

MAN IN MOTION

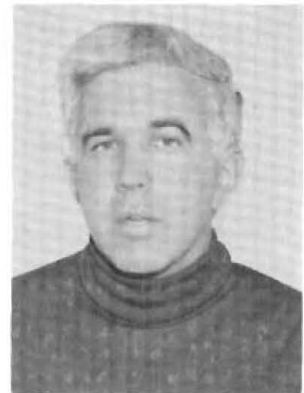
Review of *THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON* by Michael Mott

—Reviewed by **Ross Labrie**

When James Laughlin visited Vancouver a couple of years ago, he told me how much he missed Thomas Merton. “He was so much fun,” Laughlin recalled wistfully. In his preface to *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* Michael Mott writes that he has tried to bring back some “balance” to the portrayal of Merton by including the “laughter of a deeply serious man.” While Merton’s humor and high spirits are felt in this excellent biography, it is still his dramatic, spiritual openness which attracts the reader, including Mott himself.

While Mott’s tracing of Merton’s life is formally structured around a range of real and symbolic mountains, the implicit pattern that eventually emerges is one that is familiar to readers of Merton - the quest for solitude in order to allow the soul to breathe — and the countervailing, bottomless loneliness that solitude inevitably brings with it. In his struggle to balance himself between these two internal forces Merton has provided twentieth-century readers with some unique literature. As man and artist, Thomas Merton, who had taken a lifetime vow to stay put, was above all a man in motion.

What surprised me in reading *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* was how little I was surprised by the treasure of hitherto unpublished writing and fact which Mott has brought to light. Somehow, in spite of censorship both by others and by Merton himself, the paradigm of his published life had, for the most part, faithfully suggested the outline of the life which was hidden from view. Nevertheless, Mott vividly and patiently fills in the the spaces of that life with superbly researched documentation, refined perception, and engaging novelistic skill. In addition, in providing the reader with a wider perspective of Merton’s experience than he himself could possibly have had, Mott subtly modifies our impression of Merton’s autobiographical response to others. In recounting Merton’s sense of chilled rejection by his mother, for example, Mott brings out Ruth Merton’s anxieties about her painter husband’s chronic



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inability to provide for his family, and in so doing broadens our understanding of Merton's unsympathetic portrait of his mother.

A new objectivity is also brought to bear on the relationship between Merton and Dom James Fox. Reaching into the hitherto restricted journals, Mott brings out Merton's admission of his need for and dependence upon this abbot, who otherwise appears such a constraining figure. While, however, there is little doubt that Dom James provided Merton with a much-needed brake on his own volatile enthusiasms, it is also evident that the succession of Flavian Burns in the late sixties gave Merton a much richer sense of the relationship between an abbot and his community than Merton had experienced under Dom James. One is struck by Merton's impatience towards his abbot/father, Dom James, by his ambivalent attitude toward his real father, and by his fiercely uncomplicated attachment to God as father. In this connection, in a letter, the Polish writer, Czeslaw Milosz, for example, accuses Merton of overlooking the dark and destructive aspects of nature, a charge which Merton does not refute. For him, nature was, in Whitman's words, the "handkerchief of the Lord, bearing the owner's name someway in the corners."

At long last the love affair between Merton and the young nurse, "S", has been illuminated after years of speculation and rumor. Mott deals with the matter sensitively and judiciously, capturing not only what poignancy the relationship had for Merton but also what the furtive romance cost the young woman. Mott's observation that the experience led Merton to discover "his authentic wholeness in authentic love" should probably be balanced against Merton's abiding impression that his had been a life filled with unfulfilled possibilities - as can be seen in his evocative recollection of Ann Winsor - possibilities that would fortunately keep a sense of completeness forever beyond his reach.

Although, for reasons of space, Mott deals only in passing with Merton as literary artist, his comments are usually apt and suggestive. An example is his acute observation that in Merton's best writing the "concentration and the impatience come together to produce a sense of immediacy and urgency." At first sight, I remember thinking, Merton's criticism appears to be simply the mirror of his own preoccupations as an artist. His Edenic sense of the artist, however, allowed him to pursue criticism at its most fundamental level - so that we come to understand what gives art value for us.

In this connection, one cannot help but feel that there is much that is artful and valuable in Michael Mott's book about Thomas Merton. The sitter, who wanted, finally, to hold nothing back, would have been pleased with the likeness taken of him.