

The Seven Storey Mountain:

FIFTY YEARS OLD!

By **William H. Shannon**

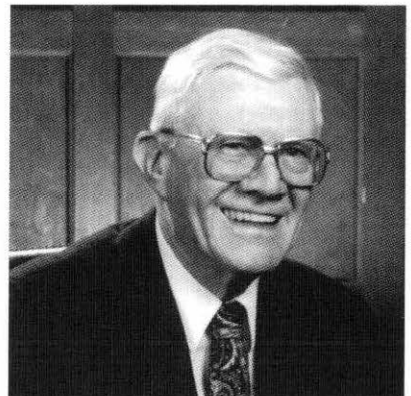
On October 4, 1998, Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (*SSM*), celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. This is being appropriately observed with a special anniversary edition that Harcourt Brace, its original publisher, is putting out. In addition to the original text, this anniversary edition includes an introduction by Robert Giroux, who was the original editor of the book fifty years ago, and a "Note to the Reader" that I was asked to write. (I might mention in parentheses that in rereading *SSM* in preparation for this article, I discovered two typographical errors: errors that continued to be handed on in the many editions published during the course of these fifty years! They are corrected in the anniversary edition! So if you want to see the text exactly as Merton wrote it, it behooves you to get the anniversary edition.)

The SSM Narrative

For those who may not know or may have forgotten the narrative of *SSM*, I shall briefly summarize it. Thomas Merton was born in France the last day of January, 1915. His mother, Ruth, was American and a Quaker; his father, Owen, a New Zealander and (nominally) Anglican. Both his parents were artists. With Europe in the grip of a great war, the young family fled to America to live on Long Island. When Tom was six, his mother died; and from then on his life was a lonely one. His father, a good man, but continually torn between his artistic need to travel the world and paint and a sincere desire to be a dutiful father, was often away on painting trips, sometimes taking Tom with him, but much of the time leaving him with family, friends or in boarding schools.

For so much of his youth, Tom was a lad on a journey, never quite sure where the journey would lead. In 1925 Owen brought him back to France, where he lived a lonesome life in a tough French boarding school. In 1928 they moved to England, where he became a boarder once again – this time at Oakham Public School. He was happy at Oakham, made friends easily, got involved in school activities (the debating club, the rugby team). It was at Oakham that he established himself as "something of a rebel." Also, while he was there, he lost whatever

Msgr. William H. Shannon is emeritus professor of religious studies at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY, the founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society and the general editor of Merton's collected letters. This article is a version of a talk presented at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York on August 17, 1998.



Msgr. William H. Shannon

bit of religious faith he had had up to then. (He went to Sunday chapel, because it was compulsory, but as a show of defiance, kept his mouth tightly closed when the rest of the congregation said the creed in the liturgy.)

His father, Owen, died while Tom was at Oakham, leaving the young journeyer an orphan. Completing his studies in 1932, as he was approaching his eighteenth birthday, he at last felt that he had grown up. Indeed, he saw himself as a sophisticated young man to whom the world belonged, and he was going to enjoy that world to the hilt.

After graduation he journeyed to Rome, where at the age of eighteen he had what can only be called a mysterious spiritual experience, as he visited the Roman churches and had a dream-vision of his deceased father. Sad to say, the experience was not deep enough to endure. By the end of the summer, after having returned to America, he was once again without faith. In the fall of 1933 he journeyed back to England to study at Cambridge, determined to squeeze all he could out of life. Absenteeism from class, too much time at the English pubs and too much irresponsible sex brought disaster into his life, academically and morally. He left England in the spring of 1934 with a possible paternity suit hanging over his head (though this fact does not appear in the autobiography).

In the spring of 1935 he recovered, academically at least, as he entered Columbia University, which he found much more challenging than Cambridge. It was at Columbia that he finally found himself. Five exciting years in that stimulating academic milieu saw him becoming briefly and superficially a communist and then deeply and definitively a Roman Catholic. Following a brief stint of teaching at St. Bonaventure College in Allegheny, New York, he entered one of the strictest religious orders in the Catholic Church, the Trappists. The date of his entry was December 10, 1941. He was, almost precisely, at the half-way mark of his life: just a month away from his twenty-seventh birthday. He would live another twenty-seven years as a monk of Gethsemani.

