

Merton's First Biography

Review of
Tom's Book: To Granny with Tom's Best Love – 1916

By Ruth Merton

Edited by Sheila Milton

Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 2005

no pagination /\$45.00 cloth

Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

It's here – what few scholars have seen – the long-awaited baby book of Thomas Merton, written by his mother primarily in Prades, France during Merton's first two years of life. And handsome it is! Gray Zeitz (who apprenticed as a printer under Carolyn Hammer) and Leslie Shane have created a keepsake volume of 425 copies, handset in Garamond type and printed via a hand-fed C & P press on Mohawk Superfine paper. (Alas, the special limited edition of 50 hand-bound copies was sold out within forty-eight hours.) This slim unpaginated volume (44 pages of print plus two photographs) invites reflection and reverent handling. Yet what is inside is just as valuable as its beautiful exterior.

Merton's mother selected fragments of her own personal journal to create Tom's "official" baby book, intended for the paternal grandparents in New Zealand. Her choice of data is both usual and unusual. Part I of the baby book is a monthly account of Tom's development through his first year. Readers learn that he smiled and turned over at 2 to 3 months, and that he said "aye" with various intonations, watching and even "talking" to a flower. We learn, too, that by his first birthday Tom had begun taking his first steps. Part II of this biography is Ruth's essay of anecdotes about little Tom. We discover his formidable powers of association, his resistance to getting dressed or undressed unless his mother sang to him, and how singing sparked little Tom's interest in words and sounds. Part III catalogues his daily routine: times for bath, dinner, and fresh air outdoors; sample menus; and a list of Tom's extensive vocabulary. Readers of Merton, the prolific writer, will not be surprised to learn that baby Tom was adept at identifying and naming birds such as kingfisher, goldfinch, woodpecker, oriole, and flowers such as foxglove, hollyhock, pansy, and chrysanthemum.

Two additional treasures in this book are Brother Patrick Hart's "Foreword," in which he compliments Ruth for being a "conscientious and responsible mother," and Sheila Milton's "Introduction: A Love Letter," in which we learn that Ruth Calvert Jenkins Merton was an "intelligent, clever, articulate, and a thoughtful young woman with strong artistic sensibilities." In what serves as a brief, useful chronicle of Ruth's life, we discover in the Introduction that she fell in love with France as early as 1909, several years before meeting Owen Merton, and returned there in 1910-11 to study art; her creativity also found an outlet in paid commissions in interior design. A few years after

Monica Weis, SSJ, Professor of English at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY, is the author – with photographer Harry L. Hinkle – of *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise* (University Press of Kentucky, 2005). She has served as vice president of the ITMS (1995-97), Chair of the Program Committee (1995) and as a member of the Board of Directors (1993-95).

embracing the Quaker religion and marrying Owen, she published “The Tiny House,” an essay in *American Cookery*, in which she sketched the design for a meditation room off the kitchen. According to editor Sheila Milton, Tom’s mother was a “lifelong creative force for Merton,” a key factor in his “vocation as a writer and a monk.”

Readers of this treasure will easily make the connection between the alertness of one little tyke named Tom and Merton the monk’s life commitment to contemplation. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton captures the essence of this life-long focus – learned in a primitive way, I would venture to suggest, in those early days in France. Contemplation, the adult Merton writes, is “life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive” (*New Seeds* 1). How good it is to experience not only the flower of Merton’s thought, but also its seeds in this important contribution to Merton studies. Kudos to Sheila Milton and Larkspur Press!