

*On Prayer:* We do not pray in order to receive just any answer; it must be God's answer. Never was a deeply honest and simple life of prayer more necessary. It is about all there is left. But people don't trust God either. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. The first essential step of a true life of prayer is freedom.

I expect this book to enjoy wide readership. Journal-keeping is a popular device today for many serious pilgrims in the search for spiritual growth. This book provides a means, not only for shaping one's daily reflection and for readjusting one's resolves from month to month, but also for meeting the challenge of Merton's profound thinking. The book will be much quoted.

In Merton's last years he enjoyed recording many of his ruminations on tape. Sometimes he would read a few lines of his own poetry, sometimes a revision of them, sometimes a favorite passage from his reading. On one of these tapes, Merton reflects that it might be better to allow varied rich, provocative thoughts to stand on their own as a sort of mosaic rather than weaving them into a contrived whole. A new understanding might then emerge from the very mosaic itself. In this book indeed one can create one's own mosaic; the unplanned-for personal insights derived from such a process await us all.

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### THE ALASKAN JOURNAL OF THOMAS MERTON

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy

Isla Vista, California: Turkey Press, 1987

88 pages -- Limited Edition [140 copies]\* -- \$175.00

Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

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1968 was a year of travel for Thomas Merton. Besides the now famous Asian journey there were two other major trips: one in the Spring to

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\* New Directions will issue a trade paperback edition of *The Alaskan Journal* in 1989, approximately one year after the publication of the limited edition.

California and New Mexico and the other, actually a prelude to the Asian trip, to Alaska (and New Mexico and California again). Merton, an indefatigable journal keeper, kept notebooks during all of these excursions. The first California/ New Mexico trip resulted in a journal which Merton himself edited after his return to Gethsemani. It was published (with photographs which Merton took) long after his death: *Woods, Shore, Desert* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982). After his death the "working notebooks" that Merton kept during his Asian journey were carefully edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin: *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973). Now, nearly twenty years after his death, we have the Alaskan journal which consists of writing that Merton did in the period between 17 September, when he flew to Anchorage via Chicago to 3 October, when he arrived at Santa Barbara readying himself for the flight East.

What distinguishes *The Alaskan Journal* from the other two journals which have appeared in print is that this is a faithful transcription and integration of two actual working notebooks without editing of the entries themselves by Merton or Daggy. From a purely technical point of view, then, *The Alaskan Journal* provides us with an intimate glimpse of Merton as he wrote without the intrusion of later reflection or subsequent polishing. Such a glimpse, of course, brings with it a certain fragmentary quality which can be, at worst, obscure, but, at best, aphoristic. One must be prepared for an observation about a Poor Clare monastery in Chicago juxtaposed with a fragmentary sentence about a multiple murder in Cleveland gleaned, one supposes, from a newspaper account, read while en route.

For some kind of context I reread the earlier *Woods, Shore, Desert* and the later *Asian Journal* since they frame this journal. What kind of impression does one gain from a perusal of these journals in general and the Alaskan one in particular? What struck me first and foremost was the alertness of Merton's eye and ear. He notes the tameness of graffiti in the Anchorage Airport's men's room and jots down a snatch of conversation between two stewardesses: "When her eyelashes began to fall out I . . . (inaudible)" "Real ones?" "Yes!" But banal moments like those are mingled with the poet's eye. Thus, for example, a sharp reflection on a volcanic mountain, first seen at a distance ("handsome and noble") and then, with the plane approaching it, a sharper view: "A brute of a dirty busted mountain that has exploded too often. A bear of a mountain. A dog mountain with steam curling up out of the snow crater."

Merton's capacity to see is all over these pages and nowhere more acute than when he looked at the world around him. The woods of Alaska were "deep in wet grass, fern, rotten fallen trees, big leaved thorn scrub, yellowing birch, stunted firs, aspen." The directional lights at San Francisco's airport strike him as beautiful -- something akin to a concrete poem: XAMN RNWY BFR XING. As one reads those close observations it becomes very clear why Merton took to photography so creatively. He had a capacity to see what Hopkins called the "dearest freshness" of the world. Merton had that peculiarly poetic (and contemplative) power to look afresh at that which is part of the common view. The hasty jottings of this journal note scattered oil drums, the color, names, and condition of the fishing boats, the snow on the head of a nail, the shape of mountains, and the slant of the rain. To read those terse observations is a necessary prelude to an appreciation of his best photographs which were close-up studies of the shapes of nature or simple things on the porch of his hermitage.

Amid those observations, his own reflections on the suitability of various Alaskan sites for a hermitage, his gratitude for the hospitality of the Alaskan clergy and religious, his letters back to Gethsemani and elsewhere (sixteen are appended to the journal), there was the reading, always the reading: from Hermann Hesse to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, from the Orthodox theologian and philosopher Vladimir Lossky to snatches from the Psalms. To that we must add the conferences to contemplative sisters and his celebrations of the liturgy. In brief: the seventeen days of the Alaskan journey were a replication of life in his Kentucky hermitage. And that life was one of intense activity both literary and religious. One gets the sense that, in the final analysis, the kind of life Merton lived was the same irrespective of place. He was a person who hated to waste time yet, as he once wrote in a poem fragment, learning how to waste time perfectly was a talent no person had mastered completely.

There was, obviously, no anchored solitude in his brief stay in Alaska. The journal is an almost breathless catalog of trips, conferences, visits to possible sites for a hermitage, and letters to the monastery requesting books to be sent to this or that person. In the background of that was the anticipation of the journey to Asia. Yet, and the point deserves emphasis, there was Merton the hermit who affirmed his desire for greater solitude either in Alaska or, perhaps, in Asia. It is also worth noting that he firmly stated his being a "monk of Gethsemani." That was possible because he understood his monastic stability to be there even if, after the Asian journey, he would live elsewhere. Thus, those who insist that by 1968

Merton was ready to leave the monastery are correct only in a very limited sense. As his journals of that year make clear, he may well have left the monastery physically for a different eremitical site but he would still have considered himself (and quite rightly) a monk of Gethsemani. Whether that hermitage would have been in Alaska is open to question. He saw the immense possibilities in that vast land and was convinced that many people lived there out of a thirst for solitude but, as he wrote Abbot Flavian Burns, he could make no decision until he returned from Asia. He had to struggle, especially in those later years of his life, with "leaving behind the renunciations of yesterdays and yet [being] in continuity with all my yesterdays." This short journal shows no resolution of such deeply personal challenges but it does reinforce my own deep conviction that whatever the changes that might have happened to him, Merton was deeply and irrevocably a monk. Indeed, not to understand him as a monk, is not to understand him at all.

Apart from the intrinsic worth of a beautiful book as aesthetic artifact is there merit in this hasty notebook of less than a month's making? The obvious answer is that any source that helps us get a fuller picture of a person so complex and important has immense value. With the California/New Mexico and Asian journals this notebook gives us an intimate look at Merton in the final year of his fecund life as a monk-writer. There is a deeper reason for a claim to be made for this book. Merton was almost always the autobiographer. His immense claim on the imagination of people rests in his capacity to refract the world through the firm center of his own contemplative experience and his yearning for a deepening of that experience. In a sense, all of the journals now published (and those, like *A Vow of Conversation*, yet to come) are necessary resources to read in tandem with the Michael Mott biography to get closer to the authentic persona of this modern spiritual master.

We learn from Merton not doctrine or systematic teaching but a way of being and seeing. Many are not (or better: I am not) anxious to live in Alaska or to read Hesse or the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. But I would like to live a life which has, at its center, the presence of God and I would like to learn how to look at the quotidian world around me with freshness and wonder. Thomas Merton's writings, especially those which reflect a certain spontaneity, remind me (and, I suspect, many others) how much I miss about myself, others, and the world around us. That is a precious lesson.

Robert E. Daggy edited this volume and supplied an informative introduction. David D. Cooper, a noted Merton scholar, wrote the preface

for this edition which sets just the right tone for reading it. The book, in a limited edition, is published by Harry and Sandra Reese at their Turkey Press in Isla Vista, California. It is a beautiful tribute to Thomas Merton and they are all to be congratulated. New Directions will publish a trade edition which will also include the conferences that Merton gave while he was in Alaska.

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M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.

*THOMAS MERTON, BROTHER MONK:  
The Quest for True Freedom*

San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987  
xvii, 205 pages -- \$15.95

Reviewed by **John Eudes Bamberger**, O.C.S.O.

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When Michael Mott's biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, was published in 1984 it was read in the refectory at Genesee Abbey. One of the brothers, who had been a member of the Gethsemani community during Merton's last fifteen years there, remarked to me that he had no idea that all those doings detailed in the biography were occurring. Rather, he knew Fr. Louis Merton as one of the monks, living a quiet and regular life and doing his work peacefully as novice-master, then living as a hermit. The Merton he knew did not seem to be described in this biography: his monastic life somehow seemed to disappear behind all the events and contacts depicted in such wealth of detail in the story of his life.

Though I was aware of many of those details, I too felt that somehow a major aspect of the life that Fr. Louis had led in the monastery over so many years had largely proved elusive. Perhaps anyone who has shared life with another, who made up a part of one's daily life for any protracted period of time, would inevitably feel some such incompleteness in any account, even as expert a one as that provided by Mott. Though Fr. M. Basil Pennington never lived with Fr. Louis in community and had but little personal contact with him, he too felt that the monastic dimension of Merton's life had not as yet been adequately treated in any of the