

Two English Diarists/Reviewers and Thomas Merton

By Robert Waldron

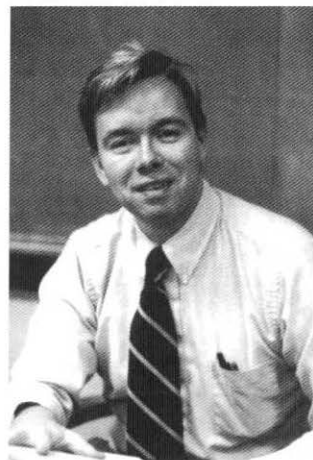
In the early 1970s, a colleague gifted me with a diary entitled *A Prison A Paradise* by Loran Hurnscot. I read it and fell in love with it, and I have read it at least once a year ever since. My colleague was very enthusiastic about it; he once wrote to me that he believed that Loran Hurnscot was the Lady Julian of her time. High praise and because it came from an erudite man, I took his word for it. From my own study and reading, I have concluded that he may be correct in his estimation.

We both tried to find out more about her identity, but to no avail. Several years after my initial reading, while I was reading the autobiography of the English poet Kathleen Raine, I felt my heart pound when she mentioned her dear friend Gay Taylor, the wife of Hal Taylor who was the founder of England's famous Golden Cockerel Press. Gay Taylor, she remarked, wrote a spiritual diary under the pseudonym of Loran Hurnscot. I finally knew the identity of my favorite author!

I needed to know more about her so when by "miracle" I was given Kathleen Raine's address in London, I wrote to her expressing my enthusiasm about Gay Taylor. I said I believed she penned one of the greatest diaries of the twentieth century. She wrote back to me and offered me more information about Gay Taylor, whom she described as one of her dearest friends.

Over the years I have encouraged people to read *A Prison A Paradise*. Unfortunately the book is rare, so I found myself lending out my own copy until I finally lost it. It was the greatest loss of a treasured book that I have ever experienced. I made a special trip to England to find another copy. But to no avail. Then came computers and Alibris where I was able to purchase two copies, the first English version published in 1958 (London: Victor Gollancz) and the American edition published in 1959 (New York: Viking).

Not too long ago I shared *A Prison A Paradise* with the writer Pauline Grogan in New Zealand, who shared it with her friend Doctor Richard Whitfield of England, sometime University Lecturer at Cambridge and former Warden at St. George's House, Windsor Castle. He wrote to me after having scanned the book, saying he was puzzled by my praise, given that Volume One of the book seemed to be little other than a lengthy account of what was essentially an abusive triangle of relationships. When I found out he had only examined Volume One of the book, I encouraged him to read Volume Two carefully, describing it as a "spiritual masterpiece." He carefully read the complete diary and now was astonished by the beauty



Robert Waldron

Robert Waldron lives in Boston, Massachusetts, where he gives retreats on Thomas Merton. He is the author most recently of *Walking with Thomas Merton* (Paulist Press, 2002) and *Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton* (Pauline Books and Media, 2001). He can be contacted at: robertwaldron@earthlink.net.

of Hurnscot's search for God. Since he didn't live far from London, I encouraged him to telephone Kathleen Raine (who is now 94 years old). He was a bit taken aback by such a bold suggestion, but I said he had nothing to lose – she could only refuse to speak with him. Well, she received his phone call ever so graciously and spoke lovingly of Gay Taylor. During their conversation, she mentioned she had a box of Gay Taylor's letters. When he relayed this to me, I immediately wrote to Doctor Kathleen Raine, CBE (as her letterhead reads), asking for the letters. She remembered me from my past inquiries and agreed to turn the box over to me. "Come to London," she wrote. But because of a family emergency I wasn't able to travel. I asked Doctor Whitfield if he would be willing to pick up the letters for me. At first he was a bit skeptical, but upon consideration he finally agreed. The result of this amazing story of synchronicity (too long to narrate everything) is that Richard (now a friend) had a 90-minute interview with one of England's eminent poets, and he carried away the two boxes of Gay Taylor's papers to the boot of his car. When he called K. Raine to thank her for her hospitality, she relayed to him a phone call she had just received from a representative of a major English publishing house indicating that a reprint of *A Prison A Paradise* was imminent and asking if she had any of Gay Taylor's papers!

