

nature of modern military strategy and technology, pacifism and just war teaching brought one to identical conclusions in a world in which the combatant was the one least likely to die in war.

Powaski's approach, in fact, seems to be quite similar to Merton's. He takes the just war doctrine seriously but the pages that shine brightest in his book are those in which it is Christ himself dominating the text.

Gerald Groves
*UP AND DOWN MERTON'S MOUNTAIN:
A Contemporary Spiritual Journey*

St. Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1988
207 pages -- \$8.95

Reviewed by **Frank X. Tuoti**

"What we've got here is a failure to communicate."

From the Motion Picture *Cool Hand Luke*

The communication failure of the Groves book is not due to the absence of data and information as such, but of depth and substance; not a void of facts but of insight. The book is a hybrid autobiography (of Groves) and biography (of Merton) and falls well short of being an acceptable, worthwhile endeavor in either classification. In the preface, Groves gives us his reasons for writing the book:

I knew that I had more insight into Merton's personality and into the Order of which he was a member for over twenty-seven years than the half-dozen or more of his biographers who had not even met him.

It is one thing for a famous person to write an autobiography and quite another for an unknown to do the same. After all, who was he (Merton) when he wrote "Seven Storey Mountain"?

I figured that, as a former Trappist, my account might have the same appeal. Perhaps even more. For I had not only gone up Merton's spiritual mountain but had to come back down again.

While other writers have plumbed the deep waters and diverse currents of Merton's thought and spirituality, Groves has taken the "silverfish approach," skimming the exterior plane of remembrances and events without offering either insight or even some occasional conventional wisdom. When Merton wrote his famous autobiography in the late forties, there was a centuries old "monastic curtain" and mystique about the Cistercian Order that defied public penetration. As little as only forty years ago the mere mention of the word "Trappist" could freeze the blood in the veins of the most devout! Merton's book not only penetrated the enclosure walls, dissolving the mystique, but also created a real bond of understanding, admiration and even affection among so many who read this "Twentieth century Confession of St. Augustine," as Fulton J. Sheen characterized it. The public was ready and eager to inhale every revealing word Merton wrote — and would write — about life as a Trappist, and the reasons why a "brilliant young man of the world" would voluntarily incarcerate himself behind the high walls of the most redoubtable penitential order in the Church. The Trappists were only just moving away from the mindset of seventeenth century La Trappe and Gethsemani's own legendary abbot, Dom Edmond Obrecht, who preceded Merton's first abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, and who energetically carried on the La Trappe tradition of public humiliation of monks and an unmitigated daily routine of physical hardship and bodily penance. The rockpile at Yuma Territorial Prison would have seemed, to them, a place of relative ease and respite!

This is why Merton knew (as he has written) that *The Seven Storey Mountain* would be a good seller, although he did not envision its climbing to the number two slot on the *New York Times* bestseller list! Today, news of a young man heading for a Trappist monastery (or of one departing the Order after several years) hardly engenders the lifting of an eyebrow. One of Groves' rationales for writing the book, as a consequence, rests on quicksand. There simply is no "high drama" remaining in the coming and going of Trappist monks. The mere entering of a Trappist monastery and persevering for a number of years cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be equated to "climbing Merton's spiritual mountain." We are not even in the same geographical reference point here.

The chapters on Merton focus almost exclusively on the "mischievous Merton," the playful Merton, the Merton who threatened to laugh until he died, and did. Groves, however, makes it appear as if Merton spent most of his monastic life in dissipation, constantly casting about for the next

opportunity to display his gregarious nature and keen wit. When not “cutting up,” Merton would expend much of his energies in an elongated twenty year “Errol Flynn / Basil Rathbone” duel with his abbot, Dom James Fox, other monks and, occasionally, Merton himself. There is a not-so-thin undercurrent of bitterness and resentment that runs throughout the narrative, a sour resonance that can be traced to Groves’ own conclusion that his years as a monk and as a hermit were lamentable past mistakes. Resentment is the bitter residue of an unresolved life, and there is much of it that oozes out from under the Groves narrative.

Throughout, Groves impunes less than edifying motives to Merton and to Dom James, suggesting, at one point, that Merton was constantly conniving and politicking to get the best jobs in the monastery (such as Novice Master) and that Dom James really had his heart set on being consecrated a bishop. Nor could Groves tolerate Merton’s “prima-donna concern with regard to his food (Merton had a botched-up stomach), his jobs, his solitude, his vocation.” Perhaps the most unwarranted cut of all is Groves’ assertion that Dom James chose to become a hermit following his resignation as abbot to avoid the humiliation of returning to the Gethsemani community as “just another monk”:

Fox had become a man of contradiction for a good reason — to avoid the humiliation of descending to what he had been. He opted to become someone he hadn’t been before. It must have seemed to Fox better than his other option after resignation — to return to the community as a monk.

