

Dancing Under the Tree of Life

Review of

Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge

Edited by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart

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Reviewed by **Walt Chura, OFS**

Merton's black ink cover art for this fine collection of essays by Canadian Merton scholars demonstrates something of the spirit of the volume, not to mention of Merton's own spirit. It suggests to me a dancing Tree of Life with a cross on the top branch, cocked to one side like a jaunty chapeau. On the right side of the tree, under outstretched branches suggesting an arm, dance a man perhaps with beret and an African American woman in a black and white dress – or perhaps it's a groovy Trappist monk. Under the left branch of the tree dances what Canadians call a First-Nations person. Some of the lines making up the tree suggest Chinese calligraphy. One might conclude that the drawing is the first "essay" of the book.

A "Foreword" by Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO, Merton's last secretary, is a welcome contribution (1). Co-editor Ross Labrie begins his "Introduction" (3-12) with the tale of his own discovery of Merton while associating with Tony Walsh's Benedict Labre Catholic Worker house of hospitality in Montreal. In his essay "Peacemaker" (101-15), Ron Dart sketches out further Merton's relationship with the Catholic Worker. Labrie's essay recapitulates the sweep not of Merton's biography but of the foundations and trajectory of his intellectual and spiritual path. Michael Higgins' essay is the first to explore Merton's true edginess: "Prophecy and Contemplation" (13-22) thrusts the reader of this collection directly into Merton-land: Paradox Regained. Both traditional biblical and systematic theologies would define these two categories as distinct and polar. Higgins explores Merton's discovery, first in William Blake, that the two categories are, in fact, not dichotomous. Merton recaptured the reality of the prophetic role of the desert monks whose life was contemplation. Higgins draws out the development of this recapture in Merton's reading, personal encounters and writing.

Susan McCaslin explicates "Merton's Mystical Visions: a Widening Circle" (23-44). She looks at Merton's experiences from the brief appearance with him of his dead father in Rome when he, Tom, was 18, his experience at Mass in Cuba in 1940, the Fourth and Walnut experience in Louisville, 1958, and finally his 1968 "coming clear" at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. Some see this "widening circle" to have thrown Merton over the edge, but McCaslin observes, "[Merton's] visions emphasize self-emptying, kenotic love and compassion" (41), Christic language which lets God step out further within the circle whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere. The always astute insights of Donald Grayston tell of "Thomas Merton in Asia: The Polonnaruwa Illumination" (135-54). First he

sets the stage by introducing us to Merton's "path to Polonnaruwa," then painting a broader picture of the site of Merton's "illumination."

Ryan Scruggs' contribution, "Interreligious Dialogue" (117-34), surveys the historical development of Merton's journey into that conversation beginning with his relationship with one of my favorite "characters" in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Bramachari, which is not really a name but an honorific for a Hindu celibate monk. Bruce K. Ward's contribution, "Apocalypse and Modernity" (45-63), and Paul Dekar's "Technology and the Loss of Paradise" (65-78), together help us to rearrange our thinking about two crucial images, exploring Merton's thinking in the context of the thought of a range of intellectuals and creative writers. Merton saw clearly into what his world looked like and remarkably clearly what *our* world and beyond were likely to look like. The investigations into Merton as "Peacemaker," by Ron Dart, was among the most familiar material to me. I can attest to it's being a fine summary.

Probably one of the most intriguing essays for me is Angus Stuart's "Merton and the Beats" (79-100). This is one topic in Merton studies I have not explored, though I was aware of Merton's affinity for, even identification with, that generation. Other challenging but intriguing essays for me included Lynn Szabo's "The Mystical Ecology of Thomas Merton's Poetics" (155-68), which will help me overcome my fear of Merton's poetry, and Ross Labrie's "Merton on Atheism in Camus" (169-99), a dense but trenchant essay which may help me overcome my fear of Camus!

One surely mustn't expect every essay in a scholarly anthology to be helpful to every reader. But for this reviewer not a single essay in this fine collection was a disappointment. The collection is an invitation from our astute and lively Canadian colleagues to come dance with them under their Merton Tree of Life!