

Finally, there is the obvious difference in size, but not in price, between *The Hidden Ground of Love* and *The Road to Joy*. Were there fewer letters to “New & Old Friends” from which to choose or does this mean this collection of correspondence will have to be supplemented by other volumes in the years to come? Or was this an attempt by the publisher to make this volume more marketable? In one case all the Merton-Lax letters previously published in the now out-of-print *A Catch of Anti-Letters* were deleted. Such an omission interrupts the flow and continuity of their unique correspondence, and should have been retained. Clearly, those interested in the Merton letters are a well defined group of readers. They are more likely to be antagonized by than attracted to a less challenging, less comprehensive book. The way the trend is going, the third volume will be only 218 pages, but still sell for \$27.95.

Do the letters in *The Road to Joy* break new ground in Merton research? Probably not. Much of what is discussed has already come out in different forms: any revelations (if there are any left) will probably come with the publication of the restricted journals. However, Merton and Daggy have given us a deeper, richer understanding of what is already available, and for that, we owe both men a great deal of thanks.

Despite the volume of correspondence and the body of Merton’s works now in print, the monk’s deepest thoughts still remain a mystery. During the ITMS Meeting at Bellarmine College in May 1989, Merton’s longtime friend, W. H. “Ping” Ferry told me that, after spending a week in 1968 driving Merton up and down the California coast, he still didn’t know Merton any better than he did before. That which Merton *intended* to keep private will never be revealed. Even this most public of private men deserves that right, no matter how much prying we do.

### III. Jane Marie Richardson, STURDY SHELTER

*A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter:  
one who finds a friend finds a treasure. (Sirach 6:14)*

Three years before his death Merton wrote: “I could fill another page with names of people I have loved to be with and loved to hear from. Lax, above all, and Mark Van Doren and all the old friends, Ad Reinhardt and so on.” It is especially these “old friends” who are celebrated in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*, although readers will certainly be glad for the “new” ones included, the term being used quite broadly. All of these friends, new and old, underscore the kind of spontaneous bonding that Merton could establish so readily. Making and keeping friends came as easily to him as praying.

This gift of identifying so simply and honestly with his correspondents is, of course, characteristic of Merton’s writing as a whole. The personal nature of letters, however, accentuates this trait and accounts so much for Merton’s continuing power to speak to an ever-widening community of earnest searchers. It is this ability to create bonds and to express them, even in letters hastily written, that helps us to realize how deeply integrated into his being was Merton’s awareness of everyone’s fundamental oneness in Christ. In a special way, *The Road to Joy* abounds with glimpses of Merton at his most lovable, sensitive, and vulnerable best.

Merton had many more friends than acquaintances and, in some way or other, the majority of his correspondents would fall into the former category. For this reason, the editor had to make some difficult choices in his actual selection of which letters among the 3,500 extant

would most appropriately be published in this collection. Robert E. Daggy, director of the Merton Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, has done an excellent job of making such a selection and of editing this volume, the second in a projected series of five. There are brief and pertinent introductions to each of the five chapters, as well as notes sprinkled between and throughout the letters, enabling the reader to place them in proper context. Daggy's additions are very helpful without being intrusive.

As in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, the initial volume in this series, published in 1985 and edited by William H. Shannon, general editor of the series, the reader will find so much simply to enjoy: singularly good writing, uncommon insights, breadth of vision and concerns, irrepressible humor, deep compassion, flagrant exaggerations, striking metaphors — and pervading it all, an extraordinary and dynamic faith. As is usual with Merton texts, these letters quickly focus our attention and compel us to think and feel profoundly. But there is a certain warmth and non-posturing in these letters to friends that puts us at ease, sharpens our perception of how good life is, and invariably calls us home to ourselves. There are occasional expressions of vulnerability and nostalgia that come as a surprise, accustomed as we are to a certain kind of reticence from Merton even in the act of self-disclosure: "Well, it seems like a totally different world from that in which we used to spend Christmas together at Fairlawn in the old days . . . One had so much fun then: children do not know how fortunate they are to be children!"

