

MERTON & HIS BOSWELLS

Four Essays on Recently Published & Reprinted “Biographies”

—by Virginia Spencer Carr, Robert E. Daggy,
Richard J. Hauser, S.J. & Gregory J. Ryan

VIRGINIA SPENCER CARR is Chair of the English Department at Georgia State University and the author of *Dos Passos: A Life* and *The Lonely Hunter*, a biography of Carson McCullers. ROBERT E. DAGGY is Director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center and co-editor (with Marquita E. Breit) of the forthcoming *Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography*. RICHARD J. HAUSER, S.J., chairs the Religion Department at Creighton University and did his doctoral dissertation, *The Value of Abraham H. Maslow’s Personality Theory for Understanding the Approach to Christian Prayer in Selected Writings of Thomas Merton*, at Catholic University. GREGORY J. RYAN teaches in Wall Township, New Jersey, and has written several articles, including “Who is It That has a Transcendent Experience?: Main’s Meditator as Merton’s No-one.”

I

Virginia Spencer Carr

ANTI-HERO OF MANY FACES: MICHAEL MOTT’S SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON

Michael Mott’s authorized biography, *THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON*, is an arduous climb for the reader, but well worth the effort. The ascent is easier if one has read *THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN* (1948), the autobiography that turned Merton into a popular cult figure for the secular and religious alike. Merton’s mountains are thick with trees, and the reader must back off occasionally to see the forest. A sally into *THE SIGN OF JONAS* (1953), Merton’s journal of notes and meditations begun five years after he entered the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, is a good halfway house. It is hard to imagine a less likely candidate for the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance than Merton, but a Trappist monk he became, and ultimately a hermit. Yet no hermit was ever more of the world than Merton.

Born in the eastern Pyrenees of France of an American mother and a New Zealander father, Merton seemed destined to be different. In a British prep school (Oakham), he read books that most of his classmates had never heard of, clenched his teeth while others dutifully prayed aloud in chapel, played boogie-woogie and jazz at top volume while everyone else listened to swing, and at eighteen insisted he had given religion a fair test and found it, in Mott’s words, “pretty much a fraud.” At Cambridge, which he called the “lowest circle in the Inferno,” he smoked heavily, drank hugely, and suffered prodigious hangovers. His Bohemian nature ran unchecked until he was named in a paternity suit, made settlement upon the hapless expectant mother, and agreed with his godfather (Merton was orphaned at sixteen) that he was wasting his time at Cambridge. Moving to New York, he enrolled at Columbia University, where he boasted that his “lurid reputation” had been acquired with “scarcely any trouble at all.” Despite his carousing, he ran cross country and track, edited the Columbia University yearbook, and was voted “best writer,” but did not distinguish himself academically and received his diploma “unshaven and tight.”

In graduate school at Columbia when a friend suggested that Merton join him in a course on the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, he replied that he had not the slightest interest in either the Church Fathers or the teachings of the Catholic Church. His interest in Eastern religion he attributed largely to William Blake, on whom he wrote his M.A. thesis. Soon, however, he was studying the very writers he had earlier held in contempt and reexamining Catholicism in a new light. While reading Gerard Manley Hopkins’ account of his decision to become a Catholic, Merton became aware of his own overpowering need to convert.

Michael Mott presents aptly the public Merton and the private one, the man of the flesh with all his frailties and the man of God, a life filled with ironies and contradictions. Merton the writer saw importance in everything he had done and the need to record it; he was forever at odds with Merton the editor, who censored everything he could get his hands on. Repeatedly Merton asked: "When will I learn to go without leaving footsteps?" When a Vietnamese Buddhist monk instructed, "Before you meditate, you've got to learn how to close doors," he tried, but he was no more successful at keeping them closed than he was in obeying the teachings of St. John of the Cross, who insisted that those who read his works should "darken their memories."

There was the exhibitionist Merton, the argumentative Merton, the Merton who had instant friends and cherished friendships that outlasted long periods of silence. There was Merton the lone spy (in *MY ARGUMENT WITH THE GESTAPO*) and Merton the guilty bystander. There was Merton who struggled to define obedience and freedom (to Merton, laws seemed made to be broken). There was Merton whose greatest need was to learn to love himself, who knew loneliness and self-estrangement as a hermit, then fell in love with "S" (she was his student nurse less than three years before he died) and suffered the agonies of a moonstruck schoolboy yet clung to his vow of chastity and eventually gave her up.

Poet, monk, teacher, spiritual writer, artist, contemplative, reformer of monastic life, hermit, social activist, bridge between Western and Eastern religious thought — in all of these roles Merton was "man becoming," whose commitment was a lifelong search to discover himself, to validate his choices. "The good lives are those that combine simplicity and wholeness and are lived in love," he instructed, yet was constantly trying to unravel the skein of his own entanglements while spinning new wool. He insisted that the "real journey in life is interior," but pleaded again and again for permission to go out into the world and questioned whether he should leave Gethsemani and find another home. A major problem throughout his life concerned authority and fear of rejection. When his Abbot, Dom James Fox, retired and Dom Flavian Burns took his place, Merton was allowed to travel to conferences and meetings outside the Abbey, and ultimately, to make a religious pilgrimage to Asia. On December 10, 1968 — the twenty-seventh anniversary of his arrival at Gethsemani — Merton was in Bangkok for a religious conference. He emerged dripping from his shower and stumbled over an electric fan with faulty wiring: electrocuted at fifty-three.

Michael Mott has mined admirably the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, the Merton Center at Columbia University, the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani Archives in Trappist, Kentucky, and other special Merton collections. He has also interviewed extensively and skillfully woven Merton's writings along with his own gleanings into a readable tapestry that is sensitive and judicious.



VIRGINIA SPENCER CARR
Photo by Katherine Gamble Scranton