

# Editorial

He's gone! – these two stark words form the start of the poem 'To his love' by the poet of the First World War, Ivor Gurney. They distill the enormity of that war with all its loss and destruction down to a single personal cry of pain and anguish. And so too we lament Merton's needless death in Bangkok: He's gone!

We are shortly to commemorate the centenary of the end of the First World War and the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death. Reflecting on these two events, I was struck by how much war, and threats of war, had impinged on Merton's life. Born 'in the year of a great war', its looming presence forced his father to move his family to America. He entered Oakham in 1928, the same year as the consecration of the Memorial Chapel dedicated to the 68 Oakhamians killed in the war. Many of his teachers would have served in that war, not least the chaplain and the headmaster, both decorated for their bravery. In November 1940 Merton received his American draft card. Reflecting deeply on the matter, he claimed partial conscientious objection status which was deferred due to his poor health – though entering Gethsemani, three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, gave him exemption. (But for the war and the closing of the Atlantic to civilian passage, he might well have joined the Carthusians in Europe, there being no house in America at the time – in which case we may never have heard of the name Thomas Merton.) Just over a year later the war claimed his own brother. Twenty years later his prophetic ministry of the 1960s was framed by his outspoken opposition to the Cold War with its threat of nuclear annihilation and to America's increasing entanglement in Vietnam and his disquiet at the subsequent social unrest caused in America.

Our cover image is from the painting by Ric Stott, 'So I will disappear from view', based on an image of Merton leaving his last lecture in Bangkok. In 'The Call of the Blank Canvas', the artist writes about how this image of Merton, as if turning from the world, inspired his portrait.

The 2018 Oakham Conference was based on the theme 'Facing the life and Death Issues', a phrase from a letter to Dorothy Day in 1959 in which Merton wrote of his responding to the call to engage with the problems of

the world. Three of the articles we include were presented at the conference, each examining Merton's response to these problems, in particular that of war and peace. James Cronin examines how Merton was drawn into debate with Kentuckian Catholics who took issue with his views on conscientious objection; Fiona Gardner examines how Merton was very much affected by the Vietnam War in ways that resonated through all those involved on both sides of the conflict, both military and civilian. Gordon Oyer gives us a summary of Merton's engagement with social movements, charting his evolving vision; and gives us five important points for reflection of how Merton's life and witness might inform our own response to the challenges we face today.

Merton's engagement with the world was complemented, indeed grounded, by contemplation. In his article, 'Any tool shed will do', Ian Stackhouse reflects on how we too can find space and silence in our own lives, often in the most unlikely places.

We include reviews of a recent film and five books, two of the books written by Jim Forest who knew Merton and worked alongside him in the peace movement with, amongst others, Daniel Berrigan. So it is most appropriate that we have included the transcript of an interview with Jim Forest by Danny Sullivan, and the six poems Daniel Berrigan wrote in 1969 in heartfelt response to Merton's death. We also carry a report of a recent symposium in Rome, 'Thomas Merton: Prophecy and Renewal', which received a letter of encouragement and support from none less than Pope Francis himself.

In April 1962, at the height of the Cold War, Merton's 'Prayer for Peace' was read out in the US Congress. It closes:

Grant light, grant strength and patience to all who work for peace. ... But grant us above all to see that our ways are not necessarily your ways, that we cannot fully penetrate the mystery of your designs and that the very storm of power now raging on this earth reveals your hidden will and your inscrutable decision. Grant us to see your face in the lightning of this cosmic storm, O God of holiness, merciful to men. Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found. In your will, O God, is our peace.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of The Prince of Peace, may this be the prayer of our own hearts this Christmastide.

Stephen Dunhill