This book impels readers to pursue peace one person at a time and to seek the face of him who is our true peace, Jesus Christ.

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WEIS, Monica, *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up*, Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), pp. xvi + 142. ISBN 978-1-4982-7844-7 (paper) $21.

This relatively slim but content-rich monograph is a welcome addition to the expanding catalog of publications by and about Thomas Merton for several reasons, but there are three in particular that seem to be especially significant. First, the topic of Merton and his spiritual (as well as intellectual and artistic) affiliation with "the Celts" is one that has just recently begun to be explored in any depth, and Monica Weis' thorough study affords future scholars and Merton enthusiasts not merely an introduction to, but also a necessary resource for this multifaceted subject. Secondly, Weis approaches the concept of "Celtic Christianity" as a knowledgeable scholar and therefore quickly dispenses with the misguided "new-age" approach to Celtic studies: her carefully researched analyses of definitive themes in Celtic religious traditions are important correctives to the ahistorical – and thus anachronistic and uninformed – persuasion of much contemporary scholarship on (particularly) Celtic Christianity. Finally, she properly locates Merton's primary interest in the Celtic Christian tradition within the values, practices and spiritual teachings of Celtic monasticism, which, as she explains, seemed to Merton to be a "mirror of his life and his desires" for the ascetic, solitary life of contemplation he wished to experience (124). Monica Weis' book, then, is an essential addition to Merton studies since Merton's own insight into the Celtic traditions and the coherence of that worldview with his own spirituality offer the reader a deeper understanding of Merton himself.

The specific stimulus that set Merton on to the path of Celtic studies remains somewhat elusive. As Weis notes, Thomas Merton did not fully engage Celticism until later in his life as a monk, during (what would become) his final years, between 1964 and1968, and there was likely no single reason for the new direction of his religious and intellectual exploration. However, in chapter 1 (10-24), Weis does propose a few potential sources of inspiration, including his correspondence with noted medieval scholars like Dr. Nora Chadwick (a specialist in Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse and Celtic literatures and languages) and his personal friendships with such individuals as Canon A. M. (Donald) Allchin, scholar of Eastern Orthodoxy, honorary professor at the University of Bangor,

Wales and resolute enthusiast of all things Welsh. Given the eagerness with which Merton responded to compatible souls in personal encounters, Weis' suggestion is quite persuasive. Moreover, since Merton seemed to live an intellectually spiritual life that was a continuous process of interweaving the warp of *ressourcement* with the woof of *aggiornamento* (even before these became the lauded principles of Vatican II), he took the natural step of shifting his attention from what was known to what was relatively unknown: that is, just as he had already explored certain dimensions of early Christian and medieval theology, monasticism and spirituality, and had incorporated what he had learned into his modern vocabulary and sentiment, it made sense in his studies to travel from the familiar worlds of medieval France and England to the unfamiliar world of the Celts and their abundant, and in parts quite distinctive, ancient culture. Thomas Merton embraced it all. So it was that Rev. Allchin, as Weis describes in chapter 5 (83-106), was important to Merton as a resource not only for medieval Welsh poetry, which both men believed expressed a particularly robust incarnationality, but also for modern Welsh poetry. Allchin introduced Merton to several of his favorite Welsh artists, including Ann Griffith, an eighteenth-century Methodist mystic and hymnist; R. S. Thomas, a twentieth-century poet and Anglican priest, and David Jones, a twentieth-century Catholic poet and artist whom Allchin knew personally and whose work T. S. Eliot once described as a "work of genius" (85). The spiritual vibrancy of the three poets, combined with their passionate appreciation for the world of creation, not unlike the poetry of medieval Irish hermits, enthralled Merton, who recognized some of his own yearnings and sensitivities in their writings.

One other source of inspiration that Weis argues was a driving force in Merton's study of the Celts was a recognition – and reckoning – of his own Celtic heritage. Thomas Merton had long been aware of his own Welsh ancestry: as Weis explains, Merton's father, Owen, was by birth a "Kiwi" (New Zealander), but his own Merton ancestry could be traced back to Wales. In the nineteenth century, a branch of the Merton family tree left Wales to settle in New Zealand and during Thomas Merton's lifetime, several descendants remained in New Zealand (Christchurch) and he maintained a correspondence with them, especially with his aunts. Merton was always enchanted with his Welsh ancestry (although he had virtually no direct experience of Wales or any of the Celtic lands), about which Weis reminds the reader by quoting directly from Merton himself in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: "It is the Welsh in me that counts: this is what does strange things, and writes the books, and drives me into the woods. Thank God for the Welsh in me, and for all those Birds,

