

## REVIEWS

## New Merton book deemed 'invaluable'

*The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* by William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell. Orbis Books (Maryknoll, N.Y., 2002). 556 pp., \$50.00.

Reviewed by Father Patrick Eastman  
Contributing writer

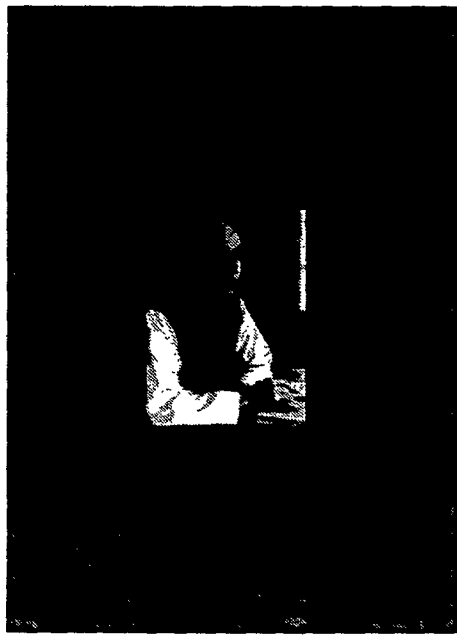
Go into any bookstore in this country that has a religion section and you will certainly see at least one book by Thomas Merton and oftentimes a whole shelf full.

The popularity of this man as a Christian spiritual writer is unmistakable. It is no surprise then that there should now be an encyclopedia of his work, and no one could be better qualified to provide it than the three author-editors. Each has served terms as president of the International Thomas Merton Society, an association for scholars, religious practitioners and general readers who have been influenced by the life and writing of Thomas Merton.

Msgr. William Shannon is a priest of the Diocese of Rochester and a highly respected scholar and theologian. As a priest of 59 years, he brings not only a thorough knowledge of Merton to the book, but also a great deal of wisdom from his long experience. Christine Bochen is professor of religious studies at Rochester's Nazareth College, where she has taught many courses on Thomas Merton. Dr. Patrick O'Connell, an associate professor in the departments of English and theology at Gannon University in Erie, Pa., currently is editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, the quarterly journal of The International Merton Society.

Those not familiar with Thomas Merton or Father Louis, as he was known in his monastic community at Gethsemani, Ky., can get a clear chronology of his life and writings from five pages in the encyclopedia's introduction. From this we can learn that Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France, to Owen and Ruth Merton on Jan. 31, 1915. Both Owen and Ruth were artists. Owen came from New Zealand and Ruth from America. They moved from country to country as their work drew them. Merton's mother died of cancer in 1921 and his father in 1931 from a brain tumor. Merton's education included Oakham School in England, followed by Cambridge University, which he left under a cloud. He finally entered Columbia University in New York in 1935, receiving a master of arts degree in English in 1939.

Following a short spell of teaching at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, Merton entered the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani on Dec. 10, 1941. He became something of a household name with the publication of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in 1947. He went on to write about 100 books, many of which have been translated into numerous foreign languages. His writings included journals and letters as well as essays and books on prayer, social justice, war, literature, interreligious dialogue and monastic renewal. There are several collections of his poems, and his in-



terest in calligraphy, painting and drawing is also evidenced in publications.

Although much of his writing was completed more than 40 years ago, Merton's books and ideas have continued to be very influential as the almost 5,000 active memberships of the International Thomas Merton Society illustrates. In his early years at the monastery, Merton discovered that much of the ancient contemplative tradition had been lost. From his research of ancient texts and through his own experience he became a significant influence in the restoration of the contemplative heritage in the West. The breadth of his interest and writings indicate that contemplative spirituality is not just about prayer. It is not just about a small compartment of life but a way of approaching every aspect of life. His life ended with a tragic accident in Bangkok in 1968 when he was participating in a dialogue between Christian and Buddhist monks.

