



## A Precis of the life of Ruth Calvert Jenkins ©

*William J. Meegan*

**Background:** The writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton are voluminous and wide ranging: monastic history, East-West spirituality, prayer, non-violence, nuclear arms race, and civil rights to name just a few. His more than 60 books and hundreds of articles are archived in The Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky (some available online). The International Thomas Merton Society has chapters worldwide.



*Research for a biography of John Paul Merton inevitably compelled me to know more about his mother, Ruth Merton (nee Jenkins). Ruth has been known primarily through the description of her in the autobiography of her son Thomas Merton, OCSO, The Seven Storey Mountain. Digging deeper into the Bradford Annals and in a biography of her*

*husband, Owen Merton, led to a more realistic and accurate account of Ruth. It is this narrative I hope to portray in the following essay.*

Monsieur Jean Libet could not have known the influence he was having on his students as he taught French at Bradford Academy during the first decade of the 1900s. Nor could Professor Edmund von Mach, PhD know how his history of art lectures would shape the life of one of his students.<sup>1</sup> It is to these faculty members Ruth Calvert Jenkins would likely trace the origins of her being a Francophile who immersed her life in the arts.

Ruth Calvert Jenkins (1887-1931) was born to Samuel Adams Jenkins (1862-1936) and Martha Caroline Jenkins (nee Baldwin-1862-1937) in Zanesville, Ohio on 12 June 1887. The Jenkins were among the earliest Welsh settlers of Bristol, Morgan County, Ohio, and can trace their family tree to the Jenkins who left Llanbadarn

Fawr, Cardiganshire, Wales, in 1801 to come to America. Ruth's parents owned Jenkins Bazaar, a store which sold sundries and eventually became a bookstore specializing in opera librettos. By the time she was a teenager the family had moved to New York City and her father was Publicity Manager at Grossett and Dunlap Publishing Company. The Jenkins lived in the affluent—at that time—neighborhood of Harlem at 282 Manhattan Avenue at the corner of W. 112th Street—overlooking the Cathedral of St John the Divine. Ruth first attended St. Agnes School and then the Wadleigh High School for Girls on Manhattan's upper west side. Wadleigh was the first high school for girls devoted to providing what was then referred to as a 'higher education'. The school is today a school for the Visual and Performing Arts.

Ruth enrolled in the General Course at Bradford Academy in 1906. She stood at 5 foot 3 inches, with the red hair and the fair complexion of her Welsh heritage. From the outset she immersed herself in school activities. She was in the cast of a production of Sheridan's *The Rivals*; she gracefully danced nightly in the parlor to the delight of the students; and she likely was an enthusiastic participant in the tradition of 'singing in the stairs'—students singing to each other from the west stairway above the first floor and from the opposite stairway. She was Class Vice President for one term, and one of the editors of the academy magazine in 1909. Ruth was most known for her writing; with the name 'sniknej htur' (backward spelling of her name), she wrote in the school newspaper: "Of all the arts in which the wise excel, Nature's chief masterpiece is writing well."

Both her humor and imagination were displayed in an unconventional prose article titled 'My Home Town' describing the island of Manhattan with huge underground dragons who daily swallowed and disgorged the people of the island. At the lower end of the island was a stately lady who watched over the bears coming out of their caverns to

*Continued on next page*

roar like bulls. In the north of the island thousands of bees were employed in making honey for the bears that live in the caves. Ruth also penned a prize winning essay titled 'William Shakespeare' which cleverly described a recently discovered manuscript of the life of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) written by a friend who settled in New England in the mid-1700s.



*Image 2*  
*Ruth Jenkins 1909*

The 1909 Annals graduation photograph of Ruth had as the accompanying quotation chosen to typify her:

'And still the wonder grew, that one small head could carry all she knew'. Her peers named her the 'Cleverest' and the 'Most Artistic' of the class.

But it was also Ruth whom they saw as having the 'Keenest Sense of Humour.' Her graduation Annals included her humorous poem: "The class of '09/ Sat in a line, /Awaiting their Christmas pie. / They put in their thumb, / And pulled out a plum, / Saying, "See what a privilege have I!"<sup>2</sup>

For the 1910 Annals she described her activities in the year following graduation: "All my time this year is spent in trying to practice my Bradford Sociology upon the maid and tradespeople; Psychology and Civil Government upon the family and the dog; Ethics and Bible upon the world in general; and as a solace for my failures to find consolation in a bit of Browning and the application of Dr. von Mach's principles to the cathedral of St. John which we see from our windows."<sup>3</sup>

In the summer of 1910 the Jenkins family went on holiday to Europe and Ruth remained in Paris, France. She studied both craft design and painting in order to develop her talents as an interior designer. 'There is no more fascinating subject in the world than the influence of surroundings on human character. And to study character with a view to making its surroundings what they should be by means of certain decoration in houses – that is what I want to try to do.'<sup>4</sup>

First she studied at the Ecoles des Arts Decoratifs where craft design was being taught. Recognizing that to express her design of a room in a drawing it was necessary to know more about drawing, painting, the materials with which she would be working, and the psychological effects of color and form, Ruth left the Ecoles des Arts Decoratifs

and became a student in the nearby painting studio of Percyval Tudor-Hart, a Canadian artist and teacher.



