

The Merton I Knew

By **Jim Knight**

Ed Rice and I were 18 and Tom Merton was 21 when we first met at Columbia. I don't know how, or why, it started, but we always called each other by our surnames; the practice was extended to the entire group involved with the magazine *Jester*. I arrived at the college in 1936, from Atlanta; Rice, from Brooklyn. Merton had transferred from Cambridge University in England, from which he was being expelled for lack of work. He had fathered an illegitimate child (who later was killed, I'm told, during the German air raids on London), and because of the scandal his British guardian advised him with hardened logic to go to America. I have always thought of him as a deliberate exile. He couldn't have loved the studied insouciance, the class arrogance and snobbishness, the fashionable idleness of the pre-war ruling class in England. Pamela, my wife, after her younger years in Newcastle, York and Leamington Spa in a comfortable lower middle class family, still steams when she thinks, mostly inadvertently, and sometimes quite abruptly, of class distinction in England. Merton must have loathed people like the complete elitist, Clive Bell, and he couldn't have liked Vanessa Stephen very much either, nor people like Ronald Firbank, Wyndham Lewis and the empty-headed Duke of Windsor, to say nothing of his bride. He was divided within himself about having fled to America, a country whose culture he quietly said he secretly despised, while at the same time loving it and needing it.

It was a troubled period – especially for a young person. We were just pulling ourselves out of the Depression, and now when the lights seemed to be coming on again, war was clearly on the way. I still have the image sharp in my mind, of my father in our house on the outskirts of Atlanta; at the depth of the Depression, getting ready to take the streetcar into town to look for work. He had a dime for the carfare there and back; he dropped it as he was putting it in his pocket, it rolled across the floor, and as we all held our breaths, it fell through a crack into the darkness under the house. It is a shattering experience at the age of twelve to see one's father, the hero and authority figure of one's young life, helplessly crying on the edge of his bed.

My family on my father's side had always been railroad people. On a trip from New York to Atlanta once, I suddenly had the urge to leave the main highway and have a look at Blacksburg, South Carolina, where my father was born. In this small town were about six churches, fifty-odd frame houses and a massive railroad yard. The railroad yard explains how my father was born in this particular Southern place; it was his father's work scene. My father was a brakeman, which meant that he hopped roll-

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ing freight cars, switched them off the mainline and braked them into sidings. His father had been a flagman, on the Southern Railroad run from Atlanta to Salisbury in North Carolina. Four brothers also worked for the railroad. My father left railroading in the early twenties, during the particularly vicious strikes of that period; several of his friends had been killed by company goons. Typical of the times in the South, he didn't get very far with his schooling, and ended up throwing his sixth-grade books into the Reedy River in Greenville, South Carolina, and going to work so he could contribute to the family income. The twenties were a huge struggle for my parents – and as they came out of those hard times, the Depression hit us all. (For someone with little education, my father did very well for himself and for the rest of us. He became a successful businessman, was elected to the Atlanta City Council over and over again, and was mayor pro tem of Atlanta under the city's very progressive mayor, William Hartsfield.)

In those days, Columbia College offered scholarships to two high school graduates from Atlanta, two from Memphis, two from Little Rock – and from other cities around the South. In 1936, I won one of the two Atlanta awards; the scholarship was worth \$500 per year; since tuition was \$400 I would have \$100 left to spend, as they say, as I pleased. There remained, of course, the matter of dormitory expense and meals, books, clothes, and, if possible a little spending money now and then. My parents would have much preferred that I went to the University of Georgia, or better still, Emory, right there in Atlanta. But the honor was too great; you don't just turn down the most coveted scholarship in town. So they looked at the figures hard, borrowed money from a friend, advised me strongly to wait on tables for my meals and find other work to pay for other expenses, said their prayers and turned me loose. God bless them; I hope they never regretted it; I certainly didn't. Columbia brought me Joseph Wood Krutch, Dwight Minor, Lionel Trilling, Ian Fraser, Louis Hacker, Mark Van Doren – as well as fellow students Robert Gerdy, Edward Rice, Robert Lax, Seymour Freedgood, Octave Romaine and of course, Tom Merton.

