

# Oakham, Oakham!

Peter Ellis

## Introduction

Merton spent five years, from age 13 to 18, in one of the most familiar yet one of the strangest educational systems in the world – British fee-paying boarding schools for boys known as prep schools (7–13) and public schools (13–18).<sup>1</sup> These schools more or less guarantee confident and assured young alumni who will find access to the world of adult privilege relatively easy. These are familiar British characters, people we know well: politicians, judges and war leaders, comedians, actors and sportsmen, heroes and villains. The access to privilege is the key reason why parents send their children to these schools and why their children, once grown up, send theirs. This certainty of a successful outcome outweighs the strangeness, which is that they will be removed from home, separated from family life, and cared for by strangers. That care will take place in often quite spartan institutions (less so in the last few decades), where they will very likely be subjected, without protection or redress, to disciplinary processes which would be regarded as unacceptable if not bizarre in a family home or in a day school.

Merton's experiences before he went to Cambridge, and their influence on his life as a writer and monk, have been widely discussed, but there has not been, as far as I know, a particular focus that leaves on one side the loss of his parents and his nomadic existence as a child, and concentrates simply on his boarding school experiences. Focusing on these experiences, one can explore the possibility that beneath his reasons for entering Gethsemani was a barely conscious need to re-

engage with deeply embedded issues from his schooldays.

### **Desolation and emptiness and abandonment**

Merton had already encountered, at age 11, boarding at the Lycée Ingres at Montauban,<sup>2</sup> where, lying in the 'huge dark dormitory', surrounded by the snoring of the 'little animals', and hearing outside the 'far screaming of the trains' and the 'mad iron cry of the bugle' from distant barracks, he knew 'the pangs of desolation and emptiness and abandonment'. There Merton learnt how children cut off from home, bully, mock, envy and behave hatefully to each other (SSM 49-50). Unlike British schools, French boarding had no grand aims behind it. This was simply hostel provision for children who could not, whether from family or travel problems, attend daily and so had to be lodged at the school.

After his two years there, those who took an interest in Merton – his wider family and his guardian – clearly decided that without a mother and with a peripatetic father, the boy needed the certainty of progress into the acceptable adult world that the British system offered. He was therefore sent to Ripley Court preparatory school near Woking in Surrey, whose headmistress saw a career in business for him. Fearful of the example of his artist father she warned him: 'Boy! Don't become a dilettante, do you hear?' – a useful summary of the boarding ethos (SSM 63). There he spent most of 1928 and 1929 aged 13 and 14. To Merton this was a pleasant and happy place with pleasant and happy children, who prayed at their bedside each night (SSM 64), though, looking back, he could see that it was essentially a 'synthetic childhood' where everyone acted as though maintaining an illusion of the British way – cricket, tea parties, castles and cottages (SSM 66). Despite his deep fears about his father's health (SSM 71), his time at Ripley Court was good. For a start he was a year older than the others, and all his peers were in their final year and by then at the top of the school heap. Further, with his background, Merton must have appeared to them as an impressive and rather exotic figure, one to be looked up to.

From there he went to Oakham, Rutland, in the middle of England, and as has been described in countless recollections by schoolboys over more than a century, the first year would have been one of experiencing the very opposite of the final prep school year, the world at the very bottom of the school heap, the victims of those who had been victims in the years before. Here, in the first year, he found the same brutality that he had known at the Lycée, that was hidden, he thought, under the veneer

of Ripley Court sentimentality (SSM 66). In a 'ratty' corner (SSM 68) of a garret bedroom seven or eight children 'moiled around in the gaslight among the tuck-boxes, noisy, greedy, foul-mouthed, fighting and shouting', beneath the pasted pin-ups of American actresses on the walls (SSM 72). The day-to-day discipline of the boys was enforced by the prefects, 'the lords of the school', as he recalled in his autobiography:

We were disciplined by the constant fear of one of those pompous and ceremonious sessions of bullying, arranged with ritualistic formality, when a dozen or so culprits were summoned ... and beaten with sticks, and made to sing foolish songs, and to hear themselves upbraided for their moral and social defects (SSM 74).

