

TESTAMENT OF GRIFFIN'S FRIENDSHIP

Review of
FOLLOW THE ECSTASY
 Thomas Merton, *The Hermitage Years 1965-68*

by John Howard Griffin
 — Reviewed by **Michael W. Higgins**

I believe it was the British scholar George Steiner who commented that the single most important book of our time he has read is the definitive biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by his brother-in-law, Eberhard Bethge. Others have made similar comments about Simone Petrement's biography of Simone Weil.

The importance of biography cannot be underestimated; the value of an honest, critical examination of the life of an extraordinary human being is unquestionable. Equally unquestionable is the voracious public appetite for biographies of the celebrated and the notorious. As a consequence our bookshelves labour under the weight of masterful and trivial portraits of the famous and infamous.

There are few figures of our time more in need of a good biographer than Thomas Merton. Not that he hasn't been served by various hands, only that they have all been found wanting in one way or another. Because he had the extreme misfortune of writing his autobiography in his early thirties, Merton, an iveterate diarist who chronicled his every thought and feeling with scrupulous attention, in effect spent the rest of his life rewriting it.

After the stunning popular success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, journals and notebooks recording his life as a monk appeared with regularity over the years: *The Sign of Jonas*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and the posthumous *Asian Journal*. Merton pursued the task of recreating his life in print with passion and integrity.

After his death in 1968, the Merton Legacy Trust commissioned his friend, the journalist and photographer John Howard Griffin, to write the official biography. Plagued with ill health, Griffin laboured for years on this assignment, as much a project of love as an albatross, only to leave the work incomplete at the time of his death twelve years after the accidental electrocution of his monk friend.

For the duration of his research, Griffin alone had possession of many of the private notebooks. Therefore, previous interim biographies which did not have access to these diaries suffer from substantial lacunae in their study of Merton's life.

Books on Merton are many. His old friend Edward Rice wrote the first biographical treatment, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, revealingly subtitled "an entertainment", and it wasn't much more than that. This was followed by the Sussmans' *Thomas Merton: the Daring Young Man on the Flying Bell-tower*, a work of juvenile literature intended to popularize *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the journals for adolescents; James Forest's *Thomas Merton: a Pictorial Biography*, a disappointing rehash of material already available in Merton's autobiographical writings, and Monica Furlong's controversial *Merton: a Biography* — provocative and tendentious.

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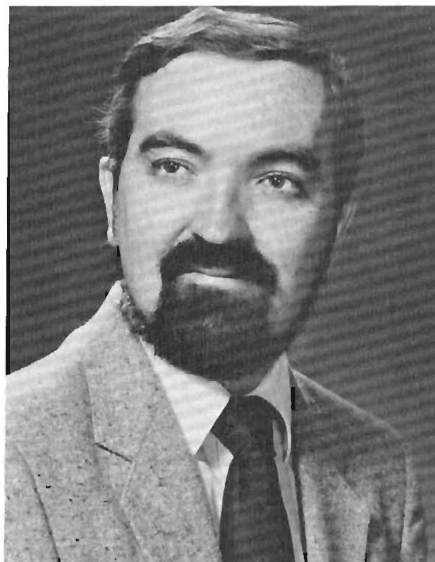
So, for years, students and admirers of Merton's works have waited for the definitive biography, that work that will go a long way toward giving a complete picture of the man. John Howard Griffin's *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, the Hermitage Years 1965-1968* consists of four complete chapters of the unfinished official biography. It is a matter of signal accomplishment that we have this work at all.

Griffin's close friendship with Merton, their shared interests, common love of contemplation, art and solitude and the mutual trust that bound them, matter and matter greatly. But they do not of themselves produce effective biography. Though it is true that *Follow the Ecstasy* consists only of the last four years of Merton's life and depends largely on the private journals, it is clear that Griffin's contribution, though indispensable, does not constitute critical biography. In fact, it is difficult to determine from reading *Follow the Ecstasy* just what its place in the biographical canon is. Are these chapters in themselves part of the official biography? Are the chapters a first draft? Were the last four years intended for separate publication? The answers to these questions, I think, are of considerable importance if any fair assessment of *Follow the Ecstasy* is to be made.

Although well written, it is not much more than a sustained paraphrase of the journals; there is no discernible critical method and the documentation is sparse. As biography, it fails, as a testament of the author's love for his dear friend it is gentle and moving. Griffin has remained faithful to Merton's rigorously honest intentions: "He observed that insofar as his journals were honest, they contained enough material to destroy him in the eyes of small-minded men forever after his death. But that was the point: not to live as one who could be destroyed, or who feared the disapproval of man. In order to be true, he must avoid ingeniously falling into ways of being 'true' in the eyes of others and of posterity."

He has not stinted in recounting the painful record of Merton's involvement with the nurse; he does not shy away from chronicling the untidy, vacillating, petty, all-too-human responses of his friend, preferring fidelity and honesty to platitudes and diplomatic silence. But there is no analysis, no effort to place what is recorded in a larger context, no careful synthesis. Griffin is satisfied to be merely an intermediary. This non-analytical approach works well where he is writing of his own impressions and feelings, as he does in his finest work, the posthumous *Hermitage Journals*; but what works splendidly in the *Journals* doesn't work in *Follow the Ecstasy*. Having abandoned the subjectivity of the journals as inappropriate to biography, he elects a forced objectivity that doesn't succeed.

In spite of my reservations, however, there is much material in this work to further confirm those aspects of Merton's personality that continue to draw people to him: an uncompromising commitment to honesty; an insatiable yearning for knowledge; an unabashed zest for life and a saucy sense of humor.



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