

“A GREAT SOUL”:

OWEN MERTON

May 14, 1887 - January 18, 1931

—By Robert E. Daggy

Thomas Merton spoke well, or rather wrote well, of his father, Owen Heathcote Grierson Merton, in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in his own letters, in an introduction to a letter of his father's which he published in *Good Work* in 1967 and which reaffirmed his own sense of his father's devotion to “good work.” Merton described his father in glowing terms in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: “It was a great soul, large, full of natural charity. He was a man of exceptional intellectual honesty and sincerity and purity of understanding” (p. 83). Or again speaking of his father's death: “Here was a man with a wonderful mind and a great talent and a great heart: and what was more, he was the man who had brought me into the world, and had nourished me and cared for me and had shaped my soul and to whom I was bound by every possible kind of bond of affection and attachment and admiration and reverence: killed by a growth on his brain” (p. 84). Those who have known Owen Merton only from his son's writings have received, it would appear, a one-sided view of the man. Which is not to say that Thomas Merton's descriptions were untrue, overblown or distorted (he undoubtedly did *perceive* his father to be what he said he was) but rather to say that Owen Merton, as observers would later point out about his son, was a man of contradictions, a person full of ambivalences and conflicting desires.

In the information in the letters and other materials which have surfaced in the last few years one incontrovertible fact comes through clearly: Owen Merton wanted to be a painter. He apparently defied (and probably disappointed) his parents who would have preferred a “safer” career in business and worried his mother, still in New Zealand, with what she feared was a Bohemian existence among “artistic types” in Europe. His letters indicate that he struggled with his “vocation” of painting, much as his son was later to reach levels of anguish over his vocation of writing. And like his son he worked at his vocation, compulsively at times, yet deprecated his efforts — both wanting and shunning success. He wrote effusive love letters to Ruth Jenkins (who became his wife) and to novelist Evelyn Scott (whom he did not marry), stating to both women that he wanted to “serve” them (he even allowed Scott who had a penchant for unflattering nicknames to dub him “Mutt” and signed himself as such in his letters to her), but he seems to have been unable to follow through on this romantic servitude and both women found his behavior, at times, immature and trying and his ability as a provider woeful. He married and had a family yet seems to have been incapable of taking responsibility, especially if he had to “work” to do so. He did sell some paintings and exhibited in important shows, but consistently remained in financial difficulty, at times virtually penniless. He wanted independence, particularly the chance and right to paint, yet remained dependent on the kindness and largesse of others — his parents, his in-laws, his teacher, his friends — for necessities. His letters are



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ebullient and charming and ingenuous yet he always seems to be apologizing to someone for something.