

TRIVIA GAME

Review of

THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON

by Michael Mott

—Reviewed by **Edward Rice**

Biography is a notoriously difficult discipline, and the exacting demands imposed on today's biographers, with full disclosure worthy of an FBI report, make it even more difficult. That Michael Mott's life of Thomas Merton has its problems must be expected.

The work is receiving wide and positive acclaim; it has its strong points, and I need not emphasize them here. But the more one goes into this massive biography, the more one finds to quarrel with. Mott has made avoidable errors, allowed grievous lapses, and failed to come to terms with his most difficult subject, a man of infinite complexities. It is a frustrating book, ambitious yet careless, enlivened by sparks of good writing but in general pedestrian and awkward; it lacks editing and style.

My annoyances began with the publisher's advertising with its promise of a *Playboy* in the Monkhouse—"the great crisis of Merton's life when he fell in love with a young woman [etc.]." That a serious biography of perhaps the greatest and most significant religious figure of this and the previous century—greater than Amiel, Kierkegaard, Ramakrishna, Gilson and Maritain, Berdaeyev, the media clergy like Fulton Sheen and Billy Graham (and Oral Roberts and Jerry Falwell), Buber, Barth, Tillich, Kung, Martin Luther King, and Mahesh Yogi and Anandamae Ma, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and so on—has to be merchandised in such terms, is, well, simply gross. A caring author would have put his foot down.

Masses of details without end smother any possible insights. Unidentified characters follow one another like a rush-hour crowd. Irrelevant facts after irrelevant facts pile up like the raw material for some kind of Thomas Merton trivia game: we are told that he landed "in Santa Barbara on United Flight 899 at 10 A.M.," that he went to "a party at Yu Ching's," and "met Paul Jacobs" (neither identified), and so on, but we never know the significance of such details. On the same page he discussed "Zen with Brother David Steindl-Rast [another unidentified individual] during a thunderstorm." More important than a weather report would have been what the two monks said about Zen. And that is the heart of the problem, the attention to trivia and the passing by of greater issues in Merton's life. The content of his writings is barely mentioned, and infrequently analyzed.

There are almost 2400 citations an impressive number. The book—nearly 700 pages—was written in some five years, during which time Mott, a poet, novelist and academic, also took care of teaching and other duties; it boggles the mind that so much detail could have been gathered together in so short a period. (Your ordinary biographer can't even type that fast.) Mott's energy and research skills are to be

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wondered at and applauded. But the sheer bulk of the work is itself a problem, not solved by the artificial structure imposed by the title, seven mountains keyed to different periods in Merton's life. Mott should have spent another five years in analyzing, probing, worrying over, fighting with what he had accumulated.

The beginning decade of Merton's life reads well enough, Owen Merton comes alive and there is interesting material on what happened to him after the death of Ruth Jenkins Merton. She was a sickly, difficult, rigid, troublesome woman, but how important she was in forming Merton the child! "In the natural order perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers," said Merton in one of several such references to his mother and his unhappy childhood.

The long-rumored affair with the woman at Cambridge and the resulting offspring—Merton's son—is aired in some detail. There was a "paternity case" in an English court and a legal settlement, and Merton, when he was professed in 1944 (the boy would have been seven or eight at the time), drew up a will which left part of his estate to his guardian, Tom Bennett, to be passed on "to the person mentioned to him in my letters, if that person [apparently the woman] can be contacted." Mott waffles the situation, and infers that perhaps it was all something out of Merton's imagination, a most unfair insinuation. That the woman and child were the "impediment" that kept Merton out of the Franciscans is quite likely, though they were not so to the Trappists. They were, I am sure, very much a concern to Merton, and were a mark and a symbol of the general feelings of sinfulness, malaise and unworthiness that persisted to the end of his life. This crucial, tragic episode in Merton's life deserves more from Mott than the suspicion that perhaps it never happened.

