

An Affectionate Anthology

Review of

I Have Seen What I Was Looking For: Selected Spiritual Writings

By Thomas Merton

Edited by M. Basil Pennington, OCSO

Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005

260 pages / \$19.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Judith Hardcastle**

Published posthumously following his death in June 2005, Basil Pennington's anthology of Merton's writings achieves what it sets out to do, that is, to offer "a good place for a beginner to get acquainted with Thomas Merton." Pennington admits the anthology is "quite limited" and makes no apologies for including "those favored pieces that we never tire of reading." The anthology is not a scholarly endeavor; rather, it reflects Basil Pennington's affectionate and somewhat biased look at Thomas Merton as brother monk.

Pennington draws heavily from *The Seven Storey Mountain* in his section "The Autobiography – And On It Went" to take us from Merton's birth on January 31, 1915 to his "enlightenment" on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville on March 18, 1958. Unfortunately, Pennington perpetuates the romantic myth to new readers that Merton's "enlightenment" was a one-time event that occurred at a specific time and place. Pennington does, however, choose ten passages from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, one selection from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (the Fourth and Walnut "epiphany"), part of Merton's letter to Boris Pasternak describing his dream about a young girl named "Proverb," and Merton's well-known prayer from *Thoughts in Solitude* ("My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going . . .") as important steps of Merton's autobiographical writings.

Pennington believes that Thomas Merton "made his most profound and lasting contribution as a spiritual master," and consequently devotes fifty-three pages to Merton's spiritual writings in this anthology, drawing primarily from *No Man Is an Island*, *The Inner Experience*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, *The New Man*, and *Seeds of Contemplation*. He also includes material from *Thomas Merton, Monk*, *The Waters of Siloe*, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, *The Springs of Contemplation*, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* and *Thomas Merton on Zen*. Later in the anthology, Pennington includes a letter that Merton wrote to an unnamed nun in which he critiques his literary output less than six months before his death. That Pennington chooses the majority of his selections from Merton's earlier and transitional period probably reflects his own spiritual stance rather than Merton's. Merton, in fact, claims "there are by and large two Mertons: one ascetic, conservative, traditional, monastic. The other radical, independent, and somewhat akin to beats and hippies and to poets in general." He notes the people who are attracted to his early books "tend to be people interested in the spiritual life

and somewhat conservative in many ways" (*School of Charity* 384-385).

Most disappointing in this anthology are Pennington's very brief and inadequate introductions to two sections on Merton's poetry, "First of All a Poet" and "The Later Poetry." Introducing the first section, Pennington writes, "Merton as a writer thought of himself first of all as a poet," and then tells us Merton's poetic voice "seems to have failed him" because his poetry did not "give expression to some of his deeper experiences." This statement contradicts an earlier comment by Pennington in *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (1989) where he writes: "In the poems we can get in touch with the deeper feelings and intuitions of faith that underlie his [Merton's] actions and his prose writings" (199). In his introduction to "The Later Poetry," Pennington acknowledges that "Merton's later poetry and poetic prose pieces like *Original Bomb Child* give voice, often heart-rending voice, to the social concerns that filled his later years," but dismisses *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* as "exceedingly curious works." This statement is at odds with Pennington's view in *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk*: that "the poem by far the most revealing of himself is the epic completed on the eve of his final journey, *The Geography of Lograire*. This is not an easy poem to read, but the time spent on it is amply rewarded with the insights it gives in regard to the mature monk, mystic, and humanist" (200). Together both introductions comprise less than one page, and offer nothing more than Pennington's unsubstantiated opinion about the relative merit of Merton's poetry. There is no evidence that he has studied Merton's poetry in depth or consulted discerning books on the subject, such as *The Art of Thomas Merton* by Ross Labrie (1979) or *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* by George Kilcourse (1993), which would have given him some understanding and appreciation of Merton's increasing mastery of poetic form.

Pennington chooses diverse passages to illustrate the section on Merton's "Final Integration." He includes letters from Merton to Father Ronald Roloff, Abdul Aziz and Dom Francis Decroix that describe his spiritual practices and thoughts on twentieth-century monasticism; he chooses three selections from *Thomas Merton on Zen* that reflect Merton's foray into interfaith understanding; and he ends with a passage from *The Waters of Siloe* in which Merton talks about the reason for the monk's existence: "not farming, not chanting the psalms, not building beautiful monasteries, not wearing a certain kind of costume, not fasting, not manual labor, not reading, not meditation, not vigils in the night, but only God."

Pennington includes some Mertonian resources in the anthology that Merton readers will find very useful: a selection of *apothegmata* (a word, phrase or sentence that will expand one's consciousness and open the heart to a new perception of reality); a brief chronology of Merton's life; and a list of the excerpts used in the anthology with their sources which will help the reader to access these writings and others.

Despite its shortcomings, Basil Pennington provides the reader with his own inimitable commentary on Merton's life in this anthology, and presents a variety of writings that will help the beginner to get acquainted with Merton. *I Have Seen What I Was Looking For: Selected Spiritual Writings* no doubt will be welcomed by a new generation of Merton readers, and those who knew and loved Basil Pennington will want a copy of his final offering about his friend and brother monk, Thomas Merton.