

# LIGHTING THE WAY

Review of

William H. Shannon  
*SILENT LAMP: THE THOMAS MERTON STORY*  
 Foreword by A. M. Allchin  
 New York: Crossroad, 1992  
 xvi, 304 pages / \$22.95 hardcover

Reviewed by **Anne Carr**

This is a book that equals and even surpasses the glowing comments on its jacket by Merton friends and followers. William Shannon has written the kind of biography for which, whether we knew it or not, we all hungered. It is the sort of inner exploration that perhaps could only be made nearly twenty-five years after Merton's death, after many forays by writers and students of Merton's thought, and after the work of the Merton Studies Center in collecting and organizing the letters, journals and manuscripts of this century's most significant American religious writer. And perhaps it could only be written by another writer whose conjoined scholarship and personal wisdom so closely meet the inner sensibilities of the monk who changed the world for so many readers and seekers.

Shannon, first president of the International Thomas Merton Society and general editor of the Merton Letters (three volumes already published, with two more to come) has, in his earlier books not only studied Merton (*Thomas Merton's Dark Path*) but in sermons and retreats and two superb books communicated the power of Merton's religious wisdom for later generations (*Seeking the Face of God* and *Silence on Fire*). Thus he is an outstanding guide for a different sort of biography, one that charts Merton's inner journey. His intuition is that Merton's life is best understood as an interior quest, that although the outward events are important and often of compelling interest, it is the inward path that is central. *Silent Lamp* demonstrates that this insight is exactly right. Shannon offers meticulous scholarship in which careful chronologies lead to exact dates of events by the correlation of journals, essays, letters, novels, pub-



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lished and unpublished drafts with an outline of major events of politics and culture and of Merton's own life that evoke their fullest context. This careful scholarship is combined with Shannon's acute sensitivity to his elusive subject precisely at the place where it is so difficult to know another person, or even oneself — in the hidden reaches of the heart. *Silent Lamp* is a critical appreciation of Merton that is unsurpassed. I suspect that it will serve as *the* guide for scholars and ordinary readers for a long future.

One element that is special in this biography is the incorporation of impressions gained in personal visits to the places in Merton's life (there are wonderful pictures and sketches) and conversations with people who either knew Merton or remembered the settings where he had been. In addition to combing the literary sources for revealing traces of Merton's experience, Shannon skillfully evokes the human personalities and physical contexts that were formative in the monk's inner geography. The result is a richly detailed account of both the dark and the brightly colored threads in the fabric of Merton's life as they were woven into his own "inner experience." Shannon is not afraid to offer spiritual criticism at certain points. His hero is shown to have clay feet at times, to be moody, to make serious mistakes, to be wrong-headed, in short to be human. And he suggests some reinterpretations that will surprise readers, for example as he diminishes the scope of Merton's conflict with his abbot James Fox who, he argues, was particularly sensitive to Merton's needs, sympathetic to his ambivalences and saw "the deep monastic commitment of this energetic, sometimes restless, sometimes recalcitrant monk" (p. 248). Fox provided for Merton's first place of hermitage an old tool shed and, in appointing him to the key position of master of novices, showed his deep trust in Merton.

Shannon lifts up the three gifts that Merton once acknowledged about himself as the very loose structure around which this "reflective biography" is framed. The gifts of writing, of a monastic vocation, and faith, suggest the pattern of Merton's "path of no path," for "the person we are able to become is hidden in our gifts" (p. 13). The blessings and burdens of these gifts are detailed in Merton's life as he moved on "the real journey of life which is interior and is a matter of growth and greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts" (p. 167). This growth and greater surrender underlie the events and the writing of the short, productive (fifty books, 4,000 letters, 1,000 pages of poetry) and turbulent years of Merton's life. Shannon thus explains Merton's turn from speculation to experience, from an artificial methodology of the thesis to that of the question as he reflected on his own experience in moving from a devotional to a contemplative spirituality. Shannon is especially deft in sketching the Catholicism of the pre-Vatican II "old church" that Merton originally embraced and the monastic tradition as it was embodied at Gethsemani in the 1940s and 50s. With similar sureness, he describes the rediscovery of old truths in the re-thinking that Merton's writing registered about peace and peacemaking in his "Cold War Letters," about racial equality, monastic renewal and the religions of the world in his last years. Writing, monastic vocation, and faith, with their blessings and burdens, deepen and change as they continue to form the matrix in which the inner journey to growth and surrender to creative love happens.

Readers will have their special preferences in this richly contextual telling of the Merton story. My favorites include Shannon's explorations of the always autobiographical Merton in his early unpublished novels *The Labyrinth* and *The Straits of Dover* and in the differences in his earlier and later articles on poetry and contemplation, of clues in the *Perry Street Journal* and the *St. Bonaventure Journal*, and the perceptive use of Merton's letters. In fact, this book draws one back to read Merton anew, especially the letters which are now so abundantly available, to fill in the deeper detail of a life and an inner journey to spiritual integration that mirrors the experiences and desires of so many. The title, *Silent Lamp*, is the name given to Merton by John C. H. Wu,

the Chinese scholar who aided him in the writing of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. It indicated that Wu recognized Merton's own spiritual growth. For Shannon it also suggests the illumination that Merton's life and writings bring to the vast numbers of readers who find him a lamp lighting the way for their own inner journeys.

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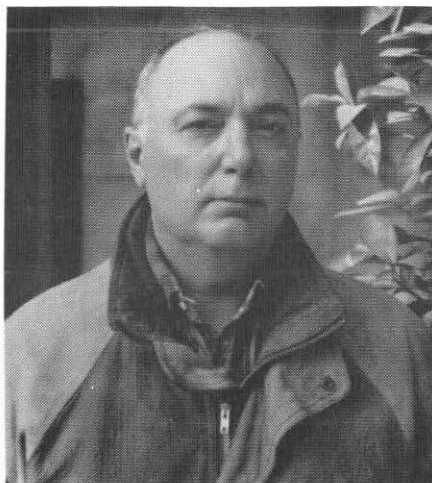
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If only Robert Daggy, before sending me a review copy of William H. Shannon's *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, had first removed the book's jacket, he would have spared my becoming at first intimidated, but then challenged, as I read the jacket's list of lauds offered by a partial collection of the most solemnly professed in the community of Merton readers and interpreters for this new biography by one of their own. But now, having read *Silent Lamp*, I find their high praise merited. While I have an argument with a portion of the text's structure and its editing, I regard *Silent Lamp* an important addition to the corpus of biographical studies of Thomas Merton.

I am not writing this review in a vacuum. By the time this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* is in the hands

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