

VARIOUS IDENTITIES

Review of
THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON
 by Michael Mott

—Reviewed by **Jim Forest**

About half way into Michael Mott's biography of Thomas Merton, I began listing various Merton identities. In random and fragmentary order, these include: fire fighter, forester, barracks lawyer, patient, wise guy, practical joker, citizen, teacher, neurotic, pioneer, fool, spy, anarchist, ad man, propagandist, existentialist, friend, hermit, convict, escaped prisoner, rebel, pacifist, pessimist, poet, mad poet, traveller, mystic, picnicker, blood donor, cook, solo singer, traveller, incurable infant, and lightning rod. At times he saw himself as a 14th Century Man, and at other times someone especially at home in the 20th. He welcomed renewal, but was distressed with "noisy renewers." He saw himself a "a lover of the Dark Cloud." He identified with an amazing diversity of people, and also with various animals, including the hawk, the deer, the dolphin, the quail, and the grizzly bear. Trying to keep secret from fellow monks who didn't need to know of his forthcoming trip to Asia, in one of his Agent 007 moods he sent packages of books ahead to one of his stopping points, addressing them to Rabbi Vandata. His aliases are in fact quite numerous, and include Fr. Ludovicus, Benedict Monk, Marco J. Frisbee, Joey the Chocolate King, Frisco Jack, R. Higden, Harpo, and Moon Mullins. He was pleased to have been described by some local Kentucky people who encountered him in denim work clothes as a "well read farmer." But at other times he wanted to be known and recognized as Thomas Merton.

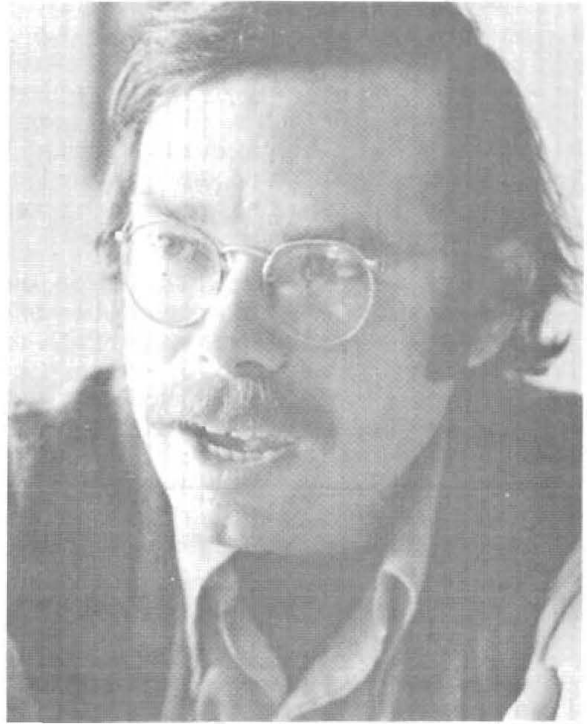
In some measure he has all his aliases and occasional identities. Yet he was painfully aware that no name or anti-name, no identity or attempt to escape identities, offered him his "true face." One of the great prayers of his life, as we learn from Mott's biography, was this: "Teach me to go to the country beyond words and beyond names." He lived long enough for the prayer to be answered. Ironically, the necessary path for him to find that country, which was always nearer than the tip of his nose, was full of works and names.

Within all the labels he occasionally applied to himself, we can add another—saint—one of the few he would not have glued to himself, precisely because it was the only one of real interest to him. This meant for him not becoming a star in the circus of the church, a subject for canonization, but one whose life was at home in God, was centered in God, a person living in God's mercy and forgiveness, someone who is (as Mott says) God-inebriated.

Jim Forest is General Secretary of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and lives in Alkmaar, Holland. Friend of Thomas Merton, he has cited Merton's writings, and the extensive correspondence they shared in the last years of Merton's life, as a major influence on his commitment to peacemaking. He is the co-editor of *A Penny a Copy*, a collection of writings from the *Catholic Worker*, and the author of *Thomas Merton: a Pictorial Biography* (Paulist Press, 1980) and *Thomas Merton's Struggle with Peacemaking* (Benet Press, 1983).

(Merton was also, sometimes to his great annoyance, people-inebriated and an avid discover of friends.)

