

The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University

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THOMAS MERTON'S LIFE AND WORK



Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is arguably the most influential American Catholic author of the twentieth century. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, has sold over one million copies and has been translated into over fifteen languages. He wrote over sixty other books and hundreds of poems and articles on topics ranging from monastic spirituality to civil rights, nonviolence, and the nuclear arms race.

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France. His New Zealand-born father, Owen Merton, and his American-born mother, Ruth Jenkins, were both artists. They had met at painting school in Paris, were married at St. Anne's Church, Soho, London and returned to the France where Thomas Merton was born on January 31st, 1915.

After a rambunctious youth and adolescence, Merton converted to Roman Catholicism whilst at Columbia University and on December 10th, 1941 he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, a community of monks belonging to the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists), the most ascetic Roman Catholic monastic order.

The twenty-seven years he spent in Gethsemani brought about profound changes in his self-understanding. This ongoing conversion impelled him into the political arena, where he became, according to Daniel Berrigan, the conscience of the peace movement of the 1960's. Referring to race and peace as the two most urgent issues of our time, Merton was a strong supporter of the nonviolent civil rights movement, which he called "certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States." For his social activism Merton endured severe criticism, from Catholics and non-Catholics alike, who assailed his political writings as unbecoming of a monk.

During his last years, he became deeply interested in Asian religions, particularly Zen Buddhism, and in promoting East-West dialogue. After several meetings with Merton during the American monk's trip to the Far East in 1968, the Dalai Lama praised him as having a more profound understanding of Buddhism than any other Christian he had known. It was during this trip to a conference on East-West monastic dialogue that Merton died, in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, the victim of an accidental electrocution. The date marked the twenty-seventh anniversary of his entrance to Gethsemani.

A CHRONOLOGY OF THOMAS MERTON'S LIFE & PUBLICATIONS

1915 - January 31-born at Prades, France, son of Owen Merton (artist from New Zealand) and of Ruth Jenkins (artist from USA)

1916 - moved to USA, lived at Douglaston, L.I. (with his mother's family)

1921 - his mother dies-from cancer

1922 - in Bermuda with his father who went there to paint



Br. Patrick Hart, Merton's last secretary,
and Thomas Merton. Photo by Philip Stark. S.J.

1925 - to France with his father, lived at St. Antonin

1926 - entered Lycée Ingres, Montauban, France

1928 - to England-Ripley Court school, then to Oakham (1929)

1931 - his father dies of a brain tumor

1932 - at Oakham School he acquired a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge

1933 - visited Italy, spent summer in USA, entered Cambridge in the fall - study of modern languages (French and Italian)

1934 - left Cambridge and returned to USA

1935 - entered Columbia University

1937 - at Columbia - editor of the 1937 *Yearbook* and art editor of the *Columbia Jester*

1938 - graduated from Columbia, began work on M.A.

1938 - November 16 - received into the Catholic Church at Corpus Christi Church

1940 - 1941 - taught English at St. Bonaventure College

1941 - December 10-entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky.

[**Note:** January 31, 1915 to December 10, 1941— nearly 27 years before entering monastery. Dies on December 10, 1968— the 27th anniversary of his entering Gethsemani.]

1944 - March 19 - made simple vows, published *Thirty Poems*

1946 - *A Man in the Divided Sea*

1947 - March 19 - solemn vows, published *Exile Ends in Glory*

1948 - Publication of best-seller autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *What Are These Wounds?*

1949 - May 26 - ordained priest; *Seeds of Contemplation*; *The Tears of the Blind Lions*; *The Waters of Siloe*

1951 - 1955 - Master of Scholastics (students for priesthood)

1951 - *The Ascent to Truth*

1953 - *The Sign of Jonas*; *Bread in the Wilderness*

1954 - *The Last of the Fathers*

1955 - *No Man Is an Island*

1955 - 1965 - Master of Novices

1956 - *The Living Bread*

1957 - *The Silent Life*; *The Strange Islands*

1958 - *Thoughts in Solitude*

1959 - *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*; *Selected Poems*

1960 - *Disputed Questions*; *The Wisdom of the Desert*

1961 - *The New Man*; *The Behavior of Titans*

1961 - *Emblems of a Season of Fury*; *Life and Holiness*;

