

Merton Made Audible

Review of

Heretic Blood: An Audiobiography

by Michael Higgins

Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

3 cassettes / \$24.95 [Canadian]

Reviewed by **Kathleen Deignan, CND**

For those who have spent the better part of their lives *reading* the life and legacy of Thomas Merton, *listening* to the “audiobiography” *Heretic Blood* will be a fresh encounter with the man whose story has become a twentieth-century spiritual epic. For those new generations of Mertonphiles still at the foothills of the many-storied mountain of material by and about him, this three-part audio-documentary produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is a comprehensive introduction to the man, the monk, and the mystery. Written by Merton scholar and professor Michael Higgins and produced by Bernie Lucht, *Heretic Blood* marks the thirtieth anniversary of Merton’s death and the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of his world-winning autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It was first broadcast on the prestigious CBC *Ideas* program in December 1998, and is now commercially available. (While sharing a title with Higgins’ recent book, which was published to coincide with the broadcast, *Heretic Blood* the radio series is an independent effort, without the particular focus on Blake that marks *Heretic Blood* the book.)

This wonderfully crafted audio-drama begins with the strains of a hauntingly beautiful theme, one of the several musical threads that weaves through this nearly three-hour listening experience. Peter Togni’s original compositions create the sonic environment for Higgins’ fine narration, and a variety of musical idioms evoke the proper moods and moments of Merton’s life. Canadian actor R. H. Thompson assumes Merton’s voice, drawing the listener into a sense of intimacy that is enhanced by a chorus of friends and scholars assembled to tell the tale. Michael Mott, Merton’s official biographer, makes an impressive contribution to the work, not simply because of the comprehensiveness of his knowledge and understanding, but because this aural form allows his insight to flow with the familiar ease of a story-teller. William Shannon, another biographer, likewise fills in the portrait of Merton the man and the monk, with his own particular sensitivity and insight.

Early on in the program Higgins sketches a family portrait with economy and skill, highlighting the ways Merton resembled his exceptionally creative parents, and noting early

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childhood wounds. We imagine Merton learning his habit of autobiography from his mother Ruth Jenkins. Devoted to recording each detail of her first-born's every word and mood, this first writing coach was at the same time emotionally detached and aloof. With the birth of her second son (John Paul is curiously never mentioned in the program) Ruth abruptly turns her attention from Tom, and the child begins to take up the aborted labor of mirroring himself in words. So marked is their relationship by the literary daemon that Ruth even discloses her terminal illness and bids farewell to her young son in a letter: the written word seared and sealed deeply upon his heart. Just as vivid is the portrait of his father Owen, a landscape artist from whom young Tom inherited a deep love of nature and the visible world. As the story unfolds, one sees how the patrimony of the father's romantic soul becomes the son's inheritance of virtually inexhaustible creativity and vision.

Merton's various migrations are traced from his birth in France, to his education in England, to his adult life in America, and finally to his death in Asia. Another movement within the story follows the lines of his several conversions: his infant baptism, his disturbing awakening in Rome, his embrace of Catholicism while at Columbia, his monastic call, and his enlightenment experience at Polonnaruwa. All of these strands of biography are woven in what feels quite seamless as the writers interviewed apply their craft to the rich and subtle telling of Merton's expansive and expressive life.

The real treasure of this audiodrama is the richness of personal remembrance by the many friends of Merton whose reminiscences illuminate Higgins' narrative text. John Howard Griffin, Robert Giroux, Bob Lax, Tommie O'Callaghan, Glenn Hinson, each in turn and throughout the audiobiography, bring the richness of their friendship to the story. Merton scholars too bring their insights, including Christine Bochen, Jacques Goulet, Donald Grayston, and Ross Labrie. But perhaps nowhere is the use of personal reminiscence so effective as in the testimonies of Merton's fellow Trappists who lived with him in the monastery: John Eudes Bamberger, Flavian Burns, Patrick Hart, Timothy Kelly, Matthew Kelty and Paul Quenon. These men give us a palpable sense of Merton the man – gentle, whimsical, merry, sad, bright, fast, intense, critical, disciplined, breezy, “someone who thought with his skin.” The monks also bring authenticity to the telling of the Gethsemani story that makes this part of the program an important archival treasure for generations to come.

