

Creating 'a Culture God grew warm in' : David Scott and the Thomas Merton Society

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In remembering David Scott four encounters with him stand out in my mind and, I think, recalling those encounters will give some insights into the blessing he brought into my life and into the lives of countless others.

The first time I met David was at a small Merton gathering that Canon Donald Allchin had convened in Oxford. I think it must have been early in 1993 as *Courage for Truth*, Thomas Merton's letters to writers, had just been published. Although David hadn't yet seen a copy the focus of his presentation that day was on Merton's literary contacts, a topic he would return to a number of times over the years.¹ It was clear from that presentation just how much Merton's lifelong engagement with literature and literary figures resonated with David, and he was like a child exploring the pages of *Courage for Truth* for the first time.

With Donald's encouragement David's plans for the December 1993 gathering in Winchester to mark the 25th anniversary of Merton's death were just germinating, and we spent some time dreaming and brainstorming what form the gathering might take.

This leads me on to that second encounter, at St. Lawrence's in Winchester when David's parish embraced David's enthusiasm for Merton and hosted a highly memorable gathering, the gathering that led to the formation of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, thirty years ago this coming December. That weekend David far exceeded our dreaming and brainstorming, bringing together personal friends of Thomas Merton, authors, scholars, poets and Merton aficionados and creating an atmosphere that would forever characterize the British Merton Society.

The third memory was David staying with my family here in Louisville prior to the seventh International Thomas Merton Society conference in June 2001. At that stage we had only been living in the States for six months and David arrived armed with some British goodies we were missing, most notably Walker's Cheese and Onion crisps! David (or perhaps Miggy) were concerned about the air in the packets causing the bags of crisps to explode in midflight and so pierced each bag, squeezed the air out, and then sealed the hole with sellotape to keep them fresh! Once the conference began, and David moved into conference accommodation on the Bellarmine University campus, I hardly remember

seeing him again in the whirlwind of conference activity. But, in the days prior to the conference, David was able to relax and enjoy some time exploring Louisville. After one such outing, making the most of the early morning before the heat and humidity of the day descended, he took a walk through our neighborhood which led to his poem 'Valley Road' which would appear in his 2005 volume, *Piecing Together*. Unknown to David before he shared the poem with us, was that Valley Road was also familiar to Thomas Merton. Right at the top of Valley Road was the home of Tommie and Frank O'Callaghan and Merton was a frequent visitor to their home in the sixties. I am sure David experienced many times on that trip — though with the sensitivity of the poet, a marginal man, like Merton — the sense of sacredness that comes with a pilgrimage to places that have carried such a key role in one's own life - the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton's hermitage, and the intersection of Fourth and Walnut where Merton had his famous epiphany.²

My last memory was of the final TMS conference that David attended in 2014. David and I sat together for the conference dinner and had a wonderful time catching up on news of family and friends, including the wide network of Merton friends we'd encountered over the years. I have never had a good memory for names and faces and David's memory was already declining due to early-onset Alzheimer's but, between us, and a glass or two of wine, we shared warm memories of the community of friends brought together in such a unique, special way by Thomas Merton, a legacy that David had certainly continued, especially through the key part he played in founding and then guiding the TMS-GBI over many years. That evening I was reminded of Merton's reflections on browsing the index to *The Seven Storey Mountain* when it was first published:

the most peculiar collection of names you ever saw. ... The index is beautiful. It is like the gathering of all the people I have known at a banquet to celebrate the publication of the Book, and it is like a pledge that they will all belong to me somehow as trophies in heaven, or I will belong to some of them as a trophy.³

— what Merton would later call his 'apostolate of friendship'.⁴

Donald Allchin was once 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!'⁵ And time and time again I am drawn back

to David's poetry. Quietly reading some of his poems, I can still hear David sharing those poems in poetry readings at the TMS conferences over the years. But, in particular, it is David's Merton poems that stand out for me – 'Watercolour (Owen Merton 1887-1931)', 'Thomas Merton's Cambridge (1933)', 'The Hermitage, Gethsemani (1964)', and 'Ibn Abbad Woke Early (11 September 2001)'. And one phrase that I have returned to time and time again is from 'Hermitage, Gethsemani (1964)':

...what he would come to
see as sin, was the culture God
grew warm in.⁶

where David so beautifully, gently, poetically, simply, and I stress, pastorally, points to Merton's own 'hidden wholeness' and gives us all hope for our lives, and for our world.

Thank you, David.

Notes

1. For example, articles on literary figures in *The Merton Journal* included Milosz (2.1), Levertov (5.1) and Pasternak (8.2).
2. David wrote about his visit to Louisville in 'Louisville 2001: Fragment of a Journal', *The Merton Journal* 8.2 (Advent 2001), pp. 46-48.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), pp. 106-7.
4. Letter to Pope John XXIII, November 10, 1958 in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), p. 482.
5. David recalls this advice in 'Give them some Poetry (i.m. Donald Allchin)' in *Beyond the Drift: New & Selected Poems* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2014): pp. 200-201.
6. David Scott, *Selected Poems* (Trowbridge: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 125.

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