

The Impact of Saint-Antonin and Montauban on the Life of Thomas Merton

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Introduction

One day ‘My father said: “We are going to France.” “France!” I said, in astonishment. Why should anybody want to go to France?’¹ It was July 1925, Tom was ten and a half years old and for a little bit more than two years he had lived with his mother’s parents, with whom he had settled down. This balanced life didn’t attract him at all to resume his father’s wanderings. Nevertheless Owen Merton wanted to achieve the plan he and his wife Ruth had had – before her death – to go back and settle in France. Undoubtedly he wanted to share this plan with his eldest son. However this is what Tom thought when he wrote in his diary some 16 years later: ‘Sometimes I think I don’t know anything except the years 1926–27–28 in France, as if they were my whole life, as if my father had made that whole world and given it to me instead of America, shared it with me.’²

In fact, it is as pilgrims that father and son, in September 1925, crossed France by train. Tom discovered a quite different world, full of villages centred on their church, castles in the surrounding countryside, and wild landscapes, in the France that was re-emerging after the First World War. The geographical pilgrimage was also a spiritual one because Owen told his son the story of Joan of Arc.³ Disappointed by Montauban, where Owen Merton thought he would find something to paint, he discovered some photos of a medieval village far away in the Aveyron’s gorges. The next day, they immediately took the old train there. The current road is on the same route as the former railway. It is a 45-minute drive to go from Montauban to Saint-Antonin.



Painting of Saint-Antonin by Owen Merton

Joy in Saint-Antonin

In the late 1920s trains stopped in villages where medieval castles stood on rocky spurs and Tom watched peasants wearing black smocks getting on and off the train and on the roads men leading their herd of oxen.⁴ Travellers can still admire the same landscapes: villages separated from woods and fields, medieval castle ruins, poplar tree-lined banks of the Aveyron, tunnels, grey and ochre cliffs, and a road which meanders alongside the river. As soon as he arrived in Saint-Antonin Tom liked the appearance of the village: its narrow medieval lanes, the church right in the middle, the three rocks surrounding Saint-Antonin, and then the numerous trails for hiking

in the surrounding countryside. Today this village is a green tourism location with many marked footpaths, climbs and places for canoeing in the gorges of the Aveyron River. Tom reminded himself: 'When I was eleven I used to spend hours looking at the Michelin map, the red roads, the yellow roads, the roads without color, the pale green forests, and I not only looked at the map but went where my feet could carry me'.⁵



Saint-Antonin viewed across the river



A street in Saint-Antonin

Tom described many delights during his first year spent in Saint-Antonin. He remembered his father designing the plans and the garden of their future house, painting, or even playing the piano. He remembered the parties in the farms and the patronal feast, wild characters like Pierrot, Rodolausse, or Marius, Rugby Club outings with his father, a fascination for books such as *Le Pays de France*, and novel writing.⁶ For all these reasons, Saint-Antonin can be considered as somewhere close to Thomas Merton's heart.

Here too, alone with his father, he experienced some freedom. He had so much confidence in their project of building a new life in France that he very quickly learnt to speak this new language

with a Southern accent picked up at the primary school. Perhaps this contributed to his vocation as a writer: 'But I know I finished at least one other [novel], and probably two, besides one which I wrote at Saint-Antonin before coming to the Lycée.'⁷

In his early novel written in 1941 Merton draws on past experiences when he writes: 'I have come back to see the red fermented muck of grape left in the streets when the wine press is taken into the house again in autumn. I have come to see the provincial ladies drinking grenadine syrup and soda water at the open air tables under the elm trees in the little towns of the South. And I have come back to see the rusty iron crucifix that stood near the Place de La Condamine'⁸ in Saint-Antonin ... I have come back to see the blue river curving under the bridge, and to hear the paddles of the laundresses echoing under the arch.'⁹

It is in Saint-Antonin that Tom fell in love, perhaps for the first time: 'I fell in love with a mousy little girl with blonde locks called Henriette.'¹⁰ An inhabitant that I met last year, remembered very well how her mother told her that Tom liked to go and see the girls playing tennis.

The patronal feast used to take place at the beginning of September and it was an occasion to celebrate with dances, all sorts of games and torchlight processions. 'For my own part, I entered a great competition with most of the boys and youths of the town, in which we all jumped into the river and swam after a duck that was thrown off the bridge. It was finally caught by a respectable fellow called Georges who was studying to be a school-teacher at the normal school in Montauban.'¹¹ The young trainee teacher mentioned at this feast was Georges Linières (1909–1994). He described Merton this way: 'For me, Thomas Merton, looked like an urchin figure of a child about eight or ten years old, with a turned up nose, frizzy blond hair poked out from underneath some strange cap, as oddly-shaped as his trousers knickerbockers, a leg of which down over his shoe whereas the other was held somehow loosely at the knee.'¹² Like everyone in

Saint-Antonin, he remembered 'his grinning face, his smart eyes, the sharpness and mischievousness of his mind.'¹³

Tom enjoyed a happy life in Saint-Antonin: the environment, the landscapes, the walks; the life with his father, the building of their house – that is to say of a home; the feasts, the friends, love, his writings and the new language he had learnt. All these things contributed to the fulfillment of Tom as a boy and explained his joy of living. Georges Linières told us also that, 'Thomas was considered to be a little prodigy at Saint-Antonin because in one or two years he learned what it took others three or four years to learn. He was, according to his instructor, my friend M. Cagnot, the best student he ever had in French.'¹⁴ As for his biographer, he spoke about 'warm times.'¹⁵

Identity Formation at the Lycée Ingres¹⁶

Entering Lycée Ingres in October 1926 Tom was eleven and a half years old. It was the end of what had felt like freedom in Saint-Antonin and the beginning of a different way of life. It was a difficult adjustment. He was bullied physically and verbally by his new classmates, but also felt vividly a sense of paternal desertion.¹⁷ Tom was left to his own devices. However, it is in this high school that some important factors helped his self-development. Initially things were bad with the high school equivalent of a traditional college initiation, but Tom took up the challenge of trying to integrate into one of the groups. What happened in this group surely contributed to Thomas Merton's intellectual, literary and social education.

