

'almost as if I had a sister'

Introducing the Merton-Gullick Correspondence

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Introduction

Writing to Etta Gullick a year after their correspondence began, Thomas Merton remarked, 'Your letters are always most welcome, ... I can hardly think of letters I enjoy more. ... it is really almost as if I had a sister still living there (in England). I never had a sister, and really I have felt this as a kind of lack.'¹ The correspondence with Mrs. Gullick is one of the most interesting and extensive of the many in which Merton engaged. Begun in early 1961, it lasted until Merton's death in 1968. The correspondence file in the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky contains 129 items, in all 326 pages.² Fr. William Shannon, an editor of Merton's letters, recognized the importance of the material and devoted 40 pages to it in *The Hidden Ground of Love*. In gathering that material he, too, began an epistolary friendship with Gullick which runs to 75 items. Writing to her on February 24, 1984 Shannon noted, 'I think the set of Merton letters to you is the most charming set of all.'³

All this being the case, I was surprised when I began to 'pursue' Mrs. Gullick that *no* secondary material on Merton and Gullick was evident.⁴ The length, extent, and content of the letters makes this very odd indeed. Perhaps it is because Mrs. Gullick is not known in the United States, or that obscure women of an earlier century are not of interest. In either case, I have had the happy work of breaking ground in a new Merton field. In this brief essay I introduce Gullick, explain the genesis of the correspondence, introduce something of its content, and close with observations on the Merton-Gullick friendship.

'almost as if I had a sister'

Etta Montgomery Gullick, 1916-1986

Brief biographies of Gullick by William Shannon appear in *The Merton Encyclopedia*⁵ and at the start of the section devoted to her letters in *The Hidden Ground of Love*.⁶ The material is clearly taken from a six page, hand-written autobiography which she provided Fr. Shannon and which is preserved in the Shannon-Gullick files in Rochester. The following biographical sketch relies heavily on her notes.

Etta Montgomery was born September 7, 1916 and grew up and attended school in St. Andrews, Scotland. In 1935 she went up to Oxford to study theology, joining The Society of Oxford Home-Students, now St Anne's College. In 1938 she received a B.A. (Hons.) and married C.F.W.R. (Rowley) Gullick, university lecturer in Economic Geography. From 1939-1944 she worked in Naval Intelligence (Norway and Italy). Their son Charles was born on June 4, 1944. From 1948-50 she wrote articles on Italy for *Chamber's Encyclopedia*.⁷ In 1950 her husband was made Fellow of St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford where she 'helped by teaching men newly returned from the forces the History of Geography for their Preliminary Examination'.⁸ Her letters to Merton frequently describe college events in charming and sometimes hilarious detail. Somewhat limited by the academic strictures of her time, Gullick was a scholar in her own right, as evidenced in part by the fact that she was 'largely responsible for the index' of J.N.D. Kelly's classic 1958 study, *Early Christian Doctrines*.⁹

About 1958 she became acquainted with Abbot Christopher Butler of Downside Abbey who became her spiritual guide and who suggested that she read the writings of the English recusant and mystic Benet of Canfield. From 1958 she was involved with the House of St. Gregory and St. Macrina, an Orthodox-Anglican Centre and Hostel in Oxford, and worked with Donald Allchin, one of the founders of the Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. By 1965 she was teaching material related to Benet and the life of prayer to general audiences and to the Anglican ordinands studying at St. Stephen's House in Oxford. This led to exchanges in the letters with Merton about prayer and its difficulties, and about spiritual formation. Merton's letters to her on these subjects contain some of his most richest and practical material.

She met frequently and collaborated with the popular priest Fr. Michael Hollings who was then the Roman Catholic Chaplain to Oxford University.¹⁰ They co-edited several books including *The One Who Listens, It's Me, O Lord, The Shade of His Hand, You Must Be Joking, and As Was His*

Custom. She herself wrote a book on prayer, *Getting to Know You*, and a number of articles on prayer. The ones in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, *Clergy Review* and *Theology* are particularly perceptive.¹¹

