

gestures toward the possibility of using technology to help us deal with the digital deluge, such as when he says that “technology is not only part of the solution but also part of the problem” (73), or that “Some experts on communication technologies offer additional tips” for balancing our digitally-mediated lives (54). Thus a useful supplement to Thompson’s elegant book would be Howard Rheingold’s *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online*, in which the famed Stanford and Berkeley social-media lecturer explains how one can use Buddhist meditation techniques to successfully navigate the flood of digital media, outlining five fundamental digital literacies: attention, critical consumption of information, participation, collaboration and network smarts. Aside from fostering the essential digital literacy of attention, or mindfulness, Rheingold’s book can show how to set up the appropriate filters, dashboards and news radars that would enable the computer to handle the digital deluge, providing both time for solitude and the opportunity to create a meaningful, community-based, Catholic online experience. If Phillip Thompson’s book is essential for any Catholic seeking to discover Merton’s practical advice for dealing with our always-on digital media, then Howard Rheingold’s book is essential for any Buddhist; and as Merton said before leaving for his fateful Asian trip, “I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can.”<sup>2</sup>

Patrick Thomas Morgan

*Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*, edited by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart (North Vancouver, BC: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012), pp. 199. ISBN: 978-1-927512-02-9 (paper) \$25.00 Can.

Thomas Merton was a monk on the edge of the monastery, on the edge of the Church as well as on the margins of society. The edge motif was one that Merton cultivated and promoted. Long before it became fashionable to be marginal he had confronted the monastic appellation known as singularity and its overtones of being marginal, special or peculiar. Imagine walking around a Trappist monastery with a best-selling autobiography under your name, at the age of thirty-three. Things began to get complicated. Merton entered Gethsemani in 1941. By 1948 he had published *The Seven Storey Mountain*. By 1955 he was novice master, a job he held for ten years. By 1965 he was a hermit, and by the end of 1968 he was dead at the age of 53. During this short span he achieved an enormous amount of writing and publishing. He also happened to live at a time of rapid and unprecedented change. How he fitted himself into all

---

2. David Steindl-Rast, “Recollections of Thomas Merton’s Last Days in the West,” *Monastic Studies* 7 (1969) 10.

this is what the authors here investigate, and why the concept of the edge and the margin so aptly frames Merton's life and legacy.

The Canadian Merton Society has put together a collection of a wide variety of studies on the life and work of Thomas Merton. One is always fascinated by the way scholars come up with yet one more study of an intriguing subject, how they dig up and develop themes that may not have been addressed, at least in certain directions. This book is a good example. The volume opens with a Foreword by Patrick Hart (1) and an Introduction by Ross Labrie (3-12). Both are helpful and centering, as we have come to expect from these authors.

In "Prophecy and Contemplation" (13-22), Michael W. Higgins tells us that to prophecy is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new. To prophesy is not to calculate; it is to perceive. And Higgins tells us too that Merton came to see the contemplative life as a dependence on God. And contemplation for Merton was nothing less than the perfect and ultimate guarantor of human freedom.

"Merton's Mystical Visions: a Widening Circle" (23-44) by Susan McCaslin deals with what she terms four of Merton's most important mystical experiences. These took place in Rome, Cuba, Louisville and Sri Lanka. And she goes on to investigate and define how these four visionary experiences manifest and express the importance of being in relationship to all that is human. This provides a map of Merton's progression to a mature humanism.

"Apocalypse and Modernity" (45-63) by Bruce K. Ward investigates whether or not apocalypse has any interest or relevance in our time. Here, we get a short review of apocalypticism as expounded by such figures as Dante, Blake and Dostoevsky, as well as several Church Fathers. Pasternak and Girard are recruited as well. Ward tells us that allusions to the apocalyptic abound in Merton's writings.

"Technology and the Loss of Paradise" (65-78) by Paul Dekar deals with Merton's approach to a technological age and some of the dangers and advantages involved. (The author does not mention it, but ironically it was the technological malfunction of an electric fan that led to Merton's blazing entry into paradise.)

"Merton and the Beats" (79-100) by Angus Stuart is an interesting and curious attempt to situate Merton in the mentality and life-style of a certain marginal segment of the culture, the beat generation. Stuart lays out what it means to be a beat not just in the etymology of the word, but in its cultural manifestation. Some of the major beat figures, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, are marshaled to the cause. Here Merton's

affinity for the edge and the margin, and the countercultural, both civil and religious, is investigated and examined at length.

