

BOOKS

New Life of Merton May Play Normative Role

"The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton," by Michael Mott; Houghton Mifflin, \$24.95, 674 pp.

"Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton (The Hermitage Years 1965-1968)," by John Howard Griffin; JHG Editions/Latitudes Press, \$15, 230 pp.

Reviewed by

Msgr. William H. Shannon
The Merton "industry" keeps growing. The first dissertation on Merton's writings appeared the year before his death. In the 16 years since that tragic death, some 90 dissertations have, for better or worse, graced the halls of academe; in addition a sizable number of books, of varying quality, have rolled off the printing presses. Merton scholarship does indeed exist and, I hope, grows better as time goes on.

It needs to be said, though, that up to now that scholarship has lacked any real center or focus. By "center or focus" I mean an objective and well-balanced portrayal of Thomas Merton, based on all the available sources of information about him, that could serve a normative role for Merton studies. Michael Mott's "Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton" does, I believe, fulfill this need. First of all, his book may be called normative in somewhat the same sense that it is "official." As the biographer appointed by the Merton Legacy Trust, he had access to all unpublished Merton material — which is not available to other scholars. Secondly — and more importantly — the care, sensitivity, and discernment with which he has handled all the

Merton material justify the judgment that we have in this book as genuine and authentic a presentation of the real Merton as is presently possible. It was no easy task to write a biography of Thomas Merton. Merton knew the value of simplicity, but he was not a simple man. There are many facets to his person. His interests ranged far and wide, his enthusiasms were boundless, his energies enormous. Who else would read Meister Eckhart while recovering from a painful operation in the hospital? Who else would write 4,000 letters to over 1,000 correspondents, protesting all the while that he needed to stop writing letters? Who else but Merton would make contact with Boris Pasternak and then try to learn Russian in order to communicate with him in his own language? Who else but this monk would fall in love with a young woman, try to keep that love secret, yet let ever so many friends in on the secret, and when finally they parted, give her as a farewell gift a journal complete with title telling the day-by-day story of his love for her (and besides deposit with his publisher the love poetry occasioned by this relationship)?

Not all Merton's enthusiasms bore fruit in a book or an article. The fact that so many did is amazing when one realizes his rigorous commitment to prayer and solitude. And even this commitment has its ambiguity. He sought solitude relentlessly, yet he needed to be with people. Moreover, by the 60s a new and demanding dimension was added to his

monastic life that further complicated his desire for solitude. He began to reach far beyond the monastic walls, writing articles and letters on racial justice, Vietnam, and nuclear war (his statements on the last find significant parallels in the 1983 American bishops' pastoral, "The Challenge of Peace"). When he was forbidden to write on war and peace, he went underground with mimeographed articles. Yet his involvement in the social issues of his day never shook his conviction that he was irrevocably a monk.

This man of many talents and lofty ambitions was not a contradiction, but surely a paradox — and more than that, a mystery, not only to others but often to himself, as he strove to integrate his enormous spiritual, intellectual, artistic, and emotional capabilities into a unified life. Michael Mott has managed to put together a remarkably coherent, and eminently readable portrait of the different Mertons that emerge from the published writings, the journals, the life-events, and the many friendships of Gethsemani's most famous monk. Surely no small feat. One does not have to agree with everything that Mott has said, but nonetheless from now on anyone who writes about Merton must reckon with this biography, and anyone who ignores it runs the risk of moving Merton scholarship in wrong or unproductive directions.

Mott has followed an appropriate hermeneutic. As far as possible he allows Merton to interpret himself.

This means of course that there is a generous use of the journals (since it is especially in the journals that Merton analyzes self and motives). Yet Mott is careful not to let his text become entangled in a catena of quotations. The book is clearly Mott's, not Merton's: the author remains in control. More than that, Merton's judgments of himself are not sacrosanct: Mott does not hesitate to question them when it seems necessary. For if Merton was his own best and most frequent critic, he was at the same time his own severest judge. There are times when his self-criticism needs softening. This is perhaps especially true in the book that brought him instant fame, "The Seven Storey Mountain." Mott writes, "Merton was not always fair to his younger self. Trying to be fairer, at times I have been critical of 'The Seven Storey Mountain.' The older Merton and the younger Merton showed a gaiety and high spirits which were largely suppressed during the early years in the monastery, and I have tried to bring back the balance occasionally by including the laughter of a deeply serious man."

