

## Shared Facts, Different Stories: The Mother of Thomas Merton

by  
Sheila M Hempstead Milton

It is a matter of interest to me that people can share the same facts of certain events and yet hold widely different views and tell contradictory stories about them. I am particularly fascinated by Thomas Merton's change in perception of his mother Ruth.

While the late Dr. Daggy has shown Owen to be something other than the saint Merton consistently portrayed, most Merton scholars' views of Ruth have never wavered since the published version of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. However, I believe that she, too, is a complex person. Close consideration of her letters to her future mother-in-law and to her former painting instructor, of "Tom's Book," and of the paragraphs cut by editors from Merton's autobiography, along with the content of his newly published private journals, all raise in my mind some perplexing questions.

For example, how and why did she lose her youthful spontaneity and her zest for life, only to become in a few short years a severe and exacting person? Did she begin this change of personality when she transferred her personal ambition to become a painter on to Owen? She has said that she stopped painting because she thought her talent was only mediocre. What caused their deeply passionate love for each other to wither? Why did she try to impress Owen's mother with her promise to nurture him rather than try to win her over by promising grandchildren? Why was the possibility of their having children never a part of her equation of how the young couple would manage Owen's choice to paint for a living?

If, as Daggy suggests, Ruth and Owen lived together in a "Bohemian style" prior to their marriage, why didn't she get pregnant, while in the early weeks of their marriage she conceives Tom? Did a deterioration in their marriage coincide with the burdens of poverty compounded by the demands of raising their first child? Was it the pressures of a country at war or something else which compelled Owen, Ruth and young Tom to move back to the home of Ruth's parents in Douglaston, Long Island? Was Owen having an affair with Evelyn Scott as Daggy has suggested, just after John-Paul was conceived? Did Ruth unconsciously transfer onto Tom her

expectations to become a famous artist, and were such expectations stimulated by Tom's exceptional brightness and precociousness?

In the final months of her life, did she develop a cancer, and/or did she in fact withdraw from life in great bitterness and attempt to starve herself, as a late family member has claimed to me personally, and which Michael Mott alludes to in the official biography but now wishes to recant as mere rumour? Rumour or not, to this day, the resentment harboured by the descendants of Ruth's sister-in-law make it impossible to access Ruth's memorabilia and journals along with Merton's early childhood writings, and thereby perpetuating their original one-sided story.

These issues have hardly been raised by the several biographers (notably Mott, Callard and Daggy) of Thomas and Owen Merton over the years, let alone explored with much openness. General biographical commentary has been made by Rice, Sussman, Furlong, Griffin, Padavano, Shannon, Cooper, and Forest, to name a few. Besides me, only Padavano and Mott have suggested that Tom's vocation as a writer was inherited from Ruth.

I believe Ruth Jenkins Merton remained a life-long creative influence on her son Tom, and one day, I hope to establish a clear and concise portrait of Ruth. But all the records necessary for this may no longer exist, and those that do, remain inaccessible, so such a portrait may remain incomplete. Ruth the woman, wife and mother is an enigma, and may well remain so.

What perplexes me is that most Merton scholars are willing to accept at face value Merton's early accounts of his parents in the *Seven Story Mountain*. I admire and trust Dr. Daggy's views, but we could never agree on one subject: Ruth. Over the past few years, Dr. Daggy has shown us a fuller and more complete picture of Owen, a picture that contradicts Merton's assessment of his father. Courageous for being alone in this endeavor, Daggy, however, has never accorded Ruth the same possibility that there may be a contradiction in Merton's assessment of her. Let me be perfectly clear: I have no argument with the validity of Merton's early recollections. There is no doubt in my mind that Merton gives us a true account of his experience of Ruth, his mother. My doubt comes from the fact that his daily experience of Ruth ends at the age of six years. Perhaps more importantly, the overvaluing of his father, as proved by Daggy, I believe, may compensate for his undervaluing of his mother Ruth, and I believe Merton undervalued her on a conscious level simply because she died.

