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Cloistered Correspondence

CLAIRE BADARACCO

When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, ed. Arthur W. Biddle. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. 472 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8131-2180-X.

The publication of these 346 letters over thirty years between Thomas Merton and his friend Robert Lax, who died in Olean, New York, three months before its publication, is timely, comprehensive, definitive, and a significant contribution to Merton studies. This is not light reading. Some of the correspondence is so encoded, privatized, and self-absorbed that the reader needs to compare the letters with the other works of the same period by these writers in order to make sense of things. The edition is scholarly, reliable, a solid addition to one's personal or university library, and highly recommended.

Editor Arthur W. Biddle, an emeritus professor of English at the University of Vermont, devoted ten years to arranging this collection. His textual apparatus is minimal, retaining all the intentional misspellings, limiting himself to brief headnotes that explain earlier emendations of Merton's previously published letters, and inserting identification of names within brackets.

The letters are arranged in five historical periods, representing shifts in the lives of Merton and Lax, whose lives parallel one another. Both were born in 1915 and graduated in English from Columbia, where they met on a college literary magazine. Both converted to Catholicism (Merton in 1938, Lax in 1943), and both devoted themselves to the craft of writing and to seeking the solitude necessary for a writer's life. For Merton, the monastery provided the stability and solitude, discipline and routine without which he might not have written. For Lax, a Jewish layman, the life of a hermit on the Greek islands followed stints at *The New Yorker*, in several colleges as a teacher, as a Hollywood screenwriter and circus worker.

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Both men were cloistered, though, after their own fashion, and both eagerly sought out the connections necessary to keep themselves vitally interested in the events of their day. Certainly their friendship was a tremendous resource, as they exchanged gossip, pieces of poetry, and essays over the decades since their boyhood summers of 1939–40 at Olean, New York, when they and several friends tried to match William Saroyan's record of writing a novel in a week. As Biddle remarks, the edition is a textual study of a friendship: the letters are fast-paced, and meant to entertain.

Readers looking for soul-searching by either man, or information about Merton's romantic interlude, will be disappointed. Even on critical dates (e.g., letter 66.22), there is not much about Merton's inner life. A reader would do well to compare these letters to Merton's Journal 6, for 1966–67 (*Learning to Love*, ed. Christine Bochen [New York: Harper, 1998]), to see how Merton presented the different sides of himself to his new and old friends. Biddle interviewed Lax (see the appendix), and Lax conceded that he knew nothing about how Merton meditated or prayed. While these letters appear to be the correspondence of intimates, and they are the record of an important literary friendship, both men were deeply solitary souls whose surface banter seldom reached any literary depth. In Merton's case, he seemed to have reserved the deepest part of himself for his audience.

Though the letters from Lax had not been published previously, some of the Merton letters have appeared in print in *Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, edited by Robert Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1989). The late Dr. Daggy, buried at Gethsemani, devoted his career to establishing the Merton Center at Bellarmine College.

Although scant correspondence survived from the years when Merton wrote *Seven Story Mountain*, those between 1961 and 1964 and between 1965 and 1968 are intact. These include several "Cold War Letters" and others from the period of Merton's greatest social activism. Sixty-six of the letters were published a decade after Merton died in 1968, by Sheed Andrews as *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (reissued in 1994). Originally, in 1965, it was

Merton who suggested to Lax that they publish a "Catch" collection of their letters, and they tried unsuccessfully to interest a publisher. This autobiographical fact is even more amusing as one realizes through Merton's Journal his deep ambivalence over becoming a best-selling writer. However, one must study this correspondence as one does all edited letters, realizing that every writer whose life is invention necessarily is creative about inventing his own self, and every writer succeeds by testing the limits of that created self. I can think of few religious writers for whom this is more relevant than Thomas Merton, and this edited collection of his letters to the poet Robert Lax contributes to a contextual understanding of Merton as an important American writer.

NHPRC Seeks Host Applications for Fellowship in Historical Documentary Editing

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission will offer one fellowship in historical documentary editing for the 2002–03 academic year. They will accept applications from NHPRC-sponsored documentary editing projects interested in serving as hosts for the NHPRC fellow until the postmark deadline of October 1, 2001. The host institution will be selected by December 1.

The NHPRC fellowship is designed to give fellows hands-on experience in historical documentary editing including documentary collection, document selection, transcription, annotation, proofreading, and indexing. The fellow's stipend is \$35,000, with a benefit payment of \$8,750. The host project is awarded \$1,500 to cover the cost of interviewing prospective fellows and to use for the fellow's professional travel during the fellowship year.

Application forms for prospective fellows will be made available when the host project is selected and will be due by March 1, 2002. The host project will select the fellow from the pool of applicants, and the fellowship will begin in the late summer or early fall of 2002.

Interested editing projects should contact the NHPRC staff to discuss their applications. The application and related forms are available on the NHPRC Website, www.nara.gov/nhprc, or may be obtained by mail from Michael T. Meier, Program Officer, NHPRC, National Archives and Records Administration, room 111, 7th and Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20408.

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Assistant Editor, Washington Papers

The Papers of George Washington at the University of Virginia seeks an assistant editor for a full-time grant-funded position starting in the fall of 2001. Responsibilities include laying out volumes, collating and transcribing original documents, researching and writing scholarly annotation, and analytical indexing. Required: Ph.D. or ABD in history, documentary editing experience, familiarity with early American history, strong writing and research skills, and word processing proficiency. Preferred: French or Spanish language proficiency and/or advanced computer skills. Applications must be received by 1 October 2001. Send cover letter, résumé, writing sample, and three letters of reference to Philander D. Chase, Editor, Washington Papers, Box 400117, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4117, or by fax to 434-982-4529. The University of Virginia is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer.