

The Art of Serious Letters - Five Volumes of Merton's Correspondence

by Paul M Pearson.

Thomas Merton was once advised by Evelyn Waugh, who edited *The Seven Storey Mountain* for publication in this country, to “put books aside and write serious letters and to make an art of it.”(1) The seriousness of Merton’s letter writing and the art he made of it can now be grasped to some extent with the publication last autumn of the fifth and final volume of Merton’s letters under the general editorship of William Shannon.

In his own lifetime Merton had been the first editor of his own letters with the publication of his correspondence with Pasternak, his *Cold War Letters*, and in preparing a selection of his letters to Bob Lax for publication.(2) In his Legacy Trust, Merton also made provision for further collections of his letters to be published. This project, begun in 1985 with the publication of *The Hidden Ground of Love*, has, with the publication of *Witness to Freedom* (3) last autumn been completed.

Sadly, only two of the five volumes in this series have been published in this country. (4) These two volumes. *The Hidden Ground of Love* and *The Road to Joy* will be briefly mentioned in this review which sets out to give an overview of the five volumes whilst giving readers in this country some insight into the three volumes that are not currently available here.

The Hidden Ground of Love contains Merton’s letters on religious experience and social concerns and is by far the longest of the five volumes, containing letters to over seventy-eight different correspondents. the majority of which were written in the nineteen-sixties. The letters in this volume are arranged chronologically under each recipient, which means reading the book from cover to cover involves the reader in see-sawing through Merton’s life. The letters in this volume feature the same themes frequently cropping up often making the book quite repetitive. This was never more evident than in some of the letters concerning peace issues, especially in the period when Merton was banned by the censors of the order from publishing on that subject. Those comments aside, this is a very important book for Merton scholarship as it is possible to see in it how vital letters and communication with friends were to Merton's development. The areas Merton covered in his letters. especially seen in this volume, are breathtaking.

The second volume of letters *The Road to Joy* edited by Robert Daggy contains Merton’s letters to new and old friends. The editorial style is quite different to volume one with the book divided into five sections, reflecting different degrees of friendship – letters to family and friends, to close personal friends, including, among others, Bob Lax, John Howard Griffin, Sister Therese Lentfoehr and Ed Rice, letters to young people, Merton’s circular of 1963 - 1968, and a section containing just Merton’s letters to his friend and mentor Mark Van Doren, a series covering almost thirty years. The writings in this volume are reminiscent of Merton’s autobiographical journal writing, which is frequently Merton writing at his best. Shannon has described Merton's letters as a “kind of latter-day *Seven Storey Mountain*”(5) ,a very fitting description as in this volume Merton’s letters are an alternate form of journal keeping and through them we learn about the books Merton was reading, the events of his day that concerned him, and we see Merton and his thought developing from the young Columbia graduate of the late nineteen-thirties to the mature hermit monk of the sixties.

The School of Charity (6) edited by Brother Patrick Hart contains Merton’s letters on religious renewal and spiritual direction. Brother Patrick’s editorial style is totally different to the earlier volumes with the letters presented in chronological order and the book divided into three parts, reflecting the major periods of Merton’s monastic life. This volume contains Merton’s letters to his superiors in the Cistercian Order and of particular interest are his letters to James Fox who was

Merton's abbot for the greatest part of his monastic life

For Merton as a monk, monastic life, monastic renewal and other connected issues were very much at the centre of his thought and writing. Letters in this important collection, especially Merton's correspondence with Jean Leclercq, Godfrey Dickmann, Myriam Dardenne, Hildelith Cumming, Marcella Van Bruyn and Kilian McDonnell, reflect Merton's developing thought on these areas which he would more formally express later in his books on monastic life especially *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *The Monastic Journey*.

Alongside Merton's understanding of the monastic life from his perspective as a writer and thinker, these letters also show Merton's own personal struggles with many of the issues he was writing about in this area. The solitary life was a dominant theme in Merton's writings on monastic life and it is highly prominent in these letters, both as a larger issue in religious life and as a central part of Merton's own religious life. Central to this volume is Merton's own position as a monk of Gethsemani, the religious community which was Merton's own "school of charity" and where he learned of God's love and mercy towards him and from there poured it out to so many others.

The fourth volume of Merton's letters, *The Courage for Truth*, edited by Christine Bochen and containing Merton's letters to writers, is the narrowest of all the volumes both in its scope and range of correspondents. It is also narrow in the years that it covers with only two sets of letters, those to Evelyn Waugh and Jacques Maritain, predating 1958. The letters in this volume have been divided into five sections – Merton's letters to Waugh, to three eminent literary figures, Jacques Maritain, Czeslaw Milosz and Boris Pasternak, a third section containing Merton's letters to Ernesto Cardenal, and two final, broader sections, one containing his letters to literary figures in Latin America and the other his letters to poets and writers in North America. Christine Bochen's division of this volume into these five sections and the succinct introduction she gives to each of the different correspondents gives the volume a very whole and rounded feel which balances its narrow scope and range of correspondents.

