

# Annual Celebrations

Review of

*The Merton Annual*, Volume 8 (1995), edited by Michael Downey  
 Collegetown, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996  
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*The Merton Annual*, Volume 9 (1996), edited by George A. Kilcourse  
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**Reviewed by Anne M. Davernson**

These two recent volumes of *The Merton Annual* maintain the high quality readers have come to expect from this series. Both Volume 8, edited by Michael Downey, and Volume 9, edited by George Kilcourse, follow a format similar to that established in earlier volumes by including unpublished or hard-to-find material by Merton himself, an interview by the editor with a close personal friend of Merton, a wide variety of scholarly essays, a helpful survey of “the year’s work in Merton studies” by one of the series editors (Victor Kramer for Volume 8, Downey for Volume 9), and a gathering of book reviews. Each of these volumes contains valuable material in all these categories.

Featured in Volume 8 is Merton’s essay “A Balanced Life of Prayer,” first published as a pamphlet in 1951 but long unavailable. As Brother Patrick Hart notes in his foreword to the essay, it “was obviously based on some of his conferences to the novices and early professed” at about the time Merton became the abbey’s first Master of Scholastics.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the four-part work is both on prayer as pervading and integrating every aspect of (monastic) life and on the necessity for balance, between intelligence and love and particularly between liturgical and personal contemplative prayer. Though not a major work, this essay does provide significant insight into Merton’s thinking a decade after entering the monastery.

The other important primary source material in this volume is the selection of correspondence between Merton and his former novice Ernesto Cardenal during the latter part of 1959. While Merton’s side of this exchange was published in the fourth and fifth volumes of the collected letters, Cardenal’s letters (translated by Roberto S. Goizueta) appear here for the first time. As Christine M. Bochen points out in her introduction to the selection, “It enables us to appreciate the significant role that Ernesto Cardenal played in Merton’s life both while he was at Gethsemani and after he returned to Latin America,”<sup>2</sup> as well as the profound influence Merton had on the Nicaraguan poet, priest, contemplative, and future revolutionary.

Another mutually influential relationship is revealed in Michael Downey’s interview with Mother Angela Collins, OCD, former prioress and novice mistress of the Louisville Carmel, with whom Merton visited and corresponded during the last decade of his life. Despite her initial reluctance to continue the contacts Merton had initiated with the previous prioress, Mother Angela became one of

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Merton's closest women friends, serving as a confidante and informal advisor until she left Kentucky in 1965 to become prioress of the Savannah Carmel, a position she still holds. This frank and honest interview, which includes discussion of Mother Angela's initial "sense of betrayal"<sup>3</sup> upon learning (after Merton's death) of his relationship with the student nurse, a part of his life that she eventually recognized as "a test" that Merton passed,<sup>4</sup> provides important insights into Merton's life from a woman contemplative who deeply shared his spiritual aspirations.

The nine scholarly essays included in this volume are largely drawn from papers given at two Merton conferences, in October 1993 at St. John's University in New York (which also provided some of the articles in Volume 7 of the *Annual*), and in March 1994 at Bellarmine College. Leading off the essays are the two keynote addresses from the latter conference, Parker J. Palmer's reflection, based on his study of Merton and on his own experiences, concerning the need for a contemplative dimension in teaching and in life, and Paul Wadell's consideration of friendship as a countercultural practice, a life of charity that "means, as both Aquinas and Merton testified, that the reign of God need not be completely postponed."<sup>5</sup>

Though Downey notes in his introduction that there was no effort to organize "a predetermined theme" for the volume, "an extraordinary convergence"<sup>6</sup> nevertheless emerged in which four of the articles (in addition to Palmer's keynote) focused on different aspects of Merton and education: Roy Fuller considers Merton as a model for "the virtuous teacher," that is, one who sees education as a process of transformation for both teacher and student; Julia Upton finds in Merton a resource for exploring themes and experiences of inwardness and interrelatedness in the academy; Gloria Kitto Lewis shares her research in interviewing Merton's monastic students about his teaching; Thomas Del Prete (who, Upton comments, "probably knows more about what Merton thought about education than even Merton knew"<sup>7</sup>) explores the dialectic between culture and personal identity as revealed in Merton's teaching.

