

## Enjoy, Ponder, Be Stunned

Review of

*In the Valley of Wormwood: Cistercian Blessed and Saints of the Golden Age*

By Thomas Merton

Edited by Patrick Hart, OCSO

Cistercian Studies Series 233

Collegetown, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2013

xxix + 438 pp. / \$39.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Bonnie Thurston**

Readers of Thomas Merton already have many reasons to be grateful to Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO, for his editorial work on Merton manuscripts, his wonderful talks and lectures on Merton, and his personal encouragement to many in the Merton community and beyond. When he is listed as editor of a work, we know it will be well done. Merton's "good and faithful" student, secretary and friend has done well yet again in editing this collection of Merton's monastic sketches from the 1940s.

In his early monastic years Merton wrote a good deal of hagiography. When in 1967 he devised a graph to evaluate his own books to date, Merton ranks *What Are these Wounds?* (the life of St. Lutgarde, written in 1945 at the request of Dom Frederic Dunne) as "awful" and *Exile Ends in Glory* (the life of Mother Berchmans begun in 1944 and published in 1948) as "very poor." The latter was being read in the refectory at Gethsemani in July 1944. Merton commented in his journal on July 11, 1948: "there are parts of it that make my stomach turn somersaults. Where did I get all that pious rhetoric? That was the way I thought a monk was supposed to write, just after I had made simple profession" (*Entering the Silence* 217-18).

*In the Valley of Wormwood* (Merton's title) is his Cistercian Menology, a chronological listing by commemoration day of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries' blessed and saints of the Cistercian Order. Gethsemani's Abbot Dunne recognized Merton's literary skill and encouraged him to make the Cistercians better known. This collection was Merton's response, and it does reflect how the young monk thought a monk should write. Using primarily Migne's *Patrologia Latina* and the *Acta Sanctorum* (other sources are listed on pages 437-38 of this volume), Merton wrote "early monastic sketches" (xvi) of 72 Medieval Cistercians, 16 of whom are women. According Br. Patrick, the manuscript was typed by Frater Francis de Sales Fischer, OSCO in 1954 on dittograph stencils, copied and circulated to English-speaking Cistercian monasteries. This volume makes the collection widely available in one well-produced volume.

The biographies are of varying lengths. Not surprisingly entries on the first three abbots of Cîteaux are longer than those of Blessed Andrew of Scotland or Saint Sancha of Portugal. (Recognize

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either of them?) The sketches frequently open with a note on Latin and French sources, often with an evaluation of or comment on the sources (on Blessed Alan of Lille: “It is no inconsiderable paradox that one of the famous men of his time should have left us not one single reliable detail about his life” [277]). There follows a life drawn from those sources, with interesting anecdotes (Merton often corrects or notes what is legendary material) and commentary on the subject’s writings if there were any. Most entries close with exhortative material, what one might be expected to learn from the saint’s life. Occasionally Merton excuses or defends his subject (see for example the comment on St. Robert, Cîteaux’s founder [146]) or (more often) inserts his own preferences, as in the uncharitable dig at “mediocre and insignificant intellectual achievements” (56), or, more happily, the opening pages on Blessed William of Thierry (327-28). Merton notes that the Cistercians were slow to undertake causes for canonization (276). Occasionally his entries suggest why this might be the case.

It is true that the material reflects a certain “pious rhetoric” (especially in the closing remarks of the entries), but I’m not sure this is so much a fault as a reflection of the rhetoric of devotional writing in the 1940s. In this regard, it is instructive to compare Merton’s entry on Saint Gertrude of Helfta (401-11) with Olivier Quenardel’s recent article on her in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 49.2 (2014). The more difficult aspect of the lives for contemporary readers may be that Merton often takes extraordinary miracles “straight up.” While Br. Patrick suggests the book “is of historical interest to the monastic world” (xvii), I would suggest it to anyone interested in the development of Merton’s rhetorical style before the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) and certainly to general readers curious about our forefathers and mothers in the faith.

*In the Valley of Wormwood* includes a Foreword by Brian Patrick McGuire, Br. Patrick Hart’s introduction to this volume, and Merton’s 1954 Preface to the original collection. One could read the 72 entries from January to December for a “year with early Cistercians” if he or she can afford the \$39.95 cost of this, the two-hundred-thirty-third volume in the Cistercian Studies series. The comment in Brian Patrick McGuire’s Foreword gets it just right: “The fact that this collection of Merton’s biographies of the Cistercian blessed and saints contains small faults and imperfections does not diminish its validity as a witness to Merton’s perception of Cistercian life and spirituality in its beginnings and early development” (xii). The book also bears witness to Merton’s own early monastic development and provides interesting and edifying reading for scholar and the generalist alike. One doesn’t have to be interested in Merton to enjoy, ponder and be stunned by these saints’ lives. Thus, we have occasion, yet again, to thank Br. Patrick Hart for his faithful and skillful editing.