

THE ROAD TO JOY. THE
LETTERS OF THOMAS MERTON
TO NEW AND OLD FRIENDS,

Selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy. 383 pp. [Collins Flame £12.95.]

The corpus of literature in this country concerning Thomas Merton continues to grow with Collins' printing of 'The Road to Joy' and their reprinting of 'The Hidden Ground of Love' (originally distributed here by Faber.)

This second volume of letters is skilfully selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy, director of the Thomas Merton Studies Centre in Louisville, Kentucky and President of the International Thomas Merton Society. With his vast knowledge of Merton's writing readers can know that they are in trusty hands and his editing is highly unobtrusive, filling in the minimum of background information to allow the book to flow smoothly.

There are different degrees of friendship and this is reflected in the five sections into which the book is divided - letters to family and family friends, to close personal friends including among others Robert Lax, John Howard Griffin, Sister Therese Lentfoehr and Edward Rice, to young people, Merton's circular letters of 1963 - 1968, and a section containing just his letters to his friend and mentor Mark Van Doren. (dating from 1939 through to Merton's death in 1968.)

'The Road to Joy' is much shorter than 'The Hidden Ground of Love' and I wonder whether that was to keep the size and the cost of the edition down or whether there were just fewer

letters available. But, having said that, I found it much more readable than 'The Hidden Ground of Love' where his letters on social concerns tended to be rather repetitive, whereas in 'The Road to Joy' I was reminded much more of his autobiographical journal writing, which is frequently Merton writing at his best. In fact, William Shannon has described Merton's letters as "a kind of latter-day 'Seven Storey Mountain' - a very fitting description, because, in this volume, Merton's letters are an alternate form of journal keeping and through them we learn about the books Merton was reading, the national and international events of his day that concerned him, we see his thought developing and we see him developing from the young Columbia graduate of the late thirties to the mature hermit monk of the sixties.

In his introduction Robert Daggy has described 'The Road to Joy' as a "celebration of friendship, showing a lighter and more playful Merton", though this is true there are many passages of deep theological insight, for instance when in a letter to Van Doren he reflects on mercy and justice (p40). There are also passages of spiritual insight, and others concerned with social issues. I was particularly struck by a 1964 letter to Jim Frost, a high school student, in which Merton says "we Americans ought to love our land, our forests, our plants, and we ought to do everything we can to preserve it in its richness and beauty, by respect for our natural resources, for water, for land, for wild life. We need men and women of the rising generation to dedicate themselves to this." (p330) As on so many social

issues Merton once again proves to be a prophetic voice. I would highly recommend 'The Road to Joy' which describes the "unfathomable grace of friendship" (pXIII) and allows us to see that grace in Merton's life and in his contact with friends whose names are so familiar from his other writings and from biographies about him, and invites us to join him travelling along that same road.

Paul Pearson, Worth.
