

Reaping the Whirlwind

Review of

Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet

Papers from the Second General Meeting

of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Edited by Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson

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Reviewed by **David Joseph Belcastro**

When attending a conference, I frequently feel caught up in a whirlwind of ideas from which I will eventually emerge knowing something significant has happened but at a loss for words to say exactly what. Consequently, the opportunity to read at leisure the papers presented at a conference is greatly appreciated. This is especially true when the papers are of the quality of those presented at the 1998 Oakham Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Paul Pearson, Danny Sullivan, and Ian Thomson have done a fine job of editing this volume of papers which provide the reader with an opportunity to revisit (or attend for the first time) a conference which focused on Merton as poet, monk, and prophet.

This publication begins with an introduction by Paul Pearson and a prologue by A. M. Allchin and concludes with an epilogue by Christine Jensen Hogan. These three readings invoke the conference experience as Pearson recalls the idyllic setting for the gathering of friends and scholars at Oakham School in the market town of Rutland, England, Allchin in the presidential address reconstructs from journal entries, notebooks, and memories a day in the life of Thomas Merton, and Jensen discusses her play, "Un Pas de Deux, Un Pas de Dieu" (performed on the first evening of the conference), which reveals once again how Merton's life intersects with the lives of others, in this instance, that of Anne Bradstreet, born in 1612. Between the prologue and epilogue, the reader will have an opportunity to listen to a panel of editors discuss the journal project, hear the main conference addresses, and reflect on the papers presented in the sessions.

The panel of journal editors, chaired by Tommie O'Callaghan, included four of the six editors: Patrick Hart, Lawrence Cunningham, Victor Kramer, and Christine Bochen. (In addition to discussing their own volumes, Hart and Kramer commented on volumes two and five, edited by Jonathan Montaldo and the late Robert Daggy). While the introduction to each of the seven volumes will be of interest to many, the underlying and recurring question regarding the editing of the journals opened a line of inquiry important to Merton scholarship. It was noted, principally by Victor Kramer, that

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the journals have been structured and restructured by Merton and the editors, including those at HarperCollins, in such a way that the published text is a complex, multi-dimensional construction requiring the reader to pay attention to the way in which the narrative is moving on more than one level.

The main conference addresses were presented by Rowan Williams, Esther de Waal, and Basil Pennington, OCSO. Bishop Williams' insightful "New Words for God: Contemplation and Religious Writing" considered Merton's understanding of poetry as a religious activity giving expression to the "there-before-us reality of God" and to the "pure act of God" in the ever present here and now. It is here that Williams believes poet and contemplative come together and here that we encounter the essential Merton. De Waal's "Merton's Seeing Eye" reconstructs the development of Merton's way of seeing from the influence of his father (who painted like Cezanne), Cistercian practices, and Zen interests. She rightfully reminds us that while Merton was not a visual artist in the same manner as his parents, he was nonetheless at heart an artist in search of a way of seeing more clearly and deeply the world in which he lived. Pennington's "Thomas Merton, Cistercian Monk" explains that in order to fully understand Merton we must look at him in light of Bernard of Clairvaux and see that central to their vocations as monks and writers was the restoration of humankind to the image of God. Each of the addresses helps to get at Merton's "foundation or inner core which expressed itself so diversely in his multifaceted" vocation.

The rest of the volume consists of papers presented in sessions tracing out the multifaceted lines of Merton's vocation and thereby addressing the primary foci of the conference: Merton as poet, monk, and prophet. While different lines of inquiry are explored and developed in these papers, all are ultimately interested in Merton's lifelong effort to discover, understand, and live in an authentic manner his monastic vocation.

