

Finding Merton Familiar

Review of

Tom Merton: A Personal Biography

By Joan C. McDonald

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Reviewed by **Erlinda G. Paguio**

Joan C. McDonald's *Tom Merton: A Personal Biography* is a combination of fact and fiction. It claims to be a "personal biography" because of the familiar approach that the author has taken to introduce Merton to her readers. In portraying Merton as a very human person in search of God, of himself, and of his relationship to other people and to the world that he lived in, she injects into Merton's persona the dialogue and self-analysis that she has created for him. She presents these as Merton's, but they are actually her own imagination of what and how Merton may have thought and spoken. Her technique may be innovative, but it is irritating and confusing to the reader when she shifts from a straightforward narration of Merton's life using "he" to a viewpoint in which her version of Merton's recollection is made in the first person "I."

McDonald, a graduate of Tulane University, held research, writing and management positions with the U.S. Federal Government in Washington, DC and in Germany. She is quite right that *Tom Merton* does not replace any of the biographies that have been published on Merton. Her biography is a creative, but sometimes misleading juxtaposition of Merton's autobiography, journals and letters, Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, and other materials about Merton. Her attempt to combine materials from Merton's writings with those found in secondary sources is frustrating because of the lack of references. Readers do not want to be bothered with an excessive amount of footnotes, but it is important to cite sources so that the biographer's account may be compared to her sources. When McDonald assumes the persona of Merton and recreates a conversation, a reflection, or a dream, she sometimes indicated this by using italics. In Book 3 and Book 5, however, the italics completely disappear.

McDonald's statement in her note to the reader that Merton "proved he had flaws by carefully recording them" is erroneous. Journal writing had always been a part of Merton's way of capturing his observations, experiences and reflections. He did not write about flaws in his character to prove deliberately to his readers that he had them.

Book One begins with the child Merton speaking: "*I did not know very much when I was six years old*" (19). Book Five ends with Merton's spirit saying in Bangkok: "My heart was stilled by 220 volts of alternating electrical current. I had become the ground" (437). McDonald's narrative follows the chronology of Merton's life and the publication of his writings. It ends with an epilogue describing Merton's funeral. Although the author has accumulated much information in her book, inaccuracies in interpretation occur in her description of persons, places and events.

McDonald writes that during Merton's initial retreat at Gethsemani, he began to think about the Carthusians: "From what he had read about them, they seemed to offer more solitude than the Trappists" (111). Merton had not read anything about the Carthusians before he went on retreat. He actually learned about them from a well-traveled Carmelite priest who also was making a retreat at Gethsemani at the same time. He told Merton about the Carthusians at Parkminster, who ate alone in their cells and worked alone in their garden or workshop. Merton read more about the Carthusians after he became a monk at Gethsemani. For several years he felt he needed to leave Gethsemani to lead a more solitary way of life.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton wrote that while he was in the hospital, he prayed the rosary that his brother, John Paul, gave to him at Christmas. He described it as the kind that easily fell apart, but he liked using it because it symbolized the affection of his brother. He preferred this rosary to the strong wooden beads that he bought in the basement of Corpus Christi Church (*Seven Storey Mountain* 276-77). McDonald distorts this in the fictional recreation that she wrote: "*The rosary beads John Paul had given me for Christmas started to fall apart. I suppose I pressed them too tightly in my anxiety. I had to switch to a rosary I already had*" (104).

McDonald's rendering of John Paul's visit to Gethsemani, the instruction he got for his baptism and his departure is informative, but lacks the poignancy found in Merton's autobiography. She writes: "*As the car started down the driveway, John Paul turned and waved solemnly to me, and I waved slowly back. I had the feeling I would never see him again. But I believed now that we would be together with God in eternity*" (139). This is how Merton remembered that day: "As the car was turning around to start down the avenue John Paul turned around and waved, and it was only then that his expression showed some possibility that he might be realizing, as I did, that we would never see each other on earth again" (*Seven Storey Mountain* 399). Merton's account expressed both his brother's and his own sense that this was their last meeting. McDonald's version focuses only on Merton's feelings and her own ad lib, "*But I believed now that we would be together with God in eternity.*"

Merton had a deep respect and admiration for the foundress of the Madonna House Apostolate. He wrote: "Catherine de Hueck is a person in every way big: and the bigness is not merely physical: it comes from the Holy Ghost dwelling constantly within her, and moving her in all that she does" (*Seven Storey Mountain* 342). McDonald's description of the Baroness as "a large woman in every sense of the word" (113) falls short of the depth and expansiveness of spirit that Merton saw in her.

Errors in location: Cunningham's Restaurant, where Merton and Jim Wygal took Margie, the student nurse, to lunch is not "within walking distance" (316) of St. Joseph's Infirmary on Eastern Parkway. McDonald may have been thinking of the old St. Joseph's Infirmary that was formerly on Fourth Street between Broadway and Chestnut from the 1850s until 1926. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth moved the hospital to Eastern Parkway in 1926. Merton had his surgery in 1966 in the Eastern Parkway location. During this time Cunningham's Restaurant was located on Fifth and Breckenridge. St. Agnes Church, where a memorial service for Merton was held, is not located "in downtown Louisville" (446). It is on 1920 Newburg Road in the Highlands section of Louisville.

The book suffers from poor proofreading and indexing. Father John Loftus is indexed as John, Father and Loftus, Father John T. McDonald writes that Merton was particularly fascinated by St. John of the Cross, especially his understanding of "what God is not" and notes Merton's writing of *The Ascent to Truth*, which deals with St. John of the Cross and contemplation, yet there is not an index entry for St. John of the Cross.

A welcome addition to the book, however, are pictures of Merton, old postcards of places where Merton lived, some illustrations that Merton himself had drawn, and snapshots taken by the author herself.

Tom Merton is McDonald's devoted effort to make Merton more readable especially to an audience which is not yet inclined to read his autobiography, diaries, and correspondence, but who may be satisfied with starting with a popular biography like this. Because the author is concerned with including as much information as she is able to, I felt that she was just treading on the surface of Merton's life. Her approach failed to evoke that contemplative spirit one finds in reading Merton's autobiography, journals, and other writings. Her treatment of some of Merton's most moving experiences are without life. I have many reservations about recommending this book.