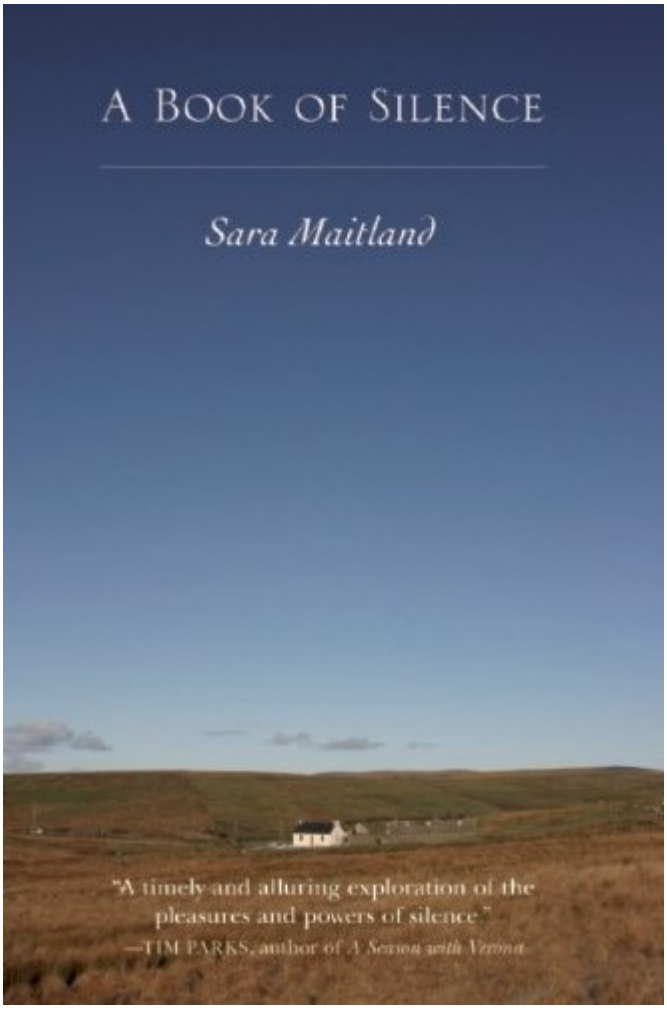
A Book of Silence

reviewed by Valerie Weaver-Zercher in the June 29, 2010 issue

In Review



A Book of Silence

Sara Maitland

Introverts who read Sara Maitland's new book about silence may need to recommit themselves to the commandment not to covet. In the first chapter, Maitland is sitting on the porch of her house on a high moor in England's County Durham on a warm

October morning, “with nothing in my diary for the next fortnight.” By chapter two, in order to more fully explore her hunch that “silence is something positive, not just an abstraction or absence,” Maitland has moved for 40 days and 40 nights to a cottage on Skye, the northernmost island of the Inner Hebrides. By chapter six she is researching desert spirituality on a retreat in the Sinai Desert; by seven, she is investigating romantic notions of silence and the self by hiking in Gal loway.

If you’re not coveting your neighbor’s ox yet, wait for it. At the end of the book we take leave of Maitland’s new home, a shepherd’s cottage on a moor in Scotland about which Edwin Muir once wrote, “The silence of such places is so complete that it sinks into one’s mind in waves, making it clearer and clearer, drenching it as with a potion concocted out of some positive life-giving essence, not out of the mere absence of sound. In that silence the moor was a living thing spreading its fleece of purple and brown and green to the sun.” There, Maitland writes, surrounded by sheep and foxes and barn owls, she will continue her attempt to “write silently, somehow to *write silence*.”

The rest of the Decalogue never looked so easy.

Jealousy aside, most readers will find Maitland a companionable and careful translator of the literary, spiritual, philosophical and psychological argot of extreme silence. Leaving few items unexplored, she covers questions about the distinction between silence and solitude, about whether reading can be considered a silent activity, and about whether the self-emptying, listening silence of hermits seeking God is antithetical to the creative, narrative-filled silence of writers and artists. Along the way she introduces us to nature writers, polar explorers, desert monks and solo sailors who traversed lengthy spaces of silence and recorded what they found there.

Maitland is one of several writers who have recently plumbed the depths of silence and reported back what they found there. Three other books about silence have been published by major trade publishers in 2010: Gordon Hempton’s *One Square Inch of Silence*: *One Man’s Search for Natural Silence in a Noisy World*, George Prochnik’s *In Pursuit of Silence*: *Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise* and Anne D. LeClaire’s *Listening Below the Noise*: *The Transformative Power of Silence*. Although the books differ in approach and voice, each suggests an imbalance of power in contemporary life between noise and quiet, and each author declares fidelity to the latter. Four books do not a genre make, but perhaps they’re enough to claim their own little (quiet) corner of the literary turf.

