

“I NEVER HAD A SISTER”: Merton’s Friendships with Women

by **Bonnie B. Thurston**

I. INTRODUCTION

As with so many other issues that interested Merton, with regard to women he is both a man of his age and ahead of his time. If we look at his pronouncements of the 1930s and 40s, we hardly find a feminist. Merton more or less saw women as objects and used them as such. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, for example, Merton remarks: “Spanish is never a weak language, never sloppy, even on the lips of a woman.”¹ Later, however, Merton evinces another point of view. He writes in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “Man is most human, and most proves his humanity . . . by the quality of his relationship with women.”² More striking are remarks made to a retreat for contemplative prioresses in May, 1968: “Behind the playboy attitude toward women, I think, is fear of women.” He goes on to say that if woman is equal to man and not a toy, the man is threatened.³ Or, on Mary Daly’s book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, Merton writes: “She has brought out with relentless and sometimes infuriating clarity how this supposed idealization of women in fact makes a mutilation of human persons — both men and women . . . she is talking about the . . . work of achieving authentic partnership on a personal level. I am grateful to her for her many new insights.”⁴

What precipitated the change in Merton’s thinking? The answer is, his friendships with women. In writing to Etta Gullick, Merton said: “I never had a sister, and really I have felt this as a kind of lack.”⁵ My thesis is that Merton’s friendships

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1970), p. 339. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), p. 190. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

3. From transcript of talks owned by Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, S.L.

4. Thomas Merton, Letter to Marie Cantlon, 5 May 1968. Merton Studies Center.

5. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 353. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.



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women (particularly those in the 1950s and 60s) provided the ordinary give-and-take knowledge of the feminine point of view which, because of his family circumstances, Merton lacked.

Before mentioning some specific friends, a digression on methodology is in order. There are a variety of approaches to the study of Merton and women. One could survey the remarks on women in his writing as well as his biographies of women; one could study the interest of female scholars in Merton's work; one could look at what biographers have said about Merton and women (beginning with the section in Mott's index "relations with women"); or one could examine the images of women in his poetry. I look at some of his friendships because it is with his friends that Merton explored important ideas. I divide Merton's life into three segments: childhood (1915-1931), education and pre-monastic adulthood (1932-1941), and monastic life (1941-1968). The method is to mention several women from each period who influenced Merton. These remarks are not exhaustive, but do suggest the variety of women by whom Merton was influenced.

If you expect to read about Merton's relationship with Margaret (or "S" as the Mott biography refers to her), you will be disappointed. That episode has been treated elsewhere.⁶ What more particular thing could we say about it than we would say about any adult experience of loving and being loved? The more important omissions are Merton's dream of Proverb and his profound interest in Hagia Sophia which resulted in the poem of that title (Mott, pp. 312-313).⁷

CHILDHOOD (1915-1931)

The two women of note in this period are Merton's mother, Ruth Jenkins Merton, and his aunt, Maud Grierson Pearce. In a sense these are not "friends" *per se*, but their influence is too pervasive to overlook. Mott notes that the editorial work on *The Seven Storey Mountain* "makê[s] Ruth even more enigmatic, remote, cold than she is in the original" (Mott, p. 9). Merton idealizes his father and is rather critical of his mother. He remembers Ruth Merton as "worried, precise, quick, critical of me" (SSM, p. 13). In writing to Rosemary Ruether on 24 May 1967, he refers to resenting his mother's "intellectuality." Speaking of Merton in an interview, Dom John Eudes Bamberger remarks on a man who loses his mother at an early age and goes to a monastery and discovers the Blessed Virgin Mary. He continues: "I'm sure that there are psychiatrists who would find a lot in that . . . Hé [Merton] did say . . . that probably only strict mothers make the best contemplatives . . . his recollections of his mother were not very positive. She wasn't very motherly."⁸ The general impression from *The Seven Storey Mountain* and reflections elsewhere is that something essential was lacking in Merton's childhood not just because his mother died when he was six, but because of the character of his relationship with her. Like Dom John Eudes, we will leave further comment to professionals.

Merton's memories of Aunt Maud are of an altogether different tenor. Of her he says: "I think I have met very few people in my life so like an angel" (SSM, p. 81). She provided a sense of

6. See Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) — hereafter referred to in the text as *Furlong*; John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy* (Fort Worth, Texas: Latitudes Press, 1983); and Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984) — hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

7. Mott, pp. 312-313; see Robert G. Waldron, "Merton's Dreams: A Jungian Analysis," *The Merton Seasonal* 16 (Autumn 1991), pp. 11-23, and Boris Pasternak and Thomas Merton, *Six Letters* (Lexington, Kentucky: King Library Press, 1973).