In connection with her husband's work and for their holidays, the Gullicks travelled extensively. They visited Merton at Gethsemani in April, 1967, and she visited Shannon in Rochester, New York. Merton especially enjoyed reports of her European travels. When her husband retired in 1972, they moved to the Isle of Man, where in 1973 she became an Anglican Reader in the Diocese and continued to give talks on prayer there, in the U.K., and in Malta where her son, then a Professor of Anthropology, had a home. After some years of ill health, Rowley Gullick died on August 16, 1981. According to his *St. Edmund Hall Magazine 1980-81* obituary, 'His wife Etta, who is a lay-reader of the Church of England, conducted the funeral service at Rowley's express request.'¹²

Her correspondence with William Shannon began in 1983 when he wrote to her in search of further letters from Merton. As with her letters to Merton, these began as 'business' letters, but soon transitioned to an epistolary friendship that embraced matters of common interest including their mutual friend Donald Allchin, and biographies of Merton and their English reviews. Readers of Gullicks' letters to Shannon quickly discover that she was the source of many of his footnotes on the correspondence with Merton.¹³ Their correspondence continued until Gullick died quite suddenly after a short illness in September, 1986. Her memorial service was held on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1986, at the Catholic Church of St. Mary of the Angels in Bayswater, London, where Michael Hollings was then the parish priest.

Genesis of the Merton- Gullick Correspondence

In her hand written autobiography Gullick wrote:

About 1958 I had got to know Christopher Butler, Abbot of Downside, who became my spiritual guide and he suggested I read Benet of Canfield's 'Rule of Perfection', and I was so much helped by the third part of this book that I started working to produce an edition of it. To try to understand Benet I worked through the works of those spiritual writers who might have influenced him, so I had a great amount of material to use for lectures.¹⁴

Indeed she would have had, for influences on Benet probably include the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, the Flemish mystics, Pseudo-Dionysius, and others known to Merton in his own work with the Gethsemani Scholastics.

Benet of Canfield (1562-1611), born William Fitch in Essex, was educated at the Inns of Court in London. Robert of Darbyshire, then in Newgate prison, received him into the Roman Catholic church in 1585. Thereafter he left England, entered the Capuchin Order in Paris in 1587, professed in 1588, and studied and was ordained in Italy in the early 1590s. After holding various positions with the Capuchins in France and assisting with reforms in various Orders, he returned to England and was imprisoned in 1599 during which time he wrote the first sections of *The Rule of Perfection* in English. He returned to France in the early 1600s. The three parts of *La Règle de Perfection* (1610) treat three aspects of God's will: the exterior, the interior, and the essential.¹⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* sums up the three aspects as follows: 'At first God's will is sought actively in the circumstances of life; then follow the manifestations of God's will through inspiration and illumination to the passive soul. In the third . . . the soul contemplates God's will directly without the help of the intellect or images; this entails the annihilation of the self before God.'¹⁶

In February, 1961 Mrs. Gullick wrote Merton two letters, apparently in response to a letter from him which is not in the Bellarmine correspondence file. She speaks of Benet's Rule and of his influence on Jean-Pierre de Caussade, whom Merton also admired, and solicits Merton's reading of her own manuscript of Benet's work in the hope that he will write an introduction to it. Merton responded on March 5, 1961: 'I am reading Part III of Benet with the very greatest interest.' Merton found him 'very like Eckhart'. On April 22, 1961 Merton wrote that he had received the first two parts of Canfield's *Rule*. He offered to get a friend to do a hand printed limited edition of selected passages from Part III for which he would write a 'little note of introduction' and which would not 'interfere with ... a "trade edition" of the complete *Rule*'. On April 24, 1961, Gullick asked to check Merton's selections before publication, but by his letter of June 10, 1961, Merton had backpedalled on his offer of a small anthology, explaining that the publishers he had had in mind were not agreeable. Clearly, he had made the offer to Gullick before he had checked with the publishers. On July 25, 1961, Merton wrote that he had

heard from his Vermont publisher, who had declined the work, but he asked to keep all of Gullick's material on Canfield's *Rule*, some of which he hadn't yet read.¹⁷

