

# Thomas Merton and Evelyn Waugh: *Elected Silence at 75*

## Mary Frances Coady

### A Brief Encounter

The single meeting between the English literary lion Evelyn Waugh and the 33-year-old newly famous Thomas Merton took place in the Gethsemani Abbey parlour on a wet November day in 1948. No complete record of their conversation exists, but each left a brief written impression of the other. Merton, despite knowing well how to create a lively picture in few words, gave only the blandest possible description of the novelist in his journal: 'I thought that he would be taller and more dashing, but he was very nice and friendly.'<sup>1</sup>

Waugh's impression of Merton was a bit more fulsome, writing to Merton's friend, Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr:

I would not describe Merton as at all odd looking. Indeed I rather expected someone older. Of course monastic barbers make the monks look different from laymen, but differently dressed I could well imagine him as a social success in Bohemian New York. He *looks* intelligent rather than intellectual, and has a happy, humorous way of talking. Quite humble, as one would expect, and not spoiled by success. Only wishing a little perhaps that the Rule allowed him more privacy — but I only guessed this. He made no hint of complaint.<sup>2</sup>

The encounter took place during Waugh's second visit to the United States. His first North American visit two years earlier had come about as a result of his sweeping Catholic novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, published in 1945, and the American public's subsequent discovery of his work. He and his wife, Laura, had been flown to Hollywood, where a deal for a film version of *Brideshead* eventually fell through. The planning for a second visit to the U.S. to make a study of American Catholicism was already in

the works when Waugh received the proofs of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which had been sent to him by Merton's publisher, Robert Giroux. Giroux did not expect to hear from him, but Waugh replied as soon as he read the proofs, and his endorsement was placed on the cover of the first edition: 'A book which may well prove to be of permanent interest in the history of religious experience.'<sup>3</sup> As a result, Waugh's interest in the American Church widened considerably. In a September, 1948 letter to his American agent, who was helping him plan the trip, he wrote:

I am specially interested in American monasticism as the result of reading an intensely moving book shortly to appear by a young man named Thomas Merton who after a disorderly youth has become a Trappist monk in Kentucky. It seems to me likely that American monasticism may help save the world.<sup>4</sup>

*The Seven Storey Mountain* was published later that year and became an unlikely bestseller. Merton's own moniker for the book, 'Seven Storey Molehill', suggests that for him it was already past history.<sup>5</sup>

### Editing *The Seven Storey Mountain*

Waugh's enthusiasm for Merton's new book was not uncritical, however, and he made this fact clear in his reply to Giroux: the text, although deeply moving, was too verbose and needed a good editor. Tom Burns, Waugh's friend and publisher of Hollis and Carter, bought the rights to publish *The Seven Storey Mountain* in Britain, and almost immediately Waugh set about the task of editing the text for a British readership. It is unclear whether Burns or Waugh himself had the first notion that Waugh should be the editor. The sole reference to this task is a journal entry of August 28, a few weeks after he had read the galley proofs of the book: 'Tom Burns gave me [the] enthralling task of cutting the redundancies and solecisms out of Tom Merton's [*The Seven Storey Mountain*]. This took a week and has resulted in what should be a fine thin volume.'<sup>6</sup>

Although the tone of this journal entry suggests irony, the probability is that the subject matter of the book stirred Waugh so deeply that the craftsman in him wanted to work on the material. Since his early years as a writer he had considered himself as a literary craftsman. He had met a Jesuit carpenter called Father Mather on a 1933 journey to British Guyana and had written about him in his travel book *Ninety-Two Days*: 'He is a skilled and conscientious craftsman; everything he does, from developing films to making saddles, is done with patient accuracy,' he

wrote of the priest, and further, describing the priest's environment: 'Some way from the church stood Father Mather's workshop where every kind of odd job in leather, iron and wood was brilliantly performed.'<sup>7</sup> Waugh would later echo this view of the importance of craft in a letter chiding Merton for what he considered the monk's rambling prose: 'Your monastery tailor and boot-maker could not waste material. Words are our materials.'<sup>8</sup>

Waugh's editing work on *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which he said took him a week, consisted of efforts to make the narrative flow: it was the story of Merton's life from lost and angry youth to Trappist monk that had caught his interest, and so he excised words and passages that slowed the story down. Discursive passages that interrupted the narrative were cut, as were paragraphs that repeated what had already been said: a paragraph that began with phrases like 'In other words' was immediately slashed. He softened Merton's judgementalism of anything outside of his own narrow new-convert-Catholic understanding, and he cut out many American references that, in his view, would not be of interest to British readers. In his Foreword to the edited text, Waugh indicated obliquely the aspects of Merton's text that he admired and those he disliked. He was pleased that in the heart of the 'American way', which he considered crass, faithless and spiritually dead, there lay a seed of hope: 'There is an ascetic tradition deep in the American heart which has sometimes taken odd and unlovable forms. Here in the historic Rules of the Church lies its proper fulfillment.'<sup>9</sup> From a literary point of view, however, he hints that he and Merton are not on the same page, as it were. The Atlantic Ocean separates them: 'Columbia not Cambridge formed his literary style,'<sup>10</sup> he writes.

