





# Merton & Waugh

A MONK,  
A CRUSTY OLD MAN,  
& *THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN*



Mary Frances Coady



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*Merton and Waugh: A Monk, A Crusty Old Man, and The Seven Storey Mountain*

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FOR

Patricia A. Burton



## EDITOR'S NOTE

The extant correspondence of Thomas Merton and Evelyn Waugh, from August 2, 1948, to February 25, 1952, comprises twenty letters: thirteen from Merton and seven from Waugh.

Merton's letters were written on paper containing variations of the letterhead "Gethsemani Abbey, Trappist, Kentucky." One was handwritten and the rest typed. Waugh's letters were handwritten on paper with the letterhead "Piers Court, Stinchcombe, Gloucestershire," which was his home address. Waugh seems to have had a systematic method for saving others' letters to him, but Merton—at least at the beginning of his fame as a writer—had no such system, and it is only because of the archival instinct of his friend Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, who, Merton notes in one letter, "has a misguided notion that I am the cousin of Santa Claus," that any of Waugh's letters to the Trappist monk managed to be saved at all.

In the transcription of the correspondence included in this volume, the dates of the letters have been standardized and the year has been added in square brackets to letters where it had been omitted. Both writers had stylistic idiosyncrasies in writing the titles of books and magazines,

sometimes indicating them in capital letters, sometimes underlining, sometimes not making them stand out at all. These have also been standardized with the use of italics, while the truncated form of the titles that each of the correspondents often employed has been kept. Merton had trouble with the spelling of certain words (“succeed” for “succeed,” “discrete” used improperly for “discreet”); these have been corrected. In a few places missing words have been placed within square brackets. Likewise, a few commas have been added to certain passages for greater clarification.

The Waugh Estate has allowed no more than two-thirds of each letter from Waugh to Merton to be printed. Ellipses indicate the omissions. Five of these letters can be found almost in their entirety in the *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter/ Studies* (Vol. 3 No. 1), via the website of The Evelyn Waugh Society (<http://evelynwaughociety.org/journal/>). Thanks to Luke Ingram and Thomas Dobrowolski.

In 2009 I received a Shannon Fellowship from the International Thomas Merton Society, which enabled me to spend several days working on the Merton/Waugh material at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. Thanks to Paul Pearson and Mark Meade for answering my many questions there. Thanks as well to Paul Spaeth of the St. Bonaventure University Archives in St. Bonaventure, New York, who allowed me

access to the Naomi Burton Stone Collection, and to the Merton Legacy Trust for permission to quote from two of Merton's letters to Naomi Burton Stone. I am also grateful to John McGinty and Jeff Manley, and to John H. Wilson, editor of *Evelyn Waugh Studies*.

Thomas Merton's letters to Evelyn Waugh first appeared in *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, edited by Christine M. Bochen, and published in 1993. I am grateful for the permission to reprint these letters. Likewise, grateful acknowledgment to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for permission to quote passages from *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Part of the present book was worked on during the summer of 2012 at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota, and I am grateful to both the institute and the Lilly Foundation for a tranquil week of writing.

Finally, I owe much gratitude to Jon Sweeney, Robert Edmonson, copyeditor Jeff Reimer, and the staff of Paraclete Press.





## INTRODUCTION

# “I came into the world”

In the early summer of 1948, the British novelist Evelyn Waugh, low in spirits because of unrelenting rain and an itchy nettle rash, received a manuscript in the mail from an American publisher, along with a request for an endorsement. Waugh was newly famous in America; two years earlier, his novel of illicit love and divine grace, *Brideshead Revisited*, had been named a Book of the Month Club selection, and as a result became a national bestseller. Previously little known, the novelist was now a writer of note, especially among educated American Catholics.

Waugh himself had a jaded view of Americans; a visit to the United States the year before had ended badly. His opinion of his own country was little better, however. He detested not only the gray weather but also the high taxes and postwar rations imposed by the British government. The unsolicited package from the United States, containing the galley proofs of an autobiographical book by an obscure Trappist monk who lived in rural Kentucky,

proved a distraction for him. Waugh read the pages and sent the publisher an immediate reply.

