

# Thomas Merton: The Earliest Stories.

by  
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According to Thomas Merton himself and to his biographers, he wrote stories, plays and autobiographical material from an early age. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton, already an avid reader, tells how he and his friends at the Lycée Ingres, in Montauban in 1926, when Merton was only eleven, "were all furiously writing novels" and that he was "engaged in a great adventure story, the scene of which was laid in India, and the style of which was somewhat influenced by Pierre Loti."<sup>1</sup> Although that particular story "was never finished" he recalls that he "finished at least one other, and probably two, besides one which I wrote at St. Antonin before coming to the Lycée." These novels "scribbled in exercise books, profusely illustrated in pen and ink" may sound like the poetic licence of the budding author writing in later years but, recently discovered manuscripts dating back to 1929 confirm Merton's description here.

In 1993 John Howard Griffin's widow, Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi, donated his papers relating to his work on the official biography of Thomas Merton to the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, Louisville. Among these papers there was a reference to a Frank Merton Trier who, in 1975, was still living in the family home, "Fairlawn" in West Horsley. Merton in his letters mentioned two first cousins, Merton and Richard Trier, sons of his father's sister, Gwynedd Fanny Merton Trier (1885 - 1986) whom Merton called "Aunt Gwyn." Dr Robert Daggy alerted me to this connection and before the Merton conference held in Winchester in December 1993 I discovered that Frank Merton Trier was still alive and still living in West Horsley. After the Winchester conference, on December 13, 1993, Robert Daggy and I contacted Frank Merton Trier and accepted an invitation from him to visit him at "Fairlawn." We were greeted cordially by him and introduced to his wife, Lady Sheelagh Trier, daughter of the Earl of Mayo, and he showed us several things relating to Thomas Merton and to his brother, John Paul, including family photographs, paintings by Owen Merton and the like. But the most exciting items in Merton Trier's possession were four early stories written by Thomas Merton. These stories were contained in rather beat-up looking, schoolboy notebooks, and all in Merton's handwriting, unmistakable even in his school days, as is seen clearly when the handwriting in these notebooks is compared to other later writings.

Merton Trier told us that Merton often wrote stories to entertain his younger cousins. He himself, he told us, was born in 1919 and was four years younger than Merton. His younger brother Richard, who died in 1968 (the same year as his cousin) was born in 1920. When Michael Mott took over the writing of the official biography of Thomas Merton from John Howard Griffin he decided not to follow up the Frank Merton Trier connection as he felt he knew all he needed, and indeed all that there

was to know, about Merton's time in England. Whereas at that stage Gwynedd, Aunt Gwyn, was still alive, and he also missed out on the opportunity of discovering the earliest known extant Merton writings.

I want to move on now to look briefly at all four of these early stories paying a little more attention to two of them in particular.

### “The Five Emeralds”

Four stories were discovered in the possession of Frank Merton Trier. The first written possibly in the autumn of 1928, just two years after his references to writing stories at the Lycée, was an adventure story called “The Five Emeralds.” This story was undated but was written in a Ripley Court exercise book and the style of the handwriting would suggest that it is the earliest of the four. The story is eighteen pages long and is unfinished. It also contains a number of illustrations by Merton reminiscent of his claim in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that his early attempts at writing were “profusely illustrated in pen and ink.”

### “The Haunted Castle.”

The second story, “The Haunted Castle”,<sup>2</sup> is one of the stories Merton wrote for his younger cousins, Frank and Richard, while he was spending the Christmas holidays with Aunt Gwyn and her family at Western Cottage, Windsor. It is dated 1929 and so must have been written in early January before the children returned to school. “The Haunted Castle” is a complete story, though the shortest of the four, just fifteen pages long. Of the four it also contains the most illustrations, no doubt to entertain the younger boys, as is the case with its story-line. Robert Daggy described this story as a “Winnie-the-Pooh” story and an early example of Thomas Merton staying “abreast of current literature”<sup>3</sup> due to its resemblance to A. A. Milne's Pooh stories. *Winnie-the-Pooh* had been published only three years earlier in October 1926 to be followed in October 1928 by *The House at Pooh Corner*. In “The Haunted Castle” Merton changes the names of Milne's characters and introduces a new character of his own – Winnie-the-Pooh becomes Sir Ted le Pooh, Christopher Robin becomes Dick, Tigger becomes Jagular and the fourth character in the story is called Toc-toc and is the man who drives Dick's toy toc-toc boat, the name of a child's toy boat at the time this story was written.