On June 16, 1962, Merton mentions using her text in his study of the English mystics, but admitted that he had done nothing more about a publisher for the small anthology, but that 'I will eventually get a little edition of this done and I think it will be worthwhile.' Epistolary exchanges on Gullick's edition of *The Rule* become less frequent from 1963 onwards. On August 8, 1966, Gullick asked Merton to read and evaluate Fr. Optatus' evaluation of her introduction to Benet. Merton agreed on September 30, 1966. He wrote: 'I am quite sure your work on Benet is important and I have long been anxious for you to get it done. I am only sorry that I never managed to get anyone interested in doing the little bits I once planned.' Having received and read the introduction and, apparently, all Gullick's Benet material, Merton wrote to her on November 24, 1966, saying that she had 'done a good job on Benet', that hers will be a 'valuable book on mysticism' and her 'conclusions look right enough', but 'the writing breaks down ... sometimes gets very involved and clumsy and falls over itself when the things you want to say could be said quite simply and directly.' Then he asked: 'Are you in a big hurry to get this back?' Although their correspondence continued until April 1968, it included no further references to Benet.¹⁸

To my knowledge, Gullick never published her full translation and edition of the work of Benet of Canfield. She did produce two scholarly articles in 1972 which are listed in standard bibliographies on Canfield.¹⁹ The material on Canfield that she sent to Merton languishes in a file at the Thomas Merton Studies Center in Kentucky waiting for a doctoral student in need of a dissertation topic or a scholar of Christian spirituality to edit and bring to press her 'valuable book'.²⁰

Other Material in the Gullick-Merton Letters

While the precipitating reason for the correspondence foundered on the rocks of Merton's own over-committed literary life, the friendship flourished. The subjects we find in the letters, particularly from 1962, reflect many of Merton's own interests and concerns, and the simple joy of a well crafted letter from an observant and intelligent friend. As early as September 9, 1961, Merton addresses Gullick, 'Dear Etta', although, with characteristic English reserve, it is March 5, 1962 before she asks,

'Am I allowed to call you Tom? You sign your letters this way.'

The letters of 1961 focussed on Gullick's Benet of Canfield project and on English mystics, especially Augustine Baker, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*, all of whom appear in essays in Merton's *Mystics and Zen Masters*, with forays into Muslim saints and Orthodox theologians with whom Gullick was conversant through her work in Oxford. Orthodoxy continued as a subject in 1962 when Julian of Norwich, St. John of the Cross, Ruysbroeck and current affairs entered the correspondence. Merton addressed four of his Cold War Letters to Gullick.²¹ Referring to his anti-war stance, she queried on February 17, 1962, 'Are you unpopular?' From the outset the letters reflected their authors' spiritual lives, and by 1962 Gullick had begun to include in her letters descriptions of Oxford life and of her family. This informal, friendly material continued especially in 1963 and 1964, along with descriptions of travel in Europe. Merton delighted in these glimpses of English academic life and of Europe. (Americans tend to forget that having spent almost all of the first nineteen years of his life in France and England, Merton's sensibility was essentially European.) Gullick noted in her letter of March 27, 1967, 'I think you like chatty letters about things.' Like many monks, Merton certainly did!

The majority of the letters were exchanged between 1962 and 1964, with a few letters in 1965, a resurgence in 1966, and a tapering off in 1967 with only two letters in 1968. The letters of 1963 and 1964 mention figures in Oxford including Donald Allchin and Michael Hollings (Gullick collaborated with both on several projects), reports of conferences Gullick had attended (especially on Patristics), discussions of writers and their works including the novelists Charles Williams and Morris West as well as the important theological and spiritual writers of the time like Danielou, Maritain, Congar, Kalistos Ware, and Gullick's reports of her travels. Those interested in Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue will find in the letters of the mid-1960s absorbing comparative discussions of clerical formation, spirituality, and monasticism. Since Merton had revised his largely negative assessment of Anglicanism in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and Gullick was open to and appreciative of Roman Catholicism, their exchanges occurred on very fertile ground.

In the midst of all these high theological exchanges are charming descriptions of family life, the students at Christ's Hospital School, holidays in Yorkshire, Scotland and Europe, the opening ceremony of the

celebrations for the 900th anniversary of Westminster Abbey ('Queen Mother in peacock blue', January 15, 1966), as well as some very perceptive and sometimes edgy comments about well known figures. In short, the Merton-Gullick letters are a rich source of information on intellectual and ecclesial life in the 1960's, hers being a no less acute but perhaps gentler view of that turbulent decade.

