

## Mining Memories of Merton

Review of

*Awake and Alive: Thomas Merton According to His Novices*

Edited by Jon M. Sweeney

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Reviewed by **Thomas E. Malewitz**

There is an old adage, often attributed to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913), that you should never meet those you admire because you will be left disappointed. When biographies or reminiscences that examine the life of a celebrity are published today, transparency often seems to be predicated on a style of investigative reporting that seeks to elicit shock or offer a damaging exposé. For a culture steeped in a tabloid mindset, an individual's life does not seem to be real if there is no dirt to dig up, or skeletons to find in the proverbial closet, which leaves little room for human dignity or acknowledging the sacred present in the life of the individual being examined.

Thankfully that is not the case with *Awake and Alive: Thomas Merton According to His Novices*, edited by Jon M. Sweeney. Here, Sweeney presents a simple literary scrapbook of joy-filled memories and snippets about Thomas Merton by his novices and confreres, full of fondness and reverence. This brief collection offers a view of Merton distinct from the celebrated literary persona formed by editors and censors and through his own presentation in journal entries, to offer a glimpse beyond the veil of Merton in his prime at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

*Awake and Alive* is a quick read, and is purposefully edited as a collection of *apophthegmata* – “pithy maxims, stories, and sayings” (11) – to reflect Merton's admiration of and scholarship on the writings of the early monastic Fathers and Mothers of the desert. The book begins with an introduction and concise but selected biographical summary of Merton's life, as well as a description of the premise of the text (1-12). The second, largest section of the book offers stories and reminiscences from six confreres of Merton, all former novices or scholastics under his guidance: Br. Paul Quenon (15-48); Abbot Timothy Kelly (49-64); Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell (65-82); Abbot John Eudes Bamberger (83-89); Fr. Matthew Kelty (91-116); and Abbot Flavian Burns (117-27). The book concludes with three short sections: a glossary of monastic terms and phrases (129-30); a list of Merton's published journals and a few selected texts of the editor by and about Thomas Merton (131-33); and brief biographical sketches of each of the six contributing monastic storytellers (137-39). As acknowledged by the editor, the text is a piecemeal of portions from previously existing interviews, along with some new material from Br. Paul, woven together to

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create a portrait of Merton's monastic life from some of the remaining living witnesses who shared communal life with him.

Somewhat reminiscent of *The Book of Joy* (2016), a collaboration and reflection of the friendship between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *Awake and Alive* offers whimsical snippets of humor, joy and a humble uplifting energy surrounding Thomas Merton from the memories of his life within the walls of Gethsemani. Many of the short accounts of Merton offer a sense of deep and friendly admiration by the storytellers. The memories captured in these brief stories, sayings or one-line responses mirror the exuberance of comradeship and laughter that can also clearly be heard in the archived audio recordings of Merton's conferences and talks for the novices and community, most dating from roughly the same time period, which tangibly support the recollection of Abbot Kelly that Merton "was a very enthusiastic teacher . . . He called forth a lot of enthusiasm from his students" (51). In contrast to *The Book of Joy*, however, *Awake and Alive* lacks a sequential narrative or commentary to create a consistent and established thread to bind the stories together and offer a deeper meaning to the collection as a whole.

Due to the brevity of the memories, most only covering about a quarter of a page in length, as well as an assumed familiarity with Merton and his associates, I would not recommend this book as an introduction to Thomas Merton. I would suggest that the stories would be appreciated more by those already familiar with the context and content of Merton's monastic life. This edited collection includes more odd stories about Merton than I had previously encountered, such as a bizarre dream and eerie premonition of his death shared by Br. Paul (31), a story of Merton befriending a rabbit-hunting neighbor near his hermitage who later recounted a possible experience of Merton bilocating during his Asian trip (40), a wacky situation where Br. Paul pretended to be the voice of Merton's guardian angel interceding for extra dessert (45), Merton's lack of success or concern with correctly using A/V equipment (70), and his lack of coordination or handiness as an outdoorsman (97).

There is no doubt after reading the stories the veracity of Abbot Kelly's claim that Merton was "always really alive! . . . Always seeing the humor of the present moment" (57). As interesting as aspects of the book are, there also seems to be something overall that resonates just a little hollow. At times it feels that the reader is just a little too far removed from the heart of the action. For a young scholar deepening my sense of Merton, I feel that Father Kelly sums up experiencing Merton the best: "Reading [Merton] is different, but hearing him . . ." (110). Clearly, from these stories, there was something extraordinary in hearing Merton and being in his presence.

The stories offered in *Awake and Alive* offer the sense that being in the presence of Merton would challenge Proust's adage. With the humor, joy and a down-to-earth nature present in such stories, how could one be disappointed? Sweeney's collection creates an image of Merton that would fit in with the hearty youthful and whimsy illustrated in the joy-filled friendship of Tutu and the Dalai Lama. *Awake and Alive* offers a distinct reminder that beyond the image of the celebrated author, readers need to remember the humanity of Thomas Merton – a man of humor, joy, monastic fraternity and simplicity.