It was a child of ten who ultimately gave this book, so manifestly the work of a free spirit, its lovely title. When little Grace Sisson sent Merton her drawing of a house, it "had no road" leading to it. Five years later she sent him another drawing which she called "The Road to Joy." Merton responded sensitively: "I am glad you still draw things with love, and I hope you will never lose that. But I hope you and I together will secretly travel our own road to joy, which is mysteriously revealed to us without our exactly realizing." How could a book whose special focus is friendship be better named? Friendship creates its own joys and enhances all others. These Merton letters, so strongly rooted in the awareness of God's love for all of us, make that happiness unmistakably clear.

There are degrees of friendship, of course, and the division of these letters into five sections recognizes that fact. The first chapter consists of letters to one of Merton's oldest and dearest friends and mentor, Mark Van Doren. Dating from March 1939 to November 1968, these sixty-five letters, unfailingly rich in respect, appreciation, and self-revelation, give us another perspective from which to view Merton's development both as a poet and literary artist and as a human being always reaching out for truth. From Columbia to Darjeeling, the remarkable and congenial Van Doren, a Pulitzer Prize poet and an outstanding teacher, accompanied Merton



JANE MARIE RICHARDSON

Photo by Thomas Merton (ca. 1967)

on his life's journey, always a stimulating and sustaining presence. Letters to this faithful friend, twenty years his senior, drew forth from Merton some of his most beautiful writing: "Love's debts have this in them that they are too great to be paid, and that therefore one loves to remain in debt. I hope that I will owe you more and more that I can never repay, and I fully expect to. You are certainly one of the joys of life for all who have ever come within a mile of you." Merton's solicitude for the Van Doren family in time of stress is touching. No wonder that on receiving the news of Merton's death, Van Doren would offer this deeply-felt tribute: "I shall mourn for him as long as I live."

It is in his letters to another lifetime friend, Robert Lax, that Merton's unrestrained spontaneity, wit and imagination have their heyday. One gets the impression that nothing was ever held back from Lax, that underlying the clever playfulness and outrageous humor rampant in these letters was an unshakable trust in the recognition that here was someone who understood and accepted him thoroughly. Merton was a man of many words; Lax, of few. (In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton describes Lax, in part, as "a mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions, and every day he found less and less to say about them.") These letters to Lax, their casual style notwithstanding, register a gamut of significant cares, ideas and reflections. In the summer of 1965, as the war in southeast Asia was escalating, Merton deplored the apathy of his country and Church. He wrote to Lax, now living on the Greek island of Kalymnos: "Here all is forgetfulness of the morals and of the Vietnam, everybody just want to forget issues. The doors slam and people retire to forget the issues and stick their heads all the way into the TV where the issue is befuddled and made comfortable." Looking back sixteen years after Merton's death, Lax would say, with typical reserve: "I certainly felt I'd lost a correspondent; if I had something funny I wanted to tell him about it would be a little more difficult now, but I didn't feel lost. I felt that he'd gone on to another stage, and I really felt that if it happened, it must have been the time for it" (*Merton, By Those Who Knew Him Best*). But on that fateful day in December 1968, Lax could only respond in his telegram to Gethsemani: "Sorrow."

The eruption of joy in Merton's letters to Lax is somewhat complemented by the more or less even keel of those addressed to Therese Lentfoehr, a Salvatorian sister, a teacher and a published poet. This correspondence makes up the largest set of letters (135 of them) in the book. Therese was invaluable to Merton in her skills of typing, recording and preserving his manuscripts and he consulted her on occasion. Therese first wrote to Merton in 1939, telling him how much she liked one of his poems, but it was not until 1948 that their correspondence actually began. Daggy suggests that these letters were an "alternate form of journal keeping" for Merton. Certainly, there are long, personal passages not common to other letters. He writes at length about his books in process, about prayer, about situations at the monastery, about other people's writings, about her work and his health. He continually discourages her from making him bigger than life but her praise seemed to nurture his humility. There is about these letters something that suggests Merton really did find in Therese the sister he never had. In any case, he appears to have had no difficulty in writing to her from the heart when he so wished: "I walk around saying 'Love!' Or I just mentally keep slipping the catch that yields my whole soul to Love."

