



Thomas Merton at Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, Ky. (Photo by James Laughlin of New Directions Publishing.)

The simple life

Thomas Merton's tribute to the Shakers in a new volume

By **PATRICK HART**

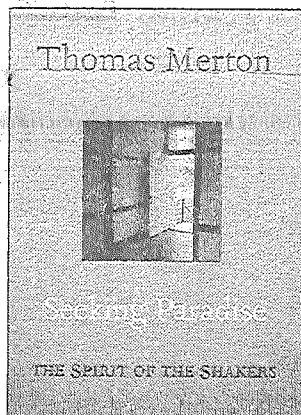
Special to The Courier-Journal

THOMAS MERTON first encountered Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, Ky., in his early years at the Abbey of Gethsemani, before the Blue Grass Parkway was built. Monks in the 1940s who had doctors' appointments in Lexington traveled a more scenic backwoods route, which passed through Harrodsburg and Pleasant Hill. As Merton recorded in his journals, he

always enjoyed visiting Shakertown, and, if the weather was congenial, he photographed the old buildings and furniture. On a number of occasions, he brought out-of-state visitors with him to experience it, such as Dean Donald Allchin of Canterbury and Ox-

ford, as well as poet James Laughlin of New Directions Publishing in New York, who is responsible for an excellent photograph taken of Merton at Pleasant Hill, included in this volume. About this time there was a movement growing among friends in Lexington to restore the old buildings, of which Merton was enthusiastically supportive. Edward Deming Andrews, the nation's foremost authority on Shakers, came to Gethsemani to see Merton. They discussed Andrews' great love for the Shaker spirit and its message of simplicity and peace. Letters at Bellarmine University show that Merton continued to correspond with Andrews, and wrote an introduction for Andrews' book on Shaker furniture, "Religion in Wood." Merton even did a little fund raising for the project among friends in the Louisville area, explaining in a letter to Andrews that he intended to contact The Courier-Journal's publisher at the time, Barry Bingham Sr.

"Seeking Paradise" brings together for the first time Merton's writings and photographs that evoke the true spirit of the Shakers. It is ably edited by Paul M. Pearson, director and archivist of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. The volume opens with an informative introduction in which Pearson explores Merton's fascination with the Shakers and draws analogies between their simple spirit and that of the early Trappists who arrived in Kentucky at about the same time.



In addition to the selection of Merton photos, there are more recent ones of Shaker villages such as South Union, Ky., and several in New England, which were photographed by Pearson. If one would venture a criticism of the book, it would be directed more at the publisher than the editor for the rather poor reproduction of the photographs. Having seen some of the originals at the McGrath Gallery at Bellarmine in conjunc-

tion with the 40th anniversary of the opening of the Merton collection, this volume in no way represents the superb quality of the originals. But this is a minor flaw in an otherwise fine volume that would grace anyone's library.

The reviewer, who was the last secretary to Thomas Merton prior to his death in 1968, is a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Ky. He is the editor of Merton's papers and journals and the author of numerous books on the famed spiritual figure.

Book Review

Seeking Paradise

The Spirit of the Shakers
By Thomas Merton
Edited and introduction
by Paul M. Pearson
Orbis Books
125 pp., \$24

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