

THE ROAD TO JOY:

A Review Symposium

by **Michael Casey, O.C.S.O., Robert Grip,
Jane Marie Richardson, S.L., & Bernard Van Waes, O.H.C.**

I. Michael Casey, FRESH AND READABLE LETTERS

The second collection of Merton's letters continues the high standard set by *The Hidden Ground of Love*. It contains letters to Merton's close personal friends, the circular letters of 1963-68 and his correspondence with younger people who had made contact with him.

The first thing that strikes a reader is the quality of the letters. Merton had a vast correspondence: he could be excused for lapses in style and content. What is amazing about these letters is that, on the whole, they are fresh and readable today even when the events which colored them have become ancient history. I imagine that comparatively few letter-writers of such volume would expect their output to hold its interest twenty years after their death.

Anyone who read Michael Mott's *Seven Mountains* with a finger stuck in the endnotes will appreciate this volume which places the reader in direct contact with many of the sources from which Mott drew. Here is displayed the wide-ranging network of relationships which, like so many guy ropes, kept Merton's circus tent from collapsing. Friends who stood by him through so many radical changes in direction. Those who knew him before and beyond his literary preeminence. New friends who brought to the surface latent aspects of his rich and complex personality. Merton remarks somewhere in *The Sign of Jonas* that one of the delights he experienced in the appearance of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was reading the index. It was like a solemn litany of the names of all those who meant something to him. To readers who know something of Merton's career, this book will provide crucial insights into Merton's relationships. The impor-

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tance of this source comes from the fact that because of Merton's lifestyle, letters were about the only means of maintaining relationships with people outside the monastery. At least, most of the time. By way of qualification it is good to remember that we will have to wait for Merton's monastic letters to see another aspect of his relationships. And I was rather relieved that his communications with S. in the latter phase of his life remain private. For the moment they do not belong in such a collection, interesting though they might be to some.

The collection opens with 65 letters to Mark Van Doren, beginning in 1939. They provide an interesting counterpoint to the changing rhythms of his life from that date until his death. These letters manifest a fascinating interplay of fun, serious reflection, intellectualizing and a genuine interpersonal feeling. The same is true of most of the letters in this collection, although the circulars are somewhat cooler and even a little stodgy. Solid content, lightness of form and warmth; these are the qualities that presented themselves to me. Merton's letters to young people are delightful, his friendliness and willingness to oblige clearly outweigh his inexperience in communicating with non-adults. In a letter to John O'Keefe, Merton lists five qualities of good writing. Three of them are typical of the letters in this collection:

1. Never write down to anyone.
2. Never write simply what you think they want.
3. Write what is deepest in your own heart. (p. 376)

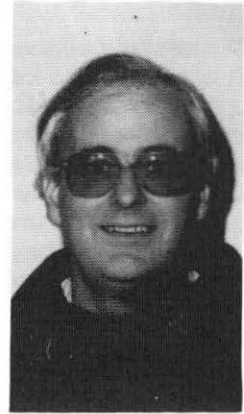
A later volume will have the letters associated with Merton as a writer. Many of his friends were people in the publishing world or on its fringes. His letters are punctuated with references to what he is writing and what is appearing. The impression I gained from reading these letters was that Merton took his writing very seriously and, despite his protestations, was unable to visualize himself as living and not writing. For those interested, the setting up of the Merton Trust is chronicled, with memos, on pp. 299-302.

It would be good to know more about the physical details of Merton's letters. How were they collected? Did Merton keep carbons? Was he such a bad speller (p. 273)? What sort of typescript did he produce? I also wondered about letters not included here. There is one written days before his death to John Howard Griffin, quoted in *Follow the Ecstasy* (p. 206): I would have liked to see it included.

The editing is almost invisible. I felt like a V. I. P. being assisted by a skilled aide-de-camp, who subtly draws attention to something, murmurs a name, but stays in the background. The way in which the letters have been strung together is clear and makes sequential reading easy. For those who prefer to browse, the book can be opened almost anywhere and it is not long before you strike gold. I used the index in a number of instances both before and after reading. I found the entries clear and the references accurate.

The division of material into several volumes must have been difficult. I have no quibbles here, but I would like to suggest a comprehensive index when the project is complete. Perhaps also a re-edition of Mott's work, updated to avail itself of the accessibility of the sources.

This is a handsome book and part of a splendidly produced series. Anyone who is interested in Merton will certainly consider it a treasure.



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