

## From the Inner Frontier to the Last Frontier: Thomas Merton's 1968 Alaska Journey

By **Kathleen Tarr**

Thomas Merton's seventeen-day sojourn to Alaska in 1968 is a remarkable but much overlooked episode in the monk's extraordinary life. To dispel some of the commonplace perceptions that Merton's relationship with Alaska was inconsequential, a mere stopover, an interesting excursion tacked onto the more historically significant journey to Asia, it is necessary to mix in more sub-arctic colors in order to create a more vivid Merton canvas, to provide additional concrete details about his unique, personal experiences in Alaska which relate directly to the slim Alaska notebook he somehow managed to keep and leave behind.<sup>1</sup> Be forewarned, however: in doing so, some of the insights, reflections and comments may sound more personal



**Alaska Glaciers**

than scholarly, a tribute to Merton's impact on this writer.<sup>2</sup> For me, Thomas Merton was more than a bookish guide; he symbolized something far greater. In my interior life, he was the equivalent of an *eight-thousander*.<sup>3</sup>

Merton traversed and beheld challenging and unforgettable landscapes during his intense Alaskan reconnaissance in September 1968 in what ultimately turned out to be his last few months on earth.

Alaska thrilled him to the core.<sup>4</sup> He admitted to Alaskan priests and nuns that he was "moving rapidly to this part of the world."<sup>5</sup>

The vast amount of open space, the state's enormous scale – over 650,000 square miles compared to Kentucky's roughly 40,000

– lit up Merton's eyes and stirred his wanderer's imagination. How wonderful to be out on the Pacific Rim for a change in perspective – in Alaska – where *West meets East!*

To date, scholars and biographers, with few exceptions – Bonnie Thurston<sup>6</sup> and Ron Dart<sup>7</sup> prominently come to mind – have barely spoken about Merton's Alaska experience, concluding that this brief sojourn was but a peripheral precursor to the more historically important trip of meeting Buddhists in Asia. Though I greatly admire

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**Kathleen Tarr**

Michael Mott's monumental biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, it devoted only two scant pages out of 576 to Alaska,<sup>8</sup> and the book's index omitted it entirely. That is understandable, however. Mountains of material had to be reviewed about a full and complex life. The Asian journey and its tragic outcome, as others have stated, naturally drew much more attention, and Alaska's geographic distance and the monetary constraints it created greatly limited Mott's on-site research.

By 1968, Thomas Merton had pondered a good long while about what new monastic directions he should take, outside of big-institutional monasticism. As he began formalizing plans for his world trek, and by his estimation and to his welcome relief, the constant wordsmithing was, at last, winding down. John Howard Griffin would later observe, "Had Thomas Merton returned from the East alive, he would have become more and more silent. . . . he would have published less and less."<sup>9</sup> But in the Merton sense of it, a slower literary pace with fewer words meant that in 1968 he would "only" publish *three* books,<sup>10</sup> edit *Monk's Pond*,<sup>11</sup> develop *The Geography of Lograire*,<sup>12</sup> and everywhere he traveled, lug an extra suitcase of books.

With a twist of irony I certainly appreciate, Merton also published "The Wild Places" in the June 1968 *Catholic Worker*.<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter, fate led him to a place bursting with raw nature that was elsewhere vanishing—off he went to wild Alaska. Monica Weis beautifully describes how overwhelmingly influential nature was to his spirituality, how "Inner and outer terrains impinge on each other."<sup>14</sup> In "The Wild Places" Merton reviewed Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* – a comprehensive study of America's ambivalent and often contradictory ideas of wilderness. Our oft-repeated mythological tales of the heroic, conquering pioneers, the frontier figures who "settled" and "civilized" the West, rarely take into account the long-term impacts all the colonizing had on the environment – to its meandering rivers, its old-growth forests, its abundant animal populations, and to the tribal cultures who lived amid its mountains, canyons and deserts. Merton greatly appreciated Nash's book. In the review, the monk took issue with the "virility cult" (*PAJ* 103) associated with the opening of the American West. A few months later, he found himself in the nation's wildest remaining place where semblances of virility cults still existed.

Alaska's plentiful resources had always attracted miners, loggers, hunters, fishermen, developers and, in the mystique of the "Last Frontier," many self-proclaimed, fiercely independent individuals. It was a cultural badge of honor that great reserves of physical strength and manliness are needed to fight nature's unrelenting forces. Historically, the territory's isolation, sparse population, need for economic sustainability, and life-or-death necessity of finding reliable food sources, often took precedence over environmental protections, especially since true ecological awareness and understanding hadn't yet entered the collective consciousness. Merton doesn't specifically comment on having run into any perceived virility cults on his northern tour. He does nervously comment about bears several times.

