

True North

Review of

We Are All Poets Here:

Thomas Merton's 1968 Journey to Alaska

By Kathleen Witkowska Tarr

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Reviewed by **Ron Dart**

I have often been intrigued by the amount of research and writing that has been done on varied aspects of Thomas Merton's life and prolific literary output. Yet a paucity of sorts exists of serious and sustained reflections on his trip to Alaska in the autumn of 1968. It was this obvious yet often missed reality that challenged Angus Stuart and myself, in September 2008, to make a three-day drive to Eagle River in Alaska to reflect on the fortieth anniversary of Merton's visit to Alaska (where he led a retreat in Eagle River and visited possible hermitage sites in the surrounding area). I even wrote an article on our trip to commemorate Merton's time there ("In the Footsteps of Thomas Merton: Alaska," *The Merton Seasonal* 33.4 [Winter 2008] 14-19). Since 2018 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death as well as of his Alaskan trip, it is quite appropriate that Kathleen Witkowska Tarr (who has lived in Alaska since the 1970s and has been shepherded by Merton on her spiritual journey) should publish her finely crafted memoir, *We Are All Poets Here: Thomas Merton's 1968 Journey to Alaska*, on such an auspicious occasion.

When Angus and I were in Eagle River, Kathleen contacted me about her emerging vision of writing a book about her journey with Merton. The final birthing of such a book has taken more than a decade but the child has been worth waiting for. *We Are All Poets Here* is a fast-paced yet delicately woven tapestry of events, thoughts and images of Kathleen's ever deepening journey with Merton in her own "spiritual seeking." The confessional style of writing in which Merton draws the author to new and deeper places in her imagination and soul makes these delicately textured autobiographical reminiscences a worthwhile text for meditation. In style and content, *We Are All Poets Here* has significant affinities with Merton's own *The Seven Storey Mountain*, though Kathleen amply draws from a wide range of Merton's writings for her reflections (quite like Merton himself).

The introductory section of *We Are All Poets Here* considers Kathleen's early years in Pittsburgh and Florida and her restlessness in such places. The role of Merton is only hinted at in this initial

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phase of her journey, although each chapter begins with a brief passage from Merton. But it was just a matter of time before Merton presented himself as a mentor and spiritual guide. The wide range of Merton's life and thought is covered, but it is the threading together of Merton's reflections in *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals and Letters* with Kathleen's more in-depth understanding of life in Alaska that makes *We Are All Poets* such an effective volume.

There is a vulnerable honesty in *We Are All Poets Here* that, in many ways, embodies and reflects the layered nature of Merton's own transparent insights about himself in his journals. Much is learned about Kathleen's journey, her troubled and trying family relationships (at many levels) and her fragile relationship with her husband as her journey with Merton deepened and became more intense. Her discovery and appreciation of Merton as an honest guide provides a touching and tender revelation of how those who are dead can still live. Each of the 23 chapters in the book begins with a passage from Merton's writings and, appropriately, many of the excerpts come from his short yet significant time in Alaska. Some important connections are made between Merton, Russian Orthodoxy, Alaska and Kathleen's many trips to Russia and classes she taught in Russian literature. The affinities between Merton and Kathleen are evident at a variety of levels: the spiritual search, Russian literature, Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Chapter 12, "Pasternak's Tree," for example, is a poignant reflection on Merton's essays on Boris Pasternak, the Pasternak-Merton correspondence, *Dr. Zhivago* and Kathleen's own immersion in Russian literature and politics during the Cold-War Era, from the perspective of someone who was living at the time in Alaska (where such history was so intricately and intimately close). There are also hints about their mutual interest in the Beat writers and poets (and their politics) and an account of Kathleen's visit to the Redwoods in Northern California where Merton visited a couple of times in 1968 (see my article, "Merton on the West Coast: New Camaldoli and Redwoods," *The Merton Seasonal* 40.3 [Fall 2015] 10-18).

Merton takes a more prominent role in the latter parts of *We Are All Poets Here* as the book gains momentum. Here the author delves deeper into Merton's trip to Alaska and its significance for her own journey, making this wide-ranging volume a personal engagement with Merton's time in Alaska that has universal implications and applications for those living anywhere reached by Merton's words. Photographs of Merton in Alaska and elsewhere, a map of Alaska that pinpoints where Merton had been and hoped to be, and "Thomas Merton's 1968 Alaska Itinerary" complement the text and provide an enlightening context.

I mentioned at the beginning of this review how I have often noticed that Merton's journey to Alaska tends to be marginalized or simply ignored in writings about Merton. Kathleen notes this fact in chapter 17, "Merton's Alaska Journal," pointing out that the trip is scarcely mentioned in the magisterial yet somewhat dated Michael Mott biography (1984), and that "Alaska was left out of the book's index"; in the earlier biography by Monica Furlong (1980) and Sister Elena Malits' study *The Solitary Explorer* of the same year, there are no references to the Alaskan trip. Kathleen could have noted also that this episode receives little attention in Jim Forest's updated biography of Merton (2008). This lacuna means that the stage was prepared for someone who knows Alaska and Merton to explore the topic in depth, and Kathleen has risen to the occasion in an exquisite way. She does note that since the Alaska materials were not published until the late 1980s, this might explain the failure of Mott, Furlong and Malits to reflect on Merton and Alaska. But there has continued to be a paucity of commentary on Merton and Alaska and *We Are All Poets* corrects such an omission.

For me, the “St. Elias summit” (see chapter 19, “The Russian Icon,” for Kathleen’s reflections on Mt. St. Elias as both literal and metaphorical mountain) of Merton’s trek to Alaska was the series of eight conferences he gave to nuns and priests during his time there. His insights in these talks embody in many ways the essence of Merton’s integrated and compact vision of the faith journey. It is this distilled vision, articulated in an accessible and inviting manner, that is core of *Thomas Merton in Alaska*. If I have some minor criticisms and quibbles about *We Are All Poets*, I would question the tendency to dash from one place to another that Merton saw while in Alaska but miss the deeper content and contemplative wisdom of these conferences. A chapter or two could have pondered the significance of this final retreat of sorts that Merton offered to his Alaskan audiences and, in printed form, to the world. There has perhaps been too much attention paid to Merton’s final journey to Asia and not enough to the white-heat wisdom of these conferences. (See however the article by Bonnie Thurston, “Islam in Alaska: Sufi Material in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*,” *The Merton Seasonal* 29.4 [Winter 2004] 3-8). The speculative Merton of Asia must be read within the context of his final conferences in Alaska if we are ever going to get a balanced appraisal of Merton the committed and rooted conservative and Merton the speculative eagle flying high under the Alaskan blue sky (that is, when the clouds actually part, and Elias and Denali are seen).

We Are All Poets Here is a beautiful exploration of Merton’s presence in both Kathleen Tarr’s inner life and in her home state. Only a person who has cared for both Merton and Alaska could have penned such a compelling set of reflections. I doubt whether any other writer can match Kathleen’s understanding of both Merton and Alaska, given the fact she has lived in Alaska for decades and has travelled with Merton for many years. There may be, in the future, a more academic book on Merton’s Alaska sojourn, but none will match the way Kathleen enfolds Alaska, Merton and her own human journey in one unified and attractive whole.