In looking back, I think I was ready, in that fall of 1936, in spite of the fact that I carried around with me, at least in the beginning, the classic Southern inferiority complex of the period (we carry a stigma, we Southerners, about blacks and slaves – we are said to be shiftless, rural and a little crazy), an attitude that in retrospect had a slight resemblance to the problems of a minority. Not nearly as serious, of course, and certainly not as long-lasting; with a little effort on all sides, we all soon became more or less equal. At any rate, I had been prepared educationally by one of our region's better public schools, perhaps not quite up to the level of the top New York schools of that time, very good nevertheless. Herbert Orlando Smith, principal at Atlanta Boys' High, was a classicist, and a committed educator. He was also a disciplinarian who had a deep love for his work. He made useful flowering plants out of some of his weeds, and he recognized the hunger for learning when he saw it and never missed the chance to nurture it.

While we were at Columbia, Rice became the editor of *Jester*, the college humor magazine, and I was one of his writers. Robert Lax, the poet, Robert Gerdy, later one of the better editors at *The New Yorker*, Charles Saxon, later a *New Yorker* cartoonist, Bob Gibney, Seymour Freedgood and Ad Reinhardt, the painter, were there. Most important for Rice and for me, and I daresay for a number of the others, Merton was also there. He was an illuminating presence in all our lives. This is especially true of Rice, of Lax, and, as I am now discovering, of me too. Rice recalled the first time he saw Merton; it was in the student center where most of the undergraduate activities took place – this was in John Jay Hall, where the college newspaper, *Spectator*, was put together, and where the *Jester* staff hung out. "I heard this extraordinary piano music," he reminisced, "loud and rhythmic, sounding as though three or four people were at the keyboard at once. 'Who are those guys making all that

noise?’ I asked a friend. ‘It’s only Merton,’ the friend said, ‘playing barrelhouse.’ He was my friend from then on,” Rice said. “We never lost track of each other, and since his death not a day goes by that I don’t think of him.”

In terms of sophistication, he was miles ahead of most of us. He dazzled the country boy from the South, as well as the starry-eyed kid from Brooklyn. He did all the things we thought about but didn’t do – at least, not yet. He drank a lot, partied, chased (and caught) women. He impressed the hell out of both of us by saying he had learned Hungarian in bed. Beyond these classical youthful, gallant boasts, he was also a very serious man. Looking back, it seems to me he was always right from the very start on the big issues of yesterday (most of which remain the big issues of today) – on racism in America, on social justice, war and peace, the trials of democracy that require us to work hard at it or lose it; the bomb; fairness; the value of the arts and the meaning of his own life and the lives of his fellow human beings, all of them.

I owe Merton introductions into my own cultural life of James Joyce, Graham Greene (he gave me *Brighton Rock* right after it came out in 1938, when I was 20), and Evelyn Waugh (Tom and he carried on an extraordinary correspondence for many years); Picasso, Georges Braque, Matisse, and, in the music world, Mozart. He influenced me so totally that I wrote a mocking parody for *Jester* of my absolutely favorite writer, my fellow Southerner, Thomas Wolfe, whom I adored, and imitated – at the age of eighteen, and maybe three or four years more. Tom did not share my affection for Wolfe; even today I feel a quiet surge of embarrassment for having found it necessary to poke fun at my favorite author in order to please the new people in my life. (One close friend of those days, who is still a close friend now, made fun of me: “You’re on the periphery of a coterie.”) Merton also, without any great resistance from me, guided me to Mark Van Doren’s class on Shakespeare; the experience is at the top of the list of the many wonderful things I got from Columbia as an undergraduate in the late 30s; with Mark Van Doren around to set the casual, human, contemporary tone flowing from Shakespeare, the reaction to the poet is voluntary and full. (With all that, I still could never get accustomed to the fact that student Merton and Professor Van Doren constantly referred to each other as “Tom” and “Mark.”) Merton also led me to jazz, away from Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller, to Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Jelly Roll Morton, Billie Holiday, the Mound City Blue Blowers, the Austin High School Gang, Peewee Russell, Eddie Condon; he was a jazz lover all his life, and looked for live jazz wherever he could find it, in his travels as a monk, for medical or other reasons, to Louisville or New York.

