Brother Patrick Hart has written in the foreword to a new book on Merton: "As the twentieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death is commemorated, we are once again confronted with the mystery of this monk whose life and work continue to have considerable impact on both religious and secular society. How does one account for this phenomenon?" This essay attempts, not so much to explain the phenomenon (or rather that part of it connected with continuing publication of material by and about Merton), as to report on it, focusing on materials published from late 1986 through 1987. It was a middling year in Merton publication, not exactly quiet, but not so overwhelming as some years have been. Several important items appeared, much of the work dealing with familiar Merton studies "themes": silence, solitude, self, and what I like to

call the “phenomenon” writings, those which seek to introduce Merton to a new audience (frequently one previously unfamiliar with him) or to provide a short, basic overview of the Merton career. One of the better of these phenomenon articles to appear in 1987 is Bonnie Bowman Thurston’s “Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century,” Vision Quest 1:4 (Winter 1987), pp. 1-2. Significantly, perhaps, this article was written for a Disciples of Christ publication and in short and snappy fashion, Thurston gives an overview of Merton which shows, in part, why he has been important to the twentieth century. She says:

His life demonstrates that new insights do not necessarily need to conform to old ones. Merton’s life shows that ideas about any subject can be outgrown or worn out. When a theory is no longer serviceable, when it causes discomfort or no longer fits, it can be discarded from the intellectual and theological wardrobe. Merton suggests that to cling to an outgrown idea is to refuse to mature, to choose emotional and intellectual discomfort, to distort the nature of reality.

Also in this category (in Roman Catholic publications) were Mary Fidelia Chmiel’s three-part “Merton: Symbol of True Conversion” in Pittsburgh Catholic; Mary de Lourdes Muench’s quite brief “Merton, on Fire” in Sisters Today (June/July 1987); and Portia Webster’s “Thomas Merton: A Man for All Generations,” Living Prayer 20:1 (January/February 1987). The last is an account of Webster’s experiences with Merton during his visit to Our Lady of the Redwoods in California before he left for Asia. She says, in reference to Merton’s conferences: “[He] radiated a deep and profound respect for the dignity of each person present . . . for the unique quality that was the singular essence of any person, thing or idea.” Her article provoked the only response in a “Letter to the Editor” of any during this time period. Myriam Dardenne of Redwoods wrote (printed in the July/August issue of Living Prayer) that she felt some of the events were presented out of context and that she wished to “dissociate [herself] from the view of Redwoods and Mother Myriam” in the article.

These “phenomenon writings” show that Merton’s impact continues as does the simple fact that most of his major books remain in print, in paperback editions for the most part it is true, but in print. Some have appeared in facsimile reprints. In late 1986, Unicorn Press published, at $6.00, a reprint edition of Cables to the Ace, thus bringing that volume of poetry back into print in individual edition. New Directions issued a facsimile reprint of the 1949 edition of Seeds of Contemplation at $18.95, making available that original work without the additions and emendations contained in New Seeds of Contemplation. Both reproduce, fairly faithfully, the look of the original editions. Seeds of Contemplation, and its redaction New Seeds, continue to provoke interest and Mitch Finley, a writer who seems ubiquitous in this period, discusses New Seeds in his book, Catholic Spiritual Classics: Introductions to Twelve Classics of Christian Spirituality (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1987), pp. 64-69. Finley notes:

If there is one word that might be used to describe the spirit of Thomas Merton’s New Seeds of Contemplation, that word might be “iconoclastic.” It’s a word that refers to the ancient practice of idol smashing. To be an iconoclast is to shatter false gods. Merton does this with regard to romanticized notions of contemplation, ideas of God, and ideas of spirituality which by-pass relationships with other people.

