

Dr Robert E. Daggy - A Tribute.

1940 - 1997

by Paul M. Pearson

Robert Edward Daggy was born in New Castle, Indiana on 28th July 1940. He lived in Henry County, Indiana until he was eighteen years old. His family had settled the county and lived there for several generations. His father's family were birthright Quakers and had come in a migration of Quakers out of the South and slave territory to the free soil of the old Northwest Territory. (1)

At eighteen Robert Daggy went up to Yale as an undergraduate and upon graduating in 1962 he went on to Columbia for a year. He once noted how Merton had loved Columbia and hated Cambridge, calling it the darkest year of his life, whereas he had hated Columbia and loved Yale.

From Columbia he went back to Yale for two years as an assistant to the archivist in charge of Yale memorabilia. It was at this point that his interest in archival work and literary estates developed. From Yale he went on to the University of Wisconsin, Madison where he received a doctorate in history for his thesis entitled *Measures for Yalensia: Naphtali Daggett and Yale College, 1766-1778*.

After completing his doctorate Robert Daggy taught at Wisconsin for two years. It was at this time that he was hired as a consultant to the Merton Legacy Trust. It was at a stage when Merton studies were in an embryonic stage. Very little had been published since Merton's death - John Howard Griffin's *A Hidden Wholeness* and Ed Rice's *Man in the Sycamore Tree* - but with the publication of Merton's *Asian Journal* in 1973 the Merton industry began to develop.

As Director of the Merton Studies Center, up until ill health forced him to resign, Robert Daggy oversaw the vast growth in Merton Studies which has led to Merton's recognition as one of the great spiritual writers of this century. Robert Daggy became an international force in the Merton world through his own writings, the books he edited, (2) those scholars he encouraged and guided, and through the love and friendship he brought to all those interested in Thomas Merton.

Robert Daggy played a prominent part in the development of Merton studies on the international scene and made numerous trips abroad to encourage fledgling Merton groups, including visits to Belgium, the United Kingdom, Spain and China. It was on such a visit to England in 1987 that I first met Bob after corresponding with him for a number of years. It was a typical meeting – he was standing in the sun outside the church where the conference was being held, smoking whilst William Shannon lectured inside. Although a Merton Society did not get off the ground on that visit he came over again when the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland was finally formed at Winchester in 1993.

I have some particularly fond memories of that visit as I hosted Bob during his stay. As well as attending the Winchester conference, we visited old friends and new. After meeting my fiancée Helen for the first time he accepted an invitation to supper and prayer at the local L'Arche community where she was living and spent the evening with his hand held in a vice-like grip by Primrose, one of the residents. It was an evening he would frequently recall.

The following year I visited Louisville to work at the Studies Center. Bob hosted my visit and, besides assisting in my research and, giving direction to my thesis, was also a splendid host introducing me to many of his friends, to the delights of Kentucky life and to Manhattans made with his favourite bourbon, Very Old Barton.

When Helen and I next saw Bob he was already feeling the effects of the disease which would

eventually take his life though at that stage he attributed it to a virus he thought he had picked up on his visit to China. It was to be two years before our next visit and in that time, despite loving and expert care, his health had worsened dramatically. Those times we spent with Bob in June 1997 will long remain with us - he had not lost his sense of humour, or his famous braces, and the old glint was still in his eyes. Bob quizzed us about his friends in England and about the way the Merton Society was developing and, as we left him his final words were that he would see us at Oakham. However that was not to be. He died on December 15th 1997.

In an article Bob wrote for *Spiritual Life* on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death he reflected on his own experience as director of the Merton Studies Center and on a dream montage he had about Merton and his work at the Center. He concluded that article saying:
"Merton's finger points us toward many things, but in the end they are all the same. He points us "home," to where we belong, to where we are "all pieces of the paradise isle." In my Merton montage, whether waking or sleeping, that is the important thing. That is what appeals to me."

It was that appeal which Robert Daggy shared with the Merton community and which he expressed in the powerful titles he chose for the letters and journals of Merton that he edited - *The Road to Joy* and *Dancing in The Water of Life*, titles which express his own zest for life and the zest he discovered in Merton.

In tribute to him the Thomas Merton Society has included on its pages his paper [Question and Revelation: Merton's Recovery of the Ground of Birth](#). This paper, on one of his favourite areas of Merton studies, was read in his absence at the first general meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

Footnotes:

(1) Parts of this tribute are based on an interview by Carl Simmons published in *Burning Light*.

(2) Books edited by Robert Daggy include:

Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. 1997.

The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends. 1990.

Reflections on My Work. 1989.

Thomas Merton in Alaska. 1989.

Encounter: Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki. 1988.

Day of a Stranger. 1981.

Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton. 1981.

Monk's Pond.

Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography.

The Merton Annual.