Family love constitutes a special kind of relationship, one that resembles friendship even though distinct from it. *The Road to Joy*, therefore, includes a chapter of letters "to family and family friends." These letters to relatives — three aunts, an uncle and a cousin — and others connected in one way or another with the Merton family put us in closer contact with some less familiar Merton roots and influences. In writing to "Aunt Kit," one of his father's four sisters, Merton seemed particularly at ease. Once, after sharing with her some thoughts on the Christian life, he added: "We live in the belief that God loves us and will let nothing happen to us that is not

for our good. He is in fact always with us and indeed in us . . .” One cannot but believe that Aunt Kit remembered this when, four years later, in a tragic ferry accident, she set her own death after being “a tower of courage” to others on board the sinking ship.

There is much more in *The Road to Joy*, like letters to Dan Walsh and John Howard Griffin and other people special to Merton. There is a whole chapter of “Circular Letters to Friends,” a form Merton adopted out of sheer necessity in order to communicate with the growing number of persons who found in his words and understanding a source of strength and clarity in their struggles. It was not simply courtesy or interest or even kindness that motivated these letters. It was a conviction that this was part of his vocation, as he himself states in the first circular letter. There are, finally, letters “to and about young people,” in which we see once again Merton’s exceptional ability to accommodate himself to others, whatever their age or experience, background or concerns. He could and did attract younger readers, dialoguing with these “new friends” and taking seriously their questions and values. Each of them must have been grateful that Merton never did speak down to them.

Early on, Merton had expressed a desire that his writing be “frank without being boring.” Small chance. One has only to read a little of these letters to see how powerfully his prayer was answered. His enormous talent for straightforward and engaging speech blesses us all. Still, I was struck by how much Merton owed to these people — and many others — and by how much he needed them to become and to be all that he was. Never one to point to himself (not seriously, anyway), Merton implicitly invites and even challenges us in these letters to examine our own friendships, our own relationships to God, to others and to ourselves. After spending time with him, one is never left in total comfort, but paradoxically, one never feels more alive. This is the way Merton gifts his true friends, never failing to open up for them new pathways to joy.

#### IV. Bernard Van Waes, MAILBOX NUMBER 5

The perdurance of Thomas Merton’s influence and importance to contemporary spirituality twenty-one years after his death is, from time to time, the subject of debate. Much of his work has been explained, explored, expanded, exegeted, theologized, etc. Yet the essential elements in his message have not been so changed that they lose their primary value in coming to grips with modern secularity while, at the same time, preserving the ancient Christian tradition. It appears a thoroughly respectable endeavor therefore to look beyond the “Glittering Image” (see Susan Howatch’s thesis in her novel of the same name) to the human image in Thomas Merton — the “bluejeans” Merton to which I have referred on a previous occasion.

Matthew Kelty, O.C.S.O., in an edited interview conducted by Victor Kramer, was asked what he thought was the most important thing to be remembered about Merton and he replied:

I would always think of him not as being brilliant and an intellectual and all that, I think of him as being poor, and simple, and little and fragile and dearly loved . . . his lesson was how good God is, how sweet God is and how loving God is, even for the littlest and the most fragile of us.

*(Merton Annual I, pp. 75-76)*

Good fortune has preserved Merton’s correspondence. At Bellarmine some 3,500 letters are in the archives and, no doubt, a considerable number as yet unaccounted for that are in private hands and/or collections. Merton scholars and buffs have had the good fortune of sound intellectual and scholarly editing by Robert E. Daggy, Director of the Thomas Merton Studies