

TRACKING MERTON IN THE U. K.

by **Jack T. Ledbetter**

We should have gone the other way. We should have visited John Barber in Oakham first then driven down to Cambridge. Then I could have been on the lookout for just this dock or that certain window barely seen through the green branches of the lovely tall trees that grow along the bank of the Cam River. Yes, then I could have popped my imaginary net over the illusive Merton as he glanced about him, wondering if the guard was watching as he went wading (or fell) in the river after a lady's hat, or on a dare, or just for the fun of it. I should have gone the other way around.

But I didn't. I took the places pretty much in the order my wife had laid out for us on this trip. First to Oxford where we walked the wet streets and peered into the courtyards of the colleges and wondered which prime minister or what poet had leaned against such-and-such a wall or had stopped into this-or-that bookstore in search of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* or a fine edition of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Then off to Cambridge where we reclined in the punt while a "young gel" polled us up and down the river with the other summer tourists and pointed out this school and that house and famous bridge. My mind was on Merton then, but all the sights and sounds of this beautiful place kept me agitated beyond taking notes or thinking deeply about anything. Even as I tried to poll

the long, narrow boat myself — unsuccessfully — I managed a quick, side-long glance through the branches at the old buildings passing by, and wondered at the incredible beauty mingled with an overwhelming sense of history and learning. And we moved on. On to Oakham.



JOHN BARBER and JACK T. LEDBETTER

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If I expected to find John Barber in a thatched cottage tending his garden in the English sun I was a bit disappointed. But only for a moment. But first I had my camera out at the school Merton attended before he went to Cambridge. The old school building with its knife engravings put there by generations of schoolboys hoping to leave their mark forever on the old wood, none of them knowing that their marks were being left indelibly on minds and hearts far beyond anything their penknives could have accomplished. But that would be later.



THE OLD SCHOOL AT OAKHAM

Photo by Jack T. Ledbetter

I found him not in the thatched cottage but in a small retirement apartment on the outskirts of Oakham. His wife was just popping off to the market so my wife, Dolores, and I had a good chat with John Barber, and it didn't take long to find ourselves sharing stories. Actually I listened while John Barber shared his stories. He has a quick mind and his memory of those school days is keen.

Here's a story you might find amusing, Jack. One night some of us had gathered in one of the boy's rooms at Cambridge and we were drinking, you know, having a good time, and we noticed that Tom was not there. He was pretty generally always there, around the parties, often in the center of them, you know. But tonight he wasn't. Then the door opened and a very wet, drowned-looking Tom Merton came in. It seems he had fallen in the river behind the college. He was soaked. Well, with a rather sheepish grin on his face he scuttled into the bedroom to see if he could find something warm to put on. As luck would have it, the porter came upstairs to tell us we were making too much noise and did we have any women up here. Just then he happened to look toward the half-open bedroom door and saw a bare white leg. That did it for him. He gave us to understand that this was serious and that we had jolly well better get that woman out of the apartment or there would be trouble for all of us. Well, he had no sooner left than Tom opened the door and stepped into the room wearing a bathrobe! He was doubled up with laughter, glad to be "the woman" and to have caused us this embarrassment. Well, we laughed at him. You couldn't stay mad at Tom Merton for long. It was a good joke, he thought, and I must admit we thought so too, and we all had a good laugh over it. He was always in the drink in one way or another.

As the day wore on we left Oakham behind us and continued our trip through beautiful England. We stopped at all the places in the books: York, Durham, small towns, country inns. And at each stop I would seek out the bookstores and look for Merton books. I was surprised at not finding any when I had expected to find Merton in every bookstore in every city and hamlet. But then I would find some in some musty old bookstore beneath the ancient gate of a wonderful old English town. And I would take great delight in handling the books, reading the flyleaf, and if it was one I didn't have I certainly bought it. The back of our little Ford grew heavier and heavier as we made our way on this six-week pilgrimage.

Then it was on into Scotland, after visiting Fountains Abbey in northern England, near Ripon, and Jedburgh Abbey and Melrose Abbey, two of the Border Abbeys in Scotland. There was more Merton tracking, and on to Wales and Tintern Abbey where we crossed the river and climbed the mountain to find the spot Wordsworth and Dorothy found to see the Abbey far below and to revel in the landscape he immortalized in "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern

Abbey.” Then back down the rainy mountain just in time for a delicious dinner cooked by our hostess and shared by the two other house guests, Douglas and Elizabeth, two retired English people who taught us, again, what a civilized life was like. “Dougie,” as “Lizzie” called him, always appeared for meals in tweed jacket and vest, and Elizabeth with a different comb in her hair and a single strand of pearls on her English sweater. And Dougie would ask me, again, just what America was like and were there still Indians about. He was most eager and kind in his questioning. And after dinner he took his stroll to watch “the lads at cricket” and to get his copy of the *London Times*. Had he heard of Merton, I asked. “Oh, yes, quite. I read him a long time ago.” Quite good, I remember. Yes, quite good. Quite.”



