

## Ed Rice: A Remembrance

By James Harford



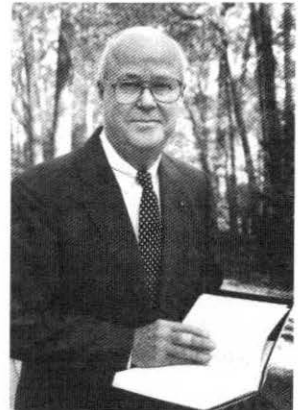
Edward Rice, who died at 82 on August 18, 2001 of complications from Parkinson's disease, was the last survivor of a trio whose friendships, dating from Columbia University days in the late 1930s, remained intensive through their lifetimes. The other two were Thomas Merton, who died on December 10, 1968, at 53, and Robert Lax, who died on September 26, 2000, at 84. Rice, the only born Catholic of the three, was godfather to both Merton and Lax when they converted to Catholicism - Merton in 1938, Lax in 1943.

There was not much in the college doings of the three - Lax, the small town Jew, Merton, the skeptical Protestant, and Rice, the casual big-city Catholic - to suggest the eventual direction of their talents. Their writings and art in the Columbia humor magazine, *Jester*, differed very little in range of subject from what could be read in other Ivy League magazines of that genre - satirical poems, flip essays, insightful but sometimes savage reviews of plays, musicals and jazz records. But they were superbly creative, serving a discriminating academic community that appreciated the magazine's penchant for going beyond humor to deal with issues confronting the students. Rice got the most enthusiastic encomium in the college annual of 1938:

In the process of extracting copy from the student body, the editors of *Jester* had the good fortune to discover Ed Rice, a writer-artist of exceptional merit who will in all probability move into the editorial chair and from there to greater things. To him, more than to any other individual contributor, goes the credit for making this a successful *Jester* year.

Both Lax and Merton had earlier served on the *Jester* staff, Lax as editor-in-chief and Merton as art editor, and both stayed on to serve on Rice's staff the following year. Rice was a sophomore, Lax a senior, Merton a graduate student. Each got effusive praise from the article cited above. Each would justify, in spades, the predictions of their future accomplishments. And each would live lifestyles that disdained trappings, social distinction and material possessions.

It is unlikely, however, that any of them would have envisioned the directions that their careers would take. In the summers of 1939



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and 1940 they caroused, drank, listened to jazz, entertained girls, and wrote novels in Lax's brother-in-law's cottage outside of Olean, New York. After that period, their get-togethers became infrequent but they kept journals and sent each other hundreds of letters - rollicking, ruthlessly candid, eclectic in subject matter - using language so full of inside-argot as to be at times untranslatable.

I first met Rice in 1953, having just come back to New York from a year in Paris where I had worked as a contract writer for the Marshall Plan, and where my wife Millie and I had met Lax. Lax was working nominally for *New Story*, a small literary magazine edited by his friend Bob Burford, but mostly he was writing poetry. We had only recently read *The Seven Storey Mountain* so we were thrilled to get to know Lax.

"When you get back to New York, you must help Ed Rice get his new magazine, *Jubilee*, started," he said. And so I did, or tried to. Rice put me on his Advisory Board - other members were mostly liberal-minded nuns and priests - and he asked me to help him get grants. I had gotten a job as Executive Director of the American Rocket Society in the pre-Sputnik era, and was raising money for that fledgling enterprise. I didn't have much time for *Jubilee* but I made passes, largely unsuccessful, at foundations like the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation (never got past the receptionist on that one). However, my involvement enabled Millie and me to get to know the *Jubilee* team and be invited to their wonderful wine-and-cheese gatherings where we would mix with the staff and meet drop-ins like Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward, Ad Reinhardt, and once - I think - Jack Kerouac. I even wrote a few articles for the magazine myself - one on a subject which fascinated both Rice and Lax: the theological implications of the search for extraterrestrial life. (This latter particularly intrigued Lax, who would often meet me at international space congresses to indulge his own interest in space and in the Russian space scientists with whom he made some lasting friendships.)

