

## II

**Robert E. Daggy**

### **BIOGRAPHER LIKE ME: JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN'S *FOLLOW THE ECSTASY***

Biography can be challenging and difficult and there are several ways to write the story of another person's life. John Howard Griffin, Thomas Merton's first "official" biographer, chose one way, a way in which he sought to understand Merton by living as he did. Unfortunately, Griffin did not complete his biography before his death in 1980. In 1983, Griffin's widow, assisted by Robert Bonazzi who did whatever editing was done, published some chapters from the unfinished "authorized" biography. These chapters, dealing with the last three years of Merton's life "which fascinated Griffin most deeply," have been titled *FOLLOW THE ECSTASY*. From these fragments, and they are really nothing

more than drafts of a section which was to be fitted into the larger work, we glimpse something of Griffin's approach to the biography and we can extrapolate from that something of what his authorized work on Merton might have been.

Griffin, by his own admission, had problems not altogether occasioned by his rapidly deteriorating health. Factors other than the complex of physical ailments which plagued him contributed to his failure to produce the book which he came to consider "his life's calling." His health though may have been the final preclusive factor. But his methodology and his becoming bogged down in that methodology were also factors. He eventually became more interested in the process by which he came to understand Thomas Merton than in relating his findings to others in conventional biographical form. As he lost himself in the process of his research, he needed more time and, as it turned out, time was not vouchsafed him.

To begin with, Griffin did not really want to be Thomas Merton's "official" biographer. He said: "I didn't want to do the biography. In fact, I had turned the idea down flat." Merton had left instructions in his Trust Agreement that his private diaries and correspondence were to remain closed for twenty-five years to all but "a competent student of my works" if the Trustees "see fit" to let such a person "write my biography." The Trustees did see fit and approached Griffin, long a friend of Merton's, within months after the monk's death in December 1968. Griffin refused at first, reluctant to intrude on his friend's "very private life," and then agreed because they "had long worked together in the area of social justice and had become close friends." Having agreed, he set to work quickly and began his research in August 1969, a little less than eight months after Merton's death.

Seldom has a biography been so anticipated by so many. Griffin himself thought it would only take "a year for the research and one year for the writing." But it took longer, much longer, and anticipation grew as people wanted to read what many thought would be Griffin's masterwork, the story of one great humanitarian written by another great humanitarian. In 1973, 1974, 1975 and 1976, word had it that publication was imminent. By 1977, weakened by ill health, Griffin relinquished the task "with deep disappointment." In the fall of that year, he publicly discussed the state of his health in an interview called "Dying Like Me" in U.S. CATHOLIC. He said in that interview "When I was doing the biography of Thomas Merton...." indicating that for John Howard Griffin, disappointed as he was, the experience was over.

From his methodology, his approach to writing Merton's biography, it seems clear that Griffin set himself the task of knowing "the very private Merton" by becoming Merton himself or at least as much like him as he could. This was not, of course, a departure for Griffin. It was, in fact, his usual methodology. He had consistently attempted to get under the skin of those of whom he wrote, to "walk a mile in their shoes," to immerse himself in their experience. He used this technique in his two novels, *THE DEVIL RIDES OUTSIDE*, about life in a French Benedictine monastery, and *NUNI*, about life among South Pacific aborigines. The dust jacket of *NUNI* stated: "Mr. Griffin immersed himself in native life by adopting their language, customs and mentality and by seeking to become one of them." His hallmark, the work for which he will be best remembered, *BLACK LIKE ME*, recorded his ultimate experience with such immersion. The paperback edition of *BLACK LIKE ME* said: "What is it like, really like, to be a Negro in the deep South today? Novelist John Howard Griffin darkened his skin and set out to discover by personal experience the night side of American life." In his technique Griffin tried to experience directly what others felt, to lose himself in their lives, to become them. The technique, the methodology, worked well in these cases, masterfully so in *BLACK LIKE ME*. It was a "masterpiece of empathetic revelation." It was in this kind of journalistic reporting that his reputation was made and his place in the cumulative experience of the twentieth century assured.

