

Insights and Interviews

Vol 1 - Insights - Essays & Works

Thomas Merton

Intro: David Odorisio

Ed. Glenn Amorosia

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These substantial volumes, collectively running to over 1100 pages, bring together little-known works by Merton, and interviews with persons connected in one way or another with him, that were originally included in the first 35 volumes of the *Merton Annual* from 1988 until 2022. The *Annual* began due to the initiative of Victor Kramer who steered it through its early years, and it was his vision to bring all these pieces together in two collections. Sadly, he died in 2023, but they stand as a worthy tribute to his dedication and scholarship.

The volumes are published by Fons Vitae, and a list of their contents may be found on their website at: <https://fonsvitae.com/product/thomas-merton-insights-and-interviews-vol-1/>

Both volumes have excellent introductions by David Odorisio as well as comprehensive indexes, and each piece by Merton, and each interview, has a brief introduction putting it into context. If I were to summarise their content, I would say that the first is largely of scholarly interest, the pieces sitting somewhat to the side of, and complementary to, Merton's major works, whereas the second offers wide-ranging glimpses into Merton's life, work and legacy.

Volume 1

The first section of *Volume 1* consists of five pieces under the general heading 'Pre-monastic Materials'. The first is Merton's insightful memories from 1967 looking back to his French teacher at Montauban, Monsieur Delas. This is followed by two semi-autobiographical fictional works from the 1930s - a short story, 'The Black Sheep', and a fragment of an early novel, 'The Man in the Sycamore Tree'. There is a collection of 'Letters to Pat', being correspondence with his then girlfriend Pat Hickmanin from 1938, Merton's application for Conscientious Objector Status from 1941, and an essay from 1941, 'Vocations to the Lay Apostolate', being Merton's early attempts to define what might be his own vision of the 'lay apostolate'.

The second section consists of eight pieces on 'Monastic Matters'. Two of them, 'The School of the Spirit' (1949) and 'A Balanced Life of Prayer' (1951), lay out Merton's views on prayer and the contemplative life at that time. The former shows Merton developing his own style in spiritual writing, similar to that of *Seeds of Contemplation* published the same year. The latter is based on Merton's conferences to the novices and professed monks. The work is broken down into short sections and apparently was popular with the monks at Gethsemani. Also included are two pieces for monastics: 'Monastic Courtesy' (1950s) which is a guide to novices navigating life in the monastery, and 'The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life' (1956) – from the same year that Merton met Dr Zilboorg – which reveals to us Merton's early interest in psychoanalysis as applied to monasticism. Also included are variant drafts of passages from *The Sign of Jonas*, and two brief essays, 'The Monk and Sacred Art' and 'Art and Worship', both of which show that, for Merton, 'Art and worship are inseparable in the Christian view of life (p.168).' This section ends with the correspondence between Merton and the Benedictine monastery of Regina Laudis, and the complete correspondence, running to 80 pages, between Merton and his secretary Br Patrick Hart.

The 16 pieces that make up the final section, 'Further Perspectives' are much more varied. The first three consist of correspondence between Merton and the artist Ad Reinhardt, whom Merton first met when they were undergraduates at Columbia University, the correspondence with Douglas Steere, a Quaker who was an observer-delegate during the Second Vatican Council, and a single letter to Thomas Francis Smith concerning 'The Jesus Prayer'. Next there are Merton's notes of a conference to his novices, 'Some Points from the Birmingham Non-Violence Movement' (1964) highlighting Merton's turn toward social justice, and two transcriptions of recordings on the renewal of the religious life, 'About Contemplative Life Today' (1968) and 'Comments about the Religious Life Today' (1967). Also included are the transcriptions of two recordings from the hermitage, 'Prayer and Identity' and the beautiful Easter sermon 'He is Risen' (1967) which is full in insights, such as: 'Christ is the Lord of a history that moves. He not only holds the beginning and end in his hands, but he is in history with us, walking ahead of us to where we are going. He is not always in the same place (p.419).' This is followed by two rich conferences on prayer from India in 1968, a collection of Merton's Marian writings, and an essay, 'Christian perspectives in World Crisis', that would later appear as a chapter in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. The work ends with two pieces

showing Merton's developing interest in Eastern religious traditions as evinced from the second, 'The Zen Insight of Shen Hui', where we read: 'The religious genius of the Far East, China and Japan is the *only one* that has so far achieved this perfect resolution of any possible conflict between "action and contemplation" (p.536).'