Equally impressive — some would say amazing — is that the majority of the more than forty books written about Merton remain in-print and available. Doubleday re-issued a paperback edition [4$4.95] of Raymond H. Bailey’s Thomas Merton on Mysticism, first published in 1975. Bailey did not revise this relatively early study of Merton and a major weakness in re-issue is that it fails to confront or discuss the serial publication of The Inner

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In “Thomas Merton’s ‘Bluejeans’ Spirituality,” Holy Cross 8:3 (Autumn 1986), Fr. Bernard Van Waes, O.H.C. introduces Merton to those who receive the newsletter from the Anglican (Episcopal) monastery at West Park, New York. He says:

Like many prophetic figures, it is possible that his greatest influence is yet to be evaluated. I would like to remember him as a man who was profoundly rooted in the great tradition of Christian prayer and spirituality common to East and West alike, and whose clarity and insight energized the contemporary search for meaning in ordering and interpreting our world. It is a “bluejeans”/everyman spirituality not restricted to an elite or religious audience, but for all.

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Previously unpublished Merton material appeared during the year. Though published in mid-1986, Merton's Eighteen Poems, a compilation of poetry written to and for the student nurse in 1966, aroused perhaps the greatest interest in the "nurse incident" continues to attract attention (the other two "biggies" always seem to be the circumstances of Merton's death in Bangkok and his relationship with Dom James Fox) and though this incident has been covered sufficiently, it would seem, by Michael Mott, John Howard Griffin, and most recently Basil Pennington, interest has not extended to Merton and women in general. Little has been done on this topic though several, most notably Bonnie Bowman Thurston, are doing preliminary work in the area. For this reason, long-time writer on Merton, Thomas P. McDonnell, makes a significant contribution with his "Thomas Merton and the Feminine Principle," Vortex 1:2 (Fall 1987), pp. 10, 29-30. Certainly not exhaustive, it does point the way to lines of inquiry which might shed light on the total Merton experience in its discussion of Merton's mother, Rosemary Ruether, the nurse, and some other women.

When The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton was edited from his journals and published, the editors decided to begin with his flight east on 15 October 1968. He had, however, left the Abbey of Gethsemani several weeks before and had spent the period from 17 September to 2 October in Alaska. He left, as usual, two different journal accounts of his time in Alaska and I have edited these into a version published in limited edition by Turkey Press of Isla Vista, California. Called The Alaskan Journal of Thomas Merton, it also includes an appendix of surviving letters and postcards written by Merton while in Alaska. New Directions will publish a trade edition in 1989 which will be called Thomas Merton in Alaska and which will contain the journal, the letters, as well as the conferences which Merton gave in Alaska. The limited edition is reviewed in this volume by Lawrence S. Cunningham. I conclude my "Introduction" with the statement:


Interest in Merton's journals is reflected in at least three publications. The
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The poems are love poems by Merton, two years before his death, to a woman he loved and who, it seems, enriched his life. The story of the relationship has been told before, enigmatically and passionately ... How shall we receive these poems and the love they bring us? Our response may be hesitant as we balance the individual's right to one's own life and charm with the claims of communities and commitments to define us in ways we do not always choose. As we answer this question, we reveal our understanding of God and religious life, of human love and of creation itself. Merton invites us to rejoice with him. Are we receptive to the invitation? 4


Though interest in the “nurse incident” continues to attract attention (the other two “biggies” always seem to be the circumstances of Merton’s death in Bangkok and his relationship with Dom James Fox) and though this incident has been covered sufficiently, it would seem, by Michael Mott, John Howard Griffin, and most recently Basil Pennington, interest has not extended to Merton and women in general. Little has been done on this topic though several, most notably Bonnie Bowman Thurston, are doing preliminary work in the area. For this reason, long-time writer on Merton, Thomas P. McDonnell, makes a significant contribution with his “Thomas Merton and the Feminine Principle,” Vortex 1:2 (Fall 1987), pp. 10, 29-30. Certainly not exhaustive, it does point the way to lines of inquiry which might shed light on the total Merton experience in its discussion of Merton’s mother, Rosemary Ruether, the nurse, and some other women.