Keeping in mind that Merton perhaps needed to believe his stories about his parents, does that mean that we should accept them also? In 1961 Merton had an unexpected visitor, Aunt Kit, one of his father's sisters from New Zealand. Much of their conversation was about family history, and it must have occurred to each of them that for all the big families of the last generation, there were now few surviving Mertons. Merton took notes of what Aunt Kit said, feeling he was learning a great deal for the first time. About this Mott remarks that there were some odd confusions. Merton's stories and recollections did not match Aunt Ka's memories. Mott interprets this as, "Either the myths were too strong, or it was Aunt Ka, Aunt Kit's sister, who was the true family historian"<sup>1</sup>. It is central to my present theme that this sort of remark of Mott's, while apparently substantiated by reference to Merton's journal entry for the day and a letter from him to Aunt Ka on Sept. 23, 1964<sup>2</sup>, conveys myth-making of its own, interjected with such offhandedness so as to appear to be Merton's own thought, which it is not. However, Merton wrote in his private journal for Nov. 4, 1961:

It is from the Bird family, Gertrude Grierson's family in Wales, UK, that comes our face - the one Father had and I have . . . and Aunt Maud, too, the look, the grin, the brow. . . . When she [Granny] came to Flushing [New York] with [Aunt] Kit in 1919, I was four and I remember her very well. The reason I remember her is her affection. [Aunt] Kit said Granny and my mother didn't get along, and that Mother thought Granny was being too indulgent with me and that I ought to be made to obey. *I remember Mother as strict, stoical and determined.* Granny believed children ought to be brought up by love".<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising to learn that Granny and Ruth didn't get along. Their views on raising children were entirely different. Merton continues this entry with what appears to be a further recollection of his mother. He writes, "Mother's integrity, directness, sincerity." These qualities we would not have difficulty in assigning to Merton! This is followed by a direct quotation of Kit's observations of Ruth: "She was 'artistic but not an intellectual.'" This view of Aunt Kit's contradicts the commonly held view of Ruth as an intellectual, and I might add that the term "intellectual" has been generally perceived as a negative attribute. Merton continues with his own thoughts again about his mother and father: "And she was practical, more so than Father. The Mertons were all eminently impractical."

Merton records more of the family story the next day for his Nov. 5, 1961 journal entry:

"My Mother, whom he [my father] met in Paris was studying interior decorating. They married hoping to sell pictures to tourists who came through the south of France, but the war [WWI] stopped that. [ . . . ] My mother was strongly pacifist and opposed further going to war, saying it would be murder. She also was strong on poverty and did not want to have many possessions. Whatever asceticism I have in me seems to have to do with her and my problems about asceticism are inseparable from my problems about her. Certainly I understand my vocation a bit better"<sup>4</sup>.

This is a remarkable journal entry. I think this is the first time Merton reveals an awareness of sharing with his mother the problems about asceticism, and in the same breath conjoins problems about her with a better understanding of his vocation. If we take this sense of asceticism to include the embrace of poverty and the distrust of possessions, we recognize that Ruth, however problematically, inhabits the center of Merton's vocation. They are in fact inseparable. It would appear that it takes Aunt Kit's visit to the monastery in Nov. 1961 and their talking about both sides of the family to instigate these thoughts in Merton. But most importantly, this entry is notably free of blame, yet full of responsibility for his own issues. What is revealed here is an incredibly rare glimpse of Merton's acknowledged intimacy that he shared with his mother Ruth. We finally see just how closely integrated was his understanding of her and her importance to his vocation.

Merton closes his entry for Nov. 5, 1961 by saying he's sorry to see Aunt Kit go, and recalls it is 42 years since he last saw her, and 20 years since seeing a blood relative. This is no small regret as he figures he will probably never see her again. He writes of her, "Lots of lines in her face, but much animation. Thin and energetic, she reminds me of Aunt Maud"<sup>5</sup>. Aunt Maud, we remember, was the wife of the Ealing school headmaster Benjamin Pierce who got Tom into Ripley Court as preparation for Oakham. Aunt Maud was not just part of the Bird family, she became Merton's primary mother figure after Ruth died.

I do not wish to infer an entire picture of clearly projected motives through such a paucity of evidence. Nonetheless, the lesson here is that there is in fact some evidence for the importance of Ruth's

relationship to his life than has yet been fully acknowledged. As a result of his conversations with Aunt Kit, Merton, now 46 years old, develops a new understanding of Ruth, or perhaps sees her for the first time, and acknowledges that he share valued traits with his mother. These passages Merton has in fact left in rather plain view, at least for his biographers and now, through the publication of the private journals, for the rest of his readers. Again, I offer as an example of a more balanced view of Ruth provided by Merton himself in the paragraph edited out of the published *Seven Story Mountain*, still sleeping in the Boston College library, and still ignored even in the latest dissertations.

