

Thomas Merton at Cambridge – Rediscovered Writings

Stephen Dunhill

Thomas Merton's earliest writings to appear in printed form were in *The Oakhamian*, Oakham's termly school magazine, of which he was appointed editor in 1931. According to one biographer, Michael Mott, his contributions '... were a mixed lot, both in medium and quality'.¹ Other writings from this time, some dating back to his years at Ripley Court, remained in manuscript form until uncovered by Paul Pearson. One of his stories, *The Black Sheep*, was printed in 'The Merton Annual' in 1998.²

So did any of his writings appear in print during Merton's year at Cambridge? There are four possible publications to which he might have considered submitting work. The most prestigious of these was *The Cambridge Review* that came out weekly during term-time. Published from 1879 to 1998 it aimed to be 'a Journal of University life and thought'. Its editor was always a post-graduate member of the university, normally from St John's College. Alongside articles and poems submitted by members of the university it also included news about academic appointments, the text of the weekly university sermon, news of debates at the Union, substantial articles written by prominent academics, sporting news, reviews of artistic events, and once a term a full listing of all members of the University with their place of residence. There were also two weekly magazines, *The Granta*³ and *The Gownsmen*. Both were edited entirely by undergraduates and included articles, poems, reviews and cartoons. Of the two, *The Granta* took itself more seriously – but not too much so. 'Contributions are always welcome at our office. Especially do we like considering

humorous verse or prose, or prose that is serious. Poetry that is serious has no appeal'.⁴ *The Gownsmen* was much more down to earth, and had extensive coverage of sporting events. Finally Merton's college had its own magazine, *Lady Clare*, published termly. It mainly consisted of reports of each of the college's clubs and societies along with a few poems and articles submitted by members of the college.

There are a few clues pointing to possible articles published by Merton. *The Oakhamian* regularly included a section headed 'News from the Universities,' detailing the activities of old boys. In the autumn term of 1933 we read that '...he is already a confirmed journalist, publishing in the "Granta"', and '...Merton is on the staff of a paper called "The Gownsmen," less exacting than the "Granta," and less critical of Rabelaisian humour'.⁵ There are also two references in Merton's quasi-autobiographical novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*:

"Have you ever written anything, except in the Granta?"

"No, I wouldn't know how...."⁶

This is from Chapter XV Journal: London. Further detail is included in Chapter XII Journal: London as part of an extensive passage relating to Cambridge.

'...I did cartoons in the *Granta* and the *Gownsmen*. . . . I wrote a poem that was refused by my college magazine, *Lady Clare*.⁷

Thankfully the British Library holds bound volumes of each of the periodicals for the academic year 1933–34 where I was able to examine them early in 2014. In *The Cambridge Review* Merton only makes an appearance in each term's list of members of the university, with his address given as 71 Bridge Street. There are certainly no articles by Merton in *Lady Clare*. The only mention he gets is in the Boat Club report from the Easter Term where he is listed as second oar in the fourth boat. *The Gownsmen* is more problematic. No author

is credited to any of the articles or reviews; but even so I was unable to identify any article or cartoon that might possibly have been by Merton. Matters are different with *The Granta*. There are three articles and a single cartoon by Merton, all signed with the initials T.F.M.⁸

The first article appeared in *The Granta's* Christmas Number, published on 29 November, 1933. It is '... the last of the articles, which we have published from time to time, written by undergraduates who spent their long vacation in adventurous or unusual ways.' Headed 'Paris in Chicago' it refers to Merton's visit to the Chicago World Fair in the summer of 1933, amplifying in quite racy detail the two paragraphs referring to this visit in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁹ Certainly it would not have been passed uncut by the Cistercian censor.