JACK T. LEDBETTER

On the Estuary in Laugharne, Wales
With Dylan Thomas' Home in Background

After a wonderful stay in beautiful and wet Wales with its slate sky and grey rock walls on the narrow, winding, watery roads, and the magical visit to Dylan Thomas' boathouse in Laugharne we boarded the ferry for Ireland to find, if we could, my roots. Ledbetter was quite common in England, rather uncommon in America, and unheard of in Ireland, I soon found, until I found the source: Killybegs, a small fishing village in County Donegal, on the northwest side of the island. And I found much more in Ireland than the names of my ancestors. I found abbeys and churches and tall crosses and towers. And we found Mellifont Abbey where we talked with Brother Aloysius about Thomas Merton. I was interested in learning that most of the monks there had read Mer-

ton at one time but had gone on to other books, other mentors. Brother Aloysius thought Merton a tremendous influence but not the kind he needed to return to again and again. He asked me why I did, and we had a good talk as the evening lowered itself gently into the beautiful tall trees surrounding the Abbey. The sounds of the place carried to us now and then as we stood in the guest's entrance hall. Merton, he said, was certainly all right. Necessary, even, at one time, but now he thought there were other things to read. He certainly did not hold him up as an ikon. And he was rather surprised to learn that so many other people did just that. He couldn't account for that, he said, but he thought it was very interesting. Then the sound of a chant broke in on our talk, and we shook hands and he disappeared down the hall.

Later, down many long country roads we saw a few “Tinkers,” those roving bands of people who plied the back roads and small villages in Ireland in former years, with their bright wagons. We could not keep from seeing the street people, living out of their trailers and tents on the edge of the freeways near the large towns, trailers grounded forever on the hard cement, dogs and children moiling about the outdoor fire for evening meals. It was this contrast, this stark and unforgiving look at the way things are in Ireland that gave us such a start. The quaint thatched roofs of Connemara and the poverty of the cities all covered by the same insistent rain, surrounded by the same indescribable green of Ireland, and all partaking of that wonderful spirit

that is also Ireland.

And then we found Mt. Melleray Abbey. Or rather Dolores found it, as she found all the places, with her array of maps and charts on her lap, gently telling me to turn left or right and telling me which signs to please look out for as we approached another round-about or bridge with six roads leading off the other side. The weather was holding fine, and I eased the Opel Ascona onto the side road leading up to the Abbey, when I noticed something on the left side of the road, a sort of walkway leading down a small hill. Some odd lights had been strung in the trees and boxes of bottles — all kinds of bottles — were stacked near the footpath. Stopping the car, I grabbed my camera and followed the path into a kind of grotto, very damp, very green, very beautiful. At the foot of the hill others had gathered. Some knelt in prayer, some were drinking from a spring; still others filled bottles and were returning up the path. Candles were in evidence and the whole place had the aspect of some place very old, and very holy; and at the same time there was an odd, almost Hollywood feel about it. It was a stereotype of the religious grotto. But, after these sudden sense impressions wore off, I could see that it was not a cave at all but rather a sort of natural bower of tree branches. The actual shrine — for such it was — was on the slant of hill across the stream from where I stood. There, on the hillside surrounded by trees, bushes and ferns, was a statue of the Blessed Virgin. So still it was, and so green and rich in color, that you could not help but stop and pray. I took a couple of pictures, rather guiltily, I must admit, and left. It was a short visit, yet it made a profound impression. Something happened there: a vision of Mary was seen by some of the faithful, and the Irish come here to pray, to be healed, to see a miracle perhaps.

With these unexpected thoughts rattling in my head we drove up the long, winding road to the Abbey that rose fortress-like out of the trees — not unlike, I thought, my first impression of the Abbey of Gethsemani as I approached it on the long winding road from Bardstown that first time. It, too, seemed austere and dark.

