

# NOTES ON WALTER CAPPS'

## *PREVIEW OF THE ASIAN JOURNEY*

(New York: Crossroad, 1989 / 114 pages / \$13.95 hardcover)

By **W. H. Ferry**

Thomas Merton was no stranger to the Fellows of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions when, for the first and last time, he talked to us on October 3, 1968. For seven years or so his books and papers and letters had been circulating among us briskly. Most were on topics of common concern. In the early 1960s, they included, indeed featured, his *Samizdat*: that is, writings banned by the Church Center, mainly those shaking with anger about the self-righteousness of U. S. policy in Vietnam and such related matters as the black-white confrontation in the U. S.



### THOMAS MERTON AT THE CENTER

From l. to r.: Robert M. Hutchins, Frank K. Kelly, Edward Reed, bust of Linus Pauling [on mantel], Richard Kipling [standing], Peter Marin, Thomas Merton, W. H. "Ping" Ferry, Grace Tugwell, Rexford G. Tugwell

Photo by Jimmy Chen

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□ **W. H. "Ping" Ferry** was a friend and correspondent of Thomas Merton's and his host during his visit to Santa Barbara, California, in 1968. He privately printed Merton's letters to him and they were published in *Letters from Tom: A Selection of Letters from Father Thomas Merton, Monk of Gethsemani, to W. H. Ferry, 1961-1968*; chosen and ed. with an introd. by W. H. Ferry (Scarsdale, New York: Fort Hill Press, 1983).

The first letter from him suggested some kind of collaboration. This came in 1961, when he said that he felt “. . . a contemplative monk should have a quiet though articulate place in the discussions of his time, when the time is one like ours.” It was an irresistible suggestion, quickly accepted, and soon the relationship flowered into invitations to join us in Santa Barbara for a month or three. Could he not, Chairman Robert Hutchins asked, join the many notables who came to the Center as visiting Fellows? He would, but could not. His abbot of many years, Dom James Fox, said Nay, and so it was, even with respect to Tom’s participation in two international conclaves in 1965 and 1967 based on Pope John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris*.

Thus there were rejoicing and high anticipation when Tom at last got abbatial permission, from Dom James’s successor, to undertake an Asian journey, with a few domestic stops en route, Santa Barbara and the Center among them.

And here we come to Walter Capps’ instructive and agreeable *Preview of the Asian Journey*. It was enterprising of Capps to see into print Tom’s last recorded statement to an American audience. Capps is learned in the Merton canon, and his Introduction outlines the development of Tom’s thought, concisely relating Gethsemani, Kentucky, and the Far East. Then follow Tom’s statement to the Center and a brief dialogue with the Fellows. Here we learn what he had in mind as he embarked on his long-awaited and, as it turned out, terminal adventure. It is weighty and whimsical, speculative and quotidian. It is clearly an effort to summarize before departure, to set up an intellectual and spiritual account. Some have found even an anticipatory note of final words. But I found no reason to think that this was so in the following days. In any event, the Fellows were happy to be taken into his confidence and to be promised that the Center would be the first debriefing stop on his return.

Still to come was a week of hermitage hunting. We — Tom, my wife, and I — drove slowly north. Encouraged by the new abbot, Dom Flavian Burns, Tom poked about the Pacific coast between Hearst Castle in the South and the strands of southern Oregon for a site that might replace his hermitage at Gethsemani. He specified a remote shelf high above the Pacific, “where the ravens will feed me” — meaning a convent of friendly nuns not too far away.

The trip was without incident. Famous Highway One, crowded by mountains against the sea, was admired and discarded: too popular, traffic, traffic. We dropped down into coves, strayed into the occasional meadow while Tom took care of his Office. My wife and I soon became used to our meditative, often preoccupied, passenger. Every so often we were made to realize that Tom’s mind was far distant, perhaps with experiences, as he told the Center, “that cannot be communicated in words . . . only on the deepest level . . . this to me is the most important thing.” He said that he dreamed of his Asian journey.

But all was not solemnity and silence. Tom read billboard signs aloud and crowed derisively. He glanced at newspaper stories about recurring and bloody American follies in Vietnam, and growled and used profanity (old-fashioned thirties profanity). He was often content to sit in the back seat with a can of “Oly” (Olympia beer, a cherished companion on the voyage) and comment on Northern California’s handsome furnishings of mountains and sea and clouds.

Below Mendocino our quest had been unavailing. We’d had disappointment after disappointment. It appeared that every possible and accessible acre “remote and high over the Pacific” had been invaded by bulldozers and the other impediments of development. But then we came to the Monastery of the Redwoods in the thinly-settled mid-North. The monastery is a community of a dozen nuns of the Cistercian persuasion, who overwhelmed us with hospitality and had, of course, boundless enthusiasm about Tom’s hermitage search. They informed us of a logging road beginning close to Redwoods Monastery which, if followed, to the end of its craggy

twelve miles, would bring us to the point of heart's desire overlooking the ocean.

The dozen miles took two hours, inflicting lasting wounds on the middle-aged Dodge four-door, and ended in a high meadowlike expanse beyond which we could hear booming waves. "This is it!" We stumbled across a hundred upslope yards to come to the brink of a cliff: and looked down three hundred feet, where bulldozers and dumpsters and cement mixers and dust told the story we'd heard so often two hundred miles south — "Another development."

We persisted north, disheartened and no longer with much expectation. And just as well, for we came upon nothing that even came close to Tom's specifications. "There's always Alaska," he said often, as we hastened back to San Francisco and his plane to the Orient.

He spoke to us as he had in Santa Barbara about his intention to "hunker down" indefinitely at a monastic house in one of the countries he was so anxious to get to — Japan, by preference. It was an intention he repeated in letters many times, as if giving stern warning that he wasn't to be expected back soon from his widest of mystical adventures — never, however, failing to say, "but I'll always be a monk of Gethsemani."



It wasn't until long after I'd put him on the plane at San Francisco that I learned of a salient aspect of our eight days together. He often excused himself, morning or night, by saying: "I've got to write in my journal" — that which all Mertoniacs know now as *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. What I did not know was that Tom was keeping two journals all this time, the second of which — the so-called "secret journal" — has still to come to publication. Since Tom said little about these weeks in what was edited as *The Asian Journal*, I look forward with some eagerness to what if anything he had to say about them — especially about his appearance at the Center and our fruitless but lovely voyage looking for a place "remote and high over the Pacific."

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## A CONCRETE POEM from **MUNX POND**

by **Gregory J. Ryan**

**MERTON**

**NOTREM**

**TREMON**

**MENTRO**

**MENTOR**