

A Not Quite Reliable Guide

Review of

*Reading Thomas Merton:
A Guide to His Life and Work*

By John Laughlin

Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2000

218 pages / \$32 cloth; \$20 paperback; \$8 eBook

Reviewed by **Sheila M. Milton**

The title aptly conveys the intent of this book: to provide a guide for readers in approaching Merton's life and writing – a rather daunting and ambitious undertaking considering the breadth of the Merton canon and the complexities of Merton's life. The intent is admirable, but unfortunately, Laughlin's work is not quite equal to the task. Generally well conceived and including much helpful information, this volume from a subsidy publisher shows the want of careful editing and proofreading. From an inauspicious typo in the back cover blurb through numerous factual, grammatical and typographical errors throughout the text, Laughlin's efforts to serve as a guide for the new or old reader of Merton is marred by errors of form, and its style and organization require a bit more final polishing. Readers already familiar with Merton will not find new insights in these pages; new readers might fare somewhat better.

Laughlin's concept and objective for his book are laudable. He begins with a biographical overview of Merton's life that includes a chronology and photographs of Gethsemani Abbey; the author adds his own conjectures concerning significant events in Merton's life to this section. The following sections deal with an array of topics that range from instructions for making a visit to a monastery, to where to find collections of Merton's works, to a list of dissertations about Merton, venues to buy books and tapes on Merton, and a list of related web sites. (Readers should heed Laughlin's warning that web sites change frequently since many of those listed are incorrect.) One section gives Merton's rating scale chart that he created in 1967, which Laughlin uses for those works that Merton evaluated. The annotated bibliography of Merton's books and secondary sources is indubitably an important and helpful tool for the new reader of Merton, some errors notwithstanding.

Among the most conspicuous, outright errors and omissions are the following: Victor Kramer, a Merton scholar, is twice described by Laughlin as "a longtime friend" of Merton's (46, 173), whereas Kramer neither met nor corresponded with Merton (perhaps he is being confused with Merton's close friend, the artist and printer Victor Hammer); Owen Merton's death is given as October 4, 1931 (28) instead of January 18, 1931 – though it is listed correctly in the chronology of Merton's life; at one point Laughlin implies that Thomas Merton died in 1964 (162-63) whereas of course Merton

died December 10, 1968; the chronology of Merton's life does not include the birth of Merton's younger brother John Paul, who was born November 2, 1918. Omitted too, is the record of Merton's maternal grandmother, Martha Jenkins', death on August 16, 1937. (The death of Martha's husband, Sam Jenkins, is listed correctly in the chronology.)

Collectively, these flaws obscure somewhat the book's primary merit, which is its informality and general accessibility to new readers. In fact, however, as a basic introduction to Merton and his work, Laughlin's book falls well short of the one conceived in 1962 by Thomas P. McDonnell and Merton himself, *A Thomas Merton Reader* (rev. ed. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974).