

As the centenary of his birth (“on the last day of January, 1915, in the year of a great war,” as he himself puts it) approaches, Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, prolific author, dialogue partner of the famous and the obscure throughout America and around the world, continues to fascinate and attract thousands of readers. As popular as he was during the twenty years between the publication of his best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in 1948, and his accidental death in Thailand in 1968, Merton’s influence during the subsequent decades has been even greater.

One reason for his continuing prominence is undoubtedly his personality. Merton seems in many ways to be a coincidence of opposites: down-to-earth and approachable, yet enigmatic, difficult to figure out; drawn to solitude yet genuinely gregarious, a mystic with his feet firmly planted on the ground; thoroughly American yet cosmopolitan; a committed Christian who was quite comfortable with Buddhists and atheists and other “exotic” types. Born in France of an American mother and New Zealand father, he was idiosyncratic yet representative: even his unique upbringing, wandering around Europe after his mother’s early death with his artist father, and his almost equally rare decision to settle down within a monastery, become in some sense a paradigm for contemporary alienation and the search for roots. Merton was, in Anthony Padovano’s apt phrase, “symbol of a century.”

But it is not just Merton the person but Merton the writer who draws such passionate interest. One cannot help but be impressed by the sheer variety of forms he used: he was poet, autobiographer, spiritual writer, essayist, social commentator, literary critic, even novelist in his pre-monastic days, as well as prodigious letter writer and journal keeper, as the five volumes of collected letters and seven volumes of complete journals published in recent years bear witness. He was an eloquent voice for racial justice and intercultural understanding, a passionate advocate of nonviolence and ecological responsibility, a trenchant critic of consumerism and technological hubris, a proponent of contemplative stillness and silence as an indispensable source of wisdom in a hectic, often unfocused world. More than 90 books by Merton have been published in the past 60+ years, about forty of them since his death, with more still to come. His style makes him almost compulsively readable for many people, whatever the topic or genre. He is typically informal without being disorganized, self-revelatory without being self-centered, accessible without being condescending, often profound without becoming obscure. He is passionately committed to his vision and values without taking himself too seriously. He has an uncanny ability to penetrate to the heart of an issue, to separate the wheat from the chaff. He can be exasperatingly inconsistent, but is seldom conventional, commonplace or repetitious. The reader feels that Merton is interested not only in his subject but in his audience, not merely in conveying information but in developing a kind of community of shared insight. One of his greatest skills as a writer is to be suggestive rather than definitive, to point beyond himself, to relinquish the last word. He invites his audience to make direct contact with authors he discusses, whether William Faulkner in the twentieth century or John of the Cross in the sixteenth; he challenges readers to think and act for themselves on issues of social justice or nuclear proliferation; not just to read about prayer, but to pray.

But even this does not fully explain the remarkable degree of interest in Merton today. It is perhaps because he was ahead of his time. There is a quality about much of Merton’s thought that can legitimately be termed prophetic. Mainstream American society has only recently come

to recognize and respond to issues about which Merton was passionately concerned in the 1960s. His extensive contacts with Latin American and Asian writers, thinkers and religious leaders made him sensitive to issues of third-world poverty and the need for radical social transformation long before Central America or the Middle East exploded into revolution and civil strife. His dialogue with other cultural and religious traditions made him a global citizen even as he was passionately committed to challenging and inviting his adopted country to realize its full spiritual and intellectual potential.

Thomas Merton is certainly one of the most compelling and most attractive American figures of the past one hundred years, and therefore well deserving to be commemorated on a US postage stamp. I therefore am writing to encourage the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee to approve the issue of a Thomas Merton stamp in 2015 to mark the one hundredth anniversary of his birth. Thank you for your attention and consideration of this request.

Sincerely,