

# THE MERTON COLLECTION AT BOSTON COLLEGE

—by **M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.**

There are presently three significant Merton Collections readily available to scholars. The most extensive and best known is that housed at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky. Merton was active in its establishment and prepared a word for its inauguration (actually delivered by his friend, Fr. Dan Walsh).

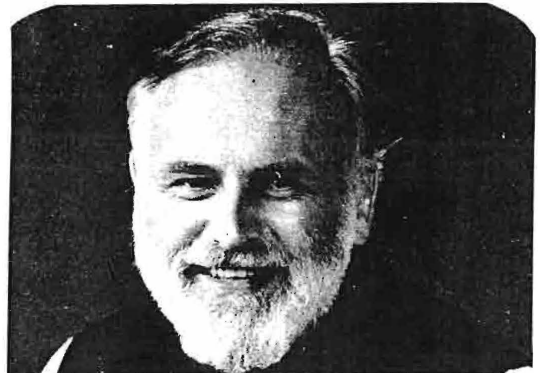
The other two collections also arise out of the generosity and zeal of Father Louis himself in response to the zeal of others.

Sister Therese Lentfoehr volunteered her services to Father as a typist and was steadfast in this service through more than a dozen years. She collected carbons of her work and obtained many other pieces from Merton. In 1964 when plans were first being initiated for the Merton Collection at Bellarmine, Merton reassured her: "You have things there which I have forgotten or never heard of and there is no question that you are the one with the real collection."<sup>1</sup> There was no doubt interest in bringing Sister's collection to Bellarmine. Merton sought diplomatically to steer a course among his friends. He affirmed indifference as to where Sister's collection went; she was to "feel perfectly free and unpressured." Later in the year he writes rather defensively about his giving his Pasternak letters to the University of Kentucky and again assures Sister: "You still have the best collection."<sup>2</sup>

In the end Sister Therese's collection went to the campus of Merton's Alma Mater, Columbia University, after a Merton Collection was inaugurated there on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his death: This collection, enhanced by materials sent by Carolyn Hammer after her husband Victor's death and some purchases, is housed in a rectory behind the Grotto Church adjacent to the campus and cared for by the Catholic chaplaincy. Only very gradually is it being catalogued.

The third collection is the smallest of the three and the oldest. It arose out of a friendship that predated *The Seven Storey Mountain*. A Jesuit scholastic poet wrote appreciatively to a Trappist scholastic poet and a friendship that had to depend completely on the pen began. In 1947 Francis Sweeney, S.J., published a poem in *Commonweal* entitled "Lancelot" and dedicated it to Thomas Merton.<sup>3</sup> After the sensational publication of the autobiography, Sweeney, who still teaches poetry at Boston College, was completing his theological studies at Weston College in Weston, Massachusetts. He asked Merton for the manuscript of *Seven Storey Mountain*, if Merton had no other recipient in

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mind. Sweeney specified that eventually he would turn over the manuscript to the Special Collections Division of the Boston College library, where it would become the foundation of a Merton Collection. This opened the way for an ongoing correspondence between Merton and successive librarians at Boston College.

Terence Connolly, S.J., Boston College's Director of Libraries at that time, decided to make the manuscript the centerpiece of a special exhibition. He sent all the Merton books he had to Gethsemani for the author's autograph and begged for more items for his collection.<sup>4</sup> For the exhibit he was able to borrow Merton's own copy of Gilson's *Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*<sup>5</sup> as well as one of his volumes of Blake. The exhibit was opened with a very successful lecture in the auditorium of Bapst Library on the College campus given by the same man who would, almost twenty years later, deliver Merton's words at the opening of the Bellarmine Collection, at that time Professor Dan Walsh of Columbia.<sup>6</sup> So we see an interesting interweaving of the history of the three collections.

Through the years Fr. Terence Connolly and his successor, Fr. Brendan Connolly, kept in correspondence with Father Louis. Boston College was a treasure-trove for the enclosed monk. It is interesting to read through the collection of letters Fr. Merton addressed to these two librarians, their assistants, and also to the assistant to the librarian of Saint John's Seminary (which is across the street from Boston College), Mary Stack McNiff, whose letters are also in this Boston College collection. We can follow Merton through his various enthusiasms. Besides interest in monastic history and spirituality which included an extensive study of the Irish monastic rules, the Order of Grandmont and the Carthusians, we find him studying Franciscan spirituality, Dominican spirituality, social psychology, and particular persons like Piaget and Faulkner.

The Fathers Connolly readily acceded to his many requests which included long searches. In their turn they sent Merton books for autograph and welcomed an endless flow of manuscripts and mimeographs, galley and carbons of letters. All of this was accompanied by a warm and interesting correspondence.