those Celts" (12). Thus Merton concedes that, in some ineffable way, his Celtic ancestry was not merely a matter of genetic chemistry but rather a predilection, an inclination or a channel of perception that he sensed within himself that in its specificity could not be explained away by mere happenstance. Merton's sensibility is almost anthropological: he was always uncovering the past to shine a light on its present formation and make it viable for the future, and so his fascination with his Celtic roots is quite explicable. The present is often best understood within some context of the past and that is most apparent in one of Merton's last works, left unedited at his death, the long prose-poem of a journey of reflection and self-discovery, *The Geography of Lograire*, which, as Weis notes, opens with allusions to Wales and various aspects of the Welsh "landscape":

> Should Wales dark Wales slow ways sea coal tar
> Green tar sea stronghold is Wales my grand
> Dark my Wales land father it was green
> With all harps played over and bells
> Should Wales slow Wales dark maps home
> Come go green slow dark maps green late home . . . .
> In holy green Wales there is never staying
> Plain plan is Anglia so must angel father mother Wales
> Battle grand opposites in my blood fight hills.[1]

That the opening of the poem is so meditative, so deliberately unembroidered, should not surprise any reader, given its authorship, yet Merton's insistence on situating Wales at the start of the poem and the inception of his own beginning affirms the tenacious appeal of his attenuated ancestry. The images absorb his vision: dark Wales, sea-swept Wales, musical Wales and Welsh coalmines, Welsh songs and Welsh hillsides, and yet he acknowledges the familial disconnect with the land – in "holy green Wales" there is no place for his ancestors, only memories.

Nevertheless, Thomas Merton's interest in the Celtic tradition was, of course, not simply a matter of narrow self-reference. Indeed, Weis offers an ample view of Merton's excitement for all matters related to Celticism by citing from his (unpublished) *Working Notebooks* throughout her text: for example, #48 delineates in notes his broad range of study on several topics related to the Celts, including compilations of books and articles on Celtic religious and cultural history; primary editions and secondary studies of Irish and Welsh (mostly early Christian and medieval) literature (poetry); research into Celtic monastic theology; monographs and stud-

1. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) 3-4; subsequent references will be cited as "*GL*" parenthetically in the text.

ies of Celtic art and architecture and linguistic commentaries on Celtic languages (see 4). Merton's brilliant awareness of nuance and his supple capacity to integrate different areas of thought are captured in a statement Weis quotes from his notes: in discussing the "Irish language," Merton perceived symmetry existing among the language, its expression in literary form and its presentation as a facet of public demeanor. He observed:

> The extreme concreteness of the Irish way of thought is reflected in the idioms of their language and determines the effect of their literature . . . a universal quality in Irish lit – sharp and homely brevity of epigrammatic speech eminently calculated for the rapid thrust and return of contentious talk. (5)

It was indeed a splendid insight to discern in the very structures of the spoken Celtic dialect those habits of mind that infused the literary style as well as the common parlance of the Celts, and it is obvious that such a consistency of wit and wordplay charmed Merton. Culling again from one of his *Working Notebooks* (#14), Weis offers a few examples of Merton's own attempts (with mixed results) at replicating in English the rhetorical strategies of the early Irish poetic voice, such as the drafts of his poems "Merlin and the Deer" and "St. Maedoc" (see 88-90), and she offers as well details about the anthology of early Irish poetry that Merton was developing as a kind of *vade mecum* for his daily contemplation (see 91-94). In all that, it does seem that the spiritual values and religious intensity of those early Irish monks and hermits, and not simply their deft use of words and symbols, most attracted Thomas Merton, for, as Weis explains, he embraced the luminosity of the imagination of

> the Irish hermits in the woods who were writing of the immanence of God revealed in the birds, water, rocks, and trees that comprised their environment. . . . Some of these early Irish monks went on *peregrinatio*, adrift on the sea . . . but some sought the "place of one's resurrection" in the local wild landscape as anchorites or solitary ascetics. Steeped in their Celtic culture of experiencing God in all creation, they were committed to seeking God not just in solitary contemplation but also in their everyday duties . . . and in their intimate natural environment. . . . They understand the Celtic spirituality of seeing and experiencing creation and redemption . . . expressed as one loving action in the Person of Jesus. (90)

Merton could not help but identify the endeavors of his own inner journey and his array of spiritual impulses with the distinctive characteristics of the Irish monks, specifically, and the Celtic monastic tradition, generally. The

