

THE MERTON I KNEW

Review of

THOMAS MERTON

by Victor A. Kramer

—Reviewed by **Flavian Burns, O.C.S.O.**

Many good and interesting things have been written about Thomas Merton, but, in my opinion, this book by Victor A. Kramer is the best yet. Reading it was an inspiration and a delight. Here at last I could say: “*This is the Merton I knew.*”

It has been pointed out to us often enough recently that there were many Mertons. “The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton” by Michael Mott received high praise for making this more manifest and we were warned not to take exception to it because our own Merton was not as prominent as we would like. Very well, and be that as it may, I suggest that more than one reader will find his or her Merton here in Professor Kramer’s book and rejoice in the find. Many others may find their Merton here for the first time.

Victor Kramer does his research in the best possible way: he reads Thomas Merton’s books and he reads them in order. “To begin at the beginning and go on to the end” has been sage advice, well known and around for a long time. Dr. Kramer follows it and if we follow him we will be greatly rewarded.

I do not wish to criticize or belittle Michael Mott’s biography of Merton, but to me it seems to lack interiority. Victor Kramer’s work supplies precisely this. Here we have an interior biography of Merton, seen through his own writings. I confess that I am astonished that one who did not know Merton personally could depict him so well from his writings. On the other hand, it proves something that I have often said: you can know Thomas Merton best through his writings.

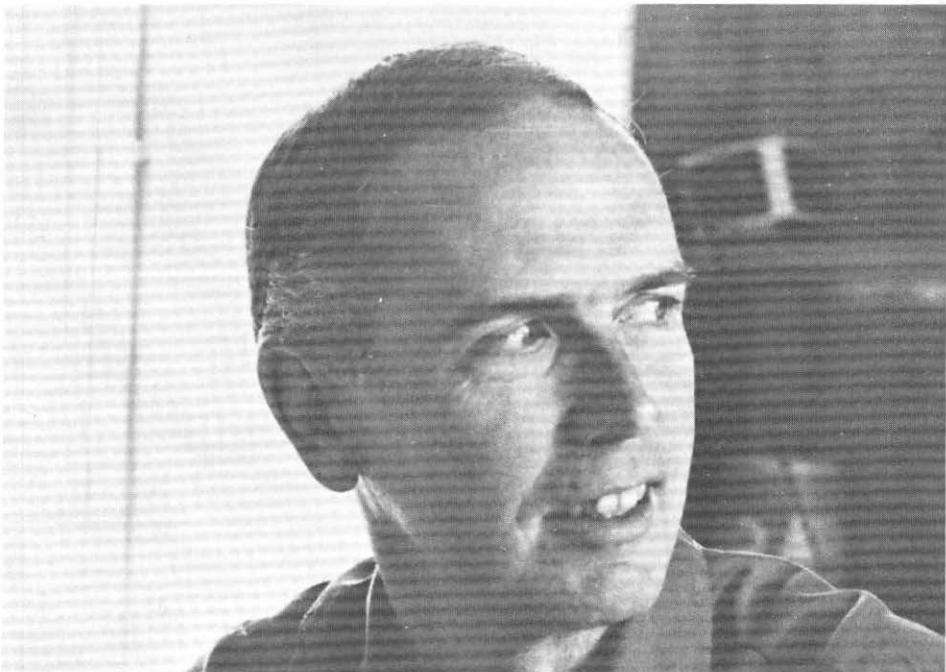
As Professor Kramer says throughout his work: Merton was first and foremost a writer. Everything else he was or desired to be would find expression in his written works. It was his nature to write and we can thank God for that, for it lets us share in this man’s depth in a way otherwise closed to all but God alone.

Abbot Emeritus Flavian Burns was Abbot of Gethsemani from 1968 to 1973 and Superior of the Trappist Monastery of Holy Cross, Berryville, Virginia, from 1980 to 1984. He is the author of “Homily at the Funeral Mass for Father M. Louis (Thomas Merton),” published in *Thomas Merton/Monk: a Monastic Tribute* and “The Consciousness of God and His Purpose in the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton,” included in *The Message of Thomas Merton*. A transcript of his interview for the television documentary *Merton: a Film Biography of Thomas Merton* is included in the recent *Merton, By Those Who Knew Him Best*; edited by Paul Wilkes. He is currently back living in his hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Recently, a Brother in one of our monasteries asked me for a good introduction to Merton's writings. I suggested the present book. I told him that as I read it I wished that I had the time to read each of Father Louis' works as Victor Kramer introduced them. I believe that would be a very revealing experience, bringing one into the very heart of Thomas Merton. Some day I plan to do it.

The only other thing that I would like to point out about this compelling book is the constant reference in Merton's work to the sickness of modern Western society. It has been popular to speak of Merton's changing attitude toward the "world" but here in Professor Kramer's report on Merton's writings we see something else: a rather consistent and prophetic concern about the society we live in being sick. This is one new thing about Merton's thought that I have learned from Victor Kramer and I am grateful to him for the insight. Now I will have to decide what to do about it. It is an important thing for any society to listen to its prophets.

The rest of this book speaks to me of the Merton I knew and loved. I am delighted that this perceptive and talented reader of Merton's books has shared his insights with all of us, by reason of his own love of the written word. Thank you, Victor Kramer.



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(Photograph by Brother Patrick Hart)