An epistolary friendship

The sheer number of letters exchanged indicate Merton's commitment to this epistolary friendship. By his own admission, and that of William Shannon's evaluation, Merton enjoyed the correspondence, his '... most real contact with England', and not only England, but with the intellectual life of the ecumenical church in Europe.²² But evidence for the importance of their friendship goes beyond the letters.

On July 23, 1961 Merton wrote in his journal 'Fine letters from Etta Gullick, wife of the Senior Tutor at St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford. I say I will not make friends and yet I do, I have friends, and it is true that on them I depend for support and recognition. She is becoming one of them.' He continued, 'Etta Gullick is the one who is editing Benet of Canfield. Works of Eckhart. And of C.F. Kelley [sic] who used to be Dom Placid at Downside.'²³ On October 23 of the same year Merton's journal mentioned Gullick's 'wonderful letters from the Adriatic' (where she was in Istanbul to see the Patriarch in connection with her work with the Orthodox in Oxford), and that she had 'sent him Watkin's book *Poets and Mystics*. She wants me to read especially the essay on [Augustine] Baker.'²⁴ On February 11, 1964 Merton recorded that 'I have several books Etta Gullick sent from Oxford and have not got to any of them yet.'²⁵ Mentioning on July 17, 1965 that he had finished an article on Zen Monasticism, he wrote, 'I realize there is a great need for this element of recalling men to their selves, and they are not finding this easily in Catholic writings today.... Letters from Etta Gullick, about the same thing in England. The Catholics she (an Anglican) reaches with her ideas on prayer.'²⁶ In 1966, a tumultuous year for Merton, he continued to note in his journal material Gullick sent from England, and, on November 2, that he was reading the manuscript of her introduction to Benet of Canfield which he declared 'on the whole very good'.²⁷ Gullick and her husband visited Merton on April 11 and 12, 1967. Merton wrote to her on the 22nd that 'I really enjoyed your visit and it was nice to meet you both. I enjoyed

the picnic and hope we will have another someday.'²⁸

Clearly Gullick played a significant role in Merton's personal and intellectual life in the 1960's, which makes it all the more surprising that her influence has not to my knowledge heretofore been explored. She not only provided her own, intelligent commentary on events and ideas, but sent him books and articles, largely on the English spiritual tradition. At the very least, one finds her influence in the essays 'The English Mystics', and 'Self-Knowledge in Gertrude More and Augustine Baker' in *Mystics and Zen Masters* which Merton was preparing at the height of their correspondence. He must have enjoyed her admission that she enjoyed 'a good cut and thrust argument' (April 13, 1967) and quips like 'I do prefer genuine sinners to the pious' (November 2, 1964). In Gullick, Merton found a woman, not unlike Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, S.L, whose intellectual background, breadth, and intellectual capabilities matched his own.²⁹ A more daring writer than I might suggest that Gullick was the woman Merton didn't meet, and wasn't emotionally ready for, at Cambridge.

Sometimes rambling and disorganized, the Gullick letters are just plain fun to read. She was an interesting and complex woman in an interesting and complex time and place. She wrote with verve, style, and often provided quirky observations that were entirely devoid of mean-spiritedness. Finally, however, I think it was their mutual commitment to the life of prayer and the formation of spiritual life in others that drew them and kept them in correspondence. Of the many subjects discussed in the letters, the most prominent and pervasive is prayer and how to communicate its practice to others. Their correspondence is a largely unmined source of Merton's teaching on prayer and reveal a 'chosen family', a Brother and his 'almost' sister.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, William H. Shannon, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 353. Extract from a letter of July 14, 1962.
2. I am most grateful to the archivists at the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Dr. Paul Pearson and Mark Meade, for their help, hospitality, and many kindnesses during my work at the Center. Thereafter, Mark was unfailing patient about checking the Gullick files when deficiencies in my own notes might have led to inaccuracies. All references to Gullick's letters to Merton in this essay are from the file in the Studies Center.

