

life and thought that so often strike me – how could one man write so much and accomplish so much; what other writer grew so much or so deeply in so short a time; you don't read Merton, you meet him; you need to read him holistically; Merton is one of the great readers of the century. I was reminded here of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* where Hector, the general studies teacher, says that "The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met . . . and it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours." In this volume this is Porter's experience of Thomas Merton and I am sure it is one with which many readers of Thomas Merton will feel familiar.

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Soul Searching, The Journey of Thomas Merton

DVD

Running time 67 minutes

2007 Duckworths Inc

The new documentary about Thomas Merton does not provide a complete picture. It is not objective, and it is not thorough.

Instead, *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* is a poetic reverie, a beautifully edited homage and thoughtfully presented personal appreciation by

the American filmmaker Morgan Atkinson.

The operative concepts in *Soul Searching* are "search" and "soul." For here, Atkinson offers a search for meaning, for self, for the other, for love, and for God. He employs an impressive roster of collaborators – many of the stars and a few surprise comets from the sky of Mertoniana – as commentators. Their work assumes some knowledge of Merton, and although most will quarrel about some omission or emphasis, one is unlikely to quibble about the sensuous good looks, noble spirit, and the finely stitched fabric of sound in Atkinson's film.

The film has plenty of soul. While it evidences the scholastic soul of intellect and will, of which Merton had amply, the film also exemplifies the soul of the good jazz that Merton dug. This is the Merton of *Everyone* – the monk who sinned and picked himself up; who aspired and got knocked down, and who at the end of the day persevered and tried to do the right thing, and succeeded at it – only to die an accidental and premature death.

Merton does make for good drama, and this is an attribute not lost in the sound bites of the film's commentators. Within the time restrictions, Atkinson understandably skips over circumstances and achievements some may regret. Still, the filmmaker finds ways to subtly interject events or practices that are satisfying to those who know about them. Atkinson echoes, for instance, Merton's photography in shots of his own, and uses Merton's abstract and figurative drawings, cleverly paralleling the mindset of the man who drew female nudes with the man who doodled monks in their cowls.

Soul Searching is a complex bit of work

in humble trappings. A parsimonious use of archival footage sets a stage for Merton's own chronology – the jazz club scene, the returning troops from World War II, the development of the civil rights struggle, the epochal trip to Asia. Subtly, the film's montage often tells its own story, as when a sublime mid-century suburban group of children freely frolicking around a summer hose is juxtaposed with shots of the control of demonstrating African-Americans using torrents from fire hoses. Too, a reoccurring motif of a vulture picking food at the sea coast suggests Merton's journal entry about "the silent flight of a vulture" which he sees as a call to prayer, and, in Atkinson's instance, an inference of the picking apart performed by any history, his own included.

Wonderful still images from the old Gethsemani dissolve into a contemporary passage of the monks; as previously, Merton's search was symbolized by the pell-mell rushing of trains, and now, he lights a way into the darkness, searching for God, as he makes the watch rounds at the Abbey. These things are not explicitly explained; metaphor carries, as a new understanding and a new Gethsemani are symbolized by images of a fire that ravaged the chapel. Paul Elie, who wrote about Merton in his *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, observed that he then died to what he had lived before. Jonathan Montaldo declared Merton's a "restless spirituality...complacency was his enemy."

Merton struggled to understand his role as a monk, his role as a writer, his commitment to the world and his life in solitude. He lived a "full reality," said his friend, the peace-activist priest, Daniel

Berrigan. And this fullness included a brief love with a student nurse, which occupies a climactic turning point in the film. But Atkinson overstuffs his treatment with coy waves and hesitant footfalls from his actors, and a prancing doe that in synchrony with the lovers' decision to part, slowly walks into a misty forest.

Berrigan acknowledges Dom James Fox's leadership in setting considered boundaries for Merton in the affair, and Christine M. Bochen, professor of theology at Nazareth College and editor of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, calls for an understanding of "the other side of the relationship," namely that of the student nurse, silent through the past forty years. This bloated section occupies a tenth of the film's duration, which then happily finds its footing for a denouement dealing with Merton's involvement in the civil rights movement and his tragic death.

Atkinson's skilled filmmaking locates an experience of spiritual development with wisdom and beauty in both image and language – and with wise, challenging commentary. The film ends with Michael Mott, Merton's authorized biographer, noting that the fire that was Thomas Merton has gone now "somewhere else. Where," he wondered, "has the fire gone?" Bravo.

For further information about this film, go to www.morganatkinson.com

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