

WHALE OF A BOOK

Review of

THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON
by Michael Mott

—Reviewed by **A. M. Allchin**

This is, it must be confessed, a mountain of a book, almost seven hundred pages in all, including eighty pages of notes. Is it going to be one of those biographies which lie like a massive tomb-stone over the remains of its hero? I have to admit that the fear came to me from time to time, but in the end it was overcome. Time and again Merton came to life in these pages, surprising me, as I discovered some new episode in his life, some new aspect of his thought. Bit by bit, piece by piece, with great care and patience, Michael Mott has built up a picture of the man, more balanced, more just, more inclusive than any we have had before.

One of the things which this book brings out particularly well is Merton's extraordinary capacity for empathy, his ability to identify with whomever he was in contact with at the moment. This capacity could lead to misunderstandings and muddles. More often it gave him an amazing facility of entrance into the minds and hearts of his fellow human beings. It was true of those who had a chance of meeting him personally, it is true too of those who have known him only through his books. The reader feels an immediate personal contact with the author. It is as if he were speaking directly with you, in the room. In him an immense variety of people found a point of unity. In the light of his writing the world proved more surprising but less meaningless than one had feared it to be.

A century ago Fr. George Congreve, one of the first Anglican religious writers, "The consecration of the Christian tends to a unity like that with which life can collect, hold together and fertilize innumerable atoms in any live organism. The

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Canon Allchin does not mention it in his review, but he is erroneously referred to in the Mott biography as *Andrew Macdonald* rather than *Arthur Macdonald Allchin*.

consecrated man has not fewer interests in life than another; he may have more but however many they are, they do not divide, distract, exhaust him, because he holds them all together, along with himself, by a vital link to God”.

As we find in this book, Merton was at times exhausted and distracted by the multiplicity of concerns which filled his life. It was inevitable that it should be so. But what is so impressive is that in and through that multiplicity his life should have been drawn into such a unity. He was a man with a great capacity for love and knowledge, of the universe and of his fellow men and women. That capacity in him had been strengthened, deepened, enlarged by his constant readiness to grow in the knowledge and love of God. He was a man who was always ready to go further, to look deeper into the mystery of things, in which he found the mystery of God.

Here, as Michael Mott shows, his monastic consecration was absolutely essential. How could he have become that universal man who at the end we find him to be, had he not been able to follow that particular way of discipleship? For all its rigidity, it proved to be, for him, a life-giving way. There is more to be said on this inner side of Merton’s life. We must hope that one day one of his monastic contemporaries will say it. This book opens the way to such further explorations.

Meanwhile, the writer of this review, who like the writer of the book claims the designation ‘Catholic but not Roman Catholic’ salutes *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* with a mixture of awe and admiration, and records his gratitude for the vision and the labour which has gone into it. Perhaps in the end it is not so much a mountain of a book, as a whale of a book; a whale which is a sign, a symbol, a sacrament of new life springing up in unexpected ways in unexpected places, a vehicle for abundant mercies.



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(Photographed at Gethsemani
with Thomas Merton)