In the story Sir Ted sets out to explore a haunted castle in search of honey and is joined in his “perilous mission” by three friends. As in A. A. Milne's stories, Sir Ted has difficulty in reading and in pronouncing certain words. So, having arrived at the castle, Dick suggests they go in to which Sir Ted replies:

“Most certi - I mean certain - no, I mean certitanley - well, in fact, I mean Yes” said Ted - You see, he couldn't pronounce certainly quite correctly.

Once inside the castle Merton introduces us to the two other characters, once again in a way reminiscent of Milne:

Dick started to walk down the hall, when suddenly two voices were heard behind them. They turned around and there stood a little man, and a funny animal.

“May we come with you?” they both asked, all out of breath.

“Yes, come along!” answered Dick. “But, who are you?”

“Don't you know me?” asked the little man, who wore a funny blue uniform.

“I can't remember you” answered Dick after a while.

“Well, I'm the man who drives your toc-toc boat.”

“Oh, of course!” answered Dick and Ted both in chorus. “But who is the funny animal?”

“I” answered the animal, who was a large one - nearly as large as Dick, if he stood up on his hind legs - “am a jagular!”

“Oh!” said Ted, moving a few paces further away.

“Hmm” said Dick.

“Yes,” went on the jagular, “I'm the brother of the one whose skin used to hang up in Western Cottage at Windsor.”

The reference to Western Cottage is an interesting personal note and a clever literary device by the storyteller to entertain his young audience and to keep their attention.

The story of “The Haunted Castle” concludes with Sir Ted finding his honey, Jagular, some large joints of meat, Toc-toc, some treacle and Dick “a large box full of lovely pots of jam, of Bath buns, of eclairs, of jam tarts and plum puddings.” This story is the only one of the four to have been published so far and appeared in the winter 1994 edition of *The Merton Seasonal*.

### “Ravenswell”

The third of these stories, “Ravenswell”, is the longest and the only one to be accurately dated. It is one hundred and fifty-eight pages in length and was written between April 12th and April 24th 1929 – written in just twelve days. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton relates that the

Easter vacation of 1929 I had been with Father at Canterbury, where he was working, painting pictures mostly in the big, quiet Cathedral close. I had spent most of my days walking in the country around Canterbury, and the time went quietly.<sup>4</sup>

It is quite likely that during those quiet days in Canterbury when Owen was painting Merton was writing “Ravenswell” in a school exercise book. This is made even more likely by the dating of Easter and the school vacations. In 1929, Easter Sunday fell on March 31st but Merton Trier pointed out that the school vacation at

Ripley Court would not have started until after Easter Sunday and that it would have lasted for roughly four weeks.

"Ravenswell", like "The Five Emeralds", is an adventure story with illustrations. The story begins in the time of the Spanish conquests in the New World and then moves on to pick up the story of an early twentieth century family in England, the Ravenswells, who were descendants of English sailors who fought with the Spanish. The story tells of their financial difficulties and the rediscovery of a long-lost treasure from their ancestors' encounters with the Spanish. As "The Haunted Castle" had been based on current literature I decided to look into the possibility that the same could be true of "Ravenswell." The answer to this was provided by Frank Merton Trier who had in his possession a book Merton had been awarded as a prize at the end of the Christmas term 1928 – *Ravenshoe* by Henry Kingsley, the brother of Charles Kingsley. This book was inscribed on the first page to "T. F. Merton. Form VIth. Christmas Term 1928." and was signed M. H. Pearce – the headmistress of Ripley Court and Aunt Maud's sister-in-law.

### "The Black Sheep"

The final story in this collection, "The Black Sheep", is undated but the content of the story would date the book to the years 1929 to 1931, most probably 1930. The story is a semi-autobiographical memoir of life at Oakham School. After Owen's death Merton had no further contact with his relations in this country and since this book was in Frank Merton Trier's possession this would suggest this story pre-dates Owen's death and is from Merton's first year and a half at Oakham.

Chapter One of "The Black Sheep" is a descriptive account of Oakham and begins:

If you look at a map of England, in the Midlands about the latitude of Leicester, you will see a small space marked Rutland, and approximately in the middle of it, the town of Oakham. You will probably have never heard of the former, and you may have heard of the latter, for there is one thing there that makes its name known in almost any part of Britain, and that is a public school.<sup>5</sup>

The only remaining fragment of Merton's pre-Gethsemani novel "Straits of Dover" begins in a similar fashion with an introduction to the English Public School system and some information about Rutland and Oakham. This suggests some continuity in Merton's early attempts at telling his own story, attempts that would eventually result in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in further journals telling his story right through until just before his death.

