MERTON AND 1988:

A Survey of

Publications and Commemorations

by Robert E. Daggy

In 1968 Thomas Merton, aware that he had written a great deal (he often said: "I write too much"), referred to the accumulated body of his writings as "a mass of stuff." This mass remains a bibliographic maze, one which increases every year, one complicated by the vastness of the Merton corpus itself and compounded by the dozens of books, scores of theses and hundreds of essays about him. He wrote, prophetically, to bibliographer Frank Dell'Isola in 1965: "There will be some publication going on quite actively . . . whether I am alive or dead."

Dead now these twenty years — he died, of course, in Bangkok, Thailand, on 10 December 1968 — Merton might be amazed at how active publication has been (and continues to be) and astounded by the incidence of events which have commemorated the twentieth anniversary of his death. The International Thomas Merton Society proclaimed 1988 as a "Celebrate Merton" year, a year marking not only the twentieth one after his death, but also two other anniversaries in his life — the fiftieth anniversary of his baptism on 16 November 1938 and the fortieth anniversary of the publication of his signal work, The Seven Storey Mountain, on 4 October
1948. This vigesimal year has seen the “mass of stuff” grow even more massive with an explosion in publications, conference papers, tapes, and depictions of Merton.

The impulse to portray Merton existed even in his lifetime (as the many photographs made of him testify), but he has been depicted in 1988 in several ways. Commemorations prompted several drawings, led by Jim Cantrell’s “official” Society one. Chuck Trapkus did an interesting series of drawings for America’s Merton issue which showed Merton in a number of guises, including his face rising as part of an atomic explosion mushroom cloud. Other periodicals carried new impressions of Merton’s features. David Kocka, O.F.M.Conv., has cast a twenty-inch tall full-length bronze of Merton as well as a smaller bronze head. The most unusual medium used to portray Merton has been a lifesize one in needlework, “The Merton Quilt,” designed and executed by artist Penny Sisto. These depictions indicate that there is a desire and an interest, not only to read and hear about Merton, but to see him.

Another part of the impulse to depict Merton is expressed in dramatizing his life (or parts of his life). This continues, and increases, despite Merton’s firm prohibition against any portrayal of himself on stage, screen or radio (television is understood here). At least two plays about Merton have been produced and one other written (the latter is A Moment of Love: Thomas Merton’s Ascendancy into Light, a one-person play by Thomas Brooks). In April, Joseph P. Ritz’s Acts of Contrition was presented in New York, a thinly disguised fictionalization of some events in Merton’s life: Merton = Thomas Hogan; Margie Smith = Susan Shawnessy; Dom James Fox = Dom Gregory; Abbey of Gethsemani = Abbey of the Monongahela; and Bangkok = Rangoon. In November, Christine J. Hogan’s Un Pas de Deux / Un Pas de Dieu, an intriguing dialogue between Merton and Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, both dead and both coming to grips with death, premiered in Terre Haute, Indiana. Other plays are in preparation (notably one by McCarthy Coyle); an oratorio based on Merton’s works is being composed by Elizabeth E. Sydor; and Michael Mott has been approached for the screen rights to The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton. We may yet see a Hollywood film or a television mini-series about Merton and I have often fantasized about a cast for such a production. Merton himself would be hard to cast. Perhaps Merton should be played by an unknown or little known actor, as Vivien Leigh was in Gone with the Wind, Peter O’Toole in Lawrence of Arabia or Ben Kingsley in Gandhi.

People have suggested other possible casting for fetching barmaids at Cambridge; his British guardians Thomas and Iris Bennett; his grandfather “Pop” Jenkins; Bob Lax; the madcap Sy Freedgood; Naomi Burton Stone; Sister Therese Lentfoehr; the inevitable nurse; and Dom James Fox. But enough of fantasies about possible Merton epics. If his wishes are followed, there will be no such film.

The reality is that 1988 was surely one of the most momentous years in what William H. Shannon describes as the “Merton mosaic” — a word that seems to convey, better than “studies,” with its implications of academe and scholarship, or “industry,” with its overtones of commercialism and exploitation, the complex of Merton and Merton-related activities which have grown up around this man in the twenty years since his death. There are various levels to the Merton mosaic. “Studies” remains a good word, perhaps the best one, to apply to much of the writing about Merton and to the papers given at conferences on college and university campuses.

But a distinct part of the interest in Merton shies away from the scholarly, from what is often considered esoteric or labored. One article written in this vigesimal year states: “Some of Merton’s old friends said they are occasionally puzzled by academic studies of his work and life. The man they remember is too often buried under footnotes and solemn scholarship. ‘Tom would have a stroke if he could hear some of these things,’ said Tommie O’Callaghan with a smile.”1 Non-scholarly things are definitely a part of the Merton mosaic — rememberances, reminiscences, anecdotes, stories (some undoubtedly apocryphal). Increasingly, there is a genre of writing about Merton that I call the “spin-offs” — writings which are more about the persons writing them than they are about Merton though they may seek to convey something about him. These include accounts of “pilgrimages” and visits to places in the Merton experience; tales of meeting, knowing, even just plain seeing Merton; and testimonials of Merton’s influence. These “spin-offs” are occasioned, inspired, informed by Merton and they become a part of the mosaic, a part that loomed large in 1988 publication. It was a year of heavy, and in some cases significant, publication of material by and about Merton. The following is an attempt to provide an overview of this new “mass of stuff” as a checklist reference.