Many seek to center their lives in God and surely a great many people now living are saints. But very few are as gifted in writing about finding the path of grace as Merton, and few so determined to identify and remove all the idols and obstacles impeding the way. Merton's Don Quixote-like attacks on various windmills, within and without, is really the main substance of his life, and of Mott's biography. The quest included exploring not a few blind alleys, and yet not even the detours were wasted. His accounts of discoveries and disappointments provide us, and are likely to provide others for many generations to come, with useful, encouraging material as we make our own way. Mott's book makes it less likely to get trapped in the detours.



JIM FOREST
(Photo by Janet Charles)

I don't think any other book about Merton has done so well in catching Merton whole, with all his seeming contradictions, all of which were essential to his wholeness. One sees him, especially through his letters and journals, as having a spirit that pulled him forcefully in opposite directions. He was like the pair of trousers in the Levis symbol which, though being connected to mules who are pulling against each other, is held together by its rivets: for Merton the rivets were his faith, his prayer life, his community, and his vows. (Regarding his vows, he commented to a friend that poverty wasn't so hard, chastity was more difficult, but the real killer was obedience. Perhaps even more difficult was the Trappist vow of stability—a commitment to find the way of grace where you are and to give up the search for greener pastures and holier places elsewhere.)

While this is one of the most gripping biographies I have ever read, the work of a particularly gifted and insightful writer, I do have some complaints. Mostly they are small ones. For example, Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl are friends and co-workers but have never been husband and wife to one another. The six-year prison sentence that Mott mentions at one point was not for both Dan and Phil Berrigan but only for Phil (in this instance for Phil and three others who had poured blood on draft files, not destroyed them as Mott says). Dan and Phil were later tried together for burning draft records (not 1-A cards), but by the time of the trial of the Catonsville Nine, Merton was already in Asia and, as it turned out, a few weeks from his death.

Every biographer of Merton has emphasized Merton's immense difficulties with censorship, but there is a lot of new material on the subject in Mott's book, partly because of his own interviews and research and partly due to the restricted personal journals to which the trustees of the Merton Legacy gave him access. One finds here a long struggle with the "politics of permission" on a great many subjects. One learns to be aware that much that Merton wrote on such controversial issues as war and nonviolence, if it was to be published under his name, had to be approved, and that Merton had to write with the blind spots of his censors and superiors in mind. But in private letters and in his own journals, he was free to speak freely. Thus it is exciting to have such access as Mott provides to the hidden (at times the prohibited) Merton.

There is not only the prohibited Merton, but the scandalous Merton. Merton was a source of scandal both before and after becoming a Catholic. While a student at Cambridge, he fathered an illegitimate child, who may well be still alive and not dead in the Blitz as I and others have previously written. Apparently he had an adulterous affair shortly before becoming a monk, while teaching at St. Bonaventure's College. In the latter part of his life, he fell deeply in love with a nurse in Louisville. It was an engagement in which he finally discovered both his capacity to love another and to receive love. For all its pain and incompleteness, it seems to have been a healing experience that helped open the way for the spiritual breakthroughs that occurred in the last year of his life. (I am sure many readers will share my hope that the poems he wrote to "S" will eventually be published.)

For me the great joy of the book is the new light it throws on the spiritual life of Merton. He was careful to say and write very little about what was most hidden and fragile, what could so easily be damaged by words. Perhaps the book's greatest treasure is a letter he wrote to a Moslem, Abdul Aziz, in which he speaks about his method of meditation. His life of prayer, he writes, is actually very simple. "It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love."

Elsewhere Mott develops Merton's attention to the spirituality of the Russian Orthodox Church, his use of the Jesus prayer, and the icon which he carried with him in his travels.

I would have been glad if there had been one or more long extracts from the remarkable talk—"A Life Free From Care"—that Merton gave when he was about to move into his hermitage. In few places did Merton speak or write so simply and joyfully of his own sense of God's presence: "Life is this simple—we are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to Him and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God manifests Himself everywhere, in everything, in people and in things and in nature and events...so that it becomes very obvious that He is everywhere and in everything and we can't be without Him. You cannot be without God. It's impossible. It's simply impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it. What is it that makes the world opaque? It is care." (Of course today Merton probably wouldn't use masculine pronouns for God. It is exciting to find in Mott's book how attentive Merton was to the feminine qualities of God, and to meet a most special woman who entered his life in a dream named Proverb.)

I repent of any criticisms in this review that would cause anyone to hesitate in getting and reading this most special book, truly a great biography. It not only presents a Merton that is nearly as complex (and funny) as the real Merton, but draws the reader into the deep, vital, often ignored questions that were so crucial to Merton. For the important thing about him, as he wrote before becoming a monk, was not "where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair" but rather "what I am living for... and... what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for."