

Old Truths and New Myths

Review of
Thomas Merton: Contemplative and Peace-maker
 By Ashley Beck
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Reviewed By **Sheila Milton**

Occasioned by the fortieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death, Father Ashley Beck's booklet provides an accessible introduction to Merton's life and influence in 64 pages. Beck's primary goal is the portrayal of the mature Merton to the new reader, and in this he generally succeeds. In particular, the chapters on Merton the contemplative and the peacemaker are excellent. However, Beck contributes new myths regarding Merton's childhood through numerous mistakes concerning dates and places and about Tom and his family. While most probably the errors will be of little consequence to most readers, Merton scholars and aficionados will be dismayed. It is salutary that Merton is finally included in the list of Catholic Truth Society biographies, but it is a pity there are significant flaws in the text.

In the introduction, Beck lauds Merton's spirituality in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which he says provides a window into Merton's soul. However the core of the booklet, and its foremost strength, are its two chapters devoted to Merton's adult life and its influence. In the chapter, "Merton the Contemplative," Beck views Merton through the lens of two books: *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *Seeds of Contemplation* (which is also the title used for *New Seeds* in Great Britain, a confusing situation). Beck begins the chapter with a discussion of the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and he says there were 50,000 sold in the first year, whereas the number was actually 600,000. Aside from this error, this chapter is well written.

The most successful parts are when he uses the text of [*New*] *Seeds of Contemplation* as a tool for teaching prayer and contemplation. This is useful for the beginner or anyone who encounters difficulties in praying. Merton's words lead the reader step by step through all the stages. Beck correctly notes that Merton's famous visit to Fourth and Walnut (now named Merton Square) in Louisville in 1958 was a pivotal event illustrating his growth and development as a contemplative. Beck quotes what Merton wrote about the event: "Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, suddenly I realised that I loved all the people and that none of them were or could be totally alien to me. . . . My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men . . . since the Word was made flesh and became, too a member of the Human Race!" (25-26). Merton's awakening to this truth and the belief in the Incarnation led him as the contemplative to become the prophetic

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critic. Merton's maturity as a contemplative was necessary in order for him to address social, racial and political issues and Beck reminds us that those issues are just as relevant today. Beck notes that Merton's writings had anticipated the Second Vatican's Council's call for all persons to be holy. The Anglican writer Kenneth Leech is aptly quoted, saying that "Merton saw solitude and solidarity as interconnected" (32).

The chapter on peacemaking is the best chapter in the booklet. Beck writes with the assurance of one who has read closely Merton's peace essays and is familiar with the period. Beck gives an overview of Merton's writings beginning with World War II, followed by the Cold War and the Vietnam War up until the recent posthumous publications. The clarity of this chapter is enhanced by quotations not just from Merton but from other pertinent sources and includes important areas of Merton's thoughts during the Sixties in his prose and poems. Merton's best and the most important is the prose poem *Original Child Bomb* (1962) (subtitled "Points for Meditation to Be Scratched on the Walls of a Cave") – the name the Japanese gave to the atomic bomb. As an indication of its importance, Beck devotes an entire section to it. Michael Mott concurs with Beck in his 1984 biography *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, writing that it was "perhaps the most telling thing Merton wrote against atomic warfare, worth far more than most articles on both sides of the debate in those early years" (370).

Merton's essay on the sanity of Eichmann, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann" (in *Raid on the Unspeakable* [1965]), along with his poem, "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces" (1963), is representative of that period of Merton's meditations on World War II. Beck says that Merton's writings are crucial as they link the atrocities of that war to the killings of civil rights activists in Mississippi in 1964. Beck places Merton's writings into the context of that time by noting the widespread ambivalence of the Western world regarding war. Beck makes an important point that for many Americans the Vietnam War is analogous with the present war on terror and he likens the widespread ignorance of the culture of Vietnam to that same ignorance at the present time towards the Islamic world. Merton's influence on the peace movement in the USA is shown through his active support of people like Daniel Berrigan and in the retreat that he gave at Gethsemani for peace activists. Beck successfully presents Merton in his role as a peacemaker whose writings will have a lasting influence.