The title of the soon-to-be-published book was *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The editor who had sent Waugh the proofs was Robert Giroux of the New York publishing company Harcourt Brace. The company's president was uncertain about whether a book by a Trappist monk would sell, and so Giroux, in an effort to give it prominence, had sent the text to several well-known Catholic writers with the hope that at least one would respond with a quote-worthy endorsement. Besides Waugh, three others received galleys of the book: Graham Greene, Clare Booth Luce, and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Giroux did not expect to hear from Waugh, but when he received the novelist's reply—as well as praise from the other three—he increased the print run from 5,000 to 12,500 copies.

*The Seven Storey Mountain* was published a few months later, and Waugh's endorsement was chosen for the cover of the first edition: "I regard this as a book which may well prove to be of permanent interest in the history of religious experience. No one can afford to neglect this clear account of a complex religious process." The name of the author was Brother Louis, but the cover of the book would carry only his birth name: Thomas Merton.

*The Seven Storey Mountain* covered ground that Evelyn Waugh was more or less familiar with in his own

life—early precociousness, desire to become a visual artist, a dissolute youth spent at one of England's great universities, serious emotional setbacks in early adult relationships, a drift toward a literary career, and finally, conversion to Catholicism. The Catholic Church in which Merton was received in 1938 offered solace and a moral and religious structure to rein in the wildness in his temperament, as it had for Waugh eight years earlier. But there was even more drama in Merton's life story: a childhood odyssey that took him from his 1915 birth in the south of France to bohemian artist parents and his mother's early death, back and forth across the Atlantic to Long Island, New York, and to England, losing his father to cancer at the age of fifteen. The removal of this slight anchor led him, as a scholarship student at Cambridge University, into a year of debauchery that ended in what seems to have been a paternity suit. A final move across the Atlantic that began in his sense of shame brought him to the heady, vibrant world of New York City, where he made life-changing friendships and discovered the Catholic faith. And then, at the age of twenty-six, three years after his conversion, he entered the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (otherwise known as Trappists), a rigorous religious order that emphasized silence and asceticism.

Waugh was not entirely uncritical in his praise of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, however. He found a few

faults with the book—the monk-author was too hard on Cambridge University, and his writing was verbose and diffuse. The essential message of twentieth-century conversion and religious experience, Waugh thought, was in danger of being drowned out. The book needed a good editor.



Unknown to Waugh, the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* had already been reduced from a sprawling tome of nearly seven hundred pages to just over four hundred. It was not Merton's first book. In fact, the monk had been writing almost from the day he walked through the gate of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky on December 10, 1941. When he entered the Trappists, Merton had been prepared to give up writing completely in order to follow a higher calling, only to find that the abbot of the monastery, Dom Frederick Dunne, was a bibliophile whose father had been a bookbinder and publisher. The abbot was also in charge of a community of nearly two hundred monks. The abbey was in debt, the buildings in serious disrepair, and in need of some means to fill the coffers. Although the Trappists' main work was manual labor, there was already a literary precedent at Gethsemani. Father Raymond Flanagan's book, *The Man Who Got Even With God*, the biography of a Texas rebel who became a monk, had been published the year Merton entered the monastery. Flanagan's book became a favorite among Catholics, and just as important, it brought royalties

and donations to the monastery. It was not long before Merton, too, was put to work at a typewriter.

Thus the abbot unwittingly highlighted a conflict within Merton that would never quite be resolved. After he left Cambridge University in disgrace and enrolled at New York's Columbia University for the 1935 winter term, Merton had displayed a literary flair almost immediately. He became part of a cutting-edge artistic group and submitted articles, poems, and drawings for the university's humor magazine, *The Jester*. He received his master's degree in English in 1939 and began writing autobiographical novels, two of which he presented to Robert Giroux, who had been a classmate at Columbia and had by now become an editor. Giroux saw evidence of talent in the emerging writer's work, but neither manuscript proved successful as a novel. The structure of each was too loose, the characters were derivative of those of Hemingway, and the style was too self-consciously that of James Joyce. Reacting to these rejections, Merton concluded that the novel was "a lousy art form anyway."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of his desire to begin his life anew, there was still a writer lurking inside Merton. Even as he bade good-bye to his former life and entered the monastic enclosure in 1941, having destroyed most of his writing, he left some manuscripts, including an unpublished novel, with his former professor and mentor at Columbia University,

Mark Van Doren. (The novel, lightly autobiographical, which he called *The Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, would be published much later as *My Argument with the Gestapo*.<sup>2</sup>) He brought a few poems with him into the enclosure, eventually showing them to the abbot, who encouraged him to continue writing poetry. As the months went by, he found himself composing more poems, and he sent these, along with the ones he had brought with him, to Mark Van Doren. In 1944, eight months after he made his simple monastic vows, the poems were published as a collection by New Directions under the title *Thirty Poems*. It was Merton's first book.

