

DISCOVERIES & REDISCOVERIES TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER THOMAS MERTON'S DEATH

by **ROBERT E. DAGGY**

December 10, 1993, marked, of course, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death and the event was attended throughout the year and around the world by conferences, symposiums, celebrations, and commemorations. One of the most interesting of these was the "interreligious prayer gathering" held "in honor of the life, work, and interreligious inspiration of Father Louis Thomas Merton" on December 10 at St. Louis Hospital Chapel in Bangkok, Thailand. John Bowers, the artist who provided the cover drawing for this issue attended the service. He writes: "The service was very beautiful with Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists participating." He also adds that there was "no coincidence intended" in holding the gathering at St. Louis Hospital. (Actually Merton said mass at St. Louis on December 8, 1968, two days before his death.)

The talks and addresses at the various events, while usually interesting and frequently offering insight into Merton, his writings and his concerns, did not offer startling new information. I agree with Michael Mott, who says in the new "Afterword" written for the 1993 reprint of *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*: "I hope I can say that since 1984 there have been no great revelations regarding Merton's life." I would, in fact, go a step further and say that there will be no great revelations in Merton's private journals, now released for publication after twenty-five years. The journals will, I think, help flesh in and flesh out areas which may be "bony" and they may provide us with nuances, little flashes of insight which help us to understand some things better. And that is precisely what the "discoveries and rediscoveries" made in 1993 (to which I was in some way a party) do for us. Some of the discoveries grew from what I like to call Merton quests.

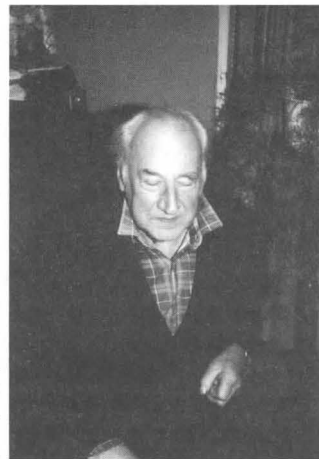
Quest I: On Sunday, October 17, after the "Merton Symposium" at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York, had ended, Jonathan Montaldo, Robert Moore, Paul Pearson, Paul Ruttle, and I set off across Long Island to find the Jenkins house, the home of Merton's grandparents, and Zion Episcopal Church. We found the house, not far as it turned out from St. John's. It was less exciting than we had thought and looked much smaller than it seemed in the pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Just across the way was Zion Episcopal Church (I intend to suggest to Julia Upton that if she holds another Merton symposium at St. John's, Zion Church would be a nice place to have the conference liturgy.) The church itself was locked and so we walked down to the house of the rector, Patrick Holtkamp, where I was sent to the door to ask if we could see inside the church. His pleasant wife greeted me at the door, accompanied by a Heinz 57-type dog. When I explained why we were there, she exclaimed, pointing down at the dog: "This is Thomas Merton! Say, hello, Merty!" Merton probably wouldn't have minded having a dog named for him, but I'm certain he'd have been as taken aback as I was when I learned that the friendly Merty (who took to me like a dog to a biscuit) is a *female* dog.

Quest II: That same Sunday afternoon, Sheila Hempstead and her husband, Christian, left St. John's on another venture: to find Patricia Priest who had eventually inherited the Jenkins house. After the death of Ruth Jenkins Merton in October 1921, Elsie Hauck Holahan came to the Jenkins home in Douglaston to help take care of Tom (age six) and John Paul (age 3). She was a widow with two children, Peter and Patricia. She became a kind of "companion" to Martha Jenkins, Merton's grandmother, who suffered from diabetes and other ailments. Ruth's unmarried brother, Harold Brewster Jenkins (1889-1927), also lived with his parents, Sam and "Mattie" Jenkins. After Sam's death in 1936 and Mattie's death in 1937, Harold Jenkins married

Elsie Holahan in October 1938. When he died in 1972, the Jenkins home with all its contents, including materials belonging to Ruth, Owen, Tom, and John Paul Merton, was left to Elsie. At her death, it was left to her children and thus the house and its contents passed from the Jenkins/Merton family. Sheila Hempstead gives an account of her quest in “Some of the Treasures of a Sunday Afternoon.”

Quest III: On December 13, 1993, after the “Merton Conference” at Winchester, England, Paul Pearson and I (Bob Daggy) motored to West Horsley, Surrey, on a quest. Thomas Merton had mentioned two first cousins in his letters: Merton and Richard Trier, sons of his father’s sister, Gwynned Fanny Merton Trier (1885-1986), whom Merton called “Aunt Gwyn.” I had recently discovered in John Howard Griffin’s materials that in 1975 Frank Merton Trier lived in the family home—“Fairlawn” in West Horsley. I alerted Paul who found a phone listing still for “F. M. Trier” in West Horsley. On my arrival in England, we made arrangements to call on him.

That Monday we called Merton Trier from a local pub and he invited us to come over to “Fairlawn,” just blocks away as it turned out. We were greeted cordially by him and introduced to his wife, Lady Sheelagh Trier, daughter of the Earl of Mayo. He showed us several things, family photographs and the like. But the most exciting items in Merton Trier’s possession are four early stories written by Thomas Merton, all in rather beat-up looking, schoolboy notebooks, and all in Merton’s handwriting, unmistakable even in his school days. Merton Trier told us that Merton often wrote stories to entertain his younger cousins. He himself, he told us, was born in 1919 and was four years younger than Merton. His younger brother Richard, who died in 1968 (the same year as his cousin) was born in 1920. “The Haunted Castle” was written for the younger boys while Merton was spending the Christmas holidays with his “Aunt Gwyn” and her family at Windsor. It is a “Winnie-the-Pooh” story. Thomas Merton was later to stay abreast of current literature, but he seems to have developed this skill at an early age. A. A. Milne’s first Pooh story had been published only three years earlier in 1926. Merton changes the names, but the Milne influence is there. An interesting aside is that Joan Baez has recorded that, on her visit to Gethsemani in the 1960s, Merton himself looked “considerably like Winnie-the-Pooh.”



MERTON TRIER

A DISCOVERY & REDISCOVERY: In 1960, Sister Elizabeth Ann Brazzel, OSB, was teaching English at the High School in Beatrice, Nebraska. She was a member of the community at Mount Saint Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas. As part of a class project, her senior year students sent letters to Thomas Merton. The letter, “Another Stop on the Road to Joy,” was his response to Sister Elizabeth Ann and her students. The letter came to my attention when Sister Noreen Hurter, OSB, read it at “The First Kansas Merton Conference” at Mount Saint Scholastica in November, 1993. It certainly would have been included in the last section of *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*—“Letters to and about Young People”—had I been aware of it before the volume was published.

The remainder of this issue includes Larry Cunningham’s discovery of interest in Merton in the East in “Teaching Thomas Merton in Asia;” Donald Allchin’s sermon from the “Merton Conference” at Winchester, England (after a report from Paul Pearson about the formation of “The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland”); James Conner’s homily from the Merton commemoration at the Abbey of Gethsemani; a poem by Chris McDonnell and Patrick McDonald’s reflection on Steven Spielberg’s award winning film, *Schindler’s List*. The issue concludes with George Kilcourse’s review of the fourth volume of the Merton letters, Christine M. Bochen’s edition of *The Courage for Truth*.