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It is clear that Merton liked Alaska, that he thought about the possibilities of living there, or at least thought about it while he was there. This part of the trip doubtless helped prepare him, a man unused to travel for more than twenty years, for the more arduous and longer Asian stint. We shall, of course, never know, since he died in Bangkok, whether Merton would ever have become a “monk of Gethsemani” in Alaska. He did say: “If I am to be a hermit in the U.S., Alaska is probably the place for it.” Parts of Alaska definitely appealed to him. When Lake Aleknagik “spoke” to him and he answered, “Is this it?” he did not know that it would not be it, that a different destiny lay ahead. But his brief experience in Alaska was a positive and enjoyable one. After it, the monk of Gethsemani was off to California and Asia convinced that Alaska would provide “ideal solitude” in the United States.

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current fascination for journal-keeping may, in fact, provide a partial explanation for the “phenomenon” of continuing interest in Merton since so much of his writing, so much of his exploration of himself, was in journal form. Doubleday has attempted to capitalize on both these interests—journal-keeping and Merton—by boxed, slickly produced publication called Keeping a Spiritual Journal with Thomas Merton [$14.95]. The best news about this publication—it is not really a book as such—is that it marks a return to Merton editing by his own editor, Naomi Burton Stone. Each page contains at the top a Merton quotation enclosed in a green box—all too often with a great deal of unnecessary and jarring “white space.” Several lines are marked off for each day so a person may keep “journal entries.” No specific dates are given so that the publication might be used in any year. Unfortunately, and contrary to Merton’s practice, each day is allotted six or seven lines (is Sunday really more a seven-line day than any other?) which can be frustrating if one has more to write and equally frustrating if one has less. Merton’s practice was to record what he had to record regardless of length, but the approach here gives Keeping a Spiritual Journal with Thomas Merton a canned, commercial and gimmicky feel which gets in the way of Stone’s careful and judicious selection of quotations. She cannot be faulted for the book’s format perhaps, but she can be commended for citing her sources—the reader is given the source and page number for each quotation and can thus pursue further reading if prompted by the short quotation. Other “quotation books,” such as Thomas P. McDonnell’s Blaze of Recognition (Through the Year with Thomas Merton in paperback), have not pinpointed sources as Stone has and she has thus provided the reader with a much better introduction and guide to pursuing further reading in Merton’s books. The publication is reviewed in this volume by Sister Mary Luke Tobin.

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In the interview in this volume, Matthew Kelty, O.C.S.O., explains, in part, why Merton taped so many of his lectures to the novices at Gethsemani. Over six hundred of these talks/lectures/conferences are housed at the Thomas Merton Studies Center. A new series of MERTON TAPES has been edited by Clarence Thomson from the Master Tapes at the Center and published by Credence Cassettes, a division of the National Catholic Reporter. For those who were unable or who never got around to acquiring any of the tapes published some years ago by Electronic Paperbacks, this new series has nineteen tapes, over 90% of which are previously unpublished. The series includes eight cassettes (16 talks) on PRAYER; one on ART & BEAUTY; three on RAINER MARIA RILKE; two on WILLIAM FAULKNER; two on EARLY CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY; and three on MONASTIC SPIRITUALITY. Each cassette tape sells for $7.95.

Several books in translation were reprinted and two new translations of Merton appeared in Poland: Contemplative Prayer [Modlitwa Kontemplacyjna], translated into Polish by Mirosław Dybowski and published by W Drodze; and a volume of selected poems [Wybor Wierszy], edited by Jerzy Ilg, published by Znak, with translations by a dozen Polish poets including Nobel Laureate Czesław Milosz.

