

# **The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton, His Life from His Journals.**

**Reviewed by Paul M Pearson**

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The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton, His Life from His Journals. pp. 448, Oxford: Lion, 2000. ISBN: 0745944353.

The Intimate Merton, as its subtitle suggests, tells the life of Thomas Merton using his own words taken from his complete journals. Readers of The Merton Journal have been aware over the last four years of the publication of Thomas Merton's complete journals, a vast project covering almost three thousand pages. In The Intimate Merton we are presented with what the editor's believe are the essential entries of those journals reduced to a very manageable single volume.

In four hundred and fifty pages the reader is taken on a journey with Merton from one of the earliest entries in his private journals from October 1939, when he was living at Perry Street, New York City, through to his final entry on December 8th, 1968 as he was preparing to leave Bangkok for the conference at the Red Cross Centre where he was to die two days later.

In reducing Merton's seven volumes of complete journals to one volume a vast amount of material has been omitted. For instance, from the first section of Entering the Silence, the second volume of the journals, one hundred and fifty pages has been reduced to just two pages in The Intimate Merton. But, on looking at this section of Entering the Silence, I must say there is not a single passage extra I would have included if I had been preparing this volume and, generally, this was the case through the whole book. The great danger with a compilation of this kind is that the natural bias of its editors can more easily detract from the original work than enhance it. This volume enhances the seven volumes of Merton's journals and that is down to the skill of the editors and their familiarity with Merton's work and thought.

The Intimate Merton is edited by Brother Patrick Hart, general editor of Merton's complete journals, at one time Merton's secretary and editor of numerous other volumes by and about him, along with Jonathan Montaldo editor of volume two of the complete journals and currently Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville. This volume has been divided into seven chapters that correspond to the seven volumes of the complete journals, and for the chapter titles the subtitles of each respective volume have been used and these described well the content of each of the chapters.

In their introduction the editors outline the editorial policy they have followed, selecting passages that would "produce a powerfully written, chronological presentation of his journal's major themes." (13.) Among the themes they highlight are Merton's desire to be more than a writer in becoming a monk, his search for a monastic identity, for wisdom and for the "perfect place," and his awareness of the natural world. As well as these themes many of his prayers and dreams have been included along with other important themes from Merton's life. In editing this volume the editors also "deeply edited Merton's text to present him as favorably and faithfully as we could" (15.). The extent of this editing varies from omitting Merton's "too-frequent use of And to begin sentences" to deleting anything that they judged weakened Merton's style.

On reading The Intimate Merton I think the editorial policy has worked extremely well. There were some themes which I felt could have done with greater attention, in particular Merton's paradoxical nature and some of the writers, events and movements that influenced him. For example, many of his references to Rilke, the Shakers, and Blake are missing and his decision to become an American Citizen, the visits of the Hibakusha and Sidi Abdesalam to Gethsemani and his reference to the trial

of Adolf Eichmann are totally omitted. Having said that, the editors have created a most readable volume which will serve to introduce the essential content of Merton's complete journals to Merton aficionados who have been put off by the size and the price of the complete journals and will also introduce a whole new generation to Merton's life and thought.

Except for some very penetrating epigrams at the beginning of each of the chapters the editors are totally unobtrusive providing no footnotes or textual notes. In many ways I felt this book would have benefited from more input from the editors, perhaps just a few paragraphs at the beginning of each chapter, in a style similar to that used by Merton in his introductions to the chapters of *The Sign of Jonas*, would have been enough to provide readers with a few biographical and contextual details which would make a real contribution to their reading of this book.

In their introduction Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo sum up very succinctly the value of Merton's journals and one of the key reasons why they continue to attract so many readers: His writing operates for readers as both a window and a mirror. In Merton's journals readers catch a glimpse of their own "infinite possibilities" for "contemplation and praise." As he struggles with his life's contradictions, readers are self-examined in the mirror of his autobiographical art. By hearing Merton's literary voice, readers are seduced into listening to that still quiet voice within themselves, one that longs to become incarnate in some outward gesture uniquely their own. (15.) This quotation gets to the very core of Merton's literary work and in *The Intimate Merton* we have the essence of those journals in one volume. If you like to read Thomas Merton and you have not read his complete journals then this book is a must.

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