

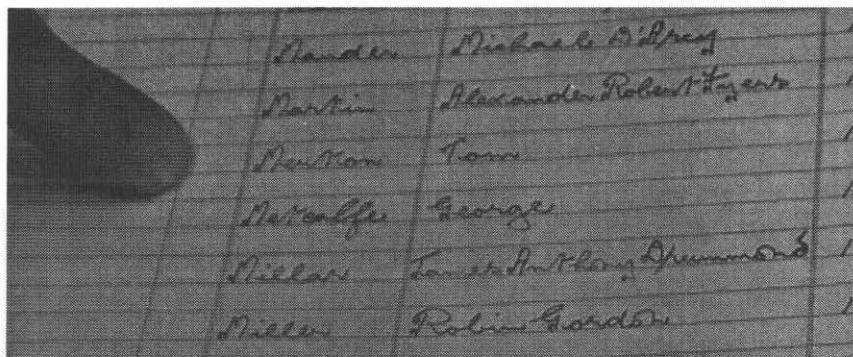
# Nine-Tenths Pilgrimage and One-Tenth Vacation

By Beth Goodwin-O'Neal

*But it was one of those medieval pilgrimages that was nine-tenths vacation and one-tenth pilgrimage – Thomas Merton<sup>1</sup>*

## Clare College, Cambridge

In September 2004, I travelled from Australia to visit my son Andrew, who is studying at Cambridge University in England. While there, I decided to contact Elizabeth Stratton, the archivist at Clare College, to see if there was something in their library on Thomas Merton. We ended up meeting and this proved very satisfactory. She was able to show me the Terms Book indicating Merton's presence at the College for three terms: Michaelmas 1933, and Lent and Easter 1934. She also showed me the original Clare College Freshmen photos of October 1933 with Merton in both. It was exciting to look at the Admissions Book giving details of Merton's birth date (France, January 31, 1915), his last school (Oakham) and his next-of-kin and their addresses (Dr T. M. Bennett and H. A. Jenkins, guardians).



Ms. Stratton expressed an interest that something should be written up about Merton for their Old Boys' magazine. Although I am aware of at least one previous visitor to Clare College with interest in Thomas Merton (Monsignor William Shannon), the present archivist did not seem to know anything about Thomas Merton despite there being a very good selection of Merton books in the main Cambridge Library. Again, from the account in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, we know that Merton had little to say

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Beth Goodwin-O'Neal (r.) with Christiane Thouron At Lycée Ingres, Montauban

of praise about his time at Cambridge (*SSM* 118-28). We are also aware that much of that is a projection of his own troubled mind-set at the time. Merton speaks of his time at Clare as “dark” and “sinister” (*SSM* 118). He recalls his time at Cambridge as “a dizzy business,” a time when “I was breaking my neck trying to get everything out of life that you think you can get out of it when you are eighteen” (*SSM* 119). Whereas so many others have studied at Cambridge and loved the experience, Merton took a strong dislike to it. This attitude lasted most of his life. The time there carried too many painful memories.

A visit to the local library in Cambridge led me to look at the

Spalding’s Directory of Cambridge for the years 1932–1933 in order to

locate 71 Bridge Street, Cambridge, where Merton boarded for some of the time he was studying at Clare. Although a number of buildings around 71 Bridge Street had been demolished in the 30s, the building where Merton lived still stands there. It is now Jessop’s Photography shop, and is very close to Trinity College. John Barber, who also went to Oakham and to Cambridge, spoke about “Old Merty”: “He was a wildcat at Cambridge and he used to go drinking and off with girls, probably not the right kind of girls very often. . . . I think most of us at Oakham and Cambridge were very surprised that he should have become a Trappist . . . . [F]rom all I hear, he was a bit of a wildcat as a Trappist!”<sup>2</sup>



## Montauban

From Cambridge I moved on to Merton territory in southern France. It was at Montauban that Merton boarded at the Lycée Ingrès when he was 11-12 years old. Because Andrew and I had been touring around the small French villages with their inherent grace and charm, Montauban hit us with its vast grey industrial air of “progress.” The city seemed huge. Fortunately we found the Tourist Office without too much trouble, only then becoming alerted to the fact that maybe school was finished for the day! It was then about 3 p.m. A map located the entrance to Collège Ingrès (Lycée Ingrès) at Rue Arogo, off Boulevard Montauriol. It is now a big co-ed high school.