We worked together at *Jester*, on the fourth floor at John Jay Hall where most of the student activities were located. Merton, now in graduate school, had been a very good editor, a funny writer and an interesting illustrator. So was Rice – all three of those things. Lax was a sage and poetic presence, generous with all he knew about the new writers and the new art. Harry Rosenthal wrote very good Proust-like prose that showed a nervous psychological fragility; he later had a complete breakdown. Eugene Williams, an earlier *Jester* editor, when Merton was art editor, was a very good jazz critic; a painfully thin, fragile and high-strung young man, he later committed suicide. Chuck Saxon was one of our funnier cartoonists; he obviously was honing his talents for the success he would have at *The New Yorker*; he died a few years ago. Bob Gerdy was a wise, knowledgeable and talented editor, as he was to be later at *The New Yorker*; Gerdy died young on a New York street corner of a heart attack brought on by a collision between alcoholism and anti-anxiety medication, and I’ve never gotten over it.

Rice, Gerdy and Knight – we were instant friends. We spent hours together in Rice’s room in Hartley, often drinking a concoction of grapefruit juice and rum, nearly always listening to jazz and

talking about the coming war. Rice used fiber needles on his 78s, claiming they preserved his precious records better than steel needles. The fiber needles had to be sharpened for every other record with a special appliance; Rice used most of his spare cash buying fiber needles. They were light and flimsy; Pops Foster's bass on the Louis Armstrong recording of "Dallas Blues" was so loud and forceful that the needle and the arm would jump right off the record.

The shadow was always there. The world had just barely started again after the Depression, and suddenly it seemed to be coming to an end – an end quite different, more terrifying, than just the poverty and deprivation of Depression. "The war was coming, we all knew it," Rice said. "It looked as though the world as we knew it was finished. This made most of us party even more, but Merton became very serious about life; he was going even more deeply into medieval philosophers, among them St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, and the Spanish mystics, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. We didn't notice at the time, but Merton was now a sincere and practicing Christian. Eventually, he decided he was going to become a Catholic; since I was the only Catholic in our group, he asked me to be his sponsor. He was baptized at Corpus Christi Church near Columbia on November 16, 1938, with me as his sponsor, and Gerdy, Lax and Freedgood in attendance. We were all nervous and scared about the war. Merton and Lax both were pacifists, but they registered for the draft when the time came. I thought we had to be involved; in fact, that it was a great thing to do, a necessary thing. I was strongly anti-Nazi, worried about the threats to England and France, upset about what was happening to the minorities being persecuted by the Germans, and I was ready to go to war." Rice did not go to the war. An eye disability – a congenital coloboma, that prevented the iris of the right eye from opening properly, a kind of cat's eye – kept him from being accepted.

Increasingly, during the summer of 1940, Merton isolated himself from the rest of us at the cottage lent to us by Lax's brother-in-law, Benjy Marcus, in the hills above Olean, NY. We were all gearing up to become writers; we all brought L. C. Smith or Royal portable typewriters and sat around in the main room of the rustic, drafty little house, racing to complete more pages in a day than the others. Lax wrote about a travelling nightclub; the book was to be called "The Spangled Palace"; it later was published in *Jester* under Rice's editorship. Merton had started the summer before on an autobiographical book called at first, "The Straits of Dover," and finally, "The Labyrinth." Rice wrote something called "The Blue Horse," about a race around the world. My text was untitled, and, as everyone expected, was to be an epic about the South. The weather was foul, the news oppressive, the food terrible (it was our own), and the dishes piled up in the kitchen sink and around it. Freedgood was there, with his wife-to-be, Helen, who suggested that Freedgood should go off to Europe for a year or two in order to mature properly. Gerdy was there, along with Robert Gibney and Ad Reinhardt. There were also wonderfully pretty girls, Peggy Wells with her long stems, beautiful Nancy Flagg, and earthy Norma Prince, who painted a portrait of a naked Walt Whitman that was so large it ran off the canvas and on to the living room wall. Reinhardt watched us with amusement, and a painter's disdain for writers.

