

find themselves re-reading familiar passages as a renewed call to natural contemplation and its practical outworking, and as impassioned celebration of “creation as the body of divinity – at once veiling and unveiling the God Merton so longed to behold.”

Gary Hall

HIGGINS, Michael W., *Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, and the Rest of the Story*, 12 conferences on 4 DVDs / 4 CDs (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2014) \$49.95 (DVDs); \$29.95 (CDs); \$24.95 (MP3).

“Old hands” are frequently asked by newcomers to Thomas Merton’s writings, “where should I begin?” Accomplished Merton scholar Michael W. Higgins (former college president, now vice president at Sacred Heart University, author of three books on Merton, and current president of the International Thomas Merton Society) provides an excellent entrée by means of these twelve lectures on Merton’s autobiographical writing which focus on the journals in which Merton tells the rest of his story.

After a general introduction to Thomas Merton and to his *Secular Journal*¹ (which describes his pre-monastic life), Higgins devotes two lectures to *The Seven Storey Mountain*,² which provides the frame of reference for the other lectures and to which he returns in the final one. Higgins then traces Merton’s life through the original versions of his journals with the addition of lectures on the “restricted” journals that were published after Merton died and on his early autobiographical novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*.³ Higgins never loses sight of the fact that Merton was a poet and wrote with a poet’s sensibility. He uses the monk’s poetry to good effect in the lectures whose hearer is guided through Merton’s life “in his own voice” with (largely) helpful interpretive commentary by a respected Merton scholar.

These “autobiographical lectures” evince many strong points. Higgins helpfully reminds us that Merton was a European (born in France, raised there and in England); thus his intellectual framework was largely shaped before he came to America and Columbia University. Higgins utilizes as a theme in the lectures the importance of Merton’s study of William Blake and demonstrates how Blake’s visionary world influenced Merton the monk and writer. The lectures give the listener excellent literary

1. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959).

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

3. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

reconstructions of the journals, especially *The Secular Journal* and *The Sign of Jonas*⁴ which, like Higgins, I find one of Merton's best. Higgins' literary reconstructions especially commend the lectures to his fellow Merton scholars. I was particularly pleased that the "Western journals"⁵ were treated (lecture 8) as they are frequently overlooked in Merton scholarship and provide important information about Merton's mature (often last) word on a number of subjects.

I found the first eight lectures stronger than the last four. Lectures 9 and 10, which deal with Merton's last days in Asia and with his relationship with the student nurse respectively, sometimes hover on the edge of the speculative. Higgins' presentation of events surrounding Merton's death and his relationship with the nurse is very dramatically rendered, a fact reflected in their more grandiloquent delivery than what I heard in earlier lectures. I suspect I am not the only student of Merton who would question the statement that Merton "kept on top of his publications." And contemporary accounts of Merton's last days in Bangkok by those who were in attendance at the conference do not suggest the participants were "disciples" of Merton (whose last talk was not enthusiastically received).

But these are minor quibbles. Higgins' primary use of Merton's journals to introduce the monk and writer is both creative and insightful, as is his description of important figures who influenced Merton (particularly William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Simone Weil). The themes of Merton's various journals are accurately and clearly highlighted so that not only the exterior events but the internal development of Merton's life are demonstrated. The recordings are well produced and the set includes a study guide CD. I learned from Higgins' lectures and gained new insights into some material I thought familiar. I am delighted we now have this excellent resource to suggest both to those new to Merton and to those eager for fresh insights about his life and work.

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4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953).

5. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*, ed. Joel Weishaus (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982); Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989).