"The Seven Storey Mountain" — Merton's bestseller autobiography which covers more than half his life — probably poses as serious a challenge as any to a Merton biographer. It is no easy thing to retell a bestseller. Mott manages this well. Again, he does not succumb to the temptation of letting biography become autobiography. It is his story about Merton rather than Merton's story about himself

that we read, fleshing in details that were omitted in "The Seven Storey Mountain," and clearing up many of the mysteries that Trappist propriety left obscure or unresolved.

Merton was one of those persons whom people instinctively like. He was very human, unaffectedly and endearingly so. The subtleties of that humanness have been captured by Mott in both its strengths and its frailties. Readers will especially want to see how Mott handles two crucial and complicated situations in Merton's life: his brief love affair with a young woman in 1966 and his long-time relationship as a monk to his abbot, Dom James Fox. No review can do justice to Mott's careful and sensitive portrayal of both these incidents. Both are put in a context that makes his presentation balanced and insightful. For many readers Mott's handling of these relationships — confusing and complex though they be, yet important for understanding Merton — may well be highlights of clarity and clarification in a book that reads well from beginning to end.

The title of the biography — intended to stress the importance of place to Merton and its influence on him — seems to me a bit artificial and contrived. One could probably think of an eighth or ninth mountain. Further, the title gives no indication that the book is a biography and indeed the unwary browser in a bookstore might mistake it for a novel or a new edition of "The Seven Storey Mountain."

Minor points: the most

admired of Merton's books on contemplation is, I feel sure, not "Seeds of Contemplation" (p.238) but "New Seeds." Father Irenaeus's name does mean "peaceful," but in Greek not Latin (p.129). To the impressive list of Merton names and nicknames (p.7), I would like to add the delightful name given him by Dr. John Wu: "Mei Teng" which means "Silent Lamp."

"Follow the Ecstasy" purports to be a "dialogue" between Merton and the late John Howard Griffin, the first appointed Merton biographer who was forced because of ill health to give up the project. It is also, so the preface says, "the hermit's life-story and Griffin's lucid synthesis of solitude." As one who knew and admired John H. Griffin in life and would not want to dishonor him in death, I regret that the decision was made to publish what I can only judge to be an early rough draft — perhaps from tapes of his reading of the Merton journals. If this is a false judgment and this text was actually intended as finished copy, one can only conclude that Merton fared better in a book by Michael Mott who never knew him than he would have fared at the hands of a very dear friend.

(Msgr. Shannon is chaplain at the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, and professor emeritus of religious studies at Nazareth College of Rochester. The foregoing review was originally published by Commonweal and is reprinted with permission.)

MOVIES

'Passage' Gravely Flawed, but Worth Seeing

By Michael Gallagher

New York (NC) — "A Passage to India" (Columbia) marks the return to filmmaking of David Lean — the celebrated British director responsible for such classics as "Great Expectations," "Brief Encounter," "Doctor Zhivago," "Lawrence of Arabia" and "The Bridge on the River Kwai" (though some would demur on the last two) — after an absence of 14 years. The less-than-classic "Ryan's Daughter" was his most recent film.

The 76-year-old Lean hardly could have chosen a more challenging project than the 1924 E.M. Forster novel about the inability of two cultures to make any but peril-fraught contact in British-ruled India.

Among the main characters of Lean's film version,

which also owes something to the dramatization of the Forster story by Santha Rama Rau, is Adela Quested (Judy Davis), a sensitive young woman of immense intellectual curiosity who comes to India with Mrs. Moore, her prospective mother-in-law, to visit her fiancé, a magistrate in a provincial capital. Others include Mrs. Moore (Dame Peggy Ashcroft), a woman in her 70s with a quite unconventional openness to spiritual reality; Doctor Aziz (Victor Banerjee), a bumbling, naive young Moslem, kind-hearted and eager to be liked and respected; and Richard Fielding (James Fox), a teacher viewed askance by his colleagues because he treats Indians with respect.

Adela comes under intense emotional strain after her

arrival. The force of the Indian environment and culture, fascinating and threatening, seem overwhelming to her. Everyone else, however, with the exception of Mrs. Moore and Fielding, resolutely refuses to notice that sort of thing except in passing.