For Thomas Merton, entering the monastery was love at first sight. In fact, he writes in *SSM*: "Never since I have entered religion have I ever had the slightest desire to go back to the world."¹ In 1946 (or perhaps even a little earlier) at the behest of the abbot he wrote the story of his life, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. One of the issues he struggled with in his early years in the monastery was whether or not he should stop writing in order to be a better monk. *SSM* was published on October 4, 1948. For all practical purposes, it resolved the dilemma regarding his writing. An obscure, unknown young monk, hidden away in the mountains of rural Kentucky, was suddenly catapulted into fame and fortune. Thomas Merton became a celebrity almost overnight. He had to continue to write. His writing became an important part of his monastic journey.

Fame

I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that *SSM* may well be described as probably the greatest and certainly the most influential spiritual book of the twentieth century. It became a best-seller in its first year of publication, 1948, and has continued to be widely read, not only in English, but in more than a dozen languages and in the East as well as the West. The latest translation I have heard about was into Chinese.

The Reviews – Fifty Years Ago

Fifty years ago it received rave reviews. I did some searching and found a number of those reviews. I got so excited as I read them that I thought to myself: "Wow! I have to read

this book!" Then it came to me, almost with a feeling of disappointment, "but I have already read it many times." Here are a few quick comments: "a startlingly beautiful book! Brilliant writing! A thrilling book." And a few longer ones. "There is mysticism here worthy of Evelyn Underhill and in the same chapter affection for Louis Armstrong!"² It was described in *The Chicago Tribune* as "of intense interest and timeless value. Engrossing from first page to last."³ *The Saturday Review of Literature* saw it as "the odyssey of a soul . . . with warmth and gusto and Augustinian wit."⁴ Clare Booth Luce wrote: "It is to a book like this that men will turn a hundred years from now to find out what went on in the human heart in this cruel century."⁵ I don't know how many of us will be around in 2048 to discover whether or not her words truly were prophetic, but at least we can say *SSM* has reached the half-way point toward making these words come true.

The New York Times described the book as having "an urgent and phenomenal quality." Merton's writings, Horace Gregory, the reviewer, said: "are filled with youthful energy that seems younger than his age of 33. Yet he writes with less innocence perhaps, than deliberate candor, and his literary personality is of a kind that seldom fails to fascinate the reader. . . . He has something to say and what he says touches upon issues of timely importance."⁶

The New York Herald Tribune called it "one of those either/or books which come right out of the center of our lives. There will be many who, however alien the experience may remain to them personally, will put the narrative down with wonder and respect."⁷ Two great descriptive nouns, those: wonder and respect!

The Chicago Sun summed up the view of countless readers, when it described *SSM* as "a hymn of positive faith sung in the midst of a purposeless world. A book that can be read with fascination by a [person] of any faith or none at all."⁸ Those words sound very much like they could have been written today. They express as well as anyone could the reason for the book's appeal then and its continuing appeal today. The reviewer makes three points: (1) *SSM* is a hymn of faith; (2) it is addressed to a world without purpose; and (3) it can be read with equal fascination by a person of faith or by a person who has no faith at all. I would like to expand a bit on these three points.

Hymn of Faith

In many ways it is a hymn of *faith*: faith lost in Merton's adolescence while he was at Oakham School (1929-32), then momentarily recovered during a momentous visit to Rome (1933), only to be lost again during a disastrous year at Cambridge, England (1933-34), and finally found in a definitive and maturing way (during his years at Columbia - especially the year 1938). It is truly a *hymn* of faith. A hymn is a song of praise to God. There is a moving hymn of praise that comes about one-third of the way through the book. It comes at a point in Merton's story where one would not expect a hymn of praise. The author-monk is recalling a deeply wounding experience in his youth. It was the time of his final departure from Cambridge, England. His life at the time was a mess. He had failed in about every way possible: scholastically, morally, religiously. Yet, it is in describing this unhappy time in his life that he sings a striking paean of praise to God and to a providence that, he is convinced, works insistently in the lives of people. Thus he writes:

There is not a flower that opens, not a seed that falls into the ground, and not an ear of corn that nods on the end of its stalk in the wind that does not preach and proclaim the greatness and the mercy of God to the whole world. There is not an act of kindness or generosity . . . or a word of peace and gentleness spoken . . . that does not sing hymns to God.⁹

