

Canon Donald Allchin, who has died at the age of eighty, was President of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland from its beginning almost twenty years ago. Yet Donald was also so much more, in being a friend and encourager to many associated with the Society, those he met at conferences and a large number of people across the world.

In this issue, we are pleased to be able to print three tributes to Donald: two addresses, by Rowan Williams and Kallistos Ware, from his funeral held in Oxford, and to begin, a brief article from Paul Pearson, explaining the origins of the part he played in the life of the Society.

*The Editors*

## Donald Allchin and the Thomas Merton Society

Paul M. Pearson

I find it hard to believe that there is anyone who knew Donald Allchin who would not have been aware of his interest in the life and thought of Thomas Merton. Like Merton himself Donald was a man of unbounded enthusiasm and for those of us who knew Donald it is hard to imagine the energy that must have been present when Donald met Merton for the first time at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1963 and on his subsequent visits in 1967 and 1968. Recalling that first meeting Donald mentioned his shyness on meeting Merton, the world-renowned author, until in small talk he mentioned that his host, Dale Moody from the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, had taken

him to the Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill, whereupon the conversation immediately took off. Donald recalled, "we started off on the Shakers and that got us going. And from that time we never stopped...there were so many things we talked about. It was very difficult to make a kind of catalogue of them. There was a kind of quicksilver quality about the conversation."

From that time onward Donald would continue to share his enthusiasm for the life and thought of Thomas Merton, believing that Merton's message needed to be heard, shared, and celebrated and Donald took every opportunity that came his way to do this. So Donald became the British spokesperson for all things

Merton and over the years he gave freely and generously of his time and energy to speak of Merton. Through his friendship with William Shannon, Donald was all too aware of Merton celebrations that took place in the United States and of the formation of the International Thomas Merton Society in 1987. Subsequently Donald was very involved in the initial attempt to found a British Merton Society in 1989.

However, the time was not quite ripe for a Merton Society so it was a few years later, at a day organized by Donald at the St. Theosavia Centre in Oxford, that the key people who would play a part in the foundation of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland began to come together. Influenced by Donald's infectious enthusiasm and his own love of Merton's work, David Scott was inspired to plan a conference in Winchester to

commemorate, and celebrate, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death in December 1993. Over the course of those few days opportunity was provided for a small group to meet and to share ideas about how to carry forward the enthusiasm and energy David had generated and thus plans were hatched for the foundation of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. On the final day of the Winchester conference those plans were shared with the gathered participants who enthusiastically endorsed them and thus the TMS of GB&I came into existence.

Plans were soon made to start publishing *The Merton Journal*, to organize the first formal conference, ("Your Heart is My Hermitage" held in Southampton in 1996) and it was felt by all of the founding committee that Donald should be asked to become the



*Paul Pearson and Donald Allchin at the Merton Conference at Oakham in April 2006.*

## Paul M. Pearson

honorary President of the Society in acknowledgement of his leadership in promoting Merton, his enthusiasm and of his place as one of the few people in England who had actually known Merton and could bring that knowledge and connection to the fledgling society. Donald graciously accepted and over many years was a boundless source of encouragement and support to the Committee and to the Society as a whole.

Donald's presence, his enthusiasm and his stories will be greatly missed from future gatherings of the Society but his spirit will no doubt be remembered and his stories retold. And I'd like to conclude with one such story that sums Donald up so well. When asked for his advice on what a speaker should bring to an audience Donald's immediate and simple advice was: "Give them poetry, poetry, poetry!"

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