The writing lagged, boredom set in, Merton clearly was in the process of making an enormous decision about his life. He and I, Gerdy and Rice decided to hitch-hike to Cleveland, where Gerdy said he had a rich uncle living in Shaker Heights. We split into pairs to make it easier to get rides – Merton and I together, and Rice with Gerdy. I can still remember how unsure I was; what can I possibly say that will interest Thomas Merton, cosmopolitan, French-born, English-educated, deep thinker, poet and pianist, three years older at a stage in one's life where three years is a big notch on the sophistication scale? We got along like a dream. He talked at length about his brother, John Paul, who was already planning to volunteer for naval or military service either in America or in England

– to act before he was drafted, so that he would have a say in how and where he was to serve. (John Paul became a pilot, and was lost in action in 1943 over Germany.) We shared a love for the countryside; this was a bit exaggerated in me, simply because the lakes, rivers and farms in the northeast were so much more spectacular than the muddy waters, pine forests and red-clay soil of the South. “You will love France,” he told me. “Every part of it. You and France will suit each other, so don’t miss the chance to go.” I got a chance to go all right, but under rather forced auspices, and after a delay of several years. I was accepted into the army in May, 1941 at Fort MacPherson in Atlanta, and spent nearly five years in the armed forces, campaigning in North Africa, Italy and southern Germany. I think I did my job willingly, and with application, every step of the way. I remembered Merton’s remark made on our hitch-hiking trip when I first traveled as a soldier from Germany into France to Strasbourg, and then across to the Touraine and from there on to Paris; this was right after the war, in 1945, when France and Paris were worn out and uncared for, tired beauty on good bones. Another instant love affair.

Merton and I were stranded near Geneva, Ohio, not far away from the shores of Lake Erie; we agreed that it was one of our more beautiful spots, so we sat at the edge of the road for a while and soaked in the view. Merton then admitted to having a little money so we went to a nearby restaurant – which turned out to be one of those fancy small-town country clubs, straight out of John O’Hara’s Pennsylvania scene. We ate among well-dressed businessmen and their wives and girlfriends, and then went laughing back out into the night, rollicking over the scene. We slept in the fields. The next morning Merton handed me a page from his spiral notebook (he always carried a spiral notebook for comments on books and creative jottings, and a bound notebook for his private journal; insofar as I can determine, he kept the journal, surely the private one, all his life). On the page was the poem, “Aubade: Lake Erie,” which he had written, I assume, once the sun was up. It was minstrel-like, and a memory of France:

When sun, light handed, sows this Indian water
 With a crop of cockles,
 The vines arrange their tender shadows
 In the sweet leafage of an artificial France . . .

It was nostalgic for childhood, and suddenly, gratefully, optimistic about the future, as though a very important decision had been made.

Awake, in the frames of windows, innocent children,
 Loving the blue, sprayed leaves of childish life,
 Applaud the bearded corn, the bleeding grape,
 And cry:
 “Here is the hay-colored sun, our marvelous cousin,
 Walking in the barley,
 Turning the harrowed earth to growing bread,
 And splicing the sweet, wounded vine.
 Lift up your hitch-hiking heads
 And no more fear the fever,
 You fugitives, and sleepers in the fields,
 Here is the hay-colored sun!”
 And when their shining voices, clean as summer,
 Play, like churchbells over the field,
 A hundred dusty Luthers rise from the dead, unheeding,

Search the horizon for the gap-toothed grin of factories,
 And grope, in the green wheat,
 Toward the wood winds of the western freight.¹

I looked at a very serene Tom Merton; he usually had a devilish, mischievous grin on his face, but now it was calm and serious. "You have decided what to do with your life, haven't you?" I said. Yes, he had. In a way, the poem was mine, too; I felt I was a part of it. I still feel a part of it.

