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## MERTON SOCIETIES

Thirty five years after his death interest in Thomas Merton seems to be increasing. The years immediately after his death saw a number of publications<sup>1</sup> and the consolidation of the Merton Collection at Bellarmine University which Merton himself had established. The first Merton organization I should mention is the Merton Legacy Trust, Merton's literary trust, set up by him, with prompting from his publishers in 1967 to look after his literary affairs after his death. The current Trustees, Bob Giroux, Anne McCormick and Tommie O'Callaghan, along with the Abbot of Gethsemani, hold the copyright for Merton's estate and decide what can and cannot be published. They also hold the copyright to Merton's drawings and photographs, and to many photographs taken of him, such as those by John Howard Griffin, John Lyons and Sibylle Akers.

It was only in 1978, ten years after his death, when major commemorations were held in such places as Columbia University, New York and in Vancouver, British Columbia that the real expansion of interest in Merton

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<sup>1</sup> Of particular note would be: *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* and *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*.

Vancouver, British Columbia that the real expansion of interest in Merton began and it has continued unabated. With delays in the publication of the official biography 1980 saw the publication of Monica Furlong's biography of Merton, eventually followed in 1985 by Michael Mott's official biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. The publication of the official biography opened the way for further major publications, as stipulated in Merton's trust document – selections of letters and then the seven volumes of his long awaited personal journals.

Against the background of the growth in publications individuals in many different places were coming together to study and ponder Merton's life and writings. Although some of those gathered in Vancouver in 1978 discussed the possibility of founding a society, nothing came of it at the time. The first official society was formed in Belgium in the autumn of 1986 after a Merton weekend held at Oude Abdij (Abbey) in Drogenen. This group continues to meet regularly and to publish four times a year a small journal called *Contactblad Merton-Vrienden*.

On May 29<sup>th</sup> 1987 a group of fourteen Merton scholars met together at the Thomas Merton Studies Center<sup>2</sup> at Bellarmine University and the International Thomas Merton Society was formed. Over the course of their meeting a tentative constitution was drafted, an initial general meeting was planned for May 1989, and they designated 1988 a "Celebrate Merton" year to raise awareness about Merton and to promote the fledgling society<sup>3</sup> publishing articles in a number of journals and even persuading a couple of key journals to devote whole issues to Merton.

The ITMS set itself the following seven goals:

- To encourage research, study and reading of the works of Thomas Merton.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Bochen, David Cooper, Lawrence Cunningham, Robert E. Daggy, Br. Patrick Hart, Glenn Hinson, Dewey Kramer, Victor Kramer, Patrick O'Connell, Anthony Padovano, Ron Seitz, William Shannon, Bonnie Thurston and Sr. Mary Luke Tobin.

<sup>3</sup> William Shannon was elected president, Robert Daggy vice-president, Christine Bochen corresponding secretary, Glenn Hinson recording secretary, and Bonnie Thurston treasurer.

- To promote the writing of both scholarly and popular books and articles about Merton.
- To assist members in exploring the unique spiritual journey of Thomas Merton through shared insights.
- To promote recognition of Thomas Merton as a spiritual theologian, a social critic, a catalyst for inter-religious dialogue, and as an important American literary figure.
- To encourage and assist in the formation of local and regional chapters of the ITMS.
- To promote communication among members through biennial general meetings, special meetings and various publications.
- To assist in the designing of graduate and undergraduate courses on Thomas Merton in various disciplines of study.

*The Merton Seasonal*, already being published by the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University and in its 13<sup>th</sup> year of publication, was adopted as the official publication of the Society, with a newsletter, published twice a year, being added in 1994.

To assist in fulfilling some of these aims and objectives the Society has created Daggy Youth or Student Scholarships and Shannon Fellowships.

Daggy Youth or Student Scholarships enable young people (ages 14-29) to participate in an ITMS General Meeting, thereby inspiring the next generation of Merton readers and scholars. These scholarships honor the late Robert E. Daggy, founding member and second President of the ITMS. These scholarship pay the conference costs for the participants requiring them just to fund their travel expenses to the General Meeting.