Although scholastically very behind in classics and mathematics, it would seem that once again Merton benefitted from being a year older than the other new boys. He was moved up a form after three months and given a study (SSM 73). After a year he was in the sixth form focusing on Higher Certificate Modern Languages and Literature (SSM 74). In his fifteenth year he was aware of a very definite sense of independence. He felt that now 'I would think what I wanted and do what I wanted' (SSM 76), and this is illustrated by his account of a fearless challenge to his seniors, unusual in the boarding school world. In an essay on Gandhi he recalls arguing about India with the school's head prefect, no less, who had come to turn out the dormitory gaslight. Merton's position was the 'perfect justice' of the demand for Indian independence while the head prefect's turned on the ingratitude of the pagan Indians to their betters, their uncivilized backwardness, and the colour of Gandhi's skin. The prefect stood, said Merton, with one hand in his pocket and a frown on his face that was not 'illuminated with understanding'.<sup>3</sup>

Later we see Merton discovering jazz and reading Céline, Gide, Joyce and D.H. Lawrence (SSM 80). We also see him at 16 spending an afternoon on the hills above Oakham *on his own* – very few boarding school accounts witness such independence, or the strength of will to escape school control to enjoy it (SSM 86). But this independence hid his fragility. At the same age, sailing to the States for his summer holiday, Merton recorded the confusion of his sexuality in an infatuation with a woman twice his age, a confusion inevitable amongst boys traversing adolescence in such isolating circumstances. (SSM 88-90). Returning to

Oakham his self-description as the only one there 'who knew anything about life' portrays the shallow boarding-school boy veneer of confidence (SSM 93). A year later he won a school prize, age 17, with an essay on the modern novel (SSM 99), and then went on to gain an exhibition to Cambridge after a week of essay writing during which he 'devoured' Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. Winning the exhibition he left Oakham just before his 18th birthday (SSM 102-3).

### Creating a rational adult

Is it possible to go deeper into Merton's rather dispassionate account? Boarding schools are embedded and normalised in British culture. Hogwarts and Malory Towers allow us to entertain the otherwise strange thought that childhood is better away from parents, more adventurous, more real, more in touch with the adult world to come. But in recent decades this normality has been revisited and deconstructed, focusing in particular on how the damage wrought by the boarding school experience can be seen to lie beneath our apparently confident leaders, inhibiting their ability to access feeling and encouraging their choice of rash actions without thought of their outcomes. The fact that these leaders sit on top of a rigid class system gives this recent work of analysis, and this essay too, an awkward consciousness that descriptions of the sufferings undergone by an elite, by toffs and posh boys, must inevitably rankle with the ninety per cent or more who did not enjoy their luxurious facilities.

In a nutshell the boarding school system is intended to break the attachment between the child and those who initially nurtured him.<sup>4</sup> It originates in the nineteenth century and comes from an ideal of creating a rational adult being by suppressing that being's instinctive, natural or 'primitive' side when a child. Thus, key to the enterprise is the early imposition of the distinction between reason and emotion, the head and the heart. The child removed from home to boarding school is introduced immediately to a splitting of the self into different parts that must stay apart for the child to survive. The schoolboy learns to dissociate the disapproved 'feeling' aspect of himself from the approved social ones. Thus the child's vulnerability, childishness, trust in others, innocence, and sexuality has to be put on one side. He has to occupy a ready-made being, where feelings and vulnerability are denied and repressed. Everything that is redolent of emotion has to be projected on to others. Others are stupid not intelligent, others are innocent rather than experienced, others

are vulnerable rather than impervious to attack, others foolishly trust someone else rather than learning to rely only on themselves. In this splitting the child does, in his head, the work of the school, learning to prefer the school esprit de corps to the childishness of home. Not only does each individual do the work of the school but the children as a whole undertake it as well, not just in the prefect system where the older boys are given more or less unlimited power over the younger ones. For the children all monitor each other; violence, bullying and being caught out become used on each other. At a deep level the core activity is betrayal, betrayal of each other and betrayal of their real selves.

One writer has constructed a boarding school ABC, A for abandonment, B for bereavement and C for captivity.<sup>5</sup> The three together are a deliberate alteration of the innately creative child, turning it from spontaneity and an open future, to living under constraint but with a very definitely closed and decided future. The survival mechanisms adopted by the child result in a defended and defensive adult. Essentially the captivity of children in boarding schools – the necessity to conform to a uniform regime of mealtimes, worktimes and bedtimes with any personal input on these decisions forbidden – tends to create a passivity in the face of authority and an automatic resistance to change.

Those who become compliant are the 'normal' school product who go on to careers, often in closed groups like the army, the law and the church, where submitting to, and exercising authority is repeated. But there are also anti-authoritarian rebels, incapable of living in groups, often rootless and independent – these are our explorers, eccentrics, artists and indeed saints. And then, too, there are those who do not function successfully as adults and have been crushed by the system. Forming such 'ideal types' is useful in one way, but misses the way that the reality of the child is lost under complex layers of falsity by being brought up in this way. Most ex-boarders are a mixture of these types and most remain hidden from self-discovery as a result of years of self-disguise. In essence they have encountered a strange 'normality' when they were boarded, one that has been represented to them as good and necessary. The flaw is that this normality was acceptable to all except themselves, for all of them would have preferred, if they had ever been offered such a thing as a free choice, not to have experienced abandonment, bereavement and captivity so early in their lives and for so long, if at all.

