

Beautiful, Simple and Solid: Owen Merton's House in Saint-Antonin

By Roger Collins

In the summer of 1925, Owen Merton and his ten-year-old son Tom left New York for England and traveled thence to France. Their first destination was Montauban in the southwest of the country, where Owen had been led to believe there was a suitable school for Tom to attend. Not only were they misadvised on that point, but Montauban itself turned out to be unattractive as a painting ground. Instead, on the basis of photographs seen at the regional tourist office, they chose the small town of Saint-Antonin-Noble-Val, in the valley of the Aveyron River, a short distance east of Montauban.

They arrived there toward the end of September 1925, walking across the bridge from the railway station, and soon rented an apartment "in a three-story house at the edge of the town, on the Place de la Condamine, where they held the cattle market."¹ This is presumably where they were at the time of the 1926 census, early in March: the documents record "Merton Owen" (born in 1887 in Christchurch, English nationality, head of the household, an artist) and "Merton Tom" (born in 1915 in Prades, English, his son, with no profession) but curiously do not report their residential address.² They ate, at least occasionally but perhaps on a regular basis, at the Hôtel des Thermes beside the river, a short distance downstream from the bridge.³

The peasant in Owen had always dreamed of owning land: the house he and Ruth had planned in Provence, the plot of land they had hoped to buy in Prades, even, at a pinch, the property they had rented in Flushing and the garden he had tended in Bermuda, were all manifestations of this fundamental desire. And here in Saint-Antonin this wish was finally about to come true. The earliest step that we can pinpoint was taken during a visit to the local lawyer, Maître Guillaume Dutemps, an occasion on which Owen was accompanied by his American friends Reginald and Betts Marsh who visited France for six months from late 1925: he would one day refer back to "that interview with the greffier the night you & Betts came into his office with me."⁴

On 20 January 1926 he paid Armand Raynal and his wife Gabrielle, *née* Simian, 800 francs for a field on the western fringe of the town in the suburb known as La Condamine, between the Bonnette river and the foot of a steep hill, Le Calvaire.⁵ Raynal, a Justice of the Peace living in the nearby town of Caylus, had been gifted this land approximately two years earlier by his mother who had herself inherited it more than thirty years before. It was declared to be just under fourteen *ares* in area, that is, 1400 square metres – equivalent to the playing surface of almost five and a half tennis courts – although the exact size was not guaranteed, any difference of up to one-twentieth being to the advantage, or to the



Roger Collins

Roger Collins, formerly a teacher in both French and Art History at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, has published extensively on pre-colonial, colonial and early twentieth-century New Zealand art. He is presently researching a biography of Owen Merton.

disadvantage, of the purchaser. The vendors' identities, the husband's profession and the history of his ownership of the land were matters of some importance, carefully recorded in the documents of sale, and have for us the added interest of destroying the claim, long associated with Owen's purchase and resale of it, that this land could be owned only by a foreigner (Mott 38).

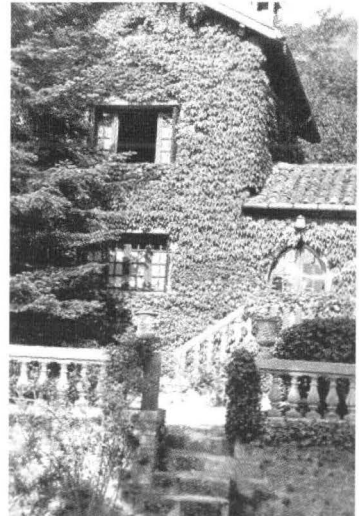
The foundations of a house were promptly traced out, a water-diviner found water and a well was dug, two poplars were planted – one for Tom, one for John Paul – and in the spring Owen laid out a large garden, a source of great joy to him (SSM 39).

Don't you forget that I live a very fully charged life, that's what saves me, I have a garden, which is *some* garden – best soil I ever had, & manure is thrown away in this place. So it is paradise to me. You don't know the gardener side of me. There were five years of my life when I was an absolute farmer, with all the oneness I have. Thank the Lord all that's in its place now, and the garden is the adjective in my life. . . . As to the garden – It has been fun to do it for myself instead of for the bloody hurrying clients I had in New York, and I think it is good – I really do. A lot of my morals came out of knowing gardening, nothing like it – as a rest from working your brain.⁶

A house was still some way in the future, but Owen was always the optimist. Counting his chickens before his next exhibition had hatched, he had already sized up the local building stone, and the local craftsmen, and sketched a plan.

