

AFTER SUMMER TALK OF HOGS, IRISES, & FIRST DAY COVERS, WHY NOT SOME MORE MERTON ANNIVERSARIES, BOOKS & ANNUALS?

by Robert E. Daggy

I have friends (as probably most of us do) who are perplexed — even confounded — at the interest in Thomas Merton, at the rate at which his books sell, at the many events and happenings held in his name. I don't wonder at their wonder for, sitting in the Merton Center in the summer of 1994 after the events connected with the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, I can wonder that in 1993 and into 1994 (far into 1994!) I traveled to New Mexico (twice), Colorado, New York, West Virginia, Kansas, Indiana, Arizona, Spain and England (with some events right here in Kentucky). Yet, to friends and acquaintances who say, "I can't believe there is a society devoted to Thomas Merton; what does it do, sit around talking about Merton," my usual response (often to my regret as my eyes roll back in my head as they tell me more than I want to know about their groups) is, "Yeah, why not? What do your "societies" do?" One of my good friends, one who is continually saying "I just don't get this Merton thing," went out with his wife this summer and bought two Harley-Davidson motor cycles, assortments of black leather costumes, joined some biker groups, and they blithely rode off to rallies and meets on their "hogs" (or is **he** the hog? I'm unclear though I think both men and their "bikes" are hogs and women — get this bit of politically incorrect labeling — I'm told are called "sows!" This one I find hard to believe! I don't get it).

In any case, I have realized that there is a group, a "society" if you will, for nearly every interest group that exists. At a cocktail party early in the summer, I was introduced to a man by the host as the former president of the ITMS. The host added, "Bob can tell you all about Merton and you can tell Bob all about irises." I thought, "What?" but soon found out. The man had no interest in Merton (or me) as he made clear by passing right over what I was saying to tell me that **he** belongs to the American Iris Society. Yes, the flower. He described in detail the recent annual meeting which he of course attended in Seattle or somewhere, and he grows irises in every known color. He invited me to come by and see all the colors, but somehow I never did.

So I've learned never to be surprised that there is a society for any interest, and that many make the ITMS seem quite natural and even more credible to me. Sometimes the interests of other societies mesh with those of the ITMS. I can't quite imagine biker societies and flower-growers societies developing much interest in Merton as societies, but there must be some ITMSers who own bikes and some who grow flowers. Noel Almeida of Australia, for example, has combined his postal interests with his Merton interest.

When he wrote to me introducing himself as a member of The American First Day Cover Society, I wasn't even sure I knew what a first day cover is. But he explained it and I now realize that First Day Covers are commemorative, decorative envelopes (usually canceled, I think), collected and preserved like stamp collections. He proposed to do such a first day cover to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death. He commissioned Lyn Cloud of Fort Collins, Colorado, to do a drawing of Merton for the cover. She chose to base her drawing, with permission, on a photograph of Merton taken by John Howard Griffin. (The drawing appears on the cover of this issue.) A reproduction of Almeida's first day cover appears later in the **Merton Seasonal** and he has generously offered to provide one of these First Day Covers, canceled in Merton, Wisconsin, or Merton, Victoria, Australia, to any member of the ITMS who requests it.

Twenty-fifth anniversary commemorations may be over, but it seems that the ITMS or anyone interested in Merton can always find an anniversary of some kind to mark. When Chalmers MacCormick wrote to ask if the **Merton Seasonal** might like to note the centenary of Aldous Huxley's birth in 1894 with an essay on Merton's early review of **Ends and Means**, I responded why not? Shortly thereafter (as often happens with Merton connections, Mitch Finley called to ask if anyone had ever interviewed Barry Ulanov, well known professor and author. Ulanov, mentioned in **The Seven Storey Mountain**, was a fellow student of Merton's at Columbia and the editor of **The Columbia Review** who first published the Huxley review. I told Finley that no one to my knowledge had interviewed Ulanov. And so he proceeded to do a telephone interview. These two "Huxley pieces" lead off the Summer **Seasonal**.

Pat O'Connell reminded me that 1994 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Merton's first book, **Thirty Poems**. The book was printed in July 1944, though not officially published until November. We feature his "**Thirty Poems After Fifty Years**."

Whether members of the ITMS or not, people seem fascinated by Gethsemani in general and by Merton's hermitage in particular. Through the years many who have visited the hermitage have felt impelled to write accounts of those visits: John Howard Griffin (**The Hermitage Journals**), Basil Pennington (**A Retreat with Thomas Merton**), John Albert ("Lights Across the Ridge"), David Kocka ("Week of a Visitor in a Stranger's House"). Timothy Fullerton provides us with another reflection on visiting the Hermitage, "Sunday, Up at Louie's Place." Poems by Terry McNally and Francis J. Walsh provide other reflections on Merton in this issue.

Merton books continue to come at a steady rate. Jane Marie Richardson reviews Wayne Simsic's **Praying with Thomas Merton**. I said in the cover blurb: "This is the most accessible and reader-friendly book yet written on Thomas Merton and prayer . . ." NOW, we have witnessed an unusual and, in some ways, inexplicable occurrence with **The Merton Annual**. It continues with a switch from AMS Press to Liturgical Press as publishers; with the retirement of Brother Patrick Hart, Dewey Weiss Kramer, and me as editors; with Victor Kramer continuing as editor with the addition of Michael Downey and George Kilcourse. It not only continues, but we have seen the spectacle of the **sixth** annual appearing before the **fifth**. So before the fifth is reviewed or can be reviewed, Lawrence S. Cunningham and Paul M. Pearson review the sixth in this issue. One more word about the fifth: AMS Press assures me that **The Merton Annual 5** is definitely in production and should appear before Christmas (I assume they mean Christmas 1994!). So, look for a review of the fifth **Annual** in a future issue.

Merton events also continue: 1) "A Merton Day" sponsored by the Rochester, New York, ITMS chapter at Nazareth College on October 22 (featuring Christine Bochen, Robert Daggy, Richard Deats, and William Shannon); 2) "A Merton Lecture" by Lawrence S. Cunningham sponsored by the Tucson ITMS chapter on October 23; and 3) "The Second Kansas Merton Conference" in Atchison, Kansas, on November 11, 12, and 13 (featuring, among others, James Conner, Tommie O'Callaghan, and Patrick O'Connell). For information: 1) Thomas Merton Society of Rochester, Nazareth College, Attn Religious Studies Department, 4245 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618-3790; 2) Frank X, Tuoti, 4940 North Tamarind Place, Tucson, AZ 85749; and 3) Sr. Noreen Hurter, OSB, The Mount Community Center, 751 South 8th Street, Atchison, KS 66002.