

TWO QUESTIONS

Review of
THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON
 by Michael Mott

—Reviewed by **Rosemary Haughton**

Reading Michael Mott's biography is a very strange and discomfiting experience for anyone who remembers the Church before Vatican II, and the years of tumult and ambivalence which followed. This is an excellent biography - detailed but very readable, well written, witty, poignant, sensitive to the turns and twists of a stormy and ambiguous development, compassionate and yet astringent. (There are some minor inaccuracies which can be irritating to those who recognize them; they are peripheral and do not detract from the main thrust). The strangeness and discomfort arise from two different questions which emerge. Neither of them is commented on by the biographer, perhaps with deliberate intention, perhaps because being so close to the narrative makes them less apparent, perhaps in the first case because Michael Mott has not shared the experience and need not be disturbed as one who has. In a short review, I shall confine myself to these two issues which arise out of a complex and fascinating book.

The experience that prompts the first question is one shared by millions; the struggle to combine a belief in the validity of religious authority with the need for certain kinds of personal freedom which come in conflict with the dicta of that authority, whether it be Roman or Abbatial. Merton's journals, and the evidence of his behavior, show this conflict very sharply. He accepted for a long time, as most of us did, the rightness of an outside authority that could override desires, needs, and even conscience. In some ways it seems he longed for and needed that exterior limitation. He embraced a church founded on that principle, along with thousands of other converts, including myself. To read this story creates a most disturbing and dream-like *deja-vu* experience, but the later parts of it are more disturbing still. We are shown Merton, still accepting authority in principle, but in practice constantly and increasingly finding ways to circumvent it, indulging in little deceptions, shifts, games and evasions, making use of permission to do one thing, to do something different which would have been forbidden. This was especially the case during the time when the first experience of real love broke his defenses wide open, and he pursued every opportunity to meet or call the woman he loved. One's sympathies are all

Rosemary Haughton, like Merton a convert to Roman Catholicism, was born in London of an English-Jewish mother and an American father. In 1948, she married Algy Haughton; they had ten children and various foster children. In 1984, they founded a community called Lothlorien, in rural southwest Scotland, whose work is with mentally troubled people. She is also part of a small community at Wellspring House in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a place of hospitality for people in crisis. Her best known books (among thirty or so titles) include *The Transformation of Man* (Templegate), *The Catholic Thing* (Templegate) and *The Passionate God* (Paulist). Her essay, "Then and Now," was included in the revised edition of *Thomas Merton/Monk: a Monastic Tribute*.

with Merton, yet the double-standard, the deceptions, are so blatant that they oblige the reader to realize that this is the kind of thing many of us were forced to - and found acceptable behavior. It is a measure of the distance we have come that most would now reject such behavior as dishonest, and one wonders how Thomas Merton would have viewed it, had he lived.

That brings me to the second issue which remains with me after reading this book. It is the question of Merton's death, and the reactions to it. Mott concludes, as most have done, that it was indeed an accident, though there are enough unanswered questions and oddities around the event to give some justification to those who think he may have been murdered because of his controversial stands on issues of peace and justice. In a way it doesn't matter, for the deeper question arises from the tendency of most commentators to search for signs that his death at that time was "meant", whatever the human cause; that he had somehow completed his allotted span. I have read little that reflected any sense of outrage at this premature cutting off. If any is felt it is muted by a fear of seeming to question "God's will". Why are we so eager to blame God for horrible events? Does it make us feel better to resign our capacity for feeling and judgment in favor of some inscrutable decision we may not question?

Death is the natural end of human life - we need to learn to live it, accept it, yet if the Christian creed means anything it means that our God is "not the God of the dead but of the living", that death is not God's will, but an enemy. So we have the paradox that death is inevitable, yet a shocking outrage. And we consider the death - accidental or not - of this man, who, the journals make clear, after so many years of pain and struggle and deep desire had reached a point of revelation and transformation, and was beginning to be the person he was capable of being. At this point he was killed. There is something very horrible about this, a sense of the panic reaction of the powers of evil, however we choose to conceive of them. Such a human being, free, compassionate, wise, able to call and encourage, to bring reason and hope, was needed, and we lack him. If he were alive now he would not be very old.

Yesterday, I found myself imagining him sitting under the dripping plastic shelter with the woman of Greenham Common, in tune with their energy, their peace, their joy and humor and hope. He could have brought a sober joy to many peace people, a sense of right freedom and right anger to us all, having himself learned those things so hardily. Himself descended from Welsh forebears, (and wanting, just then, to visit that land of myth and music) he might have heard the words of a Welsh poet - "Do not go gently into that good night, Rage, rage against the dying of the light".



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Photographed by Thomas Merton