

## Water in the Wilderness

Review of

*Merton & Waugh: A Monk, a Crusty Old Man, & The Seven Storey Mountain*

By Mary Frances Coady

Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015

155 pp. / \$22.00 hardcover

Reviewed by **Angela Alaimo O'Donnell**

Mary Frances Coady's *Merton & Waugh* reads like a joint biography of two celebrated writers – and larger-than-life characters – spanning the three-and-a-half-year period when they exchanged a lively and revelatory correspondence. Coady uses the twenty letters the men wrote (thirteen from Merton and seven from Waugh, Merton as ever the more talkative) as the backbone for her book and the occasion for her engaging narrative, reproducing Merton's letters in their entirety and generous excerpts from Waugh's (this in keeping with the strictures established by the Waugh Estate). The reader is thus treated to an intense session of eavesdropping as they discuss subjects near and dear to their Catholic writers' hearts, ranging from models of prose style to matters of faith, from the pitfalls of publishing to the spiritual gifts gained by reciting a daily rosary. The interplay between the two voices belonging to "a crusty old man" (Merton's term of affection for Waugh) and the loquacious young author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* is by turns charming, alarming, predictable and surprising. Serving as referee and mediator between these two highly-opinionated literary lions is Coady herself, who expertly provides exposition, explanation and judicious commentary, enabling the reader to grasp the significance of the letters in the context of each writer's life, to appreciate the ways in which they engage with history and the contemporary milieu, and, most important of all, to enjoy them.

*Merton & Waugh* gives us a glimpse into the very different kinds of people, kinds of writers and kinds of Catholics these two men were. Despite the considerable common ground they shared – both were converts who found in the Church a stable force to help regulate their disordered lives, both had survived dissolute years as students in England, and both were poised on the brink of literary immortality, Waugh having just published *Brideshead Revisited* and Merton about to publish *The Seven Storey Mountain* – they could not have varied more greatly in temperament. Where Waugh is a cranky, reserved, laconic correspondent, Merton is characteristically eager, curious and mildly desperate for conversation. Coady sets up nicely the occasion for their correspondence – Waugh's generous praise of the manuscript of Merton's autobiography, sent to him by publisher Robert Giroux, and Merton's

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**Angela Alaimo O'Donnell** teaches English and Creative Writing as Fordham University and is Associate Director of Fordham's Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. She is a regular columnist for *America* magazine, and has published numerous collections of poems, including *Saint Sinatra* and *Moving House*, as well as *The Province of Joy*, a book of hours based on the prayer life of Flannery O'Connor, and *Flannery O'Connor: Fiction Fired by Faith*. Her latest book of poetry is *Lover's Almanac*.

excited response to this unexpected gift from the Catholic literary giant he so admired. Merton (typically, as is the case in so much of his correspondence with other writers) fires the starting shot, writing to Waugh on August 12, 1948 to thank him and to ask him for writing advice. So begins their conversation – one in which Waugh will serve as literary advisor and Merton will serve as spiritual director – until Merton concludes the correspondence, sending a final letter on February 25, 1952.

There is much to recommend Coady's book. The letters reveal a startling honesty and endearing vulnerability. A quasi-confessional quality emerges in each writer's voice – Merton because he is writing to an artist he considers his superior, and Waugh because he is writing to a monk and near-priest (Merton will be ordained in the course of their correspondence). In Merton's opening letter, he admits to Waugh that he is writing in a literary vacuum, without a mentor or a guide: "I need criticism the way a man dying of thirst needs water" (31). The simile he chooses here is poignant, echoing as it does Christ on the cross and also the death of his brother John Paul, who was shot down over the North Sea in World War II and who died in a small boat of thirst and exposure, as well as his injuries, before he and his mates could be rescued. (Merton famously documents this painful loss in the poem that concludes *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943.") Merton feels that he, too, is lost – that his writing is somehow connected to "the whole process of my sanctification" and to practice his craft imperfectly constitutes a spiritual as well as a literary lack (32). Thus, his writing to Waugh is a cry for help, demonstrating his insecurity and his need for affirmation as a writer.

Waugh is invulnerable when it comes to matters of craft. He is both merciless in his judgment of Merton's work and generous in terms of his advice. One observation that he makes in connection with several of Merton's books is the latter's tendency to write too much and too quickly. His clear confidence in his own work as spare, precise and deliberate is evident – so much so that Waugh finds himself undertaking the task of editing two of Merton's books, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and later *The Waters of Siloe*, for publication in England – a painful process for Waugh, and one that will alter the experience of Merton's work for British readers. Among his editorial choices is the decision to exclude the two poems originally featured in the memoir, including the poem Merton wrote mourning his dead brother, who had been the last surviving member of his immediate family. This powerful conclusion, which has moved so many American readers, was rendered unavailable to the English in *Elected Silence* (the memoir as retitled by Waugh after a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins), yet far from being troubled by this, Merton was grateful. Such is the state of a young and inexperienced author as yet unsure of his voice.

