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ZACCHAEUS, MAKE HASTE: EDWARD RICE'S *MAN IN THE SYCAMORE TREE*

Edward Rice was one of the first biographers of his monk-friend. His book, which originally appeared in 1970, named after an early unpublished novel by Merton, introduced many readers, including me, to the life and writings of the famed Trappist. As its title page indicates, the book is truly an "entertainment."

I had the book in hardback and later in paperback so, when I saw the present edition on the bookstore shelf, I bought it, anxious to see if anything "new" had been included. The copyright page answers that question best: "Reprint." While there are four additional works included in the acknowledgements, there is little difference in the two editions. Indeed with "escapt" for "escape" in this edition and the hardback edition, but not in the original 1972 paperback edition, it seems evident that the book was "shrunk down" from the original hardback galley pages. The type, therefore, is

sometimes downright miniscule! Perhaps this would better be called a "Mini-Print." Photographs, captions, and text are all identical, with the exception of a close-up photo and caption that replace a double-page panorama photo of a shadowy Merton striding across a Kentucky hillside. A rather unintelligible sentence on page 17 included a portion of a sentence from page 15, leaving out the part that should be there. According to the hardback edition it should read: "Father Ford assigned him to Father Moore, one of the assistants at the church of Corpus Christi, for instruction.

After reading the Epilogue (which has been added to this edition) I went back through the book to see how well it holds up in light of the intervening years of on-going Merton scholarship. The book remains an "entertainment" with wonderful photos that only a friend like Rice could give us. We should be grateful to him for sharing with us this extraordinary friendship.

There are, however, some sections that Rice could have reworked a bit to reflect what is now known about Merton. One of those areas which confounds Rice relates to why Merton stayed at the monastery and remained obedient to an "authoritarian abbot." It should be clear by now that Merton believed he had a vocation or a "calling" to the monastic life and that he responded to this calling as generously as he could. In several significant passages in his novitiate conferences on John Cassian he refers to obedience:

"St. Benedict says zeal for obedience is one of the signs of a true vocation."

"All else is to be placed after obedience . . . The emphasis is always on obedience to a living and concrete man rather than to an abstract rule."

"Finally — [and Merton has this all in capital letters] THE IMPORTANCE OF OPEN RESISTANCE, RATHER THAN FLIGHT."

In the opening passages of his book, Rice rightly points out that "The two main themes in Merton's later life were peace — in various forms: social and racial justice, freedom, love, liberty — and the interior life, and neither excluded the other." While he refers to these topics by quoting from Merton's writings, except for one instance when he writes "I have been quoting from MY ARGUMENT WITH THE GESTAPO," he does not assist the reader who may be new to Merton by giving citations for these quotes. A selected bibliography might have proved helpful. Also, I think Merton himself would today be a little more sensitive to such sexist remarks as "He pointed out that Christian nonviolence is built on the basic unity of man" and "the Christian message is for all men" as well as the repeated use of the word "mankind" by Rice.

Regarding prayer, Rice quotes a significant passage written by Merton about an incident which occurred in 1931 — ten years before his entrance into the monastery — a quote which has the resonance of some of his very last written words:

"And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray — praying not with my lips and my intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my life and my being."



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In the Merton Center
Photo by Robert E. Daggy

On the subject of writing and the burden it placed on Merton's "hard" life Rice observes: "he was expected to write." Of course. It could not really be expected that he would NOT write.

Rice believes that THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN was "castrated" by mean-spirited censors and remarks: "As far as I have been able to determine, there is not even a copy of this bowdlerized material." Here is another instance where Rice's book could be helped by Merton scholarship. There are copies of the excised material in existence. The late Sister Therese Lentfoehr once quoted a letter from Merton, saying: "Its length was impossible for any publisher and it did need to be cut." In a paper presented at a 1983 Rochester Merton Symposium, Dr. Robert Daggy simply concludes that "Editing [of the manuscript] was done to tighten it, make it flow, cut out digressions." Trappist censors had cut one-third of the original manuscript mostly because of style, but Evelyn Waugh, while preparing the book for British publication, cut another 20% from the American edition. It is clear that the editing of THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN was done, not to castrate the book, but to enhance the telling of the monk's story.

Rice seems keenly interested in the significance of Merton's Eastern studies. The original hardback edition dust jacket touts that this book will "immortalize an Englishman who became a Communist, then a Catholic, later a Trappist monk, and finally a Buddhist, at which point, his life having ended, he died." Pffft!

I think this gives an impression that Merton himself would qualify. When Merton spoke with peaceniks, he spoke of peace. When he spoke with monks and nuns, he spoke of monastic renewal. When he spoke to Sufis or Zen practitioners, he spoke of what interested them. For someone steeped in studies preparing for his Eastern trip, I think it was natural that Merton spoke as he did. And despite the critics of Merton to whom Rice refers, there were significant supporters at that time — Jean Leclercq, Aelred Graham, and David Steindl-Rast, among others. Many of the quotations casting doubt on Merton's fidelity to Christian monasticism are attributed to "several people," "one participant," and "another [who] remarked." We might well wonder: Who were these people?

Rice offers an insight which for 1970 was quite bold: "Thomas Merton could have remained a monk of Gethsemani without ever seeing the monastery again." But he seems reluctant to take the next leap to realize that Merton could also dialogue with Asians and share their religious experience while remaining an authentically Christian monk.

It would have been interesting to see these points addressed had the entire book been revised rather than reprinted.

In the New Testament story, Zacchaeus, the original "Man in the Sycamore Tree," who had perched in a tree to get a better view of Jesus, is invited down to learn from the Master. From reading this book, we become certain that our man Merton has come down from his limb to converse with the Master, but, unfortunately, we are left looking up into the empty tree.

