

THOMAS MERTON'S "MUSE OF FIRE"

by **Robert E. Daggy**

Go, Child of God, upon the singing desert,
Where, with eyes of flame,
The roaming lion keeps thy road from harm.
— "The Flight into Egypt," *Thirty Poems* (1944)

"That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men."
The Seven Storey Mountain (1948)

We are warmed by fire, not by the smoke of the fire.
No Man is an Island (1955)

Laved in the flame as in a Sacrament
The brilliant walls are holy
In their first-last hour of joy.
— "Elegy for the Monastery Barn,"
The Strange Islands (1957)

All the gates are shut
The monastery is cold
But everything here is certain:
Fire smoulders however
In the center.
— "Untitled Poem," *Eighteen Poems* (1985)

While planning and preparing this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* for publication, I saw Kenneth Branagh's stunning new film version of William Shakespeare's *Henry V* in which, from the beginning, the image of fire plays a significant role in the narrative. I was struck by the first lines of the play: "O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend / The brightest heaven of invention!" As Merton's muse inspired him to the brightness of invention, he frequently used images of fire — of flame, furnaces, burning, smoking, even of shimmering fireflies — in his prose and poetry. *Henry V* is about war (though one must say that in Branagh's hands the play becomes at once a patriotic and an anti-war tract) and certainly Merton was aware of the destructive nature of fire and of burning, as in his description of the great fireball of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima in *Original Child Bomb*. But Merton's images of fire were, for the most part, positive, benign, beneficent, creative, even sacramental.

This issue of *The Merton Seasonal* is devoted to some of the "fire" incidents and images in his life and writings. Fiber artist Penny Sisto has now "stitched" several Merton quilts, including the one featured on the cover of *The Merton Seasonal's* Summer 1988 issue. She calls one of them "The Firewatcher," and it is based on an incident at Merton's hermitage in the mid-1960s. It is an "audio-visual" quilt with a tape in a pocket sewn to the bottom. The incident which inspired the quilt is given in "The Significance of the Firewatcher Quilt." Lawrence Cunningham examines



PENNY SISTO

Photo by Brother Paul Quenon

Thomas Merton as a different kind of “Firewatcher” in his analysis of the Epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* — “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952.” Sister Thomas Jeanne Doriot, S.P., whose collection of poetry is titled *Diving after Flame*, has contributed two poems, one of them inspired by the first Merton Quilt. Rusty Moe reflects on Thomas Brooks’ one person play about Merton in “Giving Voice to the Fire,” a discussion of fire as a force within us.

Fire implies color — vivid, bright, consuming color — and this is the first color cover on a *Seasonal*, a way of giving hue to Merton which is less controversial than the “de-sexing” of his language to which Kenneth Voiles objects in “The Colorization of Thomas Merton.” Erlinda Paguio reviews Terry Tastard’s book in which he discusses Eckhart, Merton, and the image of the “spark.” Three other reviews — by John Dear, S.J.; Thomas King, S.J.; and Bill Koch — of books with significant sections about Merton complete this issue.