

## Reviews

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MERTON, Thomas, *Cistercian Fathers and Forefathers: Essays and Conferences*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2018), pp. 470. ISBN 978-1-56548-671-3 (paper) \$34.95.

Patrick O’Connell and New City Press have come up with a real winner in *Cistercian Fathers and Forefathers: Essays and Conferences*, a collection of Thomas Merton’s writings on eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic authors. Perhaps the greatest compliment one can pay to such a volume as this is that, as I finished the section on each author, I was hard put not to take a break from my duty to read the volume and review it, and instead to go immediately to read the works of the author Merton had just finished speaking about. In other words, he had succeeded in the basic task of a great teacher: to whet the reader’s appetite to delve deeper.

For over a decade now O’Connell has been making some of Thomas Merton’s most important shorter works available, either for the very first time, or newly collected and reprinted.<sup>1</sup> The present volume includes both previously published and previously unpublished material. Three of the thirteen selections are first-ever transcriptions of recordings, while a fourth is a new transcription of two conferences previously “transcribed and published in . . . compressed form” in 1972 (187). Of the remaining nine selections, five are articles published in five different journals in the 1950s and (mostly) ’60s, and three were introductions to volumes of translations of the “Fathers” into English. The remaining selection, the longest in the volume, is a re-editing of an unfinished work on Aelred of Rievaulx, previously edited by Patrick Hart, OCSO and published serially in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* in the late 1980s. In other words, most of the material re-printed here would not be easy for the average reader to access today.

The volume is arranged chronologically, not by the date of Merton’s composition, but by the dates of the authors discussed. So it begins with

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1. See Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013); Thomas Merton, *Early Essays: 1947-1952*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015); as well as the nine volumes of Merton’s monastic conferences, most recently Thomas Merton, *Medieval Cistercian History: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 9, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, Monastic Wisdom, vol. 43 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2019).

the “forefathers” Peter Damian, Anselm of Canterbury and Guigo the Carthusian, before moving on to the Cistercians Gueric of Igny, Aelred of Rievaulx, Isaac of Stella and Adam of Perseigne (who is edging into the thirteenth century). While most of Merton’s work here dates from the 1960s, some is from earlier in his life. This fact means that the author’s outlook varies considerably from selection to selection. Nevertheless, the decision to organize according to the dates of the historical figures was a wise one. The reader is led naturally through a succession of major authors of the glory days of European monasticism, and the student looking for material on a particular author can see at a glance where to go to find the relevant material gathered together.

Just by the nature of the subject matter, this volume brings home, much more clearly than most of Merton’s writings do, just how erudite he was. I could not help but wonder where on earth he got the time for the voracious reading he did – in Latin as well as English. Of course, this was back in the days before the unification of the “choir” and “lay” brothers or sisters, so perhaps choir monastics could find more time for study than most of us manage now. He was also blessed to belong to a monastery with a particularly well-stocked library, evidently including much (maybe all) of Migne’s *Patrologia Latina*.

Merton still seems so contemporary that it is easy to forget that he was reading and writing about Anselm, Aelred & Co. well before 1970, when Cistercian Publications began commissioning and publishing English translations of the medieval Cistercian authors. Not only that, but the critical editions of the Latin texts themselves have mostly been done since Merton’s death – the exception being the first four volumes of *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, available in Merton’s lifetime; but Merton’s extensive works on Bernard are not a part of the present volume. Even the final volume of the critical edition of St. Anselm, whose writings are highly regarded in several academic fields, only appeared in 1968 (although English translations of a few major works were readily available). So Fr. Louis was limping along there with *Patrologia Latina* and not much else to go by. And as it turns out, that was quite enough.

Merton is recognizably Merton, whether in an article he himself polished and prepared for publication, or in a transcription of conferences delivered, with a great deal of spontaneity, to novices. One of the most attractive qualities of all the selections is the great love and admiration Merton has for each of these monastic authors. It is impossible not to be affected by his enthusiasm. He was of course blessed to live in an era that saw a great flowering of superb Catholic scholarship, and was a personal friend of authors (such as Jean Leclercq) who integrated impeccable scholarship with tremendous

respect for their predecessors in the faith.