The second and third articles appeared in *The Granta*, published on 25 April 1934. 'Night Out', describing a night spent sleeping rough in London, is intriguing. Does it describe an actual experience, or it is a piece of fictional whimsy perhaps inspired by George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, first published in London at the start of the year? Certainly the topography is spot-on. Merton would have spent many hours getting to know London during the school holidays that he passed with his relations in Ealing at the flat of Tom Bennett, a close friend of his father, just north of Oxford Street. 'A Crust for Egoists', contrasting Merton's lofty ideals of academia with the realities of his student life, with its slight tone of self-loathing, is summed up in the final paragraph. Six shillings and eight pence (one third of a pound in old money and equivalent to about £20 today) was the standard fine levied by the university proctors for student misdemeanours. One wonders how many times Merton paid this amount?

All three articles contain vivid descriptive writing, but capture none of the chaotic hedonism of Merton's year at Cambridge. For that one needs to turn to *My Argument with the Gestapo*,¹⁰ and the poem 'Sports without Blood – A Letter to Dylan Thomas (1948).'¹¹ So just enjoy these pieces, the first of Merton's writings that were available to the general public, as enjoyable precursors of his later

works that have inspired, and continue to inspire, countless readers across the world.

Of the cartoon published in *The Granta's* Christmas Number, published on 29 November 1933 and reproduced here little can be said. Perhaps it was produced in response to an exhibition of cubist portraits. Who knows? The context, if there ever was one, is now lost.



Thomas Merton's cartoon published in *The Granta*, Christmas 1933

Notes

1. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986), p.61.
2. Thomas Merton, 'The Black Sheep' (Foreword by Paul Pearson), *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 11 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p.13.
3. *The Granta* was founded by students in 1889. By the late 1970s the magazine was ailing. Rescued by a group of undergraduates it was relaunched in 1979 as a literary magazine devoted to 'new writing' with a readership drawn from the world beyond Cambridge.
4. *The Granta*, May 2, 1934.
5. *The Oakhamian*. The references are from Vol. 49 – Christmas Term 1933 and Vol. 50 – Easter Term 1934, respectively.
6. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1975), p.146.
7. *ibid.*, p.103.
8. When *The Granta* was relaunched in 1979 it did not take over the copyright of any article from the earlier magazine. I have been unable to trace the copyright of Merton's articles included here.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p.116.
10. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1975). See in particular Chapter XII Journal: London, p.97. For further details about Merton's autobiographical novels see Paul Pearson, 'Thomas Merton in Search of His Heart: The Autobiographical Impulse of Merton's Bonaventure Novels', *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 9 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p.74.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), p. 232. (Originally included in *The Strange Islands*, 1957).

Paris in Chicago – Thomas Merton

I had travelled out from New York to see the World's Fair. After two days in Chicago I was footsore and penniless. This I realized in a part of the fair called the "Streets of Paris." There was a dancer in a place called "Le Select," who used to twist herself about in the most amazing fashion. She came from the South: she had hitch-hiked from Memphis, she said. Well, I had treated her to a glass of beer, and we were talking. Finally I put down fifty cents on the bar for the beer. There was no change. An odd feeling came over me: I began to feel in my pockets: one solitary crumpled dollar bill was all I had.

I drank my beer and pushed my way out through the crowd of farmers huddled around the door. It was seven o'clock.

The "Streets of Paris" were everything that their name suggests. A conglomeration of papier-maché buildings, housing bars and pornographic peep-shows. At the moment, with the noise of the crowd and the yelling of the barkers, it all had the most depressing effect upon me: but I had not been there long before I had an idea. Near "Le Select" was a place called "La Galerie du nu." I approached. I asked to see the boss. To a tall, sympathetic Jew I unfolded my plan: "... You see, I can speak French. I was born in France. What do you say?" He looked at me. He asked me suspiciously to say something in French. I uttered the first words that came into my head. I do not know if they meant anything or not. However, he said it "sounded O.K. to him," and at ten minutes past seven I was yelling through a megaphone in French and broken English, fulfilling my promise to bring local colour to the "Galerie du Nu" for a dollar and two meals a day.

