

## Introduction

One hundred years on from the birth of Thomas Merton and there are still new areas of enquiry about his life and work to be explored, alongside original reflections on what he has to say about our own times, and even new discoveries of Merton's own writings from many years ago. This volume has all of these and more.

The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland (TMS) has been bringing people together around Merton since 1993, mainly through conferences and the publication of *The Merton Journal*, with contributors from across Europe, North America and the Far East. Looking back at the very first edition of the *Journal*, one sees an article on 'Thomas Merton and "the Asian Tradition,"' extracts from Jim Forest's Serbian Diary and details about the forthcoming conference of the International Thomas Merton Society in Olean, New York.

To commemorate the centenary year of the birth of Thomas Merton, this special and extended issue of *The Merton Journal* highlights European perspectives. Contributors were approached and commissioned to write about an area of interest and asked where possible to link it to their own country. It was also decided to include some early essays written by the young Merton when he lived in England, an article by Donald Allchin, and a personal reflection by David Scott.

In Donald's article, originally published in 1969, he refers to Merton as a liberator – as someone who put aside conventional thinking and in his life and work demonstrated how to move beyond the constraints of the usual. In this volume that same spirit can be

found. The contributors have, through their own thought and reflection, taken on that spirit of the unusual and offer a breadth of new perspectives. The papers serve to remind the reader that it may now be 100 years since the birth of Thomas Merton, but his words resound with a prophetic authenticity and are ever alive to our present-day concerns.

The foreword to this volume is written by Paul Pearson, the first secretary of the TMS, a longstanding contributor to *The Merton Journal* and to the conferences, and from his position as the archivist at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, a great supporter of the Society to this day. Here Paul frames for us the European 'make up' that characterises in part some of Merton's way of thinking. Merton himself referred to his 'European sensibilities,' a term quoted later in the book by Maurizio Renzini, and Paul traces these 'sensibilities,' offering us a different perspective on some of Merton's European experiences than those found in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

The first paper in the book is by Dominique Brulé who takes us to Saint-Antonin in the South of France where Merton went with his father in 1925. It gives us a picture of Saint-Antonin today and also of Merton as a French schoolboy coloured by reminiscences of some of its inhabitants. These include those of Georges Linières (1909–1994), an older boy who became a teacher and was decorated for services to education in France, who seems to have been an important role model for Merton before and in his early teens. We are then delighted to publish for the first time three pieces and a cartoon by Thomas Merton, written and drawn when a student at Cambridge. These have been tracked down and rediscovered by Stephen Dunhill who sets them in the context of the student publications of the thirties. Next it seemed apposite to republish David Scott's beautiful poems, 'Thomas Merton's Cambridge (1933)' and 'The Hermitage, Gethsemani (1964)', the latter quoted by Paul Pearson in his Foreword.

Gary Hall's paper is a meditation on the childhood drawing by Grace Sissons – Grace's House – which she sent to Merton and which

gave him great pleasure. Starting with the drawing Gary develops the theme of childhood joy and its counterbalance of adult sorrow and disenchantment, making use of recent studies of the patterns formed in the human brain. He suggests, quoting Merton, that sorrow over suffering in the world allows us to accept it with joy and that this acceptance is the basis of our creativity. Lars Adolffson explores his own relationship with Merton, inspired by the framed photograph of Merton and the obituary in Swedish on his desk. He looks at the shape of Merton's life, particularly in relation to love, both of people and of God, as a paradox rather than as a dialectic process leading to a synthesis. His Mertonian non-conclusion is that living the question is preferable to finding the answer.

In the next paper Maurizio Renzini explores the long friendship between Merton and Giorgio La Pira, based on their commitment to peace activism, especially in the face of the threat of nuclear war. La Pira was a tireless advocate for peace, basing his work on his 14-year long mayoralty of the city of Florence where he was known by his fellow Florentines as the 'holy mayor'. This is followed by an interview with Dr Hildegard Goss-Mayr, introduced and conducted by Detlev Cuntz. Dr Goss-Mayr met and corresponded with Merton as part of her lifelong mission in the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. Her fascinating description of her meeting with Merton and analysis of his attitude to the peace movement is accompanied by her thoughts on the perennial pacifist questions about violence, reconciliation, and changing minds, looking particularly at the necessity to understand oneself and what lies behind the attitudes of those who are opponents of nonviolence.