Trinitarian disposition of Celtic spirituality that unified God, humanity and the earth was, as Weis contends, a core tenet of Celtic monasticism and of great appeal to Merton, as was also the Celtic inclination to experience the immanence of God in the world through the incredible multiplicity of its hued and honed creatures and materials. Such a perspective would have resonated with Merton because he consistently sought out a completeness to the human condition that would unite divine (and eternal) perfection with the most mortal incidents of creation, and that would reveal the "places of resurrection" in the most earthly of locations, perfect in their simplicity and intimacy. Like his Celtic monastic brethren before him, whether cenobitic or eremitic, Merton looked upon the world around him as lush with spiritual possibilities.

One other aspect of Celtic spirituality that was of especial interest to Merton was the notion of *peregrinatio*, or pilgrimage, perhaps a most emblematic image for the Celtic peoples. From centuries prior to their settlement in the far western shores of Europe, the Celts had been migrants, clans of travelers and wayfarers wandering across plains and plateaus from lands likely as far east as Central Asia. They were a people particularly drawn to water, whether the churning tides of the oceans or the roiling currents of channels and bays and seas, and so the concept of movement, of travel and of journey, was endemic to their culture, secular or religious. In addition, from the time of Augustine especially, Christian teaching had commonly identified the earthly life of the faithful with the experience of pilgrimage, the endurance of existing as an exile in a foreign land, and that sensibility resonated vigorously within medieval monastic culture, including that of the Celts. As a result, Celtic monasticism, especially in Ireland and Wales, advocated *peregrinatio*, the metaphoric "lonely pioneering of the soul," as described by Nora Chadwick, as a common spiritual discipline as well as an actual practice of monastic life (53). As Weis explains in chapter 3 (44-65), Thomas Merton was immediately drawn to the teachings and the narrative accounts of those "wandering monks," whether real or allegorized, and understood instinctively their practice of pilgrimage as the unique "charism" of their monastic life, the fundamental order of salvation: desire, movement, abandonment, faith, hope and, finally, love. As Merton himself claimed,

> The pilgrimage of the Irish monk was therefore not merely the restless search of an unsatisfied romantic heart. It was a profound and existential tribute to the realities perceived in the very structure of the world, and of man, and of their being: a sense of ontological and

> spiritual dialogue between man and creation . . . . in witness to the wisdom of God the Father. (54)

For Merton to depict pilgrimage as a "dialogue" was to realize the spiritual signification of its process, the interior "relocation" of the soul toward engagement with God. The Celtic monks, as Thomas Merton correctly surmised, perceived peregrination as not only actual pilgrimage on the lands and seas (for which the medieval Irish monks were famously celebrated) but as also the inner journey of the soul from a place of detachment and isolation toward a more intimate and more compassionate relationship with God. Indeed, that was Merton's instant insight upon reading what would become one of his favorite texts of Celtic monastic spirituality, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (*The Sea-Voyage of St. Brendan*). Weis argues that the *Navigatio* became for Merton "a model of the quintessential *pereginatio*" and he took such delight in its interlacing of geographic legend and cultural myth, spiritual direction and liturgical design, and overarching monastic intent, that he devoted a significant portion of one of his working notebooks for extensive (and interpretive) notes on all eleven chapters of the text (see 51-52). It was important to Merton, moreover, not to situate Brendan and his fantastic journey only in the Celtic past: Merton's notes suggest that he perceived in the story an exploration of monastic discipline and pilgrim spirituality that was yet still relevant in Merton's own time.

In closing, it must be reiterated that Weis has gifted both the Merton scholar and the Merton admirer with an excellent book that is quite erudite without being pedantic, rich in detail without being overwhelming, generous in its historical, literary and religious contextualization of themes and texts without becoming overly discursive, and sensitive to its subject without being sentimental or naïve. The writing is clear and calm and the bibliography is itself an excellent resource for further research into this fascinating topic. It has been a pleasure tarrying awhile with Thomas Merton and the Celts, such elegant voices of both the heart and the soul, but one can only dream about the many possibilities of his continuing exploration into the world of Celtic monasticism and Celtic literature, had he lived beyond his journey to Thailand in 1968:

> Minster in the New Wood Minster Frater in the grassy
> Summer sun I lie me down in woods amid the
> Stone borders of bards. . . .
> Lay down last burden in green Wales seas end firs larches
> Wales all my Wales (*GL* 4).

June-Ann Greeley