The papers presented in the session on Merton as poet examined his poetry within the context of the Merton corpus, relevant literary history, and comparative contemplative traditions to clarify the reoccurring themes of love, communication, and the human experience of God which run throughout much of Merton's work. Bonnie Thurston's "Human Love and the Love of God in *Eighteen Poems*" provides a valuable critique of *Eighteen Poems* which helps us to understand the manner in which Merton worked through his experience of human love and discovered it as both a "gift of God and path to God." Paul Pearson's "*The Geography of Lograire: Merton's Final Prophetic Vision*" opens for us a view of Merton's expanding geography which embraced the myth-dreams of other cultures previously denied by the dominant North American culture. As Pearson points out, this prophetic vision breaks through the walls of alienation to restore humankind to its original unity. Christine Bochen's "Speaking of Contemplation: A Matter of Metaphor" explores how Merton spoke of contemplation in metaphors (diving deep, waking up, and being born again) that open the reader to the lived experience of God's presence in the ordinariness of daily life. Sonia Petisco's "Recovering Our Innocence: the Influence of William Blake on the Poetry of Thomas Merton" brings together Blake and Merton in a dialogue on the religious transfiguration of reality which transcends the opposites of life and death to discover a deeper vision of our original unity and thereby recover our innocence.

The papers in the session on Merton as monk focused on the shifts that took place in his monastic formation, shifts which deepened and transformed him as a monk in the modern world. Victor Kramer's "A Journal Toward the World: Merton's Private Record and Public Awareness" suggests that the journals indicate a movement from pomposity, certainty, and cleverness in the beginning, to ambiva-

lence and doubt during Merton's middle years, to increasing honesty in the sixties. Catherina Stenqvist's "How Postmodern is Thomas Merton?" reveals something of this bold honesty by pointing out that while Merton is not postmodern he nonetheless anticipated the postmodern era in his outspoken dissatisfaction with Western philosophy, culture, and views on what it means to be human and in his relentless struggle to discover and develop new ways of being in the world. Michael Callaghan's "The Influence of the English Mystical Tradition on Thomas Merton's Life and Writings" demonstrates how Merton's search for new ways was influenced by the old writing of English mystics, in particular Walter Hilton, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich. David Scott's "Thomas Merton: The Apophatic Landscape" continues Callaghan's line of thought with an interesting reflection on *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the landscape of Oakham, and the mystical tradition which provides additional insight into Merton's monastic formation.

The papers from the session on Merton as prophet explore how Merton's inner transformation as poet and monk resulted in possibilities for the transformation of the modern world view. Patrick Eastman's "For the Sake of the World" demonstrates that the authentic contemplative, as seen in Thomas Merton, does not forsake the world but lives for the sake of the world in such a way that the individual's life and the life of his monastic community become a prophetic witness to the mystical dimension of the larger society in which they live. Danny Sullivan's "In Praise of Insanity: revisiting Thomas Merton's 'Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann'" addresses the question of Merton's relevance to our world today, some thirty years since his death, and answers in the affirmative, pointing out that much of what Merton had to say in the Eichmann essay still holds true. Colin Albin's "Merton and Inter-Faith Dialogue: Exploring a Way Forward" and John Wu Jr.'s "Thomas Merton: the Once and Future Paradigm" take this point one step further and trace out patterns in Merton's approach to interfaith dialogue that should and could be foundational to present efforts at building community among the diverse religious traditions that exist today.

Three closing comments are in order. First, this is a very well organized collection of conference papers; I imagine that the same could be said of the conference itself. Conference organizers and editors served participants and readers well in their apparent effort to "compose" a gathering of scholarly papers. Second, Paul Pearson, in his introduction, states somewhat modestly that these papers "witness to the growing maturity of the Society." This collection of papers from the 1998 Oakham Conference indicate a very mature development in Merton scholarship that has moved beyond merely recalling what Merton said and did to analysis and synthesis. Third, one thing is missing from the publication that was present at the conference. As I read from paper to paper, I frequently wondered about those conversations that must have taken place between presenters and participants in and outside of sessions. What connections were made? What insights were discovered? What new questions emerged? I see this invocation of my imagination as indicative of the quality and importance of these papers for both scholars and general readers of Merton.