We got our hitch-hiking heads out of the fields and all the way to Cleveland and to Shaker Heights, but Gerdy's uncle wasn't rich and didn't want us around for more than a night. Gerdy and Merton took the train back to Olean, but Rice and I hitch-hiked together, sometimes separating, for lack of space in the car. On one occasion, I rode late into the night with a French-Canadian who drove with wild abandon and a growing anger; he had his radio on a French-language station somewhere, probably Montreal, which was only a few hundred miles away. The more appalling the news, the more reckless he became; I thought he was ready to kill us both – the Germans, the broadcast said, have just marched into Paris. Merton later sold "Aubade: Lake Erie" to *The New Yorker*; they paid him \$20 for it – an encouragement to all of us to keep on writing.

Merton, I'm told, visited the cottage on the hill over Olean the following year, alone. He was teaching at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, and had moved most of his belongings there. By himself in the cottage, he was lonely; he wrote and wrote, but couldn't get it right; he walked into the woods in bad weather and became acutely aware that something had finished in his life and in ours, that the old group was dispersed and would never be together again as before. He composed imaginary letters in his journal, as though he were a small boy at camp writing home: "Dear Uncle Harry, It is a typical day at the cottage. Tommy Merton has made a cross out of two sticks and stuck it in the ground in the woods in a place where he thinks he is going to like to sit, but where there are too many lousy mosquitoes." He enclosed pictures of "Jimmy Knight, Bobby Lax, Norma Prince, Eddie Rice" and other campers. "It is a typical day at the camp, mother dear. Next year at this time, Bobby Gibney will have left for the army three days ago, and Jimmy Knight will have already been some time at Camp Polk, La., and the others? . . ."²

The group was no longer a group; its members had scattered. And the scattering was to last a number of years, especially for me, because rather than return to America when the war was over, I got my discharge from the Army Air Force in Marburg, Germany, and went straight to work as a newspaperman in Paris. But before that, I did manage to visit Gerdy at the end of the war in Bad Kissingen, where he was winding up an excruciatingly painful military career by writing a history of his Air Force unit. I doubt there was ever anyone less suited for the military experience than Bob Gerdy, unless it was the saxophonist Lester Young, who flunked the test for different reasons; Young could never have survived anywhere outside the jazz spots of Kansas City and New York. Gerdy wasn't made for army life either. But he did his job, and he did it well. How he must have hated the discipline, the artificial sense of rank and position, and the ordering of other people around. Merton described him in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "Bob Gerdy was a very smart sophomore [in 1937] with the face of a child and a lot of curly hair on top of it, who took life seriously, and had discovered courses on Scholastic Philosophy in the graduate school."³ In fact, Gerdy's wanderings as an undergraduate at Columbia into the graduate school led him to Daniel Walsh's course on St. Thomas Aquinas; Merton was to be profoundly influenced by both St. Thomas and Dan Walsh as he moved toward conversion, and the monastic life. It could be said that Merton's life as a monk got its start with Gerdy.

After the German surrender, I led a company of black American soldiers in a truck company up