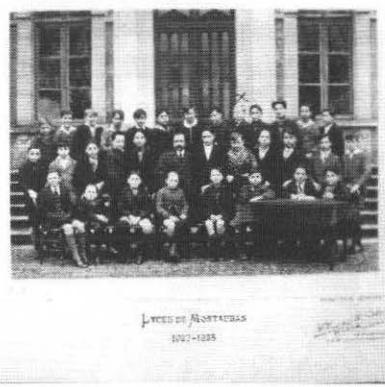
As we were entering the building, I half-jokingly said to Andrew: “Wouldn’t it be great if we came out of here with something *new* to interest Merton followers?” – not really expecting such to happen. Monica Weis, SSJ had just recently been to Montauban where she heard the then Principal, Monsieur Crohare, announce that in 1927 Merton had won prizes for general academic honours in English, Gymnastics and Fencing. In 1928, he was mentioned for achievements in History and Geography and Art.<sup>3</sup> On arriving at the school, we met the Secretary, Mme. Michele Charles. She was familiar with the Canadian Merton group that visit the school bi-annually. But, more importantly, she told us that her own father, now deceased, had been in the class above Merton at that school! She had, at her home, prize lists where her father and Thomas Merton were both mentioned. These were similar to what Monica had seen on her trip. She invited us to look around the courtyard until

such time as the Principal, Mme. Jocelyne Falconnier, was free. When the Principal arrived, she in turn took us to Mme. Christiane Thouron, Principal Councillor of Education. Christiane was delightful, and most helpful. She had been doing archival duties in the past two years and was willing to take us up to the former Temple (Protestant Chapel for boys during Merton's stay), where the archival material was still in the process of being finalised.

Boxes of items lay everywhere. Soon we located photograph boxes of the years 1926, 1927, 1928. As we quickly flicked through photos, we came across a group of boys, where someone had marked in pencil with an arrow "Thomas Merton???" Indeed, the question marks were definitely in order! Andrew and I laughed out loudly and quickly: "That's not Thomas Merton!" The image was of a boy with strong dark hair parted strictly in the middle. In no way like TM! Soon, however we came across the real Merton, very recognizable in both photos. We saw no smiling face (under-



standably, after reading his account of life at Montauban in *The Seven Storey Mountain*). Mind you, not too many of the boys were smiling! But there was Merton indeed, blond hair, full cheeks, and in one photo bearing a rather superior look! Unlike most of the other boys, he was wearing a tie.



Had we discovered something new? We were excited. Christiane offered to photostat the photos for us, whilst Andrew took photos on his camera. Then Michele joined us again. Her face lit up

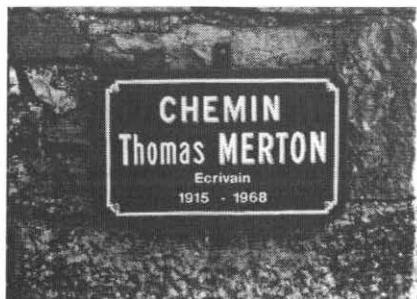
when she saw the photos because her own father was there in the pictures! (1926-1927: end of third row right; 1927-1928: end of second row right). She almost wept. The fact that she, who worked at the school, had not seen them before, made us think that they might not have been seen before by Merton scholars either. I have since been in contact with Dr. Paul Pearson at the Bellarmine Merton Center and he has confirmed that he had not seen them. Christiane kindly offered to post us follow-up scans of the school photos. We walked out having encouraged the staff there to read at least *The Seven Storey Mountain* and at the same time realizing that Merton does not remember the place with great relish. It was only later that I recalled Merton, in his introduction to Fénelon, appreciating "kind, polite, smiling, modest" M. Delmas, his professor in sixième at the Lycée.<sup>4</sup> (Incidentally, as we were passing through the city, we noticed that the museum was holding an exhibition of both Picasso [1881-1973] and Ingrès [1780-1867].)

## Prades

Having spoken to Christine Hicks (the previous Thomas Merton Association Leader there) in the Tourist Office in Prades, Andrew and I visited Merton's birth-place on the corner of Rue 4 Septembre and Rue du Palais de Justice. We admired the plaque that had been placed there by Br. Patrick Hart and the then Mayor, Paul Blanc, in 1995: ICI EST NÉ THOMAS MERTON ÉCRIVAIN AMÉRICAIN.<sup>5</sup> Naturally we visited the baroque Church of St. Peter and its surrounding streets, many paved in the characteristic red marble of the area. Most striking was Mt. Canigou, a place which attracts walkers from many areas. We marvelled at the beauty of the area; the extraordinary light; the contrast of mountain and valley. Christine explained to us that, while the Post-Impressionist painters like Matisse and Picasso (both comparatively wealthy) were able to paint around the southeastern coast, the poorer painters went inland to paint. Owen and Ruth Merton belonged to that group. In Prades itself, it is interesting to still hear strongly spoken the Catalan of which Merton remained proud. The village life is still very alive. The whole area is surrounded by rushing and trickling water and there are many hot-water spas.

## St. Antonin-Noble-Val

After examining the map and locating a St. Antonin south of Montauban, Andrew and I arrived there, to find only two or three houses and no trace of the imposing cliffs described by Merton. It seemed we had made a mistake. The local mayor (!), who was well acquainted with the handful of houses, supported this conclusion. He kindly suggested that perhaps we were looking for one of the other St. Antonins (with various modifiers). Indeed, we were looking for St. Antonin-Noble-Val, a small village to the north of Montauban. As we discovered on our approach, the entrance to St.



