

# MERTON: TALK FOR A TELEVISION PROGRAM

Review of

MERTON, BY THOSE WHO KNEW HIM BEST

Edited by Paul Wilkes

—Reviewed by **Victor A. Kramer**

This book was not inevitable, but given the fact of a television documentary about Merton, and the producer's realization that more information had been gathered than could be used for a one hour program, it was predictable. This collection of interviews results from transcripts made of interviews of persons who were instrumental in connection with the making of Paul Wilkes' film, *Merton: A Film Biography of Thomas Merton*. The title is not to be taken seriously, but it does (perhaps) reflect something about Merton who could apparently easily project the image of being an intimate with whomever he happened to be at any one time.

Perhaps a third of those included here really knew Merton "Best," but some of those could only have known him in a limited manner. Of the twenty interviews included, less than half could, by any stretch of the imagination, be construed to be close associates of Merton. In fact, much of what is contained here is by persons who only knew him slightly. Thus, the remarks by Jean Jadot, Rembert G. Weakland, and even The Dalai Lama, while they are of some value as documentation, must finally be designated reminiscences of encounters with Merton, rather than statements of persons who really knew him quite well. While the title of this gathering is inappropriate, the book does have value. It helps us to see more about a writer-monk who exhibited a tremendous amount of energy, enthusiasm, wit, sparkle, and also, (sometimes) confusion. Thus, these remarks will be of assistance as the composite picture of Thomas Merton/Father Louis is drawn.

These statements are derived from tapes made as information was being gathered for the television program. Wilkes says he wanted to provide "a unique, straightforward, unvarnished primer on a man about whom so much has been written, whose various aspects have been so closely studied that Merton as a human being often was neglected" (p. X). In this respect the book succeeds. As an introduction to aspects of Merton the man, or in relation

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to particular aspects of Merton studies these pieces will prove to be of value. They would be of more value if the methodology employed by Wilkes was more clearly explained. Some of these remarks are preceded by formal questions (Robert Giroux, Bob Lax); others appear to be pasted together; and all would be of greater value if accompanied by a clear editorial apparatus. For example, the remarks by James Laughlin are clearly of significance, but some dates would make it much easier for someone to understand all these remarks. Obviously, when Laughlin first recalls visits with Merton, he is recalling the last few years of Merton's life. And, similarly, to call Merton's poem "about the night the monastery barn burned up" "early" is misleading because it is a mid-career poem. Interestingly, just following this remark (p. 4) there is an ellipsis, and we must suspect that if the entire manuscript had been included we would (perhaps) have more information.

The book is arranged in five categories: Merton, the Writer; Prophet; Friend; Monk; and Pilgrim. It is quite clear, within this context, which are of most value. Some are much more lengthy too. The book will provide basic information about Merton for persons ignorant of his career and tidbits of information helpful for those who have read everything. Wilkes also includes photographs of all of the persons interviewed.

The book clearly indicates the value of oral history in providing information about Merton. We hope that Mr. Wilkes will eventually make all of his audio and video materials gathered for the film available to scholars. This book provides glimpses, more often than not, of a public Merton. Clearly, what is needed is more specific detail about the private Merton. It might even be valuable in the future, for example, if funds were available, to tape interviews with many novices and monks Merton lived with, and who subsequently decided to leave Gethsemani.

This book's main value will be to direct new readers to other materials by, and about, Merton. With this in mind, Wilkes provides an annotated bibliography. That bibliography, however, should have been carefully corrected by a Merton scholar, for it contains several inaccuracies about dates, and contents of particular books. Such points are perhaps minor considerations in a book which is certainly meant as homage to Merton. It will provide additional ways to think about Merton and stimulate more interest in his work. It is certainly worth reading especially because many of the comments are by persons who were extremely close to Father Louis.



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