In a Purposeless World

SSM sings of faith in a world that was seeking to find its bearings at a time when people were more and more confused about life and its meaning. Not without reason did the *Chicago Sun* reviewer called it a "world without purpose." Much was happening in the world in 1948. In May the state of Israel was proclaimed and, in a brief but decisive war, Israel emerged in control of most of Palestine. The surrounding Arab states refused to recognize even the existence of the state of Israel and the Middle East crisis was born, an unsettling crisis that is still very much with us today. This was also the year when the Cold War sent an alarming chill through the West, as the Iron Curtain tightened its grasp on Berlin. The USSR stopped road and rail traffic between Berlin and the West. For more than a year, in a gigantic airlift, thousands of American and British planes brought food to two million Berliners. It was the year when Mohandas Gandhi, the prime mover for India's independence and the noble apostle of non-violence, fell to an assassin's bullet. And in our own history this was a period of spiritual unrest. People had not yet recovered from a searing world war that left so many homes with empty places at the dining room table. It was a time of personal upheaval and spiritual seeking by many people, who experienced the urge to search for life's deeper meaning, but were not very clear about what it was they were looking for. It was 1948 that saw W. H. Auden win the Pulitzer prize in poetry with a book significantly entitled *The Age of Anxiety*.

It was into this troubled world that the voice of a young man, a long-time journeyer and a seeker for life's deepest meaning, spoke a word of hope and offered the vision of a life that could be different. It was the right voice at the right moment. *SSM* struck an instant and sensitive nerve in America and eventually in other parts of the world. His story is a compelling one. The reader is swept along with this young man, as he seeks to make something out of his hitherto undisciplined life.

If people were able to identify with his story fifty years ago, so can women and men of today who hover on the verge of a new millennium. Many of the issues of fifty years ago are still with us: the Middle East crisis, an Eastern Europe in disarray, an India which, as a recent editorial in *The London Tablet*¹⁰ suggested, has preferred the bomb to Gandhi's spinning wheel. Here at home one of our greatest problems has been our great failure in so many areas of our national life to engage in moral discourse. Still we live in an age of seekers: people who experience a sinking feeling that their lives are empty and aimless. The fare of "bread and circuses" that life on the surface of existence offers them no longer satisfies. They search for meaning. They want to know if life leads anywhere. If it does, then where? So many of us find ourselves, like Dante Alighieri, "in a dark wood," where "the right way" seems to be lost.

The Audience

What I am suggesting is that, just as Merton's story struck a sensitive chord in people's lives fifty years ago, so also will it appeal to our own world of searchers. Fifty years, I am

confident, have not dimmed the need this book meets and the magnetism it continues to exercise. The words of the reviewer for *The Chicago Sun* still hold true: "it can be read with fascination by people of faith or of none at all."

I find intriguing the description of the audience that the reviewer believed might be attracted to read *SSM*: people of faith or people with no faith. I suppose you could say that that includes everybody. But the point he is making, I think, is that people of faith will read *SSM* for one reason, people with no faith for another reason. Both will find nourishment and sustenance in the reading. "People of faith or of none at all" aptly describes those whom I think will find this fiftieth anniversary edition of *SSM* attractive.

Reasons for the Popularity of SSM

What is it that made this book so popular and continues to make it so even today? There are, I believe, a number of reasons. One is that his story is so well told. It's witty and urbane. Seldom pietistic. Often rather worldly for a monk. The reader senses something of his or her own story mirrored in this narrative of a young man as he looks, sometimes hopefully, sometimes desperately, for meaning in life. There is at the same time the personal magnetism of the author, the enthusiasm of his discoveries, the vivid narratives masterfully told by a born writer, the perennial elements of human experience and concern that parallel the human journey of every woman and man. At times we almost think he is telling our own story. All these factors contribute to the mesmerizing power the book continues to exercise over readers.

The Deeper Reason for the Power of SSM

But I think there is another and deeper reason why this book appealed when first published and why it continues to appeal today. The book's power, I believe, consists in this: it is more about spirituality than about religion. By making this statement, I realize that I am placing myself in the precarious situation of having to clarify the difference between religion and spirituality. There is no scholarly agreement on the exact difference between the two. But I shall try to offer a brief clarification at least of the way I am understanding these terms.

Religion

By religion I intend to designate an organized, structured way of relating to transcendent reality. Religion generally involves rituals, as well as some kind of religious leader who presides over the rituals. As Dr. Johnson once said: "As I take my shoes from the shoemaker, my coat from the tailor, so I take my religion from the priest."¹¹ Religion involves doctrines as expressions of faith. John Henry Newman wrote: "From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the fundamental principle of my religion."¹² Religion also implies a set of moral principles to which the members of a religion subscribe. Thus religion involves cult, creed and code. Perhaps I could sum up by saying that religion mediates the contact that its adherents have with the divine.