It was in Tudor-Hart's studio that Ruth met a New Zealander—Owen Merton. Owen left his home in Christchurch, New Zealand at 17 years old, first to study painting in London and then in Paris. Tudor-Hart identified Owen as a talented artist and had him help with running the details of his studio. Ruth and Owen's courtship was idyllic. They enjoyed the hiking, theaters, music halls, and museums during their painting trips in France to Chantilly, Fontainebleau, and the Provence region as well as England and Italy. Owen finally persuaded Ruth to marry him and they were engaged in the summer of 1912.

Ruth's family was well off; Owen was from modest means. Their love for each other and interest in fostering Owen's artistic career led Ruth to defer her own talent as a writer and interior decorator in favor of Owen's prospects as a painter.



*Copy of photo of Ruth and Owen in front of French bakery. Circa 1913*

Ruth wanted to allow Owen to be free to paint by managing all the details of their daily life. The couple adopted a life of simplicity and did not fear the poverty of an artist's life but they hoped it would not spoil their life together. To understand Ruth's change of lifestyle from an upper middle class background to her choice of simplicity one needs only to look at her mother's influence. Martha Jenkins' religious heritage for many generations was in Quakerism. Ruth attended the Flushing Quaker Meeting House and incorporated the values of silence, introspection, non-violence, and simplicity into her life.

Ruth married Owen Heathcote Grierson Merton on 07 April 1914 in a Church of England ceremony in St. Anne Church, Soho, Westminster, London, England. In marriage Ruth became a British citizen. Following their marriage they lived in the Provence region of France

in the small town of Prades. Owen planned on selling his paintings to the tourists who came to the area for the mountaineering and hiking. Both Ruth and Owen acquired a basic closeness to nature, the land, and humble enjoyments that required neither money nor status. Ruth adopted the dress of the local inhabitants, Owen gardened barefoot, as did the locals, and they spoke French at home. Owen made furniture for the rooms of their home, and Ruth did the best she could decorating the home on a limited budget. Owen remained hopeful that one day, he could buy land.<sup>5</sup>

Ruth and Owen's first son, Thomas, was born 31 January, 1915. Ruth kept a detailed journal of each of Tom's developmental steps in order to let Tom's New Zealand grandparents know of his growth. The journal was edited by Sheila Milton and published as Tom's Book.<sup>6</sup>

Three months after their marriage WW1 had begun in July 1914. With the battle lines 600 miles northeast of Prades the family was in no physical danger; the threat was loss of income due to the decline of tourism brought on by the war. Owen lost his opportunity to sell his paintings. Lacking any other options Ruth and Owen accepted an offer from Ruth's parents to live with them in Douglaston, New York City.

Ruth and Owen left France with heavy hearts on 05 August 1916, but they never gave up hope of returning. Traveling in a first-class cabin with British passports, Owen, Ruth, and Tom left Bordeaux, France, on the liner SS La Touraine. German submarines regularly patrolled the North Atlantic, so the danger was real. These dangers of the voyage became all too clear to them as soon as they boarded and saw the ship had been outfitted with guns on the decks for the trip across the North Atlantic. They arrived at the port of New York City on 15 August 1916 where Ruth's parents, Sam and Mattie Jenkins, along with Ruth's brother, Harold, met their son-in-law Owen and grandson Tom at the dock for the first time. Owen not only greeted his well-to-do in-laws, he greeted a New York City skyline, the likes of which he had never seen. Both represented challenges to which he failed to adapt.

Ruth and Owen lived for a time with her parents in Douglaston, Queens, in a home with a maid, a housekeeper, and a cook; but, their idealism, preference for simplicity, and sense of independence led them to refuse any financial help from the Jenkins and the couple soon rented a small four room house nearby in Flushing. Ruth began to decorate it as best she could on a limited budget and began to write articles about interior design and living simply in a small house.