*Jubilee* made its debut in May, 1953, and success was instant. While Rice was the driving force - founder, fund-raiser, publisher, editor, art director, writer, photographer - he probably would not have been successful with the magazine had it not been for the help and participation of Merton, from Gethsemani, and Lax, from wherever he was in the world. Rice concedes that one of the incentives for starting the magazine had been the phenomenal success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. That remarkable memoir convinced Rice that many of the faithful were trying to get beyond the Church's dogmatism to learn what being Catholic really ought to mean in the twentieth century. His instinct was on the nose.

Tens of thousands of Catholics, and many non-Catholics - circulation, including news-stand and back-of-the-Church sales, was 72,000 at peak - found that *Jubilee* provided much-needed nutrition during the pre-Vatican II period of meager diet on diocesan pap. There were *Commonweal* and *America*, but unlike those worthy publications, largely opinion journals, *Jubilee* had wonderful pictures, taken by top-notch photographers, marvelous art layouts, beautifully written stories about Catholics and non-Catholics living extraordinary lives in ordinary situations.

"The Church was dominated by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish pessimism in those days," Rice once told me. "I thought, this is not God. God is love. Priests were telling us that God punishes those he loves most, that women were handmaidens of the Lord. That was wrong. God is your friend. We tried to reflect that in the magazine."

The conviction was sound and readers were ecstatic. A Benedictine monk's comment on the first issue: "Keep up this pace and you'll rejuvenate the whole Catholic press." Issue after issue for 15 years - from 1953 to 1967 - featured outstanding writing on saints, laymen, history, social causes,

and offered exemplary pieces on enlightened Church liturgy, architecture and music. Such writers as Richard Gilman, Wilfrid Sheed and Ned O’Gorman, and photographers Jacques Lowe, Charles Harbutt and Frank Monaco started their careers on *Jubilee*. Merton and Lax provided important advice along the way, wrote articles themselves, and helped to get distinguished authors. Merton’s first piece, on Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, was in the magazine’s fourth issue, in August, 1953. It tipped his hand on the kind of message he thought twentieth-century Catholics ought to be getting by characterizing the twelfth-century Cistercian as “a great contemplative. And because he was a contemplative he never ceased fearing to be a mere man of action.”

It is amusing to read, from the editor’s page of the same issue, this comment by Rice dealing with rumors about Merton that abounded in those years - that Merton had left the Trappist monastery . . . become a Carthusian, a Jesuit, a Franciscan, that he had taken a wife and gone to Hollywood to live on his new-found wealth and direct the story of his life. Other reports claimed that he had flown to Rome to advise the Pope, he had broken away from the Trappists to start a new order. He was seen on the beach at Cannes and in the gambling casinos of Monte Carlo. He was reported dying of rare and mysterious ailments; remote cousins of friends of the rumor bearer, lying in the adjoining hospital bed, had indeed witnessed Merton’s last moments.

Merton pieces over the years included many that nudged Catholics towards social or political action. Others pushed for more aggressive attitudes by the Church in the direction of unity with other religions. Rice once told me, “I think Merton started a whole new movement and that he is still the most significant religious figure in the world today. He told the Church to bug off. He was thinking and writing about what was important.” Through Merton’s intercession there were contributions from many writers whose views of their faith were eclectic - Brother Antoninus (William Everson), Daniel Berrigan, Henri de Lubac, Ernesto Cardenal, Jean Daniélou, Dorothy Day, Dom Aelred Graham, John Howard Griffin, Jacques Maritain, Thich Nhat Hanh and John Wu.

Lax’s contributions were not as voluminous as Rice would have liked. He was banging around Europe most of the time, coming back to New York for brief periods, and eventually settling on various Greek islands to write his poetry. But his articles, and poems, were beautifully written and when he was in New York his presence was felt strongly by the other staff members, and by the volunteers. “He took care of our hearts and souls,” recalled one former staffer. Both Lax and Rice were excellent editors. “With them around you didn’t need Strunk and White,” remembered photographer Charles Harbutt. “Lax’s forty words and my photos of the Cristiani Family Circus made a fine article.”