8. Victor A. Kramer, *A Thomas Merton Oral History* (Decatur, Georgia: Deweylands Press, 1985), p. 426.

home, nurture, and belonging for him. Apparently an altogether good and sensible woman, it was she who first took young Tom's desire to be a writer seriously (*SSM*, pp. 81-83). Mott correctly asserts that she was both a model by which Merton measured others for the rest of his life and a symbol of the period of his innocence in England (*Mott*, p. 48). Incidentally, Aunt Maud appeared in one of the versions of his novel, *Straits of Dover*, as one who never "did anything except for someone else" (*Furlong*, pp. 84-85).

The striking fact of Merton's childhood is how regularly and rapidly the significant people died. But it is also true that he had positive and nurturing experiences with women like Aunt Maud and Madame Privat, as well as incomplete and unsatisfactory experiences with his mother.

EDUCATION & PRE-MONASTIC ADULTHOOD (1932-1941)

Merton is very hard on himself when he describes his years in English schools and at Cambridge. He mentions no friends by name at Cambridge, only a dark story about the unfortunate suicide, Mike. The episode with the woman he impregnated is removed. We hear only of a series of shipboard romances until his arrival at Columbia where he enjoyed a number of significant friendships. In fact, Part II of *The Seven Storey Mountain* is largely a story of books and people. Among these are numerous women friends, Donna Eaton, Jinny Burton, Peggy Wells, and several "girl friends" discretely not mentioned by name.

The exception to these generalizations is Ann Winser, the sister of Oakham fellow student, Andrew Winser. Their father was rector of Brooke on the Isle of Wight where Merton was a guest in September, 1932. At the time Ann was thirteen, but she made an impression on Merton, partly because he had no sister, but also as a symbolic figure. Ann appears in *My Argument with the Gestapo* and is remembered again on June, 1965, in this entry from *A Vow of Conversation*:

The other day after Mass I suddenly thought of Ann Winser. I remember that quiet rectory in the shady valley of Brooke. She was the quietest thing in it . . . I realized that I had never forgotten her and that she had made a deep impression.

I was left the other day with a sort of Burnt Norton feeling about that part of the garden I never went to. A feeling that if I had taken another turn in the road, I might have ended up married to Ann. Actually, I think she is a symbol of the true (quiet) women with whom I never really came to terms in the world, and because of this, there remains an incompleteness in me that cannot be remedied.

When I came to the monastery, Ginny Burton remained as the symbol of the girl I ought to have fallen in love with but didn't and she remains the image of one I really did love, with a love of companionship, and not of passion.⁹

Clearly, Jinny Burton, too, was significant, but due to space limitations (and the fact that her friendship with Merton has been treated by Furlong and Mott), we pass on to Catherine de Hueck Doherty (the "Baroness"), a Russian refugee whose experience of poverty had led her to found Friendship House in Harlem.

Merton met the Baroness after his first visit to Gethsemani. She was speaking at St. Bonaventure where Merton was teaching in the fall of 1941. He devotes a large part of "The Sleeping Volcano" section of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to the Baroness and her work. Of her he says: "I never saw anyone so calm, so certain, so peaceful in her absolute confidence in God"

9. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), pp. 193-194. Hereafter referred to in the text as VOC.

(SSM, p. 414). Merton's work with her in Harlem raised the question of the vocation of social action "in the world." He tells of writing long, questioning letters to the Baroness. Her responses were "full of strong and definite encouragement . . . 'You have arisen and started on the journey that seeks Him. You have begun to travel that road that will lead you to sell all and buy the pearl of great price'" (SSM, p. 431).

The Baroness exemplified practical, poverty-centered religion like that Merton had hoped to find with the Franciscans. Her work appealed to his idealism, and her interest in him and his vocation was crucial. In a letter to the Baroness dated 10 November 1941, he speaks of his past which "demands a whole life of penance and absolute self sacrifice: so that if I thought the Trappists would take me I think I would want to go to them" (HGL, p. 8). It was Merton's readiness to make the sacrifice necessary to go to Harlem that enabled him to see his readiness to enter the Trappist Order. The Baroness was instrumental in the decision-making process. Merton never forgot her and in 1965 corresponded with her about his "silencing" by the Order. It is to Merton's friendship with Catherine Doherty that we can trace his interest in social action.