Because Richard agreed to come to America, I now have in my possession Gay Taylor's archives: diaries, letters, reading notebooks, and her book reviews.

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The subject of this essay is really Thomas Merton as appreciated by two twentieth-century English diarists. I have always loved diaries because they chart the inner journey. I am also drawn to them because diarists are usually unmasked: in a diary one can be one's self; there is no need to pretend or impress. The last century produced some impressive diarists: André Gide, Virginia Woolf, Julian Green, Thomas Merton, Loran Hurnscot and Philip Toynbee.

Both Hurnscot and Toynbee are English diarists who have much to say about the journey to God. They are also admirers of Thomas Merton. I am interested in how the English have responded to Merton, a man born in France, educated in England, finally to become a naturalized American citizen. Hurnscot wrote four reviews of Merton's books from 1949 to 1959. At first, she wasn't greatly impressed by Merton's autobiography, called in England *Elected Silence* (a title chosen by Evelyn Waugh and taken from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom Merton admired), but over the years one can see her opinion change. Allow me to quote passages from Loran Hurnscot's four reviews.

Elected Silence, The Autobiography of Thomas Merton, (Hollis and Carter, 15s.)
[reviewed 19-8-49].

It will probably come as a surprise to most English people to learn that monasticism is undergoing a startling revival in the United States, as though materialism were breeding its own antidote. To judge by certain films and by the best selling career of an American autobiography, *Elected Silence*, many Protestants and even many agnostics have a comfortably sentimental feeling about the ancient faith. But in spite of the faults of rawness and naïveté that this book displays, one can respect its author for honesty of purpose and the courage to carry it out.

He seems to have been a half-baked but sincere young man trying to be a tough guy, and bewildered by the number of contradictory influences which "tried, at every turn to feed me poison." He spends an Easter Retreat at the Trappist monas-

tery at Gethsemani in Kentucky, fails to become a Franciscan, gets Biblical sortes, “Behold, thou shalt be silent,” which “practically floored” him, and finally becomes a Trappist monk studying for the priesthood.

His story is fascinatingly readable – perhaps too easily readable. Of Father Louis of Gethsemani one cannot speak. But is not Mr. Thomas Merton perhaps a little bit of a vulgarisateur?

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The Ascent to Truth by Thomas Merton (Hollis and Carter) [reviewed 4-1-52].

This study of the contemplative life, which is also a study of that great mystic, St. John of the Cross, is a far more mature work than the same author’s somewhat garrulous autobiography, published in England under the title of *Elected Silence*. No reader can fail to be impressed by the absence, in *The Ascent to Truth*, of the raw and jejune element that times so marred the earlier book.

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The Sign of Jonas by Thomas Merton (Hollis and Carter. 18 s.) [reviewed 4-9-53].

He (Merton) has certain misgivings about American monasticism – a dangerous combination, he says. “Our energy runs away with us. We go out to work like a college football team taking the field. We seem to think that God will not be satisfied with a monastery that does not behave in every way like a munitions factory under wartime conditions.” He conveys an impression of the contemplative life being lived under strange and noisy influences, to which he himself contributes at times, as when he careers madly about the woods in a borrowed jeep he does not know how to drive, whooping, “Mary, I love you.”

Indeed, in spite of his sincerity it is impossible not to feel embarrassed at times by the spectacle of this Trappist monk living his cloistered life in the full glare of contemporary publicity, and it is clear that Thomas Merton sometimes shares our embarrassment. Here, one feels, is a spirit that might benefit to the full by the austerer atmosphere of a Carthusian house, and one is led to speculate a little dryly upon the intention in the minds of his superiors.

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A Secular Journal by Thomas Merton (Hollis & Carter. 15/-) [reviewed 2-5-59].

The many people who have been interested not only in that notable (though sometimes irritating) best-seller, *Elected Silence*, but in later writings of Fr. Merton, with their increasing wisdom and dignity, will also find an especial interest in his *Secular Journal*, written during the period from 1939 to 1941, during which he was trying to discover what his true vocation was to be. He had not at that time believed that he was destined for the contemplative life, but imagined that he was to remain a writer and nothing but a writer.