In the course of the 350 entries in the encyclopedia, the authors cover not only all of Merton's published writings, but also the themes and topics addressed by this multifaceted man. Although Merton was secluded in a Trappist monastery, he had a wide range of friends from many walks of life, some famous in their own right and others whose names are unknown to most. There are those from many other countries in the world, some of whom he met in person, such as the Anglican priest Canon Donald Allchin from the United Kingdom, and others with whom he corresponded, such as the Sufi scholar Abul Aziz. Aware that geography and place had significant influence on Merton, the authors include entries on the places where he lived. Without doubt, there is a wealth of material here, and I cannot find anything significant that has been omitted in the 559 pages.

No college, university or high school

that has a religious-studies section in their library should be without this book. Similarly, all monastic and religious communities of whatever religious tradition, Christian or not, should have it available.

Speaking personally, Merton has been very influential in my life. In the past, I have often had to turn to Msgr. Shannon to ask questions on points of Merton's life and writing that are now, I discovered, almost all answered in this book. (Maybe it is because of me and others like me who kept calling for information that nudged Msgr. Shannon into initiating this volume.) It surely is an invaluable reference for those who already are interested in Merton, whether for personal enrichment or scholarly and academic study. For others it will serve as a useful introduction to a man who still has much wisdom to impart to our world.

My particular interest is in the ancient monastic and contemplative heritage of the Christian tradition with its attendant commitment to non-violence and social justice. Merton's interest in interreligious dialogue, especially with Zen Buddhism, has also stimulated me personally. The articles and entries on such topics as contemplation, silence, solitude prayer, meditation, Hesychasm, non-violence, war and racism are all helpful. The entry on Zen and Merton's book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* was particularly interesting and informative. Cross-referencing is given at the end of each article, which certainly facilitates any search for information that the reader might have. Footnotes are given at the end of the entry, which sometimes point to further reading material. I would have liked to see the footnotes extended to suggest more books for further reading.

In a book such as this, it would be surprising if there were no entries that were thought to be lacking. I found very few, but I must say that I was disappointed with the entry on Cambridge University, where Merton spent one academic year. Personally, I think that Merton's time at Cambridge, although clearly something of a disaster morally and academically, had a significant influence on him precisely because of the disaster that it was.

Finally, I must comment most favorably on Orbis Books' presentation of this volume. It is substantial, well-bound, attractively laid out, clearly printed and well illustrated with 50 black-and-white photographs and drawings.

All in all, we can be grateful for the diligent and immense amount of work that went into providing us with this "indispensable guide to the life and thought of one of the spiritual and literary giants of the twentieth century."

Father Patrick Eastman, a member of the International Thomas Merton Society, is a priest of the Diocese of Tulsa, Okla.

## Slate of 9/11 books offered

By Katherine Nunn  
Catholic News Service

A year after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, seems too soon to reflect—the wounds are still too fresh. But that didn't stop every media outlet from pulling out all the stops to mark the anniversary. Here are a few of the 200 books that document the day.

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*Searching for God at Ground Zero*, by James Martin, S.J.: This first-hand account of a priest ministering at ground zero tells the positive and intimate stories of recovery workers at the World Trade Center site from a human as well as spiritual perspective. Here are counselors of all kinds, non-religious and religious, struggling to find some peace in the midst of so much despair while supporting those who had seen more than could be comprehended in the context of the world we had lived in before that Tuesday in September. The author brings you in close to give you glimpses of the grace that was everywhere in the months that followed in his well-written and candid journal.

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*9/11 Meditations at the Center of the World*, by Eugene Kennedy: This is a very personal commentary from prolific writer and professor emeritus of psychology Eugene Kennedy of Loyola University in Chicago. These meditations take us through the first six months after the attack and each one can stand alone. The author reflects on grief, sacredness of the site, healing and societal changes from a spiritual New York and U.S. perspective. He examines the larger questions that we find difficult to answer, in our own satisfaction, in a scriptural context.

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*After September 11: New York and the World*, by the journalists of Reuters: The story of recovery and retribution after Sept. 11 is told well by Reuters in what is almost a timeline. The foreword by British Prime Minister Tony Blair is an example of this book's European perspective. It places things into the context of world events when we Americans were certainly more focused inward. I take exception to David Morgan's statement that the 40 passengers and crew of Flight 93 in particular have "been largely overlooked by the public, by the media and by national leaders."

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