

Tracking the Pilgrim of the Transcendent

Review of

Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton

A Film by Morgan Atkinson

Louisville, KY: Duckworks Inc, 2007

DVD: 68 minutes / \$25.00

Reviewed by **William H. Shannon**

Whereon rolled the ocean, thereon was his home;
Where a blue sky, and glowing clime extends,
He had the passion and the power to roam.

– Lord Byron

This DVD opens and closes with vast ocean waves breaking under azure skies, waves ever coming, always changing. This may well serve as the director's metaphor for Thomas Merton, pilgrim of the Transcendent. Merton was a roamer, never content to remain in one place, ever searching, never fully sated with the results of the search.

Inevitably this recording will be compared with Paul Wilkes's video of some years ago. An immediately evident difference is in the persons interviewed. Wilkes had the advantage of interviewing a wide variety of people who knew Thomas Merton personally and in different aspects of his life, such as his publishers Robert Giroux and James Loughlin, his literary agent Naomi Burton Stone, his friend Sr. Mary Luke Tobin and a host of others who at one time or another entered into Merton's life and were involved in various aspects of that life. Morgan Atkinson had to rely primarily on a second generation of Merton scholars who knew Merton only through his writings. It is true that several monks of Gethsemani who knew Merton are interviewed, but briefly; the far greater number of interviews are with persons (such as Lawrence Cunningham and Jonathan Montaldo) who are well acquainted with Merton's writing, but had no experience of him in person. This obvious difference between the two recordings put me in mind of Robert Browning's poem about the death of the last apostle: "How will it be when no more saith: 'I saw.'"

The recording begins with Merton's Columbia days, with brief flashbacks to his disastrous year at Clare College in Cambridge. It moves swiftly from his conversion story and baptism to the first trip to Gethsemani for a retreat and then his later visit to stay for good. Much of the time – rightly so – is spent on Merton's life at Gethsemani and his growth as a monk and a priest. He came to Gethsemani to find God and in finding God he found all his sisters and brothers. He came to the monastery to escape the world only to find that he had brought the world along with him. It was a different world, though, a world transformed by God's grace and presence. It was the experience

William H. Shannon, a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, NY, is the founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society. He served as General Editor of the Letters of Thomas Merton and edited two of the volumes, *The Hidden Ground of Love* and *Witness to Freedom*; he is the author of numerous works on Merton, including the now classic *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* and the biography *Silent Lamp*, as well as other books on Christian spirituality such as *Seeking the Face of God*.

of this world charged with God's presence that Merton felt he must share with others. As he put it, they had the right to a share in his solitude.

Lawrence Cunningham expressed the view of many Merton scholars when he described Merton as the greatest spiritual writer of the twentieth century. It was a spirituality that inevitably flowed into social activism. John Dear saw Merton as a peacemaker, who, different from many Catholics of his time (including most priests and bishops), believed that in our day working for the total abolition of war was the most pressing duty imposed by God on all of us. This was a stance not readily accepted by his superiors of the Trappist Order.

I was pleased to see that Dom James Fox – Merton's superior for most of his monastic life – is not pilloried, as has so often happened when the relationship of the monk and his abbot is discussed. Though their differences about monastic life and its meaning were many, Dom James respected Merton. He showed this in different ways. Recognizing his need for solitude, Dom James allowed him to use an old tool-shed (which Merton called "St. Ann's") for some extra time alone. He also chose to put the training of future monks in Merton's hands by appointing him as Master of Novices. He was gentle though firm in dealing with Merton's relationship with the student nurse. Daniel Berigan, the one non-monk in the recording who knew Merton in person, spoke of the Abbot's fairness and gentleness in enabling Merton to work his way through this unnerving period of his life.

One event that it seems a biographer of Merton must deal with is this brief "love affair" with a student nurse. Atkinson's narrative of this event seemed to me overdrawn and the symbols overmuch (though the image of the fawn, looking straight at you and then scurrying off into the forest was insightful, the moving feet of an otherwise unseen nurse were not). When space was scarce and there was so much to say, it was well out of proportion to devote seven minutes to this event, while allotting very little time to his Asian trip: just about two minutes from takeoff in San Francisco to his sudden and unexpected death in Bangkok. There is hardly anything about his experience of the East in the East.

One question that came to mind as I reviewed this recording: what precisely was the audience the producer had in mind? It was hardly a scholarly audience, as the recording breaks no new ground. It would work well as an introduction to Merton for readers who have just discovered him; also for the increasing number of courses on Merton in high schools or colleges, sending such readers to Merton's writings to fill in the details of events that limitation of time and space forced the producer of this recording to leave untold.

The recording closes with a fitting challenge voiced by Michael Mott: "The fire has gone somewhere else. Where has the fire gone?"