It was a stroke of good fortune for Merton that the first Archbishop of Anchorage, Joseph T. Ryan, visited Our Lady of the Abbey of Gethsemani sometime in early August 1968 (see *OSM* 153). Following their personal introduction at the abbey, Merton sent a follow-up letter to the Alaska archbishop.<sup>15</sup> Ryan, himself a former New Yorker, had served in World War II as military chaplain in the U.S. Navy. He hoped to convince the world-renowned Trappist, practically at the last minute, to include Alaska on his global itinerary. The well-liked, gung-ho archbishop wanted

Merton to give retreats and talks to the priests and nuns as he considered the state in his quest to relocate his hermitage vocation.<sup>16</sup>

Anchorage, the state's most cosmopolitan city, population of about 45,000 in 1968, wasn't exactly a Catholic stronghold, not compared to New Orleans or Pittsburgh, for example, where parishes flourished. The new Anchorage Archdiocese, founded in 1966, had barely been organized. The "freezing faithful" needed a morale boost, especially the group of six contemplative nuns Archbishop Ryan had recently recruited from Oregon. The adaptable, non-complaining, but highly overworked Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood lived off a dirt road in Eagle River, about an hour north of Anchorage. Their makeshift convent – a two-story house without any running water – was surrounded by thick spruce and birch trees. The bishop was always sending them retreatants and asking the nuns to prepare meals for guests. With Merton's charismatic presence as a religious celebrity, the archbishop reasoned, his scattered pockets of Catholics would likely forget their bouts of cabin fever.

As a further enticement, on August 22, 1968, Merton reported receiving by mail a picture postcard of Denali (20,320'), called Mt. McKinley at the time (*OSM* 158). Merton said far-off Alaska was not a location he would have spontaneously chosen for his hermitage scouting, especially since it was full of military. Ultimately, though, he came to understand that Alaska had always been full of religious hermits and he didn't let the state's widespread military presence stop him. He agreed to tour Alaska and speak to its religious, all expenses paid, arriving via commercial jet from Chicago on September 17, 1968. The short summer season was definitely over. With each crisp and blustery day that passed, Anchorage was losing five-plus minutes of daylight. While Merton visited Anchorage, termination dust, the early mountain snows, powdered the city's peaks.

The forty-ninth state boasts eight more or less separate mountain ranges, and one alone, the Wrangell/St. Elias Range, is among the mightiest mountain groups in North America. Whereas the highest peak in Kentucky (nowhere in sight of the Abbey of Gethsemani) is Mount Black, a speck at 4,145 feet, twenty peaks of this huge Alaska range hover above 11,000 feet. Nine of the 16 highest peaks in the U.S. are located there. This same region contains the world's most impressive coastal mountains.<sup>17</sup> Upon viewing the Chugach Mountains which surround Anchorage, Merton said, "They are sacred & majestic mountains, ominous, enormous, noble, stirring. You want to attend to them. I could not keep my eyes off them. Beauty & terror of the Chugach. Dangerous valleys. Points. Saws. Snowy nails" (*TMA* 20).

Before the Trappist monk ever got to the tea plantation in northern India and laid his eyes on the famous Kanchenjunga (28,146') in the Himalaya, he had referenced mountains over 70 times in the "slender, sketchy and spirited" Alaska notebook (Cole 23). In one of the monk's letters written to Br. Patrick Hart about the "really wild country" he said, "The mountains have got the Alps beat a mile. This is utterly unique" (*TMA* 50). Merton was enraptured by the view of Mount Saint Elias – the mountain that first gripped my own imagination – and the second highest in the U.S. (it shoots up to 18,008' practically from sea level). Recalling his commercial jet ride up the northern Pacific coast, past Yakutat and Cordova, on his way into Anchorage, Merton observed: "The clouds opened over Mt. St. Elias & after that I was overwhelmed by the vastness, the patterns of glaciers, the burnished copper sheen of the sun on the bright blue sea" (*TMA* 16). On rare, clear days, this "great, diaphanous pyramid"<sup>18</sup> dazzles on the horizon in Yakutat (where I once lived), which Merton chanced to briefly visit. Mount Saint Elias is a less-hyped but almost

impossible mountain to climb. The solitary mountain seems to stand apart from all the rest when viewed from certain Yakutat vantage points. It was named in 1741 by Russian explorers in honor of the Old Testament prophet, Elias (Elijah), the same Elias depicted in two of Merton's treasured icons,<sup>19</sup> and the subject of his famous poem "Elias: Variations on a Theme."<sup>20</sup>

In the national imagination, Alaska's mountainous terrain was generally known and appreciated, but not much else. When Merton came, the state was mostly thought of as an economic and cultural backwater, a separate country, not at all an important part of America, though it had been accepted into the Union as the forty-ninth state nine years earlier. The Outsiders' perception of Alaska? It was a gigantic slab of ice floating around the Arctic Ocean without sunlight six months of the year and where big grizzly bears with sword-like claws would eat you alive. But that was only partially true. After the Prudhoe Bay oil field announcement was made public in June 1968, shortly before Merton arrived – the largest oil field ever discovered in North America – its suffering national image changed somewhat. The half-forgotten outpost was suddenly a hot commodity; a kind of wild, wild West northern stampede began.

