

Merton's Legacy Distilled

Review of

The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals

By Thomas Merton, edited by Patrick Hart & Jonathan Montaldo

San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999

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Reviewed by **Doris Donnelly**

My bookstore in Cleveland carries a hefty four shelves lined with over a hundred books on or about Thomas Merton. I've grown accustomed to such abundance. What I was not prepared for was the sight of so many Merton offerings in Perugia, Würzburg, and Cracow when I recently visited these cities. Apparently, to paraphrase Shakespeare, age has not withered nor custom staled Merton's infinite variety. Nor his infinite appeal.

My suspicion is that bookshelves the world over will bend – at least temporarily – from the weight of this latest offering from Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, editors of *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, before the book achieves the best-seller status it deserves and flies out of stores.

This book distills the seven volumes of Merton's journals into one, and it does so with extraordinary discrimination. The reader gets the feeling as early as the editors' exquisite introduction that we are in the hands of two men who possess an uncommon appreciation for Thomas Merton as monk, poet, author, and spiritual master. Their respect for Merton's gifts is mirrored in their own. Furthermore, those of us who have read all seven volumes will marvel at the feat the editors accomplished. The essential Merton has survived the cutting room floor. We may yearn for more – and more is certainly available in the full collection – but there is no sense whatsoever of being shortchanged.

Of his vocation Merton wrote: "To be as good a monk as I can and to remain myself and to write about it. To put myself down on paper . . . with the most simplicity and integrity, masking nothing, confusing no issue: this is very hard because I am all mixed up with illusions and attachments. These, too, will have to be put down." The secret to Merton's popularity, success, value, and attraction probably lies in the fact that he does all of these things honestly and unselfconsciously. Merton sees the big picture, the place where the grace of God centers his world (and ours), but he also understands the smaller world where anxieties, pettiness and stubbornness confuse and derail him (and us). "There have been repeated failures, failures without number, like holes appearing everywhere in a worn-out garment. Nothing has been effectively patched."

Of course, Merton does more than "see." He writes, and nowhere is his writing more humanly compelling, more transparent to how God works and how we resist or surrender to that Divine initiative, than in his journals. Merton may have lived in a monastery in Kentucky, but the joys and struggles he describes are hardly limited to Trappist life. Fourth and Walnut is the venue in Louisville for an epiphany whereby Merton connected with human life beyond the walls of Gethsemani. It is a connection he never lost and to which we continually gravitate.

With the publication of this stunning diary-like memoir, the gravitational pull of Thomas Merton's legacy will have no end in sight.

Doris Donnelly, professor of theology at John Carroll University, is director of The Cardinal Suenens Program in Theology & Church Life. She is the author of *Learning to Forgive, Mary, Woman of Nazareth: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, *Putting Forgiveness into Practice*, and *Spiritual Fitness: Everyday Exercises for Body and Soul*, and most recently the editor of *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century* (Liturgical Press, 1999).