



## Walter J. Ong, S.J., 1912-2003

Saint Louis University Professor Father Ong was on the Associate Board of Antenna and the Mercurians. The following text is abstracted from the complete notice posted at: <http://www.slu.edu/readstory/newslink/2974>.

Born Nov. 30, 1912, in Kansas City, Mo., Ong was the elder of two sons of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Jackson Ong, Sr. He majored in Latin at Rockhurst College, where he received a bachelor of arts degree, and entered the Society of Jesus in 1935. He studied philosophy and English at Saint Louis University concurrently from 1938 to 1941, when he received a master's in English and a Licentiate degree (roughly equivalent to a master's degree) in philosophy. Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, who supervised his master's thesis, was quoting his former student by the time he wrote his classic, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

After teaching English and French at Regis College (now Regis University) in Denver, Ong undertook theological studies at the Saint Louis University School of Divinity from 1943 to 1947. He was ordained a priest in 1946. Ong earned his doctorate degree in English at Harvard University in 1955, then returned to Saint Louis University, where he taught for the next 36 years. Ong was the William E. Haren Professor of English and professor of humanities in psychiatry at the School of Medicine, before his appointment as University Professor of Humanities in 1981, then University Professor of Humanities Emeritus in 1984, when he also received the honorary doctorate of *Humaniorum Litterarum Doctor*.

A prolific writer, Ong authored numerous books, including the widely circulated and translated *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), as well as *Rhetoric, Romance, and*

*Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (1971). He rooted his work in the existence of an always-mysterious God. When other thinkers felt trapped between what they saw as mutually exclusive alternatives, Ong built a bridge between them. For example, he stated that new technologies didn't replace their predecessors, but interacted with them, reinforcing some aspects and reshaping others. He found more commonalities than differences between women and men. His central insights clustered around the transition of one form of communication to another. He always disliked the label of a theorist, insisting that he "just tried to say how things are, describe, things."

Ong believed that there were ways to humanize the power of even the most advanced technology. He continually prodded religious thinkers to attune themselves to a global, interdependent culture, and called for a theology that incorporated modern technology. Defying categorization, his work brought together innovative ideas in literature, anthropology, philosophy, theology, psychology, and media studies. Perhaps Ong's most lasting contribution was to show how various forms of communication—from storytelling to cyberspace—shape our thoughts, relationships, and cultures.

For years, Ong offered daily Mass, listened to thousands of confessions, baptized, blessed, and counseled countless individuals, and taught religion in a detention hall and the inner city.

## Mercurial Matters

With this issue, *Antenna* introduces a few new changes in its traditional format. For starters, this is the longest issue ever produced. It includes two pages of material relating to the upcoming meeting in Atlanta.

Two tours have been arranged for Mercurians in Atlanta, in addition to those organized by the SHOT local arrangements committee. Both take place on Thursday, October 16, the same day as the SHOT tours. One is a trip to the satellite tracking facility of PanAmSat; the other a visit to a 19th-century woodworking mill and the Corliss steam engine that once powered it. For more information, see page 3. If you are interested in either or both tours, you must make your interest known no later than September 20 via an e-mail message to: Mercurians@go.com.

Once again, the Mercurians are meeting outside the SHOT meeting hotel. This time, the venue is a Vietnamese restaurant named Cha Gio. Everyone will pay for their own meal at the restaurant, and you will need to indicate your attendance at the meeting on your SHOT registration form.

**It is most important that students indicate their attendance at the meeting prior to the meeting, preferably before October 1, so that they can qualify for a free lunch.** Again, the e-mail address is: Mercurians@go.com.

Written directions and a map indicating how to get to the restaurant are on page 4, as well as at the Mercurians' website: [www.mercurians.org](http://www.mercurians.org). Click on the link <Upcoming events, meetings, news>. The same web page (and page 3 of this issue) also has information on the two tours, as well as other communications-history-related tours available in Atlanta.

This issue also departs from the past by including three full-length book review essays. The first deals with politics and communications in South Africa before and after the fall of apartheid. Ironically, the book reviewed, *Communication and Democratic Reform in South Africa*, was authored by Robert B. Horwitz, an American, not a South African. Horwitz, however, actually served on policy-making bodies in South Africa, making him a participant in the events he portrays. The

writer of the book review essay, Keyan G. Tomaselli, Professor and Director of the Graduate Program in Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Natal in Durban, is the author and editor of several works on the media in South Africa, some of which are indicated in the review essay's list of references.

The second and third book review essays work together rather nicely, as they both deal with gender and communications. However, one (*Women, Power, and AT&T: Winning Rights in the Workplace*) is a study of women working for the telephone company, while the other (*Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850-1950*) looks at young males employed in the communications industry.

The reviewer of *Women, Power, and AT&T: Winning Rights in the Workplace* is Thomas C. Jepsen, an independent scholar and a member of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars. Carrie Sanders, the reviewer of *Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850-1950*, just received her M.A. in sociology from Carleton University, Ottawa, and is continuing her studies at McMaster University, where she working on a Ph.D. in sociology with a concentration in health and technology.

An article by Mercurian Ron Thomas continues *Antenna's* coverage of the ground-side of satellite history by recounting the trials and tribulations of working on the Air Force's Eastern Test Range, a string of tracking stations running from Cape Canaveral to Ascension Island. Thomas is a communications specialist and author of two books on telecommunications.

Yet another change to the traditional *Antenna* format is the addition of new book releases. Generally, these books either appeared in print this year or will appear next year. If anyone wishes to review these books beyond the blurbs printed here and culled from the publishers, please contact the editor or any of the assistant editors listed on page 28.

Of course, the reader will find the usual notices of "Books of Interest to Mercurians" and forthcoming conferences. Enjoy!

Andrew Butrica