### The anti-authoritarian rebel

In Merton's case there seems no doubt that he fell into the 'rebel' group, though it could be argued that the stability of boarding might have been welcome after his chaotic early life. His mind was far from closed as is shown by his wide range of reading beyond that prescribed by the school; and he was able to travel widely during the school holidays, including to Italy, Germany and America. He seems to have been unimpressed by authority and lacked the British 'stiff upper lip': with the last days and death of his father, for example, we read that he cried openly (SSM 82), and as a teenager he was, on his own account, highly susceptible to falling in love (SSM 100).

Yet he chose, after a short chaotic period at Cambridge and then a time of searching in New York, to repeat the dormitory experiences of boarding school and the submission to rules that restricted his physical freedom in a monastery. He chose to read only prescribed texts and not to read proscribed texts and he submitted uncomplainingly to the seemingly arbitrary authority of Abbot Fox. He was certainly aware of the similarities between the boarding school and the Gethsemani regimes with their set timetables, suspensions of freedom, a collective enclosed life with others of the same sex. Late in his time at Gethsemani he tells the novices in an amused tone that having experienced boarding school the monastic regime held no problems for him.<sup>6</sup>

But to take his accounts of Ripley Court and Oakham as relatively unimportant, would be, I suggest, to miss something crucially important. I think that a grand overall scheme can be suggested which can be sketched out as follows. At his British boarding schools Merton inevitably had to live within a system of *internalisation* where the child's mind is 'dominated by the memory of adult voices which become part of the organism which the child recognises as himself.'<sup>7</sup> Those adult voices taught submission to a 'rational man project' and to its special observance to satisfy the needs of the British empire and colonies. This socialisation process he gradually healed over time at a deeply embedded and unrecognized level. Merton's whole oeuvre could be described as replacing the internalised voices of social norms with the voice of God and the words of Christ as perceived directly rather than through the conventions of organised religion. The reason why this process was barely conscious was because it was one of redemption directed not from himself but from God.

### From childhood to adulthood

How to access any young person's experience more directly, to access the true inner world of the child? How to get beneath the common boarding-school survivor accounts, like Merton's, that present the author as an adult observer? One way is to think of the whole process of boarding school adolescence as a *rite of passage*, something that selected children have to go through to pass from childhood to adulthood. On one side, the before side, the adolescent rite of passage, as classically understood, begins from before leaving home and the child's well understood social status there. There is then a rite of separation that involves isolation from society in a state of marginal limbo subjected to various taboos. Life exists outside time in some kind of sacred condition, where the participants have no continuing secular social status. They live in a completely flattened egalitarian community dominated by death and rebirth and symbolic sacrifice – an abnormal world compared to the real one. Then, the rite of passage over, there comes the return to the world as an initiate in a rite of joining and aggregation.<sup>8</sup> The rite of passage, as so described, could be the very definition of the boarding school process where the child is extracted from its home and then returned after five years as a young man. It could also, *but this time in reverse*, be the very definition of the monastery where the would-be monk leaves the adult world and enters a wholly separate space, dedicated again to death, rebirth and symbolic sacrifice, from where he passes on to a new life in which death now represents the return to home.

This grand overall scheme thus sees Merton at the gates of Gethsemani in 1941 re-entering a boarding environment where he will annul his previous days of boarding by reliving them from their end back to their beginning. One way of giving this some depth would be to take some of Merton's themes and play them back against the basic message of the British boarding school in his day – the hidden pedagogic scheme that lies beneath the production of the British ruling elite. If one accepts the similarity of the description of boarding school and monastery as places where a group of boys and men undergo a major rite of passage, then a deeper set of explanations for Merton's choice come into view.

### The recovery of self

In the first place, like many before him, Merton chose to explore a Christian life from a life shared with others. Comparing daily life in Gethsemani and in a boarding school the immediate difference is

obviously in the quality of their community relations. Checking the deserted monastery rooms on his fire watch duty in 1952, Merton saw his 11 years in the monastery as redemption from his past: 'What was vile has become precious.'<sup>9</sup> His life at Gethsemani was an overturning of his boarding school life by reliving it in the form of mutual aid rather than mutual fear. The enforced community of school involved fear of the others, fear of betrayal, fear of exposing real feelings. This often makes the resultant adult secretive, isolated, unable to trust others, and unable to articulate feelings: all necessary losses in order to achieve that self-possessed core personality that goes with elite entitlement. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a monument to someone who was able to recover his self by the very fact of being open to his fellow monks and to the world about what he thinks and feels.

We only need a few sentences of Merton's writing to tell us that at Gethsemani lived experience won out over rational analysis every time, and that the validity of his lived experience was never mistrusted. For its part the school insists that, at all costs, rationality in one's self expression should drive out spontaneous reactive feelings. Further Merton had not the slightest desire to be gradually building an impregnable fortress of thought. His writing style delights in uncertainty and in arriving at a point only to abandon it without apology – anathema to the school's enlightenment project.