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The Origins of Prayer
AA2067 Cassian: Trials and Belief
AA2068 Faith and Prayer
AA2069 Cassian: Disposition for Prayer
AA2070 Our Father: Perfect Prayer
AA2071 Does God Hear Our Prayer?
AA2072 Prayer and the Active Life
AA2073 Renunciation and Contemplation
AA2074 Renunciation of Desire and Will

Art and Beauty
AA2075 Beauty is from God

Rilke — Poet of Inwardness
AA2076 Poetry and Imagination
AA2077 Natural Contemplation
AA2078 Love and the Search for God

Faulkner: Disaster in Paradise
AA2079 The Bear
AA2080 The Deluge

Early Christian Spirituality
AA2081 Introduction to Church Fathers
AA2082 Clement of Alexandria / Origen

Monastic Spirituality
AA2083 Monastic Spirituality / Citeaux
AA2084 Monastic Spirituality, Part II
AA2085 Meaning of Monastic Spirituality

Solitude
AA2099 Solitude: Breaking the Heart
AA2100 Solitude & Resurrection

Poverty
AA2101 The Modern Cult of Efficiency
AA2102 The Vow of Poverty
AA2103 The Sins against Poverty
AA2104 Inner & Outer Poverty

Humility
AA2105 The Holy Rule
AA2106 Conversion
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Three Merton books have come available on tape. In addition, a project is underway to record M. Basil Pennington's Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom. It is being taped by John Polk for "Books for the Blind."

1. Life and Holiness (West Covina, California: Religious Books on Tape / Ignatius Press, 1988): 4 cassettes. [#198 / $12.00]

ARTICLES by MERTON


POETRY by MERTON

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The Merton Seasonal of Bellarmine College; edited by Robert E. Daggy (Louisville: Thomas Merton Studies Center, 1976- ). Subscription rate is now $8 per year. Contents of Volume 13 (1988) were:

ARTICLES:
7. “Merton at Brooke — A Photo-Essay with Photographs by Patricia Trunfull,” no. 4, pp. 4-5.

POETRY:

COVER ART:

REVIEWS by: Arthur W. Biddle (The Merton Annual 1); James T. Fisher (Thomas Merton, A Vow of Conversation); John H. Ford (Robert Imperato, Merton and Walsh on the Person); Robert Grip (Ronald E. Powaski, Thomas Merton on Nuclear Weapons); Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

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Another of the Merton "spin-off," this follows Seitz’s Gethsemani Poems as a series of poetic tributes to Merton. 560 copies were made of which 50 were printed on Iyo Glazed paper and bound in boards. The paperback edition was printed on Mohawk Letterpress paper and hand sewn into a Curtis cover.

MERTON FESTSCHRIFTS

In addition to The Merton Annual 1, The Merton Seasonal and Basil Pennington’s Toward an Integrated Humanity (all of which could be considered festschrifts of a sort), there were, in this "Celebrate Merton ‘88" year, at least four periodicals which devoted an entire issue to essays and poetry about and for Merton.

1. AMERICA, Volume 59, Number 11, 22 October 1988.

Christine M. Bohen, “From Monastery to University: Teaching Thomas Merton to Undergraduates.”
Robert E. Daggy, “Whatever May Be of Interest: The Merton Center at Bellarmine College.”
Robert Giroux, “Editing The Seven Storey Mountain.”
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Frederick Zydek, “Abbey Tombstones.” Poem.

2. the kentucky poetry review; edited by Wade Hall, Joy Bale Boone and Gregg Swem with Robert E. Daggy, guest editor, Volume 24, Fall 1988.

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Jack T. Ledbetter, "Watching the Birds: Gethsemani Abbey."
Christopher Meatyard, "Untitled."
Ralph Eugene Meatyard, "Three Photographs of Merton."
Michael Mott, "Thorn: Mlawula."
J. S. Porter, "Untitled."
Joe Pouder, "25 August, Feast of St. Louis."
Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O., "[Review of] Death Eat, by Ron Seitz."
Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O., "Vigil of a Novice 1959."
Margaret Randall, "Brian's Legs."
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David D. Cooper, "Thomas Merton's Christian Humanism in a Post-Christian Era."
Mitch and Kathy Finley, "The Home Front: Merton on Family Life?"
Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., "Thomas Merton Remembered: Twenty Years After."
Cornelia Jessey [i.e. Cornelia Sussman], "Honey from the Rock."
Thomas Merton, "The Historical Consciousness."
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Wayne Teasdale, "In the Spirit of Thomas Merton."
Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Why Merton Looked East."
Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., "That Eventful Day."
Gertrude A. Wilkinson, "A Meeting Almost Missed."
Joan Williams, O.C.D., "[Review of] A Vow of Conversation, by Thomas Merton; The Hidden Ground of Love; and Solitude: Breaking the Heart / Solitude and Resurrection, cassette tapes by Thomas Merton."


