

Why I Must “Elect Silence” and Not Talk About *The Seven Storey Mountain*!

Paul M Pearson

I must begin this piece with a major confession – I have never read *The Seven Storey Mountain* in its entirety! That’s correct. Growing up in England, long before the appearance of the internet and online booksellers, earlier generations of Merton reader’s, myself included, were largely familiar with the British edition, substantially edited by Evelyn Waugh, and published in 1949 by Hollis and Carter as *Elected Silence*.

In his diary Waugh recorded his work on Merton’s autobiography, the ‘enthraling task of cutting the redundancies and solecisms out of Tom Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*. This took a week and resulted in what should be a fine thin volume.’¹ Waugh would also edit *The Waters of Siloe*, criticizing passages in both books for ‘their redundancy and diffuseness’ and describing Merton’s inconsistency of style as ranging from literary English to slang, writing to Merton: ‘Do you not think you tend to be diffuse, saying the same thing more than once ... pattern-bombing instead of precision bombing ... It is not art.’² Waugh, in a letter to Thérèse Lentfoehr, suggests that ‘Cheese and liqueurs are the proper products of the contemplative life.’³

Robert Giroux was Merton’s editor at Harcourt Brace for *The Seven Storey Mountain* and, even in Giroux’s final years, as I discovered several times on meeting him, any mention of Waugh’s name was likely to release a tirade about the nerve that Waugh had in radically editing Giroux’s own work of editing and, not only that but, adding insult to injury, changing the title of the book.⁴ In two excellent essays Robert Murray Davis explores in great detail the changes Waugh made, calculating that he cut approximately twenty percent of the American edition.⁵ According to Davis, Waugh ‘approached *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a craftsman, and his editing was intelligent and ruthless’ and he cut ‘in order to make the narrative move more rapidly, to give it point and emphasis, and to focus it.’⁶ So Waugh would eliminate ‘casual, autobiographical aspects,’

Merton’s struggles as a writer, his reflections on literature, and his poetry thus, according to Davis, transforming the book into a spiritual autobiography, rather than a coming of age story or ‘artist’s novel.’ These changes were expressed most clearly in Waugh’s retitling of the book.

For Robert Giroux, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was an unexpected success, indeed the bestseller of Giroux’s career as an editor, a career that would include editing numerous nobel laureates, Pulitzer Prize winners, and recipients of various other significant literary honors. Giroux had a host of stories relating to *The Seven Storey Mountain* that he would regale audiences with. One in particular comes to mind: After first reading the manuscript, Giroux recommended its publication to Donald Brace. It was an unusual title to be published by a trade house at that time as, according to Naomi Burton Stone, Merton’s literary agent, Catholic authors as a rule were published by Catholic publishers with a few exceptions such as Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. Giroux’s recollection of his conversation with Donald Brace, his senior editor and one of the founding partners of Harcourt, Brace and Company, clearly demonstrated the unexpected nature of *The Seven Storey Mountain*’s success. Giroux recalled:

I told Mr. Brace this was a manuscript by a former classmate of mine and that it was about his conversion to Catholicism and his going into a Trappist monastery, he said, ‘you really like it?’ And I said, ‘yes, it’s really very readable.’ ... he said ... ‘You don’t think it will lose any money if we publish it, do you?’ And I said, ‘I really don’t think we’ll lose any money, but whether we’ll make any is problematic.’⁷

At that time the break-even point for a publisher was selling 5,000 copies. With early interest in the book, prior to publication, the initial print run was upped to several tens of thousands. And, in the words of Merton’s literary agent ‘the book just sold and sold.’ To celebrate the publication of the 100,000th copy, Burton told one interviewer that she went with Giroux to Giovanni’s Restaurant where they had seven-layer chocolate cake to celebrate. After Merton’s ordination to the priesthood on May 26, 1949, Giroux presented him with a specially bound and engraved copy, the 200,000th copy to come off the press. The book would enter the *The New York Times*’ bestseller list in late 1948 and remain on that list for every single week of 1949 and on into the next decade.⁸

Reflecting many years later, Giroux would say that the book owed its success to three factors: It appeared ‘at a time of disillusion, following the

Second World War, when another war—the Cold War—had started and the public was ready for a change from disillusion and cynicism.’ Secondly, Merton’s story was unusual: ‘An articulate young man with an interesting background leaves the world and withdraws into a monastery.’ And thirdly, it was well written, ‘a tale well told, with liveliness and eloquence.’ This combination of the ‘right subject at the right time presented in the right way,’ according to Giroux, ‘accounts for a good part of the book’s success.’⁹ That success continues to this day with the book having remained continually in print for seventy-five years, translated into over twenty languages, and with new translations still being made, most recently into Norwegian, Dutch, Ukrainian and Croatian.

One reviewer of the 50th anniversary edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* wrote that Merton ‘transformed the tale of the Prodigal Son into a literary thriller—jazzed up, powerfully narrated, and as impossible to put down now as it must have been a half-century ago.’ A reflection, I have to say, I find better suited to the British edition, than the American edition. For both Merton and Giroux their literary style was formed by Columbia, not by Cambridge, and they lacked Waugh’s obsession with language and his professionalism as a writer, which he brought to bear with force on his editing of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.¹⁰

Thomas Merton’s autobiography, however, wasn’t just well written as stated by Giroux, but it was written in a way that made readers feel as if Merton was speaking directly to them. The episcopal bishop G. Porter Taylor summed it up succinctly writing that it was one of those rare books that ‘read me, as much as I read it.’ Or, in the words of Parker Palmer, Merton was ‘a kindred spirit who understood me better than I understood myself,’ a true soul friend.¹¹ And that was my own experience of first reading Thomas Merton and the experience that made me want to read more and, even after more than forty years, to keep reading more. His writings would lead me into an international community of similar friends and aficionados of Thomas Merton and into, what has become, my life’s work.

My journey with Merton reminds me of Merton’s account of being handed his first copy of the published edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he writes of browsing the index and finding there ‘the most peculiar collection of names you ever saw ... The index is beautiful. It is like the gathering of all the people I have known’ and how ‘they will all belong to me somehow as trophies in heaven, or I will belong to some of them as a trophy.’¹²

Notes

1. Evelyn Waugh, *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, edited by Michael Davie (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976), p. 700.
2. Evelyn Waugh to Thomas Merton, August 29th, 1949. *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter* 3.1 (Spring 1969), p. 3.
3. Thérèse Lentfoehr, ‘My Meeting with Evelyn Waugh’, *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter* 11.1 (Spring 1977), p. 4.
4. Waugh’s title, *Elected Silence*, was taken from a poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘The Habit of Perfection’: Elected Silence, sing to me/And beat upon my whorled,/Pipe me to pastures still and be/The music that I care to hear.
5. See Robert Murray Davis, ‘How Waugh Cut Merton’, *Month* 4 (April 1973): 150-153 and Robert Murray Davis, ‘Grace beyond the Reach of Sullen Art: Waugh Edits Merton’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 13.1 (March 1986): pp. 163-166.
6. Davis, 1973, p. 150.
7. Transcribed from an interview with Robert Giroux by Paul Wilkes. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center.
8. Often overlooked is the fact that Merton was still a British subject when he wrote the book that would catapult him into the public arena, not becoming an American citizen until the decade after the publication of his autobiography.
9. Robert Giroux, ‘Introduction’ to *The Seven Storey Mountain* Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), p. xiv.
10. Evelyn Waugh, ‘Foreword’ to *Elected Silence* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949), p. v.
11. Parker J. Palmer, *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 218), p. 62.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 107.

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