In the second place one of Merton's most striking insights is that the world contains aspects of madness. It is reason's insistence on prioritising the ends over the means that Merton saw as creating the mad world of nuclear weapons, genocide, racism and war. To the rationalist the end is security and that renders the means of getting there unimportant. In modern political discourse everything is regarded as a potential debating point; it is not playing the game to call out war and genocide as mad. Merton would have been told at boarding school that the running together of means and ends was to be seen as fundamentally reasonable and justified by tradition. The logic is, for example, that the beatings that took place were of course barbaric and unjust but without them discipline would fail. This logic is internalised within the child whose initial separation from his family is rationally presented to him as for his own good. Is it this that lies behind Merton's insistence that the world's logic was mad? His analysis is very well understood if we look at the child's double bind – to do the thing that he is told is the right thing to do is to lose the essence of himself and so to have fallen into the world's

mad aspect.

Thirdly, for Merton thinking had to be posited in the everyday here and now. This can be seen in Merton's thinking about action, for example in his anxiety and concern about the burning of draft cards or his horror at pacifist suicide. From his school days Merton was aware of how leaders are likely to undertake irrational acts from within their damaged selves, where loss of face or standing up for the existing order takes precedence over compassion. Merton's authority at the peacemakers' conference held at Gethsemani in 1968<sup>10</sup> came from a different position to the ordinary pacifist ones – his concern was really the state of the human soul. One could perhaps reframe this in boarding school terms as the primacy that should be given from the start to one's ordinary playful humanity. All action is wrong that ignores this. It is almost as though for Merton all action that springs from principle or belief gives rise to the nagging doubt that it is avoiding one's humanity.

## Conclusion

So, finally, whether fully conscious in Merton or not, it was the nature of the false self as some ersatz property that is taken off the shelf to be put on to become a human, particularly using a false self as a guide to when to act, that he learnt from his schooldays. The boarding school child is well acquainted with forms of absurdity and madness such as the Oakham chaplain describing the Christian aim as to become a gentleman (SSM 73), and this is encountered so often as to become normative and lead to a dissociation from reality. In his last year at Oakham, Merton became very ill. He felt nothing except an 'abominable coldness and indifference' (SSM 99). This learned absence of feeling in the boarding school boy is also our western dilemma today – coldness and indifference to everything that does not personally affect us, from indifference to our neighbours to the gross misuse of our planet. Is it possible to take courage from Merton's patient reworking of his own school experiences through an adult process of repeating them in reverse? By reliving one as the antithesis of the other he found redemption.

## Notes

1. The primary source for details of Merton's schooldays is his autobiography: Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: SPCK, 2015), hereafter referred to as SSM. The chapter detailing his time at Oakham and Cambridge is titled 'The Harrowing of Hell'. The title for this paper, 'Oakham, Oakham!',

starts section ii (SSM 72).

2. Dominique Brulé, 'The Impact of Saint-Antonin and Montauban on the Life of Thomas Merton' in *Universal Vision – A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton*, Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin & Peter Ellis (eds), (Thomas Merton Society, 2014), pp. 5–8.
3. Thomas Merton, 'A tribute to Gandhi', in Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, Patrick O'Connell (ed), (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), pp. 177–184.
4. Nick Duffell, *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System* (London: Lone Arrow Press, 2000); *Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion, - A Psychohistory* (Dorset: Lone Arrow Press, 2015).
5. Joy Schaverien, *Boarding School Syndrome: The Psychological Trauma of the Privileged Child* (London and New York, Routledge, 2015).
6. From a talk taped at Gethsemani, 'Discernment and Authority' issued by Now You Know Media, 2012, as part of their collection *Solitude and Togetherness*. Talking about the rigours of monastic communal living, 'I have been through a French boarding school and I've been through the kind of real concentration camp life that you go through over there and I've learnt to live with it, and it really doesn't really bother me that much.'
7. *The Making of Them*, p. 91.
8. Edmund Leach, 'Fishing for men on the edge of the wilderness' in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds), (London: Fontana Press, 1989), pp. 579–99, 584.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London, Hollis and Carter, 1953), p. 354.
10. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).

**Peter Ellis**, to declare an interest, has to say that he was boarded from age 7 to 18 so 'I know because I was there!' After school he took various jobs, including TEFL abroad, and finally worked in British archaeology ending up at the University of Birmingham. He is now retired.

The image on the inside back cover is the cover of the conference programme that was due to be printed the week after the decision was made to cancel the conference — a memento of an event that, alas, was not to be. The artwork is by Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga who was to have been the artist in residence.