

## Beyond the Shadow and Disguise?

Review of  
*Beneath the Mask of Holiness:  
 Thomas Merton and the Forbidden Love Affair That Set Him Free*  
 By Mark Shaw  
 New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009  
 ix + 246 pages / \$27.00 cloth

Reviewed by **Jim Forest**

While still a young, aspiring writer who had not yet set his sights on becoming a monk, Thomas Merton lamented his latest rejection letter in a journal entry with which any writer can identify: “So many bad books get published, why can’t my bad book get published?” Mark Shaw has much to celebrate. Despite (or perhaps because of) his purple prose style and sensationalist approach to the life of Thomas Merton, his particular bad book has gotten published.

The book centers on what Shaw presents as shocking revelations of closely-guarded secrets. The reader learns that, while a college student in England, Merton had a sexual liaison that resulted in the birth of an out-of-wedlock child; and then later in life, long after becoming a monk, fell in love with a nurse he met while recovering from surgery.

Is there anyone with the remotest interest in Merton’s life who is unaware of Mark Shaw’s headline news? Soon after Merton’s death in 1968, his friend Ed Rice became the first to write, in *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, about Merton fathering a child while at Clare College. No subsequent biographer has ignored the event. As for his affair with the nurse when he was 50, it was first described a quarter century ago by Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. It is now more than a decade since Merton’s journals about the affair, included in *Learning to Love*, were published.

Shaw is indignant that Merton’s autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948, referred in only “watered down” terms to the more serious sins he committed before he became a monk. This is nothing less than intentional misrepresentation, Shaw asserts, “the result of a concerted effort to disguise a tormented sinner as some sort of plastic saint rehabilitated through monastic practices” (21). The real Merton was transformed into a Catholic “poster boy” (vii). Continuing in the same vein, Shaw sees the lack of detail as nothing less than the result of

a quiet conspiracy, a cover up, if you will, by not only Merton, but also the Catholic Church hierarchy stretching from the United States to the Vatican, Abbot Frederic Dunne [Merton’s abbot when he wrote the book], Merton’s literary agent, and his publisher, none of whom did anything other than promote the book as factual even though critical parts did not disclose the whole truth. Strict censorship, in effect, issued a restraining order on Merton’s true story, omitting crucial information about him, and readers were hoodwinked and misled into believing that while

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Merton may have been a sinner prior to entering Gethsemani, he was not “that bad” a sinner. (21)

Thus the book’s title: *Beneath the Mask of Holiness*. Shaw sees “holiness” as a disguise that the Catholic Church and the Trappist Order managed to squeeze Merton into. But, thanks to his affair in 1966, Merton finally discovered what life was all about and thus was no longer “a schizophrenic persona, passive on the outside while pangs of anguish and fear patrolled within him” (9). If such over-heated sentences appeal to you, either for content or prose style, I urge you to rush out and buy a copy. Otherwise, save your time and money for a better book.

Perhaps it’s not entirely accidental that the reader is reminded of Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, populated by evil Catholics whose goal in life is to conceal the truth. In Shaw’s book, Merton is assigned the starring role in an anti-Catholic tract. (In the book’s last chapter, Shaw speculates that Merton may have been murdered, in which case “the logical suspects would be directives hired by the Catholic Church hierarchy, who were afraid of a scandal if Merton were to return to his lover or leave Gethsemani” [213-14].)

If you want to know about Merton’s actual life, including those events that he brought to confession, read Merton himself or one of his less conspiracy-minded biographers. Regarding his year at Cambridge, Merton asked aloud in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, “Shall I wake up the dirty ghosts under the trees of the Backs and out beyond the Clare New Building and in some rooms down on Chesterton Road?” He decided to let the ghosts slumber. “There would certainly be no point whatever in embarrassing other people with the revelation of so much cheap sentimentality mixed up with even cheaper sin,” as he put it in an earlier draft of the autobiography. It was characteristic of Merton to take pains not to embarrass others.

What Merton makes crystal clear in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as published, is that it was a hellish interval in his life, “an incoherent riot of undirected passion,” as he put it – a time of “beer, bewilderment and sorrow,” in the words of his friend, Bob Lax. “I had fallen through the surface of old England,” Merton wrote, “into the hell, the vacuum and the horror that London was nursing in her avaricious heart.” He remembers reading Freud, Jung, and Adler, struggling to understand “the mysteries of sex-repression.” Though clearly something dreadful occurred, the reader was left guessing exactly what actually happened – something to do with the mysteries of sex-repression, clearly, but what? On the other hand, what Merton shared with his readers is a great deal more than is provided by most authors of autobiographies. In Charlie Chaplin’s autobiography, to give one typical example, Chaplin simply skipped over some of the more painful or humiliating moments in his life, while inventing or radically revising others.

For all its sorrows, Merton’s year at Cambridge wasn’t a total loss. Perhaps the high point was Professor Edward Bullough’s class on Dante. Canto by canto, Merton read his way to the frozen core of hell, finally ascending through purgatory toward the bliss of heaven, a “slow and majestic progress of . . . myths and symbols.” It was purgatory’s seven-storey mountain that provided Merton with the metaphor for his autobiography.

While Shaw provides a compact if voyeuristic chronicle of how Merton fell in love with a young nurse and what occurred between them in the weeks that followed, by far the best and most vivid and three-dimensional account of the same story is related by Merton himself in *Learning*

*to Love*. Here the reader gets both a day-by-day history of what happened as well as a poignant account of his struggle to make sense of what all this meant, his justifications side-by-side with his self-recriminations. Here one can also read about the very human community Merton was a part of and his frustrations with his abbot, James Fox – and then hear him express his gratitude for both.

Unfortunately, Shaw seems to have no understanding of or sympathy with Merton's basic choices: to become a Christian, to be baptized in the Catholic Church, and then to embrace monastic life in a penitential order. It was ultimately Merton's renewed realization that he had a monastic vocation, not a vocation to marriage, that made him end the affair. It wasn't, in my opinion, Merton's finest hour. Many priests suffer from extreme loneliness and have affairs which, in most cases, end as Merton's did. I have known several women at the other end of similar stories who felt abandoned, suffered from a deep sense of rejection for years afterward, and even wrestled with thoughts of suicide. The fact that this particular story involves Thomas Merton doesn't make it better and mean that, thanks to the special magic of the Merton factor, it became an encounter sprinkled with pixie dust for the young woman who so desperately loved him.

"God writes straight with crooked lines," says a Portuguese proverb. After the affair, Merton realized he needed not only a hermitage but also vital relationships with several Kentucky families he had begun to know. Never a hard-hearted man, he became even more compassionate. One hopes the nurse he loved was also able to make good use of the intense relationship she had with Merton in that period of her life. (In the past, most biographers have shielded her identity, either using the initial "S." [as Mott does] or "M." [as in the journal], or her first name, Margie. To his shame, Shaw reveals her family name.)

One could write much more about Shaw's book and its thesis that it was only thanks to his affair that the true Merton at last emerged from hiding rather than remaining a masked counterfeit coined by the Catholic Church. But then I would have to discuss every chapter, a penance I leave only to those who find ordinary penances inadequate.