

MERTON: THE "CANADIAN CONNECTION"

by
Robert E. Daggy

"Miles of Canadian lakes, blue, bluegreen, & brown,
with woods between, an occasional road...
Olive green, wild stretches of watery land."

So wrote Thomas Merton in September 1968 as he flew over Western Canada on his way to Alaska to give conferences and to scout out sites for a possible hermitage. Three months later he was dead without ever living in a more isolated seclusion, without ever visiting Canada (a rumor that Merton spent a night in Vancouver is not borne out by known evidence; He does, however, note in his journal that, on his flight from Anchorage to San Francisco, the plane had difficulties and, though Merton does not mention it in his journal, the plane may have landed at Vancouver and this landing may have given rise to the rumor). Since his death interest in Merton in Canada has grown consistently and Canadians have contributed some of the most solid scholarship to the ever-burgeoning Merton canon.

I first became aware of this "Canadian Connection" in September 1975, seven years after Merton had flown over those stretches of Canadian lakes, when four Canadian scholars (pictured to the right) "descended" individually and without knowing the others were coming on the Old Merton Room in the Bellarmine College Library. Three --- Donald Grayston, Jeff Roberts & Robert Wiesenbaugh --- came to work on theses, all being done at Canadian institutions. Ross Labrie, already Professor of English at the University of British Columbia, spent a year on sabbatical leave in Louisville to work on his book on Merton. The Thomas Merton Studies Center has hosted visitors from all fifty states, from Australia, England, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Switzerland; from India, Japan, Taiwan; from Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua; but this was, and remains, the only occasion on which four nationals from the same country met and worked at the Center at the same time.

Actually, Merton himself had a number of Canadian "connections". He corresponded with Rabbi Zalman Schachter at the University of Manitoba; with Dr. Raymond Prince of the University of Montréal; with Linda Parsons Sabbath (later founder and director of the Thomas Merton Centre for Contemplative Prayer at Magog, Quebec), with his old friend the Baroness Catherine deHueck Doherty at her Madonna House Apostolate in Combermere, Ontario; with various members of the R.M. Bucke Memorial Society. He, in fact, contributed short articles for the Society's newsletters.

Canadians have made notable contributions to Merton studies and to the fostering of interest in Merton and his works in Canada and elsewhere. Two of the major, well-received books about Merton have been written by Canadians, both faculty members at the University of British Columbia: Ross Labrie's *THE ART OF THOMAS MERTON* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979) and George Woodcock's *THOMAS MERTON/MONK AND POET: A CRITICAL STUDY* (Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 1978 and New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978). There have been theses --- completed and on-going --- by Hunter Brown, Sister Monique Cousineau, Sister Marguerite Davies, Donald Grayston, John Anthony Hassan, Alvin Hergott, Michael Higgins, Gary Hudak, Mark Lodico, Myles Nodar, Peter Onofrio, Sister Peg O'Shea, Jeff Roberts and Robert Wiesenbaugh. There have been scores of articles, published in Canada and the United States, dealing with Merton and his writings. There has been the teaching and thesis-advising about Merton of William Lawlor at McGill and of Herbert Richardson at Toronto.

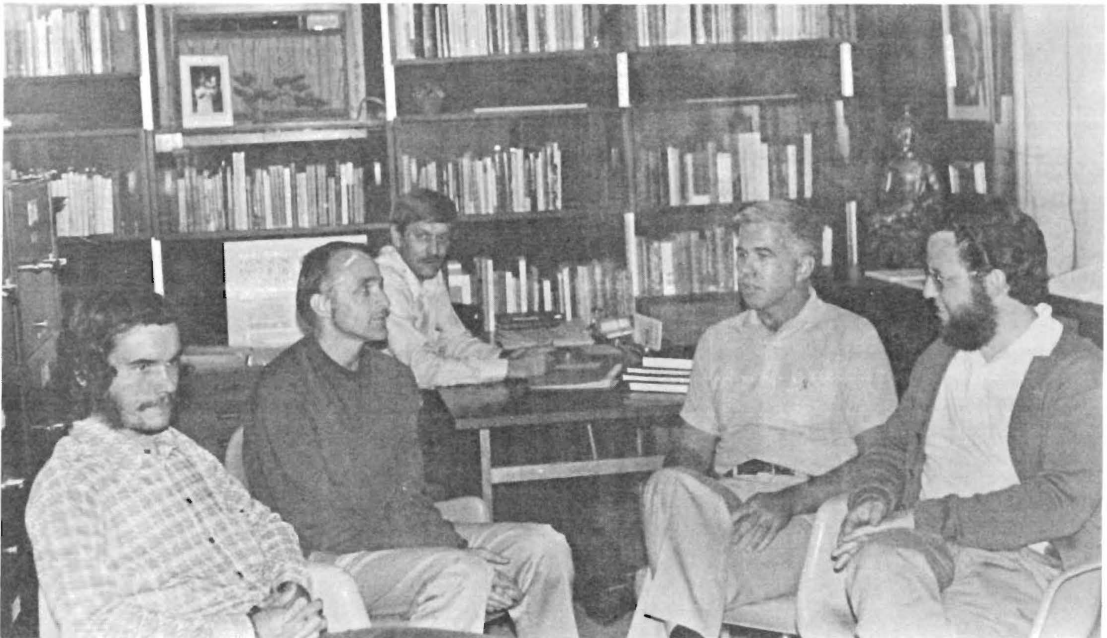
Of the rash of Merton Commemorations in 1978, the first (and with the commemoration at Columbia the largest) was the Merton Symposium held at the Vancouver School of Theology in Vancouver, British Columbia in May 1978. Two special addresses and twenty papers were delivered at this symposium. Some of these papers were published in *THE MESSAGE OF THOMAS MERTON*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), but the bulk of the papers were published in the recent *THOMAS MERTON: PILGRIM IN PROCESS* (Toronto:

Griffin House, 1983). The co-editors of this volume (reviewed later in this issue by William H. Shannon) were the coordinators of the Vancouver Symposium, Donald Grayston and Michael Higgins. We feature an essay by Donald Grayston, "Thomas Merton and Family Violence," in this issue.

One of the side benefits of the Vancouver Symposium was the production and airing of the first major television documentary on Merton. Staff members from the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company) were present at Vancouver and conducted interviews with a number of the participants. Excerpts from these interviews and footage shot in Vancouver and at the Abbey of Gethsemani were woven together into the final production. The documentary, produced by Roman Bittman of the CBC and titled THOMAS MERTON: MONK ON THE RUN, was aired on the "Man Alive Series" in Canada on May 10, 1979.

Though Donald Grayston and Michael Higgins are not speaking only of a Canadian interest in Merton, the words with which they close their introduction to THOMAS MERTON: PILGRIM IN PROCESS help to explain general interest in Merton, not only in Canada, but everywhere.

As one participant in the Symposium remarked, "Merton is like a biblical text. You can take him apart, write commentaries on him, study him in a hundred ways. And at the end of all this, he remains himself, he is just 'there.'" It is because Merton is very much "there" to us that the Symposium was convened. We think it will not by any means be the last occasion on which the friends he continues to make will want to meet to celebrate his achievement and to continue to learn from him, a "pilgrim in process."



Curator Robert Daggy with Four Canadian Visitors
Old Merton Room, Bellarmine Library, September 1975
l. to r.: Jeff Roberts (McGill University, Montreal);
Robert Wiesenbaugh, S.J. (St. Paul's University, Ottawa);
Ross Labrie (University of British Columbia, Vancouver);
Donald Grayston (University of St. Michael's College, Toronto).