

ending with the Strict Observance and Trappist renewal in the seventeenth century. He then goes backward to show that the roots of this idea were not unique to the Cistercians, but preceded them in the works of the ancients. “There can be no doubt that the more we are able to get back to our various sources: Cîteaux, St. Benedict, the Desert Fathers, the Fathers of the Church, the more will we discover things that will help us the better to appreciate and love and, hence, to practice the virtue of simplicity” (47).

Who, then, is this book for? Naturally Merton completists will want to have it. However, those looking for the Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain* or *New Seeds of Contemplation* and other later works will be disappointed. His notes on the text and on Bernard are relatively dry and scholarly. But they are interesting and worth reading. The book is invaluable for historians of the Order. The Trappists of the early twentieth century are often depicted as rigidly following extreme austerities through desire for penance. This book reveals another motivation behind these austerities, which is not obvious to those perusing the early Usages. But this little book will also be valuable for the casual reader as well. It talks about the necessity for simplicity in the monastic life, but it implies the necessity for simplicity in the spiritual life in general, and gives practical advice on how to attain it.

Lawrence Morey, OCSO

TARR, Kathleen Witkowska, *We Are All Poets Here: Thomas Merton's 1968 Journey to Alaska – A Shared Story about Spiritual Seeking* (Anchorage, Alaska: VP&D House, 2017) pp. 400. ISBN: 978-57833-691-3 (paper) \$24.95.

Although almost all of the series of conferences Thomas Merton presented to religious women and to priests during his two weeks in Alaska in late September and early October 1968 first appeared in print barely two years after his death,¹ and his journals and letters from his brief sojourn there have been available since 1988,² relatively little attention has been paid to

1. Thomas Merton, “This Is God’s Work,” *Sisters Today* 42 (Aug.-Sept. 1970) 1-7; “The Life That Unifies,” *Sisters Today* 42 (Oct. 1970) 65-73; “Prayer, Personalism, and the Spirit,” *Sisters Today* 42 (Nov. 1970) 129-36; “Building Community on God’s Love,” *Sisters Today* 42 (Dec. 1970) 185-93; “Community, Politics, and Contemplation,” *Sisters Today* 42 (Jan. 1971) 241-46; “Prayer, Tradition, and Experience,” *Sisters Today* 42 (Feb. 1971) 258-93; “Prayer and Conscience,” *Sisters Today* 42 (April 1971) 409-18; “Prayer and the Priestly Tradition,” *The Priest* 42 (July-Aug. 1986) 47-48.

2. This material first appeared in a limited edition as *The Alaskan Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Isla Vista, CA: Turkey Press, 1988); the following year a trade edition that included Merton’s Alaskan conferences as well was published: Thomas

this preliminary phase of his final journey.³ It was of course considerably shorter and much less significant than his pilgrimage to Asia that ended with his sudden death, but even in comparison with the similar amount of time spent in California immediately afterward (October 2-15) it has been largely neglected,⁴ despite Merton's own fascination with and enthusiasm for this “most beautiful part of America” (*TMA* 52) as he investigated the possibilities of establishing a hermitage there under the auspices of the Abbey of Gethsemani. Now, a half-century later, a riveting new memoir seeks to remedy this oversight. In *We Are All Poets Here*, Kathleen Tarr, founder of the Alaska chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society and longtime resident of the state, provides a unique insider's view of Merton's visit in the context of her own spiritual quest. While serving as a knowledgeable, trustworthy guide in retracing Merton's Alaskan itinerary, she presents with frankness and insight an account of her own ongoing “odyssey with Alaska, Russia, and with the beautiful, towering, and flawed human being – Thomas Merton” (16).

Born into a largely dysfunctional working-class family in Pittsburgh in early 1955, baptized but completely unchurched, from an early age Kathleen Witkowski found refuge in a love of reading that eventually developed into a fierce desire to become a writer herself. As a teenager, after her parents' divorce and her mother's two subsequent re-marriages, she moved to Florida with her family in 1971, finished high school, went on to a local college, and at graduation found herself unsettled, unhappy and deeply restless. After reading *Coming into the Country* (1977), John McPhee's vivid travel book about Alaska, she decided to move there in 1978, as far away from Florida as one could get in the continental United States, and pursue a career in television journalism (inspired by Mary

Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989); subsequent references will be cited as “*TMA*” parenthetically in the text. The journal entries are also found in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*, vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 179-99.

3. For insightful discussion of the Alaskan conferences, see Bonnie Thurston, “Islam in Alaska: Sufi Material in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*,” *The Merton Seasonal* 29.4 (Winter 2004) 3-8; and Bonnie Thurston, “I Spoke Most of Prayer”: Thomas Merton on the West Coast (September 11–October 15, 1968), *The Merton Seasonal* 35.3 (Fall 2010) 10-19. For an account of a personal visit to Merton's Alaska, see Ron Dart, “In the Footsteps of Thomas Merton: Alaska,” *The Merton Seasonal* 33.4 (Winter 2008) 14-19.

