



John Howard Griffin



John Howard Griffin, longtime friend and correspondent of Thomas Merton's and at one time his "official" biographer, died September 9, 1980, in Fort Worth, Texas, after a protracted illness of several years' duration.

Born in Texas and educated in France, he entered the struggle for human and social justice as a teenager by helping to smuggle Jews out of Nazi Germany. Blinded by injuries in World War II, he dismissed the possibility that his blindness was psychosomatic, caused by the emotional shock of participating in bombing raids. He gave up his plans to study medicine and become a psychiatrist, but, while blind, wrote such novels as *THE DEVIL RIDES OUTSIDE* (1952) and *NUNI* (1956). In January 1957 he regained his sight suddenly one day.

In 1959 he undertook the project for which he will be most remembered by history, an assignment from the black magazine *SEPIA* to pose as a Negro and travel through several Southern States. He darkened his skin by the use of drugs and vegetable dye, polled his brown hair, and wore dark glasses for the four weeks he lived as a black man in the South. His account of the hostility and discrimination he encountered, *BLACK LIKE ME* (1961), became an international bestseller, a controversial conversation piece, a Hollywood film, and a manifesto for the American civil-rights movement.

He began corresponding with Thomas Merton in 1962 after meeting him while on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The friendship continued until Merton's death in 1968. A photographer of note, as well as writer and musicologist, Griffin took some of the best-known and most widely-circulated photographs of Merton. He introduced Merton to photography in the mid-60s and was his mentor in this new form of expression, developing and printing the photographs Merton took. It was, in fact, Griffin's camera which Merton took with him on his trip to Asia. The camera was returned to Griffin from Bangkok, the negatives of Merton's last pictures amazingly preserved from damage.

After Merton's death, Griffin accepted appointment as his "official" biographer from the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust. He lived and worked in the Hermitage in 1969 in an attempt to come to grips with Merton's life. In 1970 he published what he called his "silent study" of Merton, *A HIDDEN WHOLENESS*, a collection of photographs by and of Merton. Though he regarded the biography as his "most important project," ill-health and the problem of over-closeness to his subject prevented its completion. In an article titled "Dying Like Me" (*U.S. Catholic*, 1977), he announced that he would not finish the biography.

His inability to finish the biography was a disappointment and denied the Merton world the valuable insights of a close and empathetic friend. Griffin did, however, leave a body of writing on Merton which we cite here.

GRIFFIN'S MERTON MATERIALS in the MERTON CENTER:

1. "The controversial Merton." In *THOMAS MERTON: PROPHET IN THE BELLY OF A PARADOX*; ed. Gerald Sean Twomey (New York, Paulist Press, 1978): pp.80-91.
2. Correspondence of Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin:
58 Letters from Griffin to Merton, December 12, 1962 - July 13, 1968.
21 Letters from Merton to Griffin, October 29, 1963 - August 3, 1968.
3. "Description of cover photos of Thomas Merton taken by John Howard Griffin." *SIGN* 44 (October 1964): no. 3, p. 9.
4. "Dying like me." *U.S. CATHOLIC* 43 (November 1977): no. 11, pp. 22-26.

5. "(Review of) *Figures for an apocalypse*, by Thomas Merton." VOICES (1948): no. 134, p. 60.
6. "Les grandes amities." CONTINUUM 7 (Summer 1969): no. 2, pp. 286-294.
7. A HIDDEN WHOLENESS: THE VISUAL WORLD OF THOMAS MERTON; photographs by Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin; text by John Howard Griffin (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1970). 147p.
8. A HIDDEN WHOLENESS: THE VISUAL WORLD OF THOMAS MERTON; reprint edition (Dunwoody, Georgia, Norman S. Berg, 1977). 147p.
9. "I knew the quality of his friendship." In "Thomas Merton: his friends remember him." Edited with an introduction by Jack Wintz, O.F.M. ST. ANTHONY MESSENGER 86 (December 1978): no. 7, p. 39.
10. "In search of Thomas Merton." In THE THOMAS MERTON STUDIES CENTER, by Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin, and Alfred Horrigan (Santa Barbara, Unicorn Press, 1971): pp.17-24.
11. "Interview at the Hermitage, November 6, 1969." Thomas Merton Studies Center Tapes.
12. "The last words of Thomas Merton." Review of *The Asian journal of Thomas Merton*. NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER special supplement 9 (September 28, 1973): pp. 7, 17.
13. "The meaning of Thomas Merton." Oberlin College Merton Festival, November 13, 1972. Merton Events Tapes.
14. "Merton and his camera." NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER 7 (November 20, 1970): pp. 6A-7A.
15. "Monk like me: Merton's biographer." Interview with John Howard Griffin NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER 6 (February 11, 1970): p. 15.
16. "Silent communication." WAY 30 (September 1974): no. 1, pp. 18-21.
17. "Thomas Merton: man as believer." Six Lectures, Bellarmine College, January 22, 23, 24, 29, 30, 31, 1973. Thomas Merton Studies Center Tapes.
18. "(Review of) *Thomas Merton/monk and poet: a critical study*, by George Woodcock." CRITIC 37 (Spring 1979): no. 3, pp. 2-3.
19. TWELVE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS (Greensboro, North Carolina, Unicorn Press, 1973) Unpaged.

John Howard Griffin
in Merton's
Hermitage, 1969.