Getting back to the all-important journal entry of Nov. 5, 1961, for the first time we have Merton as a man, a monk, a poet and a writer speaking of his mother. As he gives her credit for his asceticism, he acknowledges other attributes that they share, such as her strength of belief in pacifism and in poverty. We suddenly sense his recognition of her as a source for these same things in himself. At the same time we see this as a step apart from the super-inflated rhetoric he reserved for Owen. Thus far I have found that the mature Merton gives us no basis to infer this sort of presence of Owen in Merton's understanding of his own vocation. We may recall that only the biographers do this, and that in *Seven Story Mountain* Merton credits Owen and to some extent Ruth for his own artistic sensibility. We may note numerous commentators who attribute Merton's passion for writing only to Owen. But just as with our consideration of Ruth, we must keep in mind that the autobiography is not definitive in the descriptions of Owen, Ruth, or Tom himself. Most of us as we get to be of a certain age come to an understanding of our parents as being inseparable from us. To those of us who have believed ourselves to be quite different from our parents this realization can come as a bit of a shock!

Ruth was the writer who provided her young son with a discipline and a stability he could trust. These are precisely the things he gratefully regained when he entered the monastery, and the things he ultimately opted for, when he heart-wrenchingly ended his love-relationship with Margaret (stating as much in a journal entry as late as Nov. 12, 1967<sup>6</sup>). I believe that from his infancy, Ruth shows him the spiritual value of these matters, and in particular his understanding of poverty. Was this due to the fact that she saw the image of Christ in her child or was it simply self love on her part? We may never know the answer, but a deep form of love firmly bonded Tom to her.

Mott recently confirmed in a conversation with me that Merton had no idea of just how poor his parents were.<sup>7</sup> Ruth, we can safely assume, was able to feed her children even if she herself was not able to eat nor could she provide them with medical and dental care. Merton never writes about his memories of being hungry. In my experience, I have never forgotten going to bed at night hungry as a small child during war time, nor the memory of my mother setting traps for rabbits. On the rare occasion of her success, I vividly remember eating this treat. In one of my own journals I wrote that I experienced an enormous sense of hope as I ate rabbit! As Ruth ate less and less in her sacrifice for her children (as Pat Priest told me in 1993), did Ruth lose hope? Did she recall how seven years earlier she had speculated in a letter to her future mother-in-law on the effects of poverty and the possible harmful changes poverty may cause in a person's character? Ruth wrote to her future mother-in-law,

I know it often brings with it worries and sadnesses which spoil one's disposition if not one's character. So it is not the being poor which we are going to be on our guard against, but being spoiled by being poor. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

It was at this time that Ruth was earning money interior decorating in New York as she had done in Paris. Also, when her family moved to Douglaston she enthusiastically decorated the rooms of their new house. In a letter written seven months later, Ruth answers Gertrude on the subject of income, "We are both strong and could work with our hands if we were in danger of starving"<sup>9</sup>. Ruth may be making these assumptions based on her father's experience. She writes in another letter, "He was very poor when a boy and got his education and started into a business career by his own efforts"<sup>10</sup>. Perhaps, because her father succeeds, Ruth believes Owen will, too. Her hope is also based on her own expectations to be able to work. This is a novel approach in 1913. Her mother did not work outside the home; and remember, women were still eight years from getting the vote! What is more striking to me is that Ruth does not expect children. As I indicated at the start of this talk, Ruth makes no mention of them in her letters to Gertrude about her and Owen's future together.

But, from Ruth's letters we see that she was also utterly serious about helping her husband fulfill his artistic aspirations, and she was devoted to Owen just as she was to become devoted to Tom. However, there is no doubt that Ruth was strict about the all-important matter of educating her precocious son Tom. The fact that

she nursed Tom indicates an intimate bond with her child. In fact, to nurse a baby, the baby must be held in a way that produces in the child an intimate connection with the mother's body for which there is no substitution. This provides the shared experience of eye contact, warmth, security, dependency. Furthermore, such intimate caring takes time and no small effort.