Up to five Shannon Fellowship awards, of a maximum of \$750 each, are awarded annually to enable qualified researchers to visit the Merton Center archives in Louisville, Kentucky, or other major repositories of Thomas Merton materials, such as the Lentfoehr Collection at Columbia University or the St. Bonaventure University Friedsam Library archives in Olean, New York. The awards are named in honor of William H. Shannon, founding President of the International Thomas Merton Society, general editor of the five volumes of Merton's correspondence and the author of numerous books including the *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*.

Applications are encouraged from established scholars, from researchers without academic affiliation, and from students and younger scho-

lars, including those engaged in research for theses and dissertations. Occasionally awards have been made for other reasons for example, to assist with the translation and publication of Merton's first books in Russian and to assist with the expenses of this conference.

The International Thomas Merton Society has continued to organize general meetings every two years since 1989 with the last such meeting, the seventh, at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, the eighth being planned for Vancouver, Canada in June 2003 and the ninth for San Diego, California in June 2005.

Although the International Thomas Merton Society attempts to be international interested groups in other countries have formed their own societies, normally affiliated to the ITMS. In 1993 the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland was formed after an initial conference in Winchester to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Merton's death. That society has now grown to over 350 members, organizes a biennial residential conference, other day conferences and retreats and publishes its own journal, *The Merton Journal*, now about to enter its tenth year of publication. It has also published three volumes of conference papers with a fourth currently in preparation.

Less formal groups are also in existence in Spain, Brazil, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and most recently Canada with the thriving Vancouver Chapter of the ITMS recently becoming the Merton Society of Canada.

One final organization I would like to mention briefly is the Thomas Merton Foundation. The Merton Foundation was set up in 1995 to, and I quote, "raise awareness of spiritual and contemplative practices in individuals around the world as a means of addressing global issues and assisting them to integrate the spiritual into their everyday lives." Their two major goals were to gather resources to ensure the preservation of Thomas Merton's original documents and to share Merton's life-changing spiritual legacy with people. Thus far most of their work has focused on the latter goal with the provision of a variety of lectures, retreats, programs and other events reflecting Merton's spirit and interests. With its emphasis on fundraising this organization tends to appeal to a slightly different audience than the Merton Societies that I have been describing.

How does one define a Merton Society? I think it is impossible. A Merton group or society will be as diverse as the people who read Thomas Merton. The ITMS is a very formally organized society with by-laws, cha-

ritable non-profit status, with a formal structure of officers, board, elections and the other constituent parts of such an organization. The TMS-GBI, has followed a very different path with a very informal structure and the decision not to organize itself into a legal entity. Both models function equally well. The less structured model though can be a good model to follow, and certainly less daunting at the beginning.

At the Merton weekend held in Winchester, England, in 1993 – a gathering very similar to this gathering now – a small committee was formed to bring the Society into being. Using the list of attendees of the conference, along with addresses of others who expressed interest, a simple membership leaflet was mailed outlining, very simply, the basic aims and objectives for the Society and asking for a five pound subscription for membership. The subscription was just to cover basic costs, especially mailing and the printing of a newsletter. The newsletter became *The Merton Journal* and the initial issues included the papers from the inaugural weekend conference, along with some book reviews and other items of interest to members. Gradually materials began to be sent in for inclusion, and sometimes articles were solicited, so that the content of the journal is now more or less self-generating. It is published twice a year at Easter and Advent.

The founding committee also made plans to have a residential conference in May of 1996 and, in the interim, organized a one day conference in December 1994 so as to keep the momentum of the new society moving. April this year saw the 4<sup>th</sup> general meeting and conference of the society, a gathering of about 100 of the members including participants from Spain, the Netherlands, the USA and Canada. By contrast the 7<sup>th</sup> general meeting of the ITMS, held at Bellarmine University in June 2001, attracted around 400 participants.

Both organizations are thriving and suggest models for organizing a Polish Merton Society. The basic requirements I would suggest are:

- a small organizing committee
  - a mailing list of interested people and a subscription fee
  - a regular means of communication, such as a newsletter, magazine or the like
  - future events.
- Hopefully we can discuss some of these options shortly.