Though Gethsemani was a haven for Merton, it was not heaven, as the program takes pains to reveal. The ironies of Merton's life there are underscored with wit and rigor. We learn that the solitude and contemplation he dearly sought were almost endangered species in the monastery he had joined, though he wrote about both as if they were the air he breathed. It was not until he moved to his hermitage in the woods of Gethsemani in 1965 that he finally had the real solitude he so desired; but once there, he squandered it on visitors and the many writing and correspondence projects his extraordinary celebrity entailed. At the root of his ambivalence toward his hard-won solitude was a difficult fact as he records in a journal entry: “Here the work of loneliness begins.” The man who once said that all sanctity was born of conflict had found in his self-chosen desert of purgation a place to wrestle with an array of conflicts that were as deeply personal and private as they were social and global.

Crucial to the tale of this man of contradictions is the honesty with which his restless, rebellious, and romantic nature is presented. At the center of much of the drama was Dom James Fox, Gethsemani's abbot from 1948 to 1968. Opposites in every temperamental way, Fox became the sparring partner for Merton in his struggle to revive for himself and for the Church a monasticism he considered moribund. Yet the boundaries held by Dom James in his efforts to guide his charismatic brother enabled Merton to mature into the extraordinary prophet he became. The silence and stability of Kentucky's wilderness provided an echo chamber for Merton to hear his own prophetic voice and allow it to resound around the world during the turbulent decade of the 60s. Although Merton addressed every social, political, moral and spiritual suffering of the age, the program does not articulate the depth and comprehensiveness of these contributions, an omission that to some extent obscures Merton's full stature.

As the story moves on to its climax, the audiobiography explores a most intimate moment in Merton's exceptionally public life: his love for the beautiful young nurse who helped heal a deep heart-wound. Drawing on private journals from the period, Christine Bochen and Michael Mott illuminate what they have come to understand of this brief but passionate experience, aided by those who were closest to him at the time. With this Merton's true story takes on a dramatic poignancy not even fiction could have achieved.

Inevitably, the narrator brings the listener where we would rather not go: to Bangkok for the death of Thomas Merton. With dramatic irony the Euro-American monk who had been straining east in his quest for enlightenment experienced it in one electrifying moment in Thailand, but died before the world so hungry for his insight could hear him describe it. Again it is tender recollections of his brothers and friends that make this telling of the story of Merton's death so unique. Never has there been such a confluence of memories as these, nor has there been so personal an assessment of Merton's legacy.

For those of us who have been weaned on television and cinema, and even more so for those whose preferred diet is the printed word, the primitive and original medium of spoken narration seems almost a novel experience. Yet hearing a great story being *told* causes it to resonate in memory and imagination. Such is the case with this wonderful audiobiography, whose form allows Merton to be with us in a variety of situations. This being said, however, one wishes the program notes might have been more developed to direct the listener to deeper engagement with Merton's work and wisdom by the inclusion of some bibliography or links to Merton related web-sites for further exploration.

In the end, Higgins pronounces the epitaph that is the signature of his creative retelling of the Merton story: his was *heretic blood*. Yet Merton's "heresy" recovered a vein of orthodoxy and orthopraxy essential to the vitality of the mystical body of Christ and of the body earth: right contemplation as both the generator and fulfillment of right action. Whatever spiritual anemia we may suffer, Merton's *heretic blood* is a transfusion of grace flowing from the heart of a spiritual master, invigorating and enlivening. As if to invoke such sacred energy, a haunting Thai chant evocative of the *Veni Creator Spiritus* sounds the final note to a grand story wonderfully told.