Antonin-Noble-Val was as Merton described it in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (SSM 35-37). It was a pretty village, quite ancient. We had some difficulty in locating Ville Diane (the house Merton's father began building), which was indeed at the foot of "Le Calvaire," a "mountain" which has the Stations of the Cross leading up to the top. We saw the sign that indicated the walk up takes about two and a half hours. There is a relatively new sign in blue tiles in the street leading to Owen's previous house: "CHEMIN / Thomas MERTON / Écrivain / 1915-1968." We rang the bell at the gate of the house of C. Bryan, but there was no answer. Andrew took photos of the outside. We all know of Merton's time at the local school there, and we can only imagine how much he would have loved to have stayed there. He certainly looked forward to the week-ends when he came home whilst boarding at Montauban. The town has a beautiful old church (1872) which has that great luminosity of stained-glass windows one comes to love in many of the French churches and chapels. The windows of the choir are very large, with red and blue as prominent colours. Their medallions are inspired from the thirteenth-century stained-glass windows. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton writes:

Festival of a martyr (Saint Antonin, September 2). Through the martyr in whose town I knew thee, O Christ, whose sanctuary I did not enter, though as a child I danced at his festival. Through the great merits of this martyr bring me to truth and to the suffering of reality, which is my joy. Thy martyr, O Christ, has a deep green river, and a limestone bridge of unequal arches, reflected in the placid water. Thy martyr, O Christ, has cliffs and woods, and, as I understand, no longer any train. Sometimes, O Lord, I pray best to the saints, and sometimes best of all to this one who had a clarinet and a gramophone. (I was reproved for sticking my head into the horn of the gramophone, which was playing "Tea For Two" and not for one). The people of the town, O Lord! They have not changed. . . . Thy martyr's town, O Lord, still walks at the pace of the ox cart.<sup>6</sup>

A George Linière from St. Antonin talks about meeting the 9-year old Merton there. He was a little older than Merton. He mentions the strange clothes Merton wore – "knickerbockers": "But he was nice, he was eager to learn, very friendly and a little mischievous, too – he liked to play jokes. And when I played jokes on him, he didn't take it badly" (Wilkes 77).

## Columbia University, New York City

The final leg of my pilgrimage/vacation was America. At Columbia, I visited the Rare Book section of the Library, where there is a large collection of Merton Books. Some time ago, the archivist, Patrick Lawlor, had put on a Merton exhibition, a copy of which was given me. I was especially interested in looking at any Merton material on humour. The Rare Books Section is meticulously laid out and there are many boxes of Merton material, so I was able to look at many Merton drawings (copies of *Jester*, etc.). Whilst in the area of 129th Street, I visited Corpus Christi Church where Merton was baptized and also saw the apartment on 114th Street where he had lived. Later, I went to visit the site in Perry Street, where Merton later boarded. I think I encountered the area near Amsterdam Ave. where he went to breakfast after he was baptized.

## St. Bonaventure Library, Olean, New York

At St. Bonaventure, the last Merton site on my journey, there is a marvelous collection of material on Merton and Robert Lax in the Rare Book Section. Library Director Paul J. Spaeth and Archivist Dennis Frank were exceedingly open to allowing me to look at all of it. I found of particular interest the Fitzgerald File, the *Oakham Review* and Michael Mott's lecture given on the occasion of the ITMS meeting there in 1995.<sup>7</sup> The originals of the Bonaventure Diaries are also in the library. There is the total collection of the Merton/Naomi Stone correspondence there which was not to be opened till after her death. The (now retired) assistant archivist, Lorraine Welsh, a wonderfully interesting woman who was extremely helpful, had been processing most of the Merton material. It was informative to have had time with her. I had re-read Ed Rice's *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*<sup>8</sup> and so had familiarized myself with anything that was mentioned about St. Bonaventure – e.g. the Big Clock, the garden statue of St. Thérèse – and was able to locate them easily.

Within easy driving distance of Olean was Rochester, NY, and the opportunity for a much-cherished visit to meet three important Merton scholars, Monsignor William Shannon, Christine Bochen and Monica Weis. The St. Joseph Sisters kindly offered me accommodation at their new home. Then at Nazareth College, we all met up. This meeting was especially valuable to me, as I have read many of the Merton works by them. I spent quite a lot of time in the Merton Room in their Library, looking at material I had not seen before.

This mini-Merton tour has certainly been well worthwhile. It was exciting to actually visit the places Merton was in . . . none of them as I had imagined! The record has been set "straighter" – as far as my visit in 2004 can allow!

- 1 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 279; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); subsequent references will be cited as "Wilkes" parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Monica Weis, SSJ, "Rambling with the Early Merton," *The Merton Seasonal* 28.2 (Summer 2003) 3-6.
- 4 Thomas Merton, Introduction to *Fénelon: Letters of Love and Counsel*, selected and translated by John McEwen (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964) 14.
- 5 Patrick Hart, "Thomas Merton's Eightieth Birthday Is Celebrated in Prades," *The Merton Seasonal* 21.1 (Spring 1996) 4-5.
- 6 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 129-30.
- 7 Michael Mott, "'Do Not Disturb': Thomas Merton at St. Bonaventure" (Keynote Address, ITMS Fourth General Meeting, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY, June 16, 1995).
- 8 Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).