Also before anyone knows where they are, I shall have a house on the land – enough for Tom & me to live in – If I put over a good show next time I shall put up a small house – Louise there is another side of me you don't know. I am perfectly awful business man in the way I know how to be. That is, here, I get awful value out of workmen because I know to handle them. I get far more for my money than even French people because I know how to keep them in a good humour. Here where wages are lower than anywhere – Best masons 3/- a day – Best stone – about 2/4 the cubic yard delivered, & a tradition of building in the very hardest stone that is wonderful – I can do something. I have drawn a picture of the house I want, which is pretty cocky, but not too, and the mason, who is far above his job in intelligence has arranged it & made it possible, believe [*sic*] me, that house will be built.⁷

As opportunities presented themselves, Owen collected ruined or abandoned buildings, describing to Reginald Marsh in August 1927 the acquisition of “two old houses in the town – from which we got most wonderful stone, and what is more, stone which is cut very well there were some old stone doorways & window frames and by means of juggling them about we have arrived at an awfully good result.”⁸ A few days later he reported the same coup to his teacher, Percyval Tudor-Hart: “I bought up two old houses *in town for about £4 each!!* pulled them down & used the stone again – and the doors etc were wonderful.”⁹ Tom provides



Owen Merton's Saint-Antonin house

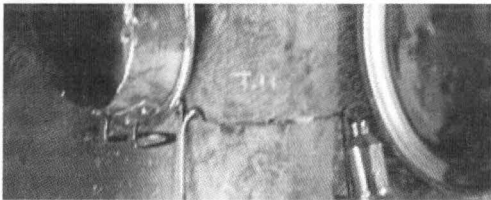
a complementary recollection, that of an abandoned chapel with a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century window which they bought and “eventually used the stones and the window and the door-arches and so on in building our house at St. Antonin” (SSM 43).

Construction was well under way by August 1927, funded in part by sales of Owen’s paintings (according to Tom) and in part by Owen’s mother (on Owen’s own admission). To Tudor-Hart he put it briefly, thus: “My mother – for the sake of the children has helped me to build a house here –” but to Reginald Marsh he was more expansive:

Last year however, a very old friend from New Zealand came over and much to my surprise gave me a regular blowing up because I would never let my mother help me with money.¹⁰ Well, I thought a lot, and then I thought as she had banked quite a lot of money for the children that I really might allow her to give me some of it towards building this house. And by Jove I can’t tell you how well it has turned out for so very little money.¹¹

That letter began with the “great news” that he was building a house, and included a promise to send photographs when the roof was in place.

My great news is that, do you know, I am really *building a house* on the piece of land that I bought as the result of that interview with the greffier the night you & Betts came into his office with me. I must say the having the piece of land has definitely saved me from all kinds of things. . . . When the roof gets on I will send you photographs.



Fireplace with initials “T.M.”

The house was simple enough, with two bedrooms on the upper floor linked by a winding stone staircase to the large, all-purpose room below, with a

certain touch of class conferred by the medieval chapel window, and a medieval fireplace humanized by the initials “T.M.” carved into it. For Owen it was “the only thing I have ever had to do with that turned out better than I anticipated,”¹² while for Tom it was “a beautiful little house . . . simple and solid. It looked good to live in” (SSM 59). It seemed set to become the calm center in what had been thitherto two disrupted lives, but, to Tom’s regret, “we never lived in the house that Father built” (SSM 60).

As if to confirm his intention to live permanently in Saint-Antonin by anchoring himself there even more firmly, Owen made a second purchase in the same suburb, on 17 April 1928. He acquired for 500 francs, from a local widow, Madame Albertine Fraysse, *née* Jourdes, a property she had owned since 1900, some of it under cultivation, some not, with in addition a *vigne* – a vine or perhaps a small vineyard – woods and some buildings. Its area is not recorded in the sale documents. Although Owen took immediate possession, the vendor reserved the right to harvest the crops that were then growing, valued at about 40 francs.¹³ Owen’s recurrent dream of a house was clearly a desire for security (“I will have another wedge of security jammed in the world,” he wrote to Louise Theis in October 1926) and the outcome of his realization that he did indeed owe something to his children: “I do want the kids to have a house they can consider their home.”¹⁴

It was also to be the locus of his response to the knowledge “that he could not leave the training and care of his sons to other people, and that he had a responsibility to make some kind of a home,

somewhere, where he could at the same time carry on his work and have us living with him, growing up under his supervision” (SSM 33). In some measure, one of Owen’s letters confirms that he wanted to be a better father: “When I brought Tom over I was determined to make up for all I had never been able to do in our very trying life in New York,”¹⁵ not that having his son with him in France was easy. “My having Tom with me restricts my movements a great deal,”¹⁶ he wrote to Tudor-Hart in 1925, and to Louise Theis a year later he revealed some irritation with this arrangement: “I can’t after all be at his beck & call always & do my own work properly”¹⁷ – for he needed freedom to travel a little and paint as best he could. Tom’s eventual enrollment at boarding school was a solution to this problem.

