

Rambling with the Early Merton

By **Monica Weis, SSJ**

One of the highlights of June 2002 was my trip to France with the Third Thomas Merton Pilgrimage, sponsored by Simon Fraser University. Scheduled biennially, this study tour enables participants to enjoy presentations by several Merton scholars and experience some of the delights of Prades (Merton's birthplace), St. Antonin (where Owen Merton built a house for 11-year-old Tom), and the lycée in Montauban (where Merton unhappily boarded for two years).¹



Prades Cathedral

In addition to the excitement of being in France and the collegiality of this year's participants (11 Canadians, 2 Britons, 6 Americans, 1 dual Canadian/Israeli citizen), I discovered more meaning to those early chapters of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and found my understanding of Merton's upbringing nuanced by walking the town streets and absorbing the landscape.



Prades Buildings

The most startling discovery was the light. Days were brilliant with clear blue skies and sun not only beating on the central Place, but also seeping between buildings and down tiny streets, creating a chiaroscuro world of looming shadows and glaring light. I no longer wondered why famous artists of the last two centuries gravitated to southern France to paint. Owen and Ruth Merton made an excellent choice by settling in Prades – a small village dominated by snow-capped Mt. Canigou to the south and the rushing Têt River to the north. Nature writer Barry Lopez believes that “human imagination is shaped by the architecture it encounters at an early age.” The cityscape, he writes, and the “sunlight everywhere [etch] lines to accentuate forms.”² Surely little Tom's awareness and sense of color were nurtured by this dramatic environment. Indeed, in *Tom's Book to Granny 1916*, the record his mother was creating for the New Zealand grandparents, Ruth Merton comments on Tom's delight in color and his application of that word to his father's



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paintings and equipment, and to the entire landscape.³

Another comment by Ruth Merton – that 8-month-old Tom liked to stand up in his pram to see the river as they crossed the bridge (*TB 3*) – had my detective antennae on high alert. Consulting a map of Prades, I noted only one bridge over the river, not far from the Mertons’ apartment on Rue 4 Septembre. Setting out one afternoon, I was determined to discover what might have intrigued a precocious infant beginning to respond to his surroundings. I heard the river before I saw it. Like all mountain streams in close proximity to their source, the Têt catapults down from the Pyrénées, rushing over stones and creating a symphony of white-water melodies. I can’t be certain that today’s road is the same height over the river as that walked by the Mertons in 1916, but it is high above the water, necessitating some stretching to see between the spindles of the bridge. For little Tom, the rushing river must have been like mythic sirens calling to him with secret messages, imprinting a love for water in its many forms and perhaps preparing for another celebration of water, the



Prades Bridge

“festival of rain” Merton loved to listen to outside his hermitage.⁴

A second discovery occurred in Montauban, a worn industrial city we briefly visited to see the lycée where Merton attended school for two years (ages 11-13) and where, in his autobiography, he laments his ill fortune at having to endure once again the sarcasm and pranks heaped upon the “new boy.” We were met at the lycée entrance – now the Collège Ingres, a co-ed high school for some 800 students – by the principal, Monsieur Croharé, and given a brief tour of the inner courtyards and the Protestant “temple,” now a computer center.⁵ M. Croharé had not heard of Thomas Merton and seemed a little puzzled that a busload of pilgrims from across the pond would visit his facility because of a student in the 1920s. Nevertheless, prompted by curiosity or French politeness, the principal had located among the school archives (which he described as “chaotic at best”)⁶ programs from the end-of-the-year Awards Ceremony for 1926-27 and 1927-28. Readers of Merton have known that he perfected his French in Montauban, but we experienced a dramatic moment as M. Croharé announced that in 1927 Merton won prizes for general academic honor in English, gymnastics (!), fencing (!!). In his second year, he achieved satisfactory accomplishment as well as merit in French, History and Geography, and Art.⁷ While I cannot take credit for this discovery, I admit to having felt a chill as M. Croharé handed to Donald Grayston, our fearless leader, a photocopy of the two programs. What a revelation and treasure to present to the Merton Archives at Bellarmine University.

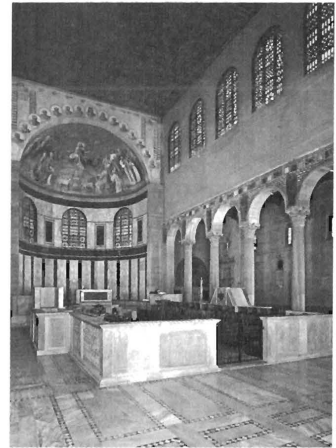
My third discovery occurred not in France, but in Rome where, alone, I made a personal pilgrimage to a few of Merton’s favorite churches. Here, captivated by their Byzantine mosaics, eighteen-year-old Tom relinquished his pursuit of classical Rome and began to learn something of the doctrines of Christianity (*SSM* 108 ff.). Having plotted a route I could reasonably accomplish on foot in a day, I headed for the Roman Forum and the churches of St. Maria Nova [*sic*] and Sts. Cosmas and Damian. Merton’s comments in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and current addresses in



Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian

Sabina to which Merton fled the morning after the emotionally-wrenching vision of his dead father (*SSM* 111-13).

