

## Merton's Celtic Pilgrimage

Review of

*Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up*

By Monica Weis, SSJ

Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston

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Reviewed by **Edward C. Sellner**

In her foreword to Monica Weis's book *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up*, Merton scholar Bonnie Thurston says that Weis's book "breaks new ground in Merton studies as the first full-length examination of Merton's engagement with the Celtic, both in his own history and in that of the Celtic church" (xi). For those of us who have studied both Merton and the Celtic spiritual traditions, one couldn't agree more. Weis does a masterful job at tracing the origins of Merton's keen interest in Celtic spirituality, especially its monastic aspects, showing not so much an "obsession" he might have had about the Celts, but a genuine search to understand his true self. As the Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung presumes in his practice and writings, to know ourselves truly we must go deep into our personal unconscious, and, in particular, into the collective unconscious in which our psyches dwell. Weis's book's content does precisely that, examining some of the major causes of and influences upon Merton's developing Celtic interests, especially during the last four years or more of his life and considering how, like the Irish saint Brendan the Navigator whom he came to love, that search on his part became a genuine pilgrimage toward greater wholeness. As important as her contribution is to Merton studies, however, Weis does more. She not only examines the direction of Merton's Celtic interests that reflect a genuine passion on his part; she provides the reader with an excellent overview of what Celtic Christianity itself was about, and why the major characteristics of its spirituality so appealed to the Cistercian monk and to many of us today.

In an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion (which is a chapter in itself), Weis examines major influences on Merton's evolving interest in Celtic studies. She also provides a whole list of twentieth-century Celtic scholars which he relied upon that anyone pursuing knowledge of the Celtic tradition should read, such as Robin Flower, Dom Louis Gougaud, Charles Plummer, Kenneth Jackson, John Ryan, James Kenney and Kathleen Hughes. Weis refers also to more recent writers, Esther de Waal, Oliver Davies, Ian Bradley, John O'Donohue and others, who reflect a more contemporary understanding and explanation of Celtic spirituality.

In chapter one, Weis explores the major figures in Merton's search, such as members of his own Welsh family, especially his Aunt Kit, as well as friends like Donald Allchin, an Anglican spiritual writer with extensive knowledge of Welsh history and poetry, and Nora Chadwick, a noted English

medievalist and Celtic scholar. Both Allchin and Chadwick became his mentors – Allchin whom Merton planned to travel with in Wales after his return from his Asian pilgrimage in 1968 (plans interrupted by Merton’s own sudden death in Thailand), and Chadwick who provided him through their correspondence with suggestions of major Celtic sources to read. Her own book, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, he found particularly helpful, telling an Anglican spiritual guide that it was “especially interesting to me as I really intend now to do something on recluses and the Irish started all that, or so it seems” (21). (He, of course, was forgetting his own study of the desert Christians who really were the pioneers of the solitary monastic life, and whom the Celtic Christians imitated.) Weis suggests that this study of Celtic hermits and the nature poetry associated with them coincided with Merton’s desire at the time for a hermitage of his own.

Chapter two briefly examines the origins of early monasticism itself, both eremitism and cenobitism, and Celtic monasticism in particular, especially that of the Irish Church, the ecclesial tradition and spirituality that most intrigued Merton. Here Weis explains two early monastics whom Merton especially loved: John Cassian and his works on early desert Christians, and Egeria, a fourth-century Spanish nun who went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and whom Merton, when he discovered her writings, called “my delight” and “one of my saints from now on.” In an essay he wrote, he referred to her travelogue as “one of the liveliest and most interesting of all written pilgrimages.” Weis states this link with Egeria and pilgrimage “further set the stage for Merton’s focused research into Celtic monasticism” (34). Chadwick’s book on the Celtic Church, mentioned above, of course gave him further insights into Celtic monasticism, with its rich traditions of the soul friend (*anamchara* in Gaelic, *periglour* in Welsh), kinship with animals and nature poetry, all of which, of course, especially appealed to Merton.

In chapter three, Weis focuses specifically on the importance of the tenth-century *Voyage of Saint Brendan* in Merton’s reading, and looks at his fascination with this tale of the saint of Clonfert, Ireland (c. 484-c. 577) in search of the Promised Land. This Irish *peregrinatio* or pilgrimage story, originating in pre-Christian *immram* or voyage tales, profoundly intrigued him, and, according to Weis, quoting Merton scholar Paul M. Pearson, “Merton found in Celtic Monasticism and in *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, in particular, a way of understanding monastic life and his own monastic life” (52). It also contributed to Merton’s essay “From Pilgrimage to Crusade,” which eventually appeared in his book *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967). Weis suggests that Merton so identified with that strain of Celtic spiritual wandering, reflected even up to his last pilgrimage to Asia, that he might have seen himself and his own pilgrimage through life as “a new Brendan” (55). Certainly his Celtic genes seem to have kept him perpetually unsatisfied, as even preceding his Asian pilgrimage he was investigating other possibilities on where to settle, even what community he might join, when he returned.