Tom believed that his father “had become definitely aware of certain religious obligations for us as well as for himself” (SSM 33). Owen’s own religious instruction had taken place within the double environment of home and school: in particular, he studied Divinity as a regular school subject in each year he was at Christ’s College, and received a special award in it in 1902. However, away from home and leading his own life in Europe, there is no evidence that Owen was a regular churchgoer. Yet Tom was certain that Owen had never ceased to be a religious man, although what faith he had was clearly located outside organized structures. Thus, they did attend a Protestant service in Saint-Antonin on one occasion but it was too grim for Owen, and they never went back (RM 374). Nevertheless, prayer had a place in Owen’s life and on one occasion he told Tom to pray, to ask God for help, to help him paint, to help him have a successful exhibition, to find them a place to live. We know that Owen was deeply moved by the intense expression of religious faith he had observed in Brittany in 1910, and that he was attracted to Roman Catholicism by the rituals he observed in Spain in 1911, but, Tom believed, he resisted the attractions of Rome to which he was susceptible, to avoid complications within their family and was happy for the boys to be brought up within whichever form of faith was most accessible to them.

Tom had no recollection of his father ever giving him any specific religious or moral instruction but it did, nevertheless, sometimes happen in a spontaneous way. “[I]t came out more or less naturally” as on the occasion in their apartment in Saint-Antonin when Owen told Tom about Peter’s betrayal of Christ and of Peter’s tears when he heard the cock crow. Otherwise, during this time in France Tom received nothing more than some rudimentary Protestant instruction at the *lycée* (SSM 53-54; RM 374).

* * * * *

After the Easter holidays of 1929, by which time Owen and Tom were both living in England, Tom went back to school and in early June Owen returned to Saint-Antonin, surprised that he had managed to live a whole year in England and grateful to be back in a climate he appreciated. He was working – “I have done a small painting of a model here in the last 3 days. I think it is a distinct improvement” – but if he also felt relieved to be back “home,” in a place he knew and loved, to which he had made a substantial material and affective commitment, he kept that to himself – out of a sort of emotional reticence, perhaps, because the principal reason for his visit was to break some of those ties. He had come to sell his house and land, which would release his capital, allow him to pay off debts, and leave some cash in hand on which to live.

My dear Mr Tudor Hart,

I have been here nearly a week now – & the result of my trying to sell the House has been, that the highest offer is 15,000 francs. Out of this I should owe here, 1500 francs – and I must admit I shall not get much liberty for £100, even in France

– I owe already £25 of the £100 . . . – But I do feel that I ought perhaps to accept the 15,000 or a bit more that will be offered to me, I do feel I shall be able to work a fairly long time on that money. . . . I feel this £75 will get me through this next 6 months if I am careful.¹⁸

He cut short his stay at Saint-Antonin, however, surprised that he felt so tired and blaming the summer heat. Next he tried Albi, which was even hotter. There he was seriously ill and decided to return north in search of cooler weather, stopping at Rouen in Normandy, downstream from Paris, where he had a brief remission from his illness before relapsing. There was now nowhere else to go but his uncle's and aunt's home in London, and once there – certainly by 12 July, but exactly when he arrived we do not know – Owen again felt better, before a further relapse a week later.

Setting aside his health problems as best he could, Owen tried to maintain the momentum that had been set up for the sale of his property in France. Two letters hint at the early stage of the process rather than elucidate it. On 19 July he wrote from London in slightly imperfect but nevertheless respectable French to Gaston Piques, the town clerk of Saint-Antonin:

Cher Monsieur Pique,

[I had your note here a week ago.: *crossed out*]

J'ai recu votre lettre il y a une semaine. – Je m'aurais depeché pour vous envoyer la réponse voulue, mais je dois rester en dedans la maison – Je ne sais pas ce qui se passe sur moi mais mon estomac ne fait pas sa moindre fonction.

Je crois pouvoir sortir la semaine prochaine et je vous enverrai tout cela de suite.

Avec mes meilleurs remerciements pour toutes vos gentillesses – mes sentiments les plus sinceres chez vous.

Owen Merton¹⁹

We can only guess at the real subject of this letter, which has been swamped in news of the writer's own health. A little over three weeks later, by which time he and Tom were visiting friends in Scotland, Merton wrote again to Saint-Antonin, apparently about some photographs for Monsieur Piques and a receipt he could not find, and tucked in a reference to the sale of his house.