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The Merton Seasonal of Bellarmine College, heretofore the only publication devoted to Merton and his concerns, appeared quarterly and contained some unpublished Merton material. The Winter issue (12:1) contained a letter from Merton to poet James Edmund Magner who had visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1968 during a period of intense personal stress. Merton concluded his letter of counsel and advice with: “... unlimited trust is the only sane root of all the rest of it. If one can’t trust then it is mad to turn the other cheek ... etc. And if one can’t trust one can only pray to be able to until eventually one becomes able.” The Spring issue (12:2) featured Patrick O’Connell’s “Sunken Islands: Two and One-Fifth Unpublished Merton Poems,” an exciting discussion of his discovery of unpublished Merton material. The “one-fifth” was a section from “Elias: Variations on a Theme” which was inadvertently omitted in final publication, apparently without even Merton himself noticing the omission. The other two -- “The Sting of Conscience (Letter to Graham Greene)” and “Thoughts in an Airliner” -- remained unpublished for different reasons, both involving Merton’s editor, Naomi Burton Stone. This article is an example of the “detective work” which can often make scholarship such fun, for the writer and the reader. O’Connell adds a significant portion to the meandering and bewildering maze of Merton’s publication history. His contributions to textual analysis, including the one on “Elias” in this volume, point to an area of Merton scholarship relatively untouched by Merton scholars (more on this later from George Kilcourse). He also wrote another article in this period -- “Is the World a Problem?” Merton, Rahner and Clark on the Diaspora Church,” American Benedictine Review 37:4

(December 1986, pp. 349-369 -- which discusses Merton in relation to two other twentieth-century figures and follows a line of scholarship which occurs frequently in Merton studies: the comparison (I call them “the comparative articles”) of Merton with another significant person or persons.

Such comparisons are useful for understanding Merton’s thoughts in relation to another person or for adding perspective, but, more often than not, they have helped us understand relationships within his own life, and, thus, our understanding of the Merton “journey.” The Summer issue of The Merton Seasonal (12:3) was dedicated to Dom James Fox, O.C.S.O. (1896-1987), Merton’s abbot for twenty years, who died Good Friday at the Abbey of Gethsemani. In addition to comments and reflections on Dom James by Brother Patrick Hart and Father Matthew Kelty, there was my “Dom James and ‘Good Father Louis’: A Reminiscence,” a compilation of published and unpublished material by Dom James on Merton and his relationship with him.

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The Merton Seasonal of Bellarmine College, heretofore the only publication devoted to Merton and his concerns, appeared quarterly and contained some unpublished Merton material. The Winter issue (12:1) contained a letter from Merton to poet James Edmund Magner who had visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1968 during a period of intense personal stress. Merton concluded his letter of counsel and advice with: "...unlimited trust is the only sane root of all the rest of it. If one can't trust then it is mad to turn the other cheek... etc. And if one can't trust one can only pray to be able to until eventually one becomes able." The Spring issue (12:2) featured Patrick O'Connell's "Sunken Islands: Two and One-Fifth Unpublished Merton Poems," an exciting discussion of his discovery of unpublished Merton material. The "one-fifth" was a section from "Elías: Variations on a Theme" which was inadvertently omitted in final publication, apparently without even Merton himself noticing the omission. The other two -- "The Sting of Conscience (Letter to Graham Greene)" and "Thoughts in an Airliner" -- remained unpublished for different reasons, both involving Merton's editor, Naomi Burton Stone. This article is an example of the "detective work" which can often make scholarship such fun, for the writer and the reader. O'Connell adds a significant portion to the meandering and bewildering maze of Merton's publication history. His contributions to textual analysis, including the one on "Elías" in this volume, point to an area of Merton scholarship relatively untouched by Merton scholars (more on this later from George Kilcourse). He also wrote another article in this period -- "'Is the World a Problem?': Merton, Rahner and Clark on the Diaspora Church," American Benedictine Review 37:4 (December 1986, pp. 349-369 -- which discusses Merton in relation to two other twentieth-century figures and follows a line of scholarship which occurs frequently in Merton studies: the comparison (I call them "the comparative articles") of Merton with another significant person or persons.