The complicated technical or engineering aspects of the proposed Trans-Alaska pipeline did not interest the poetry-driven monk, however. Had Merton returned to Alaska – and there's little doubt he would have, given the subsequent communications that occurred between the Anchorage Archdiocese and the Abbey of Gethsemani, and in light of Merton's strongly positive responses to Alaska – the pipeline's land battles would surely have captured his political attention. Battles were brewing between the federal and state governments, oil companies and indigenous peoples. The plight of indigenous cultures was of increasing personal interest to Merton, as evidenced by his writing a series of essays that posthumously appeared as the book *Ishi Means Man*.<sup>21</sup> Since 1867, when Russia sold its claim to Alaska to the United States for \$7.2 million, ownership and clear title to Alaska Native lands had been left in limbo. (The monk might have been cheered to know that of the few Native land reserves then in place in Alaska, none carried the traumatic consequences felt throughout the reservation system found in the Lower 48.<sup>22</sup>)

Alaska's Inupiaq, Tlingit, Aleut, Yu'pik and Athapaskan peoples were not only successfully defending and preserving the legal rights to their aboriginal lands, they were adapting to modernity however they could, by honoring and blending their living cultural traditions within a dominating and devouring capitalist system. An innovative economic and social model resulted. Legislation (the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971) was enacted to establish thirteen regional for-profit but privately held Native corporations, owned exclusively by Native shareholders. This kind of



**Cordova Landscape**

economic and social empowerment which resulted among Alaskan Natives had not happened quite this way anywhere else in the world. Again, if fate had not intervened, on his return trip to the north country, Merton would likely have stayed informed about the crucial land debates, even as a hermit at Eyak Lake at the end of the road in Cordova. He would have written to Alaska museums pleading for a supply of oral history tapes featuring Alaska Native elders speaking to younger generations. Expressed in language more fitting for Alaska: on the autumn day when Merton, the great spiritual master, landed in Anchorage, he sought to strip reality down like a fish, to filet it to its very basic essence, to touch, smell and taste reality as it was – to get to the pure, unprocessed center not layered over with abstract concepts, analysis, legalisms, dualisms and too many words.

But of course, Merton was a Cistercian “hermit” with a literary agent. He didn’t have a clue how to gut, clean or smoke fish. The reality was he had no feel for true subsistence living as a solitary completely cut off from his monastic grid. An outright northern hermit would covet a .338 Winchester rifle by his side, not a typewriter. Merton never hunted to eat. Once he moved into his hermitage, he took midday meals at the monastery by walking down an easy trail. The monk was not agile with big-power tools or with a chef’s knife in the kitchen. The pedal-to-the-metal kind of monk didn’t drive. He had no experience operating a skiff or snow machine. His “hermitude” did not include possible surprise encounters with any agitated bears. If Merton had been forced to wait 85 interminable days before a supply plane could finally land to bring him any news from the outside world – as some of the early Jesuit priests working as missionaries on the Yukon River had to do – he would have withered on the vine. A new “hermitage” would eventually have to be built for him, as the forty-ninth state was devoid of any pleasant, green-grass monasteries or spare cinderblock cottages hidden in the Tongass National Rain Forest. As one Yakutat man put it, “Merton might be a Trappist monk, but he don’t know a damn thing about trapping!”

Excuse me for poking a little fun at the erudite Merton! In his so-called “hermitage years” (1965-1968), even when he lived without the luxury of indoor plumbing at Our Lady of Carmel, as he affectionately called it, his temporary domicile was more comfortable than many of the village dwellings found along the Kuskokwim River in the 1960s, and even today. A paved road connected the Abbey of Gethsemani to Bardstown, and from there, to roads, highways and modern airports beyond. Like the state capital of Juneau itself, most of the small, lost towns and fishing villages Merton visited in southeast Alaska which, as he said, were “turned upside down by tidal wave and earthquake, and moved to another spot,”<sup>23</sup> lacked any connecting roads. In Yakutat, he saw dilapidated buildings, battered houses, and a cannery that was falling down. Still, though short on subsistence survival knowledge, his letters and journal entries are chock-full of positive comments about the possibility of a hermitage life in Alaska. To Abbot Flavian Burns he relayed this message: “There is no question that this place is full of ideal solitude in every form” (*TMA* 44). In one of several enthusiastic letters he sent to Br. Patrick Hart, he described Alaska as a “great country, really wild, lots of mountains, much solitude” (*TMA* 42).