The surroundings of a home were fascinating to Ruth in as much as they influenced or reflected a person's character. In the interest of simplicity she preferred rooms furnished with only the necessities. She was absorbed in creating spaces that were functional and fit the needs of the people who lived in them. She objected to single purpose rooms like dining rooms. She argued for multiple uses for each space—and insisted on a special space she called the 'other room' in which one could meditate, think, and be quiet.<sup>7</sup> Kitchens for her were not merely places where meals were prepared and eaten but the space in which the values of a family were lived out.<sup>8</sup>



*Copy of photo of Ruth holding John Paul with Tom in front, 1919*

John Paul Merton, their second son, was born on 02 November 1918 in Flushing, Queens. These were difficult economic times for the family. Owen's paintings were not well received in New York and few sold. In order to support his family, a task at which he was never successful, Owen turned to landscape gardening and

played the piano at a movie theater and the organ for the Zion Episcopal Church in Douglaston. The lack of finances led the couple into a poverty which Ruth could never have anticipated. Despite not being able to afford the medicine she needed, she only broke the agreement she and Owen made not to seek financial help from her parents to get medicine for Tom.

Ruth was diagnosed with stomach cancer in October 1920 and died in Bellevue Hospital on October 3, 1921, at 34 years of age. Thomas was six and a half years old and John Paul was not yet three years old. At her request she was cremated at the Fresh Pond Crematory and Columbarium in Middle Village, Queens, New York City. Whether or not our Ruth knew the story of her biblical namesake Ruth she did know the motto of her alma mater —Surgo ut Prosum—I rise that I might serve. Just as the biblical Ruth left ties to her family and homeland, our Ruth left ties to her own family and career to chart a course of service to her husband and children. Her life personified both the biblical Ruth and the school motto of her alma mater.



After Ruth's death Owen Merton (1887-1931) left John Paul to be raised by Ruth's parents and took Thomas with him as he continued to paint in Bermuda and Europe. He died of a brain tumor in 1931 at Middlesex Hospital, London, England.

Thomas (1915-1968) grew to become the internationally famous Trappist monk, Fr. Louis Merton, OCSO, whose autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was the first of his more than 60 books and articles published while he was a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He died when he was electrocuted as he turned on a fan after a shower while in Thailand at a conference where he was speaking on the history of monasticism.

Following an unsuccessful attempt to complete a degree at Cornell University John Paul (1918-1943) enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force prior to America getting into WWII. Sgt. John Paul Merton, RCAF, Air Observer and Bomb Aimer, died 17 April 1943 in the crash of his Wellington bomber over the English Channel. His last efforts, which may have cost him his life, were a heroic attempt to save his pilot.

#### NOTES

1. For a description of Bradford Academy faculty and school at the time Ruth attended see

Pond, Sarah Jean. *Bradford: A New England Academy*. Bradford Academy Alumni Association, Bradford, Massachusetts, 1930. Pp.274-307

2. Annual Catalogue of Bradford Academy, 1908-1909. Received from the Bradford Academy Alumni Association.

3. Copy of pages from Annual Catalogue of Bradford Academy, 1909-1910. Received from the Bradford Academy Alumni Association.

4. Letter of Ruth Jenkins to Percyval Tudor-Hart, 20 December 1911 (Bassett Collection). Quoted in Collins, Roger. *A Sense of Construction: The Life and Work of Owen Merton*. Printed October 2006. Unpublished. Source: The Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY. Chap 8-Page 12

5. For facts of Ruth's courtship, marriage, and life in Prades I am indebted to the New Zealand Art Professor Roger Collins' book: *A Sense of Construction: The Life and Work of Owen Merton*. Printed October 2006. Unpublished. Source: The Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

6. Milton, Sheila. Editor, *Tom's Book: To Granny with Tom's Best Love-1916*, Kentucky: Larkspur Press, 2005.

7. Merton, Ruth. "The Tiny House." Introduced by Sheila M. Milton. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.1 (Spring 2004): 9-17. Available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/29/29-1Merton.pdf>

Also Merton, Ruth. *The Tiny House*. *American Cookery*, Vol. 26, Oct. 1921, No.3

8. Merton, Ruth. *Come Into the Kitchen*. *American Cookery*, Vol. 26, Feb 1922, No. 7

Image 1 Copy of photo of Ruth Calvert Jenkins received from The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, used with permission.

Image 2 Copy of photo of Ruth in 1909 from Bradford Annals received from Bradford Academy Alumni Association.

Image 3 Copy of Ruth and Owen in front of French bakery received from The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, used with permission.

Image 4 Copy of Ruth holding John Paul with Tom in front received from The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, used with permission.

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### *Transcripts*

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