

## THE PARADOX OF PLACE: THOMAS MERTON'S PHOTOGRAPHY

THOMAS MERTON could never be accused of being indifferent to place. As Michael Mott says "it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of place for Thomas Merton."<sup>1</sup> The story of Merton's life which he recorded so meticulously is the record of a journey characterized by place—St Antonin, Oakham, Rome, Cambridge, New York, Cuba, Olean, Kentucky.

Within the Christian tradition there have been two prominent themes frequently used for describing the Christian life: pilgrimage and plantation. They were themes clearly evident in the life and writings of Thomas Merton. Entering a community with vows of stability to one place and obedience to an abbot, yet all the while seeking to journey further and further on his journey towards God. His early life was marked by journeys and instability, his years at Gethsemani by stability of place, though rarely by stability of heart, except his stability in seeking God.

Merton's attitude to place was no doubt inherited from his parents, Owen and Ruth Merton. They had met in Paris where they were both pursuing artistic careers. Ruth was interested in interior decoration and design and Owen was a New Zealand painter who had already mounted a number of exhibitions. Ruth had written that 'there is no more fascinating subject in the world than the influence of surroundings on the human character'<sup>2</sup> and Thomas Merton had described his father in the opening pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* saying

His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations

of masses and for the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself.<sup>3</sup>

Here Thomas Merton points to some trends in his father's art work which would later surface in his own photographs.

The first half of Merton's life is marked by instability and wandering having developed, ever since he was sixteen, a "terrific sense of geography." He imagined that with his entry to Gethsemani in 1941 his geography would be limited to the "four walls" of the monastic enclosure imagining:

there will be no more future - not in the world, not in geography, not in travel...new work, new problems in writing, new friends, none of that: but a far better progress, all interior and quiet!!!<sup>4</sup>

Emotions similar to those he described in a poem in *Early Poems*, obviously written about this time, where he said:

Geography has come to an end,  
Compass has lost all earthly north,  
Horizons have no meaning  
Nor roads an explanation.<sup>5</sup>

As Merton's wanderings stopped in the limited enclosure of the novitiate, an enclosure within the enclosure, so he began, for almost the first time in his life, to put down roots and to notice the world around him. Monica Furlong says of him that Gethsemani

began to feel like home, a deeply consoling experience to a man who had not really belonged anywhere since he was six years old; enclosure and stability were the antithesis of the wandering that had taken up so much of his young life.<sup>6</sup>

There is a great contrast between the

travels of Merton's early years and those he undertook in the final year of his life. His early travels were an aimless wandering from place to place unlike his travels of 1968 which were a part of his journey into solitude, his spiritual pilgrimage in search of the next stage on his spiritual journey. The major difference between Merton's early travels and those of 1968 is that by the latter Merton had attained an inner stability and a sense of home, of rootedness, which allowed him to travel in a new way:

It was because he had by now found a home that he was ready to go out. He knew that he belonged at Gethsemani, and that this rootedness gave him a place from which to set out and to which to return.<sup>7</sup>

The photographs in the recent exhibition at the Thomas Merton Center in Kentucky reflected these paradoxical poles in Merton's life and writing. On the one hand, images of the places associated with his monastic life, the minute things he observed around him everyday at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the rural Kentucky countryside, images which in his photographs became prayers. Then, in contrast, the images from his travels of 1968, images of California, New Mexico, Alaska and Asia—images of places very different to his monastery, yet still seen with the same eye that captured those images of Gethsemani.

Merton's official biographer, Michael Mott, spoke of another paradoxical trend in Merton of loving one place and hating another, of contrasting good and bad places, setting up pairs of opposites so, for example, there are no good images of Cambridge and very few bad ones of Columbia. The exhibition contrasted Merton's images of Gethsemani with those of his travels of 1968. After twenty-seven years in the monastery enclosure, twenty-seven

years in which the world was literally turned on its head, Merton was once more out and about exploring this vastly altered world—enjoying Bloody Marys on airplane flights, meeting religious leaders and writers, gazing at ancient religious sites. As he humorously noted:

The old monk is turned loose.

And can travel!

He's out to see the world.

What progress in the last thirty years!<sup>8</sup>

In the last decade of his life Merton took photographs using a variety of cameras—an instamatic, a Canon F-X, a Rolleiflex and on rare occasions, the Alpa belonging to John Howard Griffin. Generally his preferred photographic medium was black and white, though a number of photographs in the collections at the Thomas Merton Center are in colour, two of which are included in this exhibition, though reproduced in black and white. All the photographs in this exhibition were taken either using the Canon F-X or Rolleiflex cameras. Thomas Merton never did his own developing or printing, this was generally done for him either by Griffin or his son Gregory, or by other friends.

The exhibition featured just thirty-one of the over 1300 photographs taken by Merton and held in the collections of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. It could not hope to do justice to Merton's artistic and religious expression through the medium of photography, but hopefully provided a glimpse into another aspect of Merton's prolific work and, along with the quotations selected to accompany the exhibition, an insight into 'Merton's seeing eye.'<sup>9</sup>

### Notes and References

1. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. (London: Sheldon Press, 1986), 205.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. (London, Sheldon Press, 1975), 3.
  4. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 456-8.
  5. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. (New York: New Directions, 1977), 24.
  6. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1980), 129.
  7. Esther de Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*. (Guildford: Eagle, 1992), 29.
  8. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 815.
  9. Esther de Waal, "The Camera in the Hands of a Monk." *Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet*. Edited by Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan, and Ian Thompson. (Abergavenny, UK: Three Peaks Press, 1998), 48.
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