

AMMON HENNACY

1893-1970

AMMON HENNACY WAS ARRESTED THIRTY-TWO TIMES DURING HIS lifetime for various acts of civil disobedience—in Omaha, in New York City, and in his native Ohio (during the First World War). From 1918 to 1922, he did time for draft resistance, in Atlanta Federal Prison, where Eugene Victor Debs and Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman's lover, were confined about the same time. After his release from that prison, Ammon and his common-law wife, Selma, walked across much of the United States and climbed Pike's Peak, in Colorado. That activity was a kind of therapy, Dorothy Day said, after the hard times in solitary confinement. Ammon had been so confined after leading a strike against conditions in the Atlanta jail when he learned that the guards dined on food meant for the inmates while serving the prisoners spoiled fish.

Ammon said that his moral education began with that imprisonment, although he had previously showed extraordinary courage in standing against conscription during World War I. One of the most moving passages in his autobiography, *The Book of Ammon* (1965), describes his time in solitary, his journey out of despair, and his gradual conversion to Christian nonviolence:

I had passed through the idea of killing myself. This was an escape, not any solution to life. The remainder of my two years in solitary must result in a clear-cut plan whereby I could go forth and be a force in the world. . . . Gradually I came to gain a glimpse of what Jesus meant when he said that the Kingdom of God must be in everyone: in the deputy, the warden, in the rat, and the pervert. To change the world by bullets or ballots was a useless procedure. . . . Therefore the only revolution worthwhile was the one man revolution within the heart. Each one would make this by himself and not need to wait

on a majority.

Born in Negley, Ohio, on July 24, 1893, Ammon Hennacy joined the Ohio Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies) at sixteen. After a year at Hiram College, he went to the University of Wisconsin, where he once gave up his bed to Randolph Bourne, the social and literary critic who had come to speak in Madison in 1914. From there Ammon returned to Ohio State University for a year and then to full-time organizing for the party of Eugene Victor Debs and for resistance to the draft. Following the prison term in Atlanta, he visited radical communes, farmed in Wisconsin, and wrote for various radical periodicals, including *Mother Earth*, founded earlier by Emma Goldman.

As a social worker in Milwaukee in the 1930s, he lived with his wife Selma and two daughters, Carmen and Sharon. After 1937, when he met Dorothy Day, he became a contributor to the *Catholic Worker*. Their first meeting, important to both of them, is described early on in his autobiography:

Dorothy Day spoke at the Social Action Congress in Milwaukee, being invited there by Bishop (later Cardinal) Strich. . . . In answering questions from patriotic questioners she mentioned something of my pacifist record, saying that I was not a Catholic, but an anarchist and that when the next war came she would be with me in opposition to it. Her continued refusal to follow the party line of most churchmen in praising Franco gained my admiration.

The uncompromised principles and the practical wisdom, the idea and the deed, appear side by side in *The Book of Ammon*, as well as in his posthumously published *The One Man Revolution in America* (1970), a collection of portraits of and quotations from *his* eighteen great Americans, from John Woolman, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson (the only president in the group), to Dorothy Day and Malcolm X. As an anarchist Ammon would not allow his two books to be published commer-

cially; that meant earning money for the tax collection and, therefore, for warmakers. These extraordinary works, privately printed, are now available from his widow (Joan Thomas, P.O. Box 25, Phoenix, Arizona 85001, \$5.00 each, plus postage). Although casual in style and organization, they belong in every public library and peace education center.

Ammon Hennacy was, I think, the most courageous man I have ever known, in his insistence on speaking truth to power and in resisting injustice. Being with him or hearing him lecture—on a street corner, on a talk show, or in an auditorium, one felt as if he had suddenly caught the pulse of the American radical tradition. Even at 70, Ammon's face was animated and friendly, although lined from years spent laboring in the fields, on the picket line, and in prison.

It would be ridiculous, however, to romanticize Ammon Hennacy. He could be contentious, cantankerous, and stubborn, often confronting his listener with theories on nutrition ("no fish, flesh, or fowl") or his favorite sayings on obscure subjects. He advised reading the morning newspaper "to find out what the bastards are up to today." Persistent in his radicalism and repetitious in his teaching, he brought many people into movements for social change by selling *The Catholic Worker* on the street corner and by his own example. Dorothy Day, who said Ammon's books resembled Thoreau's, but with a sense of humor, admitted that he had challenged her into taking a stand on issues that she might otherwise have neglected.

In the 1960s, Ammon opened a Catholic Worker House for ex-prisoners and others on the road in Salt Lake City. It was named for Joe Hill, the Wobblie organizer and balladeer who was killed by the state of Utah in 1915. (Joan Baez and others sing the famous song immortalizing him: "I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night/ alive as he could be.") Ammon took a grocery cart to nearby supermarkets each morning to beg food—day old bread and vegetables for the soup line at his House of Hospitality. Each year, even while picketing daily against capital punishment, he fasted one day for each year since 1945 when

the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He was a crusty old Irishman with a marvelous capacity for talk and a love of poetry, especially William Blake and Edwin Markham. Many people, in fact, found him *too* gregarious. Like Peter Maurin, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, Ammon never tired of preaching the gospel of Christian anarchism. Though critical of anyone who "chickened out" in the struggle for peace, he was also kind and generous, and able to appreciate the best in people who disagreed with him (and most people did).

Ammon's numerous actions in the nonviolent tradition included protests against capital punishment and against mock atomic-air-raid drills in Manhattan in the 1950s. His last leaflet, with the heading "Thou Shalt Not Kill," was distributed on the picket line in front of the state capitol building in Salt Lake City shortly before he died of a heart attack in early January 1970. Among the many statements for which he is remembered is this bit of wisdom, written after a day in the fields, in 1945.

Love without courage and wisdom is sentimentality, as with the ordinary church member. Courage without love and wisdom is foolhardiness, as with the ordinary soldier. Wisdom without love and courage is cowardice, as with the ordinary intellectual. Therefore one who has love, courage, and wisdom is one in a million, who moves the world, as with Jesus, Buddha, and Gandhi.

BY AMMON HENNACY

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ABOUT AMMON HENNACY

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