

IN PURSUIT OF THOMAS MERTON

by **Robert E. Daggy**

Paris has kept reaching out and grabbing hold of me in London, in Cambridge, in Rome, in New York, and in this monastery lost in Kentucky . . . There are times when I am mortally homesick for the South of France, where I was born.

Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

Interest in Thomas Merton continues apace and a part, a significant part, of this interest has consistently been a fascination with the life itself. As part of that fascination, there has been in many people an impulse to go where Merton went, to visit the places where he had lived and visited. This impulse has usually taken people to the Abbey of Gethsemani since, after all, that is where he found his identity in the monastic life, where he lived for slightly over half his life, and where he did nearly all his writing. I have yet to meet anyone who reads or studies Merton who does not want to visit, if they have not already visited, Gethsemani. Most of the people who come to the Merton Center, in fact, do so on their way to or from the Abbey.

Americans seem to have a drive to visit the homes and haunts of the famous. When I was going to Tennessee recently someone asked: "Going to get to Graceland?" I didn't (didn't want to!), but I have visited other homes of famous people and, surprising to me when I stopped to think of it, have actually been to many of the places associated with Merton. I live on Valley Road, the street where he visited his friends the O'Callaghan's, and I work in Bonaventure Hall, the last building in Kentucky in which he slept before leaving for Asia.

Gethsemani was Merton's "home" and, in a very special sense, the hermitage finally became his "house." In the last issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, I gave some details on what I call "the hermitage genre" in Merton literature, prose and poetry by people who pursued Merton in some way by visiting and writing about the hermitage. Basil Pennington says in *A Retreat with Thomas Merton*, an account of his stay in the hermitage while preparing to write *Thomas Merton/ Brother Monk*:

I undertook the retreat in Tom's hermitage journaled here for a couple very special reasons. I had been to the hermitage many times before and had had some fairly long periods of retreat there. It is a familiar and loved place for me. During this retreat I let that little building with its great hearth and crackling fire, with its expansive porch welcoming all the "neighbors," with its wondrous view across the valley to the abbey and across the knobs to the distant hills, speak to me in its own way. Through it, Tom, who molded it and enspirited it, was present to me in a very special way. Through his books and monographs I heard again his words; through his tapes I heard his voice; in the chapel, before the fire, on the porch, I communed with his spirit . . . I had come to the hermitage to sit with Tom for a bit . . . (p. 3)



The VIEW from the HERMITAGE PORCH

Photo by Thomas Merton

Others, such as John Howard Griffin, Jack T. Ledbetter, and Brother John Albert, have written about experiences *in* Merton's hermitage. But those other places — the ones where Merton had been or lived outside the Abbey — have called to some people, much as they called to him. The makers of *Merton: A Film Biography*, the documentary which premiered on PBS in 1984, decided to film many of the places in Merton's life. Paul Wilkes, the co-producer, says in "Merton in These Places: Early Days in Europe — Final Days in the East" (included in *Toward an Integrated Humanity*):

Many have been to Gethsemani, seen the fields he walked, the abbey church where he worshipped, his beloved hermitage. Still others have had the opportunity to visit some of the places Merton wrote about so evocatively in his books. Fewer people still, I would imagine, have visited all the foreign locations, done it within a month and for no other reason than Merton had been there. The making of the PBS documentary, *Merton*, allowed such an opportunity for me. (p. 260)

All quests to find places associated with Merton have not been successful. James T. Baker reported in "Merton on the Move: Following His Footsteps to Thailand" (*Commonweal* 105:9, 28 April 1978):

One of my students, another of the growing cadre of Merton followers, had spent the summer in France and had gone down to Prades where Merton was born. No one there, not even the parish priest, knew precisely where the poet was born. Too much time had passed. Too many bohemian artists had had babies there. (p. 272)

It was too bad that Baker's student did not have the benefit of Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* where he could have learned that Merton's birthplace stands at the corner of the Rue du 4 Septembre and the Rue du Palais de Justice. Mott visited many of the places where Merton had lived while preparing the authorized biography and provided maps of several which should make it easier for future Merton "travelers." He said of the birthplace:

If Prades has changed and doubled in size, the house on the corner . . . looks almost exactly today as it does in photographs taken in 1914-15. Only the tree at the far end of the narrow, walled garden at the back of the house had grown to block the view of Merton's first high place, Mount Canigou, which towers above Prades. (p. 5)

Mott also visited St. Antonin Noble Val where Owen Merton built a house at the foot of The Calvaire, using materials from a ruined chapel and old houses. This one is, however, much changed today. Mott says:

Today the house is the Villa Diane and has ornate towers and a whole wing that has nothing to do with the simple block which enclosed the massive doors and the window from the chapel. It is not difficult, however, to think away what has been added to studio-living room-kitchen, the circular stone staircase, and the two rooms, one for the father, the other for the son. The initials T. M. are cut into the massive fireplace in what was once the all-purpose room on the ground floor. (p. 38)



VILLA DIANE at ST. ANTONIN

Photo by Chrysogonus Waddell, O.C.S.O.

Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell, O.C.S.O., visited St. Antonin in 1964 and wrote to Merton about it, telling him several things which he had not known previous-

ly, primarily that his father had “farmed him out” to the Privats (a troubling experience for the young Merton) because he was tubercular. He sent Merton photographs of the house which his father had built. Merton noted on the backs: “Merton House St Antonin.” Waddell wrote:

I guess the place is bigger than it was when you were there, and rather more modern. But it still has the warmth and integrity and character of the old St-Antonin . . . The Abbe told me that you already have a fine color-photograph of the house your father built; but he thought that another photo wouldn't be a bad idea. I'm glad he thought so, since it gave me the chance of meeting one of the most attractive persons ever — old M. Guyon. He's the present owner, and you can rest content that the home is in his hands. . . . The left wing of the house had already been added before negotiations (or the purchase of the house) began. M. Guyon kept referring to the architect as “The Belgian”, but I don't know who he was. I missed the front window you were always so fond of. From the color photo you have, you've seen that it was replaced with a large rectangular one; but I found that the original window is still intact, shifted to a new place in the new wing, and looking out from the back of the house. M. Guyon gave me an old photo of the house as it was when he bought it, with the window still in its proper place. Also, your old initials are still very visible on the fire-place. At least, the presumption is that they're yours, since there isn't anyone else likely to have carved a TM on the right hand side of the fireplace.

In my own work, I have become interested in another place associated with Merton's childhood — where exactly he lived with his father, Owen, and the Scotts (Evelyn, Cyril, and Creighton) while in Bermuda in 1922. Joseph E. Mudd of Louisville, who spends a considerable portion of each year in Bermuda, kindly offered to do some “detective work” based on information which I could give him. Merton's only clue in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is that it was in Somerset. D. A. Callard, in *“Pretty Good for a Woman”: The Enigmas of Evelyn Scott*, states that they lived at Ely Mansions, “a dilapidated estate in Somerset Parish.” He goes on to say that Cyril Kay Scott eventually constructed a large cottage in this area. Owen Merton's letters written from Bermuda have the return “Cedar Cottage, Somerset.” Mudd failed to locate exactly where they lived, but wrote me the following:

I copied the enclosed pages [about] Ely's Lodge from a magazine in the Bermuda Public Library. Some people with whom I spoke speculated that Thomas Merton and his father stayed at this old mansion [Ely's Lodge]. This lodge was indicated on an old map in the Bermuda Archives. Several locals informed me that many fine old buildings used to be referred to as mansions. Nowhere in the thousands of records that I checked was any building in Bermuda called Ely Mansions. This is not to say, however, that there wasn't one so-called at some point in time. A building contractor (about age 65) who has long carried on his father's business recalled that he had never known but one building to be torn down in the Ely's Harbour area — which happens to be near his home. Unfortunately, he was not aware of any name being attached to it.

I spoke to an old gentleman in the Ely's Harbour area who told me that, as a child, he used to play with the Scott children mentioning two of the Scotts by name — Creighton and Cyril. When I asked him where they lived he could only recall that it was in the neighborhood of [Ely's] Harbour.

One interesting possibility suggested in the last paragraph is the old gentleman's assertion that he played with the “Scott children.” He probably, without



ELY'S LODGE [?]

Painting by Owen Merton, 1922

knowing it, played with young Tom. The Mertons and the Scotts were in Bermuda less than a year and Tom and Creighton were the only “children” in the household. At least one of Owen Merton’s watercolors painted in Bermuda strongly resembles later photographs of Ely’s Lodge and this suggests that they lived in or near it. But Mr. Mudd and I will have to do more detecting before I feel sure about it.

Other places in the Merton experience are easier to identify and to find: Oakham School in England, Clare College at Cambridge, 50 Rushmore Avenue in Douglaston, 548a West 114th Street in New York, Columbia University, 35 Perry Street in Greenwich Village (though I had forgotten the number on a recent trip to New York and wandered along Perry Street with my companion, feeling foolish since we had no idea where Merton had actually lived), St. Bonaventure University (where the clearing in the woods is now called “Merton’s Heart”). These places have called to people, too, but there seems to be something especially intriguing about the places he visited in 1968 — the California shore, Christ in the Desert in New Mexico, Alaska — perhaps because this year marked his first extensive trips since entering Gethsemani. The Asian pilgrimage has called particularly to people. Some have gone singly and some in groups, such as the tour to India and Sri Lanka in 1985 which was called “In the Steps of Thomas Merton.” Paul Wilkes has written, in “Merton in These Places,” an account of his trip to Thailand and to Sawang Kaniwat, the Red Cross Camp outside Bangkok where Merton died:



ST. THERESE outside JUNEAU, ALASKA

Photo by David Goldenberg

It is somehow touching that the room in which Merton died not only has no marking or plaque, but in a sense does not exist anymore. The partition on the right side of Bungalow # 11, which had made it into private quarters, has been removed. Chairs and a table, sitting out in the center of the area, now form a sitting area. Why does it seem like a sitting area no one uses?

The bathroom at the rear contains a toilet and in one corner, a squared off area of ceramic tile forms the equivalent of a sink or small tub. Water from a spigot above fills the tub. With a pan, a person can bathe themselves — as Merton did — taking a sort of a shower. The water drains through an opening in the wall to a klong at the rear. The spigot has a faulty washer and drips constantly.

I walk out of the bathroom, tracing Merton’s steps, across the dustless terrazzo floor and stand in the middle of the room . . . I kneel down on the floor. I touch my hand to the terrazzo. It is so cool to the touch, even in the sweltering heat of mid day.

I have been where Merton had been throughout America, at his hermitage at Gethsemani, the places he visited or where he lived in Europe and now, Asia. But in that moment, my hand pressed to the spot where he fell, I feel as close to him as I know I may ever be in this life. (p. 277)

The pursuit of the places in Merton’s geography — both exterior and interior — goes on. We feature in this issue four more accounts in this pursuit: William Buchanan’s “Merton’s Asian Trail;” Jack T. Ledbetter’s “Tracking Merton in the U. K.,” Brother Paul Quenon’s photo-essay “The Merton Tree Revisited;” and Brother Patrick Hart’s review of *The Alaskan Journal of Thomas Merton*.