4. Familiarity with the California stage of Merton's journey is probably due especially to the interviews with W. H. Ferry and Lawrence Ferlinghetti included in Paul Wilkes' *Merton: A Film Biography* (1984); see also the transcripts of these interviews in Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 87-94, 28-31.

Tyler Moore's sit-com character Mary Richards!). Quickly finding a job at the NBC affiliate in Anchorage, she soon became reacquainted with a college friend, Michael Tarr, whose family had relocated to Alaska, and within a year they were married and living in the tiny fishing village of Yakutat, accessible only by boat or air, where Michael spent the next four years working for the Federal Aviation Administration. In the coming decades they lived in various places in southern Alaska, raised two sons, and Kathleen held a number of responsible positions with business and cultural groups that were particularly involved in developing contacts in post-Soviet Russia. Finally, in 2002, she realized a long-held dream to pursue a master's degree in creative writing, returning to her birthplace for a three-year program at the University of Pittsburgh. It was here that she first encountered the work of Thomas Merton, reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 2005, deeply attracted by the story of his struggles and searching and deeply puzzled by his vocational decision. But it was coming across an excerpt from Merton in a collection of Alaskan nature writings, and making the astounding discovery that not only had he spent time in her home state but had actually visited Yakutat, of all places, as a possible location for a hermitage, that prompted the ongoing engagement with Merton's writing and wrestling with Merton's vision that has continued up to the present and has resulted in this book.

Much of this information is presented in succinct form in the book's preface (9-16), and is then developed in greater detail in the chapters that follow. The years in Yakutat, a coastal village in the southeast, largely made up of indigenous Tlingit families, were particularly formative, leading to an experience of solitude and immersion in the natural world that was more involuntary than chosen. Kathleen first worked in the local fish-packing plant, then gratefully moved on to become the school librarian, and became especially close to the part-Tlingit Pavliks, befriended by the "spiritually whole and well-grounded" women of the family (84), above all by her contemporary Jennie, who became a kind of role model and guide for the newcomer. The author presents a fascinating portrait of the clan's irascible patriarch, Mike Pavlik, "Wisconsin transplant, a former farm boy, Catholic altar boy, and high school dropout" who moved to the area upon leaving the navy after World War II, "no saint" yet authentically religious in his own "do-it-yourself" way (88), whose description of the towering Mount St. Elias, shining at sunset on the northwest horizon of the village, as a kind of "silver chalice" (109), became an archetypal image for Kathleen in her own spiritual development. At his funeral, celebrated by the bishop of Juneau, Kathleen spoke of the "strong impression" made on her by his "unwavering . . . Catholic faith" and by "how much he loved

the land” and Mount Saint Elias in particular (183). Spiritual nourishment, the author attests, can come from quite unlikely sources.

Her Russian contacts proved to be another key source of spiritual challenge and insight. Friendship with Igor Runov, whom she first met through trade-mission exchanges in Russia and Alaska, nurtured her love of Russian literature and culture. In one of the book’s most vivid scenes, having brought her to the country dacha of Boris Pasternak at Peredelkino, now a museum (and getting her in trouble with the official guide by having her sit at Pasternak’s desk so he could take her picture), Igor surprised her by digging up a tiny birch seedling from the property so she could replant it in her yard at home in order that, in his words, “someday you will have a Pasternak tree” (224). But an even greater surprise comes after the fall of the Soviet Union when she discovers that he is – or has become – a religious believer, and plans to go to the great Orthodox monastic complex of Mount Athos to be baptized and fully received into the church. “Igor became a faith explorer, a new Russian pilgrim,” she writes. “The example of his life gave me hope that I would find some right answers, too” (267).

Both of these events, of course, intertwined with her growing interest, even “obsession” (227), with Thomas Merton, who had corresponded with Pasternak, “a kindred spirit as a thinker, an artist, and defender of inner freedom” (218) and wrote an appreciative essay about monastic life at Mount Athos (see 248). Passages from Merton preface each chapter and references to Merton are integrated throughout the book. Discussion of the successive stages in her deepening attraction to Merton and his work are strategically placed, increasing in frequency and intensity as the book progresses. She describes in detail her reading of Merton’s autobiography, “enthralled with the artistry of his prose and with his warm, self-deprecating narrative voice” (115), including her spontaneous decision to attend Mass at Pittsburgh’s cathedral one Sunday morning, and then immediately reading the passage relating Merton’s identical experience: “Coincidence? I didn’t think so. Mysterious synchronicity?” (117). Back in Alaska, her second encounter with Merton, reading his September 27, 1968 journal entry from Yakutat in *A Republic of Rivers*, the 1990 anthology of Alaskan nature writing, brought the realization that “What began as pure literary fascination turned into love. . . . I could no longer brush Merton off as a writer’s crush. For the next decade, and from nothing I could have pre-conceived, I was on a parallel road with a fast-talking, jazz-loving, poetry-worshipping, Trappist monk,” a road that “made me realize I had to face my own emptiness, ruin, and confusion” (121).

