

“He Was an Event!”

Review of
The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton
 A Film by Morgan Atkinson
 Louisville, KY: Duckworks, 2015
 60 minutes / \$25.00 DVD

Reviewed by **Michael Brennan**

There are a number of lines that jump from the screen in Morgan Atkinson’s arresting and poignant new documentary, *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton*, including this one delivered by His Holiness the Dalai Lama: “He followed Jesus 24 hours a day.” Unlike Atkinson’s previous sweeping documentary, *Soul Searching – The Journey of Thomas Merton*, or the very comprehensive 1984 film by Paul Wilkes, *Merton: A Film Biography*, this film eschews a lot of talking heads and embraces many powerful montages of images that help recreate the fateful year of 1968 and Merton’s journey to Asia. The recreated images manage to land perfectly, evoking a feeling of authenticity and conjuring a feeling of moments recreated. How he avoids being gimmicky and attempting a full-scale recreation of events (such as is often seen these days on cable’s History Channel) speaks to Atkinson’s skillful restraint and artistic authenticity. He assists with the unfolding of the story in such a way that we are not really aware of it, like an actor who embodies a part so effortlessly that we forget he or she is acting.

The opening scene of a camera panning the face of the earth recalls the famous “Earthrise” photo from Apollo 8, the first manned mission to the moon, but this serene image is juxtaposed with an airplane dropping bombs. “In this time, Thomas Merton is seen as a man whose vision and writing brings hope to a world in short supply,” says the narrator. “But there are some who say he is a heretic while others accuse him of using religion to hide from the real world. Who is he really?” There are beguiling glimpses throughout the film that hint at an answer – but in the end, no definitive answer is possible. The film is a tapestry of words and images with a lovely and unobtrusive soundtrack, woven together with care and a deep respect for its subject.

An early scene, which recreates Merton throwing a New Year’s Eve party-of-one as 1967 comes to a close, somehow places us with him at the hermitage, with images of the crackling fire in the hearth, but no attempt to have an actor impersonating Merton, which would have been jarringly strange. Using the actual reel-to-reel recording that Merton made in which he invites us to participate in his New Year’s Eve party, he speaks of his “girlfriend” Mary Lou Williams – “Mary Lou Williams is on a record. She is a Kansas City pianist. I am an addict of Kansas City jazz. Of course this takes me back to the days 25, 30 years ago in Greenwich Village when we used to have a couple of boogie-woogie

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pianists down around the corner from where I lived; I used to be down there almost every night. I don't know why I like it but I like it. It makes a great deal of sense to me."

This opening leads to an abbreviated biography, providing context for those with little or no knowledge of Merton, and in less than a minute we move from his birth to his becoming a monk and writing a bestseller. Against a montage of scenes from the Vietnam war, we hear a narration of Merton's January 3, 1968 journal entry: "The year struggles with its own blackness," it begins. "Incredible barbarity of the Vietnam war. The weapons used. The ways of killing utterly defenseless people. It is appalling. Surely the moral sense of this country is eroded except that there are protests. How few know even a little of the facts. Certainly this can't go on. The country is under judgment." The narrator says, "Once his words were pious, edifying. Now they can sting. Some wonder what became of the holy monk they knew." In a style now familiar from the documentaries of Ken Burns, Atkinson has actors read excerpts from a number of harsh letters to Merton, attacking his views and reminding us how controversial and, by some, how reviled he was for his antiwar writings.

Besides the surprisingly intimate recollections of the Dalai Lama, Atkinson summons an array of contemporary voices, updating the perspectives of the earlier documentaries which largely featured people who knew Merton in life. There is not a lot of quoting from his books or a plethora of biographical details. This is truly a snapshot of the intimate Merton, culled from some unusual sources like the New Year's Eve audiotope, as well as passages from his last journal. Yes, the moving images of Polonnaruwa are here, along with Merton's intense description. I was especially taken by Atkinson's technique of presenting a series of photos that Merton himself took accompanied by silence except for the click of the camera shutter – very effective and very evocative of the moment.

Dom James Fox is brought into a sharper focus than in either of the previous films, and while Atkinson doesn't back away from portraying the tension between Merton and his abbot, including a particularly caustic 1959 message in which Merton accuses Fox of having an "arbitrary and tyrannical spirit," he also manages to capture the affection and depth of respect that each had for the other. He reminds us of Fox's memorable line that Merton was "the most obedient" monk. While the other films hint at Merton's reputation as "something of a rebel" (a line uttered by James Laughlin in the Wilkes film and used by ITMS founder William Shannon as the title of a study of Merton), this documentary sharpens the focus, using actual letters from the archives to summon some of the most scathing characterizations of Merton from a less-than-adoring public: heretic, traitor, etc. Atkinson is confident that the truth of who Merton really was will be captured in this snapshot of his last year.

