

Beyond the Shadow and the Disguise

Sixth General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain & Ireland

March 31st—April 2nd 2006

Oakham School, Rutland

For its Sixth General Meeting and Conference the TMS returned to Oakham School, the site of our second, third and fourth meetings. The number of participants was up by about 50 per cent on last time, with delegates from North America, Poland, Holland and Germany, as well as the UK and Ireland. Here, Larry Culliford and Mary Pearson offer their personal reflections on the three days.

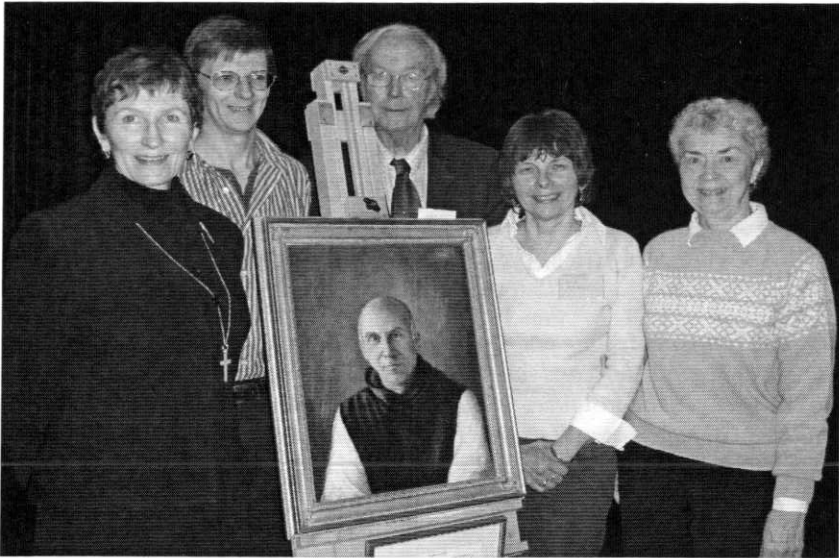
Oakham in springtime was magnificent. Changeable weather allowed us at times both to shiver and bask. Drenching downpours forced occasional retreat, while massive cloud displays, sunbursts and rainbows enticed us out daily to marvel. "Only take a breath and look around." This was Merton's revolutionary attitude, he once said, to prayer. Birdsong, daffodils and early tree blossoms bore him witness.

The climate within the conference was much more settled, cheerful and uniformly harmonious. The keynote speakers, Monica Weis, Paul Pearson and Kathleen Deignan, together with ITMS notables Bob Waldron and Judy Hunter, chimed in perfect coherence together in clear focus on Merton's Asian pilgrimage and his journal entry of 4th December 1968. Donald Allchin gave a masterly Presidential Address at the Conference Dinner, entirely rejuvenated by the memory of Welsh poet Ann Griffiths and the recent

publication of the first of several 600 page volumes of the works of the 17th century poet and theologian Thomas Traherne, never before seen, much less read. "We need his wisdom now, more than ever before", was Donald's earnestly communicated view.

The sessions found their perfect counterpoint in a world class recital by Gracenotes, and especially in the simple and delightful musical accompaniment of Caroline Price and Kathleen Deignan to the conference liturgy. Daily worship and meditation culminated in a moving eucharist, celebrated in warm and welcoming fashion by Father Aldhelm OSB of Prinknash Abbey. The three days went by so quickly. Many friendships were made and renewed. Those present shared a memorable conference. Those absent will surely want to be there next time.

Larry Culliford



Left to right: Kathleen Deignan, Paul Pearson (both keynote speakers), Donald Allchin (President of the TMS of GB&I), Fiona Gardner (Chair) and Monica Weis (keynote speaker).

Reflecting on the 2006 Conference it seems to me that during the Merton weekend my experiences didn't fit obligingly into the usual dividers, morning, afternoon and evening. Rather I had several resurrections, deaths and new beginnings all in the same day. Now events are clarifying somewhat and various phrases and associations are settling in my mind. 'Pointe vierge' from Monica Weis's paper on Friday. The dawn chorus has become more present in my consciousness, that indefinable time when dark gives way to light - a daily moment of resurrection. Very real new births in the two morning meditation periods and the birth of the Awakened Self in Gosia Poks' paper on Rites for The Extrusion of a Leper, followed by a death in the course of David Scott's

poignant paper on the Etty Hillesum diaries. Throughout the conference we paused at those references to Merton's death in Bangkok preceded by his moments of realisation at Polonnaruwa. Interwoven with the papers were the new friendships that were made, no need of introductions here, just a delightful recognition of all we had in common, the 'slender threads' that had drawn us to Oakham in March 2006. Two weeks down the line I draw on my recollections frequently to find they are not so much memories but more a way of making Merton very present in this moment, usually, one feels, with a broad smile and the encouragement to 'find meaning in the damn thing'.

Mary Pearson