Included in this group were some students who were writing. And Tom who had previously written on his own in Saint-Antonin, was able to join with others who shared this interest. This group of budding writers did not write only for writing's sake, they took it seriously. Indeed, the youngsters had some literary ambition and also were trying to express their values: 'But they had ideals and ambitions and, as a matter of fact, by the middle of my first year, I remember



Thomas Merton, back row left, at school in Montauban

we were all furiously writing novels.’¹⁸ These youths – as ‘precocious’ as they were (as Thomas wrote in his autobiography) – committed themselves as far as possible to practising literary criticism, ‘my friends and I would get together, walking in a superior way, with our caps on the backs of our heads and our hands in our pockets, like the great intellectuals that we were, discussing our novels. The discussion was not merely confined to telling the plot of what we were writing: a certain amount of criticism was passed back and forth.’¹⁹

Joining this group, Tom became integrated into their society. Within the group, he was not only acknowledged as a writer, but he was also equal to the others. Moreover, he took advantage of the spirit of competition within the group in order to start writing several novels at once. Through this he gained some self-esteem and was able to begin to express his potential. This identity as a would-be writer was supported by his group of friends when it was repeated many years later in New York with his buddies: Bob Lax, Edward Rice, Gibney, Seymour, and others.

What else did these two years spent in the Lycée Ingres bring him? They showed his adjustment and acculturation. At the age of identity formation, between the age of eleven and thirteen, Tom had made some life choices which remained with him. This is another perspective than the commonly held gloomy view of Thomas Merton’s life at Montauban’s Lycée.

Georges Linières: a model?

On Sundays, when Tom did not take the old train that brought him back home to Saint-Antonin, he hung out with his friends and went to the cinema or attended rugby matches in which Georges Linières used to play: ‘I was a few years older than him and acted as a good buddy that is somehow admired. When I played as a winger for Union Sportive Montalbanaise, dashing along the line-out, I remember the cheers launched by a little high school boy lost among lots of blue uniforms and whose ‘Allai, Tcho’ could only come from an Anglo-Saxon throat. It was Tom, no doubt, very proud of showing to his classmates he knew one of the best team members of USM.’²⁰

What did Georges – as an 18-year-old youth – represent for Tom who was twelve or thirteen? Besides the fact that both came from Saint-Antonin, Georges already looked like a success: he was a sportsman and a student teacher.²¹ Tom, in his autobiography, described him as ‘a respectable fellow.’ His ‘wonderful good buddy’ Georges exemplified a possible role model and a career as a teacher, work that Tom esteemed.

All these experiences contributed to Tom’s view of his own place in the world and indeed played a part in his future as an adult. There was writing (both in Saint-Antonin and at the Lycée), sociability and the idea of becoming a teacher (with Georges as model).

Conclusions

Although such different experiences, both life in Saint-Antonin, and then at Montauban’s State Secondary School, between 1925 and

1928, had a great impact on Tom's life. Obviously, Tom was happy in Saint-Antonin: he blossomed and found stability living with his father with whom he shared day-to-day experiences. For Tom, the idea of building one's house was also about building one's life. He had hoped the stay in Saint-Antonin would last longer than it actually did. However he also gained hugely from the more challenging time at Ingres High School in Montauban! As described above it too was part of his self-development. These years spent in his particularly beloved South of France were for Owen Merton his last happy years.

This time of his life was so important that Tom always remembered these years living in France. In Spring 1941 he wrote in his diary: 'The Saint of St. Antonin, where he [his father] was building a house, where we lived looking at the river and Rocher d'Anglars, prays for him. I have never stopped thinking about that town or all the places around it.'²² In the 1950s Canon François Delteil, born in Saint-Antonin and English teacher in Paris, discovered in London a book where his native village was described! This book was *The Seven Storey Mountain*. From then he began a correspondence with Thomas Merton. Throughout his life Thomas remained in touch with the country of his childhood and early teenage years. Even in 1965 he wrote: 'It is therefore of great importance to me that I have known the narrow streets of Cordes ... It is important to me that I have walked the dusty road under the plane trees from St. Antonin to Caylus ... There are times when I am mortally homesick for the South of France, where I was born.'²³

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1999), p.32.
2. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain The Story of a Vocation, Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol I, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p.328.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.35.
4. *ibid.*, pp.38-9.
5. Letter to John Harris, 13 May 1960. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p.396.

6. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp.42-8. See also *Run to the Mountain*, p.76.
7. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.58.
8. Today known as Pradel Square.
9. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions Books, 1968), p.241.
10. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.54.
11. *ibid.*
12. Georges Linières, *Chroniques au Fil des Eaux. Contes et Nouvelles* (Montauban: published at the author's expense, 2010), p.23.
13. *ibid.*
14. Paul Wilkes, *Merton by Those who Knew him Best* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p.78.
15. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p.38.
16. Today known as Collège Ingres.
17. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp.54-5.
18. *ibid.*, p.57.
19. *ibid.*, p.57.
20. *Chroniques au Fil des Eaux*, p.24.
21. He would become Director Emeritus of the École Publique and decorated for services to education in France (Palmes Académiques).
22. *Run to the Mountain*, p.327.
23. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday & Company, 1968), pp.185-6.

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