

# Thomas Merton and Mountains

Ron Dart

"Great things are done when men and mountains meet."

William Blake

"He has not learned to think like a mountain."

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

"Can Aldo Leopold's ecological conscience become effective in America today?"

Thomas Merton, 'The Wild Places'

There is a long lineage of contemplatives in the West and East who have turned to the mountains, white peaks and ancient spires as places to slake a deeper thirst and find a site for the soul to know a more meaningful *quies*. This reality has been well tracked and traced in evocative and visual mountaineering classics such as *Sacred Mountains of the World* (1990) by Edwin Bernbaum. Beat poets on the peaks such as Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Jack Kerouac in the North Cascades make these connections, and we know that Merton had an affinity with the Beats as I have argued in *Thomas Merton and the Beats of the North Cascades* (2005), which connects Merton, the Beats and mountains. Even the most casual reading of the works of these writers makes it clear that there is a connection between mountains and the contemplative quest for meaning and depth.

Thomas Merton wrote his M.A. thesis on William Blake, and Blake realized that great things occurred when men and

mountains met. Such greatness could not be found in the hurly burly and jostling of the streets. Aldo Leopold, an American naturalist in the tradition of Thoreau and Muir, encouraged one and all in his timeless book, *A Sand County Almanac*, to think like a mountain. Merton would have heartily approved of both Blake's and Leopold's attitudes towards the ancient rock sentinels. Merton knew the consequences of not learning to think like a mountain. The task of thinking like a mountain was part of Merton's DNA. This is why Merton, in his evocative article, 'The Wild Places', held Leopold, Muir and Thoreau in such high regard. The mountains, more than most places, stand for what is still wild and cannot be tamed by the captains of industry. They also embody sacred sites of contemplative insight.

It is virtually impossible to miss, in the life and writings of Thomas Merton, the dominant metaphor and archetype of mountains in his journey. It is the rock

hard guardians that are there in the beginning; they play a substantive role in Merton's midlife, and in the final year of Merton's life, mountains preside over Merton's imagination and the places he visited. Merton was, of course, no mountaineer, and his interest in mountains was not that of a rock jock. Merton saw in the mountains, though, a path into the inner life, and it was just such a path that spoke much to him about the geography of the soul. But, let us begin at the beginning.

Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, opens with mountains on front stage. Part One, Chapter One (Prisoner's Base) begins with these words: "On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the water bearer, in a year of great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world."<sup>2</sup> Merton, in short, came into the world in the mountains. A few pages later Merton continues: "And Mother would paint in the hills, under a large canvas parasol, and Father would paint in the sun, and the friends would drink red wine and gaze out over the valley at Canigou, and at the monastery on the slopes of the mountain. There were many ruined monasteries in those mountains."<sup>3</sup> In this passage and in that which follows Merton makes it clear that there is a distinct connection between mountains, monasteries and the artistic and contemplative life. It is all there at the beginning for Merton. Mountains have a whispered wisdom that entices Merton.

Merton's parents died when he was quite young, and he was soon in England. He began his university studies in the autumn of 1933 at Clare College, Cambridge, and he muddled through his short

stay at Cambridge. It is significant to note that one of the few things that stayed with Merton while he was at Cambridge was the class he took with Professor Bullough on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The class walked Merton, canto by canto, from the depths of the inferno, up through purgatory into paradise. The dominating metaphor in Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the mountain, and the use of the mountain as a means of understanding the ascent from lower to higher desires, lesser to higher goods, ego to self, false face to substantive reality. It was, in fact,

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the course by Professor Bullough on the *Divine Comedy* that offered Merton the title for his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Mountains were there in the beginning; they were there with him at Cambridge, and Dante's interpretation of mountains was there with Merton in his monastery in the writing of his autobiography.

*The Seven Storey Mountain* was a bumper crop seller, but Merton was on the move. He did not want to be exclusively identified with this youthful work. He had higher peaks to climb, more demanding ascents to make. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in many ways, attempted to put the sophisticated theology of Thomas Aquinas into poetic form, and he did so in a most readable and accessible manner. Merton attempted to do much the same thing in *The Ascent to Truth* (1951).

Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross are brought together in this work of contemplative theology as are other important mystical theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Ruysbroeck, Teresa of Avila, Pascal and John of Saint Thomas. The point to be noted here, though, is that Merton has returned yet once again to the metaphor of mountains and the ascent to insight, wisdom and truth. Merton can never get far from mountains and the role they play in bringing the inner journey to ever greater depth.

