

Gadfly and Good Friend

Review of

Ferrytale: The Career of W. H. "Ping" Ferry

By James A. Ward

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Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

I met W. H. "Ping" Ferry in 1989 at the first of the meetings of the International Thomas Merton Society. We struck up a pleasant conversation that lasted a goodly hour or so. I also remember a little stroll in Louisville's Cherokee Park where we spoke of Thomas Merton and his relationship with "M." When I returned to my campus I got a letter from him. Writing back and sending him an article I had written, I received a prompt response in return. Appalled that I did not know the Irish essayist and journalist, Flann O'Brien (whose pen name was Myles na Gopaleen), Ping dispatched some of his collected columns and essays. I think he did so to sharpen my prose style. My brief acquaintance with Ping Ferry reflects what Professor Ward says about him in this biography: he was an inveterate letter writer, provider of materials for one's education, and a networker *avant la parole*.

From reading Merton it was clear to me that Ping Ferry was a man of the Left whose passions were nuclear disarmament, workers' rights, racial justice, and criticism of the power of the military-industrial complex in general and of large corporate bodies in particular. What was not clear to me and now is from reading this biography is that Ping Ferry was born to privilege (his father was, for a time, head of the Packard Motor Car Company) but whose life was varied to the extreme: he was a one-time teacher at Choate (among his students: John F. Kennedy), a consultant, an advertising and business advisor, a journalist, and, for nearly two decades, intimately associated with the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Robert Maynard Hutchins' think-tank at Santa Barbara, California. After his messy departure from the Center he retired to New York where he spent his last years as a gadfly, pamphleteer, and dispenser of considerable monies for good causes. He died in 1995 at the ripe old age of eighty-five.

Readers of this journal will most likely be interested in Ping Ferry because of his close connection to Thomas Merton – a friendship that began in 1961 with a correspondence which Merton had initiated. Ferry described Merton as one of the three or four most impressive people he had ever known – and Ping Ferry knew lots of people. They exchanged over eighty letters which Monsignor Shannon has reproduced in *The Hidden Ground of Love*; Ping Ferry himself published some of those same letters in a small press run of 500 copies in 1983 under the title *Letters from Tom* (Fort Hill Press).

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I would love to tell interested readers that this biography illuminates the relationship between the two men but, alas, such is not the case. The friendship is given an entire chapter to itself, but Ward depends for his factual information about Merton himself on two dubious sources: Edward Rice's idiosyncratic *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* and Monica Furlong's tendentious biography of 1980. As a result of a too quick survey of those sources Merton's brother is said to have died in a bombing raid over Mannheim, Germany (he actually died over the English channel) and Merton's child and its mother get killed in a London air raid (for which there is no evidence beyond a guess). He tells us that Merton got up at 2:00 AM to put in four or five hours of writing before "the monastery stirred" and that Merton kept two journals one "for his eyes only." These are minor but irritating missteps but more generally speaking Ward just has a tin ear for matters Catholic and monastic. His chapter on Merton and Ferry would have benefited from a reading by someone who knew more about Merton. He gets the main-line facts straight about the relationship of the two men: Ferry attended the 1964 "peace" retreat at Gethsemani; he was a confidant for Merton when the latter was agonizing over his romantic relationship with the young nurse; and he was a hospitable guide for Merton on the monk's visit to California before the ill-fated Asian journey.

I enjoyed reading about Ping Ferry's life. He was one of those social and political gadflies who never lost his zest for conversation and debate. He was a man who put both his intellect and his money into the causes for which he had made a commitment. When bravery was called for, he could be brave; he was the first public figure in the United States to challenge the odious J. Edgar Hoover openly. His opinions were as flamboyant as his wardrobe (pork pie hat; checked jacket; bow tie; and running shoes). About him in this biography we learn much – but about Merton, little.