

# Bound by Every Affection

(In Memory of Bob Daggy)

Review of

*The Vision of Thomas Merton*

Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell

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Reviewed by **Gregory Ryan**

*The Vision of Thomas Merton* is both a fine collection of essays and a fitting tribute to the memory of Robert E. Daggy. Readers of *The Merton Seasonal* know what a debt of gratitude they owe to Bob for his work at the Merton Center and his work to promote Merton studies around the world. The book under review is a testament to the admiration and respect he enjoyed in the Merton community. It is perfectly conceived and near-perfectly produced. Bob would have enjoyed – and does enjoy, I'm sure – the simplicity with which the book came together. All the contributors are either fellow editors of Merton's journals or letters, or are scholars who worked with Bob on one or another ITMS project or event. And, since all the contributors relied on Bob's assistance in some way in their research, one might say that Bob also contributed to the preparation of this book.

*The Vision of Thomas Merton* follows in the tradition of *The Message of Thomas Merton* and *The Legacy of Thomas Merton*, both edited by Brother Patrick Hart some years ago. The cover of the book is friendly and welcoming, with Merton smiling at the reader, as if to say, "Come on, let's go have a beer and talk a while." The reader who accepts the invitation is in for a treat. The foreword by Brother Patrick tells about his first getting to know Bob and their deepening friendship as they collaborated over the years on many Merton publications. He also gives a preview of the book's contents. Pat O'Connell's introduction describes how the Publications Committee of the ITMS convened shortly after Bob's death and decided to publish a collection of essays on Merton by Bob's friends and colleagues as a tribute to his memory.

The book opens with what Bob would call "a mood piece," a reminiscence by "Tommie" O'Callaghan, longtime Merton Trustee and a friend to both Thomas Merton and Bob Daggy. It was Tommie who was responsible for bringing Bob to the Merton Center, first as an archivist to sort out the huge mass of uncollected and uncatalogued Mertoniana; as time went on, Bob became curator, then assistant director, and finally director of the Center and Chief of Research for the Merton Legacy Trust. Tommie also gives the details of Bob's education and background before coming to the Center and how, though he knew next to nothing about Merton when he arrived, his knowledge broadened and deepened until he soon was recognized as one of the foremost Merton scholars in the world. (It amused and delighted Bob that those in the Merton "industry" referred to Brother Patrick, Monsignor Shannon, and himself as the "Triumvirate" among Merton Scholars. Bob had not an

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ounce of false modesty!)

The first essay is Bob's own "Thomas Merton and the Search for Owen Merton" in which he traces the monk's difficulties coming to grips with his father's actual life following his wife's death and not the idealized life that Merton portrayed in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This was an area of research that was particularly dear to Bob. In a letter to me dated September 10, 1985 (right after the death of my father), Bob wrote: "Words can mean so little when we lose a parent because we lose a part of ourselves, a part of our growing up, a part of our innocence. I am still wrestling after more than a year with my feelings about my father's death, feelings prompted by what was and what might have been and what will never be." In this essay Bob quotes Merton writing of his father: "he was the man who had brought me into the world, and had nourished me and cared for me and had shaped my soul and to whom I was bound by every possible kind of bond of affection and attachment and admiration and reverence" (27). While he was working on this essay Bob told me in a telephone conversation that he hoped it would develop into a "double biography" of both Thomas and Owen Merton. In the copy he sent me, the complete title is "Prologue: Thomas Merton & the Search for Owen Merton," suggesting that this was just the beginning of a longer work that he had planned. (A variant state of this essay is available at the web site of the Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. A comparison of the texts shows what a gifted editor Patrick O'Connell is.)

St. Augustine said that the purpose of prayer is to return to health the eye of the heart so that we may see God. Christine Bochen's "With the Eye of the Heart: Thomas Merton on Faith" shows that Merton's "vision of faith remained clear and consistent: it was a contemplative vision" (44). After developing this theme with very good use of pertinent passages from Merton, Bochen ends by telling us that "Merton left us with a contemplative vision of faith: nurtured by prayer and meditation and committed to action" (62). Surely, this is a worthy model for all of us to follow.

"Interiorizing Monasticism" by Lawrence Cunningham could well have been titled "Listening with the Ear of the Heart." In this essay Cunningham explores what it is about the monastic charism that people find not only attractive but meaningful and helpful. Cunningham challenges us to learn from the monastic charism, but to find our particular way to Christ – regardless of our state in life.

