

Opening Doors, Opening Minds

By **Chris McDonnell**

Some people you meet open doors and offer you a whole new experience. I first came across Thomas Merton in the summer of 1987 when, during a family holiday, I read *The Seven Story Mountain*. To me then it was a startling book that kept me involved from start to finish, for here was the story of a man on an improbable journey. Just as that book led me into Merton's writings, so in subsequent years did Merton lead me into the writings of others and in doing so educated me. Over the years, I have searched bookshops for his writings and books about him and as a result have ended up with an extensive collection of my own. I never cease to wonder how he was able to produce so much in such a short time, when each day the monastic timetable determined his life – and all without the benefit of a laptop.

His correspondence was extensive and, together with his awareness brought about through wide reading, he developed a personal concern for the critical causes of the late '50s and early '60s, be it civil rights or in the later years, the war in Vietnam and issues related to nuclear weapons. His willingness to explore beyond the boundaries of his own Christian faith was ground-breaking in his time. John Herriott, writing in *The Tablet*, described how Merton would, in retrospect, be regarded as the archetypal example of a monk of the late twentieth century. His restlessness caused him to examine the possibility of leaving Gethsemani and seek a more solitary life, but that never happened. The nearest he got to it was the three years he spent in the hermitage in the grounds of the abbey. With his many visitors that was far from complete solitude.

Experiencing the breadth of his exploration widened my own interest, understanding and faith. I doubt it would have happened without my reading his writings and reading about his life. Of all his books, *Thoughts in Solitude*, *Contemplative Prayer* and the Journals, particularly *Woods, Shore, Desert*, have meant most to me.

I contributed a number of pieces of poetry to *The Merton Seasonal* during the '90s and gathered one collection of eight poems that directly related to the Hermitage years, *Pieces of a Broken Jar*, most of which appeared in the *Seasonal*. Let one of those pieces sum up his life:

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Words at the Margin

It is not much fun to live the spiritual life
with the spiritual equipment of an artist.
– *Entering the Silence*

Blue denimed
Poet

White clothed
Monk

Priest man
Writer

whose words once woven
from the debris
of our experience
speak still beyond the shores
of an adopted land.

Poet priest man
at
the margin of our existence

He was indeed priest, man, writer who lived out his vocation fully in spite of many difficulties and trials, a real person whose faith struggle was evident in the words he shared with his readers.

Let me conclude with a brief story. One cold Saturday afternoon in January, back in the early '90s, I was rushing back to the car as the parking meter was getting near its time limit. I passed a second-hand bookshop, overflowing with chaotic piles of books everywhere. I asked the man at the desk if he had any books “by that American monk, Merton.” His hand went to the bottom of a large pile in front of him and produced Jim Forest’s pictorial biography of Merton. I paid him the asking price of £2 and ran to the car. When I got there, I opened the book, to find it autographed, “Jim Forest, Alkmaar.” A couple of weeks later I wrote to Jim via his publisher and after all these years we are still in touch – one of many doors opened by Thomas Merton, a man to whom I will always be very grateful.