James Cronin looks at the bystander theme in Merton's writings. As Merton explained to his friend the poet Czesław Miłosz, who was translating the word into Polish, 'bystander' has the implication of standing by during the commitment of a crime, so by no means 'innocent'. Cronin looks at the tension for Merton of being a bystander and how Merton countered his sense of isolation from the

world with his 'apostolate of friendship' created from his world-wide correspondence. Despite his monastic seclusion it was this that made him such a significant presence in the intellectual life of the period. Mario Zaninelli then highlights the longstanding correspondence between Giovanni Battista Montini, later to be Pope Paul VI, and Thomas Merton. New light is thrown on Merton's desire to leave the Trappists in 1949 and become a Camaldolese in a monastery in Italy – starting a new life there not as a writer but as an unknown American monk. Montini was one of those who persuaded Merton to stay at Gethsemani. Later the letters deal with issues of the Church and peace and lastly with Paul VI's Message of Contemplatives where the involvement of Merton was specifically requested by the Pope. Merton saw the Message as a failure but Mario comments on the potential for monasticism of Merton's suggestions for renewal inspired by his involvement with it.

Sonia Petisco's paper is a deep analysis of Merton's poem 'Hagia Sophia'. She argues that Wisdom is not a fourth member of the Trinity but precedes the creation, precedes language, and so precedes the constructs of male and female. She highlights Merton's extraordinary insights into the deep meaning of Wisdom, but also points up where he was unable to challenge the conventional process, whereby we humanize Wisdom thereby missing its essential character. The paper ends by urging us to use theological insights to move beyond the male/female divide, which Sonia argues is the root of all conflict. Following on is an equally ground-breaking paper by Małgorzata Poks based on a close reading of another 'difficult' Merton poem, *The Geography of Lograire*. There are many references in the poem to the 15th-century French poet Villon, and the paper starts by exploring the parallels between Merton and Villon, looking particularly at Merton's pre-conversion way of life, and then goes on to pick out Merton's involvement with French symbolist and surreal poetry. Of great interest is her analysis of the breadth of Merton's knowledge of French philosophy of the period, of the structuralists, of the early

deconstructionism of thinkers like Roland Barthes, and especially of the ideas of Foucault. Throughout, the examples quoted from *The Geography of Lograire* may allow us perhaps to approach the poem anew with fewer traditional expectations of understanding. Next, Fernando Beltrán Llavador's paper is a wide-ranging meditation on Thomas Merton looking at the way Christian personalism can be socially transformative. It discusses the importance of landscape in personal and national cultural formation at Gethsemani for Merton and on the empty Spanish central plateau for Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. The potential contribution of Zen to Trinitarian relatedness is discussed and the paper ends with the hope of a change in our habits and actions that will overcome the splits in our lives that endanger the world.

The final two contributions are, fittingly, from Donald Allchin and David Scott. From Donald, who was a guiding light for the TMS from day one and its President for 17 years, there is a piece he wrote soon after Merton's death. David Scott was the inspiration for the founding of the Society. His essay, the final contribution to this volume, tells of his initial contacts with Merton's writings as a young man and the subsequent journey which led to the first meeting of the TMS in Winchester in 1993.

So 22 years later in this centenary year *Universal Vision* demonstrates not just the continuing, but the growing, influence of Merton across the world.

Many thanks go to the International Thomas Merton Society for their financial grant to help with the costs of this publication. *Universal Vision* has been compiled by an editorial team including Fiona Gardner, who had the original idea and commissioned the essays, going on to edit them alongside Peter Ellis, who also undertook copyediting and proof reading, and Keith Griffin, who also organised the typesetting, printing and cover design. After 14 issues, this volume represents the final fruits of co-editing from Fiona and Keith and they would like to thank all the contributors, subscribers and Society

members for their support over the last seven years. *The Merton Journal* will have a promising future in the hands of its new editorial team of Stephen Dunhill, Gary Hall and Elizabeth Holmes.

In all of the many millions of words which have been written and spoken about him, one must never lose sight of the fact that Thomas Merton was before all else a monk and a writer – a man of prayer and a man of words. Jean Leclercq spoke about Merton's primary legacy as calling attention to the importance of prayer for the ordinary man and woman, alongside a commitment to a universal vision. Merton's former abbot, Flavian Burns, believed that the deeper part of the man – the intimacy of his own relationship with God – was only ever truly revealed through his books. There is no doubt that readers of Merton will continue to return to him for many years to come, and new readers will discover him for the first time.