

A Small Window on a Complex Life: *Notes of Thomas Merton to Marice Gaither*

By **John E. King**

One of the continuing problems for bibliophiles in use of the Internet is that of erroneous claims of authorship that can lead one astray. Recently, the two following web offerings turned out to be illusions. Powells Books of Portland had an item listed under books about Merton entitled *Women and Thomas Merton* by John Marquand. This “ghost” was the product of a simple typo at Powells: the real title is *Women and Thomas Harrow*. Wonderful Books By Mail had the following title ascribed to Thomas Merton: *Rare and Exotic Birds*. This looked like it could have been a variant title of a Merton work by a publishing house in Great Britain, since one of the publishing sites was London. That would make sense as a number of Merton book titles were changed by English publishers, e.g., *Elected Silence* (U.S. title = *The Seven Storey Mountain*) or *Waters of Silence* (U.S. title = *The Waters of Siloe*). An e-mail to the dealer, however, revealed that he had made an error when adding a Merton book (*The New Man*) while trying to delete a book he had just sold (*Rare and Exotic Birds*).

When the offering of *Notes of Thomas Merton to Marice Gaither* appeared on a used-book website, it seemed to be just another false promise, for such a volume is not noted in any of the standard Merton bibliographies. But this time it was no error. A bookstore in Indiana had acquired a bound photocopy of a previously unknown set of letters from Thomas Merton and other monks at Gethsemani to Mrs. Thomas (Marice) Gaither, also known as Mimi. Some time before her death, her son had his secretary take the gathered correspondence, roughly organize it chronologically, and make copies for family members with the following Dedication: “This book is dedicated to all the decedents [*sic*] of beloved Mimi with the fervent hope that her fond friendship with Father Louis will bring to you the same comfort, joy and solace which she found in his letters, notes and memorabilia.”

The collection itself contains no indication which family member put the material together. By finding and contacting her only son, John Francis (Jack) Gaither of Evansville, Indiana, the editorship of the booklet was determined. With his secretary, he composed a brief biographical paragraph on Merton’s life (which contains a couple of small historical errors). What makes up the rest of the volume is a series of cards, notes, letters and printed items. In total there are 96 items and 93 pages.¹ Merton’s holographic signature appears on 51 of the items. The vast majority of the correspondence is addressed to Marice (Mimi) Gaither; a few items (four postcards) are addressed to other members of her family (three to her daughter, Nancy and one to her mother). The collection spans the period from February



John E. King

John E. King, professor in the Social Work Program at the University of Arkansas, is an expert on the Thomas Merton bibliographical materials. He presented an opening session on “The Handwritten Signatures of Thomas Merton” at the ITMS Seventh General Meeting at Bellarmine University in June 2001.

1953 until June 1969. The primary recipient, Mimi Gaither, is not represented in any of the published collections of letters from Merton. There are no copies of these notes and letters on file at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University or at Gethsemani Abbey, beyond the four mimeographed circular letters published in *The Road to Joy* and also found here.²

Many commentators on the phenomenal productivity of Merton's letter-writing have some form of reflection that expresses "amazement" at the sheer volume of his letters and notes (in addition to all the other literary products he generated). Given his monastic schedule of prayer, spiritual direction, work and other assigned duties, the output cannot be overstated. This collection – 52 letters, notes and cards from Merton, 22 completely holographic – reinforces that amazement. How many other unknown "friends" benefited similarly from Thomas Merton's prolific pen?

There are fourteen different categories of materials in the collection. The two major types within these fourteen are (a) typed notes or letters signed by Merton (26 items), and (b) holographic notes written by Merton (22 items). There are also 19 letters and notes from the monastery signed by various monks other than Merton. Three out of four of the mimeo circular letters from Merton to his friends in 1967 and 1968 are signed by Merton. Twenty-five other items round out the collection, including a telegram from the monastery notifying Mrs. Gaither of Merton's death. One of these items is the only letter from Mrs. Gaither to Merton in the entire collection. It appears from this example that her letters were holographic while we know that Merton quite often used a typewriter.

Within the collection there are a number of major themes that are prominent. By far, the dominant theme is that of thankfulness for the very generous financial support Mimi provided to Merton and the monastery. It is clear from the collection that Mimi was a faithful contributor to the financial needs of the monastery. The earliest note from monastic officers, in 1953, is a printed thank-you card that has a typed notation regarding the number of Masses covered by the offering as well as an unsigned footnote indicating that the Masses were for the intentions of "Father Louis" (7). The last letter in the collection is a typed letter on monastery letterhead from Fr. Bernard (secretary to Abbot Flavian Burns) belatedly thanking Mimi for "a generous check as Mass stipends for our needy ones" (92). The focus of most of Merton's notes is to emphasize the thanks for mass stipends and offerings. His earliest dated note is in September 1955 (21). This typed note card reflects on her gifts to the monastery of Mass stipends for "his sanctification." He promises his daily prayers for her and her family, a theme he will repeat over and over again through the years. Until this note, various monks, generally the abbot's secretary, had responded to her gifts. From the collection, it appears that from 1955, when he became Novice Master, he wrote most of the thank you notes himself.