Excellent examples of good mothering are recorded in Tom's Book. She writes that at 7 months old, "When he was called, he came with joyous shouts to announce himself."<sup>11</sup> When he was 8 months old she describes how he "used to come scurrying across the room to embrace us in a sudden fit of affection."<sup>12</sup> Ruth also describes how she soothes him: "[. . .] from the time he was a few months old and began to furiously kick and scream whenever he had to be dressed or undressed, I found that he kept quiet if I sang or talked to him. So it seemed to me that it tired him less to listen to words and songs than to resist with all his might; and that is how he began to be interested in words and sounds."<sup>13</sup> Thus, Ruth's story gives us the earliest indication of Tom's vocation as a writer. Written in 1916, these certainly are also evidence of her nurturing, just as in the enormous and obvious example of Merton himself! And now we have his reflection in the 1961 journal entry where we see Merton becoming aware of how Ruth was and had been the very example of his vocation of monk and writer.

In his journal, June 25, 1966, Merton records a dream and describes that when he awakened he feels some guilt about Margaret. Then he continues: "Imagery later - after difficulty starting -" As Merton continues with this reflection, I'm not so sure he is recording a dream: "I see a tangle of dark briars and light roses. My attention singles out one beautiful pink rose, which becomes luminous, and I am much aware of the silky texture of the petals. My Mother's face appears behind the roses, which vanish!"<sup>14</sup> This lovely image of Ruth, with its association with our Blessed Mother Mary, occurs five years after Aunt Kit's visit when Merton revised his story of his mother.

On Nov. 17, 1961 Victor Hammer visited Merton, bringing with him the beginning of a woodcut for *Hagia Sophia* first published by Hammer the following year. In the private journal entry on Hammer's visit, Merton states what I believe is a caution to those who take up the pen, as it were, although here he is talking about being camera shy. Merton writes, "The awful instantaneous snapshot of pose, of falsity, eternalized. Like the pessimistic anguished view of judgement that so many mad Christians have, the cruel candid shot of you when you have just done something transient but hateful. As if

this could be truth. Judgement really [is] a patient, organic, long-suffering understanding of the man's whole life, of *everything* in it, all in context"<sup>15</sup>.

Here I would like to continue with images of Ruth as they have been re-cast from various sources by Michael Mott in his official biography of Merton. As his interpretation of her has become official and widely disseminated, I feel it is important to show where his speculation and inferences are problematic. In an effort to get at the relationship between Merton and Ruth, Mott relies upon fragments of Merton's unpublished novel written in the late 1930s, *The Labyrinth*, as autobiographical evidence. We see Mott here taking astounding liberties, placing paraphrased thoughts of a fictional character directly into Merton: "In Rome [. . . after] praying [. . . Merton] thought of buying a candle [. . .] for his mother. Then he thought how mystified she would have been at this impulse to leave a candle burning for her, when she had made so little of dying, or tried to make little of it and failed. [. . .] Something held him back. His mother might have seen his action as a betrayal. He was a little afraid of her, even beyond death. What he could remember best was that she could be cutting and cold and intellectual, first by filling a small boy with the sense of his own importance, then showing him how inadequate he was"<sup>16</sup>. While it is true that all of Merton's writing are autobiographical to an incredible degree, it seems to me shaky ground to quote a work of fiction as fact. Indeed, I would argue that the *Seven Story Mountain* is little better as a source for accurate story-telling. A writer selects and transforms details, often either embellishing or detracting, in other words, he creates a work, and always tells a story with a personal slant. We recall that Merton told Elsie and Nanny Hauck, when they came for his ordination, that his explanation for portraying the Jenkins family in such a poor light was done in order to sell more books, because the Abbey of Gethsemani was hard up for money. This detail was given me by Pat Priest in a personal conversation. Mott, however, claims otherwise, writing, "As far as Merton was concerned, certain people in Douglaston, Queens, were ripe for [his] revenge"<sup>17</sup>. I'll have more to say on this in a moment.

These misleading conjectures are now treated as accurate facts. Let us look at the term "intellectual" which he applies to Ruth, and which most scholars accept now as an accurate description of her. As noted earlier, Merton has recorded that Aunt Kit said his mother was not an intellectual. This is of course the same journal which Mott used for reference long before its recent publication. Early in the biography, Mott contradicts himself when he quotes Merton's own

effort, made in a letter in 1967, long after Aunt Kit's visit, to qualify his own comment of her intellectuality as a dubious interpretation from a less mature perspective<sup>18</sup>. So do we accept a traditional view and the official biographer, or do we listen to a mature Merton? Yet, Mott uses the term "intellectual" as a criticism in spite of Merton's explanation in journal entries in 1961 and in the letter in 1967 just quoted.

