

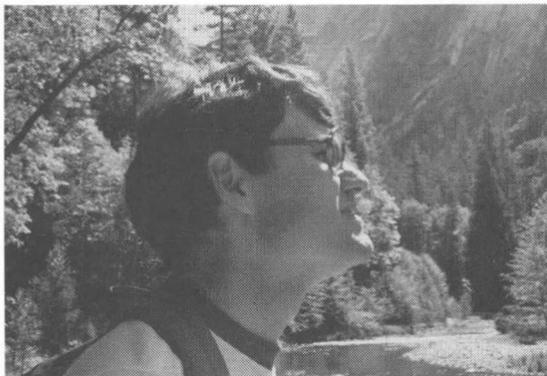
COLLECTING MERTON

by **Marc Irish**

Up front, I must confess that I cannot pass a used bookstore without stopping in to investigate their religious book section. For it is there, hidden away among the old Bibles, Fulton Sheens, and the myriad other “holy books,” that I am most likely to find a book written by or about Thomas Merton.

I suppose that Merton would find it a bit embarrassing that his books have become collector’s items. After all, he was sometimes his own harshest critic. As Robert Daggy wrote in the introduction to *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*: “In addition, he left a graph — now a valuable document — in which he evaluated his own books; this was drawn up in 1967 in response to a request for use in a class at Bellarmine College. Rather than using a more cursive format, Merton placed each of his major books on the graph, using a scale from “Awful” to “Best.” Though it must be used carefully and contextually, the graph is important as his own assessment of his books.” Regardless of Merton’s own assessment of individual books, we can only be thankful that he continued to write for his entire life. He

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MARC IRISH

has had a profound effect on the lives of thousands of individuals who find what he has to say of great personal worth. I am one such individual, and have become a Mertonophile.

Though one begins to get a sense of the depth and the breadth of the Merton corpus by perusing the bibliographies in the biographies, it isn't until you have scrutinized the Breit-Daggy *Comprehensive Bibliography* that a true picture emerges. For a Mertonophile, it is like a child being turned loose in a toy shop. If one wants to make a serious study of Merton and how his thought progressed over the course of his lifetime, it is necessary to have access to much of what he wrote — what better way than to collect it? Having decided this, the next problem is how to go about it.

First, in order to know what to collect, you must have an authoritative list. The aforementioned bibliography and *The Merton Seasonal* with its running bibliography are indispensable sources. Once you have identified the various publications, the fun begins. In my case, I am lucky to live within walking distance of five used bookstores and visit them every few weeks. I've been pleasantly surprised by the number of books I've been able to find this way. I like to buy additional copies of books so that I can give them to friends to introduce them to Merton.

Generally, I've found that the best bargains come from these used bookstores. Most of the books you will find in them are reprints or paperbacks, but my luckiest find — a first edition of *Thoughts in Solitude* which was signed by Merton — cost me all of \$3.00. Two of the bookstores I peruse also deal in first editions and will even initiate a search for a particular volume if you request it. I've found that some of Merton's less popular works — *Exile Ends in Glory, What Are These Wounds?*, and much of his early poetry, for example — can be obtained only in this fashion. I suspect that there is at least one other Mertonophile in town because every once in a while I'll tuck a volume away planning to come back a little later when I have more cash — and when I come back the book is gone.

Of course, finding Merton articles in back issues of magazines in various libraries has added to my collection. This has proved to be frustrating at times, since the libraries in my area do not always have all of the magazines and newspapers for which he wrote.

Another great source of this material is from friends I have made around the country who share my interest in Merton. Not only have I been able to add to my collection but I have made some great friends in the process.

Last, but certainly not least, has been the help and contribution I have received from the editor of *The Merton Seasonal*. I have never written a letter asking a question or a favor and not received a prompt response. We Mertonophiles are certainly lucky that Robert Daggy is Director of the Merton Center at Bellarmine College and editor of this fine magazine.