The retirement of Dom James in early 1968, and the election of 36-year-old Flavian Burns as abbot, opens the door to the central theme of the film, Merton's Asian journey. There is a rapid exposition of images encapsulating the significant events of 1968 – the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, the protests, President Johnson, Eugene McCarthy, the Democratic convention in Chicago, the Conspiracy Eight defendants, and Richard Nixon thrusting his arms out in victory. "It looks as though Fr. Flavian will approve my going to Bangkok as well as Indonesia if Thailand doesn't get into complete war as I'm afraid it will," Merton says. "In any case, I'm planning on Indonesia, and scarcely believe it possible. Hoping also for Japan, and some Zen monastery." The image that comes to mind is one of putting this last year under a magnifying glass, and Atkinson does not dwell at all on the previous parts of Merton's life which were covered fully by the earlier films, though for those with little familiarity of the monk there is enough background to make it intelligible. Simply as a movie,

the documentary moves with grace and pulls you along very effectively – there are no dead zones or segments that allow one’s interest to lag – while at the same time it somehow manages to capture many aspects of the contemplative life. One imagines that Merton would appreciate the paradox.

A few delightful leitmotifs: the presence of Wilkes, whose masterful *Merton: A Film Biography* has aged well – and a comment by Fr. James Martin, SJ, who has written about how the first Merton film influenced him deeply and led him to pursue a vocation to the priesthood. There are a few voices who in their own unique ways express a rich spirituality that one might consider coming from “the Merton school” – namely Richard Rohr, OFM and James Finley. There are the scholarly observations of authors Roger Lipsey, Anthony Padovano and Christopher Pramuk. And there are some faces familiar to those of us in the ITMS, namely Paul Pearson (archivist and director of the Merton Center) and Kathleen Deignan, both past presidents. PBS correspondent Judy Valente speaks to Merton’s continuing relevance. Suzanne Butorovich DeMattei, Merton’s teenaged friend and correspondent of the 1960s, provides a wonderful link between past and present. I have to admit that it was not immediately clear to me why the filmmaker included Tori Murden McClure, the first woman to row across the Atlantic Ocean, who speaks to the hero’s journey, or fabric artist Penny Sisto, but each offered evocative and insightful comments. (Mrs. Sisto’s husband, Dick, a noted jazz vibraphonist who was friends with Merton, provided the soundtrack for *Soul Searching*.) It is inevitable that a contemporary documentary would move away from capturing the voices of those who actually knew Merton – as so many of them have themselves passed on. But we can be grateful for the kind and gentle words of Brother Paul Quenon, a novice under Merton, and seemingly ageless. He is a link between all three films and his inclusion is important, because he speaks for Merton’s monastic family – the only family Merton really knew for the better part of his life.

The other star of the program is the Abbey of Gethsemani itself, and in particular Merton’s hermitage that for so many has become a place of pilgrimage. In subtle ways, Atkinson evokes Merton’s deep love for Gethsemani and his community – quoting from a letter written just before he dies that is a warm embrace of all his brothers. The images of the hermitage are alive and vivid – it’s not a travelogue with a tour of the place by any means, just glimpses – but with the windows warmly illuminated at night and the crackling fireplace, the location comes alive and becomes one of the key players.

The camera then whisks us away from the porch of the hermitage, the surrounding woods, the monastery of Gethsemani, and off to the clouds and into an airplane, heading east over the Pacific. The visit to California, which was covered at the outset of *Soul Searching*, is omitted. We land in Calcutta and hear an extended narration (in Merton’s own words) against a backdrop of dozens of photos of the land and its people. Merton attends a conference at the Calcutta Grand Hotel on “The Relevance of Religion in the Modern World,” and we are introduced to Dr. Arthur Shriberg, who as an intern at International House in New York City (“I was just a curious kid”) was sent to the conference. Interacting with distinguished spiritual thinkers, Dr. Shriberg met Merton, and noted how intently Merton listened and asked questions. “I was struck by his humanness,” said Shriberg. “I didn’t know he had listening skills; that wasn’t what I was expecting.”

More narrated excerpts from Merton’s writings are shared, as he discusses the monk as a marginal person. “I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope, that first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their own vocation, and to their own message from

God, communication on the deepest level is possible. And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. What we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.”

