

The Black Sheep*

Thomas Merton, OCSO

Foreword

According to Thomas Merton himself and to his biographers, he wrote stories, plays and autobiographical material from an early age. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton tells how he and his friends at the Lycee Ingres, in Montauban in 1926, when Merton was only 11, 'were all furiously writing novels' and that he was 'engaged in a great adventure story'.¹ Although that particular story 'was never finished' he recalls that he 'finished at least one other, and probably two, besides one which I wrote at St Antonin before coming to the Lycee'. These novels 'scribbled in exercise books, profusely illustrated in pen and ink' may sound like the poetic licence of the budding author writing in later years, but recently discovered manuscripts dating back to 1929 confirm Merton's description here.

In 1993 John Howard Griffin's widow, Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi, donated his papers relating to his work on the official biography of Thomas Merton to the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, Louisville. Among these papers there was a reference to a Frank Merton Trier who, in 1975, was still living in the family home, 'Fairlawn' in West Horsley, Surrey. Merton in his letters mentioned two first cousins, Merton and Richard Trier, sons of his father's sister, Gwynedd Fanny Merton Trier (1885–1986), whom Merton called

* Written in an anonymous black-covered notebook signed 'T.F. Merton'. Typescript prepared and transcribed by Paul M. Pearson and Helen T. Pearson with assistance from Frank Merton Trier and John L. Barber. Merton's original punctuation has been kept, except where corrections for the sake of clarity have been added or [sic] inserted to highlight missing punctuation or unconventional style.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975 [1948]), p. 52.

'Aunt Gwyn'. Dr Robert Daggy alerted me to this connection and I discovered that Frank Merton Trier was still alive and still living in West Horsley. Robert Daggy and I contacted Frank Merton Trier and accepted an invitation from him to visit him at 'Fairlawn'. We were greeted cordially by him and he showed us several things relating to Thomas Merton and to his brother, John Paul, including family photographs, paintings by Owen Merton and the like. But the most exciting items in Merton Trier's possession were four early stories written by Thomas Merton. These stories were contained in rather beat-up looking, schoolboy notebooks, and all in Merton's handwriting, unmistakable even in his school days (as is seen clearly when the handwriting in these notebooks is compared to other, later writings).

Merton Trier told us that Merton often wrote stories to entertain his younger cousins. He himself, he told us, was born in 1919 and was four years younger than Merton. His younger brother Richard, who died in 1968 (the same year as his cousin), was born in 1920. Four stories were discovered in the possession of Frank Merton Trier. The first—written possibly in the autumn of 1928, just two years after his references to writing stories at the Lycee—was an adventure story called 'The Five Emeralds'. This story was undated but was written in a Ripley Court exercise book and the style of the handwriting would suggest that it is the earliest of the four. The story is 18 pages long, is unfinished and contains a number of illustrations by Merton.

The second story, 'The Haunted Castle',² is one of the ones Merton wrote for his younger cousins, Frank and Richard, while he was spending the Christmas holidays with Aunt Gwyn and her family at Western Cottage, Windsor. It is dated 1929 and so must have been written in early January before the children returned to school. 'The Haunted Castle' is a complete story, though the shortest of the four, comprising just fifteen pages. Of the four it also contains the most illustrations, no doubt to entertain the younger boys, as is the case with its story-line. Robert Daggy described this story as a 'Winnie the Pooh' story and an early example of Thomas Merton staying 'abreast of current literature'³ due to its resemblance to A.A. Milne's Pooh stories. *Winnie the Pooh* had been published only three years earlier in October 1926 to be followed in October 1928 by *The House at Pooh Corner*.

2. Thomas Merton, 'The Haunted Castle', *The Merton Seasonal* 19 (Winter 1994), pp. 7-10.

3. Robert E. Daggy, 'Discoveries & Rediscoveries Twenty-Five Years after Thomas Merton's Death', *The Merton Seasonal* 19 (Winter 1994), pp. 2-3.