This volume contains many gems especially in Merton's correspondence with Milosz and Maritain, but it is Merton's correspondence with Ernesto Cardenal, the longest collection, which really stands out. Cardenal had entered Gethsemani in 1957 and was a novice there under Merton until he left in 1959 to return to Latin America. Merton encouraged Cardenal whilst at Gethsemani to keep up his interest in Latin America and in the political events in his own country. Cardenal had a profound influence on Merton and the enormous changes in Merton's view of the world dating from the late fifties were no doubt partly due to his contact with Cardenal. Merton's interest in Latin American poets and literature was also encouraged by his contact with Cardenal.

Cardenal also fed Merton's desire to travel, especially to visit Latin America and was central, as can be seen in this correspondence, in attempts Merton made to leave Gethsemani in the late fifties and early sixties. Merton's letters to Cardenal are forthright, telling him at one point:

Gethsemani is terrible. Tremendous commerce - everybody is going mad with the cheese business. I want to leave very badly. (7)

The last volume of letters, *Witness to Freedom*, containing letters of Merton's in "time of crisis" is edited, as was volume one, by William Shannon, the general editor of Merton's letters. Although brought together as Merton's letter in "time of crisis", this is the most diverse volume of letters in the series and subsequently the most disjointed. The letters in this volume are concerned with issues of war, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Peace Hostage Programme and other related areas as well as letters which touch on more personal crises in Merton's life, in particular his petition to Rome in 1959 to be allowed to pursue the solitary life in a more solitary location and his letters to James Fox relating to his relationship with Margie Smith. A number of these letters relating to Merton's personal crises were not available for publication when earlier volumes of his correspondence were published so, for example, the majority of Merton's letters to James Fox are to be found in *The*

School of Charity as are many of his letters relating to his struggle with his solitary vocation.

Amongst Merton's letters relating to issues of peace, this volume contains the remainder of Merton's Cold War Letters which had not been published in previous volumes. These letters were all written during the period when Merton was not allowed to publish anything on issues relating to war and peace and so he collected his letters on these issues together and circulated them privately. This volume contains Merton's preface to the Cold War Letters, and contains all those letters, not already published, in chronological order interspersed with references as to where the letters which have already been published can be found. To have all these letters, so often referred to by Merton's biographers, available through the course of the five volumes and indexed in volume five is a great service to Merton's readers and one of the highlights of this final volume.

The volume also contains other important collections of Merton's letters, [in particular] his letters to two of his great friends, the artist Victor Hammer and to his literary agent Naomi Burton Stone, as well as letters to Herbert Mason and Louis Massignon in which Merton discusses religious dialogue especially in relation to Islam.

As the concluding volume of this series, I felt that this volume was gathering together loose ends, collections of letters which, for one reason or another, were not included in earlier volumes. An error in editing, which surely should have been spotted before *Witness to Freedom* was published, is that one letter in this volume repeats for no apparent reason a letter which had been included in *The Road to Joy*. I also felt all the letters in this volume could have been published in earlier volumes of the letters in a more appropriate setting without providing this fifth, rather disjointed volume.

The completion now of the publication of these five volumes has provided readers and scholars of Merton alike with an invaluable resource. Many letters to certain correspondents have not been included and without easy access to the letters that have been omitted we have to trust ourselves to the editors and, I felt, some criticisms aside, that as each of these volumes appeared, I was in the hands of very competent editors. It is a great shame that there are a number of correspondents whose letters do not appear in these volumes. I think in particular of Merton's publishers, Robert Giroux and James Laughlin, correspondence which, I would imagine, could contain many valuable insights into Merton's own books as well as insights into other writers he was reading.

Depending on an individual reader's interest in Merton, everyone will find a volume in this series which they find particularly fascinated or enlightening. For me the volume I return to most frequently is *The Road to Joy*, Merton's letters to new and old friends. With the completion of the publication of these volumes I felt that I myself had walked a "road to joy" – with Thomas Merton, sharing his joys and his sorrows, his concerns and his fears, his love and his compassion, and so changing in the process, from being a new friend with the publication of *The Hidden Ground of Love* to being an old friend with the publication of *Witness to Freedom*.

Notes and References

1. Merton, Thomas, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. Shannon, William H. (New York. 1985.) p. vi
2. Merton, Thomas and Lax, Robert, *A Catch of Anti-Letters*. (Kansas, 1978)
3. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, ed. Shannon, William H. (New York. 1994)
4. It is possible to obtain copies of the volumes of letters not available in this country, as well as other books by and about Thomas Merton, through Jeannette Cantrell at Bardstown Art Gallery, PO Box 417, Bardstown KY 40004 USA.
5. Merton, Thomas, *The Road to Joy*, ed. Daggy Robert E. (New York.1989) p.xii.
6. Merton, Thomas, *The School of Charity*, ed. Hart, Patrick. (New York, 1990.)
7. Merton, Thomas, *The Courage for Truth*. Ed. Bochen, Christine M., (New York,1993) p.121.