through the Alps into southern Germany; the company once had had black officers, who had been for whatever reason forced from their commands at the Naples airport in Capodocino and replaced by me and another white officer. The word had not got through from the Mediterranean Theater to the European Theater about the change in command of the 1948th Truck Company – so I and my fellow officer found ourselves the only white persons in an entire transportation regiment composed of black American officers and black American soldiers. Major Thomas Taylor, a music conductor in civilian life, and a gentleman, examined me with some surprise when I reported for duty. So did his Operations Officer, Captain Joseph Randolph, a Chicago lawyer – and another gentleman. The “mistake” was reported to headquarters, and I was actually visited the following day by an envoy with the exalted rank of major-general, who promised to get me out of there as soon as possible. Frankly, I liked the situation, and said so. Since Major Taylor and Captain Randolph seemed to like it, too, it was decided to leave matters as they were. I’m sure Merton would have applauded my staying with Major Taylor, Captain Randolph, and the rest of the black American regiment. It was a broadening experience to be on this side of things in our segregated armed forces. I had already quickly become aware with my black American truck company that we had two enemies – the Germans, and the American military police, many of whom spent the war hounding black troops. Taylor and Randolph were close to being obsessed by the subject; MP misbehavior had followed them from England and across France into Germany. I learned quickly, too, that very positive results could be had with my own men simply by standing up in support of them, when they were in the right, in their collisions with the MPs. Taylor, Randolph and I ended our war in a little blaze of equal rights.

Now, I think of Merton’s own humanity where the continuing American stigma about race is concerned. From Gethsemani, in 1964, he wrote to Chris McNair, the father of a little black girl, Carole Denise McNair, killed by the bomb that exploded on September 15, 1963, in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The letter was accompanied by the poem he had written, “Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll”:

This is not exactly an easy letter to write. There is so much to say, and there are no words in which to say it. I will say it as simply as I can, in the hope that you will understand this message from a total stranger. I saw the pictures you took of Carole Denise in *Look* several months ago. One of them meant so much to me that I cut it out, and kept it. It seemed to say so much, principally about goodness, and about the way in which the goodness of the human heart is invincible, and overcomes the evil and wickedness that may sometimes be present in other men. Being a writer, and a writer of poems, I eventually was moved to write a poem, and now that it has been published I want to send you at least this copy of it. It is a somewhat angry poem, because I think that a little anger is still called for. I hope that love and compassion also come through, for anger is not enough and never will be. At any rate, I wanted to say what you already know and believe: that the mercy and goodness of the Lord chose Carole Denise to be with Him forever in His love and His light. Nor is she forgotten on the earth. She remains as a witness to innocence and to love, and an inspiration to all of us who remain to face the labor, the difficulty and the heart-break of the struggle for human rights and dignity.⁴

The Merton who went off and closed the monastery walls around him at Gethsemani in Kentucky never lost interest in the important issues, and never stopped speaking out, often against the wishes of his superiors. He became a dedicated peace activist and turned much of his creative attention to what was happening out there in the world. He endured a continuing struggle with censorship

within the Catholic Church, and particularly from within the Trappist Order. Whenever he lost a censorship struggle with the Trappists, he turned to a kind of underground press, centered on Rice's magazine *Jubilee*, and published articles that were often much more courageous and on-target than the run-of-the-mill political commentary of the times. Merton had a number of ways of distributing articles that he was having *imprimatur* difficulties with; one way was simply to mimeograph the articles and mail them out by hand to individuals both here and abroad. But his main outlet was *Jubilee*, which Rice had got started in 1953, as "a magazine of the Church and its people," after a number of years of preparation and fund-raising. Rice has said that *Jubilee* probably published more of Merton than any other publication. Rice launched *Jubilee* as "a Catholic magazine with a pictorial format and a commitment to the Church's social teachings." My friend John Robaton, who teaches photo-journalism at Boston University, says it was "the best picture magazine in America." "*Jubilee* had fourteen bumpy but interesting years," Rice said. "We covered an unusually broad variety of subjects, from the cold war to first communion dresses, to corruption on the New York and Manila waterfronts, cooperatives, contemplation, the Desert Fathers, very early reports on apartheid in South Africa, and on the impending disaster in Vietnam. *Jubilee* set no boundaries. The Eastern rites were presented, to the amazement of some Catholics who had never heard of them, and the Orthodox churches in all their glory and tribulation, and other faiths, including Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Judaism." Merton regularly sent articles from Gethsemani. In late 1955, Lax returned from Europe, where he had been living in a Dominican house of studies, to write occasional pieces. Wilfrid Sheed eventually joined the staff as book and movie critic. And I, from Paris, where I was with the European Edition of *The New York Herald Tribune*, sent a text with pictures about Max Jacob, a Jew who converted to Catholicism, poet and friend of Picasso; Max had been taken by the Germans from the Benedictine Abbey at St. Benoit on the Loire, and died on his way to prison camp.