As I have said, the centerpiece of this relatively small collection is the manuscript of Merton's autobiography. It is largely a carbon copy but there are three sections where typed pages have been inserted. One of them is the conclusion of the volume (pages 676 to 681 in the manuscript) where we find editorial changes in Merton's own hand. These pages like the rest of the manuscript are also edited by some unidentified hand. In his letters Merton expressed concern that the unpublished sections would not be copied or displayed. Later Sister Therese made a careful study of the Boston manuscript in comparison with her own copy and with Merton's permission published some of the sections left out of the published volume.<sup>7</sup>

Besides this manuscript there are carbons of the manuscripts for *Seasons of Celebration* and *Cables to the Ace*. There are page proofs for *Seven Storey Mountain* and *Waters of Siloe*. And there are galley of *Redeeming the Time*, *Seeds of Destruction* and *The Sign of Jonas*. Most of these have some corrections and marginal notes from the pen of Fr. Louis.

As I mentioned Terence Connolly made a facsimile of Merton's Gilson. Merton's own copy of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (3rd ed., 1932) remained in the Boston collections.

There are some rare editions, like the Unicorn Press edition of *The Jaguar and the Moon*.

Among the mimeographed material there is quite a collection of notes from courses given to the scholastics, novices, and priests of Gethsemani, as well as retreat notes. There are many mimeographed articles and a few carbons. Most of these items have a note or at least a signature of Merton's.

There are many copies of published articles and poems in English and in other languages, some from periodicals of rare vintage.<sup>8</sup> There are many articles and reviews about Merton and his work, some from magazines of great prominence like *Time* and others virtually unknown.

The memorabilia include unusual photos of Merton, some of his sketches and Chinese characters, prayer cards and book marks, recordings of his poetry, and old book jackets.

Most interesting for me, though, were the letters. Here is where the warmth and personal convictions of Father Louis come forth most candidly. The collection of these at Boston College is not extensive. Besides the correspondence with the librarians already mentioned, there is an exchange (which became a threeway triangle when Dom James Fox, Merton's abbot, got into it) with Dorothy Wayman, the circular letters Merton sent to his friends in the last years of his life, and carbon copies of about ten other letters which Merton had sent to Father Brendan Connolly.

On the whole it is an interesting and valuable collection which takes more than a few days to absorb.<sup>9</sup> It is reasonably well catalogued and presently housed in a building opposite Saint Ignatius Church on the edge of the College campus. It will soon be returned to a newly renovated Baptist Library on the other side of campus. The staff in Special Collections is most generous and gracious in their assistance and service.

We can hope that in the not too distant future there will be a union catalogue for these three collections as well as some of the lesser or more inaccessible collections, such as that of Gethsemani Abbey and the collection at Saint Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, 1 April 1964.
2. Letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, 17 September 1964.
3. This poem has been included in Deba Prasad Patnaik's *A Merton Concelebration: Tributes from Friends of the Poet-Monk* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press 1981): pp. 25-26.
4. Terence Connolly was already known at least by name to Merton, as Merton acknowledges in one of his early letters to the librarian. Connolly had translated Saint Bernard's treatise *On the Love of God*, a translation which Merton had used.
5. Father Connolly copied into another copy of Gilson all of Merton's underlinings and marginalia before returning the volume and this copy is in the collection at Boston College. Merton's own copy is now in the Columbia collection.
6. The opening and lecture were on February 20, 1949. Professor Walsh spoke on "The Impact of Catholic Thought on Modern Life and Letters." Some 1,200 persons attended. Walsh received a \$200 stipend, as did Merton, and the Collection netted \$1,000. Materials for the exhibit were obtained from Columbia University.
7. "First Christmas at Gethsemani," *Catholic World* 170 (December 1949): no. 1017, pp. 166-173, "I will be Your Monk," *Catholic World* 171 (May 1950): no. 1022, pp. 86-93; "Todo y Nada: Writing and Contemplation," *Renascence* 2 (Spring 1950): no. 2, pp. 87-101; "Thomas Merton on Renunciation," *Catholic World* 171 (September 1950): no. 1026, pp. 420-429.
8. E.G., *Agora, Approach, Contacts, Good Works, Journal for the Protection of All Beings, Staff Log, Magnificat, Mele, R. M. Bucke Memorial Society Newsletter, Tomorrow, Venerable Mother Coudere Bulletin, Sur*.
9. More will be added to it from Father Sweeney's personal collection which includes, besides the personal letters he received from Merton, poems, reviews and newspaper clippings collected by Fr. Arthur MacGillivray, S.J. Father Sweeney has always been generous in sharing his collection with interested scholars.
10. This collection has the manuscript of the last book Merton prepared for publication, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, with many notes by the author, and an extensive collection of his mimeographs and published books and articles, some rare editions (such as the Pasternak/Merton letters) and some letters, photographs and other memorabilia.