

NOEL ALMEIDA'S "FIRST DAY COVERS" FROM AUSTRALIA DOWN UNDER

Noel Almeida designed Merton "first day covers" and postcards during Australia's "summer," our winter of 1993-1994. The covers were his own personal project to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death. He wrote from Australia:

"[There are] two sets of serviced covers from the **only** Post Offices in the USA and Australia named Merton The postmarking date is 10 December 1993 and 100 were serviced at each of the Post Offices — in Wisconsin USA and Victoria AUSTRALIA

Merton, Wisconsin, did not reply to my request for information on how to process the covers. In desperation I contacted Mary Ann Bowman of Waukasaha, Wisconsin, a fellow member of the "American First Day Cover Society," who very kindly put me in touch with Frank Moertl of Hartland near Merton, Wisconsin. It was Frank who very generously arranged to deliver 100 envelopes to the Postmaster at Merton and return them to me after postmarking Merton WI did a really fine job of postmarking the covers to which I had affixed the very appropriate 29¢ **Love Letters** US stamp.

Merton, Wisconsin, is far from Australia and I knew I might run into a few obstacles. Merton in Australia is in my own State of Victoria and I was confident of getting the task done to my satisfaction because it has an **official** Post Office although it is now only a small village of around one hundred people. The Postmaster, like the Postmaster in Wisconsin, did not reply to my request for guidance! I contacted the State Philatelic Officer in Melbourne with a request that he speak with the Postmaster of Merton to ensure the postmark was applied in the manner and with the clarity I sought. Here again, the stamp affixed (Australia 1993 **Christmas Peace**) fitted the theme. The packet from Merton, Victoria, was back in a few days and I tore open the package to find that the postmark was applied with the precision and clarity I so eagerly sought, but that they were all upside down! I got real mad with the Postmaster, the State Philatelic Officer and myself (I having produced many event covers and got them right). Still fuming hours later and reflecting on the whole episode I suddenly remembered that Australia is often referred to as **Down Under** especially by Americans and that the postmark matched the **Down Under** image! Also the upside down Merton postmark would not have upset Thomas Merton who understood contradiction, reverse, down under image and paradox. **To finish on top (in Merton USA) one needs to start down under (in Merton AUSTRALIA).**

When viewed from this perspective the project was a success even though special event envelope collectors would insist that the final product is flawed."

Noel Almeida added: "I will gladly send any member of the ITMS the commemorative envelope, without charge, if they write to me, Noel G. Almeida, at GPO Box 5420, Melbourne 3001, Australia Down Under. No SASE is required."



Thomas Merton
(1915 - 1968)



All these years, people have thought they've
been listening to me, but I haven't said a thing.
The Speaker speaks.
I am only an echo.

- Bayazid al-Bistami -

Thomas Merton

Born in France on January 31, 1915 to an American mother and a New Zealand father. As a baby he was taken to New York where his mother died when he was six years old. He returned to France in August 1925 with his father and in May 1928 they migrated to England where Thomas completed his schooling. His father died in London in January 1931 and in 1934 Thomas returned to New York after an unsuccessful year at Clare College, Cambridge. He received his MA in English in February 1939 from Columbia University. On December 10, 1941 he joined the Trappists (Order of Cistercian of the Strict Observance) in Kentucky—an extremely strict order of monks of the Catholic Church—where he lived for twenty-seven years until he was tragically electrocuted in Bangkok on December 10, 1968.

Now, a quarter century after his death, Thomas Merton's words are as significant and moving as they were when they were written. What a writer—some fifty books, four thousand letters to a thousand correspondents, volumes of poetry totalling over a thousand pages, numerous essays, journals, notebooks and lectures on tape. A man well ahead of his time, a prophet of the twentieth-century whose message is timeless because it is based on an acute awareness of the sacredness of all creation, and the interconnectedness of individuals regardless of religion, race and nationality.

Illustration: Pencil drawing by Lyn Cloud, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA.
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