

The Friendship of Robert Lax and Thomas Merton

By Arthur W. Biddle



Lax's Home

The following are excerpts from my interviews with Lax on Patmos in 1992 and 1998. The complete interview is included in *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax* (Copyright 2001 by The Thomas Merton Legacy Trust).

Merton and Lax met at Columbia University in 1935. Both were contributors to the campus humor magazine, the Jester.

BIDDLE: Was it at the *Jester* office that you met Merton?

LAX: No. In the same first issue that I had some things in *Jester*, Merton did too. And I saw what he had written, and I really was impressed that he was a mature writer. And a funny man too. This may have happened in my sophomore year because by then the editor was Herbert Jacobson. Anyway I asked Jacobson who Merton was and it turned out that Merton had asked him who I was. And Jacobson arranged that we would meet in the dining hall – John Jay Hall, one of the places that you ate. And he took me around and Merton was already at the table and he introduced

us and left us together. We really hit it off immediately. I hadn't met many people anywhere who would be so open, and so ready, and so friendly to meet and to talk. It was an immediate contact and we just got along. I don't think either of us doubted that we'd be friends from that moment on.

People meeting him have had that experience. Maybe all his life he was really very outgoing in a genuine way, a genuine and innocent way. You felt completely at home on meeting him. He was funny, too, and so we had lots of things to talk about.

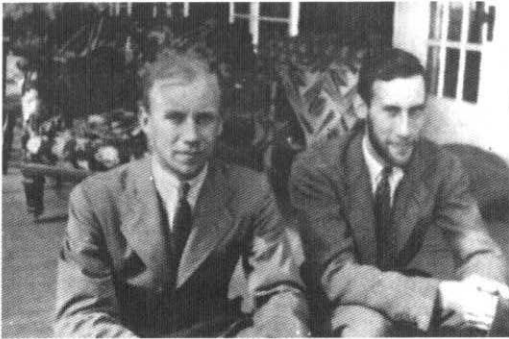
Lax told me about a dream he had of Bramachari, the Indian monk they had befriended in New York. In the dream Bramachari communicated with Lax. That got us on the subject of dreams.

BIDDLE: But you sometimes did dream about Merton, you'd see Merton's face?

LAX: Oh, yes. Certainly later when I'd get letters from him, I'd see him in dreams. And particularly good eye-to-eye meetings, more than we were likely to do in our playful moods all through life. Nice, I mean nothing mysterious about it, but it was a nice meeting, a sort of leveling with each other. Very warm and very nice.

BIDDLE: This was an extended dream?

LAX: No, not very extended. But it was "all kidding aside," that sort of thing.



Merton and Lax at Olean cottage

other.

LAX: Yes, I think that's true. It didn't cost either of us a cent. We really felt it, and sure it was good, but we never thought we were doing anything. I would say it's just that jam session thing: that you're really expecting good and better and better things from this man you know can do great things.

BIDDLE: One matter is a bit of a puzzle to me. You were friends, that is intimates, for maybe six years. And for three of those years, 1938 to 1941, you were in Olean when he was in New York, or he was in Olean when you were in New York, so you probably didn't see a lot of each other during that time. The question I'm leading up to is, what sustained your friendship from December 6, 1941, on for the next twenty-seven years?

LAX: My first impression that day at lunch. I don't know. I think one thing we shared was the stuff that could be put into words and that we were putting into words. Communication really was of the essence. Happily a lot of it was verbal.

BIDDLE: And those letters then were your expressions of friendship and love?

LAX: They were, I think that's really it. Somebody asked me how I felt after Merton died. I said I certainly felt as though I'd lost a correspondent. It wasn't that I'd lost a friend because I don't feel that now either. He's there in that sense, the friend is there. But as a correspondent he's hard to get to.

BIDDLE: There's one letter to you after you sent him the final draft of *Circus of the Sun* which he begins, "Before I get into the doubletalk, I want to tell you that this is the best thing you've ever done" and that sort of thing. He goes on for a couple of paragraphs very sincerely and in good detail. Then he starts getting silly again.

LAX: That's it exactly.

Near the end of one of our evening talks on Patmos, we were discussing their thirty-year correspondence.

BIDDLE: What strikes me about your letters is the unadulterated support you gave each