

than lecture notes. A reader interested in mere summaries—albeit at times quite idiosyncratic—of the main works of the Syriac figures discussed by Merton will not be disappointed. But the reader who would take the second lecture series as his or her first-time guide through these writers and their texts could do better by reading more recent scholarship. For, unlike in the first lecture series, Merton's typical insightfulness and ability to digest the main themes of any text and re-express them succinctly is not evident (excepting the treatment of Philoxenus). This seems to be due to the fact that Merton was encountering these texts for the first time and had yet to digest them, whereas he had reflected on the texts discussed in the first lecture series for many years. In conclusion, then, to anyone interested in being initiated into the riches of the monastic tradition, I would recommend the entire first lecture series, especially the sections from Rufinus and Cassian onward, but only the section on Philoxenus from the second lecture series. These sections contain much that is valuable and helpful for understanding the ancient monastic tradition. Accordingly, Merton's *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* constitutes another fine addition to Cistercian Publications' new Monastic Wisdom Series.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*. Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell. Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO. Preface by Columba Stewart, OSB. Monastic Wisdom Series 1 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005). See my review in *The Merton Annual* 19 (2006), pp. 400–7.

2. O'Connell has omitted listing the recent translation of this important text: Robert Rivers and Harry Hagan, "The *Admonitio ad Filium Spirituale*: Introduction and Translation," *American Benedictine Review* 53.2 (2002), pp. 121–46.

3. There is a new translation of the *Asceticon* not mentioned by O'Connell: Anna Silvas, *The Ascetikon of St. Basil the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Mark DelCogliano

HARFORD, James, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 336. ISBN 13: 978-0-8264-1869-2 (hardcover). \$35.95.

The task of writing a joint biography for three close friends whose very productive lives were intertwined for thirty years is one that

requires a serious effort to organize a wealth of information from published and unpublished documents in addition to that obtained from numerous personal interviews. James Harford was a friend of both Edward Rice and Robert Lax, and he and his wife Millie had spent much time with them over many years. At Millie's suggestion in 1997, Harford decided to write this biography of Rice, Lax, and their friend Thomas Merton.

Harford starts by recalling his own memories and recording those of Millie along with the memories of their four children who had spent much time with Rice and Lax. The book chronicles salient information that depicts highlights of their lives by presenting their major life-decisions, selected communications among the three, as well as others, and their major accomplishments. Thus, the text is heavily punctuated with many direct quotation, letters from friends and others, as well as poems.

As a close friend of both Lax and Rice, Harford had first-hand experiences with each to accompany the volumes of materials that he possessed or found in archives. His personal experiences and knowledge of the two men provide the reader with much detail that captures the essence of their two personalities. The strength of Harford's discussion of Thomas Merton is that he was able to embellish information about Merton with memories of Rice and Lax about his early years.

Rice was born to Catholic parents on October 23, 1918, and as a youth he aspired to be an artist but was discouraged by his mother who wanted him to prepare for a medical career. While in college, he pursued his own interests and took classes in French and German; studio classes in drawing and painting; history of art courses that included ancient, medieval, and Renaissance art; also English subjects – eighteenth-century Restoration drama, biography, advanced composition, and literature after the death of Shakespeare.¹

Rice became a brilliant writer. His list of twenty published books reflects a wide array of interests. The college courses he took and his subsequent travels were certainly instrumental in spawning multiple pursuits that showed up throughout his life.

As the only Catholic among the three, he was asked to serve in a special way as a sponsor to his two best friends. Merton, who was a Protestant, and Lax, a Jew, both went through a lengthy period of spiritual discernment. On November 16, 1938 Merton was baptized and received his first communion. Rice was godfather.²

Once again, on December 18, 1943, Rice was called to serve as godfather, this time for Lax, who was likewise converting to Catholicism. Lax was baptized at the same church as Merton, St. Ignatius of Loyola Church in New York. Before Lax's baptism, Fr. O'Pray "...wondered if he knew enough about Catholicism to take the sacrament."³ Lax told him that he had been reading St. Thomas, St. Augustine, and St. John of the Cross. This convinced Fr. O'Pray.

Each of the three men possessed unique gifts that supported many noteworthy accomplishments. All three were extremely creative: Rice was an illustrator, photographer, writer, magazine editor and publisher. From 1953 to 1967 he edited and published *Jubilee* magazine, using a small staff, with assistance from Merton and Lax. *Jubilee* won several awards and was widely acclaimed for airing salient issues facing Catholics. It addressed problems that still confront the Church: "abortion, birth control, race relations, celibacy, the status of women, lay participation, government policy toward the poor, the Third World, environmental degradation, ecumenism."⁴

The focus of *Jubilee* had a core agenda that permeated the individual thinking and concerns of Merton, Lax, and Rice. In each of their contributions, there were signs of these concerns. Merton, in particular, wrote a great deal about many of the issues.