My next point concerns part of Mott's sentence on Ruth: "She made so little of dying, or tried to make little of it and failed"<sup>19</sup>. His only reference for this strange and dissatisfying observation is taken from a simile in a line of Merton's poetry, untitled and undated<sup>20</sup>. Several chapters later, while discussing Merton's day of ordination, again Mott slips in a single clause on Ruth's death: "and trying (successfully) to starve herself to death", again citing no source or reference for the "fact"<sup>21</sup>. This detail is taken from the long sentence describing how the people of Douglaston viewed Merton's family, the issue I mentioned above. I recently called Mott on this and he disavowed the issue of Ruth's self-starvation as rumour provided by friends of Merton's.<sup>22</sup> The real fact appears to be a vortex of blame for Ruth's death which continues to have a life of its own. Back in the early part of the biography, while telling the famously disturbing story of how Owen gave young Tom his mother's farewell note (and leaving out that Owen left him alone with the letter), Mott simply reports that Ruth changed and wasted throughout the summer of 1921 in the public wards of Bellevue Hospital where she was told she had cancer of the stomach<sup>23</sup>. Again he uses no sources to dispute the hospital diagnoses he presents as unconvincing, if not dubious. This is Mott's only indexed reference to the all-important event of Ruth's death.

I cannot find one biographer who has convincingly raised the possibility that Merton's perceptions since *Seven Story Mountain* might change over the course of time, or that perhaps the accuracy of the details concerning the character of his mother and the events of her life might be at odds with his memories. It appears that the well worn clichés are preferable to critical thinking, such as the view generally held with regards to Merton and his mother, that "severe mothers make [produce] good contemplatives." How does this explain the countless numbers of us non-contemplatives who also can claim to have had severe mothers, or those contemplatives we all know who claim no severity in their experiences of mother? Does it mean that if your mother was not severe, then please do not apply to become a contemplative, or just accept that you won't be as good at it as Merton?

I would like to conclude these thoughts on Ruth and childhood memory by offering a much broader view of Ruth's influence on Tom, and by extension, on the meaning of "vocation" and "writing" as something shared between them. It is important to remember that when Merton gives credit to Ruth for his monastic vocation he is a mature man. I believe Merton was so closely bonded with his mother that it took almost a lifetime for him to separate sufficiently from her to see her as an individual person. By her early death Ruth severed the bond, depriving the child Tom of the opportunity years later of doing what we all have to do sometime in adolescence, (with varying degrees of completeness).

In Merton's case, rather than see this closeness as a problem or pathology, I prefer to think of Ruth in the fullness of Merton's own experience. Even if such empathy goes against the grain of a widely held view of blame and resentment, it is not so strange to imagine the life of a parent who has died young, or who vanished early among unexplained forces. What puzzles me about the treatment of Ruth is that she is so often revealed to be like Tom, as Owen is quoted by Daggy as saying, yet vilified for being harsh (Mott) or dismissed for being insincere (Daggy). These so-called problems of Ruth seem to me to stem from the one-sided views of a young adult son grieving in his journals for her loss. If we look closely at his many-layered record in the 1960s we see him taking full responsibility for what he calls the problems of his vocation. His earlier record seems, however, to serve some other purpose.

Besides the scant references in the journals, we have some partially illuminating references to Ruth in a few published and unpublished letters. For example, in a letter written to John Howard Griffin by Ruth's brother Harold Jenkins in Dec. 1970, we learn that Gwynne was not good friends with Ruth. Harold cautions John Howard, who was the official biographer at that time, not to take too seriously any of Gwynne's comments on Ruth. Letters written by Owen to Ruth in their period of courtship between 1911-1912 are very passionate. They reveal a man totally smitten by her. Owen, too, possesses great hopes for their future life in love together. Ruth's first letter to Owen's mother Gertrude, dated June 17, 1912, from England, begins with a single-sentence semi-apology. Ruth claims her innocence and yet claims at the same time she admits she is the cause of Gertrude's unhappiness, and she launches into a long platitude about "The way of things are - that mothers shall be unhappy when their sons begin to think of marrying . . ." Ruth appears to think this generalization gets her off the hook for Gertrude's feelings. Ruth



continues with her musing by assuming her own mother will feel the same way about her brother. She also includes herself as someday being a mother in the same position.