Griffin immediately adopted the same methodology in writing the biography of Thomas Merton. He sought and obtained permission to live and work in Merton's hermitage. He followed Merton's own schedule. Like Merton, he kept a running journal. He felt that Merton had been able to perceive disparate and seemingly unrelated connections in his life and in his writings. He attempted to emulate Merton and to do the same thing. In his essay "In Search of Thomas Merton" he wrote: "I hope that somewhere in all this you will find the connections . . . I try to approximate his schedule in my own research, going through his journals and other materials. I keep a running journal of my own experience in living and researching this material, — in other words, a quite complete journal of the

writing of this book. Since Thomas Merton perceived the connections in many diverse elements of his life, I simply do what he did — put down everything and wait for the connections to come in their own good time.”

Unfortunately, that good time was long in coming and, somewhere during the wait, Griffin seems to have become more interested in his own immersion in the life of the monk, in the process of becoming like Merton, than in writing the biography. He did other writings, yes, short pieces, mostly reminiscences and anecdotes drawn directly from his own experience of his friend. He quickly compiled after Merton's death a "silent book" honoring Merton's "obsession with silence and solitude." The book was *A HIDDEN WHOLENESS: THE VISUAL WORLD OF THOMAS MERTON*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1970, a collection of photographs by Merton and Griffin (he had instructed and coached Merton in his developing enthusiasm for photography). The text was short and snappy and dealt with a subject close to Griffin and an experience he had directly shared with Merton. For the larger work, the biography, Griffin waited for the "connections," seemingly unable or unwilling to make them himself as he had in *A HIDDEN WHOLENESS*. As he waited, his method was not lost on others. Jim Andrews reported: "Brother Patrick (Hart) not too lightly suggested that Griffin's approach justified titling the yet-unborn work *MONK LIKE ME*."

It is not surprising that Griffin, given his methodology, was "deeply fascinated" by the final period of Merton's life. It was in this period that he had known Merton and "les grandes amities" developed. Griffin's own monk-like experience took place in the hermitage where Merton himself had lived in the last three years of his life, not in the monastery proper where Merton spent his first twenty-four monastic years.

He became more interested in experiencing what Merton had experienced, in a sort of vicarious monastic life, than in telling Merton's life to others. What seems to have interested him was the journal or diary of his own experiences which he began in 1969 and concluded in September 1972. He prepared his journal for publication and wrote a preface before his death. It was published as *THE HERMITAGE JOURNALS* by Andrews & McMeel in 1981 and was subtitled "A Diary Kept While Working on the Biography of Thomas Merton." But it is Griffin's story, not Merton's. Merton is a focus, a catalyst, a presence, but the experience is Griffin's. And it is a much more alive, more vital, more satisfying work than are the fragments which make up *FOLLOW THE ECSTASY*.



ROBERT E. DAGGY  
In the Merton Center  
Photo by Gregory J. Ryan

If *FOLLOW THE ECSTASY* is an example of the approach Griffin would have used with the rest of the biography, it seems that the Merton Trustees would have done better to have published Merton's private diaries than to have allowed Griffin to copy and paraphrase them. He chose a methodology which had worked remarkably well for him in his novels, in *BLACK LIKE ME*, in *A HIDDEN WHOLENESS*, even in the posthumously published *HERMITAGE JOURNALS*. It did allow him to live through some experience as a monk and this he recorded far more ably. It remains a moot point whether or not he lived through an experience as Merton. His experiments with aborigines and blacks had been with people, not a person, and that may have been the base problem. Perhaps his method allowed him to know Merton, to empathize with him, to get under his skin, but he seems to have been reluctant or unable to communicate this or synthesize it for others. Perhaps he didn't want to do so. Perhaps — and this is my guess from the evidence in *FOLLOW THE ECSTASY* — he intended for his readers to immerse themselves in the materials provided, to make the connections, to put them together, to be a "biographer like me."