However, when it comes to matters of the spirit, Waugh is on much less steady ground, and Merton, much as he does in his correspondence with Czeslaw Milosz in the 1960s, begins to fulfill the role of spiritual director. In the fourth letter of their exchange, Merton schools Waugh in the virtue of hope, "the one talented people most need" as they tend to "trust in themselves – and when their own resources fail them they will prefer despair to reliance on anyone else, even on God" (47-48). Indeed, Waugh seems often at a loss as to how to live as a faithful Catholic, a fact that strikes us as ironic, given his stature as a Catholic writer and the spiritual authority with which his work is invested.

Another commonality Merton and Waugh share is an interest in the phenomenon of American Catholicism, though they approach the subject in vastly different ways. It was during their correspondence that Waugh accepted the assignment from *Life* magazine to travel to the US and write an article based

on his observations of the American Catholic Church. In her intervening narrative, Coady regales the reader with stories of Waugh negotiating a modest fee for the article (\$1000) and an extravagant travel budget (\$4000), which allowed him to sail on the *Queen Elizabeth*, enjoy accommodations at the Plaza Hotel in New York and dine on the caviar and champagne Clare Boothe Luce and her editor husband Henry generously provided. Coady also tells the story of Waugh making his way to the Catholic Worker House of Hospitality on Mott Street in a Cadillac, arriving in time to pick up Dorothy Day and her fellow Workers for lunch, and proposing they dine at Le Chambord, one of New York's most expensive restaurants. Day refused, of course, suggesting they eat at a local Italian restaurant instead, and further disapproved when Waugh offered cocktails and wine to her colleagues – an offer they evidently couldn't refuse. Waugh's experience of Day and the Catholic Worker was not a positive one. His own *bon vivant* tendencies contrasted sharply with her (and Merton's) abstemious dispositions, and his observations about Day are confined to a description of her as "an autocratic ascetic saint" (54).

Yet, creature of the flesh that he is, Waugh expresses a deep admiration for the monastic life that Merton lives. In fact, rather than his writing, *per se*, this is the source of his interest in Merton. The two men met only once – on November 28, 1948 at the Abbey of Gethsemani – and in the absence of a record of that encounter, Coady imagines it vividly for us, creating a scenario of two very different men in awe of each other. Here was Merton, living a life of legendary austerity, belonging to an order of devotees who slept in their habits, rose from their beds at 2:00 AM, spent more than seven hours a day in prayer, did heavy manual work, and when they weren't fasting, ate sparingly. Here, was Waugh, "[k]neeling in the stark abbey church dressed in his tailor-made three-piece suit, fresh from the worldly elegance of high-society parties featuring caviar and fine wines" (57).

Though Waugh was surely humbled by the pious example of the young monks at the abbey, Merton, too, was surely humbled to be in the presence of a writer he had been in awe of since his student days. As Coady's book and Merton's letters remind us, he is conducting his literary labors under difficult circumstances, very different from Waugh's. At one point, he requests that Waugh send him a copy of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and wishes he had a good dictionary to consult. He also laments the fact that he is nearly always writing under assignment and is allowed only two hours a day to devote to his writing, leaving little or no time for revision and careful planning and organization. In a particularly touching passage, he describes the intense pleasure he takes in his illicit reading of *Brideshead Revisited* (as novels were forbidden in the monastery): "It is beautifully done. The writing is so fine that I don't want to go on with the book at all, I just take a paragraph here and there and admire it" (86). In a subsequent letter, he confides, "The trouble with writing here is that one has few contacts with healthy modern prose, and the things you hear in the refectory do not form your style!" (97). Thus, Merton feels his writerly inadequacies – further exacerbated by his constraints – as keenly as Waugh feels his spiritual ones, putting the two men on an oddly equal plane.

Coady's book faithfully follows the trajectory of the friendship shared by the two men, supplementing the letters with relevant information about their lives, until they part company with Merton's final letter. She then raises the obvious and very pertinent question: why did the friendship peter out? What follows is a deft précis of the direction each man's life took, Merton's work deepening and developing as he himself deepened and developed (both in a spiritual and a literary sense), while Waugh pursued his writing but, beset by health problems, depression and bitterness over changes brought about by Vatican II, grew increasingly estranged from the faith and the Church he had adopted as his own.

Coady sums up nicely the essential difference between the two men – one which was present early in the friendship and only became more evident as the years went on. In a journal entry Merton wrote in response to a letter Waugh sent to *Commonweal* in 1964 defending conservatism, Merton wrote, “I understand conservatism – he is one of the genuine conservatives: he wishes to conserve not what might be lost but what is not even threatened because it vanished long ago” (142). As Merton’s faith continued to evolve, as he embraced the new discoveries he was making about religious traditions outside the Christian/Catholic tradition he knew and loved, he watched from a distance as his former friend fell into despair in the face of inevitable change.

Skillfully edited, carefully documented and gracefully written, Mary Frances Coady’s book conveys the story of a friendship that is both particular and universal. The reader learns a great deal about Merton and Waugh and about their milieu, but also learns much about the conflicts that have been present in the Church in any and every era, including our own. The fact that two Catholic writers of such different stamp can find sufficient common ground to admire one another’s work and see the world through one another’s eyes – even for a short time – is a cause for celebration.