In a letter dated Nov. 10, 1913, five months before her marriage to Owen, Ruth, age 26, writes to Gertrude, her future mother-in-law, and reveals her love of the countryside that her own father's new house affords (another trait she will pass on to her son Tom): "The country is very beautiful . . . I spend many hours walking over the hills in this fine cold weather . . . and the walks around our house make you forget how near the city is, until of a sudden you come out on a bare hilltop and see all the high buildings glistening in the distance." Ruth reveals in a letter to Percyval Tudor-Hart, Aug. 23, 1912 the soul's urge to transcend, to be subsumed by universal beauty through painting and art.

Unlike Owen, relatives and people are important to Ruth, as Padavano has indicated, but so, too, is the weather and landscapes, traits we also recognize in her son Tom from his earliest expressions and throughout his life. In "Tom's Book" Ruth records that baby Tom would hold out his hand to feel the rain, and that he addressed the wind as Monsieur Wind and he would imitate the wind with the sound "oooooooo." She also records that he imitated the sounds of the bells of Prades. He was less than one year old then. As a young boy he remembers hearing the bells of the church in Flushing. Later the bells of Gethsemani framed his days, employing a routine as strict as Ruth's was for him in his earliest years of recollection. The discipline that Merton experienced up until he was 5-1/2 years old but which he could not fully internalize as a boy and young adult was eventually provided by the monastery, and while there, he accomplished this task. There he could rely upon a safe structure. Although he was always restless, he nonetheless obeyed the rules of Gethsemani and of his abbots, of his vocation, and he eventually valued them as Ruth's. Looking at the photograph Merton took revealing the student's school desk in his own workplace in the hermitage reminds me of the photo taken by Ruth of Tom aged four sitting at his desk at work in his so-called "little university" back at Douglaston<sup>24</sup>.

It is not surprising to learn that Ruth was the disciplinarian in the family. Owen's refusal to discipline his children inevitably made Ruth into what today we would call the "heavy." The problem comes, however, when Owen gives over his responsibility of disciplining Tom to Evelyn Scott with whom he lives in Bermuda immediately following Ruth's death. If we believe Evelyn, perhaps Owen was incapable of doing this or anything in fact, because she describes his condition at

that time as one of "brutal insanity" at his grief and feelings of guilt over Ruth's death. Owen felt that his inability to provide an adequate income contributed to Ruth's death. According to Evelyn's son Creighton, Evelyn was more harsh in her punishments of Tom than she was of him. A reviewer of a book on Evelyn Scott writes that it strains the imagination what the effects of her punishments on the young Tom were. The boy was still mourning his recently deceased mother, and Evelyn punished Tom for crying for her!<sup>25</sup> Is this one of the episodes that Merton is referring to when he writes in a journal entry dated Jan. 24, 1966, "I realized today after Mass what a desperate, despairing childhood I had. Around the age of 7-9-10, when Mother was dead [. . .]"?<sup>26</sup> Owen's inability to discipline Tom helps us to see the significance of Merton's later relationship with his father when Merton describes themselves as "good pals" rather than as father and son.

Before closing, I wish to return to the issue of poverty. As noted earlier, Merton probably had no idea just how poor his mother and father really were. Ruth and Owen defied social conventions. This upset the community in Douglaston, but more than her odd clothing and his bare-foot gardening, the real shock to family and friends was the poverty they chose to live in, and their refusal of all outside help. Sam Jenkins, Ruth's father, felt that his generosity was thrown back in his face when Ruth and Owen refused his financial help. We must remember that Sam was bourgeois and he thought that their poverty reflected badly upon him the eyes of the community. I suspect that Ruth couldn't nurse John Paul adequately because she was malnourished to the point of not producing milk. Unlike for Tom, she had to give her second son a bottle to supplement nursing.<sup>27</sup> I cannot answer where her defiance of help came from. Was she too proud to accept money? Or was her belief in poverty so strong as to breakdown their entire dream? Was her severe asceticism and an obsessive idealism as strong if not stronger than the drive that led Merton to the monastery? It would seem to me that Ruth's idealism and Owen's naiveté combined for tragic effects in their lives. Her health fails through refusal of medicine and sustenance. Owen is racked by a sense of shame and guilt and turbulent grieving at her death. Should we not feel sympathy for both of them and for the entire family? How can such a tragic story excite a sense of preference, blame, and resentment?