Religion in SSM

If *SSM* were simply about religion and Merton's discovery of the Catholic religion, it would be difficult to see how the book could have such wide appeal. The religion which the book extols is the Catholicism of the late 1940s - not an especially appealing period in the story of the Catholic faith. The Church was in the grips of a theological rigidity. As I have

written elsewhere: "It was a church which clung to its past with great tenacity: a church of imposition that refused to accommodate itself to the questions and the needs of the time. It had something of the character of a medieval walled city with moats around it to protect it from whatever was outside. It was a self-contained structure with an inflexible discipline, especially in matters of faith and morals, which brooked no opposition. Orthodoxy was clearly defined. Plurality of theological expression was not just frowned upon, it simply was not allowed. The only thinking allowed in the Roman Catholic Church of the first half of the twentieth century was 'thinking with the Church' (*sentire cum ecclesia*), and 'thinking with the Church' meant accepting whatever Rome taught." Theology had become ideology. "It was a theology that had been trivialized by reducing it to a question of authority and obedience."¹³

It is this triumphalist sense of being the "one true church" that Merton adopted when he became a Catholic. At times the triumphalism is a bit overbearing. He writes disparagingly about other Christian churches. Thus he tells us that Catholics, when they go to church, are "more conscious of God than of one another." They are not there "to show off their hats or their clothes, but to pray, or at least to fulfill a religious obligation, not a human one." Even those who might go to church for no other motive than that they were obliged to go, "were at least free from any of the self-conscious and human constraint which is never absent from a Protestant church, where people are definitely gathered together as people, as neighbors, and always having at least half an eye on one another, if not all of both eyes."¹⁴

This approach to Catholicism would probably have appealed to most Roman Catholics at the time the book appeared. But it certainly would have created difficulties for Protestants, Anglicans and other people who were not Catholic. Yet it seems clear that the book's appeal was by no means restricted to Catholics. The reviewers I have quoted make this very point. As I have mentioned, the reviewer from *The Chicago Sun* said that it could be read with fascination by people "of any faith and no faith at all." *The New York Times* reviewer states that *SSM* "seldom fails to fascinate the reader."

The On-Going Appeal of SSM

That was about readers fifty years ago. What about readers today? The Catholic Church has gone through enormous change since *SSM* was published. The face of Catholicism today is very different from what it was fifty years ago. I dare say that Catholics would find as many problems with the way *SSM* presents the Church as people of other religions might. So why do people – Catholics or others – continue to read it? My answer is that the appeal of *SSM* is primarily the spirituality it describes, rather than the religion at which Thomas Merton arrived. When Merton was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church sixty years ago, on November 16, 1938, his discovery of Catholicism was by no means the end of his spiritual search. Rather the Catholic Church with its long history and tradition offered a huge and rich context within which he could continue that spiritual search. Evelyn Waugh, a distinguished writer himself and no easy critic of the writings of others, may have put his finger on the perennial appeal of *SSM*, when he wrote in his foreword to the British edition of *SSM* (entitled *Elected Silence*) that this book "should take its place among the classic records of spiritual experience."¹⁵

Spirituality

For that is exactly what spirituality is all about: spiritual experience. It has to do with experiencing God (or the divine or the ultimate reality, whatever term one wants to use).

Moreover it means being transformed in our consciousness by that experience. People who write about spirituality would want to assert that there is much more to life than meets the eye. There is, they would claim, a world of reality below and above (indeed all around) our ordinary daily experience; yet those who are content to live simply on life's surface are completely oblivious about it, despite the authentic wonders that exist within them and all about them. Spirituality thus sees God as immanent as well as transcendent. Spirituality is a deep consciousness of the "everywhereness" of God and of our need to be aware of God's presence, not just as a truth we assent to, but as reality we experience. When we experience that presence we are in touch with mystery. Toward the end of *SSM* Merton writes:

The life of each one [of us] . . . is part of a mystery. In one sense we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going.

In another sense we have already arrived. We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light.¹⁶

Discovering God is discovering unsuspected depths of our own real self, for ultimately we come to know who we truly are only when we experience ourselves in God. Merton's discovery of himself in God was a lifelong task. Many aspects of that discovery are detailed in *SSM*. But his search for God and for his own true self did not end with *SSM*; in some sense *SSM* tells only of the beginning of that search. Thomas Merton was a seeker all his life. The final words of *SSM* makes this very clear. He writes "*Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi*,"¹⁷ which may be translated: "Let this be the end of the book, but by no means the end of the seeking."

The Governing Metaphor of SSM

That is why the governing metaphor of *SSM* is taken from Dante's *Purgatorio*. The theme of the *Purgatorio*, as Merton uses it, is the purification of *eros* or, if you will, the purification of desires. The title *The Seven Storey Mountain* suggests that the reader is going to follow the author through the various steps whereby his desires are gradually purified and become centered in that love for God that is the fulfillment of all our desires.

