

# MERTON, THE MOVIES, AND “THE IMAGE”

by **Robert E. Daggy**

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One of the things which Thomas Merton perforce gave up when he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941 was the movies. They had been an important part of his early life, especially when he was with his maternal grandparents, Sam and Martha Jenkins. He said in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: “[T]he movies were really the family religion . . . My grandfather’s favorite place of worship was the Capitol theatre, in New York” (p. 22). As life became increasingly “intolerable” to him in the mid-1930s before his conversion to Roman Catholicism, he focused, at least when he came to write *The Seven Storey Mountain*, on movies as one thing which contributed to that intolerable aspect of his life.

“Why did we ever go to all those movies? That is another mystery. But I think John Paul and I and our various friends must have seen all the movies that were produced, without exception, from 1934 to 1937. And most of them were simply awful. What is more, they got worse from week to week and from month to month, and day after day we hated them more. My ears are ringing with the false, gay music that used to announce the Fox movietone and the Paramount newsreels with the turning camera that slowly veered its aim right at your face . . . And yet I confess a secret loyalty to the memory of my great heroes: Chaplin, W. C. Fields, Harpo Marx, and many others whose names I have forgotten.” (p. 149)

Actually Merton had enjoyed the movies, particularly some female stars, more than he later wanted to admit. Michael Mott notes in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*: “He was infatuated with Joan and Constance Bennett, Greta Garbo . . . and Madeleine Carroll.” In “Remembering Merton and New York,” Robert Lax says that Merton did indeed like the movies and had especially admired Joan Bennett, Hedy Lamarr, and Lucille Ball. In “Auden and Merton at the Movies,” Alan Jacobs asserts that one film, *Sieg im Polen* about the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, had great impact on Merton (*English Language Notes*, June 1991). Merton even wrote in his journal in 1964: “. . . how marvelous it would be to really and competently do a true movie” (*A Vow of Conversation*, p. 21). It is interesting, too, that the next to the last entry (8 December 1968) in *The Asian Journal* says in part: “[I] went on to see an Italian movie about some criminals in Milan, a quasi-documentary. It was not bad, very well filmed, and worth seeing.”

Part of his later distaste came from false images which he felt movies and television projected and helped to maintain. He certainly did not want an “image” of him, Thomas Merton, in movies or on television. Offers for the screen rights to *The Seven Storey Mountain* were refused and he left a clear and unequivocal clause in his “Trust Agreement” which prohibits dramatization of his writings. Yet, it was inevitable that Merton’s life would be dramatized and probably just as inevitable that he would eventually appear as a character, if not the central figure (we still have that to come), in a movie.

Merton makes his “debut” as a character in Robert Redford’s *Quiz Show*, discussed in “Thomas Merton and the Quiz Show Scandal: ‘America’s Loss of Innocence?’” Ten plays about Merton are on file at the Thomas Merton Center (we list these later in this issue)—and there are probably more out there which have not yet come to our attention. Michael Steinmacher takes a look at one of these plays, *Winter Rain*, in “Anthony Padovano’s Image of Thomas Merton, a paper written for a Merton course at Bellarmine College. The issue includes “Three Poems for Thomas Merton,” by John Charles Cooper; a poem by Francesca Guli; a review of a video presentation by Paul Quenon, OCSO; a review by Lawrence Cunningham of a recent Argentinean Merton anthology; and reviews by Monica Weis, SSI, and S. Christian Hempstead of two related books.

Note the Candidates for Officers and Directors of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) for 1995-1997. A ballot is inserted in this issue. President James Conner, OCSO, urges all members to vote.