

Remembering Naomi Burton Stone: A View from Gethsemani

By Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO

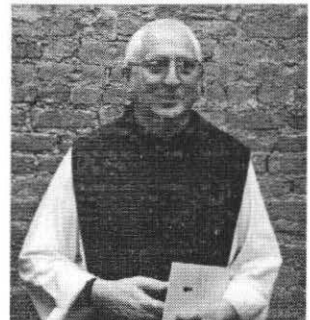
Although we had exchanged some letters and spoken over the phone, my first actual meeting with Naomi Burton took place at the time of Father Louis's death in the first part of December of 1968. She had been notified of Merton's death on December 10, and as one of the Merton Trustees came to Gethsemani to be present for the funeral, which occurred a week later. I remember her saying amid tears that she had "mothered" Merton too much, always wanting him to be the perfect monk. She recalled some interesting incidents which occurred during her last visit to Gethsemani when Merton was ignoring previous long-standing book contracts and was giving out manuscripts to friends. She said her job as Merton's agent and later as one of the three trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust was to keep Merton out of jail.

Naomi had not yet become a (Roman) Catholic at the time Merton sent her the manuscript of his autobiography, which she successfully placed with Robert Giroux under the title, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. After entering the Church in 1955, she became good friends with the local bishop, Peter Gerety, who encouraged her gifts at teaching catechism, which became a source of joy for her over the years. She was quite liberal in her thinking as I recall, advocating altar girls long before others were thinking in those terms, not to mention the ordination of women during and following the Second Vatican Council. Her autobiography, published in 1964 under the title, *More Than Sentinels*, relates her religious journey up to that time. When she returned to the Anglican Church in the 1980s, some commentators said it was *The Seven Storey Mountain* that brought her to Rome, while it was Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains* that brought her back to Canterbury. She always considered herself Catholic.



Fr. John Loftus and Naomi Burton Stone Photograph by Thomas Merton, April 1967

Naomi was one of the few women friends in Merton's life who were able to stand up to his charms, as she related to me about her last visit with "Tom" while being driven to the airport following a stormy visit. She looked at her watch and said in the midst of Merton's complaining about the Abbot: "All right, five more minutes of this griping and then no more. I've had enough of it." Merton had a good sense of humor and was able to see the funny side of the situation, and burst out laughing. After all, Naomi had become good friends of the Abbot as well as Father Louis, which complicated matters.



Patrick Hart, OCSO

Patrick Hart, OCSO celebrated his fiftieth anniversary of monastic profession at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 2004. He served as Thomas Merton's last secretary and has edited numerous Merton works, including the first and final volumes of the complete journals, for which he served as general editor.

The next time Naomi and I had some days together was in late January of 1971 when we were editing Merton's manuscript of his Asian journal. James Laughlin, another Trustee, who was very interested in publishing the manuscript at New Directions, realized it needed a great deal of editing before it could be published. He had invited Naomi and me to come to his big home in Norfolk, Connecticut, where we would spend three or four days working steadily on the journal. Jay drove us to Mass in the town each morning, and then from about 9 a.m. until noon, and again all afternoon we spent before a typewriter, making revisions as each page was scrutinized for accuracy. At one point, it was impossible to figure out Merton's hand-writing, and in desperation Naomi said to Jay: "Do you have any brandy in the house?" After reaching up to a shelf in the kitchen, he brought down a bottle, dusted it off, and poured Naomi a glass, which she sipped appreciatively. Shortly after, she turned the journal upside down and knew instinctively the missing word.

The last afternoon, we took off for some cross-country skiing, stopping at Jay's Aunt Leila's French mansion across the road, which was locked up for the winter. It was full of period furniture, so we just looked in without marching through on our skis. Jay said that John Howard Griffin spent several weeks in the mansion while he was doing research on the Merton biography, examining papers that Laughlin kept in his archives in the house.

Naomi drove her English car down from Maine for the meeting, and afterwards we took off for Spencer, Massachusetts, where she was scheduled to give a talk to the community and have a meeting with the Abbot, Thomas Keating, a good friend of hers, as well as Basil Pennington, who was interested in the publishing world. We arrived just in time for an ice storm that covered the hill leading up to the monastery. Basil was out in front to greet us and offered to drive the car over to a barn, which was warmer, but he had a hard time navigating the English car on the icy hill. We ended up with Naomi spending most of her time with Thomas Keating, who was her spiritual director, while Basil and I talked about books, especially plans for Cistercian Publications which we were both interested in at the time. But we did have our meals together in the guest house, where Naomi and I stayed for those few days. The last evening Naomi entertained the monks in their Chapter Room by giving a talk about her relationship with Thomas Merton, from the days when Merton was at Columbia in New York, and trying to publish several of his early novels. Naomi realized that Merton had been gifted as a writer, but she wasn't sure it was the novel genre. Most of her attempts at placing his novels, "The Man in the Sycamore Tree," "Journal of My Escape from the Nazis," and "The Straits of Dover," were met with rejection slips, although one was published by Doubleday (*Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*) shortly after Merton's death (as *My Argument with the Gestapo*), thanks to her personal intervention as an editor at Doubleday.

I remember having to phone Naomi on occasion regarding Merton business after his death, and her husband Melville Stone would answer. They lived in a New England house he had designed and built in Maine overlooking the Atlantic. I would say, "This is Brother Patrick from Gethsemani and I would like to speak to Naomi." He would call out to her: "Sister Naomi, Brother Patrick is on the line and wants to speak to you." Sometimes she would be upstairs or in the yard and was taking some time to reach the phone. One time I asked Ned what the weather was like in Maine, and he at once answered: "Oh, you can see Spain today!" I never dared correct him, to say it would probably be Portugal, rather than Spain, but I can still hear his distinct British accent on "Spain today."

Naomi resigned from the Merton Legacy Trust in the early 1990s due to failing health. After several attempts at nursing home arrangements she finally settled on what she considered just right for her at the Mark H. Wentworth Home in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where she remained until the time of her death. On my infrequent phone conversations with Naomi she remained as feisty as ever right up to the end. May she rest now in God's peace.