

# AN UNUSUAL DISCOVERY IN A SECOND-HAND BOOKSTORE IN ENGLAND

by **William H. Shannon**

---

As general editor of the Thomas Merton Letters, I have long ceased to be surprised when a letter turns up from a most unusual source. In May 1991, as I was finishing the typescript of *Silent Lamp*, Brother Patrick Hart kindly sent me a copy of a letter that had recently been received at the monastery. It was a letter from Merton which had been returned to the monastery from England by a gentleman named Danny Rondo. Mr. Rondo was not, however, the recipient of the letter. It came into his possession when he purchased an old book in a second-hand bookstore and discovered the letter tucked inside the book. Noticing that the letterhead read "Our Lady of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky," he thoughtfully mailed it to the monastery with the hope, as he put it, that it might be "useful for your Archives."

This lengthy letter is addressed to "Dixon" and dated November 9, 1954. From the content of the letter I assumed that "Dixon" was a faculty member at Oakham School, which Merton had attended from 1929 to 1932. But, to be sure, I wrote to the Rev. Terence Treanor, the chaplain at Oakham, who on more than one occasion has helped me in getting information. He wrote that at first he had no idea of the identity of the recipient of Merton's letter, but his research finally unearthed that it was written to C. J. (Christopher) Dixon who in 1954 was editor of the



WILLIAM H. SHANNON

---

□ **William H. Shannon** is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Nazareth College and is currently Chaplain at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse in Rochester, New York. He is the author of several books, including *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (1981), and has written several articles on Merton. He is the General Editor of the Merton Letters and edited the first volume, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (1985). He served as the first President of *The International Thomas Merton Society* (ITMS) from 1987 to 1989. His most recent work, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (1992), is reviewed in this issue.

school magazine, *The Oakhamian* — a position that Merton had held more than twenty years earlier. Dixon was a very talented young man who went on to win First Class Honors in English at Cambridge and later taught at Oakham, Radley College, and Eton. He died at a fairly young age in 1986. Dixon had initiated the correspondence. He used part of Merton's letter in an article he wrote for *The Oakhamian* with the title "Fr. Louis Merton." Here is his article from the Christmas 1954 issue of *The Oakhamian*.

The signature, T. F. Merton, can still be seen in No. 9 study at School House and his Latin Unseen book is still used by Latin scholars in their travails. But besides these, very little is left in the School to remind us of Thomas Ferverel Merton. Some people vaguely have heard of him as "the Man who wrote about Oakham," or "That monk fellow." Some who taught him here have vivid memories of his Editorship of this magazine, or his founding of a new Senior Scout Troop, or his strange literary phases, as he seized passionately the latest works of the (then) modern authors. As he said in a recent letter, his contemporaries "doubtless remember me as anything but a man of prayer." But that is what he is now — a member of the severe order of the Cistercians, better known as Trappists, the hardest and most exacting of all the contemporary orders. But he is more than that — he is the greatest and most widely read of the mystic theologians in the world today. His works have been translated into forty languages, and nine hundred thousand copies of his books have been sold in English alone. His finest work, *Elected Silence*, has been called a classic of its kind and takes its place beside *The Confessions* of St. Augustine and the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* of Cardinal Newman, as one of the great spiritual autobiographies in the history of mankind. In this book Oakham School is described, and to the casual reader it will seem in not a very complimentary way. But as Merton has subsequently said: "I know that what I wrote about the School in my book was perhaps not flattering. But I am sure readers will have seen that I was not trying to describe the School objectively, but rather the state of my own mind there. I never regret having gone to Oakham." His latest work, *Bread in the Wilderness*, is written in the same lucid, passionate style that has endeared him to the hearts of his readers, rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant, Christian and pagan, devout and careless. But amid the beauties of his spiritual life, amid the cares of his writing, although he is far away in the warmth and splendour of Southern Kentucky, his mind turns to Oakham, in his thoughts and in his prayers. Let Oakham honour one of her sons who has left the world, and gained it.

## Merton's Letter to "Dear Dixon"

Your letter was a very pleasant surprise. I assure you that I am glad to hear from my old school, and to hear that things are going along well. Above all I am glad to hear so many familiar names. Thank you.

I have often thought of Oakham in the years that have gone by since I was there. How long ago it seems! I even remember dreaming about the place once, during the war. I dreamt there was an air raid and — oddly enough — I sought refuge in Wharflands.<sup>1</sup> So doubtless my subconscious feelings about Wharflands are still very good. I remember two of my closest friends were in Wharflands — C. A. P. Winser and J. R. Dickens. J. L. Barber, of course, I remember too.<sup>2</sup> And his brother "Carnera." I take it Barber is now a Master there.

And then Mr. Moore, and Mr. Duesbury!<sup>3</sup> How well I remember them both. Especially the cavernous tones in which Mr. Duesbury used to recite the "Road to Mandalay" during the supper we had at the end of each term (or was it each year?). Give them both my affectionate regards. Mr. Moore will be surprised and, no doubt, edified to hear that one of the things I most regret about my stay at Oakham was my lack of zeal in the study of Greek. I really wish I had used my opportunities. I could use some Greek now. I would like to read the Greek Fathers in the originals — the best I can do is find my way through the New Testament.

I am glad to hear that Hodge Wing has been tidied up a bit, and that you have so many new buildings.<sup>4</sup> And you play hockey now! Glad to hear about the victorious seasons. Do you still play the same teams? Worksop, K. E. S., Bromsgrove, Bedford Modern, Trent? (I don't think I have typed those names, or thought of them, since I was editor of the *Oakhamian*.)

Really I have many glowing memories of Oakham and the O. O's.<sup>5</sup> The last person I have heard from was "Tom" Sargant who, at the time, was living in Devonshire.<sup>6</sup> I have never been in contact with any of my contemporaries there, although I have tried to reach some of them. Is the old Head, Mr. Doherty, still at Lancing??

Above all, I remember the countryside around Oakham most vividly. I can still see Burley fishponds, and Egleton, and Lax Hill. I remember the village of Brooke. Do you still run cross-country through the valley and over Brooke Hill, down by the rifle range?<sup>8</sup>

With all these thoughts in my mind I am glad to be able to tell someone at Oakham that I really bear the school a deep affection, with sentiments of gratitude that will not die. I know that what I wrote about the school in my book was perhaps not flattering. But I am sure readers will have seen that I was not trying to describe the school objectively, but rather the state of my own mind there. I never regret having gone to Oakham. On the contrary, I am very glad that I was sent there rather than to some larger school, for Oakham had something of simplicity and sincerity about it that one might look for in vain elsewhere. The school, the masters, and the boys were quite genuine. I hope they still are, and do not doubt that everything is as it was in that respect.

So I close with the hope that Oakham will reach its zenith not only in sports but in the deeper things as well. A school is a place in which one prepares to lead a productive and happy life. Therefore it must be a place in which one comes to know something of the ultimate spiritual values that men have to live by. I have never believed in professional piety, or sanctimoniousness. The sanctimonious generally manage to make spiritual things unattractive. But I hope that Oakham will always be able to teach her sons that they have souls, and that there is no more important task in life than for a man to safeguard the integrity of his deepest self — to know himself and to know God and, in a word, to "save his soul."

This is my prayer for you, Dixon, and for all who are now teaching and studying at Oakham. It is above all my prayer for all my friends and contemporaries who doubtless remember me as anything but a man of prayer. God bless you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

(signed) Fr. M. Louis Merton

Needless to say, I send my best regards to all those who remember me.