Berrigan, Daniel J., S.J., "After the Deaths of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, the Bishops Spoke for Peace."
Patrick G. Coy, "Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton: Living on the Margins."
Thomas Merton, "Cheese."
Thomas Merton, "Merton's Letters to Dorothy Day."
Thomas Merton, "Three Poems / When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple; Wisdom; and For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943."
Thomas Nelson, C.M., "The Dignity of Weakness."

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Celebrate Merton '88

Celebrations, conferences, commemorations, festivals, symposiums, etc.

In this "Celebrate Merton '88" year, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of his death, there have been a large number of Merton events. Following is a listing:


26 March 1988: A Conscience for Our Time: Thomas Merton Twenty Years after His Death, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky.

Michael Mott, "Activism and Contemplation: Merton's Attempt to Balance Both in His Life and Work."

Jacqueline Roberts, "A Musical Interpretation of Thomas Merton: Selections from the Niles-Merton Songs."

Ron Seitz, "An Appreciative Reading of Poetry by Thomas Merton and Ron Seitz."

15 - 16 April 1988: Merton Symposium, Christ the King Church, University of London, London, England.

A. M. Allchin, "Merton on the Spiritual Life."

Esther De Waal, "Merton and St. Benedict."

James H. Forest, "Merton on Peace."

Sr. Jotaka, "Merton Seen from the East."

Fr. Paul, "Merton and the Prayer of the Church."


Terry Tastard, S.S.F., "Merton's Pattern of Personal Prayer."

Rowan Williams, "Merton's Theological View."


Monday / Merton's Use of Autobiography

Tuesday / Merton's Understanding of the Monastic Vocation

Wednesday / Merton on Contemplation

Thursday / The Meeting of East and West in Merton

Friday / Merton and Social Issues


Arthur Middleton, "Merton: Retrieving the Tradition of the Fathers."


Ruth Fox, O.S.B., "Merton's Concept of Wisdom in The Asian Journal."

Victor A. Kramer, "Patterns in Merton's 'Introduction to Ascetical and Mystical Theology.'"

Chrysogonus Waddell, O.C.S.O., "Merton's What Are These Wounds? The Life of a Cistercian Mystic, Saint Lutgarde of Aywières."


Faculty: Robert E. Daggy; Thomas A. Greenfield; Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.; E. Glenn Hinson; Paul J. McGuire, S.C.I.; Don R. Osborn; Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O.


1988 Fall Series: Remembering Thomas Merton, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana.

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Mary Brosnan, "A Journey Shared."

Robert E. Daggy, "'A Mass of Stuff': The Development of a Thomas Merton Bibliography."

Eleanor Dobson, R.S.M., "Thomas Merton: A Personal Reflection."

Karen Dobson, "Merton's 'New Creation' in God Becomes a Source of Love for Others."


George A. Kilcours, "... Another Legacy ... More Rare': Personalizations of the 'True Self' in Thomas Merton's Poetry."

Michael J. Lapierre, S.J., "Thomas Merton and Mariology."

Thomas McKenna, C.M., "Thomas Merton and the Renewal of Religious Life."

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Robert E. Daggy, "Merton's Letters to Young People."


John Albert, O.C.S.O., "In Christ, Thomas Merton Found Loving Peace."

Robert E. Daggy, "A Man of the Whole Hemisphere: Thomas Merton and Latin America."

E. Glenn Hinson, "Protestant Perspectives of Merton."

William H. Shannon, "Merton and Judaism."

Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Zen, Merton and Personal Development."


26 - 30 October 1988: For the Trumpet Shall Sound: Protest, Prayer and Prophecy / Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thomas Merton, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

"The Beloved Community" / Sharon Welch, speaker; Robert Detweiler, Thomas Flynn, Victor A. Kramer, panel.

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"Wake Up and Dream: A Sermonic Address" / James A. Forbes, Jr., speaker; Mary Louise Bringle, David Garrow, Cornel West, panel.


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Panel — "The Merton I Knew": E. Glenn Hinson, Pat McCullough, Ron Seitz.


John P. Meier, S.S.D., "The Jesus of History vs. the Jesus of Liberation."


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Speaker / Canon Arthur MacDonald Allchin.

Speaker / R. B. Kearns, “Merton’s Contribution to Faith and Thought in Our Times”

November 27: Patrick F. O’Connell, “Merton’s Spiritual Teaching: Tradition and Innovation.”
December 18: Cyrus Lee, “Thomas Merton and Chinese Wisdom.”

3 - 4 December 1988: The Merton Symposium, Our Lady of Florida Spiritual Center, North Palm Beach, Florida.
Robert E. Daggy, “The Road to Joy: Merton’s Letters to Young People.”
Mary Ann Schmidt, “A Remembrance of Merton.”

10 December 1988: Merton Commemoration, St. Ann Church, Indianapolis, Indiana.
Robert E. Daggy, “The Road to Joy: Merton’s Letters to Young People.”
Panel of Respondents / Jeff Godecker; Rusty Moe; Marie Werdmann.

Presenter / Ginny Bear.