A couple of the thank you notes and letters have a special sub-theme. In April 1956 (26), the abbot's secretary wrote to apologize for the delay in acknowledging a mass stipend offering. He adds two personal references, one about his mother and the other about Lucia of Fatima. What is most intriguing is the postscript asking for more mass stipends from Mimi and her friends. This request was repeated in June of 1956: after a rather effusive typed note, the abbot's secretary slid in the following postscript: "PS – this month we are very low on masses if you could help it would be appreciated" (27).

Merton puts a special twist on Mimi's offerings in a rather long typed letter in March of 1962. After thanking Mimi for the mass offerings and assuring her that he would include her intentions in his masses, he adds an interesting piece of advice. Merton said:

It would help at this end if, when you send a gift, you specify in the letter that it is to be for “masses” unless of course you want to specify something else. Otherwise it gets hard to work with at this end. I have no right, in reality, to do anything with any gift that is sent to me, and have no voice in disposing of it. So that if nothing is specified it just becomes a contribution to the monastery funds. Which is quite all right if that is what you want. However I have the impression that you want it to be used in some way at my discretion, and the best way to effect that is to have it for Masses as you always did, and as I think you still intend (53).

This response is somewhat different from the message he conveyed to her in June of 1960 when he comments, “Above all, thanks again for your gifts. I still scruple about accepting them in the form in which you send them, it seems selfish of me and I keep wishing that instead of my being the beneficiary, the people who are so much worse off than I am in every way might have a share in it” (47). As the very strict monastic conscience he developed in his earliest days in the monastery matured, he became more confident that the spirit of the rule was much more important to spiritual growth than a bowing to the law. As he helped novices to grow up healthily in the monastery, he cautioned them about holding the rule to be more important than people. We know that, when he moved to the hermitage, he would often have no scruple about the personal use of such gifts from visitors as jazz records, modern poetry books, hamburgers and beer.

The second most recurring theme is that of remembering Mimi and her family in his prayers and/or those of the monastery. Such phrases as “I shall certainly be praying for you most especially these days” (60) or “Tell her [Mimi’s mother] I keep her specially in my prayers” (45) or “I will remember you and all your dear ones” (46) are found in at least 17 notes, from the earliest in 1955 to the very last. On August 5, 1968, as he was preparing for his fateful trip to Asia he wrote, “I keep all the family in my prayers and Masses” (80). This is a similar theme in the notes from other monks to Mimi. Two of the earliest note cards from the monastery, typed by the abbot’s secretary, said, “He [Merton] will also keep praying for your recovery” (6) and “he will remember your intentions in his prayers” (6). One of the last notes from the monastery in the collection, dated 16 Sept. 1968, and signed by Brother Patrick [Hart] ended with “and be assured of our prayers for you and your family” (87).

This general theme of prayerfulness was rendered even more specific in the area of concern for needs of Mimi’s family. The collection makes it difficult to identify the family members clearly since only one of Mimi’s letters is in the collection and Merton’s references to members of the family seldom indicate the exact relationships. Conversation with her son clears the record. She had two children, Nancy and John Francis. Nancy’s married name was Bach and she had three children, Anne, Sally and Taylor. Her mother Mrs. Francis is identified in the letters from Merton as well as a family friend, Howard Hart. John Francis Gaither, her son, has two sons who are not mentioned in any of Merton’s letters nor is his wife.³ This reminds readers of one side of a correspondence to be careful in interpreting various positions; with both sides of a letter exchange, clarity can be better achieved. Merton expressed concern for Mimi’s health, the health of her mother, other family members’ health, as well as special concerns of various family members. Over the period of the correspondence continuing concern can be observed for the health of Mimi’s mother, Mrs. Francis, who died at more than 100 years of age. The family had sent Masses for her intentions and Merton included her in his prayers. Upon notice of her death in January 1967, Merton wrote, “Well God

came and took little Mother back to himself at last. Her sufferings are over and now He will console and repay her" (75). This was part of a typed and signed note from Merton on a printed Mass stipend response card that the monastery used at the time.

A similar concern revolved around Mimi's grandson Taylor (Tay) who was in a seminary at St. Louis. In the one letter from Mimi to Merton in July 1965, she expresses how important Merton is to Tay: "Your advice to him he takes to heart" (69). A later note from Merton comments on Tay's ordination to the diaconate in the summer of 1966: "Glad to hear about Tay's ordination to the diaconate. I'll keep you all in my prayers" (72). That would be the last time that Tay is mentioned. The collection has six more personal notes from Merton (as well as the circular letters), but they contain no mention of Tay.

Tay's mother, Nancy (Nan), is the subject of two of the last personal notes, written in 1968. Nancy was in the hospital and letters from Mimi and Merton crossed in the mail. Merton comments in general about the discomfort of being in the hospital during hot weather. His second note, reflecting on a letter received right after he mailed the first note, is empathic about the trouble that Nancy was having. He says, "If God wills for her to recover, then fine. But if He wills her to put up with it, then I am sure He will give her all the strength and grace for herself and for all of you" (80).

