

# TURNING ON THE "LAMP":

More Glimpses of the Life of Thomas Merton

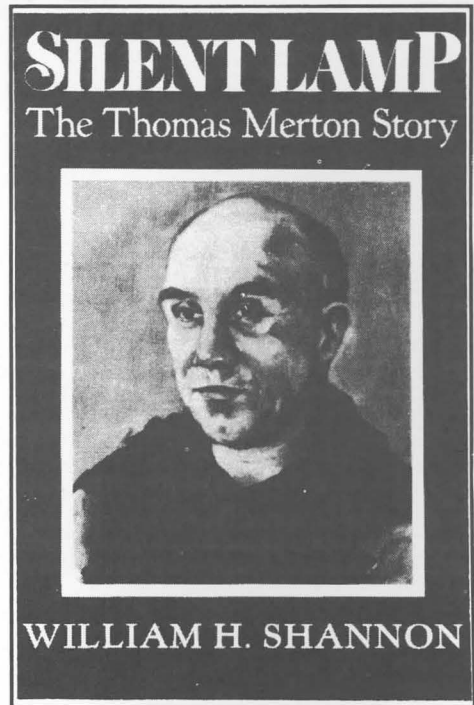
by **Robert E. Daggy**

It goes without saying that much has been written about Thomas Merton and, if the past twenty-four years since his death are any indication, much more will be written in the years to come. Interest in his life continues without abatement and we have seen several biographies and near-biographies of Merton. With some of these still in print — Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Edward Rice's *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, M. Basil Pennington's *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk* (Monica Furlong's *Merton: A Biography* is now out of print in the United States and in England) — and with the revision of Jim Forest's *Pictorial Biography, Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, published late last year, one might well ask whether there was need for yet another "biography" of Merton, another retelling of a story which he himself related in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in other autobiographical writings. Despite this William H. Shannon decided to tell *his* version of Merton's life and has done so in *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*. I was in contact with Bill Shannon during the writing of *Silent Lamp* and so was privy to some of his research, such as his efforts to identify "Jato," the Romanian friend mentioned in Merton's novel *The Labyrinth*. Yet, when the page proofs arrived from Michael Leach at Crossroad Publishing, I must admit that I approached them with some trepidation. As I read through the proofs, it quickly became clear that I need not have been apprehensive for, to quote Donald Allchin who wrote the foreword, this book is "an authoritative, if not definitive, biography!" I was asked by Crossroad to write a statement about the book, one sentence of which was used on the back of the dust jacket. This statement best expresses my own feelings about *Silent Lamp*.

William Shannon has written a biography of Thomas Merton and it is a very good one. It may well be the best concise introduction to Merton yet written.

Shannon's years of reading and reflection, his familiarity with the work of other scholars, his awareness of Merton's vast influence on so many people, enable him to tell the Thomas Merton story with verve and balance. He tells the story well because he knows it well.

He moves with assurance and authority through the details of Merton's life and the mass of his writings to provide a lean and fluent narrative. A chronology



of basic facts and a survey of world events and major publications year-by-year enhance the narrative without flagging it. And they give context. That context is the most significant thing about this biography. Shannon grounds Merton in his own experience (the half before Gethsemani and the half at Gethsemani) and in the twentieth century. From that grounding he tells us how and why he thinks Merton became a “lamp” beaming from the silence of his monastery, how and why he has become an illuminating force as humans move toward the age of the Global Village. With clarity, with conviction, with his own special illumination, Bill Shannon turns the *Lamp* on for us!

Why “silent lamp”? The story is worth repeating. Merton began to correspond with noted Chinese scholar and diplomat, John Chin Hsung Wu, in the early 1960s. The two men became friendly and Merton eventually wrote an introduction — “A Christian Looks at Zen” — for Wu’s book, *The Golden Age of Zen*. Wu helped Merton with his “interpretations” of the sayings of Taoist master, Chuang Tzu, and it was around the time of the publication of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965) that Wu sinicized Merton’s name. In Chinese he became “Mei-Teng” (as Cyrus Lee, himself a Chinese scholar, pronounces it, it sounds something like “Muir-tong”). The two ideographs which Wu used to render “Mei-Teng” literally mean “silent lamp.” In 1966, Wu wrote and sent Merton a poem:

Silent Lamp! Silent Lamp!  
I only see its radiance  
But hear not its voice!  
Spring beyond the world!

This issue of *The Merton Seasonal* is devoted to aspects of Merton’s life. William Shannon is also General Editor of *The Merton Letters* and letters continue to surface, often in unlikely places. He relates one such instance in “An Unusual Discovery in a Secondhand Bookstore in England.” Anne Carr and Jonathan Montaldo review *Silent Lamp* in this issue. In “St. Anne’s, Soho: A Photo Essay,” Paul M. Pearson goes back in time and gives us a look at the church in which Merton’s parents, Owen and Ruth Merton, were married on 7 April 1914. He has also provided a facsimile of the “Entry of Marriage” from the General Register Office which is reproduced with his essay. Note that Owen gave his profession as “artist,” but that no profession is listed for Ruth. Witnesses listed on the certificate are Tudor Atkinson (is this an error and is it really Owen and Ruth’s art teacher, Percyval Tudor-Hart?), Esmond Atkinson (a friend from New Zealand), Benjamin C. Pearce (Owen’s uncle), “Gwyn” Merton (Owen’s sister Gwynned, later Mrs. Erwin Julian Trier), and Maud Pearce (Owen’s aunt, his mother’s sister, the “Aunt Maud” of *The Seven Storey Mountain*). Absent from the list is Thomas Izod Bennet (later Merton’s guardian) and Pearson wonders if this calls into question Michael Mott’s assertion that Bennett was “probably the best man” at the wedding. Slightly over nine months after the wedding, Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France. Kenneth M. Voiles made a “pilgrimage” to Merton’s birthplace and provides us with some shots of Prades, the “Merton” house, and Mount Canigou in “Prades: A Photo Essay.”

We feature two poems in this issue — Thomas Del Prete’s “To Merton and Chuang Tzu” and Rupert M. Loydell’s “Withdrawal (for Thomas Merton).” It had long been Sister Mary Luke Tobin’s dream to bring into print the conferences which Merton gave to groups of sisters at Gethsemani in 1967 and 1968. *Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, edited by Sister Jane Marie Richardson, is the fruit of that dream. Brother Columban Weber reviews the book. The Board of *The International Thomas Merton Society* and the Program Committee for the Third General Meeting met at the Merton Center in June. The program for the meeting was finalized and is given in this issue. Note that John Wu, Jr., son of Merton’s friend and himself a friend of Merton’s, will give the keynote address. We conclude this issue with our usual listing of recent publications by and about Merton.