

## The Behavior (and Misbehavior) of Titans

Review of

*Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down:*

*The Long Encounter of Thomas Merton and His Abbot, James Fox*

By Roger Lipsey

Boston: Shambhala, 2015

xiv + 312 pages / \$18.95 paper

Reviewed by **Gregory J. Ryan**

Just when you think you know everything there is to know about Thomas Merton, along comes a book like this one. The book's back cover is right: "Roger Lipsey is a major Merton scholar." *Seasonal* readers will remember his book *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*. In the present volume, Lipsey combines scholarship with artistry as he recounts the complex relationship Merton shared with his immediate abbot, James Fox, and the several abbots general that looked after the entire Cistercian Order during his monastic career. In the days before Amazon.com and such online services, reviewers would say that this book is going to "fly off the shelves"!

The broad strokes of the material considered in this book have already been covered by others, as Lipsey acknowledges, but here we also see the fine lines of the brush strokes. Lipsey interviewed monks and had access to correspondence that has heretofore remained unpublished in the abbey archives at Gethsemani and at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. By my count, almost 35% of his 472 footnotes refer to material that has not seen the light of day until now. He quotes liberally from letters to and from the abbot, the monk and the abbots general. Readers will get a better grasp than they had before of the various trials Merton – and Dom James – suffered at Gethsemani.

Merton once observed that he and Dom James were "a pair of damned cats" (235). This book gives the reader a ringside seat at the cat-and-mouse games they played over the course of many years, often with outsiders such as the psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg. (That chapter, "The Shadow Abbot," is a real soap opera!) I will refrain from quoting from the new material so readers will be able to experience it for themselves. I will point out that most of the 23 chapters deal with Merton's search for more solitude, either at Gethsemani or possibly at another "more contemplative" monastery. Chapter 20 (14 pages) deals with his relationship with the student nurse identified here only as "M." This is an admirable feat since, as Lipsey says, Merton himself, in Volume Six of his Journals, wrote nearly 400 pages about scarcely anything else but the affair (see 225). Dom James's personal handwritten notes about it all, the only new material in this chapter, are quite poignant. Another

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chapter deals with renovations to the abbey church and with changes to daily community life at Gethsemani following the Second Vatican Council.

Lipsey writes in a way that is both scholarly and literary – and nuanced. I do have some misgivings about the result. Dom James wrote much more than is in this book. It's not Lipsey's fault that he did not include all of Dom James's letters, but he might have mentioned that there are *lots* more. The Merton Center's web site shows that there is a "Series 9, Special Merton File: Correspondence between Dom James Fox and Abbot General Gabriel Sortais" containing 904 items consisting of 1347 pages. Surely, not all of it has to do with Merton, but how much of it does? There is a similar file for Dom Ignace Gillet, who succeeded Dom Gabriel as Abbot General.

Much is made by Lipsey about the abbots' tone when writing to and about Merton: their treating him like a child. This may be explained by the monastic tradition of monks who follow the *Rule of St. Benedict* in seeing their abbots as "spiritual fathers," and abbots seeing their charges as "spiritual sons." (*Dom Gabriel Sortais: An Amazing Abbot in Turbulent Times*, the full-length biography of Dom Gabriel, makes this especially clear throughout the book, including an entire chapter titled "Spiritual Childhood.") When Dom James wrote to Dom Gabriel or to Merton, he reflected this same type of spirituality. (Merton is not mentioned at all, incidentally, in the Sortais biography. There must be more to learn on that front.)

Merton set up a Literary Trust to see that his journals and letters would be published, but not sooner than 25 years after his death. But did Dom James and Dom Gabriel and the others expect that *their* letters would be made public? If so, would they have written what they wrote in the way they wrote it? Probably not. I think our trust – and charity – should extend to them, too.

When Merton set up the Trust he did not anticipate that only three years later he would be involved in a relationship with "M," a woman more than twenty-five years his junior. But he realized that his letters, poems to her, and journals would eventually see the light of day. He wanted it *all* out there, protected if necessary from a future abbot who might want to squelch his writings. Has "M" made a similar arrangement? Till now, we have only ever gotten Merton's – and his friends' – side of the story. I don't think the men should have the last word on this. I don't fault Lipsey for this. He reported what he could. If "M" does not open up, that's her business, but one can hope.

While it's hard to say enough about Thomas Merton, it's also easy to say too much. Lipsey has done us – and Merton and Dom James and the others – a service by putting the (let's hope!) finishing touches on the material covered in this book. Though I'm afraid someone will find something else to say!

It will be well-nigh impossible to ever *really* know Father Louis/Thomas Merton. If he himself could write, "But you don't really know people here" (248), then *how in the world* do we think we can? A monk who knew Merton recently wrote that he has read everything *by* Merton and nothing *about* him. I admire that. In fact, when I read that, I said to myself: "From now on, that's what I'm going to do." Then along comes a book like Lipsey's and I think: "Yeah. That's not gonna' happen!"