It can hardly go unnoticed, incidentally, that he seems to have a chip on the shoulder about England and the English: his “momentary” conviction in May of 1940 that “England is done for forever” was a little ill-timed, and a little graceless from one at his vantage-point of safety and comfort. However, he recognized that “we are all guilty of this war,” and that Hitler could only thrive upon a condemnation

that disregards our own guilt.

My heart lifted when in her diary she mentions reading Thomas Merton's *No Man Is an Island*: Aug 7th. Read Thomas Merton's *No Man Is an Island* in the train coming back. Yes, he knows: he says that such prayer (a reference to her "sunflower" prayer), desires no witness, not even that of our own souls (*A Prisoner A Paradise* 302).

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Knowing my predilection for diaries (I also suspect in gratitude for introducing him to *A Prisoner A Paradise*), Richard Whitfield highly recommended the diaries of his friend Philip Toynbee, the son of the historian Arnold Toynbee and the grandson of the Classical scholar Gilbert Murray. Philip Toynbee was also the respected, leading book reviewer of the *Observer* for more than twenty years. He wrote two diaries: the first, *Part of a Journey, An Autobiographical Journal 1977-1979* (London: Collins, 1981) and the second, *End of a Journey, An Autobiographical Journal, 1979-1981* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).

I tried to purchase the books here in America without success. So I turned to my trusted Alibris Books and soon held the precious books (for they have become so) in my hands. I haven't the time or the space to offer my true feelings for these two diaries except to recommend them to everyone earnestly embarked upon the inner journey. But again my heart skipped when I came across Toynbee's unabashed admiration for my greatest spiritual mentor; it seems Toynbee and I shared several things in common besides our love of books and our search for God. Allow me to quote Toynbee's remarks on Merton:

7 January 1978

Thomas Merton writes of "the soul wounded by inordinate self-expression." Alerted by that splendid phrase I resolved six weeks ago to renounce writing books. . . . Yet Merton wrote and published about forty books during his cut-short life. I know this caused him much heart-searching when he first entered the monastery; but he had the rare advantage of being under obedience and all his early books were written on the direct order of his superior. . . . But not, I suspect, his later books. Towards the end of his life he was exhibiting a freedom of speculation, and a breadth of concern, which cannot have been altogether congenial even to the most liberal of Cistercian abbots. . . . But the tone of those magnificent late works is of a truly free man, freely communicating his thoughts to people far outside his earliest readership of faithful Roman Catholics or potential converts (*Part of a Journey* 83).

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5 March

A full day yesterday. In the morning I had two Merton books to review, and I realized that this is the first time I've ever written anything about him in public. I said that he was the greatest religious writer in the English language since Von Hugel (and I might have added that what Von Hugel wrote was scarcely English!). I also said that I not only admired Merton, but loved and mourned him without ever having met him (*Part of a Journey* 129).

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22 March

But here is Merton at his very best again: “it may well be that the reason God has ceased to be present to man (therefore ‘dead’) is that man has ceased to be present to himself, and that consequently the true significance of the statement ‘God is dead’ is really ‘Man is dead’” (*End of a Journey* 113).

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1 December

I got *New Seeds of Contemplation* out of Tymawr library again. Perhaps Merton’s supreme achievement. Depth after depth (*End of a Journey* 246).

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Two English diarists/book reviewers admired Thomas Merton. The first, Gay Taylor (Loran Hurnscot) was not in awe of the American phenomenon, a writer who sold 600,000 copies of his autobiography when it was first released. But she grew to respect him, appreciating his growth from a garrulous, perhaps a bit vulgar young man to a monk of wisdom and dignity. Her diary entry indicates that not only does she know what contemplation is but that Merton also knows – high praise from one proficient for another. Toynbee, it seems, took to Merton from the beginning; his only lament concerned not having had the opportunity to meet Merton, one with which so many of us can sympathize.

Three twentieth-century diarists: each in his/her own way searching for God.