

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *Thomas Merton in California: The Redwoods Conferences and Letters*, edited and introduced by David M. Odorisio, Foreword by Kathy DeVico, OCSO, Preface by Douglas Christie (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2024), pp. xvii, 443. ISBN: 979-8-4008-0031-3 (paper) \$59.95; (ebook) \$57.99.

I was fortunate to spend a week at Redwoods Monastery in 2015, my recollections of this visit subsequently published as “Merton on the West Coast: New Camaldoli and Redwoods.”¹ There was at the time (and had been earlier) much talk about Thomas Merton’s two visits to Redwoods (in May and October 1968), his public reflections when there, and the need to get them into print. Such a publication would fill in the temporal gap that existed between *Woods, Shore, Desert*,² *Thomas Merton in Alaska*³ and the much more comprehensive *Asian Journal*.⁴ The appearance of *Thomas Merton in California* is therefore a much awaited, long-anticipated source of insight into Merton’s thinking in mid-1968, and David Odorisio has done ten-bell research in transcribing, annotating and bringing together Merton’s conferences along with much else in this beauty of a volume.

Following a brief Foreword by Redwoods Abbess Kathy DeVico (ix-xi) and “Thomas Merton at Redwoods,” a Preface by scholar (and frequent Redwoods visitor) Douglas E. Christie (xiii-xvii), David Odorisio’s Introduction, “‘The Nocturnal Balconies of California’ – Thomas Merton on the Lost Coast” (1-19) provides an overview of the material to follow, supplemented by “On the Road with Thomas Merton: The California Itinerary in His Own Words,” accompanied by a helpful map of the area he visited, along with four of Merton’s own photographs (20-27).

This prelude prepares the reader for the core material of the book: Part

1. Ron Dart, “Merton on the West Coast: New Camaldoli and Redwoods,” *The Merton Seasonal* 40.3 (Fall 2015) 10-18.
2. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*, ed. Joel Weishaus (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982).
3. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989).
4. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) (subsequent references will be cited as “AJ”).

I: “The Redwoods Conferences”: May 1968 (29-259) and October 1968 (261-382). Part II, “The Letters,” includes the correspondence between Merton and Mother Myriam Dardenne (385-415) – a must-read – and “Letters to Fellow Monastics, Acquaintances, and Friends” (417-25) that reflect some of Merton’s thinking at the time. An Appendix (427-34) tells the compelling story of “Four Days with Merton” by Gracie M. Jones, a visitor at the monastery, first published in January 1969, another not-to-miss connection with one of many of Merton’s companions on the faith trail. (It would have been valuable, when including the correspondence between Merton and Myriam Dardenne, to mention as well her two poems “Mourning Tom Merton” and “Cemetery,” from her 2008 volume *Fragments for an Autobiography*.)

The two sets of transcribed conferences provide a rich record of Merton’s unfolding journey with the nuns (May) and others (October). The May reflections cover a wide range of issues, including modern consciousness, feminism, ecology, psychology and varied contemplative traditions, among them Karma and Bhakti Yoga, Sufism, Native American Ritual and dreams, to mention just a few fox-crossing, wide-terrain rambles. The twelve conferences were presented in an animated, informal, suggestive and speculative manner, his insights often linked with laughter from the sisters who sensed only too well Merton’s unfolding journey and what they shared with him in the post-Vatican II ethos and context. Some of these presentations such as “Introduction to Sufism” (177-213), are much longer than others, such as “Native American Ritual and Practice” (215-23), but the frequent dialogical interchanges make for a most engaging way of dealing with such breadth (at times some “hedgehog” depth would have made for a good companion to the creative, fox-like sights seen and places turned to in the multiple topics covered).

There are fine black-and-white Merton photographs that act as a bridge between the longer May insights and reflections and the generally shorter October commentaries, the latter meeting less wide-ranging but lightly landing and going to places, again, in a finger-pointing-to-the-moon way, missed in the earlier conferences. The more dialogical approach is still front and center as a way of facing the larger issues that more thoughtful contemplative Roman Catholics (and others, I might add) were doing their best to make sense of, the windows being open more and more to the wider world in the pathway encouraged after Vatican II.

The photographs included in the book highlight in different ways the setting for these talks – the sheer size of the ancient redwoods, Needle Rock, the interior of the monastery, Bear Harbor and a few other locations. (It might have been worthwhile to have included yet another photograph:

of the painting by Jamini Roy of the “Oriental Christ,” purchased in Calcutta, that Merton and Amiya Chakravarty offered to Redwoods as a gift.⁵⁾ These photographs brought back many a generous memory for me of days spent trekking in the area.

There can be little doubt that David Odorisio has done his research well and wisely, and in the process filled in a sizeable gap in Merton studies concerning the final few months of Merton’s life. Long awaited, this publication has been worth this lengthy wait. The fact that such Merton worthies as Jonathan Montaldo, Bonnie Thurston, Patrick O’Connell, David Steindl-Rast, Monica Weis, Paul Pearson, Cyprian Consiglio and Christine Bochen have endorsed the book and given it their appreciative recognition does need to be noted and not overlooked. I must admit I wish these conferences had been transcribed when I was at Redwoods in 2015, but the pure gold that David has mined is still worth its weight.

For those who are more systematic in their thinking, who ask of a writer-thinker that ideas be parsed in a careful, detailed and scholarly manner, it should be noted that the informal, interactive process reflected in this material is not intended to provide such analysis. For those who prefer a more creative, suggestive and speculative literary approach, like Dante’s Virgil reaching out his arms to the further shore, *Thomas Merton in California* is a meditative must-read, consistent with so much of his work, reflective of his ever-deeper dives for varied well-formed pearls of insight, wisdom and love, integration and a comprehensive approach to the pilgrimage of faith. *La Lotta Continua*.

Ron Dart

RAGGIO, Marcela, editor, *Diálogos, Puentes, Encuentros: La Vigencia de Thomas Merton [Dialogues, Bridges, Encounters: The Enduring Relevance of Thomas Merton]* (Mendoza, Argentina: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, 2024), pp. 171. ISBN 978-950-774-426-6 (available online at: https://bdigital.uncu.edu.ar/objetos_digitales/20129/raggio-vigenciadethomasmerton.pdf).

August 28-29 2025 marked The Fourth Argentine Thomas Merton Conference, which I attended virtually from my office at the Bellarmine Merton Center. I witnessed how what had begun as a small, local conference focused on Merton has grown both in number of participants and in its global reach. The collection reviewed here publishes essays

5. See Amiya Chakravarty, “Epilogue,” in Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins, eds., *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983) 171-73, and *AJ* 32-33, 46-47, 70-71.