From Calcutta Merton goes to Dharamsala, where a young American living there, Harold Talbott, arranges an audience with the Dalai Lama. Merton first met Talbott ten years earlier at Gethsemani. “Merton saw himself as a man who had to purify himself of something – it was a very heavy load to carry,” says Talbott. “But by the time he came to India, it turns out that he had lived his life, and this was the Mozart finale and he was in a state of utmost exuberance, engaged and absorbing and eating with delectation every moment of every experience in every person that passed.” Talbott’s description of Merton’s encounter with the Dalai Lama is followed by an interview with the Dalai Lama himself, along with Merton’s remembrances of the meeting. “The Dalai Lama wanted to learn from Merton about *his* spiritual life, and how monks lived in the West,” says Talbott. “There was so much good humor and so much laughter and so much camaraderie and so much confidence of understanding.” “I often describe him as a very, very strong bridge between Catholic monk, Catholic tradition and Buddhist tradition,” the Dalai Lama tells us. “But you see, many people, including myself, always remember him and admire him.” “Merton had a highly playful manner,” Talbott concludes. “He was lots of fun to travel with, but that being said, what made him happiest was to be alone. He loved his camera. He was a fantastic photographer. He radiated a sense of, ‘This is an adventure – here I am folks,’ and he woke people up and illuminated them and enchanted them and gave them a tremendous happiness and a good laugh but also there was always a communication from him, that he was a representative of the religious life, whether he was wearing a windbreaker or a habit. The Indian people greeted him as a pilgrim, a seeker, and that was the basis on which he was met by everybody, and congratulated valiantly whether they recognized his public identity or not. People knew his spiritual quality. People in planes knew it! There was no question about it! Merton was not an object of scrutiny – he was an *event!*”

As the film moves to its conclusion, we arrive in Polonnaruwa, where Merton experiences the stunning sculptures of the Buddha – “the silence of the extraordinary faces.” A series of photos are punctuated by clicks. At this point a series of images, almost hallucinogenic in nature, seem to reflect Merton’s life flashing before him. “Surely my Asian pilgrimage has become clear and purified itself. I mean, I know, and have seen, what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains, but I have now seen and pierced through the surface beyond the shadow and the disguise. . . . For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening.”

The film’s conclusion has Merton saying, “My next stop will be the Bangkok meeting to which I do not especially look forward.” We don’t look forward to it either. There is a montage of photos and video of Merton speaking at the conference in Bangkok on the day he died. Merton steps down from the podium to a slow dissolve, and the next scene is a newspaper with the headline, “Thomas Merton Is Dead at 53; Monk Wrote of Search for God.” There is an image of him lying in state, with Gregorian chant playing in the background, and scenes from the Bangkok memorial service. A reading of an Inventory of Effects of the Estate of Thomas James Merton, most of which are valued at “nil,” is punctuated by the last round of interviews. Finley says, “He wrote a letter to the monks at Gethsemani just before he died and he said, ‘The more I get to know my Buddhist brothers and sisters, the more I appreciate my faith in Christ. May He live in the hearts of all of us.’ And then at the same time he could stand just

before he died and lead a prayer and say ‘my brothers and sisters, we are already one, we only imagine we are different.’” Rohr adds, “Merton was what we would call a seer. He saw at a higher level, but particularly in the rediscovery of the contemplative tradition. He almost reintroduced the word.” The Dalai Lama says, “So I always feel a responsibility, what he would hope on me. So until my death I will carry. So logically, two persons, very similar sort of concept. Now one has passed. Now only the remaining person logically has more responsibility.” The most poignant testimony was offered by Brother Paul, against a backdrop of images from Merton’s funeral at Gethsemani: “So, it took about a week for the body to come back from Asia – it’s like really getting heavy waiting for that to happen. It was like this gray coffin which was thrust up from the Orient and like a gray whale beached on the front of our sanctuary – The Sign of Jonas, right there, staring us in the face – and Jonas was inside.”

Atkinson brings us back to the hermitage on that New Year’s Eve, 1967, as the record reaches the end and the tape unspools, reserving two insightful gems for the concluding moments as the credits run. Finley says, “Merton is one of these renaissance people, a multi-layered, multi-faceted person, and therefore, the social justice person, the poet, the literary person, the devout Catholic, the Buddhist, the Hindu, the person who identifies with more than one tradition, the person who prophetically pulls the covers on hypocrisy . . . people touch the part of Merton that they most relate to. The thing is, like pieces in a mosaic – you step back and see that really he was a kind of synchronized unity of all those things. And that unity of all those things is Merton.” The Dalai Lama has the last word: “You see, one person make effort, good! But ten persons, better. So now, time comes forward – *do something!*”

It seems unlikely that this film is *the* last word on Merton; rather, it seems to open many doors that others might explore. It hints at Merton’s prophetic power as a social observer and writer. If the film manages to capture the enormity of the pain and chaos and violence that was 1968, it also captures the profound hope and promise of that tumultuous year. And as it manages to capture the enormous loss of Merton and by revealing so much of the real man, it also expresses his rich legacy and the abundance of his life. It conveys the magnitude of Merton’s life and his impact on both those who loved him in life and those who never met him. It brought to mind poignant words shared by Daniel Berrigan, SJ at Bellarmine in 2004, when he said that for years, he could not publicly speak of his friend, so deep was the sorrow and loss. When the movie ended, I felt it had given me a glimpse of this feeling so eloquently shared by Fr. Dan. It was not simply the testament of a great writer or a great monk or a great voice suddenly silenced, but the voice of a much-loved friend, a man. His presence permeates every scene and overcomes his absence. Atkinson captures an overriding sense that everything about Merton’s final journey was fully in harmony with the will of God and that its completion was as well.