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Wilkes, despite the fact that he tells us little that Merton has not told us himself about those crucial college years, explores territory in Merton's "geography" which has been traversed much less than the later monastic years. Merton lived nearly half his life before he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, a half crucial indeed in the final story of his search for self, but it is a much less documented period even by Merton himself. Sources for studying this period (or at least the period up to 1931) have gradually come available with the discovery that several hundreds of his father's letters and a few of his mother's have survived in collections at Smith College, the University of Texas at Austin, Yale University, and the private archives of Richard Bassett. Using these sources -- and later materials from the Merton corpus, such as Eighteen Poems -- I have attempted to reconstruct the years from 1921 to 1926 in "Birthday Theology: A Reflection on Thomas Merton and the Bermuda Menage," a fifth essay in The Kentucky Review "Merton Symposium" (pp. 62-89). Passages from the first draft of The Seven Storey Mountain, deleted from the final published version, which shed light on this five-year period are included.

The final three essays in The Kentucky Review explore areas other than Merton's friendships and childhood. In "Thomas Merton as Theologian: An Appreciation" (pp. 90-97), Lawrence S. Cunningham presents apellucid and persuasive discussion that, to me, dispenses once and for all with the notion that Merton was not a theologian. Though he admits that Merton was "not a theologian in any obvious sense of the term," he quotes Evagrius who once wrote "if you are a theologian you pray in truth; if you pray in truth, you are a theologian." Taken in that sense, Cunningham states: "We cannot only justify our essay's title but add, further, that in that sense Thomas Merton was probably the greatest theologian that this country produced in the twentieth century" (p. 91). In assessing Merton as a continuing phenomenon, Cunningham concludes: "...The socially relevant clerics of the 1960s are now, at best, footnotes to church history while the irrelevant monk is still an inspiration and a model for those who thirst for that deepened experience of being human" (p. 96).

George A. Kilcourse ventures into relatively uncharted territory which he calls "a terra incognita" in "The Paradise Ear: Thomas Merton, Poet" (pp. 98-121). The territory is that of Merton's "diverse and lengthy" poetry canon and, while Kilcourse readily and rightly admits that he cannot exhaust the topic in an essay of this length, he does manage to provide one of the best shorter overviews of Merton as a poet. In his last paragraph, he says:

A brief appreciation of Thomas Merton, poet, cannot presume to explore all the dimensions of this multifaceted, talented person; but it can invite both Merton scholars and readers to include more thoughtfully this dimension of the integral Merton in their study. I dare to envision Merton studies venturing beyond the plateau of these nearly twenty years of significant and valuable theological and spiritual investigation. A truly interdisciplinary scrutiny of his mature writings awaits. (p. 119)

The last essay in the book, but by no means the least important as a reference tool for Merton scholars, is William J. Marshall's "The Thomas Merton Collection at the University of Kentucky" (pp. 145-153). He describes in as great detail as possible this small, choice collection which includes, in addition to the Hammer correspondence, Merton's exchanges with Erich Fromm, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, and Boris Pasternak. His essay, a valuable one, stands as nearly the only published attempt to survey a major
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The “international” aspect of the Merton phenomenon was given recognition in May when a group of representative Merton scholars meeting at the Thomas Merton Studies Center in Louisville, Kentucky, announced the formation of THE INTERNATIONAL THOMAS MERTON SOCIETY (ITMS) to promote understanding and appreciation and to encourage research and study in relation to his work. The first President, William H. Shannon, had been instrumental in organizing “A Thomas Merton Conference” at the University of London which occurred earlier in May. At that conference Canon A. M. Allchin spoke on “Merton the Monk”; Kenneth Leech on “Thomas Merton, Social Activist;” and Shannon on “Merton the Person.” Other officers of the ITMS are Robert E. Daggy, Vice-President; Christine M. Bochen, Corresponding Secretary; and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, Recording Secretary-Treasurer. Certainly the Society’s formation reflects international interest but so also does the number of people writing and speaking about Merton in various parts of the world. Constant Broos of Rijmenam, Belgium, coordinated the third “Merton-Weekend” held in Belgium. A unique feature of these programs is that they are held in a different Abbey each year. Speakers have included Edward Bynsse, Charles Dumont, O.C.S.O., James Forest, and Henri J. M. Nouwen.