The profound remarks and reflections he shared during his four days of workshops at Eagle River and two days of Days of Recollection in Anchorage, which I’m continuing to study, are far beyond the scope of the present discussion. I would, however, like to touch on a few of Merton’s remarks. One thing he *did* say to the Sisters of Mercy in Anchorage: “We live in a highly quantitative society that has to measure everything. Our function in society is to make clear there

is another dimension to reality,” he said, “which is beyond measure and beyond judgement.”<sup>24</sup> In his talk, as published in “The Life that Unifies,” after quoting an unidentified ascetic rabbi of the seventeenth century, Merton spoke wistfully: “Deep in our hearts is the most profound meaning of our personality, which is that we say ‘yes’ to God, and the spark is always there. All we need to do is to turn towards it and let it become a flame. . . . There is so much in us that can be brought out if we let God do it” (*TMA* 154-55).

Beyond mountains and indigenous cultures, Alaska was teeming with other subjects aligned to Merton’s abiding interests – Russia, for one. With its deep historical connections, Alaska truly was the next best thing to being in Holy Mother Russia, and Merton had plenty of on-the-ground experiences and historical facts at his fingertips to support this. Onion-domed churches are a regular part of the Alaskan landscape. Merton was driven by a nun on a special excursion to St. Nicholas at the Athabaskan (Dena’ina) village of Eklutna, where a local Native man unlocked the church especially for him. Among Natives, Russian Orthodoxy remains the largest Christian denomination. At his Eagle River conference, Merton mentioned his reading of the theologian Vladimir Lossky, a Russian exile who lived in Paris and taught at an Orthodox seminary there (see *TMA* 82-85).

In his Alaskan lectures, Merton, the bridge-builder, publicly brought up the Russian idea of prayer and of *sobornost* (see *TMA* 85), a difficult word to translate. It is more than simply “community”; it has a much deeper meaning than people living in harmony within a community. The Russians emphasize the spiritual bond, the sense of an all-togetherness in facing God’s will, and subordinating one’s individual will to that of God. *Sobornost* implies a self-sacrificing love and a unity of common fate, common past and common tradition. Merton further explained that according to Lossky, “the trouble with the Western Church is that instead of having a theology of the Holy Spirit, we have a sacramental system, and everything is tied up in this machinery, this process of sanctification by sacraments” (*TMA* 84). The teacher went on: “what he [Lossky] is saying is that we are tempted, as Westerners, to be collectivists rather than personalists. We are afraid to act as persons, afraid to act under the individual and special inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (*TMA* 85).

Today in Eagle River, now part of the sprawling Municipality of Anchorage, you’ll find a brown, wooden church, St. John, adjacent to the former Precious Blood convent house; and one mile through the woods, nestled in stands of cottonwood, spruce and birch, stands a small chapel dedicated to St. Sergius, the father of Russian monasticism. St. John’s, which owns all the property, is an Orthodox cathedral of Antiochian heritage and jurisdiction, adorned with hand-painted icons. Given Merton’s sensitivity to women’s roles and issues, I have often imagined his delight if he knew that most of its venerated icons were painted by an Alaskan woman iconographer.

Another interesting tidbit encountered on his Alaskan visit pertains to a Russian monk he heard about who was living for years as a true hermit near Kodiak Island (see *TMA* 48). That pious Russian monk was Fr. Gerasim, who first arrived in Alaska from St. Tikhon’s monastery in Russia’s Kaluga Region in 1916, and who after living for sixteen years among the Native people of Afognak Island, eventually turned himself into an outright hermit and moved to Spruce Island, off Kodiak, beginning in 1935. In a letter to his abbot, Merton mentions learning of this old and sick monk, and of a *Staretz* – a Russian spiritual elder – who also once lived on Kodiak before



**St. Herman of Alaska**

Fr. Gerasim and “is venerated as a saint” (*TMA* 48). The staretz was Saint Herman (1751-1836). (Merton didn’t record either of these names in his Alaska notebook, however.) The original boatload of courageous Russian Orthodox monks who came to Alaska as missionaries in 1794 sound superhuman. With little more than an icon and an axe, they journeyed from Valaam near St. Petersburg across what are today eleven time zones of Russia, traveling by foot, horse and boat for ten months to reach the very wet and green island of Kodiak. One of those original eight monks in the new far eastern territory of the Russian Empire was canonized almost two centuries later (1977) as the beloved Saint Herman, also known as the Blessed Wonderworker of Alaska.

