

ACCURACY IN MERTON: A Plan for Getting the Facts Right

—By Edward Rice

There is a project waiting for a graduate student somewhere (or a group of students), or even a professed academic or a journalist — to make a full and accurate list of Merton “facts,” a kind of “authentic Merton,” to get down on paper or in a computer the correct versions of names, dates, friends, relatives and associates, incidents, publications and so on, in order to end the proliferation of misinformation that is now swamping us. Perhaps it is not important that one writer says Merton entered Gethsemani as a postulant on Pearl Harbor day, another on December 10th, and another on Saint Lucy’s Day, that in 1943 the painter Ad Reinhardt tried to “talk Thomas Merton out of becoming a Trappist,” and that, to quote Monica Furlong, “according to Edward Rice, Merton had . . . been corresponding for some years with Patanjali, the Hindu writer.” I need not try to set the dates of entry into the monastery aright; by 1943 Merton was well established in Gethsemani, and as for Patanjali, there were two, one roughly 400 B.C. and the other 200 B.C., and if Merton corresponded with either, I would like to take credit for the information but I can’t. It was Brahmachari, the young Indian student who hung around the Columbia campus who was Merton’s correspondent (and Brahmachari was not a writer, either). The reviews of Michael Mott’s “Merton” in the *Seasonal* of Winter, 1985, almost all referred to errors in the book. The tragedy is that such errors will proliferate. I have seen Reinhardt’s misstatement (apparently he himself was the source) published here in an art catalog in 1966 and republished last year in Germany, and now the German text has been translated into English with the same error of date repeated; it may also have appeared in publications that escaped my attention. One can only sorrow over the students, the academics, journalists and editors who draw upon the major—and many of the minor—works for information and checking, only to repeat avoidable mistakes. Larry Levinger in the *New Age Journal* (December, 1983) says “at 53 Merton began to travel extensively in the East, visiting Catholic communities in Indonesia and Hong Kong [did he?]. . . and hermits, Buddhists, Taoists in Japan, Burma, Nepal and Ceylon.” As I read *The Asian Journal* only Ceylon is correct. Monica Furlong contains innumerable errors — “Seymour and his wife Nancy” is typical. That bit of information must have been startling to both Helen, to whom he was then married, and to Bob Gibney, who did indeed marry Nancy Flagg. Unfortunately, due to the problems of publishing today — the high cost of setting and resetting type and of making new plates — such errors are not likely to be corrected (and are they worth fixing?). As one of the offenders and offended against, I can speak out of personal experience. Some mistakes an author makes are not due to simple boneheadedness. Material that seemed established as correct, say in 1969 when I wrote *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, is now said to be wrong — e.g. of the deleted pages from *The Seven Storey Mountain* I wrote, “As far as I have been able to determine, there is not even a copy of the bowdlerized material.” (I should have said, “So far as . . . ;” sloppy English, however, is endemic to the Merton Industry, but that is another issue.) My information about the excisions came from an editor at Harcourt Brace who had worked on the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. However, “Rice believes,” wrote Gregory Ryan in the *Seasonal* of Autumn, 1985, “that THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN was ‘castrated’ by mean-spirited censors.” It was so treated—I think “castrated” an appropriate word for the excision of apparently non-explicit sexual passages that might enlighten our understanding of a young man’s guilt and angst during a difficult period in life. But I did not use the phrase “mean-spirited,” and I would forever doubt that the Trappist censors were such. A reader who sees the review and not the original will gain an erroneous impression. The deleted material—to mention briefly a topic not strictly within the goals of this proposal—its existence or non-existence, its content and the reasons offered for its removal (even by Merton, who would have been extremely charitable over such an issue), is something that the scholars might profitably discuss in the *Seasonal* and elsewhere.

However, there are in fact simple but actual errors in *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* along with some differences in interpretation. I placed Oakham in Scotland on the basis of information that I should have checked, and there are other similar mistakes. Sometimes an author’s eye fails and his mind wanders. In a review of Mott in the *Seasonal* I referred to Merton’s phrase “the clear inebriation of mysticism,” but changed “clear” to calm. The error was corrected in future references but it should not have been made even once. Then there were a couple of jokes in *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (the book was, after all, an “entertainment”) that got taken literally; one cannot help how the flat-footed read certain things, and to explain odd examples of humor here would take up too much valuable space.

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Aside from the widespread “factual” errors there is another kind, perhaps more serious, those that are made deliberately. The “documentary” done for PBS contains several mistakes inserted—so I have been told by members of the production staff—for “dramatic effect.” Merton did not “frequent speakeasies,” which had disappeared before he arrived at Columbia—prohibition had ended—nor did he “affect” an English accent, having acquired one naturally as the result of his years in England. Minor distortions, perhaps, but think of the audiences that will see the film, with all the weight of non-commercial TV behind it, that will accept these falsifications as the truth. The same applies to the Paulist docudrama, where a distortion is made, again apparently for dramatic effect, concerning Merton’s decision to leave or not to leave Gethsemani, with the focus on a purely imaginary letter of resignation. And is it important that the background music in the Tibetan and Singhalese sequences of the PBS film is totally incorrect, “Asian” music being all the same in the minds of westerners, as if one could put Blue Grass over scenes of Lourdes, or Shostakovitch over Our Lady of Cobre.

The difficulty with TV is its power and range. Twenty years ago a program I wrote for the National Council of Catholic Men about Merton experienced a disturbing metamorphosis. Half of the script, about eleven pages out of twenty-two, was replaced with a totally erroneous and incorrect section inserted by the producer. I withdrew my name from the script but it was produced and aired anyway. Merton, who had been hesitant from the beginning, was upset over the changes, though he wrote me that this was the kind of treatment one had to expect from the TV crowd. Allied to such changes is the plainly outrageously false information that gets manufactured. On two occasions (at least), in an article in a university magazine and in a popular biography of Merton, the respective authors quoted me in totally fictitious statements. The words were wrong and out of character, but the excuse was, “Well, you might have said it, that’s the way you talk.” But the point is, I had not made the statements (they were idiotic also). After much ill-will on each side, the offending material was removed. But does anyone, author, editor or producer, have the right to falsify for dramatic purposes?

One of the problems in writing about Merton is that we are dealing with one of the more important figures of our century. Why not be accurate, even in petty details? If we make a mistake in an article about Robert Frost (not to denigrate a great poet), little harm is done. I also suspect that the Frost Industry, as contrasted to the Merton Industry, is composed of more reliable, serious people. It moves at a slower pace, perhaps almost glacial, and no one is likely to get the major and minor facts wrong though interpretations will vary. But with Merton there is a rush to get into print, in books, articles, critiques, Master’s theses—anything to find something to publish rather than perish. In the Industry we get speed when we should be given thoughtful reflection.

To return to my opening statement: I am suggesting that someone, or a group, get down on paper or electronically, a file of the facts about Merton, with perhaps some comments about the vague areas (like the fate of the full MS of the SSM, and whether or not he intended to leave Gethsemani and reside somewhere else—truly an explosive matter—or the mystery and the various explanations surrounding his death), so that future authors, students, academics, journalists as well as the general public can check against a master source. The work can be issued in an inexpensive form, as a book, or on tape or computer disc, easily available at the lowest possible cost. A general appeal could be made to the Industry for suggestions—examples of errors to be corrected, facts that should be put down before errors can be made, and so on. It will not be a simple task—problems will arise with types of entries, with definitions and categories. Besides the individuals doing the dog-work, there could be an advisory panel or two. And perhaps the Patanjalis will send a few vibrations out of ancient India in support.



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Photo by Susanna Franklin