In his next chapter of "The Black Sheep" Merton moves on to describe the train journey from London to Oakham from the point-of-view of a new boy to the school and early days at the school for a new pupil – getting to know classmates, initiations into the ways of public school life, rugby and corporal punishment.

Campbell, the boy most likely to be Merton in the story, is beaten by a Latin master for misbehaving and Merton tells us:

The chastisement did not make Campbell mend his ways and become a studious and well-behaved young member of society. If anything, he considered that he had a right to look upon himself as a "black sheep," after having been "whacked" as an initiation to that class of people. He now became a great deal lazier, much more carefree, and with his "nonchalance" he made his lot a great deal worse than it might have been.

From this particular incident we see Merton's reasons for calling this story "The Black Sheep." It seems unlikely that Merton would seriously be applying that description to himself at this point though, later on, he certainly would have done so and much worse besides. Whether or not Merton was applying the title "Black Sheep" to himself, it was certainly a very important literary device he would use in subsequent autobiographical works, giving them titles descriptive of his own life in the period in question.

In "The Black Sheep" Campbell continued to get into trouble and one amusing account was an incident concerning the Matron's cat which frequently kept the boys awake at night. Merton takes up the story:

... that night, the cat was putting a little extra vigour into its efforts. Nobody did anything however for a long time. Campbell was beginning to dislike the noise however. After enduring it stolidly for a quarter of an hour, he decided to try his hand at throwing water at the animal. He got out of bed and filled a mug with water, then climbed onto the windowsill. There was puss, a great grey beast, on the windowsill opposite. Campbell emptied his mug in its direction. The contents fell short of the window sill and splashed noisily into the yard below. "Hard luck, have another try" said someone. The cat ceased its serenading for a moment to gaze at Campbell in mild surprise. Then it went on, as bad as ever. The boy filled the mug again and tried once more. This time he was nearer, and the cat got splashed, evidently, for it got up and moved to another part of the windowsill. The third time, however, the water shot over the space intervening between the two windows, and hit the window pane just above the cat: the animal was decidedly drenched, for it arched its back and spat angrily at Campbell, who was about to retire to his bed again, in satisfaction, when up flew the matron's window, and the head of the matron appeared. She was very angry by the look of things, as may well be guessed, for her cat was her most prized possession - she cherished it beyond all limits of understanding. She saw Campbell's head just as it disappeared, and shouted across to him as she gathered the cat into her arms: "What do you mean! -What do you mean!" She was speechless for a moment, then burst out again "I shall report you to Mr Benson tomorrow morning you nasty, wicked little ruffian!" She rushed off for a towel, uttering soothing words to the cat. A titter arose in the dormitory. "You're in for it now Campbell," said some one. "She doesn't half get 'sweaty' if you even look at her blooming cat." "At any rate, I hope that's shut it up for the night!" said Campbell sleepily, and he tumbled over to go to sleep. He was not caned for this offence, nor did he receive anything but mild reproof from Mr Benson, the

housemaster, who was not as fond of the matron's cat as the matron should have desired. In fact many thought that he would like to poison the beast himself, if he dared. What did happen was that Campbell joined the throng of the matron's deadly enemies.<sup>6</sup>

"The Black Sheep" continues with a collection of similar stories about English Public School life concerning Campbell and his friends.

As Robert Daggy and I looked through these school notebooks with Frank Merton Trier we came across another written page in the notebook containing "The Black Sheep." From an examination of the notebook it was clear that no pages had been removed and that this page must relate to "The Black Sheep." The passage affirmed our view that "The Black Sheep" was a semi-autobiographical piece of writing. Merton writes:

The person I wrote about is the one I know best in the school... He is a funny sort of chap, and a most tremendous ass at times, he delights in making up wars, and is always ready to join in rags, provided he does not incur too much danger in doing so. His main idea in doing this, however, is the lust for fame. He only does it so that he can be talked about. It is his weakest point. He is prone to flattery, and rather sensitive. At many times, he does not know his own mind. He will be the best friend of anybody who chats with him. If anyone says anything against him, he is decidedly hurt, and hates the fellow - but soon forgets his hatred. He wants to be a decent fellow, and sometimes he knows how to but has not the will to keep himself in the "straight and narrow path". He is immensely proud of himself sometimes, but often he hates the sight of his face in a looking glass. His great ambition is to be really fit and strong, and if possible a good rugger player. Alas! I shouldn't think that would ever be brought about.<sup>7</sup>