In the three additional essays, Thomas McKenna situates Merton's thoughts on monastic renewal in the context of postmodernism, Matthias Neuman examines *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* a quarter century after its publication and finds it still filled with "seminal insights,"<sup>8</sup> and Claire Badaracco in a brief but suggestive essay considers the influence of Merton's writing on four contemporary women authors, Patricia Hampl, Kathleen Norris, Annie Dillard and Gretel Ehrlich, all of whom "seek to integrate spiritual principles...as part of their aesthetic vision."<sup>9</sup>

Following Victor Kramer's synoptic survey of 1994 publications, including the last volume of the Merton letters, four book-length studies and a half dozen articles on Merton, as well as an overview of the growing body of European scholarship, the volume concludes with seven reviews, focused not only on books by (2) and about (1) Merton, but on books by monastic (Matthew Kelty) and secular (Wendell Berry) friends, and concerning topics of interest to Merton both traditional (Aelred of Rievaulx) and contemporary (nonviolence). Thus even the books chosen for review give some indication of the variety and inclusivity of Merton's concerns.

Like its immediate predecessor, Volume 9 of the *Annual* is filled with delights and insights, beginning with George Kilcourse's introductory "News of a More Complex Merton Industry," in which he engagingly reminisces about his one meeting with Thomas Merton when, as a Bellarmine College undergraduate, he was dispatched to retrieve books on James Joyce from the stacks of the college library, books that would result in Merton's essay "News of the Joyce Industry" (hence his own title here).

Though the original Merton piece in this volume, the sermon "He is Risen," is more easily accessible than "A Balanced Life of Prayer," having been published in 1975 by Argus Communica-

tions in a brightly illustrated edition, it too had gone out of print; it should be noted that the visual appearance of the piece, and perhaps even the experience of reading it, is quite different in its block paragraph format here than it was in the more “poetic,” sense-line arrangement of its earlier version.

Volume 9 also includes additions to the first volume of Merton’s complete journals, located after the hardcover edition of *Run to the Mountain* appeared but also available in an appendix to the paperback version of that book. (Unaccountably, the transcriptions of this new material in the *Annual* [but not in the paperback] also include the long-unpublished poem “Mens Sana in Corpore Sano” [first printed in the Spring 1996 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*], which does not belong to the journal, although it was found in the “Fitzgerald File” at St. Bonaventure University, which does include among its various contents a section of typed journal printed in *Run to the Mountain*; the Fitzgerald File is not the source of the additional journal material, four entries from the so-called “Brown Journal” and photostats of two otherwise missing leaves inserted in a copy of the “St. Bonaventure Journal.”) The last page of this additional journal material, the entry for Feb. 2, 1941, is of particular biographical interest, as it includes Merton’s reminiscence of his Aunt Maude’s funeral, which does not seem to support Michael Mott’s conjecture that Merton may have undergone a “mock crucifixion” at a Cambridge party the night before (though it does parallel certain other details Mott had assembled from various other unpublished sources<sup>10</sup>).

George Kilcourse’s interview with Abbot Timothy Kelly, a novice under Merton who later became Gethsemani novice master himself and has served as abbot at the monastery since 1973, provides important information on Merton as teacher, as monk, and as human being, including for example a touching story of Merton’s kindness in sending a personal note from Asia to one of the older monks in the community, which arrived at the same time as the news of Merton’s death. This, according to Abbot Timothy, was “the true Merton.”<sup>11</sup> The interview also yields valuable insights on Abbot Timothy himself, on his predecessors, Dom Flavian Burns and Dom James Fox, and on visitors to the abbey such as the Dalai Lama.

The majority of the eleven scholarly articles included in this volume were originally presentations given at the ITMS Fifth General Meeting at St. Bonaventure University in June 1995, including Lawrence Cunningham’s Springboard Address on Merton’s “Message to Poets,” Robert Faricy’s light-hearted but profound discussion of “Merton [and Faricy] and Zen,” Thomas Del Prete’s report on his interviews with Merton’s former students at Columbia and St. Bonaventure, Paul Pearson’s survey of Merton’s abortive pre-monastic “career” as a novelist, Ross Labrie’s insightful discussion of Merton in relation to the American Romantic movement in general and the Transcendentalists in particular, Christopher Burnham’s careful delineation of Merton’s process of revision in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” and John Wu, Jr.’s detailed presentation of Merton’s relationship to Confucian thought.