In 1946 a second book of Merton's poems, *A Man in a Divided Sea*, was published. By the end of that year he had written a series of monastic guides for Trappists and pious pamphlets for the monks and the retreatants who came to the monastery. He also completed two biographies of Trappistine nuns, which were nearly ready for publication. These would become *Exile Ends in Glory*, the biography of Mother Berchmans, the foundress of a monastery for Cistercian women in Japan; and *What Are These Wounds?*, a life of St. Lutgarde, a twelfth-century Flemish mystic and stigmatic.

On March 1 of that year, he had written to his New Directions publisher, James Laughlin, of a new project—"creative, more or less poetic prose, autobiographical in its

essence, but not pure autobiography. Something, as I see it now like a cross between Dante's *Purgatory*, and Kafka, and a medieval miracle play."<sup>3</sup> It had been "brewing" for a very long time, he added. He hoped he could keep it relatively short, about a hundred and fifty pages. The book-in-progress already had a name: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, after the ascent of the soul as it is purified of the seven deadly sins in Dante's *Purgatorio*.

By late summer, the project had become much more straightforward: "no fantasy, no Kafka, no miracle play. It is straight biography, with a lot of comment and reflection, and it is turning into the mountain that the title says."<sup>4</sup> An even more explicit description of the book appeared in a document written by a so-called anonymous monk of Gethsemani who sought the approval of the Chapter of Cistercian Abbots convening in France that year: "the biography or rather the history of the conversion and the Cistercian vocation of a monk of Gethsemani. Born in Europe, the son of artists, this monk passed through the abyss of Communism in the university life of our time before being led to the cloister by the merciful grace of Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

In the fall of 1946 Merton sent the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to Naomi Burton, of the agency Curtis Brown, Inc., in New York, who had become his literary agent in the years when he was trying to get his

novels published. Five years earlier, upon learning of his entry into the silent monastic cloister, she had lamented that she would never hear from him again. She now replied with enthusiasm for the manuscript. He received her letter on December 13, the feast of St. Lucy, patron saint of light, the fifth anniversary of the day he had been formally accepted into the Trappists. Naomi Burton told him she was sending the manuscript to Merton's classmate-turned-editor, Robert Giroux. This was by far his most blatantly personal piece of writing yet—the text representing the purging of his soul. There was no telling what Giroux, who had rejected his novels, would think about this more intimate work.

He recorded in his journal that when he was handed a telegram from Robert Giroux in the refectory on December 28, “my heart sank into my dinner.” He thought at first that the manuscript had been lost. And then he remembered that his agent had sent it to Giroux only a week earlier. Publishers always took weeks and even months before commenting on a manuscript submission. The message was likely to be an out-of-hand rejection. He waited until after dinner before opening the telegram. It said simply, “Manuscript accepted. Happy New Year.”<sup>6</sup>

Like all Merton's written work, the text of *The Seven Storey Mountain* had to pass through the Cistercian censors. There was shock at some of the passages, in particular those

that described the author's sexual encounters as a young man, possibly including references to the paternity suit that had ended Merton's studies at Cambridge University. These were excised, and only oblique references were left to describe Merton's premonastic sexual adventures. Readers would either have to fill in the blanks for themselves or assume that late-night drunkenness was the full extent of the author's debauchery. One censor, whom Merton's journal identifies as Father Gabriel, went further, objecting to Merton's writing style, which he considered inferior. He suggested that Merton take a correspondence course in grammar. (Merton was much gratified later on when the abbot general on a visit from Rome told him it was fine to write slang, which he considered his most natural prose style.)

For Giroux, some parts of the censored text still contained editorial problems. There was too much abstract sermonizing, and the writing tended to be long-winded. This was a criticism Merton readily agreed with, acknowledging that long-windedness tended to be a literary fault of silent Trappists who found themselves tapping the keys of a typewriter. The manuscript began with four pages of wordy discourse, the first sentence reading: "When a man is conceived, when a human nature comes into being as an individual, concrete, subsisting thing, a person, then God's image is minted into the world." For Giroux, this