3. The 45 letters of Gullick to Shannon and 28 of his to her are preserved in the archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, New York. I am most grateful to the Sisters who allowed me access to them and extended kind hospitality during my stay and to their charming, skilled, and generous archivist, Kathy Urbanic.
4. I presented a very short paper, "'Progress in Prayer?': The Letters of Thomas Merton and Etta Gullick on Fostering Contemplative Life', at the International Thomas Merton Society General Meeting at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York in June, 2017. No one knew (or reported to me) of any secondary studies on the subject.
5. 'Gullick, Etta', *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, Patrick F. O'Connell, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) p. 190.
6. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 340.
7. These articles are readily accessible via 'Google Search'.
8. Page 2 of Gullick's hand written autobiography in the Rochester SSJ archives.
9. J.N.D. Kelly, from the Preface to the First Edition (1958), and quoted in J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Revised Edition) (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. vi. Kelly continued: 'It is also pleasant to recall that it was at Bincombe, the Somerset house of Rowley and Etta Gullick, that the first chapters were laboriously drafted and the last were typed out in their final form.'
10. For an appreciative and balanced introduction to Hollings, see his February 22, 1977 obituary in *The Independent*.
11. See, for example, 'Short Prayers', *The Clergy Review* 51 (January, 1966) pp. 35-40; 'Intercession', *The Clergy Review* 52 (January, 1967), pp. 35-44; 'Christocentric and Theocentric Prayer', *Theology* 70 (August, 1967), pp. 343-347; 'Christocentric and Theocentric Prayer', concluded *Theology* 70 (September, 1967), pp. 409-413. I am grateful to Cheryl R. Harshman, Director of the Library at West Liberty University, West Liberty, WV for procuring the *Theology* articles for me.
12. *St. Edmund Hall Magazine 1980-81*, pp. 2, 4.
13. In the Gullick file at the Thomas Merton Studies Center there are several pages of Shannon's end notes which indicate how extensively he relied on information in her letters.
14. Pages 4-5 in manuscript in SSJ, Rochester archives.
15. The complete French version of the work appeared in 1610. Due to criticisms of the bold and somewhat controversial theology of part III, Benet only brought out editions in English of parts I and II.
16. 'Benet of Canfield' entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 188-189.
17. All details and excerpts in this paragraph come from *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 340-344.

18. All excerpts in this paragraph come from *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 352 & 377.
19. Etta Gullick, 'The Life of Father Benet of Canfield', *Collectanea Franciscana* 42 (1972), pp. 39-67 and 'Benet of Canfield. The Rule of Perfection: the active and contemplative life', *Laurentianum* 13 (1972), pp. 401-436.
20. Mark Meade at the Merton Center in Bellarmine writes: '... the complete manuscript [was] sent in sections by parcel in envelopes of Claude Fredericks, the printer from Vermont. ... there are 15 folders of materials. What is in the "Supereminent" file in C.2 came in 2013 from Gethsemani. There were four pieces of correspondence that came in 2013 as well.'
21. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 346-347 (CWL 1), pp. 348-351 (CWLs 14 & 63), pp. 355-356 (CWL 108).
22. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 353.
23. *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol 4 1960-1963*, Victor A. Kramer, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 144.
24. *Turning Toward the World*, p. 173.
25. *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 5 1963-1965*. Robert E. Daggy, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 75.
26. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 271.
27. *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol 6 1966-1967*, Christine M. Bochen, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 27, 157.
28. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 378.
29. For more information about Merton and Sr. Mary Luke Tobin see *Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto*, Bonnie Thurston (General Editor), (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Press, 2010).

This article is the first of two by Bonnie Thurston about Merton and Gullick. The second, which will be in our 2018 Eastertide edition, will examine the contents of the correspondence relating to prayer and spirituality.

Bonnie Thurston, after an academic career, lives quietly in her home state of West Virginia in the USA. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on Merton and has focused on his poetry and inter-religious thought. A founding member of the International Thomas Merton Society, she served as its third president, and received a 'Louie' award for service to the Society. She has written numerous articles, given retreats, and lectured on Merton widely in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Europe. She edited *Thomas Merton and Buddhism* (Fons Vitae Press, 2007), *Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton & Loretto* (Fons Vitae, 2010) and *Thomas Merton on Eastern Meditation* (New Directions, 2012). Her work on Merton has been translated into Dutch, German, Italian, and Spanish. Her latest volume of poetry, *From Darkness to Eastering*, has just been published by Wild Goose Press (publisher of the Iona Community). 3 of her poems may be found on pages 48, 49 & 60.