

SEVENTY YEARS AND SEVEN MOUNTAINS:

A Review-Symposium of
The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton, by Michael Mott

—by **Robert E. Daggy**

On January 31, 1985, had he lived, Thomas Merton would have been seventy years old, threescore and ten, not so old by today's standards. A strange twist of fate cut short his life sixteen years ago in Bangkok, Thailand, so that he himself would never celebrate his septuagenary year. A signal publication — the long-awaited “authorized” biography — has arrived, not planned to coincide with Merton's seventieth birthday, but, since it has appeared at this time, it is meet that this issue of the *Merton Seasonal* should be dedicated to Merton at seventy and to a review-symposium of Michael Mott's *Seven Mountains*.

The biography — authorized in the sense that Merton himself closed access to certain of his personal materials to everyone but a single biographer — has been awaited and anticipated for sixteen years. That fact alone justifies unusual attention. Much has been written on Merton in the intervening time and it seems that a biography, weighty with the designation “authorized” or “official,” deserves more than one critical voice to place it in the existing Merton canon. To that end, we have gathered several reviews to assess this important work. On the following pages we offer reviews of *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* by six individuals, all of whom have themselves written on Merton, four of whom knew him personally. They offer our readers an overview of reaction and criticism, uninhibited by editorial strictures to praise or pan. The reviews are by Canon A. M. Allchin, Fr. Clyde F. Crews, Jim Forest, Rosemary Haughton, Dr. Ross Labrie, and Edward Rice.

Michael Mott's *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* is, as it should be, an ambitious work, staggering in its scope and in its richness of detail. It is balanced, avoiding sententiousness and, just as importantly, tendentiousness, neither deifying nor deprecating Merton. That the wealth of detail may, on occasion, debunk Merton — to the chagrin of some who have created a superstructure of illusion about him — is inevitable. It is also inevitable that some who knew Merton or who thought they knew Merton — especially given his widely recognized ability to make each person feel he knew him or her in a special way — might think that Michael Mott has failed to portray adequately the Merton they knew. But Mott, by the very nature of his task, had to portray (or at least attempt to portray) *all* the Mertons who went to make up this most complex and diversified of men. It is clear that he has eschewed allowing any one of the many Mertons to override or overshadow the others and that he is aware that some will be piqued that *their* Merton is not given due emphasis. There are, all too unfortunately, some errors which are jarring. One can only hope that these will be corrected or removed in further editions. Yet these are minor and do not detract finally from the the most exhaustively and meticulously detailed work on

Merton so far completed. The detail alone makes this an indispensable resource for future Merton studies. It will provide a focus for those studies for years to come, perhaps in time proving to be *the* definitive focus.

I have frequently been asked since his appointment in 1978 “Who is Michael Mott?” At the time he was appointed to do the authorized biography, Mott had written nothing on Merton and had little acquaintance with or in Merton studies. It seems appropriate to give some details on Michael Mott himself, a person now inextricably and unavoidably associated with Thomas Merton and Merton studies.

He was born in London, son of an English father and an American mother. He was educated in England and in the United States, matriculating at Oriel College, Oxford University. He holds a diploma from the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London; an intermediate law degree from the Law Society, London; and a B.A. from London University. He received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, in 1983. He is married and the father of twin daughters.

For the last eighteen years he has taught at Kenyon College; S.U.N.Y. (Buffalo); Concordia University (Montreal); Emory University; William and Mary College; and Bowling Green State University (Ohio). He is currently Professor of English, Creative Writing Program, at Bowling Green. His publications include six collections of poetry, two novels, two children’s novels, essays and criticism. *Helmet and Wasps* (novel, Houghton Mifflin, 1966) was widely praised. *Master Entrick* (children’s novel, Delacorte & Dell Yearling, 1966) has sold over 70,000 copies. *Absence of Unicorns, Presence of Lions* (poems, Little, Brown, 1976) attracted critical notice. Individual poems have appeared in anthologies and in such journals as *Poetry, Encounter, Pearl*, and the *Georgia, Iowa, Kenyon, Missouri, Sewanee* and *Southern Reviews*. He may now, of course, add to his list of publications a biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*.