*The Seven Storey Mountain* with Waugh's editing was published in Britain in early 1949 under a new title: *Elected Silence*, which was taken from the beginning of the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Habit of Perfection' ('Elected Silence, sing to me...'). The reviews were excellent. From the *Times Literary Supplement*: 'A remarkable book, perhaps a classic of its kind, written in a vivid, rich and alert style which ranges from crisp vernacular to passionate eloquence, full of picturesque incident and passing at times into religious ecstasy....there is no escaping its spell.'<sup>11</sup>

### *The Waters of Silence*

Merton's next book, *The Waters of Siloë*, a history of the American Trappists, was published a few months later, with a dedication to Evelyn

Waugh. Waugh accepted the dedication graciously: 'It is an enormous honour I do not at all deserve.'<sup>12</sup> Even after he received the book in the mail and read it thoroughly, he expressed his gratitude at the dedication. He found the content, which was entirely new to him, 'enthalling'.<sup>13</sup> The editing of the text, which Waugh had offered to do, was another matter, however. He wrote to his friend Katherine Asquith, a fellow Catholic convert, who admired the book and whose opinion he valued, that judging from the success of his earlier book, Merton 'will write two or three a year for the rest of his life.' He went on: 'It is for his directors and superiors to decide if that is good for his soul. From a literary point of view the prospect seems depressing.' He spelled out some of the failures in the book: "His explanations of the contemplative life came in at odd places in no sort of order and were addressed sometimes to people who had never heard of a monk and sometimes to people far advanced in spiritual growth.' He was perplexed as to how he should proceed with the editing process: 'Would it do just to cut out obvious gaucheries and leave the structure as he planned, or failed to plan, it and write a foreword explaining why a Trappist is publishing books at all (which has disconcerted even sympathetic critics)?'<sup>14</sup>

To Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr he wrote of Merton:

I do hope that you are not going to lionize him too much. It won't hurt him, of course, but it will hurt his reputation in the world. One would like to think of him wrapped in silence, not typing out articles every day. I must admit that I think the *writing* of *The Waters of Siloë* rather inferior to his earlier work. I don't think it possible to combine a Trappist's life with that of a professional writer. Cheese and liqueurs are the proper products of the contemplative life.<sup>15</sup>

In the end, Waugh made structural changes to the front part of the book, but his editing petered out as he moved through the text, and the latter part had no changes. It was given the title *Waters of Silence*. It was never clear who changed the titles of the British versions of the two edited Merton books, but the repeated word 'silence' indicates Waugh's preferred vocation for Merton.

### No real meeting of minds

Waugh's first biographer, his friend Christopher Sykes, wrote: 'Evelyn's admiration for Thomas Merton's thought (to a lesser extent his writing) was great.'<sup>16</sup> Subsequent Waugh biographers have more or less agreed. In

spite of the pleasant meeting in Gethsemani in November, 1948, there was no real meeting of minds regarding literary excellence. Waugh's stay at the abbey lasted less than 24 hours. In spite of Merton's invitation for him to return to Gethsemani — he wrote after their one visit, 'Don't forget, please, that we extorted a promise that you would come back here sometime,'<sup>17</sup> — Waugh expressed no written intention or desire to do so. In an article for the magazine *Commonweal*, Waugh wrote that he was accosted at the end of his second U.S. visit by a reporter who asked him what impressed him most in America. His answer was the Trappist Abbey in Kentucky. He went on: 'I told her about monasticism. It is a subject I have at heart because I believe that we are returning to a stage when on the supernatural plane only heroic prayer can save us and when, on the natural plane, the cloister offers a saner and more civilized life than "the world".'<sup>18</sup> It is safe to say that, as the years went on, there would be less and less meeting of minds between these two great writers.

### Notes

1. *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol.* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 245.
2. Letter of 2 May 1948, quoted in *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter*, vol. II, no. 1, Spring 1977.
3. Quoted in Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 243.
4. Letter of 3 September 1948, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, Mark Amory ed., (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd., 1980), p. 283.
5. Quoted in Mary Frances Coady, *Merton and Waugh* (Brewster MA Paraclete Press, 2015), p. 47.
6. *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, Michael Davie ed. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd., 1976), p. 700.
7. Evelyn Waugh, *Ninety-two Days* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 74-5.
8. Quoted in *Merton and Waugh*, p. 94.
9. Thomas Merton, *Elected Silence*, Foreword by Evelyn Waugh (London: Hollis & Carter, 1949), p. vi.
10. *Elected Silence*, p. vi
11. *Elected Silence*, back cover.
12. Letter of 27 May 1949, quoted in *Merton and Waugh*, p. 83.
13. Letter of 29 August 1949, quoted in *Merton and Waugh*, p. 94.
14. Letter of 13 September 1949, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, p. 309.
15. Letter of 24 September, 1949, quoted in *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter*, vol. II, no. 1, Spring 1977.

16. Christopher Sykes, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), p. 328.
17. Quoted in *Merton and Waugh*, p. 73.
18. 'Kicking Against the Goad', *Commonweal*, March 11, 1949, p. 534.

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