Mary Anne Rivera⁵ cited Rice commenting about *Jubilee* in *The Merton Seasonal: A Quarterly Review*. Rice stated that the magazine was "a significant force in the awakening of the American Catholic Church to a wider world in the post-war and Vatican II period."⁶ Rivera elaborated further in her doctoral dissertation:

Jubilee chronicled the changing styles of Christian life and thought for a universal Church. By highlighting the image of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, it emphasized the concrete social, political, and cultural responsibilities of the whole Church, and encouraged its active and critical engagement in society and culture.⁷

Nearly forty years later in a personal interview with Harford, Lax reflected what he felt was the importance of *Jubilee*.

Jubilee was lively, creative and beautiful, and that's something that a lot of, particularly religious magazines, never thought of being – I really think that's why it made such an impact.

Rice wouldn't let an issue go out unless it was beautiful – and so it got good reviews, won prizes, not because its point of view was so liberal or progressive. I think it's because people felt, "It's a magazine for the greater glory of God." That was what impressed me about Rice so much right from the beginning – in *Jester* and everything else [Rice, Merton, and Lax were staff members of the Columbia University humor magazine]. He might not be able to give you a lecture on why this figure here, that photo there, he just knew – like having absolute pitch.⁸

Both Merton and Lax provided impressive support for the magazine. "Merton was a constant promoter of the magazine, sometimes exaggerating Rice's privations as publisher in his exhortations to get his friends and correspondents to subscribe."⁹ Moreover, Merton wrote numerous articles for *Jubilee* and was instrumental in mobilizing many acclaimed writers for the magazine. In the early years, Lax worked as a text editor. His subsequent letters to Rice provided much personal encouragement for the magazine, and he did write a few articles and published some poetry in *Jubilee*. Throughout its life *Jubilee* was beleaguered by financial stress notwithstanding fifteen years of successful publishing. In 1967, publication of the magazine was permanently suspended and the magazine folded due to the financial strain.

After Merton's death, Rice wrote *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, a biography of Merton. The book caused concern because some felt that Rice was too frank in his descriptions of Merton's life. After Merton died in 1968, many viewed him as a man with a halo. These perceptions were contrary to Rice's candor that described him with the same drives and temptations of every man, while his accomplishments were extraordinary. This frankness was not well accepted by some critics. However, Rice continued to write, and

In 1973 he edited a book on contemporary Indian yogis, swamis, and gurus (*Temple of the Phallic King*), and in 1974 Doubleday published *John Frum He Come*, an account of a cargo cult in the South Pacific, a subject that had been of interest to Merton [as exemplified in *The Geography of Lograire*].

The resumé he sent to potential publishers, written in the third person with a dollop of mischief, recapped his language capabilities:

Although he has been accused of being “only semi-bilingual,” Edward Rice, as the result of a classical education and some fifteen years experience in wandering about five continents can carry on macaronic¹⁰ conversations not only in his native dialect (which he speaks with fluency) but French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, Russian, Hindu and Urdu, and even classical and medieval Latin. He has survived a week in Damascus on five words of Arabic, and reports that the words *nem* and *iggen* solve all problems in Hungarian. He can read the street signs in Hellenic, Cyrillic and Devanagari, and scientific summaries in Inter-Lingua.

Also, for “young adults” he wrote about growing up in a Third World country (*Mother India's Children* [Pantheon, 1971]); the religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (*Five Great Religions* [Four Winds Press, 1973]), and his personal view of India's great river (*The Ganges* [Four Winds, 1974]). The latter two had some of Rice's most striking photos of the Indian people, and the Ganges book had absorbing asides on history, archeology, and geology.

All of that writing was prelude to some seven years of work in the 1980s—after an even longer period of travel in Asia and Africa—on the creation of what would become, in 1990, his *magnum opus*—the life of Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton.¹¹

After many years suffering from Parkinson's disease, Rice died on August 18, 2001 at the age of 82.

Lax was born in 1915 and died in Olean, New York on September 26, 2000. He was regarded as an experimental poet. His writings were characterized by broken phrases, enjambments, and by one or two words per line. Lax moved to Greece in 1962 and spent the rest of his life as a contemplative hermit writing poetry. In 1965 he was living on the island of Kalymnos. Why Greece? Lax said, “... i feel that the landscape here is properly classical, properly stripped of all that is not essential, all that is not universal. it is ready-made for abstraction and for concrete, exact, particular abstraction.”¹²

Lax was repulsed by much of the world's preoccupation with material interests. He valued a simple life, with only the essentials that he needed to live. Living on a small Greek island for

many years was the way he chose to live such a life of simplicity as a solitary contemplative who wrote poetry.

There have been many tributes written to Bob Lax that not only praise his poetry but also his intellectual integrity and professional honesty. Harford cites C. K. Williams'¹³ eloquent analysis of Lax's poems.

And he will not use degraded spiritual terminology to describe himself or his work any more than he will allow it or any semblance of it in that work. "Black and white," not "good or evil" or "life and death."

