

any one in isolation will be of much use! They are often spotty. However, listened to for what they are they do provide much information of use for Merton's students right down into the present moment.

Jim Forest
**LIVING WITH WISDOM:
 A LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON**
 Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991

Reviewed by Gordon Zahn

Another biography of Thomas Merton! One can almost hear its revered subject grumbling in the background, "Enough already." Consider, if you will, that young man who entered through the Gethsemani gate so many years ago consumed with the conviction and desire to leave the distractions and tumult of "subway" society for the cloister "where everything makes sense." Certainly he could not anticipate the flood of books, articles, dissertations, and the like devoted to him and his works since his untimely death in Asia. Nor, one suspects, would he have wanted it.

Even so, there is a place for Jim Forest's addition to that flood. His book "works" as a model of brevity and condensation comprehensive enough in coverage to provide a suitable introduction to this truly exceptional man and holy monk. Combining material from Merton's best-seller autobiography, diaries, and a broad sampling of his published writings with judicious references to other more extensive source materials, Forest presents a basic literary biography highlighted with additional insights drawn from his own personal correspondence and friendship with Merton. The reader is given a taste of everything: Merton's poetry; his spiritual meditations and more profound theological and philosophical works; and (of special interest to this reviewer) his essays addressing the gravest social evils of our time, racism and war.

Lurking between the lines we even get occasional glimpses of the "problem" monk about whom no detailed biography is likely ever to be written. And Merton certainly must have been a problem in the traditional Trappist setting in a number of ways. Few abbots or other superiors would choose to contend with a monk whose personal

correspondents include the world's foremost literary figures; an assortment of revolutionaries and statesmen; even, on occasion, popes (who actually respond!). So eminent a "celebrity in residence" might also be a source of strain for monks who, like that young man at the gate, had sought detachment from the world only to find "the world" intruding upon their monastic peace in the form of so steady a stream of prominent visitors.

This is not to suggest Merton's brother monks did not share in the widespread respect and recognition he received—some of them, after all, may have been inspired by his example and writings to become Trappists in the first place—or that he set himself apart from or above community bonds and purpose. Nevertheless, there may have been a measure of unavoidable resentment of allowances made for him and for his work (the private workspace, extraordinary travel opportunities, etc.) that were special privileges. Just as Merton made no secret of his disdain for the monastery's commercial operations—"cheeses for Jesus," as he put it—there must have been others who shared the feeling that it was "unseemly" for a monk to engage in social controversy or issue public pronouncements against an ongoing war. To such critics, so grave an offense against patriotism would have been fully deserving of the disciplinary silence to which he was subjected for a time.

If Merton was a "problem" to Forest (and this reviewer) he was also a prophet and, yes, quite possibly a saint. It is not unusual, of course, for the three to go together. It is doubtful that the complexity of Thomas Merton will ever be fully resolved, no matter how often or thoroughly the attempt is made by biographers and scholars. Consider the striking contradiction between his repeated requests to be permitted to enter some remote and more restricted Order even as he was reaching out to maintain and expand, even in his hermitage, an incredibly wide range of interests and associations. His devotion to the monastic ideal and its discipline is beyond question; yet this did not deter him from circumventing his official silencing by distributing in mimeographed *samizdat* form materials he was not permitted to publish. As one privileged to be on his mailing list, I confess to being almost as shocked as pleased to get them. Now, reading the Forest volume, I find myself even more shocked by the instances of outright disobedience he reports.

All who honor Merton and his works owe a great debt to Dom Frederic. How different things would have been had that worthy Abbot taken the more predictable course and advised the young novice to separate himself from the literary interests and associations linking

him to his worldly past lest they become obstacles to his calling to the Trappist life and ideals. Yet even admitting the great loss that would have meant for us *and the Church*, there remains that haunting image of that young aspirant at the gate. The multitude of biographies and scholarly studies notwithstanding, we will never know for sure what, in retrospect, he might have preferred for himself. All we can say with any measure of confidence is that in the end his restless heart found its rest where he always knew it would be, in God's grace and enduring peace.

Peter Kountz

**THOMAS MERTON AS WRITER AND MONK
A CULTURAL STUDY - 1915-1951**

Brooklyn, New York: Carlton Publishing Company Inc., 1991
vii, 208 pages/no price listed/hard cover

Reviewed by Richard Weber, O.C.S.O.

To what extent Thomas Merton sat down and deliberately and consciously engineered the *causa sui* project of his own immortality has yet to be fully investigated. In the past two decades however, scores of studies have appeared, all dealing with some aspect of the Merton corpus. That Merton chose religion as the vehicle for his vast literary project is most significant. Other options were open: history, literature, psychology, etc., but it is becoming more and more evident that religion and all its accoutrements was best suited to the Merton temperament, and writing the best vehicle of its expression.

Merton, early on, manufactured a huge dilemma about being both a writer and a monk. At the same time and in the same monastery another monk wrote and published, had best-sellers, etc., and didn't give it a second thought. Why Merton made such a bugaboo about everything is perhaps the point. Peter Kountz tries to throw some light on this subject.

To this end Kountz limits himself to the first thirty-six years of Merton's life—that is twenty-six years outside the monastery, and the first ten years inside. It is the twenty-six formative years "in the world" that made Merton a writer, the ten years inside the monastery, a particular kind.