

Eva Gay: A Novel Revisited

by
Peter King

The American novelist Evelyn Scott was for some years mistress to Thomas Merton's father, Owen. Her novel *Eva Gay*¹ includes a thinly disguised episode drawing on the *menage à trois* comprising widower Owen Merton, Scott and her husband Cyril. At the 1996 Merton Conference in Southampton, a paper by Robert Daggy was delivered which focused on Merton's reasons for excluding reference to Scott in his autobiographical works, and suggested that his reason for doing so was his fear that her novel presented his father in an unfavourable light.

This summer in the midst of research for a book, I called up *Eva Gay* from the Bodleian stacks, and embarked on a journey of discovery into the past, and into the mind, imagination and memories of Owen Merton's mistress. What I discovered was a story which was clearly inspired by these real people and events which were a part of Thomas Merton's childhood formation.

Scott's novel is long out of print. Some commentators compare some of her fiction to that of her contemporary Virginia Woolf in its use of experimental and 'stream of consciousness' techniques. Michael Mott speaks of her work as 'neglected', implying that she has not been given the credit which is her due.² *Eva Gay* is a long work. It begins by telling the story of the early years of its title character, an enlightened, emancipated and independent young woman. It moves on to tell the stories of two men: Hans (whom Eva later marries) and Evan, and finally describes their coming together in a three-cornered relationship obviously based on Scott's own lifestyle of the early 20s.

Evan Garrett was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, son of a 'poor musician' as Scott puts it, big and pompous, and professor of music at a girls' college.³ Ashamed of his father (who was often drunk) Evan became his mother's favourite. He is portrayed as an affectionate child, yet detesting his well educated but shabbily dressed mother's expression of her love for him:

[Her] method of petting almost cured him of his whole predilection for loving treatment.⁴

Despite his detestation of religion, Evan is confirmed. Also, despite his interest in and ability at painting, he starts work in a bank, a job he does not enjoy. Here Scott draws on Owen Merton's own life as she relates how one day in the bank Evan demonstrates his rejection of the financial life by setting fire to the entire day's mail, and soon after is granted his wish and is sent to live in England with relatives to study art.

From England Evan (like Owen) crosses the channel to France, and at Hilary Jenkins' (note the use of the maiden name of Merton's mother) art class meets the American Louise Stone (can the surname be incidental given what we know of Ruth Merton?). Louise is described as neither pretty nor (at least at first) even interesting. She is reserved yet vain about her skin, even wearing gloves to paint. She also has tiny feet. Scott writes that she is 'by far the frankest girl whom he [Evan] had ever met.'⁵ Louise envies Evan and admires his painting, yet

He really wasn't good enough for her, he thought.⁶

Louise herself is described as a feminist, "I don't like things that most girls like ...' she said explaining that she really wasn't feminine at all." Furthermore, Evan notices her 'chip-upon-the-shoulder attitude about so many things.'

Her time in France, however, is limited. Louise needs to go back to the USA because of a lack of funds. Evan, unsurprisingly, doesn't want her to:

'I'm in love with you' he muttered into the folds of her skirt. 'You're not!' she said, 'You're not, you're *not*!', she cried out in a panic-stricken way. . . . 'Outside your work, you just don't give a *damn* for anything. . . . You don't care anything about the things that mean the most to me!' ⁷

At first the relationship is clandestine. If Evan is not tactful, his Aunt in England who is supporting him will cut him off. In the end their union is approved when they travel to London in face of impending war to present themselves to Evan's family. Louise's parents, by contrast, are aggrieved that their daughter is to marry an unknown whom they have never heard of. However, the couple are married in a Church in Forest Hill, and settle in London.

'She [Louise] endured love, she never sought for it.'⁸

Because (like the real life Owen Merton) he did not volunteer for military service, Evan one day receives white feathers (a traditional emblem of cowardice) through the post. This makes Louise hate the English – she believes that the war is wrong and hates them for branding her husband. Michael Mott in his biography of Thomas Merton writes of how Ruth's strong pacifist principles 'may well have saved her husband's life, but they lost him friends . . .'⁹

Louise is expecting a child. She is a fragile person, and is advised to rest. Yet she also wants her husband to do anything rather than accept financial help from his family. Evan decides therefore to desert her and join the army. In due course, tragically, the baby dies, Evan is injured on the battlefield, and soon after their reunion Louise herself is dead.