It was not Merton as all-knowing guru but Merton as fellow pilgrim,

confronting his own brokenness, his own frustrations and failures yet remaining faithful to his chosen vocation, that made him so attractive to Kathleen Tarr. She relates her experience at a Merton “Bridges of Contemplative Living” retreat at Bethany Spring, Kentucky, down the road from the Abbey of Gethsemani, where she met Merton scholar Jonathan Montaldo, whose wise response to her account of her struggles stayed with her from then on: “You have to be comfortable to live inside the question mark” (155). She recounts from her own perspective the major events of Merton’s monastic life, listening to his “friendly, lyrical voice, but also a voice full of compassion and insight about life’s complexities and paradoxes in knowing one’s true self in relation to God” (228). Not surprisingly, she was particularly struck by his totally unexpected experience of falling in love with his nurse after surgery in 1966: “the spiritual bond I felt with Merton only grew stronger when I learned about ‘M’ and the special person she was. He was definitely and as humanly confused as everybody else. . . . still side-swiped by his own vulnerabilities and the impulses of his own physical being” (242). She concludes that this “brief, intense love . . . gave him fresher insights about what it means to be human” and was a needed preparation “to be a pilgrim and a seeker” (246) in what would be the final steps of his earthly journey, including those taken while in Alaska.

The later chapters of the book retrace Merton’s movements during these weeks, briefly in California and in much more detail in Alaska. (There seems to be a slight confusion, or at least imprecision, between Merton’s first trip to the west coast in May 1968, which was of course “prior to his arrival in Alaska” [269], and his time in California in October, immediately following his two weeks up north.) After providing a thorough summary of Merton’s journal account of his Alaskan experiences (297-306), she goes on to describe her own visits to key Alaskan Merton sites (helpfully located on the map provided at the beginning of the book): Dillingham and Lake Aleknagik, the westernmost point Merton explored (309-19); and Eagle River, in 1968 the site of the convent of Precious Blood sisters where Merton stayed for five days and presented six of his Alaskan conferences to the nuns, now the location of Saint John Orthodox Cathedral (331-43)—preceded by a discussion of Merton’s abiding interest in the Byzantine Christian tradition, with particular focus on the icon of Elias that hung in his hermitage and its connection not only to his great poem “Elias – Variations on a Theme” but to the mountain named for the prophet overlooking Yakutat (321-28), indicative of Alaska’s Russian and Orthodox roots. Tarr expresses some skepticism about Merton’s ability to survive as a “real hermit” in the wilds of Alaska, much more isolated

than Kentucky (277), but nevertheless believes that had he lived he would have been drawn back (380), whether permanently or not: “Merton clearly favored the option of undergoing a kind of monastic experiment by remaining a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani while somehow living as a distant hermit in Alaska” (382). But she also believes that no earthly place could or would perfectly fulfill the yearnings of Merton’s restless spirit.

As for the author herself, this memoir makes it clear that her own pilgrimage continues beyond the confines of her book. The final chapters relate some of her own more recent painful struggles but also her growing sense of peace, her own “epiphany” associated particularly with an extended return visit to Yakutat and its environs. She writes,

We are not drunkards here, carousers immune to the sufferings of the world. We are all poets here, bound to one another through the inner spirit, one beating heart to another. This was the silent prayer I muttered: “God, thank you for all you have given me, though I did not always see, and I did not always understand what you were trying to tell me.” . . . It was in the solitude and contemplation of Yakutat, and through Merton’s legacy, that I realized God took me here to that faraway place to quiet me, to give me time to scrape off the hardened crust of my false self. . . . I found my footing in Mother Alaska. With Merton, I understood what a centering was, what a real prayer was, what contemplation was. My Faith in God was confirmed under the Prophet Mountain. (390-91)

Kathleen Tarr quotes Merton’s statement in his Alaskan journal that “I am here in answer to someone’s prayer” (*TMA* 10), to which she responds, “And as I came to believe, those prayers were mine” (306). Readers of this moving memoir, with its informative insights into Merton’s brief but important stay in her home state and its testimony to the monk’s transformative influence on one fellow pilgrim’s journey, may well find themselves nodding their heads in agreement

Patrick F. O’Connell

DALLMAYR, Fred R., *Spiritual Guides: Pathfinders in the Desert* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), pp. 176. ISBN 978-0-268-10258-6 (cloth) \$45.00.

The cover of Fred Dallmayr’s book *Spiritual Guides: Pathfinders in the Desert* depicts four spiritual guides: Paul Tillich, Raimon Panikkar, Thomas Merton and Pope Francis. But the scope of the book goes beyond these four figures. Rather than merely raise up these particular