

# THOMAS MERTON

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Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, appeared in 1948, when its author was thirty-three years old. It told the story of a young man who, from no religion at all, became a Catholic, thought of entering the Franciscans, and then, at the age of twenty-six, entered the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance -- the Trappists -- at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky.

Merton was born in France in 1915 of a New Zealand father, who was an artist, and an American mother but he was orphaned early. He was raised in France, in England, in the United States, and, in the years preceding his conversion, was an aspiring writer, political radical, campus cut-up, and vagabond lover.

When his book appeared, in the years after World War II, the campuses were swarming with veterans whose war time experiences had aged if not matured them; Merton spoke with the authority of someone who had done everything you had, and maybe more, and, in the great tradition of religious conversion, had then done a 180 degree turn and become a monk, determined to be a saint.

The impact of this book on young Catholics, and not only them, in

this country cannot be overestimated. Merton gave voice to the longing for contemplation which is latent in any human heart. He put before one a spiritual and ascetic ideal that went against the grain of the age -- as it has gone against the grain of every age. Following the story of his life that had led him to a monastery in rural Kentucky, readers saw possibilities in their own lives that might otherwise have escaped them. Merton provided a dramatic meditation on the unavoidable question: What is the point and meaning of a human life?

It is not too much to say that, more than anyone else, Thomas Merton was responsible for the amazing growth of the Trappist Order in this country. New foundations sprang up across the country and were quickly filled with eager novices.

I was an undergraduate when I read Merton's autobiography and its impact on me was indelible, although not in every way the one he wished to make. The description of his efforts to write and publish novels fascinated me almost as much as the description of his religious vocation. That he and his friends would spend the summer in a rented cottage, plugging away at their novels, titillated my imagination. Later, in 1969, one of Merton's failed novels would be printed: *My Argument with the Gestapo. A Macaronic Journal*. It was difficult to avoid the thought that he would have starved as a novelist. He was a better poet, and indeed collections of his poems were published by New Directions before the autobiography

appeared.

And here lay one of the great ironies of his life. When he entered the Trappists, he put behind him all his secular ambitions, including that of becoming a writer, yet he was destined to become a world famous author as a Trappist, though he published under his secular name. It was not his idea to write as a monk, but when he was asked to do so, he went at it with great gusto, and books flowed out of Getsemani until he died in 1968 at the age of fifty-three -- indeed, the flow continued after his death. His range was enormous and he had a knack of making an immediate contact with his reader, speaking with the voice of an older brother, a spiritual director, someone like and unlike.

One of the oddities of Merton's autobiography was the suggestion that the Trappist life wasn't demanding enough. Maybe if war time conditions had not prevented it, he would have entered a Carthusian monastery. A lifelong tension between the cenobitic and hermetic ideals of monasticism began, and Merton would eventually argue that the Trappists themselves were originally meant to be more hermetic than cenobitic. In any case, he was permitted to build a hermitage in the woods of the monastery and to spend increasing amounts of time alone. It was in the hermitage that John Howard Griffin took the famous photographs of Jacques Maritain and Merton. I used the hermitage for a scene in my novel *The Noonday Devil*.

The two essential biographies of Merton are by Monica Furlong and by Michael Mott. We learn something Merton had been advised to leave out of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. As a student in England, he had a child but the boy and his mother were later killed during the air raids on London. This underscores Merton's sense that he entered the monastery to do penance for his past life.

The biographies disturb our sense that, when Merton entered the monastery, the old life was left behind and a new one, the one that produced *Seeds of Contemplation* and a whole series of books depicting advancement in the spiritual life, began. Life, even monastic life, is never that simple. It seems inescapable that Merton's abbot came to find him a pain in the neck, and not without reason. Merton felt he was unfairly dealt with, but it is easy to be struck by how patiently the abbot and his fellow monks endured Merton's idiosyncracies.

The literary life beyond the walls invaded the monastic redoubt. The hermitage seemed less rather than more demanding than community life. Reading of Merton working there, listening to Joan Baez records, drinking wine, we might think that at the time we were more monkish than our favorite monkish mentor. He had visitors. He engaged in a vast and global correspondence. His interest in political matters grew and he allied himself with anti-war and pacifist groups. Increasingly, he romanticized such involvements, calling his missive to the outside world *Cables from the Ace*

and *Reflections of a Guilty Bystander*.

Merton's interest in Eastern mysticism grew and took on odd dimensions. Nor was he spared the temptations of the flesh. Mott tells us of Merton, in hospital in Louisville, falling in love with a nurse and ready to desert his vocation and marry her. That he did not owed more to her maturity than his.

Frankly, I was shocked when I read of this faltering, but on reflection I have come to think that it is an essential element in Merton's influence. We lay people are wont to make impossible demands on the clergy and religious, as if they were already *in patria* rather than *in via* with the rest of us. There is something pharisaical in our surprise that even those who have given their lives to the quest of perfection often fall short. No doubt it would have been better if Merton had not suffered this foolish lapse in Louisville. But it should not obscure the fact that, despite it, in some ways because of it, he hung in there and was true to the vocation to which he had been called.

He died in Bangkok, electrocuted by a faulty connection, and was returned to Gethsemani for burial. The immortality he sought was not that of authorship but his books will go on doing good for many for a long time to come. In part this is due to the devotion of his admirers, who have refused to let obscurity claim him.

Brother Patrick Hart, a fellow Trappist who served as secretary to

Merton, has earned the gratitude of us all for his self-effacing and tireless effort to keep the flame alight. Brother Patrick has edited the letters of Merton and brought together his literary essays. But his monument will surely be the projected seven volumes of Merton's Journals of which he is the general editor

Several volumes have already been published: *Run to the Mountain*, 1939-1941, edited by Brother Patrick, and *Entering the Silence, 1941-1952*, edited by Jonathan Montaldo. Future volumes will be edited by Christine Bochen, Lawrence Cunningham, Robert Daggy and Victor Kramer. Brother Patrick himself will edit the final volume. The journals have been mined for particular publications, the main story of Merton's life is known, but the complete journals will deepen our understanding of this remarkable man, *notre semblable, notre frere*.

When I first read *Seven Storey Mountain*, in the year of its appearance, I was overwhelmed and somewhat shamed by the freshness and awe with which Merton spoke of things which had become matter-of-fact to me. Doubtless the convert will always open the eyes of the cradle Catholic to the marvels he takes for granted. But it was Merton's enthusiasm for Catholic culture, particularly the spiritual and intellectual patrimony of the Church, that awoke in me a desire to assimilate and be grateful for that great tradition.

Was Merton a good poet? I am no judge, of course, but he does

seem uneven to me. He wrote free verse, tennis without a net, but sometimes it worked. Often it did not, and his similes would not cohere. Oddly, the failures happened when he was under the influence of the psalms.

His continuing role is that of a spiritual type, a gifted author of protreptic works that awaken a deep longing for the inner life. The complete journals will give us the man, warts and all. Perhaps, as with the de-saccharinizing of the Little Flower, this will make him even more appealing to *l'homme moyen sensuel*. Mount's biography shocked me a little and I indulged some pharisaical thoughts. Any flaw in someone striving for sanctity sets off the hum of criticism in those of us who could not have lived a day of the life to which Thomas Merton gave twenty-seven years of his. It is good to settle down again with this marvelous and saintly author.