At this point the novel returns to its central character Eva Gay (modelled if at all on Scott herself?), living with Hans in France. One day Hans invites the widower Evan to tea. His assessment of the stranger is revealing: 'Beyond the talent he unquestionably shows, he's just a quite emotional, somewhat pathetic boy.'¹⁰ Eva doesn't want her common-law (it is, of course, her choice of principle) husband to see his new-found friend any more, but the friendship continues, forming the familiar Scott - Merton - Scott *menage à trois*.

Evan continues to write to Eva, telling her of his desire for her. He settles into a nearby pension, writing and visiting regularly, but Eva refuses to leave Hans.

'If someone I had loved had died', she said, 'I would be kinder on account of it – not turn into a narrow, stolid fiend like you!' ¹¹

Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, Evan is hospitalised with 'congestion of the brain'. Like the real life Owen Merton he is discharged. But now Hans advocates marriage for Eva and Evan – things would be much simpler if they were:

'This is my husband – and this is our friend.'¹²

The two get together, but the story does not end there. Scott's description of Eva and Evan's life together is not promising. He takes to drinking – 'Now he is like his father, she reflected frightenedly.'¹³ But the most damning comment comes later:

Never had Eva's brain lain fallow for so long. Never had she allowed the weeks to go without reflections and without plans. For Evan seemed to expect nothing of her but to give him pleasure by her existence.¹⁴

Eva, we are told, had made Evan young (again). But now Hans is unwell. Jealous Evan decides to leave Eva, a decision met with strong words: 'Then I despise you, Evan Garrett'. The novel ends with Evan's death from a brain tumour, Hans (in a faraway city) reading a letter from Eva breaking the news, and a final tantalising hint of his own suicide.

Precisely how much, and what, in *Eva Gay* is more or less directly drawn on the Scott - Merton - Scott relationship or the Merton family would require more detailed scholarship than is possible here. But what is clear from my reading is that the characters of Louise Stone and Evan Garrett open up for us something at least of the character of Thomas Merton's parents. Merton himself does not speak glowingly of his mother. Nor does Evelyn Scott. But at least Ruth was his mother. To the young Tom, Scott was a rival for his father's attention – and was even more demanding than his mother had been!¹⁵

Louise is portrayed in no uncertain terms as cold, selfish and reserved. The few quotes from Scott's descriptions of her which I have included above go a long way in presenting a vivid portrait of the woman whom Merton called mother. Evan, by contrast, is portrayed as in thrall first to his wife and then to his mistress, and as a weak man of mediocre background and talents. His own father, it appears, sought to be more than he was, calling himself a composer when in fact he was only professor at a minor girl's college. And, as Eva herself observes, Evan is heading the same way. Perhaps these descriptions of Evan (never flattering when put alongside Eva) reveal Scott's own true assessment of her love. In that case, it is not surprising that Merton did not want to draw attention to the novel.

Is the above merely an academic exercise, a show of fascinating but ultimately trivial information? Or is it perhaps more important? If nothing else, it underlines for us the importance of Thomas Merton's lifelong search for that 'hidden ground of love', and his clinging to the security and belonging of the monastic community. His childhood was unusual and unsettled, even by today's norms. Imagine then at age eighteen, both parents dead, discovering that they were immortalised in the thinly disguised form of Louise Stone and Evan Garrett, characters in the latest work of your late father's one-time mistress. No wonder Scott or her novels are not mentioned in any of Merton's

own work – it was too powerful a reminder of what it was like to be just eight years old and looking on while the future of your family teetered on the brink. Perhaps it was more than even a monk wanted to remember.

Notes and References

- 1 New York, H. Smith & R. Haas (1933); London, Lovatt Dickson (1934).
- 2 Mott, *Seven Mountains Of Thomas Merton*. London, SPCK / Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984, p.23
- 3 Scott, p.467
- 4 Scott, p.471
- 5 Scott, p. 536
- 6 Scott, p. 537
- 7 Scott, p. 534,5
- 8 Scott, p.552
- 9 Mott, p.8
- 10 Scott, p.620
- 11 Scott, p. 624
- 12 Scott, p.700
- 13 Scott, p. 700
- 14 Scott, p. 727
- 15 See Robert Daggy, 'Question & Revelation: Thomas Merton's Recovery of the Ground Of Birth', *Your Heart is My Hermitage -TMS Southampton Conference Papers - May1996*, London, TMS, 1996.