I agree with Daggy that Merton doesn't reveal any bitterness or resentment. However, I would add, none that is conscious. But we should also remember what Merton writes of himself: "When I reveal

most, I hide most”<sup>28</sup>. Merton seems to resolve this long past issue of love with a sense of being saved by the gradual unfolding of mystery. Merton describes the inner self as a shy wild animal that hides whenever a stranger is at hand and shows itself only when there is silence and the animal is alone<sup>29</sup>. A haiku death poem, quoted by John Eudes Bamberger, sums up Merton’s elusiveness:

Would you seek to trace me?  
Ha! Try catching the tempest  
In a net<sup>30</sup>

But when we do catch him, we catch him dancing. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton writes: “For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there”<sup>31</sup>. And sometimes we notice him drinking beer. He writes, “I love beer, and, by that very fact, the world”<sup>32</sup>. When we listen carefully, we hear his human voice reassuring us:

“The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own heart, and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you and with you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God’s spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit”<sup>33</sup>

## Afterword

“My task is only to be what I am, a man seeking God in silence and solitude, with deep respect for the demands and realities of his own vocation, and fully aware that others too are seeking the truth in their own way.”<sup>34</sup>

John Howard Griffin reminds us that Merton was convinced that if you let the hours of the day saturate you, and you gave them time, something would happen. Merton said that one of the best things that happened to him when he became a hermit was ...

being attentive to the times of the day: when the birds began to sing, and the deer came out of the morning fog, and the sun came up. . . . The reason why we don’t take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. . . . We must approach the whole idea of time in a new way. We are free to love. And we must get free from imaginary claims. We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God’s own good time, His kairos. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don’t have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us. . . . There is in all this a sense of the unfolding mystery in time, a reverence for gradual growth.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes and References

1. Michael Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1984, p.381. Hereinafter referred to as Mott)
2. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, ed. Daggy, NY, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1989, p.64
3. Thomas Merton *Turning Towards the World*, Journals Vol.4 ed. Kramer, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996 herinafter referred to as *TTW*, p. 177, my emphasis ; compare Thomas Merton *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 200-01).
4. *TTW* Vol. 4, p.177
5. *TTW* Vol. 4, pp. 177-78

6. Thomas Merton *The Other Side of Mountain*, Journals Vol.7 ed. Hart, SF, HarperSanFrancisco , 1998 p.11
7. Personal conversation., Oct. 2, 1998
8. Ruth to Gertrude Grierson Merton, April 21, 1913, (Thomas Merton Study Center)
9. Ruth to Gertrude Grierson Merton Nov. 10, 1913, (TMSC,)
10. Ruth to Gertrude, April 21, 1913, (TMSC)
11. "Tom's Book", p.3
12. "Tom's Book", p.4.
13. "Tom's Book", p.8
14. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*, Journals Vol.6, ed Bochen , HarperSanFrancisco,1997, hereinafter referred to as *LL*, p.87)
15. *TTW*, Vol 4 p.180, Merton's emphasis).
16. Mott, p.68
17. Mott, p.252
18. Mott, p.17; Merton to Rosemary Reuther, Mar. 24, 1967, *Hidden Ground of Love*, p.508-09)
19. Mott, p.68
20. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems*, NY, New Directions, 1977, p.1012
21. Mott, p. 252
22. Personal conversation, Oct. 2, 1998)
23. Mott, p.20
24. Patnaik, *The Geography of Holiness*, p.15; Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, p.4
25. Mary Jo Weaver, *Merton Seasonal*, Summer 1986, p.13, review of Callard's *The Enigmas of Evelyn Scott*
26. *LL*, Vol.6, p.11-12)
27. Ruth's Journal, in Pat Priest's possession.
28. Used by Mott as epigraph, p. xix
29. *The Inner Experience*, as paraphrased by Padavano, *The Human Journey*, p.174
30. Kukoku, in "The Monk", in *Thomas Merton/Monk*, ed. P. Hart, p.42)
31. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.297; also Patnaik, p.1
32. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p.160
33. "As Man to Man," *Cistercian Studies*, IV:1, 1969; quoted by P. Hart in *Thomas Merton/Monk*, p.14).
34. From *Contemplation in a World of Action*:(p. 245)
35. Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p.49, quoting from *The Inner Experience*.