patricia Higgins and Sr Michaela Toulmin.

Of note, too is Anthony Purvis's, *In Search of Perfect Days: contemplation as documentary practice*. It reads as both film review and extended essay on the German director Wim Wenders's *Perfect Days* which is set in Tokyo and told through the eyes of a man who cleans the city's toilets. By means of cinematography the film reveals the 'marks of a director whose gaze sees in the mundane aspects of daily living the profound truths of life itself.'

We move through this season of Advent at a time when the world appears to be engulfed in a battle for its very soul and for which Merton's entry in his journal on 24th December 1961 bears revisiting:

Above all our confusions, our violence, our sin, God established His kingdom no matter what 'the world' may do about it. He sends the Prince of Peace. The message of Christians is not that the kingdom 'might come, that peace might be established, but that the kingdom *is* come, and that there *will* be peace for those who seek it.'

With all wishes for an especially blessed and peaceful Christmas,

Susanne Jennings