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an interview with Australian actor Richard Moir, aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on 26 May 1987, and titled "Grains of Sand" (a reference to a Bob Dylan song), recounts the influence Merton has had on a well-known television and film personality. When asked how Merton’s ideas have affected him, Moir responded: “I read a piece of Merton every day and I write it down and I just attempt to allow it to sink in. It’s a sense of awe at everything.”

A consistent theme in Merton’s writings, naturally, and in work about him has been that of solitude. Parabola included an adaptation from The Wisdom of the Desert, titled “The Solitary Ones,” in their Spring issue and it is clear that what Merton himself had to say about solitude still attracts readers. Vision Quest, in addition to the Thurston “phenomenon article,” reprinted Dorothy LeBeau’s “The Solitary Life of Thomas Merton” (1:4, Winter 1987, pp. 3-6), an essay which appeared originally in Cistercian Studies 20:4 (1985), pp. 332-337. Colman McCarthy’s “In Search of Solitude,” New Age Journal 3:3 (May-June 1987): pp. 38-39, 55, 61, 64 basically reported that Trappist monasteries “have become retreats for secular reflection,” but discussed Merton and acknowledged the influence of “this life-enhancing priest and writer.” Addresses of twelve Trappist monasteries who welcome visitors, which McCarthy calls “The Haunts of Ancient Peace,” are given for those who might want to experience moments of quiet and solitude.

Two books about Merton, vastly different in scope and content, appeared in this period. The first, Brother Patrick Hart’s Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories, was published in a limited edition of 250 copies by Necessity Press in Bardstown, Kentucky. Just twenty-two pages long with only ten pages of actual text, it is, with Jim Cantrell’s fine drawings, a lovely book, lovely to see and hold, but hardly a full-fledged study of Merton. Rather, and this was its only intention, Brother Patrick Hart, in combining two short essays, has given us a flashing glimpse of two moments with Merton, a reminiscence that stands as it is, simple and telling without explanation or explication.14 The book is reviewed in this volume by Karl A. Plank.

The other book, M. Basil Pennington’s Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom, is a much more ambitious and over-reaching production. Pennington originally projected a “monastic biography” and what he presents us gives us, as Walter H. Capps put it, “a rare opportunity to approach Merton from within the monastery.” He sums up the content and structure, indeed the purpose, of the book by saying:

First of all there was Tom’s quest for basic human freedom, which he exploited and abused. Then came his quest for the freedom of the faith and the fuller freedom of the monastic life. Within that life he continued to seek, finding a freedom to be open to all reality. He went on to seek the freedom of the eremitical life. In all of this he was seeking the freedom of final integration, which prepared him to enter into the ultimate freedom of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Though not a full-blown biography as such, it is certainly an important “biographical study” of Merton’s years in the monastery. It is reviewed in this volume by a third “brother monk,” Fr. John Eudes Bamberger, Abbot of Our Lady of the Genesee.

1987, though activity and publication continued apace, was thus not one of the busier years in Merton studies in the sense that production was not so massive as in other years. It was not, perhaps, a year in which a great amount of distinguished material was published, but it was a year which saw The Alaskan Journal, the fine essays in The Kentucky Review Symposium, Basil Pennington’s biographical study, Tom Del Prete’s dissertation, and the formation of THE INTERNATIONAL THOMAS MERTON SOCIETY. So it was certainly a year which saw significant additions to the general body and direction of Merton studies, a year in which the Merton phenomenon certainly continued.
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