*Jubilee* dealt often with Orthodox Christianity, with Merton himself a major contributor on that subject. In 1959 he wrote Rice, in the lingo he used only for his old Columbia friends:

Man I go to sharpen up this typewriter and write some time in a month profound article on the Russian crazies hurling themselves at the ikons and it will be the spirituality of the Eastern Church, I hope. Sobornost, startsi, yurodivetsvo, a little Mount Athos, liturgy, then I fold for the season.

*Jubilee* profiled poets, artists, educators, parish workers, people devoting their lives to the sick, poor, mentally disabled and downtrodden. The magazine dug hard into controversial subjects that were too hot for the hierarchy - marital relations, divorce and remarriage, birth control, Catholic politicians. Unfortunately, these pieces caused pain to some Church leaders, notably at the Archdiocese of New York in the tenure of Francis Cardinal Spellman, one of whose spokesmen told Rice that

“if the Church needed a picture magazine it would have one.” That opposition, and the failure over the years to gain support from enough advertising, or from affluent Catholics, caused *Jubilee* to go under, eventually, after having piled up numerous awards, and recognition from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other national media.

After *Jubilee*'s demise, in 1967, Rice traveled extensively, visiting Merton at Gethsemani, and once dropping in on Lax on the island of Kalymnos. But most of his travel was to African and Asian countries. He wrote many magazine articles, reports for the United Nations, and some twenty books, including a 1990 biography of Sir Richard Francis Burton, the nineteenth-century adventurer. The latter, based on Rice's tracking of Burton's itinerary in India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Uganda, Kenya and other countries, became a *New York Times* best-seller. The trip also almost cost him his life when he was threatened with disembowelment for taking a picture of a Muslim woman. In 1970 he wrote a somewhat controversial biography of Merton, titled *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*. It was criticized by some who felt the book was rushed to print too soon after the monk's death and seemed to leave the impression that Merton was headed for Buddhism. It was enthusiastically praised, though, by people who knew both Rice and Merton, and who felt that it provided the first deeply human portrait of the monk. It is fascinating that the Rice archive, at Georgetown University, holds a 1972 letter to his agent proposing a second Merton biography - “a kind of Zen Merton, which would put the last six weeks of his life in India and Thailand against the background of his very pronounced Buddhist ‘conversion’.” The project never went forward, but it surely would have shed interesting light on both Merton and Rice.

Rice also wrote about Sufis, Yogis and Swamis, Haight-Ashbury youth, cargo cults, children in India, cholera, leprosy and urban planning. *The Five Great Religions* (1973), is a classic primer for those interested in comparative accounts of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.

A master photographer, Rice's hundreds of black and white photos of Merton, Lax, and of the people he encountered in his travels, are of museum quality. He was also a talented painter. Some of his works, chiefly ikon-like figures and silhouettes of friends, family and people he met around the world, were the subject of a very successful one-man show at his home in Sagaponack, Long Island, a few years ago. His house, a former potato farmer's shack, had been moved from a farm several miles away to its current location in the midst of million-dollar mansions, to the chagrin of the wealthy neighbors.

There was sadness in Rice's last years. He had been divorced from his first wife, Margery Hawkinson, of New York, mother of his two sons, Edward III, now a talented print-maker in Santa Fe, and Christopher, an executive of a management firm based in Princeton. A second marriage, to Susanna Franklin, a lawyer who became his literary manager, was happy, but short-lived. She was killed in an auto accident in 1993. The loss of many of his Columbia friends, most recently Lax, saddened him greatly, and the progression of the debilitating Parkinson's disease was painful to watch. He had come back to the Church, however, after some seventeen years of alienation, and had the Eucharist brought to him regularly. His funeral mass ended, on his instructions, with a lusty singing by all attendees of “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In,” followed by a big party in the backyard of the potato shack.

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