Among the immune is her fiancé (Nigel Havers), and Adela discovers she doesn't want to marry him.

The British carry on their social life as though India were really England with a hot climate and an inconvenient lot of dark-skinned foreigners hanging about in the background, some of whom are able to make themselves useful as servants.

When Mrs. Moore and Adela confide to Fielding a desire to see the "real India," he arranges a tea party at his home. There they meet Doctor Aziz and a mystically inclined Brahmin named Godbole (Alec Guinness). This in turn leads to an invitation from Aziz to a picnic at the famed Mahabar Caves; an offer Aziz makes to avoid having such fine ladies see how wretched his house is.

The Mahabar expedition leads to an incident that has severe repercussions for all concerned. Adela accuses the hapless Aziz of attempting to rape her, and Indian nationalists exploit his subsequent trial for purposes of their own.

The acting is marvelous. Miss Davis, who was so good

in "My Brilliant Career," is even better here in a far more difficult role. Nor is it possible to imagine any other actor being better as Aziz than Banerjee, who manifests dignity even when most naive or most put-upon.

Fox is excellent as Fielding and, as might be expected, so are Dame Peggy and Guinness as the two mystics, Mrs. Moore and Godbole.

Despite the acting and the marvelous spectacle of India itself, and although it moves well and never allows your interest to lag — with the exception of a reconciliation scene at the end — "A Passage to India" is not very compelling in dramatic terms.

The fault well may lie not with Lean's adaptation but with the original itself, which like most fine novels may not be the stuff of which movies should be made.

The central question of film and book — what actually did happen in the Mahabar caves with their awesome echoes — no doubt is supposed to be mysterious and like all mysteries ineffable.

Despite this regrettable and probably inevitable failure in coming to grips with the heart of the matter, "A Passage to India" is still well worth seeing.

The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-II — adults and adolescents. For those unacquainted with the erotic statues in Hindu temples celebrating the life

process, a word of caution is in order, since they figure in a key scene. The Motion

Picture Association of America has rated it PG — parental guidance suggested.

Movies in Brief

New York (NC) — The following are synopses of movie reviews prepared by the staff of the U.S. Catholic Conference Department of Communication.

"Cotton Club" (Orion)

This big splashy celebration of the famous white-owned, black-talent nightclub that flourished in Harlem in the 1920s and '30s has some entertaining moments, but it lacks emotional power and fails to mesh its two diverse elements: gangsters and show business. Because of some extremely graphic violence and two restrained bedroom sequences, it has been classified A-III — adults — by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

"Dune" (Universal)

This two-and-a-half-hour screen version of the popular trilogy about four factions struggling for control of a desert planet and its wondrous spice has been turned into a dark, quirky movie. Much of it is incomprehensible, and the action sequences are badly staged. Because of some grossities and some graphic violence, it has been classified A-III — adults — by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The industry rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned to give special guidance for attendance of children under 13.

"Starman" (Columbia)

A romantic version of "E.T.," with Jeff Bridges turning in a fine performance as a visitor from another planet who takes on the human form of the much-loved dead husband of a young widow (Karen Allen). Very entertaining. Some violence and a restrained bedroom sequence. It has been classified A-II — adults and adolescents — by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The industry rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

"Runaway" (Tri-Star)

Set in the not-too-distant future, where machines handle mundane chores, this stars Tom Selleck as a member of the runaway squad, a branch of the police force assigned to corralling robots that have run amok. Passable entertainment for action fans, especially if also Selleck fans. Because of some brief nudity and some violence, it has been classified A-III — adults — by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The industry rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned to give special guidance for attendance of children under 13.

Nazareth Artist Shows in Boston

Sister Anne DeMare, art teacher at Nazareth Academy, has had, for the second year in a row, a piece accepted in the Boston Printmakers' Show. Her print, "It Crossed My Mind," will be on display Jan. 27-March 3 in Boston.

Sister Anne is chairman of the school's art department. She recently won the Jurors' Award in the Rochester Art Club's Fall Juried Exhibition

for her "Going to Threads," which critic Ron Netsky called "one of the exhibitions finest prints." She was also featured in the 1984 Clothesline Art Show by the Rochester Art Gallery which has displayed several of her works.

In addition, one of her prints is featured in the Rochester Institute of Technology 1985 Calendar.