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THOMAS MERTON

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The Seven Storey Mountain

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THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN

Fiftieth Anniversary Edition

THOMAS MERTON

A HARVEST BOOK

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“*For I tell you that God is able of these stones*
to raise up children to Abraham”

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Introduction

by Robert Giroux

The Seven Storey Mountain was first published fifty years ago, on October 4, 1948. As Thomas Merton revealed in his journals, he had begun to write his autobiography four years earlier, at the Trappist monastery in Kentucky where he had journeyed in December 1941, at age twenty-six, after resigning as a teacher of English literature at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, New York. “In a certain sense,” Merton wrote, “one man was more responsible for *The Seven Storey Mountain* than I was, even as he was the cause of all my other writing.” This was Dom Frederic Dunne, the abbot who had received Merton as a postulant and accepted him, in March 1942, as a Trappist novice.

“I brought all the instincts of a writer with me into the monastery,” Merton revealed, adding that the abbot “encouraged me when I wanted to write poems and reflections and other things that came into my head in the novitiate.” When Dom Frederic suggested that Merton write the story of his life, the novice was at first reluctant to do so. After all, he had become a monk in order to leave his past life behind. Once he began to write, however, it poured out. “I don’t know what audience I might have been thinking of,” he admitted. “I suppose I put down what was in me, under the eyes of God, who knows what is in me.” He was soon “trying to tone down” his original draft for the Trappist censors, who had criticized it severely, especially the account of his years at Clare College (Cambridge University), during which he had become the father of an illegitimate child (killed with the mother apparently in the bombing of London). For this Merton was “sent down”—expelled—from college, and his English guardian advised him (both his parents were dead) to leave England. He also told Merton to forget about his hopes of a London career in the diplomatic service, so Merton sailed for America and enrolled at Columbia College, where I met him in 1935.

The United States was still in the Depression; the times were serious and so were most undergraduates. Among Merton’s and my classmates were Ad Reinhardt, who became a famous painter; John Latouche, who became famous in the musical theater; Herman Wouk, who became a famous

novelist; John Berryman, who became a famous poet; Robert Lax, Edward Rice, Robert Gibney, and Sy Freedgood, close friends who were associated with Merton on the college humor magazine, *Jester;* and Robert Gerdy, who became an editor at the *New Yorker.*

We met on the campus when Merton walked into the office of the *Columbia Review,* the college literary magazine, and showed me some manuscripts, a story, and several reviews, which I liked and accepted. I thought to myself, "This man is a writer." He was stocky, blue-eyed, with thinning blond hair, and he was a lively talker, with a slight British accent. He was a junior and I was a senior. He told me of his interest in jazz, Harlem, and the movies—especially W. C. Fields, Chaplin, Keaton, the Marx Brothers, and Preston Sturges, enthusiasms I shared. We were also enthusiastic about Mark Van Doren as a teacher. We went to a couple of movies at the old Thalia, and of course in those leftist days words like religion, monasticism, and theology never came up. I graduated in June 1936, failing to get a job in book publishing (as I had hoped) and finding one at CBS. Then in December 1939 Frank V. Morley, head of the Trade Department of Harcourt Brace & Company, hired me as a junior editor, with the approval of Donald C. Brace (who had cofounded this distinguished firm in 1919 with Alfred Harcourt). Among the first manuscripts I was asked to evaluate was a novel by Thomas James Merton, submitted by Naomi Burton of the Curtis Brown Ltd. literary agency. The hero of *The Straits of Dover* was a Cambridge student who transfers to Columbia and gets involved with a stupid millionaire, a showgirl, a Hindu mystic, and a left-winger; it all took place in Greenwich Village. I agreed with the other editors that the writer had talent but the story wobbled around and got nowhere. Six months later Naomi resubmitted it as *The Labyrinth,* an improved replay of the same novel, which was also rejected. ¡Vlerton was an interesting writer but apparently not a novelist.

For the first time after college, I encountered him in Scribner's bookstore on Fifth Avenue; this was in May or June 1941. I had been browsing and felt someone touch my arm. It was Merton. "Tom!" I said, "it's great to see you. I hope you're still writing." He said, "Well, I've just been to the *New Yorker* and they want me to write about Gethsemani." I had no idea what he meant and said so. "Oh, it's a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, where I've made a retreat." This revelation stunned me. I had had no idea that Merton had

undergone a religious conversion or that he was interested in monasticism. "Well, I hope to read what you write about it," I said. "It will be something different for the *New Yorker*." "Oh, no," he said, "I would *never* think of writing about it." That told me a great deal. For the first time I understood the extraordinary change that had occurred in Merton. I wished him well and we parted.

I next heard about him from Mark Van Doren, when I called our old teacher at New Year's. "Tom Merton has become a Trappist monk," Mark said. "We'll probably never hear from him again. He's leaving the world. An extraordinary young man. I always expected him to become a writer." Tom had left with Mark his manuscript, *Thirty Poems*, and Mark later submitted it to my friend Jay Laughlin at New Directions, who published it in 1944. Little did we know how many other books would follow.

The partially approved text of *The Seven Storey Mountain* reached Naomi Burton late in 1946. Her reaction, as Tom noted in his journal, was good: "She is quite sure it will find a publisher. Anyway my idea—and hers also—is to turn it over to Robert Giroux at Harcourt Brace." This entry was dated December 13. Fourteen days later he wrote in his journal: "Yesterday at dinner Father Prior handed me a telegram.... The first thought that came into my mind was that the manuscript of *Mountain* had been lost. Naomi Burton gave it to Harcourt Brace only a week ago. I knew quite well that publishers always make you wait at least two months before saying anything about it.... I waited until after dinner and opened the telegram. It was from Bob Giroux and it said: "'*Manuscript accepted. Happy New Year!*'"

After I had received it by messenger from Naomi, I began reading the manuscript with growing excitement and took it home to finish it overnight. Though the text began badly, it quickly improved and I was certain that, with cutting and editing, it was publishable. It never once occurred to me that it might be a best-seller. Since Frank Morley had left the firm, Donald Brace was temporarily my boss. When I asked him to read it, I was finessed by his asking, "Do you think it will lose money?" "Oh, no," I replied, "I'm sure it will find an audience." I told him that Tom had been my classmate at Columbia (both Brace and Harcourt were Columbia men), but I was worried that I might not have been as objective as I should be. "Merton writes well," I added, "and I wish you'd take a look at it, Don." (I had just become the