By the time I had picked my way through sinuous streets and climbed the cobblestone approach to the Aventine Hill, the church was closed for the lunch hours. I toyed with giving up my quest. Later, fortified with food and rest, I climbed the steep hill a second time in the blazing sun and, after exploring the adjacent park of orange trees, entered the church. It was easy to replay the scene in my imagination: Merton, his “soul broken up with contrition,” walking “deliberately into the church with no other purpose than to kneel down and pray to God.” Although the altar rail no longer exists, here, with “all the belief” he had in him, Merton slowly recited the Our Father (*SSM* 113).



Church of Santa Sabina



Santa Sabina Mosaics

the telephone book provided my basic information. However, because of multiple temporary barricades protecting new archeological sites, I circled the Forum three times before gaining access to St. Maria Nova – now renamed St. Francesca Romana. Having found Sts. Cosmas and Damian tucked into a corner of the Fori Imperiali, I saw the startling blue mosaic of the Last Judgment above the main altar – Merton’s favorite. Then off to St. Maria in Cosmedin with its ancient mosaic above the vestment case in the sacristy – now turned into the gift shop – and the hot, uphill trek to Santa

Why Santa Sabina for this dramatic moment of grace, one in a series of conversions to Catholicism that led eventually to the Trappists? I can only speculate that the mosaics over the entrance doors depicting the Church of the Circumcised and the Church of the Gentiles signaled to Merton the possibility of welcome and inclusion. But perhaps it was the light from the clerestory that bathes the nave with a brightness greater than any church in Rome. Could this have been for Merton an echo of his childhood in France?

Stopping at the gift shop for the ritual postcard purchase, I noticed that the elderly Dominican friar spoke some English. Afraid I might be overstepping some boundary, I asked him if he knew Thomas Merton had come to his church? “No,” he said, “you mean the American monk?” “Yes, may I read a paragraph to you?”

well-tabbed copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and shared with this friar the emotionally charged moment of Merton's morning visit to Santa Sabina. The brother fingered my book and murmured, "No, we did not know this. It is not part of our story. But the painting he mentions by Sassoferato is there in the Blessed Sacrament chapel."⁸

These three discoveries about the early Merton touched me deeply, but also provide a broader context for understanding Merton, the monk and the writer. Geography is, indeed, a shaping force of his identity and reveals how becoming vulnerable to place helped Merton in later years make decisions to enter and remain at Gethsemani, to seek the greater solitude of the hermitage in the woods, and in 1966 to recommit himself to that solitude. I was reminded of Wordsworth's wisdom that "the child is father to the man."⁹

The Fourth Prades Pilgrimage will take place June 24 to July 3, 2004. For further information contact Donald Grayson (grayson@sfu.ca: phone: 602-291-5516; fax 604-291-4504) or Judith Hardcastle (judithhardcastle@telus.net).

1 For more details and a distillation of the spirit of Merton in France, see Ginny Bear's "Pilgrimage to Prades," a rich account of the Second Pilgrimage, in *The Merton Seasonal* 26.4 (Winter 2001) 3-7.

2 Barry Lopez, "A Literature of Place," *Portland* (Summer 1997) 23.

3 Ruth Merton, *Tom's Book to Granny 1916* (unpublished manuscript in the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY) 7; subsequent references will be cited as "TB" parenthetically in the text.

4 Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 9-23.

5 See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 48-53, 59-60 for Merton's account of his time in Montauban; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.

6 There may be a research opportunity here for some enterprising person, possibly a Shannon Fellowship – one week to sort through the school archives for additional photos or records of Merton's time at the lycée.

7 Meeting with M. Croharé, 17 May 2002, Montauban, France. The Awards program includes this information: Distribution des Prix 1926/27: Tableau D'Honneur; Anglais (Prix Special); Gymnastique (Cinquieme B et Sixieme B); Escrime (Mention); 1927/28: Tableau de Satisfaction; Langue Française (Mention H.R.); Histoire et Géographie (2nd); Dessin Artistique et Modelage (5th).

8 Visit to Santa Sabina in Rome, Italy, 27 May 2002.

9 William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."