While in Atlanta a couple of years ago, I went with my niece, Joy Griffin, to nearby Conyers to visit Father Paul (whose name at birth and until he joined the Trappists was Frank Bourne) at the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Ghost; Father Paul had been chief censor for the Order in the United States and was asked to pay special attention to Merton's voluminous writing. We arrived too early and waited for about an hour while he took his afternoon rest, which he visibly needed. A tall, frail man of 87, with a wonderful smile, he said, yes, he had been the censor of Father Louis, and quite reluctantly so. But he did use the word "censor"; the administrative directive had said that Father Paul "critiqued" Merton's writings. Father Paul seemed lightly apologetic about the whole matter. "I told Dom Gabriel [Sortais, the Trappist Abbot General] when he appointed me that the man I was being asked to censor knew much more about the Cistercian Order than I do," he said to me. "But Dom Gabriel insisted, 'Vous avez du bon sens, vous pouvez le faire.'" From the way Father Paul described his conception of his functions to me, he must have been more of a copy-editor than a censor. "I just corrected mistakes in his texts," he said. "I never changed anything. Sometimes he was so busy with writing and everything else that he would forget to attribute passages to their author. He thanked me for this." Smiling broadly at his own audacity, he said: "I told him, if you didn't write so much, you would write better." Dom Gabriel died in 1963, and the succeeding Abbot General was easier to deal with where censorship was concerned. By 1967, Father Paul was able to write to Merton that "the green light was on." But, for whatever reason, Father Paul told me, "maybe it was just habit, Father Louis continued to send me his manuscripts. On one occasion, he sent me a novel he had written years ago. I had to write back and tell him: I'm not even allowed to read novels, how can I censor this book for you? Your friend was an extraordinary fellow," Father Paul said. "Of course, we couldn't talk with each other in those days, and I regret that. All our

talking was by mail." He went back slowly and carefully in the Georgia heat to resume his rest.

I learned more about Father Paul a month or so after our visit with him at the Monastery. Celestine Sibley, another of my Southern heroines, along with Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers, wrote in her column in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "They buried Father Paul last week, laying him to rest in Georgia clay in the habit of a Trappist monk." He had died only a few days after our visit. "He was a cosmopolitan gentleman before he became religious," she said, "traveling the world and enjoying its attractions as a young man." It sounds like Thomas Merton. "He knew Picasso in Paris and later he was to know the intellectuals of the Catholic Church. . . . He was a liberal censor (for Merton), a fellow priest told me."

It was very clear from our conversation that Father Paul, as chief censor, was not at all the main force that frustrated and harassed Merton the writer and peace activist. That was Dom Gabriel Sortais. In fact, his fellow monks protected Merton and helped him in clandestine distribution of much of the censored material. Dom James Fox, the abbot at Gethsemani, waited several months before passing along to Merton the letter from Dom Gabriel banning his "Peace Book" and ordering him to stop writing about nuclear war, to allow Merton time to continue publishing articles around the country and abroad. Dom James also approved distribution of mimeographed copies of part of "The Peace Book" even after he had handed over Dom Gabriel's letter to Merton.

