

include full references, has no bibliography and continues to misspell Gethsemani (it is *not* Gethsemane). I share Bragan's love and hope for the promulgation of Merton's work, but sadly this is not the vehicle for it and for the accompanying spiritual revival.

Fiona Gardner

LUCAS, F. Dean, *Merton's Abbot: The Life and Times of Dom James Fox* (Lexington, KY: Frederic D. Lucas, 2016), pp. 388. ISBN 978-0-9978073-0-1 (paper) \$19.95.

Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, has long been of some marginal interest because – well, he was Merton's abbot. One of three of Merton's abbots, Dom James held responsibility for Merton the longest – twenty years from 1948 to shortly before Merton's death in 1968. Here in Lucas' book is at last a rounded picture of the man, Dom James Fox, as he stands on his own, in the broader context of his times and actions. We see him as the person he was, as he understood himself as a monk trying to serve God. His simple, consistent spirituality is brought into sharp focus and remains essential to understanding every episode of his story. He was a man of many mottos, but his principal motto expressed the real, wholehearted dedication he maintained over many decades: "All for Jesus, through Mary – with a smile."

Dean Lucas follows Dom Fox's curriculum vitae from the family background in Boston, through his public-school education and devout Catholic family life, to his stellar performance at Harvard. It was there that Fox suffered a loss of faith. Eventually Henry Fox's self-proclaimed ambition to become a millionaire was brought to a halt by the realization that he had one radical choice, either worldly wealth or Jesus alone. That pivotal decision set the radical tone of his subsequent life, aimed at 100% personal dedication to the Lord.

After service in the U.S. Navy, Fox entered the Passionist Order, and that religious formation forever set the tone and focus of his spirituality through his subsequent monastic years. After six years in the Passionists, dedicated to apostolic life, he felt a call to a strictly contemplative way of life of "silence, solitude and seclusion." Upon entering the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Fr. James aspired to a hidden place in the community. He was assigned to attend to health needs of his abbot, Dom Edmond Obrecht, eventually becoming his traveling companion. Obrecht's successor, Dom Frederic Dunne, recognized in Fr. James a talent

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*A Psychological Study of the Life of Thomas Merton* by Kenneth Bragan," *The Merton Seasonal* 37.1 (Spring 2012) 29-33.

for leadership and appointed him prior and guest master. Later Fr. James was entrusted with a fledgling community in Georgia, Our Lady of the Holy Ghost. The community at that time was in its early years when it was developing economically and undergoing construction. Lucas devotes a whole chapter to that great undertaking. With the sudden death of Dom Frederic, Fr. James was elected the sixth abbot of Gethsemani.

Later chapters survey the major aspects of those abbatial years. Gethsemani already had two foundations when Dom James took office, Utah and Georgia, and under his tenure four more were added – listed regionally: South Carolina, New York, California and Chile. These foundations, in addition to his sincere concern for the home community of over 200 monks, define the large burden the man had to carry. During his abbatial term major buildings were erected, a horse barn, a novitiate building, a retreat house, a cow barn, a facility for processing alfalfa pellets, and the renovation of a barn destroyed by fire that left only the stone footing (reconstructed for food processing and business offices). The last eight years of his office were spent in complete renovation of three wings of the monastery, and the transformation of the church into a modern synthesis of Shaker purity of line and Cistercian simplicity. Much of the success of the farm business and renovation must be credited to Dom James' ability to recognize talent and to entrust responsibility to choice individuals. The same can be said about the house's liturgical renewal, which he left in trustworthy hands.

As a shepherd, Dom James had two accomplished writers to deal with, Fr. Louis (Thomas Merton) and Fr. Raymond; the latter published simply under that monastic name, without using his surname Flanagan. Each man was accomplished, each could be difficult and each could be negative about the abbot's leadership. Eventually each would come to some kind of humility and working relationship. The chemistry is fascinating.

Merton readers take special interest in the book's view of Merton from Dom James' angle. Fr. James did not try to carry that difficulty alone, and consulted with reliable people such as the Abbot General, Dom Gabriel Sortais; the theologian Jean Daniélou, SJ; Fr. Barnabas Ahern, CP; Daniel Walsh; and other people who knew and respected Merton. The abbot could be tenacious, yet would not be hasty in making a decision, and once a decision was made, he brought it to prayer in a spirit of detachment, offering Jesus to make it different if that was his will.

Much of the time Abbot Fox's decisions were simply determined by the norms of enclosure and stability in the Order, but sometimes he was suspicious that self-interest and ego were motivating Merton. Lucas' book relates times when we detect Dom James' thinly veiled distrust of Merton.