One interesting side-bar in eight of the notes is the reflection that books, cards or medals had been sent to Mimi or her family. Both Merton and other monks apparently enclosed holy cards, singly or in larger amounts, in the notes and letters. Merton also sent several pictures of himself. One is a candid shot not otherwise known to exist, taken before June 1959. Merton describes it this way: "I was glad to see the picture [which is not identified] and get all the news. In return here is one of me – very disedifying as I am parked in a soft armchair which is by no means 'Trappist.' It was taken at the gatehouse by a friend, so don't think we have armchairs in the monastery: heaven forbid. The picture was the only one on a roll that came out so the Holy Ghost must have wanted you to have it" (42).

Many of the notes were written on religious note cards with sayings and quotations on the reverse side. Some of the postcards have religious artwork on the reverse. Occasionally Merton will comment on the card's content, as he did in October 1966 when he said, "Did you ever see this lovely card?" The reverse side has the following saying: HE ABIDETH PATIENTLY / HE FORGIVETH EASILY / HE UNDERSTANDETH MERCIFULLY / HE FORGETETH UTTERLY (74).⁴

One of the early themes that more or less disappears at the end of the collection is that of Merton's sanctification. An early note (probably 1954) from the abbey says, "He [Thomas Merton] asks that you pray for him, that he will become a saint" (14). In 1955 Merton himself says, "Surely Our Lady herself has provided you as the one to give the gift I most need – Masses for my sanctification" (21). Dom James Fox himself conveys the same idea in 1956 in response to one of Mimi's stipend letters: "During the Christmas Festivities we tried to find an opportunity to write of our gratitude and appreciation for the wonderfully magnificent generosity that inspired you to send so generous a stipend for Masses for the sanctification of our good Father Louis" (23). Father Francis de Sales (the abbot's secretary) said it in a similar way later in 1956 when he wrote Mimi: "What joy filled my own heart when I received your stipend and gracious request for Masses for our own Fr. Louis' sanctification" (25). In 1958 Merton continued the theme: "Thank you for the Masses. If I don't become a saint it won't be the fault of the Gaithers" (38). Later that year, just before Christmas, he responded to a gift with the following words: "You are much too generous to me. But I know that your whole desire is

to give pleasure to the Sacred Heart of our Saviour, and I know that you do. May His love indeed make a saint of me in my poverty” (39). Merton can even make light of Mimi’s concern for his sanctification. In 1959 he responded this way: “Your Masses for my ‘sanctification’ (which the mass secretary refers to as ‘the lost cause’) may not be providing me with a halo right now, but Our Lord seems to be opening up a new way for me, and one which will not be easy.” By 1961 Merton has couched his thanks in terms that reflect his concern for others before his own sanctification. He notes in one letter, “thanks for the check. I can use it indeed for Masses for peace, and to send to needy monasteries for masses there also.”

The notes and letters are generally not very self-revelatory, though the note card for March 3, 1964 has the following cryptic statement to Mimi: “I have some nice new crosses for Lent myself.” In his journal for that day he expounds on the refusal of the order to let him republish some of his writings on nuclear war and have even seemed to indicate that *Seeds of Destruction* may not be allowed to be published.⁵

This newly found cache of Mertoniana might well be categorized as a small window into the complex life and canon of writings that have survived the untimely death of Thomas Merton. There are no startling discoveries which would lead to the revision of biographical information that has been published over the last thirty years. This new window does disclose how a sincere but mundane relationship can evolve from one person’s genuine concern for the sanctification of someone she came to know first through his published writings and then in another manner, through a steady correspondence over a period of more than ten years. Certainly, the fact that part of the relationship is that of generous benefactor and grateful monk/monastery explains what appears to be the almost “*pro forma*” response in a number of the items of the collection, particularly the early ones. However, the variety of personal, family reflections suggests that a genuine friendship did develop. Merton even provides an occasional glimpse of self-disclosure usually found in the letters to long-time, close friends.

Several collections of letters between Merton and particular correspondents have been published (the Laughlin letters, the Lax letters, the Ruether letters, the Suzuki letters). The five volumes of Merton letters alone also constitute a huge window into his life and thoughts. With the publication of the substantial whole of his journals, a formidable structure has emerged. Even if this privately circulated collection is only a “small window” in that complex structure, it certainly could be viewed as a sparkling, stained-glass window full of enhanced light into the life and thoughts of Thomas Merton, elicited by a generous woman who seems to have been genuinely concerned for his spiritual life.

¹ Pages in this collection are not numbered; page numbers cited are based on the researcher’s count.

² Personal communication from Brother Patrick Hart, August 2000.

³ Based on personal conversations with John Francis Gaither in December 2000.

⁴ Merton quotes this saying in his essay “The Climate of Mercy,” in *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 205.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 83-84. This is the only occasion on which a journal entry casts light on a comment in the letters, though journal entries exist for the following dates on which notes and letters were also written: August 19, 1963; January 21, June 12, 1964; January 17, January 30, April 21, July 11, October 18, 1966; January 31, October 23, 1967; April 20, August 5, August 7, 1968. The other notes and letter were written on days that have no journal entries.