Many of the thoughts of the banned "Peace Book" were published in *Jubilee*, in particular those contained in a long, slashing, deeply researched editorial entitled "Religion and the Bomb," which appeared in the issue of May, 1962. Merton wrote to his friend W. H. ("Ping") Ferry, of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions: "Talk about strident. I do not realize how strident I have been until I get into print. The one in this month's *Jubilee* will set a whole lot of people right on their ear, and I guess it is my fault. I could after all have been more circumspect and moderate, and there are smoother ways of saying the same thing. I lash out with a baseball bat. Some professor of non-violence I am."⁵ What he was lashing out at was the Church itself; in fact, all of Christianity. He could not, did not accept a growing consensus approving a first nuclear strike. "It is absurd and immoral to pretend that Christendom can be defended by the H-bomb," he says in "Religion and the Bomb." "St. Augustine would say, the weapon with which we would attempt to destroy the enemy would pass through our own heart to reach him. We would be annihilated morally and no doubt physically as well. The H-bomb may possibly wipe out Western society if it is used by the Communists, but it will destroy Christendom spiritually if it is used as a weapon of aggression by Christians." The stridency he referred to in his letter to Ping Ferry reverberated in the final paragraphs, in which he calls for non-cooperation on the part of Christians: "If the nation prepared to defend itself by methods that will almost certainly be immoral and illicit, then the Christian has *not only the right but also the duty* to question the validity of these methods, and to protest against them, even to the point of refusing his cooperation in their unjust and immoral use. . . . If we are going to defend Christianity and save it from the disastrous inroads of materialism and totalitarian autocracy, we must begin by realizing that the struggle necessarily begins within ourselves, both personally and as a group. The problem affects both the individual and the collective conscience of Christians. If we spontaneously approve of nuclear terrorism, if we become apologists for the uninhibited use of naked power, we are thinking like Communists, we are behaving like Nazis, and we are well on the way to becoming either one or the other. In that event we had better face the fact that we are destroying our own Christian heritage."⁶ The monk was speaking out from behind his monastery walls, fervently and effectively. And he was heard.

Five years later, in 1967, "*Jubilee* just stopped," Rice said. "It ran out of money. In looking back

over its fourteen years, it seemed that *Jubilee* had lived its life, had served its purpose. It was one voice of many during a time when clergy and laity joined together in a common vision and worked together in meaningful social causes. It did a pretty good job in documenting the struggles of people of many faiths. And Merton offered insights and guidance rarely seen in other publications.” The following year, Merton would be gone, too.

Rice, who sponsored Merton in his conversion to Catholicism, was at odds with many aspects of today’s Thomas Merton cult. “It presents Merton as a plastic saint,” Rice said in a conversation shortly before he died (on August 18, 2001), “a contemporary Little Flower, a sweet, sinless individual who has a direct line to God. But the God some people see Merton communicating with is not the God that I think Merton would have been praying to. I am not comfortable with the plastic saint image of Merton; he was no such thing. I see Merton as an individual in the grand scheme, and it makes no difference whether he is approached as a Roman Catholic monk or a Buddhist lama. He was Merton, and he has his influence as Merton.” In *Paradise with Merton*, according to Rice, are Lao Tse, Isaac the Blind, Ibn al Arabi, Confucius, Thomas Aquinas, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Charles de Foucauld, Teilhard de Chardin, Rabia al Alawiya, the Original Sai Baba, Susanna Flying Feather (his own wife Susanna), Ahmad al Alawi – “an endless number, hundreds, thousands of saints of all faiths, some with no faith at all. Such are the people Merton is associating with. He’s a world figure. He’s a man who fits into the scheme of the universal holy man with an appeal to everybody. His most important characteristic is that he is universal; anybody can approach him, pray with him, denounce him, love him; he is there. He’s part of the grand scheme, helping us on the way to that mysterious summit we are all searching for.” So there we were, the two of us at the age of 82, with nearly all our lives behind us: Rice, with his religion unique but still intact, and I, an active Protestant at a young age, having a long time ago stripped away those beliefs. Thinking of Merton. Hoping Merton doesn’t forget, pretty sure he won’t. When the lights go out and the spirit streaks off into the dizzying and frightening darkness, Merton will be there. I’m counting on him to reach out for me; then I’ll leave the rest entirely up to him; he’ll know where to go and what to do. I hope you have quick hands, Tom. And strong wrists.

1 Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 35.

2 Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 182-83.

3 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 183.

4 Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 332-33.

5 Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 211.

6 Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 73, 78-79; reprinted from *Jubilee* 10 (May 1962) 7-13.