There is more that could be said about Merton's affinity to mountains in the 1950s, but, living near the knobs of Kentucky as he did, the higher peaks did not press in so close. This did not mean that Merton did not turn again and again to the myth of the upward ascent. Merton's well known and much commented on "Fire Watch" essay of 1952 stands within such an ascent genre. It was in the last year of Merton's life, though, that the mountains took on even greater prominence. They simply cannot be missed in *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters* (1988) and *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (1968). Merton was in Alaska, of course, before he took to the East, but *The Asian Journal* was published just after Merton's untimely death in 1968. It is impossible to miss, particularly in Merton's journal entries in Alaska, his abiding fascination with the mountains. They draw and hold him, and almost each page of the journal entries from September 17-October 2, 1968 ponders the meaning of mountains in Alaska. The Alaska Range, McKinley (the largest peak in North America), Redoubt and the Elias Range

take on a compelling significance in the unfolding journal. Merton just can't take his eyes away from these ancient citadels that tower over valley and city, permanent and rock hard, as stable as the clouds are unstable and impermanent.

In many ways the Alaskan pilgrimage in search of a potential hermitage was but a primer for the trip to Asia. *The Asian Journal* is replete with description tumbling over description of mountains. Kanchenjunga factors large in a literal, photographic and contemplative sense in Merton's final reflections on mountains. Everest is there, but it cannot compete with the hold Kanchenjunga has on Merton. An essay on Merton and Kanchenjunga could tell us much about how Merton understood the role of mountains in the mapping of the soul. There is an exquisite reflection on Kanchenjunga in Merton's November 19th, 1968 journal entry. A photograph of Kanchenjunga, below the text, shows the massif of white peaks through low-lying trees.

Last night I had a curious dream about Kanchenjunga. I was looking at the mountain and it was pure white, absolutely pure, especially the peaks that lie to the west. And I saw the pure beauty of their shape and outline, all in white. And I heard a voice saying—or got the clear idea of: "There is another side to the mountain."<sup>4</sup>

Merton's life began in the Pyrenees in France, and ended in the Himalayas. There is no doubt that mountains offered Merton a way of understanding and interpreting his journey. It was mountains that pointed the way to another side of reality,

and it was what was on the other side that, in an ongoing way, ever drew Merton.

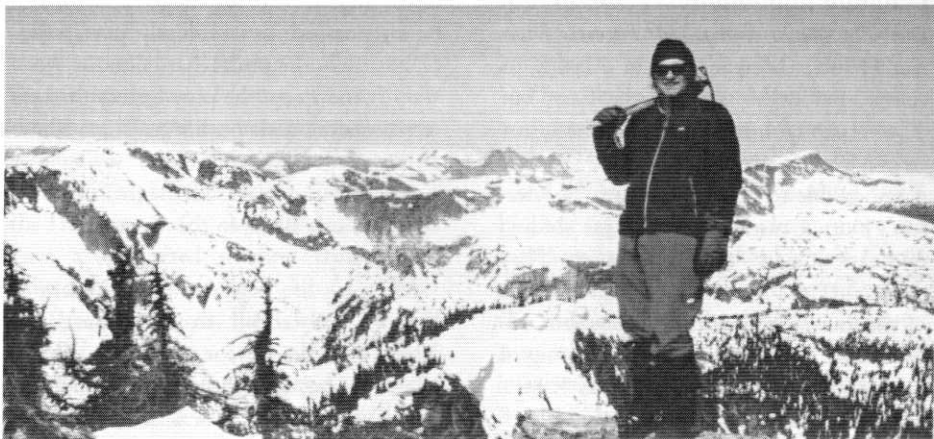
The fact that mountains were, for Merton, a map into the deeper life means that, if Merton is ever going to be more fully understood, the role of mountains must play a prominent interpretive role. This is why Michael Mott's biography was called *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, and why, Patrick Hart, in Merton's journals noted this obstinate fact in naming the first and last journals *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton: 1939-1941* and *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton: 1967-1968*.

It is, in short, impossible to separate Merton from mountains. There is a symbiotic relationship between them. These guardians of old were with him in the beginning and he was with them towards the end. Mountains were, in many ways, a mandala for Merton, ever there suggesting how peak and valley, contemplation and action, Mary and Martha are one and the same and should never be separated and severed.

## Notes

1. 'The Wild Places' appeared originally as an article in the *Catholic Worker* (June, 1968), 4,6, and was reprinted in *The Ecological Conscience: Values for Survival* edited by Robert Disch (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970, 37-43.
2. Thomas Merton: *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1998, p.3.
3. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.6.
4. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions, 1973, p.152.

**Ron Dart** teaches in the Department of Political Science, Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University College of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia and the author and editor of many books on Canadian political philosophy, as well as *Thomas Merton and the Beats of the North Cascades* (reviewed on page 49).



*Ron Dart on the summit of Tahr in the Coquihalla area of British Columbia.*