Many years later in his pre-Gethsemani novel "Straits of Dover" Merton, after recalling some of his achievements at Oakham, went on to say:

All these things I thought I wanted: to be an athlete, to be important and admired: I might have been Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman*, all over again. However, it happened to be successful at it, at Oakham. But it is embarrassing to think about it now, and besides it is unimportant, all forgotten.<sup>8</sup>

Thoughts reminiscent of Merton's description of himself in "The Black Sheep".

After "The Black Sheep" we have no further extant literature by Thomas Merton, except for a few essays, book reviews and poems, until his four pre-Gethsemani novels - "Straits of Dover", "The Labyrinth", "The Man in the Sycamore Tree" and "Journal of My Escape from the Nazis", eventually published posthumously as *My Argument with the Gestapo*. These four novels are all to varying degrees, like "The Black Sheep", semi-autobiographical. In "The Man in the Sycamore Tree", Merton writes about himself and his experience using the third

person singular - in the other three he uses the first person singular. Looking back at his pre-Gethsemani novels in *The Sign of Jonas* and in *Entering the Silence* Merton makes it clear that "The Labyrinth" was an early attempt at writing an autobiography describing *The Seven Storey Mountain* as "the book I couldn't make a go of ten years ago" adding that "it has been cooking for nine years, since I wrote *The Labyrinth*."<sup>10</sup> If Merton sees "The Labyrinth" as an early attempt at writing his autobiography can we not see an early leaning towards autobiography as his preferred medium for writing in "The Black Sheep"?

The literary form of the autobiographical novel is generally more suited to a younger writer than an older one as a younger one would be unlikely to have the perspective necessary to write a "significant autobiography." In an autobiographical novel characters are frequently "put into situations which can be called extreme" and "in which the posited potentialities of the character have the utmost room to develop" - Campbell doing well in a race in "The Black Sheep" is an illustration of this. The autobiographical novel allows the writer to discover something of their "infinite range" whereas autobiography proper "tends toward practical wisdom" telling the way in which the author has "come to terms with reality" and found their way to "the realised self," it can reveal "in a person what in life may be hidden and only latent" and point to what the author "feels is his potential reality."<sup>11</sup> This, I would suggest, is what Merton was beginning to do in "The Black Sheep" and developed more fully in his pre-Gethsemani novels. He spoke of this in an entry he wrote in his journal in December 1939 speaking of the difficulty he found in trying to write material that was not autobiographical. When he tried to create "some new, objective, separate person outside myself...it doesn't work" whereas "such things as I love as I love myself I can write about easier than about things that don't exist and therefore can't be loved."<sup>12</sup> In "The Black Sheep" we see Merton's first attempts at writing autobiography and at trying to express, as William Shannon has said, "what was going on in his own heart."<sup>13</sup>

The discovery of these four early stories by Thomas Merton is important for a number of reasons. The stories contain no major revelations about him and no spiritual gems but in them we have proof of Merton's early attempts at writing stories as referred to in his autobiography. This provides us with an insight into the beginning of Merton's literary craft from a much earlier date than was previously possible. We also see Merton's interest in current literature and his introduction of it into his own work and style. Finally, we see Merton's earliest attempt at writing in an autobiographical style, a style through which he would eventually obtain international renown with the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

## Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p.52. Abbreviated to SSM.
2. Thomas Merton, "The Haunted Castle," *The Merton Seasonal 19* (Winter 1994): pp.7-10.
3. Robert E. Daggy, "Discoveries & Rediscoveries Twenty-Five Years After Thomas Merton's Death," *The Merton Seasonal 19* (Winter 1994): pp.2-3.
4. SSM., p.68.
5. Thomas Merton, "The Black Sheep" p.1.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.20-21.
7. *Ibid.*, unnumbered page.
8. Thomas Merton, "Straits of Dover" [unpublished manuscript], TMSC, p.18.
9. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p.218
10. *Ibid.*, p.212.
11. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: 1960), pp.176-8.
12. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), p.118.
13. William H Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*,( New York: Crossroad, 1992), p.19.