Merton's generation was not lacking naïve, excessively devotional accounts of church history. In fact in his earliest writings, Merton too could swallow the standard Catholic devotional version of matters a bit too readily. In the selections on Aelred, for example, Merton's take on both Thomas Becket and his principal ecclesiastical opponent, Gilbert Foliot, is more than somewhat black and white: "A rigid and correct and solid character [Foliot] who knew all the rules and followed the correct procedure was suddenly thrown up against a saint [Becket]" (356) – probably not how most historians today, however devout, nor even Merton later in his life, would put the matter.

But such lapses are infrequent even in his early writings, and Merton's mature work is clear-sighted about his subjects, while still regarding them not only with affection, but with esteem. Does his love for the people about whom he is writing mean that Merton sacrifices objectivity in favor of a kind of modern hagiography? It would probably be more accurate to say that Merton, like the great Catholic scholars of his era, united a genuine openness to historical findings with an interior understanding of the religious experience of his subjects – and with humility in the presence of great wisdom from the past. This shared experience of faith opens an avenue to the truth that is not accessible to those who operate primarily from the hermeneutic of suspicion – who read (to paraphrase Wendell Berry) not so much to learn *from* an author as to learn *about* the author.

Love for his subjects and interest in the historical situation are not Merton's only lenses, however, and it is a third lens which lifts his writing to its own level. Whatever the subject matter at hand, Merton never set aside whatever other issues he was grappling with at the time. His own interest in his topics is vastly increased by his ability to find in them material that speaks to his own questions or confirms his own ideas. And since those ideas changed, we find here in the earlier writings on St. Aelred pages on the glories of life in community; while the piece on Isaac of Stella, from the mid-'60s, puts more emphasis on the virtues of solitude.

This tendency to work out his own questions in whatever he's speaking or writing about, here or elsewhere, is one of the qualities which attract so many to Merton. His questions and concerns are ours, too, and his ability to articulate his struggles can give the reader better insight into her own. However, this also comes at a price. In some of his writing, what may strike the reader as constant arguments with unseen interlocutors can grow tiresome. In his early writings the opponent was often contemporary culture; in later writings, it seems rather to be fellow monks, or at least fellow Catholics, that he's trying to convince of something. This volume was a happy reminder of the positive side of his wrestlings. A particular charm in the transcrip-

tions from his taped conferences, especially those given to novices, is that in these selections the polemics are least in evidence. And the spontaneity is delightful!

Somewhat remarkably, Merton's gifts of style are as evident in the unpolished talks as in the previously published material. In part, this is because his style depends less on the outward form than on the depth of his insight and his ability to articulate it.

The two figures who receive the most attention in this collection are Anselm of Canterbury and Aelred of Rievaulx. The writings on St. Anselm (41-152) are among the finest in the volume. Merton engages with some of his great contemporaries, such as Karl Barth, who were also studying this eleventh-century monk and doctor of the church at around the same time. Their insights, coupled with what was evidently extensive reflection on Merton's part, resulted in deep perception of what Anselm was attempting to achieve and a fine appreciation of his place in Christian history. As for Aelred, he occupies about 150 of the roughly 450 pages of the volume, an allotment that speaks for itself. A particularly lovely touch in the Aelred section is that Merton frequently, but unobtrusively, draws on his personal familiarity with the English countryside to bring his readers right into the events he describes.

The editorial work on the volume is admirable. Each of the thirteen selections has its own substantial introduction, generally two-three pages in length, describing the genesis of the work and its publication history (where applicable). The editor also details the circumstances of Merton's life at the time of writing or recording, mentions related reading Merton was doing, and gives quotations on the subject at hand from Merton's correspondence, journals or other published writing. Merton's own rather minimal footnotes appear duly at the bottom of the page, but the editor has added his own, and far more substantial, endnotes to each selection. Within the text the two can readily be distinguished as the endnotes are indicated by Roman, rather than Arabic, numerals; this works quite smoothly and does not distract. Non-Latin readers will be happy to note that the editor has also provided English translations of the texts that Merton cites in Latin, texts generally untranslated in previous editions of these works.

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MERTON, Thomas, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, Foreword by Sarah Coakley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), pp. xvi + 156. ISBN: 978-0-81466-357-8 (hardback) \$19.95.

*The Climate of Monastic Prayer* is the original title of the book published in