

# MERTON:

## KENTUCKY WRITERS, ARTISTS & EVENTS

by **Robert E. Daggy**

Thomas Merton spent slightly more than half his life in Kentucky yet he is rarely, almost never, regarded as a “Kentucky writer” as such. In his recent *A Literary History of Kentucky*, William Smith Ward says that, in the years following the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton “was to become *America’s* [my italics] most widely known theologian and religious poet.” “America’s” — not Kentucky’s! There is no doubt that Merton transcended place — and to a great extent time — that his writings were limited by no parochial or provincial feeling. It is true though that, in his journals and poems, his vivid and evocative descriptions of the “geography” of central Kentucky make him something of a regional writer simply because these descriptions could have been written nowhere else. It is also true that his appeal extends beyond Kentucky and his audience is broad. This was brought home to me emphatically by Paul Howie’s syndicated word game column, “In Their Own Words,” in the April 2, 1989, Comics section of *The Houston Post* (the column is copyrighted by Asterisk Features and undoubtedly appeared in many other papers — I just happened to see the *Post* thanks to Janet S. Horne of Mississippi State University). Howie chooses a quotation from a famous person, offers a brief biography, and devises a kind of acrostic to fill in the letters of the quotation. His April 2 column featured Thomas Merton. He said:

Thomas Merton was a Roman Catholic who became known for his devotional writings. His 1948 autobiography, “The Seven Storey [sic] Mountain,” brought him international fame. The book chronicled Merton’s search for God and his conversion to Catholicism. Merton went on to write many other books, and became “the world’s most famous monk.” The religious order Merton joined was known for its strict observance of prayer, silence and hard labor. It is ironic that Thomas Merton, who joined a monastery to seek the solitude he craved, became such a celebrated figure.



Art by Vernon Carne

And so Merton has hit the funny papers everywhere, but the Kentucky “connections” are very real and as startling at times as other connections in the Merton experience.

We feature in this issue work by three writers living and working in Kentucky: Anne Page Brooks of Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond; Joseph Engelberg of the University of Kentucky Medical College; and Ronald D. Ray of Louisville. Ray has been the moving force behind the Kentucky Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Frankfort and is now involved in a further project to have a quotation from Thomas Merton placed on the Memorial. An interesting

sidelight is that the Memorial was designed by Helm Roberts of Lexington, Kentucky, whose wife, Jacqueline Roberts, a close friend of John Jacob Niles, was the singer who first sang portions of "The Niles-Merton Songs" to Merton at Niles's Boot Hill Farm near Lexington.

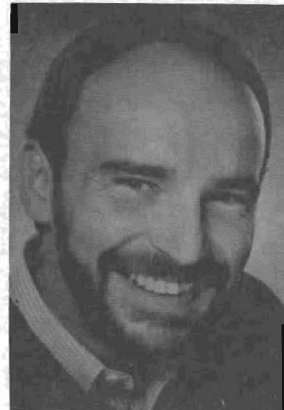
It is fitting that two major events connected with Merton should take place in Kentucky. The First General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society* will be held at Bellarmine College in Louisville, bringing to conclusion the symposiums, festivals, and commemorations of the "Celebrate Merton '88" year. The meeting, titled "The Pattern in the Seed: Thomas Merton's Glimpse of the Cosmic Dance" (taken from lines in *New Seeds of Contemplation*), will be held from 25 May to 28 May 1989 and is open to the public.

Participants will gather from the United States and Canada for this meeting and speakers at General Sessions will include James Conner, O.C.S.O., of Oklahoma; Robert Giroux of New York; Robert Hale, O.S.B.Cam., of California; William H. Shannon, of New York; and Mary Luke Tobin, S.L., of Colorado. Musical presentations will include Richard Sisto's "A Jazz Tribute to Thomas Merton" at the Opening Banquet (Merton said he was "a confirmed jazz man") and G. Philip Koonce's settings for Merton's "Eight Freedom Songs." The climax of the meeting at Bellarmine will be a dance performance, "A Prayer of the Heart," by Lee Brunner whose career began with the Louisville Ballet and who has danced since with the American Ballet Theater and the Isadora Duncan Contemporary Dance Company. The meeting will culminate on Sunday at the Abbey of Gethsemani for Mass and visits to Merton's grave and to his hermitage.

The meeting will also feature an exhibit of drawings and photographs by Merton and depictions of him in various media. These are drawn from another major Merton event in Kentucky this spring, the exhibition, *An Easter Anthology*, which ran from 26 February to 9 April at the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art, one of only three art museums in Kentucky. Conceived and executed by the museum's creative director, Mary Bryan Hood, *An Easter Anthology* was three-pronged: "Human Vision: Divine Source," featured a group of artists from seven states (including William Schickel who designed the "new church" at Gethsemani) and focused on the interrelationships of art and religion; "Thomas Merton: Images of Joy," showcased Merton's own drawings and photographs; and "A Monk Remembered," provided images of Merton himself. This third component included portraits by Kentucky painters Jim Cantrell, Terrell Dickey, and Gloria Thomas; fiber art by Penny Sisto; sculpture by David Kocka; and photographs by Ralph Eugene Meatyard and John Howard Griffin.

An unusual item, discovered at the Abbey of Gethsemani, is the triptych of "St. Bernard, Our Lady, and Thomas Merton" painted by singer-actor-dancer and artist Frank Kelly (formerly Brother Emmanuel of Gethsemani). The Merton panel is featured on the cover of this issue. Fr. Matthew Kelly found and rescued the triptych from a fruit cellar at the Abbey.

*An Easter Anthology* represents the first major exhibition of Merton's art work and provides the Thomas Merton Studies Center with the basis for a "Traveling Exhibit."



FRANK KELLY