The other essays include Dennis O’Hara’s comparison of Merton to Thomas Berry as ecological thinkers, *Commonweal* Editor Margaret O’Brien Steinfels’ 1995 Merton Lecture at Columbia University, focused on *Gaudium et Spes*, the Vatican II “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” and two essays, by Edward Long, Glen Stassen, and Ronald Stone and by Duane Friesen, concerned with “Just Peacemaking Theory,” that were outgrowths of a conference sponsored by the Abbey Center for the Study of Ethics and Culture at Gethsemani. Steinfels’ talk does not specifically mention Merton at all, and the two peacemaking essays refer to him only in passing; while both topics, as Kilcourse points out in his Introduction, were of great importance to Merton, it might have been helpful to readers if the authors had prefaced their essays with short introductory notes making explicit the relation of their topic to Merton.

The volume concludes with Michael Downey's review essay of thirty items by and about Merton from 1995, arranged in six categories (such as "Merton in the Margins," and "Merton à la Mode"), reviews of nine books and two audio productions, and a review symposium on the first volume of the Merton journals, *Run to the Mountain*. (A few minor inaccuracies occur in the reviews: *Contemplation in a World of Action* was published posthumously, in 1971, rather than "a few years prior" to Merton's correspondence with Rosemary Ruether;<sup>12</sup> both Louis Dupré's and James Wiseman's anthology of Christian mysticism and that edited by Harvey Egan include selections by Merton, rather than just the latter;<sup>13</sup> Merton's journal begins six months, rather than "a year and a half," after his baptism.<sup>14</sup>) As with the previous volume, the reviews extend beyond works explicitly by and about Merton to include books on related topics, most notably here the first two volumes of Bernard McGinn's magisterial study of the history of mysticism, which Merton would surely have appreciated immensely.

Thus The Merton Annual continues to provide a range of materials of significant breadth and depth both by and about Thomas Merton. Anyone with a serious interest in any aspect of Merton's life and work will find in these volumes an indispensable source of abundant information as well as of challenging yet enjoyable analysis.

### Notes

1. Patrick Hart, OCSO, foreword, "A Balanced Life of Prayer," by Thomas Merton, *Merton Annual* 8, 2.
2. Christine M. Bochen, introduction, "Time of Transition: A Selection of Letters from the Earliest Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal," *Merton Annual* 8, 163.
3. Angela Collins, OCD, "Daughter of Carmel; Son of Cîteaux: A Friendship Endures. An Interview about Thomas Merton with Angela Collins, OCD," by Michael Downey, *Merton Annual* 8, 210.
4. Collins 212.
5. Paul J. Wadell, CP, "The Human Way Out: The Friendship of Charity as a Countercultural Practice," *Merton Annual* 8, 58.
6. Michael Downey, "Collision Course 101: The Monastery, the Academy, and the Corporation," *Merton Annual* 8, x.
7. Julia Ann Upton, RSM, "Humanizing the University: Adding the Contemplative Dimension," *Merton Annual* 8, 81.
8. Matthias Neuman, OSB, "Revisiting *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* after Twenty-Five Years," *Merton Annual* 8, 147.
9. Claire Badaracco, "Animated Outsiders: Echoes of Merton in Hampl, Norris, Dillard, and Ehrlich," *Merton Annual* 8, 161.
10. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton, 1984) 79.
11. Timothy Kelly, OCSO, "'The Great Honesty': Remembering Thomas Merton. An Interview with Abbot Timothy Kelly, OCSO," by George A. Kilcourse, *Merton Annual* 9, 203.
12. Clare Ronzani, rev. of *At Home in the Word: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, *Merton Annual* 9, 252.
13. Paul Lachance, OFM, rev. of *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, by Bernard McGinn, and *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century*, by Bernard McGinn, *Merton Annual* 9, 281.
14. William H. Shannon, rev. of *Run to the Mountain*, Journals of Thomas Merton, vol. 1, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO, *Merton Annual* 9, 301.