Mt. Melleray was a grand place, and after walking around awhile, Father Cornelius Justice came out to meet us. He was a jolly monk if ever I saw one, with more than a twinkle in his eye. There were whole worlds of laughter and joy in them, yet with a certain seriousness I sensed rather than saw. But all that was left aside as we talked about Merton. Yes, of course, he still read Merton. read and wrote and talked about Merton. Of course. And just when I thought of my notebook and pen he was asking me (as Brother Aloysius had) what I thought of Merton. What did I read? And why did I read it? I was finding that my questions of these monks led to more questions of me than I would have expected. And that led to good talk and laughter in a relaxed give-and-take. It was, of course, better than I had thought it would be. You know how you can sometimes get so tied up in your expectations that the real thing can often turn out badly. But not this. This was better. These monks were warm, genuine, without artifice, completely open, and kind. Our talk rose and fell as the afternoon wore on until Father Cornelius said, "Come on, Jack, let me show you the inside of our Church. The others



MT. MELLERAY ABBEY

Photo by Jack T. Ledbetter



FATHER CORNELIUS JUSTICE, O.C.S.O.

Photo by Jack T. Ledbetter

won't be coming just yet." So he took out a large ring of keys and unlocked two doors and we were in the Abbey Church. The wood was clean and well-worn; the altar was simple. It had a lived-in feel to it that reminded you of your home — or at least the way you imagined your own home.

I mentioned the grotto on the way up the road, and he laughed: "Oh, the Irish!" And we both laughed. There was no need for explanations, and as I drove down the winding road, through the colonnade of tall trees, a truck was parked near the little path, and two workmen carried bottles to the grotto in the gloom of the evening. A hush was over the place, with sounds of crickets and evening starting up.

"Oh, the Irish!"

As the ferry from Dun Loaghair to Holyhead, Wales, pounded the seas I had plenty of time to reflect on our trip. What had I learned about Merton? What could I take back with me to America and put on my Merton shelf next to the books, the copies of *The Merton Seasonal*, *Cistercian Studies*, the postcards from the Abbey of Gethsemani, the slides, the biographies, and all the rest? What? And during the long train ride back to London, then to Gatwick and our flight to California, my mind raced and fought for something, some *bon mot* to put in the scrapbook. But I found none. There was so much from the six weeks, so many impressions, so many varied colors, so much talk, so many miles, so many old churches and ruins.

But, as often happens when time has covered everything with that emotional patina statues wear, things come back to you. But they come back differently. I see the hills surrounding Oakham, with the wonderful lake. I feel the excitement of seeing the old school Merton attended, only to be told by a passerby that I had the wrong building. Merton's school was "over there." And I remember punting on the Cam, wondering which college was Merton's, fretting that here I was at last in Merton country and I couldn't remember which college he had attended, and wondering if I should just take pictures of all of them to be sure of having the right one. Tourist thoughts. So many jumbled memories, so many images as we sought out the shades of Byron, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, Walter Scott, and the Kings and Queens of England — and Thomas Merton. Where was he? Where did I at last find him?

As I write this a much-needed rain is falling through the sycamores and eucalyptus trees here in southern California where I live and teach. And now some of those memories are clearing. The Irish mists are rising; the forever flowers of England are blooming, and I see and hear Thomas Merton. Not in the ways I had expected. I didn't come back with a briefcase of heretofore unknown or exciting tidbits about him. No revelations. No sudden shock of recognition. But here he was, and is. In the good talk. In the tea we had with the monks, in the open faces and warm handshakes and in the almost amused expressions as they asked why I read Merton, and in the eager bookstore people as they scabbled among their musty lists and stacks for the man I was after; and in the warmth of John Barber as he listened to his own memories of

Merton, the student. Nothing very new. Nothing for a dissertation, I think. But, then I'm not working on one. That was long ago for me. It was Mark Van Doren then — and now. Merton, then, and now. And the coincidence — if that's the word I want here — is stunning. Van Doren and Merton.

And as the rain falls and I turn the pages of my scrapbook, the sights and sounds return full-blown and rich and full and very real. Did I find Merton? Well, I found people. Good people, full of love and care and piety and humanness and doubts and fears and dreams, breathing the air we all breathe and watching, over last coffee or tea, the same sun sink into evening shadows. And through it all the echoes of bells from some abbey tower calling us to prayer. That's Merton enough.

A WORLD AWAY

(for the Monks at Gethsemani Abbey)

by **Jack T. Ledbetter**

the road winds among the autumn trees
 and carries a world away
 yet we do not watch the cars
 nor see the desires feverish among the people
 nor can we stop watching and seeing
 for we are witnesses in these holy woods
 of all that lives
 and breathes among us
 around us
 in cities dark in tangle
 and beneath the seas alive in silence
 and deep in seasons
 where angels find us
 our hands folded
 our hearts open to a waiting world
 borne forever away
 on roads winding among the autumn trees