

In Memoriam

Robert Lax (1915-2000)

Distinguished poet Robert Lax, a close friend of Thomas Merton for more than thirty years, died September 26, 2000 in Olean, New York. He was 84 years old.

Lax was born in Olean on November 30, 1915, and grew up there and on Long Island, New York. At Columbia University, he first met and became close friends with Merton, as well as with Edward Rice, Seymour Freedgood, Robert Gibney, and other young men and women whom Merton's readers have come to know through his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton described his friend as "a kind of combination of Hamlet and Elias" and "a potential prophet, but without rage," with "a mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions" (*SSM* 212).

After graduating from Columbia in 1938, Lax worked at a variety of jobs, including tutor, radio announcer, staff writer at *The New Yorker* magazine, scriptwriter in Hollywood, movie reviewer at *Time*, and teacher at the University of North Carolina and Connecticut College. He also was a volunteer at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem. He was associated for many years with *Jubilee* magazine, owned and edited by Ed Rice, and also published the poetry periodical *PAX*. Lax became a convert to Catholicism in 1943, but remained deeply rooted in his own Jewish heritage.

Lax lived in Europe for varying periods in the 1950s and early 1960s, and in 1964 he relocated permanently to the Greek islands, first on Kalymnos and later on Patmos, where he remained until the summer of 2000, when he returned to the family home in Olean, where he died after a short illness. He was buried in the St. Bonaventure University cemetery after a funeral Mass on September 29 at the university chapel.

Lax was a highly respected poet who began writing and publishing his work soon after his graduation from college. His best-known work, *Circus of the Sun*, which first appeared in 1959, is based on his time spent with the Cristiani Family Circus a decade earlier. Merton called it "one of the few if only religious books of any value" published in America in the mid-twentieth century, "a sermon in the sense of kerygma about freedom." Lax's later work was marked by a spare, contemplative, attentive style that used a minimum of words to convey his sense of wonder and appreciation of creation and Creator.

Selections of his work have been collected in *33 Poems* (1988), *Love Had a Compass* (1996), *A Thing That Is* (1997), *The ABCs of Robert Lax* (1998) and *Circus Days and Nights* (2000). Many of Merton's letters to Lax appeared in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (1989), and a collection of their letters from the 1960s was published as *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (1978). The complete Lax-Merton correspondence will soon be available in *When Prophecy Still Had A Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, edited by Arthur W. Biddle (University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

The Spring 2001 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* will be devoted to Robert Lax and his work.