Maitland's life was not always so silent. After what she calls an "unusually noisy childhood" as one of six children in a highly verbal household, she went to university, married an American man who became an Anglo-Catholic vicar, and raised two children in what she says was a quite happy life. By midlife she found herself divorced, empty-nested and living in a small town in south England—a village life that, while sounding tranquil, is actually "one of the least silent ways of living." Suddenly free of family responsibilities and with the mobile profession of writing, Maitland set out to "hunt silence" and moved to her first site on the high hill in County Durham.

Western culture is suspicious of and even terrified of silence, Maitland claims. Many people, upon hearing of her plans, accused her of selfishness for pursuing it. No one needs one more recitation of the techno-racket that fills the ears of the 21st century, the jangle of cell phones and iPods and power plants and traffic. On a more philosophical level, many people would agree with a friend of Maitland's who, in a letter questioning the validity of her project, wrote, "Silence is oppression and speech, language, spoken or written, is freedom." Even Christian scripture makes the word—which necessarily breaks si lence—central to both its creation and salvation stories.

A committed Catholic, Maitland lays out several creation myths from other cultures—Maori, Norse and Egyptian—none of which rely on speech as a central force and suggests that they match current scientific understandings of how the universe evolved better than the God-who-speaks-the-world-into-being version. She also investigates Zen, Quaker and Trappist forms and intentions of silence and asks whether and how much allowance each tradition makes for the role of the written word. Christian readers, even those comfortable with evolutionary understandings of God's work, may not appreciate her apparent dismissal of the word as metaphor for creation and Christ, or buy her characterization of God speaking as a "violent" act. Her intimation that silence is God and God is silence, while a helpful trope, would be as problematic as the word *metaphor* were a whole belief system built around it. Readers might also marvel at the relative absence of community in both Maitland's life and her writing; rare is her reference to the role of human connection and relationship in the life of faith.

There is no such thing as true silence, of course—"Try as we may to make a silence," composer John Cage has said, "we cannot." The natural world is full of noise (as anyone who has gone camping knows), and even if we get close to

absolute silence, there is a sound that people have variously explained as the rush of blood in the ears, the shifting of tectonic plates or the reverberations of faraway human noise that can never truly be escaped. Maitland says she heard this sound of silence in the Sinai. She calls it “the singing of the spheres,” “the song of *jouissance*, of bliss.”

Now, back at home on the Scottish moor, Maitland aims for 80 percent silence in her life. That means unplugging the phone (and with it the Internet) for two days a week, limiting her social activities to six days per month, and praying for three hours a day. Silence is not the opposite of language, she concludes at the end of her book; it is “a whole world in and of itself, alongside of, woven within language and culture, but independent of it.”

For some, Maitland’s silence-seeking excursions may be too far removed from their own noisy environs of job, family and church for her writing to resonate very much. While I’m not ready to level the charge of selfishness, it is difficult not to wonder how what Maitland has learned is applicable to the rest of us. (Thoreau was chastised for this too, of course, so she’s in excellent company.)

There is a restless tenor to Maitland’s prose—a quality that leads her to relocate frequently in search of the ideal landscape for silence and that also sets her life beyond the ambit of the average reader. That restlessness can be both a gift to her readers and an impediment. It is certainly the cause for the richly researched and intellectually curious nature of her book, which is receiving much applause from reviewers—the *New York Times* review calls it “brilliant,” “generous” and “thrilling”—as well it should. Yet the book’s undertow of dissatisfied energy is also what may make some readers question whether Mait land’s parameters for silence are too wide to be serviceable: “She didn’t know the half of it,” Maitland writes of Virginia Woolf’s famous claim that a woman needs a room of her own in order to write; “I need a moor of my own.”

Perhaps Maitland’s restiveness comes from the impossibility of her project, which she readily admits to: she is investigating with words something that exists only outside of them. “Silence itself resists all attempt to talk about it, to try to theorise, explain or even describe it,” she writes. How does one proceed with such a book, then, other than to move around in search of what can’t be found, to write around what can’t be written, and to require an entire moor while you’re at it?

And perhaps any critique of her project as impractical for that now-mythic group called “the rest of us” is simply the safe whining of those of us too scared to try it ourselves. Maitland does not downplay the terror of silence, and anyone who can completely sentimentalize silence after reading this book must have only skimmed it. She recounts several experiences of primal fear while alone and writes that she now understands how extended silence “can drive one beyond panic and into true madness.”

So while introverted readers (and some extroverted ones too) may lust after Maitland’s aptitude for escaping noise, perhaps living a more silent life is like writing a novel: everyone wants to—until they actually sit down and try it. While many of us swear that silence is our profound desire, when faced with the prospect of being silent, we renege, grab the nearest earbuds and return to our comfortable din.