Due to many errors, the least successful chapters cover Merton's early years. I will focus on those errors that most seriously affect the presentation of Merton's early life and I will use the name "Tom" when referring to Merton as a child. Beck begins the story of Tom's life in Douglaston, USA, and thus, he ignores Tom's first year and half spent in Prades, France where he lived happily with his mother, Ruth Jenkins and his father, Owen Merton. This period is lovingly recorded in *Tom's Book, To Granny With Love Tom* (2005), which Ruth wrote as a gift for Tom's grandmother, Gertrude Grierson Merton, who lived in New Zealand. Ruth's poignant essay reveals her pride and joy in Tom whom she portrays as a healthy and joyous infant. Owen took many snapshots of Tom and Ruth during this time and one captures Ruth proudly smiling as she holds an exuberant and joyous Tom in her arms as he grins at his father.

Tom, with his brother John Paul, who was born in 1918, lived with their grandparents, Sam (Pop) and Martha (Bonnemaman) Jenkins while their mother was in the hospital, and Tom continued to live with them for a short time after Ruth died. However, Owen left John Paul with his grandparents

where he remained until he left for college, so Beck is in error saying that John Paul accompanied his father and Tom to live in France. Neither were there any aunts to help Bonnemaman; however Elsie Hauck, a companion to Bonnemaman, did help care for John Paul. Beck wrongly claims that Owen, Tom and John Paul remained a family. Owen was unable to fully support himself and his sons, but Pop did. (However, I believe that Owen wanted to provide a home for both sons, but he failed).

Beck writes it has been suggested that Ruth's personality and her manner of dying had had a psychological effect on Tom, so he attributes the cause of Tom's sense of rootlessness to the trauma of Ruth's death and events that followed; the second half of the sentence is correct, but not in the ways he describes. It seems to me that Tom's rootlessness was caused because he had lost not only his mother, but also a stable, loving and disciplined home. Tom had no such home again until he entered Gethsemani in 1941, and while it was never an actual home it provided him with love, stability and discipline. Owen took Tom with him for restless years of peregrinations from Provincetown to Buzzards Bay to Bermuda back to Douglaston to France to England. Years later in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton wrote of "the poisons of Bermuda" and he writes this with good reason (see *The Merton Seasonal*, Summer 1986). Evelyn Scott, his father's mistress, was a cruel and severe "mother" to Tom, *punishing* him for crying for his mother! Beck includes Merton's famous comment, "Perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers" (8) – "mothers" (plural) giving added meaning to the quotation in light of Tom's experiences of living with Evelyn. (See a full discussion in my article, "Shared Facts, Different Stories: The Mother of Thomas Merton," *The Merton Journal* 7.1 [2000]).

Merton was at Clare College, Cambridge (not Caius or Gonville as Beck writes [9]). Beck says that Tom's time at Cambridge was "unstimulating" and "almost entirely negative" (10), but Merton did manage a second in Tripos and his reading and comprehension of languages were to be important in his later writings at Gethsemani.

John Paul came to visit Merton in July 1942, not 1944. John Paul's bomber crashed off the English coast in the spring of 1943, not 1944; Beck writes it crashed in France and in a later chapter that it was in Germany. Also, Beck omits John Paul's marriage to an English girl, Margaret Mary Evans, in the early spring of 1943. After Merton learned of John Paul's death he wrote one of his best poems, "For My Brother." Beck includes one stanza, the last two lines of which are particularly poignant since they recall that John Paul was thirsty and had asked for water before he died. (The entire poem can be found in the endnotes.)

The pamphlet frequently glosses over turbulent periods in Merton's life, lending a false view of him as a man and as a monk. His crises can be found in his journal and also in many of his letters. Merton was authentic if he was anything and that authenticity was a compelling feature of his character and I think that most of us can relate to his many struggles. Also omitted is any mention of Merton's many contradictions: Merton writes in an article the "Ecological Conscience," published in *The Catholic Worker* (1968), "Honesty and authenticity do not depend on complete freedom from contradictions – but on recognizing our self-contradictions and not masking them with bad faith."

The endnotes and the suggestions for further reading contain valuable insights, but both are also marred by the errors of careless editing. For example, the title *Run to the Mountain*, the first volume of the complete journals, becomes *Born to the Mountain*, and J. Montaldo becomes J. Murtando!

While the booklet may be adequate as an introduction to Merton for a new reader, regrettably the

biographical errors will create new myths of Merton's childhood. Merton scholars and aficionados had best not read it because of the biographical errors and the omissions of Merton's continual struggles and of some of his compelling qualities (such as his great sense of humor) as these diminish the authenticity of Merton's lifelong spiritual and geographical journeys. However I am reminded of the last line of a Haiku that Father John Eudes Bamberger quotes in describing Merton's elusive qualities: "Ha! Try catching a tempest in a net" (*Thomas Merton: Monk* 43).