Our desires need to be tamed. They need to be educated. We have to learn what is worth our desiring. Only then can we turn to God and find in God the deepest meaning of our existence. We have to discover that our desiring finds its true fulfillment only in God. Augustine put it this way in a prayer to God: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."¹⁸

Merton refers to the *Purgatorio* just before his baptism into the Catholic Church, which took place on November 16, 1938. He writes:

I was about to set foot on the shore at the foot of the high, seven-circled mountain of a Purgatory steeper and more arduous than I was able to imagine and I was not at all aware of the climbing I was about to have to do.¹⁹

He concludes the story of his baptism with these brief but profound words: "And God called out to me from His own immense depths."²⁰

I find it a fruitful approach to reading *SSM* to think of it in terms of this gradual

purification of love that opened Merton to the contemplative consciousness of God. On the last day of his life, in the final talk he gave at Bangkok just before the sad event of his unexpected and unexplained death, Merton put the purgatorial theme in monastic terms. The whole purpose of the monastic life, he says, "is to teach people how to love, to teach them how to live by love." We can easily extrapolate that to the whole of the Christian life. Its whole purpose is to teach us to live by love. Learning to live by love, Merton tells us, calls us to translate "*cupiditas* into *caritas*, self-centered love into an out-going other-centered love." He goes on: "In the process of this change, the individual ego is seen to be illusory and dissolves itself. In place of this self-centered ego comes the Christian person, who is no longer just the individual, but is Christ dwelling in each one. So in each one of us, the Christian person is that which is fully open to all other persons, because ultimately all other persons are Christ."²¹

These were among the last words spoken by this man who had journeyed a great deal in his life. Just before he left for Asia, he wrote to his friends about life's real journey. "Our real journey in life," he said, "is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."²²

More than he would ever have realized, countless people look to him as an authentic guide and mentor for their own surrender to the creativity of love and grace in their lives. I have often been asked: "Will Thomas Merton be declared a saint? Will he be canonized?" If the question refers to the juridical process that the Catholic Church has set up for formal canonization, I think not. If, on the other hand, it refers to the way in which people "made saints" in the earliest Christian times, namely, by acclamation, such a process may already be happening in the case of Thomas Merton. Many people in different parts of the world look to his story and his writings for the insight and the wisdom which they believe will help them to appreciate the deeper realities of life and to move their lives in the direction which love and grace are calling them to take.

One way of putting this is to say that figuratively, when Merton entered the monastery, he brought many, many people with him – people who would never have experienced his influence, if he had not entered the monastery. On one occasion soon after his arrival at the monastery, he went to confession. The confessor said to him: "Who knows how many people are depending on your perseverance in this monastery? Perhaps God has ordained that there are many in the world who will be saved only through your fidelity to your vocation. You must remember them if you are ever tempted to leave. And you probably will be tempted to leave. Remember those people in the world. You know some of them. Others, you may never know until you meet them in heaven. But in any case you did not come here alone."²³

"You did not come here alone." These were prophetic words. Thomas Merton has been the spiritual director of ever so many people (people whom in this life he never knew): people who have found that the spirituality they discovered in his writings opened up a whole new way of life for them. It reshaped their spirituality. In some mysterious way, not of their knowing, they had entered the monastery with him. Indeed, he had not come alone.

¹Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 383.

²James O. Supple, review in *The Chicago Sun*, December 28, 1948.

³*The Chicago Tribune* – on jacket of *SSM*.

⁴A. F. Wolfe, review in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, October 9, 1948.

⁵Clare Boothe Luce, jacket blurb, *SSM*.

⁶Horace Gregory, review in *The New York Times*, October 3, 1948. Noteworthy is the fact that this review was published the day before the book's official publication date, which was October 4, 1948.

⁷George Shuster, *The New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, October 24, 1948.

⁸Supple, *op. cit.*

⁹*SSM* 129.

¹⁰*The (London) Tablet*, May 23, 1998.

¹¹James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-1964) 2:214.

¹²John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1956) 163.

¹³William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 161.

¹⁴*SSM* 208.

¹⁵Evelyn Waugh, "Forword" to *Elected Silence* (British edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*) (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949) vi.

¹⁶*SSM* 419.

¹⁷*SSM* 423.

¹⁸Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, I:ii (1).

¹⁹*SSM* 221.

²⁰*SSM* 225.

²¹*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 334.

²²Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989) 118.

²³*SSM* 383.