The still-living, tired old monk Merton sincerely hoped to meet – Fr. Gerasim, born in 1888 – was the self-designated protector of Saint Herman’s grave, and of St. Herman’s memory and legacy.<sup>25</sup> While keeping his solitary vigil, Fr. Gerasim occasionally made and sold his

embroidery to earn food money. He lived as a solitary in a tiny wooden hut on a rain-soaked path, under tall spruce, surrounded by thick, tarp-sized ferns. Had Merton ever met Fr. Gerasim, face-to-face at the remote Monk’s Lagoon on the eastern side of Spruce Island, where I once made a pilgrimage, they would have had much to discuss. Fr. Gerasim dearly treasured the rich monastic tradition of Holy Russia, as did Merton. Through his writings, Gerasim spoke up about the negative impacts of the Russian Revolution. (The Bolsheviks destroyed his beloved St. Tikhon’s monastery.) Like Merton, the Russian monk circulated controversial political commentaries in religious publications, kept journals and wrote poetry. Like Merton, he was an avid letter writer, sending many letters to his friends and brother monks on the Holy Mountain of Mt. Athos, which he had once visited before coming to America. But he got into some trouble with the Russian Orthodox clergy in Alaska who opposed his desire to lead a truly eremitic lifestyle – again in resonance with Merton’s desires as a Trappist. The beleaguered monk persisted and steadfastly defended his hermit ways in defiance of his religious authorities. In 1969, one year after Merton, Fr. Gerasim died at age 81.

There are enough square miles in Alaska to last any hermit until judgment day, Merton believed. “Alaska is certainly the ideal place for solitude and the hermit life,” Merton wrote to Fr. Flavian. “In fact it is full of people who are in reality living as hermits. Men who have gone far out into the wilderness with a stack of books and who get themselves a homestead, cut wood, read, and stay away from everyone, living on moose, fish, caribou etc. I don’t plan it that way. But it gives you a good idea of the character of the place” (*TMA* 48).

Non-Alaskans often fail to appreciate other nuances of the Great Northern Land's setting, as well. A strong U.S. military presence may be one. Merton gave a Day of Recollection talk to almost 50 priests (and the nuns cooked all the victuals), half of whom he said were chaplains from various missile-launching sites in the Aleutians and far north (see *TMA* 32). Alaska's vast military build-up in World War II continued throughout the Cold War and all this military escalation rankled him. He wasn't interested in living anywhere near an army base. In the Chugach Mountains above Anchorage, along the old Glenn Highway where Merton was driven to Eagle River, nuclear missiles were aimed at the USSR. (Merton would not like to have learned that 54 new F-35 fighter jets will soon be stationed at Eielson AFB in Fairbanks.)

Then there is the scarcity of land availability. In the Tlingit fishing village of Yakutat, population around 300, Merton was offered a free quarter-acre of private land by Frank Ryman, a local lodge owner who fed Merton and drove him around the village (see *TMA* 24-25). Ryman, whose son Skip still lives in Yakutat, was one of the village's handful of Catholics. Merton flat-out told Ryman he did not want to live in proximity to town where he might be pressured to serve as



**Historic Yakutat**

a kind of pastor. But Merton failed to understand how overly generous this offer of land was. The federal government owned almost 60% of Alaska's land mass, a far higher percentage than for any other state. And coupled with land held by indigenous communities and the fledgling State of Alaska, less than two percent of its total acreage was classified as being in conventional private ownership, a fact still true today.<sup>26</sup> That offer of private land to Merton for a potential hermitage in Yakutat was therefore truly precious.

General aviation and flight instrumentation have vastly improved since the days Merton went hermitage-exploring from inside his chartered Piper Aztec. While flying around, Merton surely heard that Alaska's somewhat brief Catholic history is replete with stories about pilot-priests who have flown Cessnas or Supercubs to small villages to celebrate Mass. Truth was, Merton traveled like an important Washington, DC bureaucrat (minus any television or newspaper interviews, under Fr. Flavian's strict orders), with his own private bush-plane pilot. The monk's itinerary was quite costly and came with many risks, a biographical detail that has been little understood and appreciated about Merton's Alaskan visit. Fr. Louis covered a wider swath of diverse territory, over more remote and roadless miles, in a shorter period of time, than most residents, then or now, ever get to enjoy in their lifetimes. Before arriving in Asia, throughout the seventeen days he spent



