

A Seasonal Pilgrimage

By Patricia A. Burton

In the late summer of 1998 I made a trip to Rochester, NY to visit Msgr. William Shannon, to look at his collection of Mertoniana, and particularly to survey a complete set of *The Merton Seasonal* from its beginnings. For one peaceful week at the Convent of St. Joseph, study blended with work in an atmosphere of quiet retreat. A large golf tournament being played near the convent made no impact on the peace within, although from the upstairs windows unending streams of cars and tour buses could be discerned in the distance. During the hot summer days I worked in the corner of a downstairs meeting room, recording the contents of the *Seasonal*, and in the evenings took the volumes back to my room to read, stopping on the way to browse in the convent's well-stocked and beautifully kept library for retreatants. It was difficult not to be sidetracked – I am a great lover of libraries and will wander in them contentedly until my feet give out. Perhaps some day it will be my good fortune again to enjoy the accommodating yet unobtrusive hospitality of the Monsignor and the Sisters, and to revisit not only the convent library but also the collection which occupies every corner of William Shannon's study and workplace: Merton in good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over in every direction, like the blessing in Luke.

What follows is a brief guided tour of the *Seasonal*, a summary look at twenty-five years of a small publication which has grown prodigiously, filling out to encompass a wide variety of interests. Merton is a magnet for those endeavoring to understand and live life to the full; he is also an irresistible honey-trap for scholars. He left a large entangled legacy, and whether by accident or design managed to strew it about the landscape in such a way that there will probably always be new things to find. The *Seasonal* reflects his varied appeal: Merton has provoked not only scholarly essays and reviews but also personal pilgrimages and quests and an astonishing amount of poetry. The covers of the *Seasonal* also illustrate his appeal in the visual arts: photos and sketches, sculptures and full-scale portraits, a potato stamp, a stained-glass window and even a quilt. My favorite cover has a David Levine caricature from *The New York Review of Books* (5.1, 1980): Merton gazes out from under wild beetling eyebrows, smiling enigmatically as though about to burst into laughter or speech. There is an unmistakable glint of mischief in his eye, and the halo he wears has slipped sideways a little, to reveal that it is really a peace symbol.

The Merton Seasonal began in the winter of 1976 as a single folded sheet with a list of upcoming Merton events and activities. It was published, then as now, by Louisville's Bellarmine College, whose



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Merton Center houses the largest Merton collection in the world. The folded sheet accommodated four pages of material: as the *Seasonal* grew, extra sheets were added, increasing the number of pages in multiples of four to a recently attained record size of forty-eight pages. In the second issue of Vol. 1 another long-running feature was established: the bibliographic listing of publications by and about Merton, which has continued in every issue since. Within the first year a format was established: the third issue had increased to eight pages, including the first illustrated cover.

Early issues centered around Merton events and publications, with cover illustrations drawn from photographs taken by Merton. The listings of events seemed to grow rather than decline as the years went by. The first formal article was Clyde F. Crews' "Merton's Journey: A Reflection on Elena Malits' Studies in Thomas Merton," a brief two-pager in Vol. 2.2 (1977). The first book review, in 3.1 (1978), was John Leax' short review of the *Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. Another feature of these early issues was a series of bibliographies of Merton in other languages: Polish (2.3), Japanese (3.1) etc. These are unsigned, but I have assumed that the editor and writer was Robert E. Daggy, who later started a regular series of signed editorials.

The little magazine began to grow. Vol. 4.2 (1979) ran to sixteen pages, and featured a homily by Flavian Burns, OCSO and an account of Karl Rahner's visit to Bellarmine and to Gethsemani. Some issues were built around themes: 4.3 was about Merton and Portuguese, and also featured the magazine's first piece of unpublished Merton writing, a short statement on clerical celibacy. In Vol. 5.1 (1980) Robert Daggy "officially" began his regular series of editorials, and the first poem inspired by Merton appeared: James Baker's "Thomas." From that point on, the publication of such poetry in the magazine became more frequent, until it too became a regular feature. Up until the end of Vol. 9 there were three issues per year, but Vol. 10 (1985) established the now-customary four issues annually.

Vol. 10.1 (1985) was a turning point, when Merton studies seemed to hit their stride as a full-grown critical subject. In this issue (which had increased to twenty-four pages) there was a review-symposium on the official biography, Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, featuring a variety of opinions by six well-known "Mertonites": A. M. Allchin, Rosemary Haughton, Edward Rice, Clyde F. Crews, Ross Labrie and Jim Forest. In the same vein Vol. 10.3 was devoted to several reviews of the first volume of Merton's published letters, *The Hidden Ground of Love*. The magazine was beginning to look as it does today, with its characteristic mix of reviews and essays, poetry and personal experience. By this time also the rather unfortunate experiments in the use of colored paper began to be toned down: some of the early issues were almost unreadable because the background paper was so dark in color or had lines or textures which confused the eye.

The autumn of 1987 brought another milestone: the announcement of the formation of the International Thomas Merton Society (12.4). A letter from ITMS founding president William Shannon in 13.2 (1988) explained that the new society would begin to help Bellarmine College finance the *Seasonal* and to offer the magazine as a benefit of ITMS membership. Announcement of the first general meeting of ITMS followed in 14.2 (1989) and from then on, news of ITMS meetings became a regular feature. The ITMS eventually developed its own newsletter, which is now inserted twice a year in the *Seasonal*.