“Peacemaker” (101-15), by Ron Dart, divides Merton’s life journey into four distinct yet overlapping phases, and claims it is in the fourth season that Merton’s peacemaking vocation became the clearest and most mature. It seems that Merton was a pacifist, with reservations. How this struggle manifested itself and worked itself out is the thrust of this exhaustive and complete study of one of Merton’s most intriguing identities as peacemaker—taking on war, violence and protest. This stance positioned Merton on the edge of civil and religious culture of his time. Merton had his share of troubles with bans and censorship, and in that sense shared with those in the front lines of a new movement that was often opposed and even attacked.

“Merton and Interreligious Dialogue” (117-34) by Ryan Scruggs studies Merton’s interaction and discussion with interreligious contacts of other traditions. The three major monotheistic religions were familiar territory for Merton. Christianity attracted his attention, and especially its particular form in Catholicism. Merton in *Seven Storey Mountain* explains this attraction. The author touches briefly on the topic of whether or not Merton would have moved beyond his faith commitment. Would he have moved beyond the bounds he had known since his conversion, beyond his priesthood, beyond his monastic commitment?

“Merton in Asia: The Polonnaruwa Illumination” (135-54) by Donald Grayston discusses the experiences, mystical and otherwise, of Merton’s encounter with the Buddha statues, and Merton’s illuminating experiences. The themes of pilgrimage and journey are treated in depth and detail as well, providing thereby a thorough analysis of Merton’s interest in Asia.

In “The Mystical Ecology of Merton’s Poetics” (155-68), Lynn R. Szabo tells us that Merton’s immense love for the natural world, as he discovered it in his Kentucky surroundings, grounded his poetry in a mystical ecology. Some Merton scholars consider his early monastic poetry as among his best, and his poems about the monastery are among his most quoted and memorable. The author gives many examples of Merton’s spiritual sensibilities brought to life in his poetry as a mystical response to the natural world.

“Merton on Atheism in Camus” (169-89) by Ross Labrie brings the volume to a close, and give us an excellent introduction not only to the topic of atheism in the writings of Camus, but also a detailed account of Merton’s Camus studies, and of Merton’s own struggles with the concepts of belief, and of the place and role of God in human affairs. Merton’s reading of Camus sparked many reflections on organized religion and its

response to the plight of the human condition.

The book ends with a perceptive Afterword (191-95) by Susan McCaslin, and brief descriptions of the contributors (197-99), all Canadians. And so we have here Merton on the edge. Paradoxically, the edge moved him to the center in many ways. It seems that of all the edges from which we have to choose—far, cutting, rough, leading, sharp—Merton as fully expected fits them all.

Richard Weber, OCSO

MCDONALD, Mary M., *It Draws Me: The Art of Contemplation* (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2012), pp. xx + 76. ISBN 978-0-7648-2179-0 (paper) \$14.99.

Our postmodern world explodes with a sense of widespread exhaustion, a vision of wars, storms and devastation. Many realize that world peace begins with one's own inner peace and this book makes the case that the silence of artworks (icons and Chinese Song landscapes) promotes inner peace. Dr. McDonald's goal for this practical book is to help us use such art in our daily prayer. She asks in the Introduction: "Can meditating with great works of art help you to pray better?" (xi). The book affirms this and achieves much more: it presents convincing evidence that use of these images can reveal a model for understanding our own life's meaning. As the author puts it, "How much more powerful would an insight [into some important aspect of our lives] be if an image could help . . . live that knowledge?" (vii).

Inspired by the challenge to develop college students' insight, Dr. McDonald finds the praxis of "reading" and abiding with images. "[C]onnection and application" and "listening through reading" are key monastic principles the author stresses (5). The book clearly aims to train readers in life-giving ways to become more truly themselves. McDonald's contribution to the literature on inner-journaling is, I believe, precisely this well-structured training, which Merton aficionados will find most appealing. The book features previously unpublished lecture notes on *lectio divina* by Merton, and the 32-page illustration section includes a photo of Merton plus Song Dynasty paintings and Russian icons.

The Dedication page mentions being taught "to always enjoy yellow leaves against a gray sky" (iii). McDonald displays here the same visual-verbal sensitivity shot through Thomas Merton's journals, that reveals him as one dedicated to closely observing (reading) nature, her colors and textures. To delight in creation is to affirm oneness with it, a special joy in contemplating the Chinese tenth-to-thirteenth-century landscapes