

The Rebel in Merton

Review of
*'Something of a Rebel': Thomas Merton,
 His Life and Works—An Introduction*
 by William H. Shannon
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Reviewed by **Bonnie B. Thurston**

If there were a contest to find the living person who knows the most about Thomas Merton and the vast body of commentary on his writing, there would only be two serious contestants, Robert Daggy and William Shannon. Of the two, Bob Daggy is the “dean” of Merton studies, and Bill Shannon is the “grandfather.” And so it’s perhaps fitting that the grandfather, the patriarch of Merton studies, should be asked to write a book intended to “introduce Thomas Merton to people who knew him but slightly or not at all” (xiii), “to introduce the reader to Thomas Merton and to suggest ways in which his life story and his writings can help us on our spiritual journey” (xi). In reading Shannon’s most recent book on Merton it is important to keep the purpose in mind. This is a book for those who do not already know Merton. And at this level it is successful.

Not surprisingly, Shannon’s first chapter relates Merton’s life story, devoting about twenty-six pages to his pre- and nineteen to his post-monastic life. It begins, not at the beginning, but *in medias res* in Olean, New York, in 1939 and works back and forth from that summer after Merton finished his M.A. at Columbia. It’s an interesting approach, but maybe a little difficult for the uninitiated. Chapter Two, in spite of its “cute,” rhyming title, “Is Merton for Today, or Is He Passe?” makes a clear and convincing case for the continuing relevance for Thomas Merton’s thought. It’s insightful material.

Chapter Three, a helpful discussion of the major themes in Merton’s writing, begins as Shannon casts himself as the reader’s “guide for sorting out the things in Merton’s writing that are most significant and substantive, most attractive and appealing, most helpful and relevant” (65). Shannon admits to the temerity (“close to arrogance”) of such a stance, and, as is my experience with most guides, the reader will find in the chapter a great deal of the guide as well as of his subject. This would be annoying except that, as Shannon himself knows and as the author of books on prayer and the spiritual life (*Seeking the Face of God*, 1988, and *Silence on Fire*, 1991), what he has to say is worth hearing. But I think that a person who has read little Merton will have trouble keeping the subject and the guide clearly delineated.

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Shannon's suggestion that the fundamental paradox of Thomas Merton "can be expressed in two words: *inconsistency* and *stability*" and that he managed to combine both of these in a creative tension that...brought a large measure of unity and integration into his life" (64) is particularly penetrating. Most Merton scholars will concur with the eight threads Shannon pulls from the rich tapestry of Merton's writings. (They are Interiority, Contemplative Spirituality, God, Human Identity, Community vs. Collectivity, Freedom, Nonviolence, and Zen.) Some, however, might find them not as clearly separated as Shannon would suggest, and this one, at least, would have broadened the final theme to "Eastern Religions" to introduce the neophyte to Merton's broader interest in Eastern religious traditions, which included not only Buddhism but Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, and Hinduism. Shannon's honesty about Merton, who can, indeed, be "frivolous, conceited, arrogant, dogmatic, overly erudite" (57), is delightful. It's refreshing that, while Shannon clearly appreciates Merton, he hasn't fallen into the trap of writing a hagiography.

In my estimation Chapter Four, "The Merton Library: What to Read First," is the most helpful in the book for the intended reader, and it also contains my one serious disagreement with Shannon's judgments throughout. The chapter begins with Merton's own 1968 evaluation of his writings and lists what Shannon considers "his most important books" (125): *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *No Man Is an Island*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and *The Asian Journal*. For what it's worth. I thought his choices were excellent, although I might have added *Thoughts in Solitude*. Shannon provides very helpful background materials on the title and subtitles in the books he has chosen and makes good use of Merton's biography in introducing them to the new reader. Even seasoned Merton readers will find helpful and thought provoking material here.

But I have to take issue with Shannon's belief that "there can be no doubt that *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the place" for the beginner to start reading Merton, particularly if the first-time reader is not Roman Catholic, and I'm not even sure it would be the best bet for younger Catholic first-timers. *Seven Storey Mountain* gives us the very early, even callow, Merton. In the book he exhibits all the fervor and narrowness of a new convert, and none of the gentle, inclusiveness that is so appealing in his mature works. *Seven Storey Mountain* was one of the first books of Merton I read more than twenty years ago when considering writing a dissertation on him, and my response was not entirely positive. ("Oh, boy! What have I gotten myself into?") When I taught a Merton seminar to advanced undergraduates about ten years ago, *The Mountain* was not their favorite work. While it would be illogical to make a case from two personal experiences, and while I would certainly include it in the list of "must read" Merton, I would not rank the book as "numero uno." Proportionately, even for its intended audience, I think *Something of a Rebel* spends too much time with *The Mountain*, since Chapter One is implicitly structured around its publication and discusses its impact. There are other, less accessible works (like *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, which Shannon appropriately includes in his "must reads") with which readers will need more help.

In spite of this point of disagreement, and keeping in mind the book's purpose and publisher, I can give *Something of a Rebel* "two thumbs up," although I think Shannon's own *The Silent Lamp* (1992) (followed closely by Elena Malits' 1980 volume *The Solitary Explorer*) is the best general introduction to Merton. The tone of this volume grates a little, as if the "new" reader is also assumed to be young and perhaps not generally well read, and there are stylistic infelicities, for example repeated references to Merton's age (he was "only" so-and-so, or the equivalent) in Chapter One (see 12, 15, 16, 17, 27) that seem uncharacteristic of Shannon.

That said, when finished reading the volume, I wished for more. I'd like to hear a fuller explanation of what Shannon perceptively labels Merton's "methodology of experience" (32) or a more extended discussion of what he thinks "chastity of mind" (104) might mean to Merton. And now that there is a good introduction to Merton's work for the first-time reader, how about an introduction to the mass of secondary literature on his thought for those of us who have been around the Merton "block" more than once? Shannon's maturity as a scholar and his skill as a writer manifests itself most clearly in the fact that he can write so well for both groups.