

JOURNEY TO PUBLICATION: Bringing WOODS, SHORE, DESERT into Print

...by Robert E. Daggy

In May 1983, fifteen years after it was written, the Museum of New Mexico Press released Thomas Merton's previously unpublished diary of his Spring 1968 trip through the American West, a journal Merton had titled WOODS, SHORE, DESERT: A NOTEBOOK, MAY 1968. In his Foreword Brother Patrick Hart says:

The typescript of the journal of two weeks written in May of 1968, less than six months before his Asian journey, was the last journal writing that Thomas Merton corrected and approved for publication. Father Merton dictated these passages, which had been selected from a larger journal, onto a dictaphone and they were then transcribed by his secretary. The journal entries were made at the Redwoods Abbey, a Cistercian convent in northern California, and later while visiting a small isolated Benedictine monastery, Christ in the Desert, at Abiquiu, New Mexico.

The Museum of New Mexico states in its press release about the book, dated April 19, 1983: "How and why the Museum of New Mexico Press got publication rights to a manuscript by a monk who lived and wrote in Kentucky, is an offbeat, intriguing story." And it is a long story — a fifteen-year story — the story of a book that Merton prepared for publication, a book shelved for years, a book eventually split into two smaller books and published, not by the big Eastern publishers who had traditionally handled Merton, but by two houses in the West, neither of which had published Merton before and both of which were most known for regional publications.

Sometime during the Summer of 1968, after returning to Gethsemani, Merton worked up; the diary of the trip, adding a "prelude" and some concluding material. He combined this journal with the previously published essay "Day of a Stranger." In fact, the "Day of a Stranger" section, which came first, was simply pages cut from THE HUDSON REVIEW pasted into the typescript. Merton told his agent, Naomi Burton Stone, that he was sending off "one or two" books to New Directions though apparently this typescript was not sent to New York until after Merton had left for Asia. James Laughlin, publisher of New Directions, wrote to Merton on December 4, 1968, the letter addressed to Bangkok where Merton was to die on December 10:

Perhaps one of my letters written to California did not reach you, because I'm sure I did write there to let you know that the three manuscripts had been safely received. That is, "Geography of Lograire," "Day of a Stranger," and "Sensation Time at the Home." They are all most interesting in their very different ways, and we can certainly put one of them on the fall, 1969, list, whichever you think ought to come first... My own feeling is that the very exciting "Geography of Lograire" would be the thing to do next fall.

Merton, of course, died, probably without ever reading this letter and no one knew which he thought should come first. Laughlin published the "very exciting" GEOGRAPHY OF LOGRAIRE in October 1969. The so-called "Day of a Stranger" and "Sensation Time at the Home" (Merton's last collection of poems) failed to make any subsequent New Directions list. The latter was eventually included in THE COLLECTED POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON (New Directions, 1977).

THOMAS MERTON



WOODS,
SHORE,
DESERT

with photographs by the author

"This is a welcome addition to the Merton canon. It's one of the world's truly interesting journals... It shows Merton in his best and most rare as a writer." Annie Dillard, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

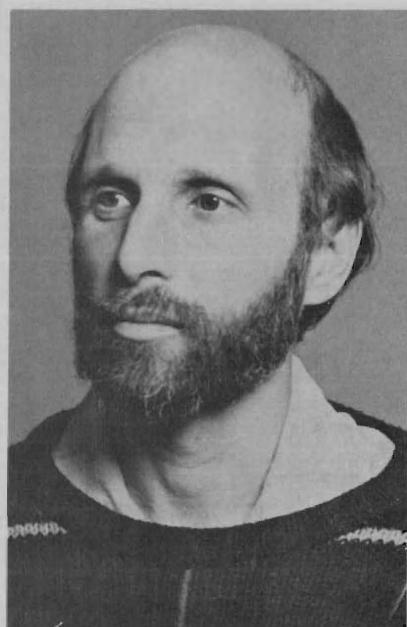
When I became Curator of the Merton Center in 1974, the tandem typescript of "Day of a Stranger" and "Woods, Shore, Desert" still rested, unpublished, on a Center shelf. Though publication was discussed on occasion by the Merton Trustees and though various publishers expressed interest in publishing it, nothing came of these suggestions for four years. Then, in the Fall of 1978, ten years after Merton's death, I received a letter from Joel Weishaus, a poet living in New Mexico, one of whose poems Merton had used in MONKS POND. Weishaus wrote: "I came across an issue of New Mexico recently in which was published a few of the photographs Thomas Merton made in New Mexico. I'm wondering whether there would be enough of these photographs to make a book worthwhile..." This letter began a process toward publication which took nearly five years, underwent a variety of changes, and finally resulted in WOODS, SHORE, DESERT.

Briefly the process went something like this: I suggested to Weishaus that appropriate text to accompany Merton's New Mexico photographs might be found in "Woods, Shore, Desert" and in the uncorrected, unedited journal entries of his Fall 1968 visit to New Mexico (just before he left for Asia) which had been eliminated from the beginning of THE ASIAN JOURNAL OF THOMAS MERTON. Weishaus responded enthusiastically to this suggestion. At first two publishers seemed interested in a joint publishing venture: Peregrine Smith in Salt Lake City and the Museum of New Mexico Press in Santa Fe. The Museum Press editors then became interested in publishing all of "Woods, Shore, Desert" which changed the project considerably, necessitating the inclusion of photographs of California and broadening the scope beyond Merton's New Mexico experiences. They were lukewarm toward including the "Day of a Stranger" essay and expressed doubt concerning the feasibility of using the uncorrected Fall journal entries (though, for a time, adding an appendix with this material printed just as Merton left it was considered). The Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust then refused to allow Weishaus to "edit" a text which Merton had himself prepared for publication or to add explanatory notes though some explanation of place names and other references was obviously necessary. Then, after Weishaus, backed by the Museum Press, presented persuasive arguments, the Trustees reversed their decision and agreed to allow Weishaus to add notes and asked Brother Patrick Hart to write an "Afterword" placing the journal in the context of the Merton career.

In the meantime Gibbs Smith at Peregrine Smith withdrew from the project and contacted me separately concerning the possibility of his house publishing an altogether different Merton item. My thoughts turned to the marvelous "Day of a Stranger" which, it now seemed, was to be eliminated from the book as Merton had conceived it. Prolonged exchanges of correspondence which took us far into 1980 followed. The result of these exchanges was that I would compile, edit and write an introduction for "Day of a Stranger," the lopped-off beginning section of Merton's book. This was done; photographs were selected; and DAY OF A STRANGER with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy appeared in the Fall of 1981, appeared in fact while "Woods, Shore, Desert" was still at an indeterminate stage.

"Back at the ranch" things proceeded slowly with "Woods, Shore, Desert." The project finally, however, began to take shape. It was to be an edition only of Merton's corrected Spring journal — with photographs. Weishaus was to do an introduction and explanatory notes. Brother Patrick's "Afterword" became a "Foreword." The problem of how photographs would be selected and who would select them was eventually worked out. And, at last, advance copies arrived in late April 1983 — a handsome production and one well worth the wait.

And so — fifteen years after Merton wrote, transcribed and corrected the manuscript — his last approved journal writing has come into print. The process has been a long one and not without its frustrations for many people. Yet the last stages of getting WOODS, SHORE, DESERT into print were successful in large part due to the interest, effort and persistence of poet-artist Joel Weishaus. His recent work THOMAS MERTON — MASK is featured on the cover of this issue and the poem which Merton included in MONKS POND, revised in 1983, is on page 10.



JOEL WEISHAUS
Photo: Museum of New Mexico Press