The show did not differ much from any of the others in the Fair; for fifteen cents one saw a few pornographic pictures, and then, as a climax, a curtain was drawn for thirty seconds, revealing a girl who reclined, undressed but judiciously posed, and who, when called upon, breathed deeply to prove that she was real. We barkers had instructions to describe her as the "Blonde Venus, wearing only a pair of black gloves, in the flesh and in the altogether, breathing, palpitating

right before your very eyes.” Although the choice of English words was restricted, I could afford to be lyrical both in word and gesture when I spoke French. If I remember rightly one of my best efforts ran as follows: “Venez, pelerins fidèles, au temple de l’amour, vous prosterner devant ce chef d’oeuvre de la nature, ce corps exquis et vierge” The French Canadians, of which there were many at the Fair, often seemed quite impressed: one, I remember, when I had finished one of my poetical descriptions, came up and said: “Doit ben y en avoir des cochonneries, là dedans!” And another, with an expression of mild wonder, asked me if I never had “des tentations,” working all night within two yards of such perfection. To which I hypocritically replied: “Eh! Que voulez vous, c’est le métier!” as if I had grown up in a nude show.

The barkers of rival shows did not appreciate fresh competition from the Galerie du Nu in the form of another loud voice, not deadened by three months of continual shouting. The owner of the “Life Class” (where, for fifteen cents you could try to draw a picture of a model posing, of course, in “the altogether,” or else just sit and look at her, as most people did), once came rushing out and found me leaning against his building. “Hey, you,” he cried, “I paid three thousand smackers for this outfit, and I aint going to have anyone leaning against it!”

All the other inhabitants of this fantastic unreal world were cheerful and friendly: waiters, musicians, barkers and dancers from all over America: many of them had hitch-hiked half across the Continent to get there. The three girls who took it in turns to be Venus for three hours each in our show had just left high school: one of them was terrified lest someone “from home” should come in and see her there breathing and palpitating for the cash customers. She had told her family she was selling peanuts.

After I had left the Fair someone told me that the “Streets of Paris” were controlled by the “Capone outfit.”

I wonder with how much truth I shall tell my grandchildren in later years that “I once worked for the notorious Al Capone”

T. F. M

Night Out – Thomas Merton

There can be few cities in the world where it is more depressing to be stranded late at night without money than London. On the Continent you could dodge sleep by wandering in streets still very alive, stopping, perhaps, for cheap drinks in cafés that never close, or you would have less trouble in finding a quiet corner to sleep in. Although in New York the police is considerably prejudiced against the obvious vagabond, moving them on mercilessly from all but the least comfortable places, yet anyone well enough dressed to look as if he might want to make a train journey, can find a sumptuous waiting room in one of the stations and sleep there unquestioned.

I was turned out of Charing Cross station at one o’clock: they were locking it up.

Guessing, quite rightly, that there would be little room on the Embankment benches, I made for the Adelphi and found a blind alley there, ending at the railings of the Embankment Gardens (closed, of course!) There, between a telephone booth and the railings, was a space large enough for a medium-sized person to lie down, out of the wind. I composed myself to sleep on a bed of newspapers. It was a quiet place, but I was soon disturbed by the sound of voices near me. Two people, noticing a pair of comparatively well shod feet sticking out from below the telephone booth, were trying to find out if I were a corpse, or merely dead drunk. After they had gone a suspicious policeman flashed a torch at me at regular intervals, until I began to wish I were dead, or drunk: I would, at least, have been beyond disturbing.

At last a shower of rain put a temporary end to my hopes of sleep. I got up, very stiff, and sheltered under Hungerford Bridge, drinking coffee at the stall there with three abject, silent figures, whose wretchedness was almost a silent reproach. With good shoes, unpatched trousers, and a trench coat one has no right to be broke. And indeed, as I shamefully put down silver on the counter to pay for my coffee, I remembered how easily I could have found some friend to put me up for the night, whereas these men knew no one, and perhaps could not even get a bed in a doss-house.

The rain stopped; I walked off towards Westminster, past benches where others lay who had slept through it all. It was about three, but for some reason I had a faint hope Victoria Station might be open. Of course I found it locked up and silent. Nor had the misery seen on the Embankment put me in any mood to admire the smugness of the Army and Navy Stores on my way to Victoria!