Volume 2

The second volume is comprised of the transcriptions of 36 interviews with people who knew Merton, either personally and/or through correspondence, as well as with those whose lives have been significantly influenced by Merton. They were conducted by a whole host of interviewers. The first eight interviews are with fellow Trappists who were with Merton for some of or for all of his time at Gethsemani. They reveal a rich portrait of Merton 'from the inside' as it were.

For John Eudes Bamburger his impressions of Merton were 'always that he was friendly, basically a friendly person who was very likeable and accessible (p.79),' whereas for Timothy Kelly, 'he was still a really private person. No-one really knew him. That may be a bit dramatic, but he was a very, very private person (p.127)'. And Paul Waddell remembered Merton for his impatience: 'He was all the time impatient, the most impatient person that I think I ever knew (p.58)!'.

Many monks make positive comments on the relationship between Merton and Dom James Fox, a corrective to the rather negative portrayal by writers such as Monica Furlong and Michael Mott. Timothy Kelly sums up the relationship succinctly: 'I think there was a mutual respect between Dom James and Merton, also a mutual suspicion. But I think it produced a life for both of them (p.118).'

Perhaps the last words from Merton's fellow Trappists should be left to Paul Quenon: 'I think Merton should be remembered as a joyful person and somebody who was very much aware and awake and alive to other people's concerns. He was that because he was so immersed in God (p.166).'

The next ten interviews are with other religious. Each has a different slant. There are several with those religious concerned with Merton's writings, particularly on monastic studies. For Fr Kilian McDonnell O.S.B. who wrote critical reviews of Merton's works of theology, he considered that he wrote best when he wrote of 'the personal moment in faith. That is where Merton is strong (p.306)'. But the most interesting of these interviews are with religious sisters. All are most revealing of Merton's attitude to women and the developing feminist movement. Mary Luke

Tobin S.L. saw that 'the whole feminist thing was beginning to dawn on him (p.273).' But Myriam Dardenne O.C.S.O. remembers saying to herself in 1968 when she wasn't invited to join the men for a beer, 'Tom, you are not yet fully liberated in your relationship to women (p.207).' And they are quite trenchant in their opinions of Merton's relationship with the student nurse in 1966.

The final section is with friends and scholars. They reveal the wide range of Merton's interests and concerns. There are several interviews with writers and poets including James Laughlin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Ron Seitz, interviews with those interested in non-violence and the peace movement including Dr. Hildegard Goss-Mayr (alas - there is no interview with James Forest), James Finley on the contemplative life, and with A M Allchin, an Anglican canon who was president of our own Society. In his interview he remembered the first time he met Merton in 1963: 'The first thing that struck me was how wonderfully ordinary he was (p.467).' And in 1967 Merton told him, 'You're so lucky as an Anglican. You're not tied to canon law (p.471).' And of Merton's late writing he said, 'He is teaching us to live with immense uncertainties - to live in a very apophatic kind of way. That is perhaps, to some extent, a sign of personal maturity (p.482).'

The final three interviews are with Anthony Padovano, William Shannon and Victor Kramer, academics and writers, who first discovered Merton's writings in the 1970s and who went on to work tirelessly to bring Merton's writings and ideas to a wider readership.

These two rich and varied volumes are a wonderful resource for exploring Merton's life and works, and they would be a worthy addition to any Mertonian's bookshelf.

I leave the final words of this review to Victor Kramer who was instrumental in bringing all these hard-to-find works into print. In his interview, the final lines of the book, he said:

Merton learned to celebrate the mystery of living in community, and as the sense of mystery deepened, his understanding of Church and community opened up. His life endorsed the wonder of an ever-changing world to be celebrated. ... In so much of what Merton observed and celebrated it becomes most fundamentally a matter of sharing in the goodness of creation and praising God's gifts.

Stephen Dunhill is the book review editor of *The Merton Journal* and is a member of the committee of The Thomas Merton Society.