Chapter four investigates the Celts’ Trinitarian way of seeing, one that blends and celebrates the graces of incarnation and redemption with the immanence and transcendence of the divine, found in landscape, animals, people and the fine arts. Here Weis considers a multitude of gifts this Celtic tradition offers, especially all the various ways of identifying the ordinary with the sacred realm. Reflecting the animist beliefs of their ancient ancestors, Celtic Christians identified the landscape of water, wind, rain, thunder, trees and high places with the realm of the spirits. Similar to Native Americans, Weis says, the ancient Celts saw animals such as birds, wolves, snakes and deer “as messengers of the spirits in the Otherworld that existed side by side with this concrete reality”

(66). According to her, Christian Celts had “a sense that God, humanity, and earth were a trinity of sacred interaction” (67), and saw the material world as not dead, but alive with the Presence of the Creator. They had a genuine sense of kinship with animals, and saw them as significant contributors to their lives and their monasteries. Weis says that “Merton was fond of telling his novices that the early Celtic monks were very Franciscan” (69) (again, somewhat of an historical anachronism, since in fact it was St. Francis, raised in a part of Italy where the great Irish missionary, St. Columban, evangelized and whose tomb at Bobbio Francis visited on pilgrimage, who was influenced by the Celts!) It was also the Celtic imagination that overflowed into the visual arts that appealed so much to Merton, the son of parents who were both artists, and something Merton himself developed in his drawings and photography. His study of Celtic art, expressed in the great illuminated gospel books, such as the Book of Kells, and on the high crosses, a number of which depicted the desert Christians whom Merton so admired, reinforced his conviction that all art “has a vitally important place not only in keeping man civilized but also in helping him to ‘save his soul’” (82).

In chapter five, Weis examines both early Irish hermit poetry as well as the works of Welsh poets, many of whom Donald Allchin introduced to Merton, especially Ann Griffith, an eighteenth-century mystic and evangelical hymn-writer, R. S. Thomas, the twentieth-century poet and Anglican country priest, and David Jones, a Catholic modernist poet and painter. Merton loved them, steeped as they were in Welsh lore and culture, and poets like himself. “These poets,” Weis writes, “formed a valuable Celtic trinity of ‘study’ for Merton during the last years of his life” (85). During the same years he was reading the Welsh poets, he also was discovering the fine poetry of the Irish hermits that had so much in common with his study of the Zen poets as well. Surrounded by nature in his new hermitage, he could look out at the natural environment and appreciate so much the evocative quality of these nature poets. One of his own attempts, a poem he called “St. Maedoc,” celebrating an early sixth-century Irish or Welsh monk, reveals his Celtic love of nature, and its description of “miracles” found in the “floating stone,” “fresh hazel,” “wolves,” and “sunlight in spring rain” (89). All of these studies were affecting Merton profoundly, as he relates in a journal entry June 2, 1964, awakening him to a new sense of reality: “Reading about Celtic monasticism, the hermits, lyric poets, travelers, etc. A new world that has waited until this time to open up” (90).

The conclusion of the book, chapter six, summarizes the reasons for Merton’s affinity with and love of Celtic Christianity, especially its monastic elements. Weis states that a number of areas of Merton’s scholarship and writings came together to shape his deeper Self in his final years: “The confluence of his extensive knowledge of Eastern traditions, his personal interaction with Celtic scholars, and his rich delving into the experience of wholeness that intimacy with the Celts provided affirmed not only Merton’s desire for deeper solitude and silence but also his attraction to the hermit life” (122). Specific characteristics of Celtic Christianity and spirituality especially appealed to him: the Celts’ love of nature, their hospitality and openness to other faiths and cultures, their resemblance to both desert elders and Zen masters, their rich literary and artistic culture that reverences beauty, and the asceticism of inner and outer *peregrinatio* or pilgrimage. As Weis wisely concludes: “In a profound way and at a very deep level, Merton discovered himself in Celtic Christianity and, especially in Celtic monasticism. He saw a mirror of his life and desire in these ancient monks living on ‘water and herbs,’ expressing kinship with all of creation, and writing poems about the birds overhead” (124). As Merton himself expressed, on our pilgrimage through life, when we have “come to the end

of a long journey . . . [we] see that the stranger we meet there is none other than ourselves” (125).

Weis’s scholarship shines through this astutely organized volume in a style friendly to both academics and ordinary readers. She writes clearly and well. She offers a rich addition to an area of Merton’s life and work that few others have covered in any depth, and in doing so, she reveals not only her thorough understanding of Merton’s passionate interest in Celtic spirituality and how it transformed him, but her own extensive research and insightful understanding of this rich tradition. Through it all, she traces well how Merton’s study of the Celts helped Merton himself achieve a new level of psychological and spiritual wholeness.