The integrity of Lax's spiritual attempt is awesome. A renunciation, a series of renunciations, of falsehood, of sham, of any sort of pretence – even of relative "meaning" or traditional verbal music. It is an asceticism, and, like any such, may be misinterpreted as a mere system or aesthetic, but it is important to recognize how inspiring the task he has set for himself can be for us.¹⁴

Lax's earliest publications were in the *New Yorker* in 1940. The four published poems in seven months were without precedent at the magazine.¹⁵ One of Lax's greatest achievements was the book of poems, *Circus of the Sun*. This book of poems metaphorically compared the circus to Creation.¹⁶

Like Lax, Merton went through an early period of spiritual searching. He craved asceticism. He was unhappy with his writing and blamed Catholics for wars.¹⁷ He had considered becoming a priest for a long time, yet his attempt to enter the Franciscan Order was unsuccessful. Later, he made a Holy Week retreat at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani and was led to pursue a monastic life there. He entered the order as a postulant on December 10, 1941 and was ordained a priest on May 26, 1949.¹⁸ A few months before Merton's ordination *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published. In an interview with Harford, Rice stated, "A lot of Catholics were struck emotionally by Merton's book and his ordination. I think Merton started a whole new movement and that he is still the most significant religious figure in the world today. He told the Church to bug off. He was thinking and writing about what was important."¹⁹

Merton spent many years studying and writing about mysticism. This period produced numerous publications on Christianity and Oriental mysticism. In 1951, he wrote about Christian

mysticism in *The Ascent to Truth*. In this book, Harford cited Merton as saying, "The human race is facing the greatest crisis in its history, because religion itself is being weighed in the balance. The present unrest in five continents, with everyone fearful of being destroyed, has brought many men to their knees."²⁰ Today, this comment seems still to resonate and takes on great relevancy.

Harford reports that Merton's interest in mysticism led him in pursuit of an opportunity possibly to conduct retreats at Cistercian monasteries in Indonesia and Hong Kong. In May of 1968, he got permission to make the trip. Through friends, it was arranged for him to meet the Dalai Lama. In Dharamsala, he had three meetings on consecutive days with the Dalai Lama.²¹ In the Dalai Lama's autobiography, his comments about Merton were very endearing: "I could see he was a truly humble and deeply spiritual man. This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity."²²

Merton died on December 10, 1968 in Bangkok, Thailand from an accident in his room. Nearly all of his years at Gethsemani had been spent writing. He was a prolific writer and during his life published over 50 books, a couple thousand articles, papers, and poems. Merton's profound spiritual knowledge provided a platform for him to write. In a review of William H. Shannon's book, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, Lawrence S. Cunningham said, "Merton's only peer . . . would be C.S. Lewis."²³

Notes

1. James Harford, *Merton and Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax and Edward Rice* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 15.
2. Harford, p. 23.
3. Harford, p. 55.
4. Harford, p. 118.
5. Mary Anne Rivera, *Jubilee Magazine and the Development of a Vatican II Ecclesiology* (Doctoral Dissertation, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, Duquesne University, 2004), p. 14.
6. "Starting a Magazine: A Guide for the Courageous – The Short Happy Life of Jubilee," *The Merton Seasonal: A Quarterly Review*, 24 (Spring 1999), pp. 3-7.
7. Rivera, p. 14.
8. Harford, pp. 118-19.
9. Harford, p. 101.
10. Two or more languages jumbled together.

11. Harford, pp. 226-227.
12. Harford, p. 199.
13. C. K. Williams, in *ABC's of Robert Lax* (Exeter: Stride [Small Print Publication], 1999), p. 183.
14. Cited in Harford, p. 280.
15. Harford, p. 36.
16. Robert Lax web site: <http://edge.net/~dphillip/Lax.html>.
17. Harford, p. 49.
18. Harford, p.72.
19. Harford, pp. 98-99.
20. Cited in Harford, pp. 165-166 [Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), p. 3.]
21. Harford, p. 180.
22. Cited in Harford, p. 191 [*The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), p. 189.].
23. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story by William H. Shannon*—Book Review. *Commonweal* (February 12, 1993), p. 24.
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LIPSEY, Roger. *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*. Foreword by Paul M. Pearson (Boston & London: New Seeds, 2006), pp. 197 with Index. ISBN 1-59030-313-X. \$26.95.

This book includes a bibliography of Merton's "Journals" and "Correspondence" (p. 187), documents apparently consulted by the author, along with other sections listing "Books" and "Books and Articles about Merton" (15 citations) as well as a list of "Other Sources" (42), yet this is a somewhat eclectic list. There are also often detailed notes (pp. 175-186). Thus, it seems this is a study researched in earnest. It is unique. It is a valuable study, yet somewhat limited in its focus.

The peculiarity of Lipsey's approaches to "Angelic Mistakes" is that it is a highly reverent genuflection to Merton's idiosyncratic late abstract "art" and print-making, yet is, therefore, by no means a book about "The Art of Thomas Merton," as its subtitle suggests. It is a beautifully printed book and it does provide valuable and suggestive (perhaps not always verifiably true) insights into Merton's "art," while Lipsey's exclusiveness might be a bit dangerous. So little is here finally included. The large numbers of extant photographs and enormous body of drawings, as well as the experiments in calligraphy and image-making are here in no way completely assessed. What is here will stimulate more research.