

THE JOURNALS OF THOMAS MERTON:

A Preview

by **Patrick Hart, OCSO**

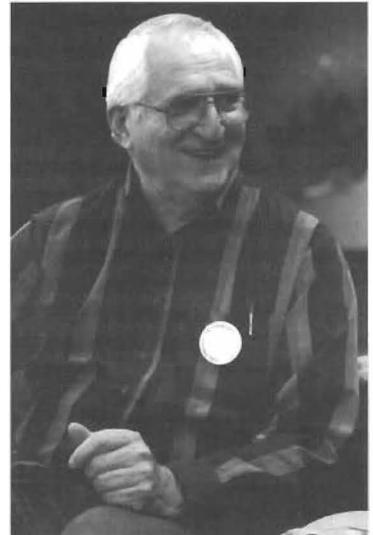
In 1990 the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust asked me to be general editor of the Thomas Merton Journals. It has taken several years of research to determine the amount of journal material that was available. Having gone through the various collections, especially those at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Bellarmine College's Thomas Merton Center, the Special Collections Department of the Columbia University Library, and St. Bonaventure University's Merton archives, I have tentatively settled for a series of seven volumes of Merton journals.

The Merton Legacy Trust, which was drawn up the year before Merton's death, includes the indenture that the journals may be published "in whole or in part" at the discretion of the Merton Legacy Trust, but not until after the official biography had been published and twenty-five years had elapsed since his death. December 10, 1993, marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of his passage through death, so the journals could begin to appear anytime after that date, at the discretion of the Trust. But the journals are not open to scholars until after their publication, according to the terms of the Trust agreement.

Since 1990 I have been able to have copies made of all the extant journals, beginning with the pre-monastic journals of 1939-1941, which are housed at the St. Bonaventure University Library, to December of 1968. His last entry was December 8th, just two days before his tragic death by accidental electrocution in Bangkok, Thailand, where he had given an address to monastic superiors of the Far East.

The next step was to appoint editors for the respective journals. The task was difficult since there are numerous qualified persons from whom to choose. Only recently was it possible to determine the number of volumes in question and then appoint persons who would be willing to undertake a segment of the entire project. I am happy to announce that all the editors have now been chosen, so subsequent volumes of the Merton journals will be edited by Jonathan Montaldo (1942-1955), Lawrence S. Cunningham (1956-60), Victor A. Kramer (1960-63), Robert E. Daggy (1963-65), and Christine Bochen (1966-1967). I have reserved for myself the opening pre-monastic journals (1939-1941) and the last volume of 1968.

During his lifetime, Merton drew upon these journals, choosing excerpts for a number of his books, including *The Secular Journal*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. He edited heavily and omitted a great deal of material, substituting fictitious names in the



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monastic journals. After his death, a number of books based on the journals appeared, such as *A Vow of Conversation*, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, *Woods, Shore and Desert* and *Thomas Merton in Alaska*.

The current plan is to publish the journals just as Merton wrote them, following the chronological sequence, beginning with the pre-monastic journals. We are indebted to the St. Bonaventure University Archives, for these journals. When Merton entered Gethsemani in December of 1941, he turned over two large journals from this period to Mark Van Doren for safekeeping. These are known as the “Perry Street Journal” from 1939-1940, and the second, “Saint Bonaventure Journal” from 1940-1941. There is a missing journal between these two journals, but we discovered a transcript of the journal he kept while in Cuba in the spring of 1940, parts of which appeared in *The Secular Journal*. Merton entrusted these transcripts to a Monsignor Fitzgerald, who many years later deposited them at Saint Bonaventure’s University Library Archives. Thus it was possible to piece together the missing journal with transcriptions made by Merton before he entered the monastery.

In the spring of 1992, I visited Robert Lax on the island of Patmos to discuss the early pre-monastic journals with him, since he was perhaps Merton’s closest friend during these years, and was able to help untangle the chronological sequence of the missing journal. Lax was in close touch with Merton at this time, and lived with him during the summer months while Merton was keeping his journal as well as writing poetry and prose articles.

The earliest monastic journal entries from 1942 were discovered by Jonathan Montaldo in the Columbia University Archives. This fragment of Merton’s monastic journal was given to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr when the latter was beginning to organize a Merton collection of her own. Fortunately this collection was preserved intact, and transferred to Columbia University at the time of Sister Thérèse’s death, and has subsequently been catalogued in the Rare Book and Manuscript Collection of the Columbia University Libraries.

The remainder of the journals was kept at Merton’s Hermitage until his death, December 10, 1968, after which they were transferred to the Merton Center of Bellarmine College where they have become a part of the Merton Collection, “secured” until after their publication.

Having gone through all these journals now in preparation for their transcription, I can confidently say that with their eventual publication we will have a more complete picture of Thomas Merton, “the good life and the hard time,” as his friend and Godfather, Ed Rice, subtitled his book on Merton in 1990. The journals as well as the letters reveal a very honest and frank Merton, and document clearly his growth in maturity over the years from the pre-monastic journals with their obvious enthusiasm for his work as a young teacher at Columbia University Extension, his discovery of Cuba, and finally his love of St. Bonaventure’s, both students and friars, to his monastic years as junior master, master of novices, and hermit with its mid-life crisis. And finally, his last days in Asia and the Red Cross place in Bangkok where he breathed his last on December 10, 1968. R.I.P.