Yet Abbot Fox assigned Merton significant responsibility, entrusting him with formation of the novices, and generally allowing him to publish on that wide range of topics that became so notable in Merton's last ten years. Again, the chemistry is fascinating. The record is clear that there was much close consultation between the two men and in the end, when Dom James lays claim to their being the best of friends, one in charity must leave one's judgment suspended.

The abbot's relationship with benefactors and friends outside the monastery comprises another chapter of the book, a chapter that discloses a further aspect of his personality. Much interest is focused on close personal connections with the Skakels, of coal and coke fortune, and with the Kennedys, especially Ethel Skakel and Robert Kennedy. Of similar interest are the illustrious benefactors for the Mepkin Abbey foundation, Clare Boothe Luce and Henry Luce, and we receive samplings of the correspondence between them. As ever, Dom James was primarily concerned about bringing donors closer to Jesus, and they trusted and confided in him for that reason. A measure of this trust is that at Robert Kennedy's funeral, Dom James was seated in the front row.

Dom James' letters are quoted throughout the book through every phase of his life, providing a very personal view of that life. Complementary to the letters are the views and estimations of individual monks contained in an appendix, including opinions both negative and (mostly) positive. Little of this appended material is incorporated in the main narrative where they might lend shade and nuance to various aspects of any situation. Additionally, a helpful glossary of monastic terms is also appended for readers unfamiliar with monastic terminology and practices.

Dean Lucas taught history at Marshall University in West Virginia (and then when it became Southern WV Community and Technical College) with a special interest in the French Revolution and in President Kennedy. Prior to the writing of this biography, he has had a long-standing relationship with Gethsemani Abbey and some of its monks.

As a biographer, Lucas keeps his opinions to himself and has a "hands-off" attitude in presenting the story of the life of Abbot Fox. He spells out events and allows the story to tell itself, without trying to mediate difficulties, or explain the abbot's attitudes that may appear foreign or extreme to modern ears. Although he seems to respect and like his subject and is fascinated with the man's history, Lucas does not elaborate on his own views. It is almost as if there is no "author's voice," not that of a commentator who anticipates the reader's responses and deliberates with him.

Gethsemani's years of monastic renewal and excitement during Vatican II were a test of the character and mentality of Abbot Fox. He at-

tempted to negotiate and moderate change while holding high esteem for silence, solitude, contemplative life, for monastic enclosure and stability. Lucas' book does not make clear how much in fact he did enable renewal, keeping the community apprised of the developments at the Council and following movements of the Spirit in the community liturgically and theologically. Invited guest speakers and retreat masters were of high quality and distinguished credentials.

The loss of vocations and departures was difficult for Abbot Fox. Often he had boasted of having over two hundred red-blooded American boys, but it proved perplexing when they began to leave during the 1960s. He resisted this trend to the extent that he could and did not always judge it kindly. He loved the monastic life so much it was hard to understand why others would want to leave it.

One of his finest moments during this decade is shown when he made a swift change in plans concerning a new foundation. Mature preparations had been laid for a monastery to be established in Norway, but that had to give way, due to a surprising change in circumstances in that region. Immediately, a request was received to assume responsibility for a fledgling monastery in Chile. Its motherhouse, Spencer Abbey, could no longer sustain it. Dom James made immediate transition to a new direction that was swift, smooth and deft, a work of the Spirit.

When Dom James retired in 1967 he entered into a long-desired life as a hermit. For many years he held that the eremitic life was not in accordance with God's will and believed that Merton should be of the same mind. The legislation of the Order was against it, and in the end Abbot Fox must be credited with being instrumental in having that changed. The first eight years of his eremitical life were spent in a remote, well-appointed chalet atop a knob with idyllic solitude and isolation. This existence was abruptly brought to an end when thieves entered, harassed and left him tied down. He could never be at peace again with being alone, and spent the remaining twelve years in the community infirmary. He turned this confinement into a fruitful period of letter-writing, including letters to the Catholic thief. He resumed giving occasional sermons at community Mass and at the infirmary Mass; these sermons can in part be found in an appendix in the book.

This book is significant for giving insight into a crucial period of transition in monastic culture, by focusing on a premier monastery of that time. The book shows how Dom James put his hand to guiding that monastery whose stature he cherished. Yet his devotional spirituality was in dramatic contrast to that of a chief spokesman of that transition, Thomas Merton. The chemistry is fascinating.

After a period of weakness and mental decline, Abbot Fox yielded his final breath on Good Friday 1987, like a dream come true. For all his emphasis on suffering and the cross, he was explicitly enthusiastic about the real goal in life, full and final communion with Christ in God. It is not surprising that throughout his life, he imagined and spoke of this final meeting with Jesus as one with a smile.

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