With the next great period in Merton's life, that at Columbia, the book starts a bumpy road downhill. Mott, born in England in 1930, is hardly attuned to the wild, crazy, exciting stimulation of New York city and Columbia during that decade ("stim" was a popular catchword on the campus then, and covered everything from sex to sports, movies and a good book). As one of the participants in many of the events in Merton's life at Columbia (and later at Olean), I can only lament the lapses and the minor errors that might have been avoided (and which make one wonder about the accuracy of the rest of the book). I question, also, Mott's metamorphosis of a clutch of rowdy, hard-drinking, talented, very bright, ambitious left-wing and often quite sensitive students into a kind of blue-ribbon intellectual, religious-oriented coterie which Merton did his social-climbing best to join. There was no such group, and the misinterpretation gives a false impression not only of the times but of Merton. With the long, physically, and spiritually demanding years at Gethsemani we are given much that is significant and sometimes well-written. Merton's sudden emergence into world attention with *The Seven Storey Mountain* needs no detailing here, nor his



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(Photo by Robert Lax)

participation in the anti-war and social protest movements and similar causes. But there was a twenty-year battle with his abbot, Dom James, and this important individual—superior, counsellor, teacher, friend and, at times, enemy—is in Mott no more than a shadow, despite his crucial role in forming Merton for good or bad as a religious. And there are many questions left unanswered—for instance, Merton was clearly unhappy much of the time at Gethsemani. Why did he not leave, as many other men did?

And what is one to say of the now-famous affair with the young woman whose presence is so necessary to Houghton Mifflin's advertising agency: Mott respectfully calls her "S," while John Howard Griffin, who had said earlier in his *Hermitage Journal*, that Merton's affair at Cambridge was "no-news" and "why make a point of it?", gives her full name in his *Follow the Ecstasy*, thus ensuring that the woman will be dogged to the end of time by the curious and the prurient. Mott quotes snippets from letters and journals which might conceivably turn up in "Great Erotic Letters of the Twentieth Century" and similar semi-porn. One cannot begrudge a very warm and probably necessary passage in Merton's life—as a friend I feel positive and supportive over the relationship—but the attention Mott gives it is far out of proportion and also ignores elementary rights to privacy.

Of far more importance—and this is a subject to my knowledge generally left untouched by all writers—is the question of Merton's "other life," his "mysticism." Merton is often called "a mystic," but what in the world does that mean? The term is never followed up nor analyzed. There were obviously very rich, fertile, deep and energetic "mystical" levels submerged in Merton's soul and psyche, about which he offered clues from time to time. The entry in *The Secular Journal* dated April, 29, 1940, when he was in Havana, is perhaps the first mention of which there is record. Then afterward we find scattered remarks which offer clues—typical would be one about "the calm inebriation of mysticism" and then a reference to "my bloody mysticism" in a letter and so on—phrases that cry out for investigation and elucidation. An exchange of letters about mysticism with Aldous Huxley (ignored by Mott) leads one to believe that Merton was writing out of deep personal experience. The last weeks in Asia were crowded with experiences that can only be described as mystical, in the Himalayas, at Mahablipuram (a kind of Hindu Seven Storey Mountain), and finally the great culmination at Polonnaruwa. On a related plane are the very primordial archaic explorations of the feminine, in some (perhaps) Jungian sense—saying that "God is not only a Father but a Mother," and speaking of "Jesus our Mother." Related are the strange anima figures that crowded his dreams, the Jewish woman of Proverbs, an oriental woman, an English woman Latinist he brought into the monastery despite the Rule, an "ugly" black woman with whom he danced, and, surprisingly, even his mother, whose face he saw behind some roses. This last dream is of particular interest, because at the time Merton was deeply committed to a form of Sufi mysticism, "a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible," as wrote a Sufi friend, adding that his prayer "tends very much what you call *fana*." ("I do not ordinarily write about such things," he explained.) But *fana* is "the end of travelling to God" and "the thinking away of self" in Sufi mystical states. This "prayer of rapture" is just what the biographer should make every effort to investigate. That Merton had gone beyond the ordinary western dilettante in dabbling in Zen and other forms of Buddhism is common knowledge. But Mott fails here, as with Sufism, giving only text-book definitions of each that are not at all accurate, and which he himself seems not to understand. These are key and central issues in Merton, in the long run more important than Cold War Letters or other, for the moment, popular and easy to handle subjects, for Merton is not "a bridge between East and West," but in the deepest and most authentic sense, East and West.