on his northern whirlwind, Merton the solitary explorer was constantly reminded of being in a land of impermanence, of supreme *anicca*. Its glaciers calve, retreat, advance unpredictably. Alaska is the epicenter of seismicity – the most seismically active region in North America – another overlooked detail about Merton in Alaska. It didn't take the notion or awareness of landslides on Kanchenjunga to remind him of impermanence. The monk reported seeing “the huge lift of land after the 1964 earthquake” (*TMA* 22), just four years earlier. Alaskans to this day never stop talking about the greatest earthquake ever recorded in North America, the magnitude 9.1 quake on Good Friday 1964. Merton, too, would have heard locals repeat their stories about its sheer terror, the initial shock wave that lasted longer than three minutes, and how Fourth Avenue in downtown Anchorage, a place Merton walked, had cracked open and split in two during the massive event, sending parking garages and office buildings crumbling to the ground. In fact, one of Merton's Alaska photographs shows what appears to be a dock damaged by the 1964 quake.

Traveling by private charter aircraft with his 35mm camera in tow, Merton was aglow about the inscrutable landscapes he was being treated to: dormant and active volcanoes, desolate north Pacific coasts, thousands of pristine lakes he compared to broken pieces of glass and to Siberia, wide, uncrossable ice fields, and his quick views of Mounts Drum, Sanford, Wrangell and the hundreds of others without names.<sup>27</sup> A piedmont glacier in Southeast Alaska near Yakutat – the Malaspina – extended 1500 square miles to the isolated Pacific shore, making it a glacier as big as Rhode Island. Another neighboring glacier – the Hubbard – was 76 miles long. All of these mind-boggling geological features, his direct experience with Alaska's dynamic landscape, led him to contemplate what is permanent and what is not.

It's doubtful whether Merton really understood the unavoidable hazards and dangers associated with his spur-of-the-moment flying in unpredictable weather over the rugged Chugach Mountains, around the Copper River Valley, throughout Southeast, and over Cook Inlet towards Mt. Redoubt and St. Augustine volcanoes. Twice in Southeast Alaska, foul weather diverted his plane while trying to reach the state capital of Juneau (see *TMA* 55-56), one of the most dangerous airport approaches in those days. (In spring 2019, two float planes carrying a total of sixteen tourists collided in mid-air near Ketchikan, killing six, including one of the pilots. A de Havilland Beaver on a commercial flightseeing tour in Denali National Park in July 2018 crashed into a mountainside. The pilot and all four Polish tourists perished; their bodies could not be recovered from the wreckage.)

Alaska is grand, daunting and demanding. To Merton's credit, once let loose from the monastery's confines, he showed great reserves of physical stamina, as if he were already acclimated to the rigors of the sub-arctic. During the first few days staying in his snug trailer under the charge and care of the Eagle River nuns who fed him, laughed at his jokes and mended his socks,<sup>28</sup> a local teenager led Merton on a hike. From what I have determined, the destination was most probably Mount Baldy (3,281'). At the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton, the nature and bird lover, often strolled under the linden and oak trees. Of the knobs surrounding his Kentucky monastery, the highest was roughly 970 feet. But the hike on Mt. Baldy was nothing like that. “Climbed a mountain behind the convent,” Merton said, “& looked out over the vast valley – Mt. McKinley – the Alaska Range – far off Redoubt Volcano and Iliamna” (*TMA* 18). I'm guessing he made it to the top – bad back and all – since he commented on the spectacular views. Mt.

Baldy's estimated elevation gain is 1,700 feet and is considered moderately difficult. The trail is marked by steep sections, switchbacks, and in September is plagued by more typically wet, muddy and slippery conditions. Four days later, he referenced the mountain hike again. "Last Sunday I climbed a mountain behind the convent, guided by a boy who knew the trail. Very tired after it!" (*TMA* 26). And once more in a letter to Fr. Flavian: "Last Sunday, I climbed a small mountain & really had a workout. My health seems better up here and the allergies that bothered me down there are much less troublesome here" (*TMA* 49). Great mountains have a way of wringing confession out of you – a form of emotional bloodletting, as one mountain climber wrote (see Waterman 195).

