

Remembering Naomi Burton Stone: A View from Manhattan

By Anne H. McCormick

In 1959 a diminutive woman – and yet in many ways a giant – arrived to be an addition to the editorial staff at Doubleday & Company, Inc. It was still then a privately owned publishing house, had a distinctive flavor and appeal, a coziness now long gone, its own personality shaped by the people and authors of the time and certainly small by comparison to the behemoth corporations today. Into this mix Naomi Burton Stone was welcomed by many editors who already knew her from her formidable career as a literary agent at the Curtis Brown Literary Agency. Those who had not yet had the good fortune to meet her did not have to wait long for she was an immediate presence, eager to be part of the team, and was from the start a Star. Her strengths were obvious to anyone watching – and of course everyone was. She was prepared to deal with authors as she had done at Curtis Brown where she arrived when she was 19 years old, youngest on the staff, to start at the bottom, pay her dues, and ultimately be highly regarded in the industry. She knew everybody! She was gracious, cheerful, resourceful, tenacious – a Wonder Woman.

I was a secretary in the office of a senior editor and early realized how valuable it was to listen to her opinions in editorial-meeting discussions of books presented for possible publication, to hear her input on the professional and personal background of many authors. It wasn't long before I felt the welcome friendship she extended to me, who was delighted to have a strong woman editor to mentor me and encouraging my own ideas of a personal publishing future.

She had converted to Roman Catholicism, and it was a basis for some of our ongoing bonding. She was more Catholic than the Catholics – and this became more evident when she wrote a memoir about her conversion. *More Than Sentinels* was handled in our editorial office. I could actually see Naomi sitting at her desk from my own. She was a constant presence in our office with an on-site opinion about the entire publication of her book. This had its rewards, but by no means always.

She handled many well-known authors, and was Thomas Merton's editor just as she had been his agent for years before her Doubleday era. Her early friendship with Merton began before he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, when he was still living in New York, writing many things, including his novel "The Labyrinth," which she never could place. After he entered the monastery she did not hear from him for several years. But when she did it was with a major endeavor – but just how major no one could have guessed. She submitted *The Seven Storey Mountain* to his Columbia University friend Robert Giroux, now a young editor at Harcourt, Brace, who took that manuscript and published it in 1948 – and was as amazed as anyone when sales soared the first year of publication. It immediately put Merton on the map, and in the minds and



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hearts of hundreds of thousands of people.

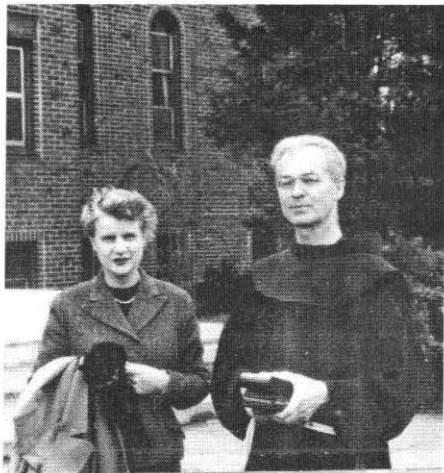
Her friendship with Merton was an interesting unfolding – rather like a big sister who told the kid what she thought, and she thought plenty about his complex personality, admitted to understanding him, but not always, for many years. By the 1960s he was more mature, very productive, still complex. She published his books, handled him as one of her stable of authors, did not offer favoritism. She was never afraid to tell him what she thought. I was not impacted by him at the time and I have often wondered why. It was to happen later.

Naomi's and my friendship continued. In the fall of 1963 my mother died suddenly. She was right there with her strength, and two weeks later when JFK was assassinated she led a group of us that awful afternoon to St. Vincent Ferrer to pray. A few days later she and her unique husband Ned Stone hosted my Dad and me at Thanksgiving Dinner in their beautiful town house in the East 70s – just the four of us. What generosity of spirit! We and the nation were all in continuing shock.

The Sixties moved on; I went to Maine a few times to visit with the Stones in their beautiful new home in York Harbor. I fell in love with the editor-in-chief: Ken McCormick. It was Naomi who invited me to lunch one day in the late fall of 1968 to warn me that I was going to be let go that afternoon because of my upcoming December marriage! Two McCormicks were going to be one too many! No question of which one of us was going. And then on December 10 Tom Merton was dead. It all seemed so impossible.

I left Doubleday to move to Alfred A. Knopf as a McCormick; Naomi resigned a bit later to move to the now defunct McCall's publishing house, soon retiring altogether to Maine. And then in 1975 she called me to say that the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust (she being one of the three) were looking for a point person in New York to handle correspondence on behalf of the Trust and to respond to routine queries. She thought I could be the perfect person. I declined, flattered nonetheless – I had, after all, a high-powered husband, a five-year-old son, and a big job at Knopf. I should have known better. Naomi did not easily take no for an answer, replying that she felt sure God wanted me to accept this position, and with that I caved in. It was instant overwhelm, and for years I struggled with the massive extra paperwork, but grateful to have the friendship and encouragement of Naomi and the other two Trustees, Tommie O'Callaghan and James Laughlin. It was the beginning too of reading Merton seriously, and acknowledging that Naomi was probably right about God's plan.

In 1997, following James Laughlin's death, I was invited to be a Trustee. Naomi had resigned her position some years previously and it was filled by Robert Giroux. It was a humbling honor for me, one I was delighted to accept. I have never been sure whether Naomi understood this event had happened, because by that time age had overtaken her mental processes, but I always felt hopeful she somehow knew that the path she had opened for me twenty-two years earlier had culminated in my new role. The result of those years of working with the Trust has led to valuable friendships with Merton-related people around the world. Each person has had a slot, a different talent, a reason for the pursuit of Merton studies. Some devote nearly a lifetime to reading and analyzing Thomas Merton, some work full-time to make sure his work is available, some are marginally studying his legacy. But it is a connected "family" and I think no one would have understood it better than Naomi Burton Stone.



Naomi Burton Stone and Fr. Irenaeus Herscher, OFM
St. Bonaventure University, June 1956

In mid-October, 2004, I had a brief visit to the Friedsam Library at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, NY, where she had donated her Merton papers. I felt great nostalgia in looking at the copies of her long Doubleday letters to Thomas Merton at least forty years earlier. It is a valuable collection and in a safe space. Less than a month later, on November 16, 2004, she died in New Hampshire at the age of 93. I am forever grateful for our friendship and her impact on a young woman's life years ago. It was important to me then, and of course reflecting back now it is clear that it remains so. God's plan indeed.