The third of these stories, 'Ravenswell', is the longest and the only one to be accurately dated. It is 158 pages in length and was written between 12 April and 24 April 1929—just 12 days. 'Ravenswell', like 'The Five Emeralds', is an adventure story with illustrations. As 'The Haunted Castle' had been based on current literature I decided to look into the possibility that the same could be true of 'Ravenswell'. The answer to this was provided by Frank Merton Trier who had in his possession a book Merton had been awarded as a prize at the end of the Christmas term 1928—*Ravenshoe* by Henry Kingsley, the brother of Charles Kingsley. This book was inscribed on the first page to 'T.F. Merton. Form VIth. Christmas Term 1928' and was signed M.H. Pearce—the headmistress of Ripley Court and the sister-in-law of Aunt Maud, Maud Pearce, an aunt of Owen's with whom Thomas Merton stayed when he first arrived in England in 1928.

The final story in this collection, 'The Black Sheep', is undated but the content of the story would date the book to the years 1929 to 1931, most probably 1930. The story is a semi-autobiographical memoir of life at Oakham School. After Owen's death Merton had no further contact with his relations in this country and since this book was in Frank Merton Trier's possession this would suggest this story predates Owen's death and is from Merton's first year and a half at Oakham.

The only remaining fragment of Merton's pre-Gethsemani novel 'Straits of Dover' begins in a similar fashion to 'The Black Sheep' with an introduction to the English public school system and some information about Rutland and Oakham. This suggests some continuity in Merton's early attempts at telling his own story, attempts that would eventually result in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in further journals telling his story right through until just before his death.

In the second chapter of 'The Black Sheep' Merton describes the train journey from London to Oakham from the point of view of a new boy to the school and early days at the school for a new pupil—getting to know classmates, initiations into the ways of public school life, rugby and corporal punishment. Campbell, the boy most likely to be Merton in the story, is beaten by a Latin master for misbehaving. This particular incident shows us Merton's reasons for calling this story 'The Black Sheep'. It seems unlikely that Merton would seriously be applying that description to himself at this point though, later on, he certainly would have done so and much worse besides. Whether or not Merton was applying the title 'Black Sheep' to himself, it was certainly a very important literary device he would use in subsequent autobiographical works, giving them titles descriptive of

his own life in the period in question.

As Robert Daggy and I looked through these school notebooks with Frank Merton Trier we came across another written page in the notebook containing 'The Black Sheep'. From an examination of the notebook it was clear that no pages had been removed and that this page must relate to 'The Black Sheep'. The passage affirmed our view that 'The Black Sheep' was a semi-autobiographical piece of writing and is included as an appendix at the end of the transcription of 'The Black Sheep'. Many years later in his pre-Gethsemani novel 'Straits of Dover', Merton, after recalling some of his achievements at Oakham, went on to describe himself in words reminiscent of his description of himself in 'The Black Sheep' saying:

All these things I thought I wanted: to be an athlete, to be important and admired: I might have been Harold Lloyd in the Freshman, all over again. However, I happened to be successful at it, at Oakham. But it is embarrassing to think about it now, and besides it is unimportant, all forgotten.⁴

After 'The Black Sheep' we have no further extant literature by Thomas Merton, except for a few essays, book reviews and poems, until his four pre-Gethsemani novels—'Straits of Dover', 'The Labyrinth', 'The Man in the Sycamore Tree' and 'Journal of my Escape from the Nazis', eventually published posthumously as *My Argument with the Gestapo*. These four novels are all to varying degrees, like 'The Black Sheep', semi-autobiographical. In 'The Black Sheep' we see Merton's first attempts at writing autobiography and at trying to express, as William Shannon has said, 'what was going on in his own heart'.⁵

The discovery of these four early stories by Thomas Merton is important for a number of reasons. The stories contain no major revelations about him and no spiritual gems, but in them we have proof of Merton's early attempts at writing stories as referred to in his autobiography. This provides us with an insight into the beginning of Merton's literary craft from a much earlier date than was previously possible. We also see Merton's interest in current literature and his introduction of it into his own work and style. Finally, we see Merton's earliest attempt at writing in an autobiographical style, a style through which he would eventually obtain international renown with the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

4. Thomas Merton, 'Straits of Dover' (unpublished manuscript), TMSC, 18.

5. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 19.