

Editorial

In October 1946 Merton sent off the manuscript of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, to his agent Naomi Burton, having been given every encouragement to write it by the abbot of Gethsemani, Dom Fredric Dunne. In his accompanying letter Merton wrote: 'It is pretty long, but I think I know where it can be cut. Anyway I think it is readable. People will understand the presence of a few metaphysical and theological comments seeing it comes from a Trappist monastery.' Naomi Burton passed it to the editor Robert Giroux, who indeed made quite extensive cuts, including an extended passage, which we have reprinted in this edition of the journal, in which Merton reflects on his first Christmas at Gethsemani: 'This Christmas, I was to get no presents, and not much of a dinner: but I would have, indeed, Christ Himself, God, the Saviour of the world.'

The book was published in October 1948, seventy-five years ago, and became an immediate best seller. At his ordination in May 1949, Merton was presented with the 200,000th copy. Since that time the book has remained continually in print and has been translated into more than 20 languages.

Many people have found that its overarching theme of the search for personal meaning and fulfillment resonates with their own lives, and have been inspired to take life-changing decisions from its reading. In this journal are included the testimony of five such people. Paul Pearson, now the director of the Thomas Merton Centre, writes of how the experience first reading the book forty years ago inspired him to keep reading more of Merton's work, to lead him 'into an international community of similar friends and aficionados of Thomas Merton and into, what has become, my life's work.' Melanie-Préjean Sullivan writes of how, on first reading, she couldn't put the book down, and how quotes by Merton form an integral part of her chaplaincy, introducing 'the importance of spiritual autobiography within vocational discernment.'

Bonnie Thurston writes that she is uneasy with *The Seven Storey Mountain* being one's first encounter with Merton as it depicts in detail the death of his previous self but 'only hints at the following resurrected life.' Thankfully the remainder of Merton's life, recording 'the healing and wholeness which resulted from his Trappist life', is well captured in his letters, journals, books and essays. Paul Quenon was so inspired by reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* in Junior High School that it led him to apply

eventually to enter Gethsemani, where he has been a monk for 64 years, having taken his novitiate formation under Thomas Merton. For him, the book 'remains for readers as a window into the presence of a divine mystery, one present and active at the heart of the life of one modern man.'

Gregory Hillis writes how he was captivated from the opening paragraph, finding that Merton's description of his crumbling vocation in 1940, particularly after his rejection by the Franciscans, mirrored the vocational crisis in his own life, unsure of the direction his life should take. Reading the book gave him hope. If Merton's 'complicated vocational journey could find resolution, then mine could and would as well.' His vocational crisis did reach resolution, due to 'Thomas Merton, the monk who accompanied me at a pivotal moment in my life and whose writings continue to resonate with me.'

Merton's triumphalist pre-Vatican vision as espoused in *The Seven Story Mountain* evolved into a wider vision of the Church and beyond, such that in *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), he would write of the book that it was 'the work of man I have never even heard of.' That wider vision resulted in Merton forming friendships with many Christians outside of the Catholic Church, including with the Baptist pastor Glenn Hinson, a relationship explored in Ian Randall's article, showing how Merton awakened Hinson 'to the necessity of a life of prayer in a world of action.' Elsewhere Peter Ellis explores how Merton's mature response to nature can help us to 'get away from our vague sense of having surroundings out there – the environment and ecology – and to become, as Thoreau was, astonished again at who and where we are.'

Also included in this edition is a report of a study day led by Sophronia Scott, book reviews by Fiona Gardner, Rachel Denton, Paul Knox and Charlie Annis, and poems by Laurentia Johns, Gerard Garrigan and Kenneth Steven.

In his essay 'The Time of the End is the Time of No Room', Merton writes of the Incarnation, of the Word of God coming into 'this world, this demented inn', a most apt description at this time as we see the harrowing events unfolding in the Middle East – 'a world of suspicion, hatred and distrust' - where we can barely believe in peace. For Merton, 'in the special and heavenly light which shines around the coming of the Word into the world, all ordinary things are transfigured.'

Unless we have the faith to envisage such a transfigured world, a world of 'peace on earth and goodwill to all men', and to act individually towards that end, we will be but lodgers in 'this demented inn'. May that be the desire of our hearts this Christmastide.

Stephen Dunhill