MONASTIC LIFE (1941-1968)

This longest and most influential part of Merton's life presents the most difficulty in singling out significant women friends. Merton had so many. The list of friends and the interests he explored with them would include Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy (Hinduism-Buddhism), Dorothy Day (peace and social action), Sr. Emmanuel de Souza e Silva (Latin American poets), Etta Gullick (the spiritual life and mystical writers — incidentally, William H. Shannon believes that this eight-year correspondence was one of his most significant), Carolyn Hammer (art and religious life), Sr. Therese Lentfoehr (poetry), Raissa Maritain (aesthetics and spiritual life), Tommie O'Callaghan (who provided Merton with a "home life" in the 1960s), Rosemary Radford Ruether (theology and feminism), Linda Sabbath (religious experience, Zen and Sufism), Naomi Burton Stone (publishing), Sr. Mary Luke Tobin (various issues, especially Vatican II), and June Yungblut (race and social issues). In short, Merton explored all the serious interests of his adult life with one or another of his women friends, suggesting that in this period he viewed women as spiritual and intellectual equals.

Singled out for special comment are Sr. Mary Luke Tobin and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Several persons close to Merton think that Sr. Luke was the pivotal figure in Merton's ability to relate to women. He established significant friendships with women after association with Sr. Luke. And Merton's correspondence with Ruether deals directly with Merton's ability to relate to women. He asks for her help and insight as a women theologian (HGL, p. 499).

Sr. Mary Luke Tobin first met Merton in 1959 through the introduction of a mutual friend, Dr. James Wygal, in Louisville. Merton initiated the friendship when he sought teaching for Dan Walsh at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse which was twelve miles from Gethsemani. According to Mott, "the atmosphere at the convent delighted him, and he had come to find in Mother Luke a kindred spirit" (Mott, p. 410).¹⁰ The latter conversation is certainly accurate. In Sr. Luke Merton found not only an intellectual equal and a woman spiritually in sympathy with his vocation, but a fellow worker for peace and justice. In addition, she was an observer at the Second Vatican Council and provided Merton with direct information on those important deliberations.

10. See Chapter 3, "The Door of Prophetic Friendship: Thomas Merton," in her *Hope is an Open Door*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).

Personally, Luke swept away any “great man” syndrome in her dealings with Merton. Their proximity and the normalcy of their relationship was of great benefit to Merton. It was a friendship of true reciprocity, perhaps Merton’s first with a woman that could be so described. For her part, Sr. Luke praises Merton’s ability to see into the evil done to women. In an interview in May, 1988, Sr. Luke remarked that Merton had “as good a view of woman as I would want a man to have.” Sr. Luke notes Merton’s special sensitivity to contemplative women whom he felt were doubly exposed to injustice. His advice to them was to take their lives in hand and do what they had to do.

If the tone of his friendship with Sr. Luke was one of openness and reciprocity, that of his friendship with Rosemary Ruether was more strident, at times even sharp. Between June, 1965 and July, 1967, some thirty-five letters passed between them, most one or two single-spaced typed pages and most weighty in tone and subject. The correspondence begins as Ruether offers to send Merton the manuscript of her book, *The Church against Herself*, and Merton responds by asking for her help with his understanding of the Bible and the Church. In the correspondence Merton’s need for community leads Ruether to raise the deeper question of whether he wants to be an incarnate Christian or “an abstraction, zen mystic.” Ruether asks Merton some of the most personally probing questions of his adult life. There is no reticence in her letters.

The letters of March, 1967 are astringent. Ruether questions the validity of the monastic life itself and probes Merton’s own inner crises. Merton admits to being defensive in response to an intellectual woman and says that the basic problem raised was an “unrecognized assumption of my own that I have to get out of here But also a genuine realization that this is my vocation, but that I have not yet found the way of being really true to it. Rock bottom: I don’t know what is down there. I just don’t know” (*HGL*, p. 509). The letters deal with the place of monasticism in the modern world, with technology, with urban poverty, and other topics, but the root issues for Merton are those of his ability to relate to an intellectual woman AS intellectual and of his own monastic vocation. The tone of the letters by June, 1967 indicates a resolution of the first issue. As we know, Merton continued to wrestle with the second.

CONCLUSION

The material presented here hardly leads to a startling conclusion. While many of Merton’s early contacts with women were incomplete, his later experience was full and mature. He had contact with a variety of women with differing personalities and interests. He related to women in varied circumstances and on different levels. His mature thinking about women and their roles in society reflect this broad association. In the retreat for contemplative prioresses mentioned at the outset Merton makes the following remarks: “. . . men stand to gain by the rehabilitation of women I mean, it’s . . . the wholeness of man is going to be profited by women becoming . . . what everybody’s got to be — men or women or anybody else — they’ve got to be people. They’ve got to be persons the differences are not decisive.”

Overcoming the difficulties created by his relationship with his mother and her loss, finding nurture from Aunt Maud and Madame Privat, experiencing family life with Tommie O’Callaghan, having both illicit and normal relationships with girls as a young man, and, finally, growing into mature, reciprocal and intellectually stimulating relationships with women, Merton found the sister he never had. Poetically and symbolically he referred to her as “Hagia Sophia.” God not only as Father, but as Mother. But that is a subject for another time.