

Finding Merton

David Scott

I attended a boarding school in the Midlands. Perhaps I was about 15 when we were first 'let out' to go into the town alone. My destination? The town library. At this point some vagueness sets in, but I most remember a striking book cover – a man with his back to us, tramping in the woods. He wore what I now know to be a black scapula, a robe and belt, and had a shaven head. I borrowed the book from the library and headed back to school. At least that is how I think I saw it, and why I was so taken with it.

Did I warm to it because at that time I had a habit of walking round and round the extremity of the school fields? No one else seemed to make it a priority to get as far away from the horde as I did, to take the opportunity to read on the hoof. But who was the monk I had become so fascinated with? It was as if he was speaking to me, as if he knew me, and as if he wanted to compare notes about boarding school, the desire to read poetry, and the longing to be alone.

The book? It was *The Sign of Jonas – the Journal of Thomas Merton*.

In 1965 my parents returned from an American trip bringing me a copy of *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (1959) purchased at Sidney Kramer Books of Washington DC. This is the first Merton book that I owned! In the introduction, Mark Van Doren says, 'in the poetry of Thomas Merton all the senses work to one end, the letting of things declare themselves'. Among these poems I found 'Elegy for the Monastery Barn', 'The Trappist Abbey: Matins', and 'The Biography' about his time at Cambridge. The extremely moving poem 'For my Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943' bears gravy stains. They

serve to remind me that I was reading the poem over a silent meal at Glasshampton Monastery.

I was still at school when first taken to Glasshampton, an Anglican Franciscan House in Worcestershire. I arrived late for the first meal, and met the silence. I was unprepared. On leaving the refectory, I met with Father Donald Allchin for the very first time. Donald would become a life long friend and mentor. We talked of many things, and he had a determination to see me into orders through the Anglican seminary in Oxford, better known as Cuddesdon, where he himself was prepared for the ministry. (And so it came to pass.)

He was instrumental in bringing me closer to Merton. In 1968 he wrote to me of his visit to Gethsemani. He met with Merton over a period of days. On 4 April they were together in a restaurant as they learnt of the assassination of Martin Luther King. It must have been a shattering blow to both of them, but it was also a deeply bonding experience. They would never have imagined that Merton was to die eight months later that same year.

In May 1993, serving as a parish priest in Winchester, I was struck down by a nasty case of shingles. Illness often bears fruit! While laid low I became aware that December would bring the 25th anniversary of the death of Merton. I asked Donald if he knew of any plans to mark the occasion; he didn't, but he encouraged me to come up with an event in Winchester. We drew up a wish list of contributors for a weekend symposium and they all said yes. Was it there that Paul Pearson met Bob Daggy, in braces with a whiskey in hand? Where Esther de Waal talked of Celtic Prayers for the word processor, and the need for deep pockets rather than a handbag? Where Monica Furlong in fur spoke of her time in the desert? Where Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland celebrated their love for Merton over the same dining table? Where a Buddhist abbot sat in the front row at Holy Communion? Where with Jim Forest we compiled the Thomas Merton Cook Book? But by the end of the weekend the

inaugural meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland had been held.

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