

NO THOMAS MERTON

Review of

Gerald Groves

*UP & DOWN MERTON'S MOUNTAIN:
A CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY*

St. Louis: CBP Press, 1988

207 pages \$9.95 Paperback

Reviewed by **William H. Shannon**

Gerald Groves teaches English and Latin at the University of South Carolina. He had been a monk of Gethsemani for fourteen years and for a shorter period of time a hermit in a variety of places. His years at Gethsemani — 1948-1962 — put him in contact with Thomas Merton during a period when Merton was undergoing remarkable changes in his understanding of the monastic life and his own role in that life.

As I understand the author, the present book grew out of an initial effort to write a "life" of Thomas Merton. He felt he had more insight into Merton's personality and into Trappist life than any previous biographers. Yet he was aware also of his own shortcomings in writing Merton's life-story. He had to rely on conversations with Merton and observations of him, neither of which gave him, as he put it, "access to Merton's inner being" (p. 7). Curiously he seemed never to have thought that Merton's writings might give him such access. I find no clear evidence that he read much of Merton's writings and he explicitly denies having read *The Seven Storey Mountain* till some time after he had left the monastery. Because he did not know Merton's story before 1948 or after 1962, Groves decided that the best way of saying what he had to say about Merton was to write his own autobiography which would necessarily include Merton as a major influence in his life. He even expressed the rather unlikely hope that his autobiography might have as strong an appeal as had Merton's. Indeed, he reasoned, it might well have more appeal, for he had not only gone up Merton's spiritual mountain, but had also come down from it. The public, he suggested, might well be as interested in knowing what it's like to leave a Trappist monastery as it showed so much fascination with Merton's story of what it's like to enter a Trappist monastery.

Groves had written two earlier articles on Merton: one, entitled "Fourteen Years with Thomas Merton," originally sent to *The New Yorker*, but actually published by *The Critic* (April-May 1963); the other, "The Gregarious Hermit," was published in the Winter 1979-1980 issue of *American Scholar*. The book expands these articles and wraps Grove's own story about

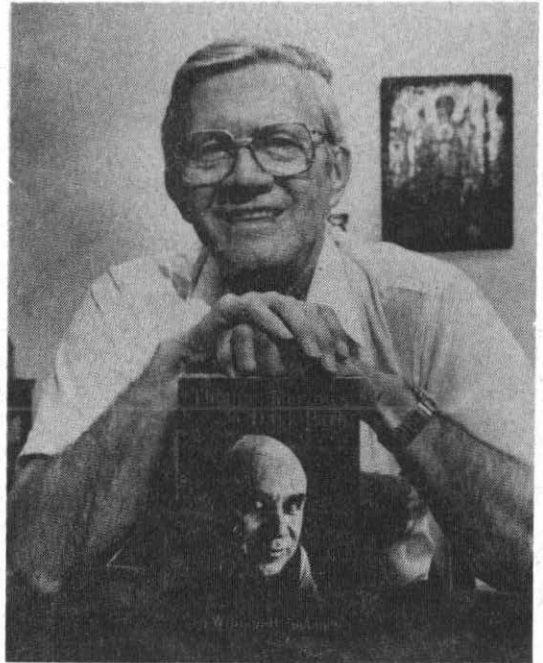
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them. The fourteen years during which he knew Merton are thus given a wider context. But that context is not the before and after of Merton's life, but of Groves's. The rather curious result is an autobiography in which, to some extent at least, the principal character is not always the person who is telling his story.

In terms of style and readability the book is good enough: the author writes fine prose. His language is forceful and clear, with descriptive passages at times bordering on the poetic. It is the content of the book and the picture of Merton that emerges which I find problematic. First, there is the lack of accuracy in the text. Merton we are told (p. 110) became master of scholastics in 1953; actually it was 1951. Again, it is simply false to say that *The Seven Storey Mountain* included most of the material later published in *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (p. 71). The author asserts that Merton badgered the abbot into inviting the faculty and students of Protestant seminaries to come to Gethsemani for ecumenical dialogue. The fact is that such dialogue began at the instance of Dr. Bard Thompson, Church History professor at Vanderbilt University, who in 1955 wrote to the abbot asking for permission for faculty and students to come to the monastery. It was Dom James Fox, the abbot, who initiated these visits. Merton did not even become involved until 1959. It is completely inaccurate, therefore, to say that such ecumenical encounter came about because Merton had persuaded the abbot that it needed to be done (p. 124). I might also add that it should be *Albert Camus*, not *Jean* (p. 137); and surely the renowned skiing expert of Great Britain was Sir Arnold Lunn, not "Lund" (p. 90).

Inaccuracies of fact (some major, some minor) are not my principal problem with the content of this book. My concern is with the tone of the book and the impression it conveys about Thomas Merton, about Dom James Fox and about Gethsemani and Trappist life in general. The author makes so clear that he detested Trappist life that one wonders why he stayed for fourteen years. His animosity and growing hostility toward Gethsemani and all things Trappist undoubtedly represents his feelings and he has every right to express them.

What I object to is that he projects so much of his own attitude onto Thomas Merton. Now there is no doubt that Merton had his gripes about Gethsemani and didn't hesitate to voice them. Likewise he felt the need for reform in the monastic life. Despite such critical feelings, he believed strongly that it was God's will that he be at Gethsemani and help work out the difficulties that all monasteries were facing in a new age in the Church. To say that Merton stayed at Gethsemani only because he had built his reputation there and knew it would come tumbling down if he left (see pp. 146, 200) is to make a terribly rash judgment that ignores all the things Merton was writing in his letters, his essays and his books. It is to call into question his integrity



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and the reality of his commitment to contemplation. I am as opposed as Groves is to making an idol out of Merton, yet I object to making a near mockery out of his dedication to the monastic life.

Near the middle of the book (p. 91) the author makes what I would consider his most perceptive statement about Merton: "Although he touched many people with his prose and poetry, few people ever really touched him." That few people ever got close to him may well express a significant element of the mystery that still surrounds the person of Thomas Merton. Yet it still remains that he did touch many people through his writings and continues to do so more than twenty years after his death. I find it impossible to imagine that he can reach and affect so profoundly the spiritual depths of so many people unless he was calling them to a spirituality to which he was himself radically committed. Perhaps Groves is conceding as much (somewhat begrudgingly?) when, near the end of the book (p. 205), he writes: "Yet it did seem that no matter how much Merton had indulged himself in unruly pleasures, even to the fracturing of his vows, he had faith . . . [It] is my experience that a person cannot preach the faith continuously and enthusiastically, as Merton did, without having it himself." By contrast, he says of himself: "But I, on the other hand, was conscious of my lack of faith."

But whether one had faith and the other did not, Merton and Groves were very different persons. So clear did this appear to me that reading this book called to mind a brief segment in the vice-presidential debate of last fall (1988) between Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle. At one point Quayle likened himself to the late President Kennedy. Bentsen pointed a finger at him and said: "Senator, you are no John F. Kennedy." Perhaps I can most accurately sum up my reactions to this book by saying: "Gerald Groves, you are no Thomas Merton."

MERTON: A FILM BIOGRAPHY

Merton: A Film Biography, produced by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn, which premiered on PBS and its affiliates on 5 June 1984, is now available in home video. This 57 minute color film is the first comprehensive film biography of Thomas Merton and has been highly acclaimed.

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M. Basil Pennington, *The Merton Seasonal*

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