1964 - *Seeds of Destruction*



Photo by Ralph Eugene Meatyard.
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1965 - *Gandhi on Non-Violence; The Way of Chuang Tzu; Seasons of Celebration*

1965 - 1968 - lived as a hermit on the grounds of the monastery

1966 - *Raids on the Unspeakable; Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

1967 - *Mystics and Zen Masters*

1968 - *Monks Pond; Cables to the Ace; Faith and Violence; Zen and the Birds of Appetite*

1968 - December 10-died at Bangkok, Thailand, where he had spoken at a meeting of Asian Benedictines and Cistercians.

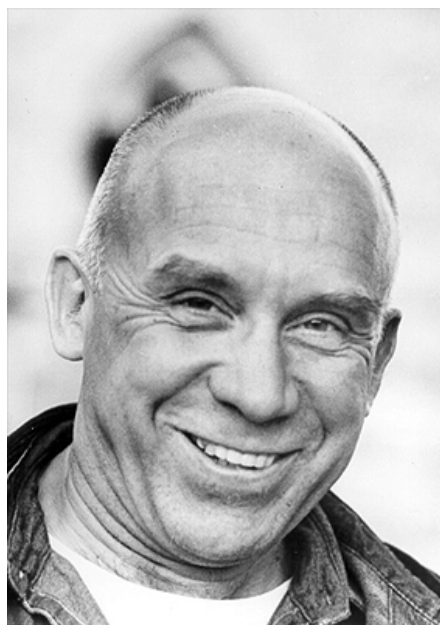


Photo of Thomas Merton by John Lyons.

Posthumous Publications:

1969 - *My Argument with the Gestapo; Contemplative Prayer; The Geography of Lograire*

1971 - *Contemplation in a World of Action*

1973 - *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton; He Is Risen*

1976 - *Ishi Means Man*

1977 - *The Monastic Journey; The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*

1979 - *Love and Living*

1980 - *The Non-Violent Alternative*

1981 - *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton; Day of a Stranger Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton* (reprinted in 1989 under title "Honorable Reader" *Reflections on My Work*)

1982 - *Woods, Shore and Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*

1985 - *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (Letters, I)

1988 - *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965; Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals and Letters*

1989 - *The Road to Joy: Letter to New and Old Friends* (Letters, II)

1990 - *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (Letters, III)

1993 - *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (Letters, IV)

1994 - *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (Letters, V)

1995 - *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, I: 1939-1941)

1996 - *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (Journals, II: 1941-1952); *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* (Journals, III: 1952-1960); *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (Journals, IV: 1960-1963)

1997 - *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (Journals, V: 1963- 1965); *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (Journals VI: 1966-1967)

1998 - *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals VII: 1967-1968)

1999 - *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*

2001 - *Dialogues with Silence.*

2003 - *The Inner Experience. Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers.*

2004 - *Peace in a Post-Christian Era.*

2005 - *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton. Cassian and the Fathers.*

2006 - *The Cold War Letters. Pre-Benedictine Monasticism.*

2008 - *Introduction to Christian Mysticism. A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection.*

2009 - *The Rule of St. Benedict. Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine De Hueck Doherty.*

2010 - *Monastic Observances.*

2012 - *The Life of the Vows.*

2013 - *Selected Essays. In the Valley of Wormwood: Cistercian Blessed and Saints of the Golden Age.*

2014 - *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer: Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.*

2015 - *Early Essays: 1947-1952. Charter, Customs and Constitutions of the Cistercians. The Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton.*

2016 - *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology.*

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Marquita E. Breit and Robert E. Daggy, *Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (Garland, 1986)

Marquita E. Breit, Patricia A. Burton and Paul M. Pearson, *'About Merton': Secondary Sources 1945-2000: A Bibliographic Workbook (2002)*

Patricia A. Burton. *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (Scarecrow Press, 2008)

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