It did not take glimpsing the world's third highest peak, Kanchenjunga in the Nepal Himalaya, for Merton to fully grasp "the other side of the mountain," as it has often been assumed. Merton first formulated these thoughts in Alaska, in his bones, breath and body. This was indeed a formative spiritual experience in its own right, independent of his Asian experience. Case in point: Merton flew by private charter aircraft, with no more than three souls on board, past Mt. Redoubt (10,197'), a still-active volcano. From a distance across Cook Inlet from Anchorage, Mt. Redoubt looks like a beautiful, symmetrical, conical-shaped peak, a landmark on the horizon, admired by everyone. But when his skilled bush pilot took the Piper Aztec as close as he could possibly get to it, *to the other side of the mountain*, Merton must have fumbled to snap a 35mm black-and-white photo with his borrowed camera, which he did, quite successfully, given how trembling and how breathless he might have been. He recalled the chilling moment circling the flanks of the mountain:

*Redoubt* (which surely has another name, a secret & true name) handsome & noble in the distance, but ugly, sinister as you get near it. A brute of a dirty busted mountain that has exploded too often. A bear of a mountain. A dog mountain with steam curling up out of the snow crater. As the plane drew near there was turbulence & we felt the plane might at any moment be suddenly pulled out its course and hurled against the mountain. As if it would not pull itself away. But finally it did. *Redoubt*. A volcano to which one says nothing. (*TMA* 30)

A mountain is foreboding and mystical. Hostile and holy. The hidden unity comes mixed with hidden tensions. Merton knew a camera, *his* camera, can never really see a mountain. Picture postcards, like the one he received of Denali, hardly disclose the truth lurking beneath and within. Again, his airplane ride so precipitously close to Mt. Redoubt was not just casual alpine sight-seeing; it was an awakening.

Great sherpas and mountaineers (and bush-plane pilots!) know the closer you get to a mountain, the more you see it for what it really is. The clean shapes and outlines quickly disappear. In reconnoitering for the most feasible route to the summit, you are enthralled and frightened by its towering spires of ice, deep gullies, terrifying crevasses, booming avalanches, savage winds and barreling storms. Where is the majestic mountain silence? For elite climbers, every single second must be devoted to the purely physical – to frostbitten feet and fingers, snow-blindness and oxygen deprivation. This is when the "smoke of ideas" instantly clears – when you stumble half-dead into base camp. The maverick Merton, perhaps more virile than he's given credit for, wasn't afraid to step across new ecumenical and physical boundaries. A. F. Mummery, a legendary British climber of Alps fame, considered the true alpinist as the man who attempts

new ascents.<sup>29</sup> Never one to remain in the safety of the status quo, Thomas Merton exemplified the ambiguities, paradoxes and questions our restless selves forever battle on the inner frontier.

At the Day of Recollection talk he gave to the Sisters of Mercy at Providence Hospital, he imparted some hard-won advice – advice that seemed to echo the dreams and ideals of an alpinist, and not a balding Trappist monk, age 53, who had lived in the safety and security of a rural Kentucky monastery for the previous 27 years:

Too often we are content to maintain a fairly decent level and never surpass it. But our lives demand breakthroughs; not every day, not every week, not every month, but once in a while we must break through and go beyond where we are. You have to build up all you have done and push through with it, and then you find that you are out of the woods in a new clearing, you are somewhere else developing a new way. (*TMA* 151)

Alaska's spiritual geography played a pivotal role in the final chapter of Merton's life. Alaska, as one big, holy mountain, surprised and inspired him. It opened up the depths of his heart – exactly the kind of breakthrough he was after. Alaska firmly set him on his path, an adventurous ascent to inner renewal.

1. The journal is found in Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 5-36; subsequent references will be cited as “*TMA*” parenthetically in the text. It is also published in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 179-99; subsequent references will be cited as “*OSM*” parenthetically in the text.
2. See Kathleen Witkowska Tarr, *We Are All Poets Here: Thomas Merton's 1968 Journey to Alaska, A Shared Story about Spiritual Seeking* (Anchorage, Alaska: VP&D House, 2017) for details of the author's background as a long-time Alaska resident and her transformative encounters with Merton's work, an account of her own ongoing “spiritual odyssey with Alaska, Russia, and with the beautiful, towering, and flawed human being – Thomas Merton” (16).
3. “Eight-thousander,” a commonly used phrase in alpine literature, refers to mountains of 8,000 meters – shorthand for any mountain of 26,000 feet or higher; most of the world's highest peaks – the *eight-thousanders* – are part of the Himalaya.
4. See Marjorie Kowalski Cole, “Wandering Hermit Hears Call to Solitude,” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* (24 September 1989) 23; subsequent references will be cited as “Cole” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, unpublished passage of a Day of Recollection talk to Sisters of Mercy, Anchorage, Alaska, September 29, 1968 (Tape #206-1, Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY); remarks not included in the published version of this conference (*TMA* 143-55).
6. See Bonnie Thurston, “Islam in Alaska: Sufi Material in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*,” *The Merton Seasonal* 29.4 (Winter 2004) 3-8; and “‘I Spoke Most of Prayer’: Thomas Merton on the West Coast (September 11–October 15, 1968),” *The Merton Seasonal* 35.3 (Fall 2010) 10-19.
7. For a compelling personal story about a scholar's pilgrimage to Alaska, see Ron Dart, “In the Footsteps of Thomas Merton: Alaska,” *The Merton Seasonal* 33.4 (Winter 2008) 14-19.
8. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 539-40.
9. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, the Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 207.
10. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968); Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968); Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968); plus the pamphlet *Albert Camus' The Plague* (New York: Seabury, 1968).
11. See Thomas Merton, *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine*, with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy and an Afterword by Patrick Hart, OCSO (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989).
12. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969).