I finally dropped on a bench charitably provided for prim Belgravia nursemaids, and had an hour or so of fitful sleep, punctuated by half-heard remarks about me from rare passers-by. Small comfort that the women, from what I could hear, wasted a little pity on me ...

I woke up, stiff and cold, at the sound of a hose splashing noisily over the street, and decided that, although the bench was not uncomfortable, it was rather cold, this early April morning.

One would hardly call a coffee stall a warm place, but I was glad to get close to the big zinc urn and sip the tea that came boiling from it ... while the man behind the counter rhapsodised about a prostitute who had her " 'ome address" just around the corner. Perhaps this world of men, who work all night and sleep through the days, is never brought home to us, of the safe middle-class, more forcibly than by the strange, dulled, husky voices they all have ...

And now it was fully light. Red mail vans were passing in the broad empty streets. A brief train whistle sounded somewhere behind

the station. Thank heaven, I would soon find a waiting-room, possibly even with a fire in it ...

T.F.M.

A Crust for Egoists – Thomas Merton

White coffee-pot, and white milk jug, and white sugar basin, and the morning sun floods the snowy table cloth. I cannot refrain from becoming slightly anthropomorphic in this first expansion of breakfast beatitude: the two eggs seem to eye me complacently, and the warm milk smiles a steamy smile. My breakfast bids me an infinitely respectful good morning, as I grandly draw up my chair. Absently with gleaming knife, I stab the first egg. I am quite naturally grand this morning: I always have been very remarkable, but now I realize it. Now I am fully conscious of my powers. See me, for instance, scoring the winning run in next Wednesday's match. One of those superb off drives I have always dreamed of and never thoroughly managed to do. See how the ball goes scudding straight off to the boundary. ... I accept my college colours, modestly of course, but I cannot help feeling pleased, as I have waited so long for them.

But what? My essay? Now I fix the spectre of my supervisor with a cold stare: he squirms fatly in his armchair, he twists a grin, his voice grows feeble, dies out. I speak thus, and thus, and thus: respectfully, of course, but not so respectfully that he misses the irony. So, supervisor, I dispose of you as easily as this poached egg: a touch of the knife, so, and ... *dégonflé*.

Now it is Tuesday at eight. She has come, or, alternately, she has not come. However, I am equal to her low female cunning (in other words, dear reader, *mon semblable, mon frère*, he resents her coldness). I peer around the corner of Rose Crescent. Is she there, under the lights, by the posters? If she is, very well: I go over to her. Otherwise,

next time I see her, I simulate humility, apologize for not turning up myself. "Hope you did not wait long," I say, basely.

The cheerful crisp crunching of toast, the aroma of coffee, and the perfume of my own superlative excellence have all intoxicated me. Suddenly I appear, a Napoleon, in a magnificent attitude on a balcony. I demand silence of the cheering multitudes with a noble gesture (or rather he unconsciously sketches a Nazi salute, holding aloft a piece of toast). I launch a thousand ships, perhaps for another Helen. ... But no, peace is in fashion, so, for the same, I destroy everybody's navy and save the world. I am not quite sure how I have saved the world, but it is cheering my magnificence. I open my lips to utter a whole chapter of future history. ... A knock on the door. The landlady, ponderous destroyer of Spanish castles, comes waddling in with a slip of paper, and finds me inarticulate with toast. It is, she says, from the junior proctor.

I choke, I am an undergraduate, a minor; I am likely to be severely reprimanded by my supervisor for laziness: I have never made more than fourteen not out at cricket: on Tuesday I shall pay one and three to hold a clammy hand for two hours. And today, this

Moral. It would perhaps discourage most of us to realize that the only effect our presence here will ever have on the University will, in seven cases out of ten, be no more than a matter of six and eightpence in the proctorial chest.

T.F.M.

Stephen Dunhill is a retired teacher living on the Northumbrian coast. He has been an avid reader of Merton for over 35 years. He has been on the committee of The Thomas Merton Society for eight years and in retirement has been giving talks about Merton across the north of England.