Cher Monsieur Piques

Enfin vous allez dire ce type m'envoie ces sacrées effigies.

Avant de partir de Londres, j'ai pu aller les faire mais le photographe a du les envoyer ici – Savez vous aussi que j'ai ete tellement malade ici pour la semaine derniere que je ne pouvais rien faire du tout.

Qu'est ce que je ne vous donnerais pas pour un mot pour me dire que ma maison est vendu!!

Mes meillieures salutations chez vous

Owen Merton.

Je ne *peux pas* trouver le recu!²⁰

Merton may have come close to striking a viable deal on his property at Saint-Antonin during his visit there in June 1929 but the delay in carrying the transaction through was not entirely of his making. A Kafka-esque paper trail got in the way, leading from London to Saint-Antonin, after crossing the Channel three times and weaving through thickets of French legalese and procedure. On his return to London from Scotland Owen started to set his affairs in order on 9 September 1929

when he signed a document giving his friend, Dr. Tom Bennett, power of attorney to act on his behalf. On the seventeenth it was certified at a London solicitor's office, on the eighteenth it was vetted at the French Consulate in London, and two months later, on 19 December, it was processed at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. Then it was translated (21 December) and the translator's signature was itself verified (23 December). Next, now that his own status as Owen's representative was officially recognized in France, Bennett had to empower someone on the spot, at Saint-Antonin, to take the property transaction to its conclusion. This was to be the local postman, Joseph Bénac, and Bennett set the process off again on 24 February 1930 when he signed a document giving power of attorney in this matter to Bénac. A London solicitor processed this second authorization on 25 February, and it was then transmitted to the French Foreign Affairs Ministry (5 March).

Finally, in Maître Dutemps's office in Saint-Antonin on 13 March 1930, the sale of all Owen's property in the *commune* of Saint-Antonin – a house under construction, ground, garden and a *vigne* – was made to Charles Boucher, a local landowner, for 15,000 francs,²¹ the sum Owen had been offered in the previous June. Just as those from whom he had bought his properties in 1926 and 1928 were clearly French, so this purchaser too was French. There is still no trace of the “quirk of French law” which ostensibly restricted the land's ownership to foreigners.²² And the cash the vendor received from this transaction was reasonably close to the rough-and-ready calculations Owen had made earlier. With 1,500 francs for debts in Saint-Antonin deducted from the 15,000 francs received, the balance, at the current rate of exchange, was worth about £108.²³ Setting aside £25 for debts in Britain would have left £83.

Meanwhile, in the early days of March 1930, Saint-Antonin, in common with many other parts of the region, had been swept by devastating floods. Widespread, long-term deforestation had left the region vulnerable to exceptional meteorological events, such as those that now combined in a dramatic way. Heavy rain, along with a rise in temperatures which suddenly melted the winter's snow, saw the river Tarn peak in Montauban on 3 March at 11.49 meters above normal.²⁴ In Saint-Antonin the Aveyron and the Bonnette combined their forces to flood 100 hectares, destroy nineteen houses, leave



Chemin Thomas Merton, Saint-Antonin.

964 victims, of whom 500 needed help, eleven who had to seek refuge elsewhere, and two deaths.²⁵ The Merton house, a “house under construction,” in which Owen had apparently never lived but where he had reportedly left many paintings and other possessions, was one of those flooded. Its contents were so damaged they were dumped (Mott 41).

“I do want the kids to have a house they can consider their home,” Owen wrote in October 1926.²⁶ When it was built, the house became known locally as “La Maison de l'Anglais,” the “Englishman's House,” and so it is still known to some of the town's older inhabitants today,²⁷ although its official name is the “Villa Diane.” It is much altered, with towers and an additional wing transforming its original simplicity²⁸ and stands at the end of a lane now named “Chemin Thomas Merton.”

