**A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton**
Rowan Williams
SPCK
(978-0-281-07056-5)
Church Times Bookshop £9.90

Most readers of Thomas Merton return to him time and again, discovering something that is new, or that touches them afresh. This should hardly surprise us, since Merton remained a mystery to himself. There was, as the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Williams says at the start of this book, a chasm-like dimension to his mind; but at least, as we encounter him in yet another suit of borrowed clothes, heacknowledges that this is what he is doing. So, not only is he always exploring his own self-identity: the quality of his mind is always being abraded and refined by his sharply self-critical honesty.

In his foreword, Williams emphasises how this is of central importance: he discovered ever more deeply the serious unseriousness of trying to be ‘before God’ — the ‘unbearable lightness’ of faith.

It is, therefore, almost inevitable that new books continue to be written about Merton, as authors approach him from a wide range of perspectives — some of whom are seeking to discover in an unencultivated plot in this fertile ground, it is thus refreshing to be taken back to Merton in the company of someone who has had what he calls “an inter-rupted conversation” in the one that took place 40 years. I was encouraged and encouraged after reading this book (an enlarged edition of one that appeared in the United States a couple of years ago).

**A microcosm of the South African tragedy, says John Davies**

A Christian Community in South Africa, 1838-1909
Fiona Vernal
OUP £45 (978-0-19-984340-4)
Church Times Bookshop £40.30

At first sight, this might appear a book with a very limited appeal. Its author is an American academic historian, who has recorded the history of a small Methodist mission in the Xhosa-speaking Eastern Cape of South Africa. She concentrates on this one place, with little reference to the wider environment.

In nearly 300 well-filled pages of text, she explores Xhosa people’s understanding of relationships, of health, and of knowledge, and their skills in moulding Christianity to meet their own reality; but, with one great exception, there is hardly any sense that the national issues of apartheid and white supremacy made an impact on the community.

And there are few references to other Christian enterprises in the country.

But there are unique features in the Farmerfield Mission, which justify this exclusive study. It came into being in the first place, not through the enterprise of missionaries, but at the request of African Christians themselves; their energies kept it going, even when, at times, the Methodist leadership would have been happy to see it fade away. It was envisaged as being a kind of elite Christian village, with higher than normal standards of behaviour and commitment. And, most significantly, it was formed and developed in an area claimed by white colonials as their land, not ‘reserves’ set aside for Africans. It was this last factor that made it a target for the apartheid regime’s policy of mass removals of ‘black spots’.

At this point, the author engages in detail with the national issues concerned, with the oppressive impact of apartheid laws and customs regarding land-tenure. She makes it clear that the displacing of Africans by the theft of their lands was going on long before it was hardened into national policy by the apartheid regime. Deeper than their protest against Bantu Education, Job Reservation, Immorality Act, or their exclusion from the franchise, it was the sense that they had been cheated out of their land that stirred the most painful anger in African people — and still does.

This book offers a microcosm of the South African tragedy at this level, and as such is a valuable window into 200 years of oppression. Successive British governments enabled and permitted this oppression, which is deep in our culture. Our treatment of land as a commodity and our notion of outright ownership amounts to theft from our Creator as well as from our neighbour; for “the earth is the Lord’s.”

The St Bede John Davies is a former Bishop of Shrewsbury; for 15 years he taught both in Germany and at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. She married twice, and had four children.

**Lavinia Byrne sees the praise piled on a peace activist**

Lavinia Byrne sees the praise piled on a peace activist

Dorothy Soelle — Mystic and Rebel: The biography
Renate Wind
Fortress Press £16.99
(978-0-8068-9008-9)
Church Times Bookshop £15.30

This nicely produced book is an act of pietas, a testimony to the life and influence of Dorothy Soelle, written by a fellow-writer and peace activist, Renate Wind.

Soelle was born in 1929 in Cologne, where she studied theology, philosophy, and literature, and completed a doctorate on the connection between theology and poetry. Subsequently, she spoke out against the Vietnam War, the arms race of the Cold War, and injustice in the developing world, while teaching both in Germany and at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. She married twice, and had four children.

Accused by some of “theological cynicism” because she found gaps between theology and the demands of life in post-Holocaust, post-war Germany, Soelle worked extensively on suffering and Christian ethics. She became known for her work in Christian circles, and was a well-known and loved conference speaker, valued for her original and challenging contention that “every theological statement must be a political statement as well.”

Her preferred platform was the ecumenical “Political Eisvogel” — a “flying buttress” for social analysis, discussion, and action — which she also helped to mould and develop in the 1960s and 70s. Her biographer enhances her profile by adding the word “mythic” in some of her key works, to describe the authority for her writings as well.

In this book, the part played by Soelle in shaping a new theology is well-served by the author’s adulation and the constraints of the German language. Wind heaves no words upon words to assure us of her subject’s importance and integrity. She writes: “For Dorothee Soelle the mystical love of God is indissolubly bound up with the longing for a better world.” So far so good. But then Wind adds: “She was a path-breaker and a torch-carrier, a symbol and a model — an enlightened and therefore a political — Dalila.”

More is than not always, and I am not certain that the author has been well served by the rather wooden translation.

This is a careful examination, a careful and poignant cautionary tale, of someone who was an important part of her times. Post-war Germany is a country such as hers, and here it is displayed; so, too, is the extent of Soelle’s political activism.

But I am left wondering whether her great value as a theologian stands the test of time. To put it another way: does liberation theology need new prophets and old ones, a more nuanced edge?