

MERTON'S ALASKAN TREK

Review of

THE ALASKAN JOURNAL OF THOMAS MERTON

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy

Preface by David D. Cooper

Isla Vista, California: Turkey Press, 1988

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Reviewed by **Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.**

The Alaskan Journal of Thomas Merton is an important publishing event, appearing appropriately during the twentieth anniversary celebrations of Thomas Merton's passage through death to life. But how does one even begin to review such a book? First of all, it is a pleasure to hold in one's hands. Elegantly designed and printed in a limited deluxe edition of 140 copies by Sandra and Harry Reese of Turkey Press, it turns out to be one of the loveliest books that has come off their press. Let's begin on the outside and work in.

The slipcase in black and white has a wrap-around photograph taken by Merton from a plane in Alaska, revealing mountain peaks amidst cumulus clouds. The book itself is bound in black and white Dutch and Japanese linen on boards — white on the spine and black for the covers. Now let's look inside: handmade Haley paper with Spectrum typeface in two colors — black ink for the basic texts and earth red for the title and ornamental graphic dividers interspersed between the journal entries. Facing the title page is a fine reproduction of a page from Merton's hand-written journal for 18 September 1968.

The Alaskan Journal was transcribed and compiled by Robert E. Daggy, director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, the principal archive of Merton's papers.

□ **Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.**, formerly secretary to Thomas Merton, needs no introduction to Merton readers. He has edited or co-edited Merton's *Asian Journal* (1973); *The Monastic Journey* (1977); and *Love and Living* (1979) and is currently at work on the third volume of the Merton correspondence: *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Life and Renewal*. He is the editor of the collections: *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (1974); *The Message of Thomas Merton* (1981); and *The Legacy of Thomas Merton* (1986). He is editor of *Cistercian Studies* and co-editor of *The Merton Annual*. His book of reminiscences, *Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories*, was published by Necessity Press in a trade edition in 1988.



PATRICK HART and THOMAS MERTON

9 September 1968

Photo by Brother Maurice Flood

He has edited and introduced this journal, placing it admirably in its historical context. It comprises Merton's sixteen days in Alaska, from September 17 to October 2, prior to his departure for San Francisco, and finally Asia, after brief stops at Santa Barbara and at the Cistercian Monastery of the Redwoods in northern California. As Dr. Daggy explains in his introduction, Merton went to Alaska not only to give conferences to the priests and religious, at the invitation of the Bishop, but also to investigate the various possibilities for a hermitage site more isolated than the one he left at Gethsemani, as his letters to his Abbot will bear witness.

The Editor arranged the texts similar to what had been done shortly after his death with Merton's *Asian Journal*, dovetailing writings from both the public and personal journals. In an effort to give a more complete picture of the situation in Alaska, the sixteen letters written by Merton from Alaska are included as an appendix. As Dr. Daggy accurately points out: "Despite rumors, then and now, he had no intention of leaving the Order or of severing connection with Gethsemani. He tried to squelch such rumors in his 'Circular Letter' to his friends (Fall 1968) written in September of 1968, and circulated throughout the following months by his secretary." Dr. Daggy emphasizes the fact that the new legislation in the Order now allowed a somewhat different interpretation of the vow of stability:

The possibility now loomed that Merton might be a monk of Gethsemani and yet live as a hermit at some distance from Gethsemani, even possibly outside the United States. A "monk of Gethsemani" might now be nowhere near the actual location of Gethsemani. Taken in this light, Merton's assertions with their ring of commitment did not actually commit him to any one course for he might have become a "monk of Gethsemani" in New Mexico, Alaska, or on that tea plantation near Darjeeling. (p. xiv)

Actually, Gethsemani has had hermits living in various countries, including Mexico and Papua New Guinea, following the new legislation.

One of the best letters that Merton penned during this time in Alaska was addressed to his Abbot (Flavian Burns), on September 26, 1968. In it he sums up his impressions of Alaska and its potential for the kind of solitude he was seeking:

My feeling at present is that Alaska is certainly the ideal place for solitude and the hermit life. In fact it is full of people who are in reality living as hermits. Men who have gone far out into the wilderness with a stack of books and who get themselves a homestead, cut wood, read, and stay away from everyone, living on moose, fish, caribou, etc. I don't plan it that way. But it gives you a good idea of the character of the place. There is also an old Russian Orthodox monk who has lived for years as a hermit off Kodiak Island and in fact before him there was a staretz there who is venerated as a saint, so religious hermits are nothing new here . . . (p. 48)

Although understandably more attention has been paid in the past to Thomas Merton's Asian experiences with the publication of his *Asian Journal*, still this fragment of journal written immediately before his departure for Asia fills in many gaps and reveals Merton's deepest aspirations as a monk and solitary explorer. Since Merton himself did not have occasion to revise the text as he had done in earlier fragments of journals, such as *Woods, Shore, Desert*, or in *Day of a Stranger*, this *Alaskan Journal* was transcribed and published essentially as it was written, with a minimum of editing or polishing of Merton's spontaneous impressions. The journal entries reveal the ease with which Merton jotted down significant happenings of the day interspersed with newspaper articles or anti-poems or with reading notes from a number of books he had with him, such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Hermann Hesse, Paul Bowles, or texts from an Orthodox theologian.

One hesitates to register a complaint about such a splendid book, but for the record it should be noted that the opening sentence of the otherwise excellent Preface by David Cooper is

somewhat misleading. It is stated there: "Books and articles about Merton continue to proliferate at a pace that keeps the bibliographers hopping, yet very little *original* [Cooper's italics] Merton material remains unpublished." Any Merton scholar who has done a serious study of Merton's unpublished notes, especially in the area of monastic orientation, will realize that this statement is not exactly accurate. There are still four volumes of Merton letters to make their appearance, as well as a whole series of personal journals. The latter private journals are restricted for twenty-five years following Merton's death, which means that by 1993 these journals will be available for publication or at least open for scholarly research. Then add to these Merton's working and reading notebooks and the hundreds of taped conferences and one realizes that it will be some years before all of this unpublished material sees the light of day.

Although the price of the book puts it into the category of a collector's item, it should be noted that plans are in the offing to have a trade edition of this work, titled *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, brought out next year by New Directions (Spring 1989). This paperback edition will include the journals and letters plus Merton's conferences to the priests and religious which are not included in this volume. Meanwhile, we are grateful to the publisher, Turkey Press, for producing a truly beautiful work of art, coinciding with this year of celebration. It is a fitting tribute to the monk who more than any other of our century has made the contemplative life known and loved throughout the world.

CELEBRATE MERTON '88

A number of symposiums, conferences, commemorations, and celebrations have been planned for the twentieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death on December 10, 1968. Following are program details which have been supplied to the Thomas Merton Studies Center. Events are projected at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York; Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama; Georgia State University in Atlanta; and Our Lady of Florida Passionist Monastery in North Palm Beach, Florida, but details are unavailable as we go to press.

October 6 - 8, 1988. NAZARETH COLLEGE, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

THE WORLD IN MY BLOODSTREAM

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Nazareth College Theater Department