-
- 1 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 38; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” in the text.
 - 2 Archives Départementales, Montauban.
 - 3 Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation – The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume One 1939–1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 328; subsequent references will be cited as “RM” in the text.. On 6 September 1926 Owen wrote to Evelyn Scott on this hotel’s headed letter paper.
 - 4 Owen Merton to Reginald Marsh, Saint-Antonin, 11 August 1927 (Reginald Marsh Collection, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, reels D308-309); see Lloyd Goodrich, *Reginald Marsh* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d. [c. 1972?]) 295–96. The dating of the Marshes’ visit to Saint-Antonin is confused. Basing himself on a text by Tom Merton, Michael Mott has the Marshes travelling from Paris as far as Caussade with Tom and Owen on their initial journey south, and leaving them there to go off on their bicycles, while the Mertons continued on to Montauban: see *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 35; subsequent references will be cited as “Mott” in the text. That would have been after dark, in September. But Tom says it was winter (RM 291), which does not sound very much like September. Perhaps they came twice, once travelling with the Mertons in September 1925, once on a winter-time visit when the Mertons met them in Caussade, the Marshes cycled off, and the Mertons took a train into Montauban.
 - 5 Formal transcript sent to the local Land Transfers Office – “Conservation des Hypothèques” – Montauban, now held in the regional office at Muret (Haute-Garonne).
 - 6 Owen Merton to Louise Theis, Saint-Antonin, 24 October 1926 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).
 - 7 Owen Merton to Louise Theis, Saint-Antonin, 24 October 1926 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).
 - 8 Owen Merton to Reginald Marsh, Saint-Antonin, 11 August 1927 (Reginald Marsh Collection, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, reels D308-309).
 - 9 Owen Merton to Percyval Tudor-Hart, 19 August 1927 (Richard Bassett Collection).
 - 10 This reticence recalls the earlier reluctance with which Owen and Ruth accepted financial help from the Jenkinses. The New Zealand friend has not been identified.
 - 11 Owen Merton to Reginald Marsh, Saint-Antonin, 11 August 1927 (Reginald Marsh Collection, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, reels D308-309).
 - 12 Owen Merton to Reginald Marsh, Saint-Antonin, 11 August 1927 (Reginald Marsh Collection, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, reels D308-309).
 - 13 Transcript now held in the regional office of the “Conservation des Hypothèques” at Muret (Haute-Garonne).
 - 14 Owen Merton to Louise Theis, Saint-Antonin, 24 October 1926 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University). This letter also contains the surprising statement that he intended to bequeath the house to Evelyn Scott.
 - 15 Owen Merton to Percyval Tudor-Hart, Toulouse?, late 1925? (Richard Bassett Collection).
 - 16 Owen Merton to Percyval Tudor-Hart, September 1925 (Richard Bassett Collection).
 - 17 Owen Merton to Louise Theis, Saint-Antonin, 28 September 1926 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).
 - 18 Owen Merton to Percyval Tudor-Hart, Saint-Antonin, 14 June 1929 (Richard Bassett Collection).
 - 19 “Dear Monsieur Pique, I received your letter a week ago. – I would have hastened to send you the reply you want, but I must stay in the house – I don’t know what is happening to me but my stomach does not perform any of its functions. I think I can go out next week and will send you all of that immediately. With my warmest thanks for all your kindnesses – my most sincere best wishes to your family.” Owen Merton to Gaston Piques, Ealing, 19 July 1929 (Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY). (Merton misspells his correspondent’s name.) Errors of French have not been corrected.
 - 20 “Dear Monsieur Piques, At last you are going to say that that fellow is sending me those bloody pictures. Before leaving London, I was able to go and have them made [taken?] but the photographer must have sent them here – Do you know too that that I have been so ill here for the last week that I could do nothing at all. What wouldn’t I give you for a note telling me that my house is sold!! My best greetings to everyone at your place Owen Merton. I *can not* find the receipt!!!” Owen Merton to Gaston Piques, Williamston, Inch, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, 12 August 1929 (Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY). Errors of French have not been corrected.
 - 21 Transcript now held in the regional office of the “Conservation des Hypothèques” at Muret (Haute-Garonne).
 - 22 The erroneous notion that the Saint-Antonin property could be owned only by a foreigner may have been derived from a 1 October 1964 letter written by Chrysogonus Waddell, OCSO to Thomas Merton (Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY), reporting on a conversation he had had with the then-owner of the house, M. Gouyon. Waddell wrote: “It would seem that there had been some kind of agreement that the property could be bought only by a foreigner,” and that “M. Gouyon was able to qualify as a foreigner” because he came from a different part of France. However, that must be set against Waddell’s own admission that he “was unable to follow the story in all its details” because of the rapidity of M. Gouyon’s French.
 - 23 On 13 March 1930 the franc was trading at between 124.24 and 124.27 to the pound (*London Times*, 14 March 1930, 21).
 - 24 *Le Miroir du Monde*, 15 March 1930, 33–35; *Dépêche du Midi*, 3 March 1930, 19.
 - 25 Archives Départementales, Montauban, Ms 3003.
 - 26 Owen Merton to Louise Theis, Saint-Antonin, 24 October 1926 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).
 - 27 Conversation with M. & Mme. André Capin, Saint-Antonin, April 2001.
 - 28 See Mott 38–39, and photograph following page 390.