Those with the most superficial understanding of the eremitical calling know that, without a true vocation, the individual will either soon give up the life in frustration and near-despair or, if it is pushed, will simply go nuts. Some years ago on my move from New York City to Tucson, I stopped over at Gethsemani where, at my request, Dom James came down from his hermitage to see me and chat. A more serene and contented hermit-monk I have not encountered. Many are those who THINK that they have an eremitical calling (Groves, for one, as it turned out), but it is a rare few who are truly called. As one longtime Trappist friend of mine recently remarked: “We should probably burn down most of those hermitages!”

Whatever the faults and foibles of Dom James, he was, in retrospect, the right man for the right job at the right time, the “Abbot of the Great Transition” from the days and ways of old to the Trappist renewal of today. No one could have predicted the tremendous explosion of the Trappist Order that followed World War II, followed by a second large wave of

recruits after Merton's books hit the bookstores. Perhaps it took a "Foxy" — but holy — abbot to keep the place from going haywire (and to keep Merton where God, again in retrospect, wanted him). Dom James passed on two years ago, but his stamp — and Merton's — will remain on Gethsemani well into the next century.

Groves decided he had finally "had it" with the Trappists on the Feast of Corpus Christi, 1960 — not only with the Trappists and Dom James, but with the entire Catholic Church! The seeds of his final defection were evidently secretly sprouting many years before, at the time of his Solemn Profession: "On the 25th of March, during a Pontifical High Mass, I vowed to remain a Trappist forever, while fully intending to leave Gethsemani and the Trappist Order within four years (to become a hermit)." Some solemn vow!

About two-thirds into the book, the reader comes upon an utterly incomprehensible, absurd reflection: "Whether or not Merton ever received mystical graces, I'm not sure." Was Groves looking for a levitating Merton? Or waiting to see Merton, like St. Bernard, absentmindedly swallow a cup of boiling oil, caught up in rapturous ecstasy? Anyone who ponders chapters in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* or *The Inner Experience* will recognize the existential quality and "authority" of Merton's writings, the "fruit of the Spirit" that touched and illumined his mind and soul. Basil Pennington brings this out beautifully in his insightful book, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk*, when he quotes from Merton:

Since the theology of the (early) Cistercians was so intimately personal and experiential, their exposition of it was bound to take a psychological direction. All that they wrote was directed by a keen awareness of the presence and action of God in their souls. This was their all-absorbing interest.

Pennington adds: "Could anyone describe Tom and his writings better?" This reviewer can offer only one such "better" description, written of one of Merton's favorite "saints," Meister Eckhart: "He breathed his own endless vitality into the juiceless formulas of orthodox theology with such charm and passion that even the common people heard them gladly!"

After fourteen years at Gethsemani, Groves pulled up stakes and ventured out to find his special "hermit place" in the world, exploring at least a half-dozen or so faroff locations. The one place where he seemed to have found some peace was at a place called "Lost Beach" in the Bahamas:

I had come to admit that I wasn't much of a hermit. I didn't care much. My health was good. I had recently published a second article, and I had Peter and Isabelle. I had reason to hope that I would spend the rest of my life at Lost Beach.

Groves' idyllic life of "respectable leisure" was, in time, interdicted by the local bishop who wanted him to undertake some pastoral work as well. Groves found this unacceptable. Following a few more forays into other parts of the world, Groves finally forsook his hermit quest and returned to his hometown of St. Louis "in a blue seersucker suit with an indult of laicization in my pocket." Groves is married now ("to a woman much younger than I") and has two "adorable sons." "They, more than anything, keep me from lamenting my past, for unless I had made those mistakes, they wouldn't have come into existence." In spite of the "mistake" of becoming a Trappist monk, Groves still goes to Mass on Sundays: "And although I am no longer a monk or a hermit — or would I want to be again — I still go to church on Sundays, as I did as a child, hoping for a short sermon."

As previously noted, the "inspiration" for the book's title is Groves' somewhat immodest statement that he "had not only gone up Merton's spiritual mountain, but had to come down again." Based on the evidence the book itself presents — its shallow content, its utterly secular vision of the monastic charism, and its pervasive judgmental tone — this reviewer is forced to arrive at but one clear conclusion. Not only did Groves not climb Merton's spiritual mountain, he never got past the base camp.