13. Thomas Merton, "The Wild Places," *The Catholic Worker* 34 (June 1968) 4, 6; also published in significantly abridged form in *Center Magazine* 1.5 (July 1968) 40-44, the version reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 95-107 (subsequent references will be cited as "PAJ" parenthetically in the text).
14. Monica Weis, SSI, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 85.
15. Unpublished August 2, 1968 letter from Merton to Archbishop Joseph Ryan (TMC archives).
16. Merton's August 15, 1968 journal entry provides an interesting insight about Merton's mulling over his decision to go to Alaska. He was thinking beyond his own personal future as a hermit, and was considering the collaborative aspects of relocating, when he wrote: "I tend to find myself thinking a lot about how to live in Alaska. The problem of my bad driving, etc. The thing is that I can't make sense out of a purely private endeavor to be completely alone, unbothered, etc. This is nonsense. The only way to make sense of it is in the frank context of the Alaskan Church. This 'call' has come really through the Bishop – my solitude and contemplation are to be worked out *with him*, not just on my own. Obviously it will mean some connections, some duties, some service, therefore some people. So the same thing starts all over again! Not necessarily! But I have to look carefully, use my head, and think not only in terms of personal preference and convenience but of charity, of love, for those whose who seek Christ as I do (the nuns with whom all this started, his priests, etc.). If I give what I can give, the rest will be taken care of. They'll fly me in and out in a helicopter if they want me that badly!" (*OSM* 154).
17. The nation's largest national park, the 13-million-acre Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve, was not created until 1980.
18. Jonathan Waterman, *A Most Hostile Mountain: Recreating the Duke of Abruzzi's Historic Expedition on Alaska's Mount Saint Elias* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997) 105; subsequent references will be cited as "Waterman" parenthetically in the text.
19. See Margaret Bridget Betz, "Merton's Images of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God," *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000) 190-207, which includes reproductions of these two icons, "The Prophet Elias in the Desert" (194) and "Elias and the Fiery Chariot" (195).
20. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 36-42; and Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 239-45.
21. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1976).
22. All but one of these reserves were dissolved with the implementation of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANILCA) of 1971.
23. Unpublished portion of September 29 Day of Recollection talk (Tape #206-1, TMC archives).
24. Unpublished portion of September 29 Day of Recollection talk (Tape #206-1, TMC archives).
25. See R. Monk Gerasim (Eliel), *Father Gerasim of New Valaam – Acquisition of the Holy Spirit in Russia Series*, Vol. V (Ouzinkie, AK: New Valaam Monastery, St. Herman Press, 1989) (published in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of Fr. Gerasim's repose).
26. Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 2010 fact sheet: available at: [http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/factsht/land\\_fs/land\\_ownd.pdf](http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/factsht/land_fs/land_ownd.pdf).
27. I have identified the somewhat blurry, black and white aerial photo that appears on the cover of *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, taken by Merton himself, as O'Malley Peak, part of the Chugach Mountains, adjacent to and slightly north of Flattop Mountain, where the most popular and well-used hiking trail in the state is located. Merton snapped this photo as he flew in a northerly direction over cloudy Anchorage, whose population in 1968 was estimated at 40,000.
28. Information gleaned from author's personal interviews conducted at various times (2008-2014) with Mary Alice Cook, historian, long-time resident of Eagle River, Alaska, and member of St. John intentional community. According to Cook, Fr. Louis asked one of the Precious Blood sisters to mend a pair of his socks, but the nun chose instead to keep the socks as a relic. Mary Alice said the nun was Sister Rita Mary Lang, the mother superior of the Eagle River nuns, who later moved to a convent in Brooklyn where she died in 2008. Cook tracked down Sister Rita Mary by phone a few months before her death for an article she was writing for her church's newsletter. Sister Rita Mary said the Precious Blood nuns who met Fr. Louis were delighted by his sense of humor, how totally relevant, yet completely simple and down-to-earth the acclaimed religious man was to those whom he met in Alaska.
29. See James Ramsey Ullman, *The Age of Mountaineering* (New York: Lippincott, 1964).