Victor Kramer's "'Crisis and Mystery': The Changing Quality of Thomas Merton's Later Journals" makes a case for certain "pivotal" years, events or themes in Merton's life as identified by passages in his books. Kramer also examines the drawbacks of giving titles to Merton's journals other than by simply identifying them by the years in which they were written; giving titles can reveal the editor's biases.

In his essay, "Loving Winter When the Plant Says Nothing: Thomas Merton's Spirituality in His Private Journals," Jonathan Montaldo incorporates the senses of hearing and seeing when he discusses Merton's "voice" as he opens his heart's inner ear (102). Montaldo's writing, though it deals with Merton's prose, is, for this reviewer, the most poetical in the book. His closing sentence is worth the price of the book!

Thomas Del Prete's "On Mind, Matter, and Knowing: Thomas Merton and Quantum Physics" is a fascinating exploration of how Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Bohr's "realization of our embeddedness in the world" contributed to Merton's contemplative certainty and his sense of being-in-the-world. Merton says, "The first place in which to go looking for the world is not outside us but in ourselves. We *are* the world" (130).

"Dancing with the Raven" is Monica Weis's latest journey into Merton's evolving view of and deepening love of nature. She believes that if Merton were alive today, he would be a staunch

environmental advocate, “reminding us of the sacramentality of nature and our responsibility to act on ecological principles” (152).

Patrick O’Connell writes thirty pages on Merton’s *Thirty Poems*. Readers of Merton literature know what a fine writer and original thinker O’Connell is and no one will be disappointed by his chapter titled “Sacrament and Sacramentality in Thomas Merton’s *Thirty Poems*.” Others have written extensively on Merton’s poetry, but one of the most interesting aspects of this essay is O’Connell’s ability to connect specific scriptural sources to individual Merton poems. Of both Merton and O’Connell one might say (with apologies to Evagrius): the one who prays is a poet; the poet is one who prays.

Bonnie Thurston also approaches Merton’s poetry in her “Wrestling with Angels: Some Mature Poems in Thomas Merton.” Going beyond the overtly “religious” verse of his early years in the monastery, Thurston believes, “Merton came to approach the mystery of God-with-us not in the language of church, of liturgy, of theology, but in the language of the natural world with imagery drawn from plants, seasonal change, and the daily cycles of light and darkness” (188).

Erlinda Paguio’s “Thomas Merton and Ananda Coomaraswamy,” the shortest chapter in the book, points out their common interest in William Blake, Meister Eckhart, and Eastern sages, especially relating to “*claritas*” (clarity) and “*lila*” (the cosmic dance) (203).

It is fitting that William Shannon has the last word here with his very sensitive and insightful “Thomas Merton in Dialogue with Eastern Religions.” Monsignor Shannon begins by explaining his embarrassment over derogatory statements made by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger concerning Buddhism, and then sets the record straight by quoting favorable documents from a “higher authority,” the Second Vatican Council. Thomas Merton, years ahead of the curve on this, learned a great deal from his reading and personal contacts with religions of the East. Shannon identifies five insights found in Merton’s works that made it possible for him to find his way to the East after having found the East in the West. It may be nit-picking to mention, but I think the last section of this essay, “Merton’s 1968 Trip to the East,” should come before “A Summing Up.” As it stands, one gets the feeling that it was “tacked on” to a finished essay.

Earlier, I said this book was nearly perfect. Black-and-white photos, by Merton and others, nicely set the tone for each chapter, though the soft edges give them a strange, other-worldly effect. The italicized extended quotations from Merton’s writings are hard on the eyes after reading for an extended period of time. The book utilizes endnotes instead of footnotes which turn it into a “two-bookmark book,” one to keep your place in the text and one to keep your place in the notes so you can flip back and forth as you read. Endnotes were one of Bob’s pet peeves, but they are in many cases unavoidable. Publishers prefer endnotes so pages appear less “cluttered,” making them less likely to scare off casual readers who can simply ignore the notes altogether, if they wish. An appendix gives a complete (and impressive) bibliography of Bob Daggy’s work on Thomas Merton. The Notes on Contributors are helpful. There is no index.

All royalties from sales of *The Vision of Thomas Merton* will go to the ITMS Daggy Scholarship Fund, which sponsors attendance by students and young adults at ITMS conferences, so that Bob Daggy’s legacy is being upheld in a double way. Finally, this book’s pages, writers, and readers are all bound by every affection for Thomas Merton, and I’m sure Bob Daggy would be very pleased and gratified by that. The writers tantalize the reader to go back to the sources, to read Merton again, but with the benefit of a clearer vision than before.