

# BENCHMARK READING

Review of

*THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS OF THOMAS MERTON*

by Michael Mott

—Reviewed by **Clyde F. Crews**

One of the anecdotes around Catholic circles in Louisville a generation ago was about a lament by the old Archbishop, John A. Floersch. “If I want to know what’s going on in the world,” this urbane churchman was supposed to have said, “I have to go down to the country.”

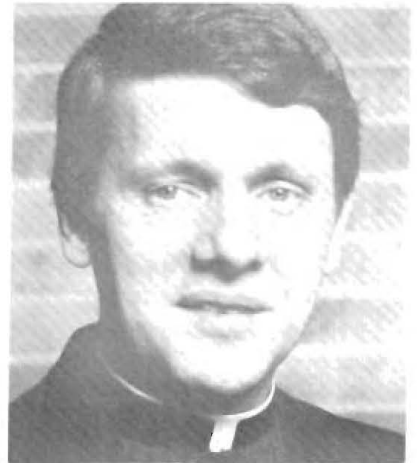
He meant to Gethsemani, the abbatial home of Thomas Merton. There, in Kentucky’s verdant, rural “Holy Land,” the world was beating the proverbial path (either in person or in correspondence) to the home of one of America’s most creative religious writers.

And what came they out to see? No reed shaken by the wind, surely. Rather, to seek out a man as complex as the times and religious tradition he so troublingly and steadily reflected. And while the enthusiastic young Merton’s 1941 estimate about the abbey being “the center of America” was overflowed, it would be he who helped to make it known as a place of major spiritual and intellectual significance.

Now the long-awaited, authorized biography of this highly diverse mystic, this seven-storey Merton, has appeared. Michael Mott’s work is masterly, sensitive and insightful. It is detailed without being tedious, and it has a pulse of authentic - and therefore frequently muddled - life about it.

In reflecting his times and his church, Merton was many-layered. Like Whitman, he was large, containing multitudes. And, like his nineteenth century poetic forebear, he was quite capable of self-contradiction. One doesn’t always find the man of the seven mountains endearing or imitable.

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And yet, Mott rightly locates Merton's unifying instinct and drive as that of becoming a saint. It is the central identity point that links the brash young Columbia student of the 30's to the seasoned monk of the late 1960's. For Merton, much as he may at times miss the mark, the mark always remained, his *unum necessarium*: sainthood. No matter how unsettling. No matter how costly.

But to become a saint in this nation and in this desperate century was not to be for Merton the simplicity he conceived it to be that winter day in 1941 when the Abbey Gatehouse door closed behind him. Given the inner cargo the man carried - a manifest made up of his own personal, intellectual and religious history, - the sailing was bound at times to be rough.

And so it was. Mott tells the intricate story well, revealing many of the layers of the man Merton. The monk's extensive writings fail to daunt his biographer. From his first book *Thirty Poems*, published, Mott tells us with his accustomed precision, November 20, 1944, through the posthumous *Asian Journal*, the major works are reviewed and analyzed.

When Merton puzzles over Providence in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz, we hear the substance of the argument. When the monk begins to fret about some of the excesses of post-conciliar liberalism in his journal, we are reminded of Merton's deeply traditional roots and we are not spared the sting: "There is too much spite, envy, pettiness, savagery and again too much of a brutal and arrogant spirit in this so-called Catholic renewal." (p.496)

My major unease with the new biography is structural, and it may be largely my own quibble. I'm not sure that the "seven mountains" format works smoothly, at least not without greater hermeneutic than the text provides.

That being said, a word on graphics. The jacket cover design is particularly handsome. Many of the inside photographs are previously unpublished and so, all the more welcome. The bibliography and index are skillfully presented.

Clearly, the last word has not been spoken in this volume on Thomas Merton. Other biographies there will and must be. Any major thinker of this century who announces so laconic a dictum as "What we have to be is what we are" (p. 545), deserves, invites and necessitates a plurality of readings.

In this work of Michael Mott, though, we have a benchmark reading with which every future scholar will have the honor to reckon.