Almost from the beginning, the magazine told stories of Merton's friends and family. Vol. 5.2 was dedicated to Dan Walsh on the fifth anniversary of his death. John Howard Griffin and John Jacob Niles were featured in 6.1 (1981); 6.3 was devoted to the memory of Merton's faithful correspondent Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, SDS, to whom he had sent many of his materials over the years,

including Grace Sisson's drawing which inspired the poem "Grace's House." Vol. 11.3 was devoted to Owen Merton, including a letter and poem written by him and an insightful essay by D. A. Callard about Owen's relationship with the novelist Evelyn Scott, and its effect on the young Tom. When Dom James Fox died in 1987 an issue (12.3) dedicated to him celebrated his long life at Gethsemani, his sometimes vexed relationship with Merton, and the respect he had gained among the monks at his monastery and many friends in "the world." The garrulous "Pop" Jenkins appeared in 16.1 (1991) as the subject of Robert Grip's interview with Helen Kelly Phares, who remembered Merton as the young grandson whom Jenkins sometimes brought with him to the offices of Grosset and Dunlap. In 19.2 (1994), William Buchanan went on a "Search for Brahmachari" who had been Merton's friend at Columbia.

In the 1980s another theme began to appear: what I would call "Merton lore." In Vol. 13.3 (1988) William Buchanan walked Merton's Asian trail, J. T. Ledbetter tracked Merton in the UK, and Paul Quenon revisited the "Merton tree" in California. Each of these forays was accompanied by a photo-essay. Patricia Trunfull contributed photos of Brooke Church, Isle of Wight in 13.4 (1988) and Ingrid Cohen photographed the Jenkins house and Zion Episcopal Church in Douglaston, NY for 16.1 (1991). In 17.3 (1992), Paul M. Pearson photographed St. Anne's, Soho, and Kenneth M. Voiles contributed a photo essay about Prades. The practice of walking in Merton's footsteps has continued to the present: in Vol. 23.4 Tim McHargue visited Rawasengeng, the eastern destination Merton never reached.

Here and there along the way, astonishing items have turned up: Robert Grip unearthed files on Merton kept by the FBI, the CIA and the US Department of State (11.1, 1986); Patrick F. O'Connell found "Two and One-Fifth Unpublished Merton Poems" including a whole page of "Elias - Variations on a Theme" which had unaccountably been left out of the published version (12.2, 1987). William Shannon recounted in 17.3 (1992) the odyssey of a letter found tucked into a book in a used bookstore in England, a letter subsequently published in *Witness to Freedom* (letter to Christopher J. Dixon, p. 154). Such finds will no doubt continue. For someone who stayed in one place for more than twenty-five years, Merton repeatedly demonstrated his ability to reach out and establish communication, often by mailing off packages of material now lovingly kept by libraries and individuals all over the world.

It seems to me that particularly in the last decade, a new note of personal involvement and encounter with Merton has sounded in the *Seasonal*. Issue 17.4 (1992) typifies this trend. Robert Daggy's editorial described "Traveling (with Merton in Tow) in the Beauty of the Natural World," encountering both old Merton friends and new discoverers and researchers, and finding a web of connection developing between them because of their common interests. Gregory M. Corrigan's "Thinking of Louie: My Personal Reflections on Thomas Merton, a Man I Never Met" bears witness to Merton's ability to establish contact with people who never knew him personally. Maria Judge's "A Merton Journey" in the same issue shows Merton's attraction for a new generation of readers and pilgrims. This thread of personal testimony adds another voice in the complex Merton fugue, and editors of the *Seasonal* have been wise enough to let all the voices sound and intertwine, not simply confining their reach to the scholarly or bibliographic.

Four editors have labored to bring the best of Merton to the *Seasonal*. Founding editor Clyde F. Crews soon handed over the reins to Robert E. Daggy, who served longest: the last of his many editorials appeared in Vol. 21.2 (1996). Brother Patrick Hart took on interim editorship while Dr.

Daggy fought the illness which (unfortunately for all on the Merton continuum) eventually resulted in his death. Patrick F. O'Connell officially became editor at the beginning of 1998, having just completed a two-year term as fifth president of the ITMS.

Now varying between thirty-six and forty-eight pages in length, the *Seasonal* still arrives four times a year with a cornucopia of varied views on Merton, from the personal to the scholarly (with every degree in between), plus occasional short items by Merton himself, hitherto generally unavailable. One of my favorites of these is "My Visits to the Secular Bookhouse" (22.2, 1997), an article for the staff newsletter of the Louisville Public Library, in which Merton works his particular magic, that indescribable ability to put the things he believes in, the essence of his own personality, and the experience of the particular joy of libraries all into a beguiling two-page package. Without the *Seasonal* we would never have had the opportunity to see it. As the magazine closes in on a quarter-century of publication, its readers and contributors continue to keep it vital. To anyone lucky enough to come upon a full set, I recommend it as a good Merton read, suitable for a scholarly analysis, a personal pilgrimage, or a quiet season of retreat.