

A Fascinating Tour of Mertoniana

Review of

The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia

By William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell

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Reviewed by **Anne E. Carr**

The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia is an intriguing collection of articles and illustrations that provides a plethora of information about the most famous monk of the twentieth century. Put together by well-known Merton scholars William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, it is more than 500 pages of thoughtful summary, research, analysis and criticism, liberally sprinkled with photographs and drawings. Far from being dull and repetitious as the word "encyclopedia" might suggest, this hefty volume proves to be a fascinating tour of the life of Thomas Merton and the names, places, issues and events associated with his often tempestuous life.

The *Encyclopedia* provides a vivid picture of the Catholicism of the 1940s, 50s and 60s, from Merton's famous conversion and entrance into the Cistercian monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, familiar to readers of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, to such events as the civil rights and black power movement, the protest of the war in Vietnam, Camus and the meaning of the absurd, the issues of non-violence, peace, other religions (especially those of the East) and censorship in the church. It traces the years of his life from his immersion in the contemplative community he entered to his increasing desire for greater solitude, finally living in his own hermitage on the monastery grounds. The collection is not only of historical interest, but strangely prophetic as it touches on issues currently debated: celibacy, ecology, other religions, especially Buddhism, the status of women in the church. On the latter, one notes the special significance Merton attributed to Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* and to his recurring dream about a female figure called Proverb, an embodiment of the "sophianic wisdom" that became so central in his later years.

The organization of this big book offers detailed descriptions and analyses of each of Merton's many writings, from small pamphlets to major books, from handsome printings in limited editions to popular volumes still in print for use in classrooms. For instance, Merton's second book, *The Waters of Siloe*, is seen to be already a critique of a rigidity and formalism that can creep into the church as well as the monastery, when he writes about the failure of La Trappe (whence the name for the monks as "Trappists") and its seventeenth-century abbot De Rancé. It foreshadows the complaints he later has about the Church itself and his own monastery and abbot. The authors sagely observe that we only hear of Merton's side of the story of his conflict with Dom James Fox who, in Merton's opinion, embodied a similar emphasis on the rule, rather than the contemplative goal of monastic life.

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The volume includes fully developed essays on special themes in Merton's thought, for example: compassion, contemplation, purity of heart, culture, experience, the fall or original sin, freedom, God, the Holy Spirit, love, monasticism, nature, poetic theory, racism, redemption, self, silence. In its treatment of poetry, it provides generous samplings of Merton's several changes of direction, the poems he wrote about his sudden love affair at the age of fifty-one, and the special influence of the Latin American poets he read in his last years, particularly under the direction of his former novice, Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal.

The wide variety of Merton's correspondence, incorporating letters to and from an amazingly wide circle of friends with whom he exchanged his thoughts on matters of common interest, is treated in detail in the *Encyclopedia*. Merton read voraciously and often began a correspondence simply because he was moved by another writer's thought and wanted immediately to set up a personal dialogue. His life of silence seemed to make him open to the communication of ideas with old friends and new and his letter writing was nothing short of prodigious. Shannon comments that four thousand letters would be a conservative figure: five volumes of his letters were published between 1985 and 1994. Merton kept in contact with his old friends from his days at Columbia University in New York as well as with new authors whose books sparked his interest. (In fact, one of his private journals, edited by Naomi Burton Stone, is entitled *A Vow of Conversation*, covering the years from January 1964 to September, 1965. Merton himself edited it but it was not published until 1988. The title derives from the monastic vow of conversion of manners, taken by all Cistercians, and indicates the intent to continually grow in living out the life of the Christian monk.)

One of the most interesting sets of correspondence was that with Rosemary Radford Ruether, which later became a book called *At Home in the World*, a collection of forty letters written between 1966 and 1968, in which Radford Ruether challenged Merton's views of monasticism as an authentic way of life today for one committed to justice in the world; it was, in her opinion, no longer a radical Christian choice. Merton comments in his private journal that Ruether is "very Barthian" and therefore trustworthy. There is no "phony incarnationalism" in her thought, he wrote in his personal journal. Merton's letters have now been published in five volumes under the general editorship of William H. Shannon. His many correspondents, besides family members, include Jean Leclercq, Robert Lax, Amiya Chakravarty, Evelyn Waugh, Czeslaw Milosz, Jacques Maritain, Boris Pasternak, Ernesto Cardenal (and sixteen other Latin American poets), James Baldwin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Henry Miller, Walker Percy, Sisters Luke Tobin and Thérèse Lentfoehr, Abraham J. Heschel, Pope John XXIII, Louis Massignon, Dorothy Day, Catherine DeHueck Doherty, James H. Forest, Erich Fromm, John Tracy Ellis, Mark Van Doren – many of whom receive individual entries in the volume.

It is apparent that Merton's letters were autobiographical; he wrote for publication and often repeated events and ideas that found their way into his published books. Thus the decision to publish his private journals twenty-five years after his death (as he himself had stipulated) resulted in seven volumes over the last years under the general editorship of his former secretary Brother Patrick Hart of Gethsemani. Derived from Merton's own handwritten journals, these seven volumes often reveal the sources of familiar events and issues otherwise available but provide a new texture that is more intimate and personal. The journals describe in more detail the problems that Merton had with commands from his superiors that he refrain from writing about social issues, especially peace and non-violence, that he cease writing about the eremitical life (the Carthusians and the Camaldolese orders as providing greater solitude than was available at Gethsemani) and accept as providential his

place in a contemplative monastery. He sympathized with theologian Charles Davis when he left the Catholic Church and felt vindicated by the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in the mid-sixties by Pope John XXIII. The journals are described, analyzed, and thoughtfully criticized in the *Encyclopedia's* entries.

Another long book that may have been overlooked by Merton readers is the collection of his literary essays. This rather eccentric collection, edited by Patrick Hart, receives a good entry by Patrick O'Connell in the *Encyclopedia*. It notes that the volume, some 549 pages, includes material from both published and unpublished sources and comprises everything Merton wrote about literature as critic and theoretician. It deals with various authors that Merton read and commented on, particularly Albert Camus, Flannery O'Connor, Simone Weil, Thomas Altizer, J. F. Powers, James Joyce and William Faulkner. He takes on Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* which he describes as a "bad play" but a "significant phenomenon" – a crude and poorly written attack on Pius XII that nevertheless raises serious questions about the church's duty to speak out for the defenseless. He treats of the early work of Roland Barthes and finds that it bears a serious asceticism that honors writing itself over the need to communicate a message. A long appendix includes Merton's masters thesis on William Blake which highlights his emphasis on imagination and creativity and uses insights from Thomist (Maritain) and Indian (Coomaraswamy) art to approach the character of genuine creativity.

Finally the book is to be praised for its lavish photographs and drawings. There are pictures of Merton's friends and relatives, and many of the photographs he himself took, especially on his journeys to California, Alaska, and Asia. He had become an expert with the camera with the help of John Howard Griffin, who developed the Asian photographs after Merton's death that now illustrate *The Asian Journal*. There are examples of the paintings of his father, Owen Merton, the woodcuts of his friend, Victor Hammer, and the wonderful line drawings, sketches and calligraphies of Merton himself who had proved to be a creative artist in his own right.

There has been some concern that Thomas Merton is being turned into a cult figure among his many followers, that the meetings of the International Thomas Merton Society especially have sometimes taken on the dimensions of a pep rally. But *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* demonstrates the Merton was truly a remarkable figure and that serious and critical scholarship about the man and his times is a very worthy project. It is an outstanding venture.