“Biography has been described as the conversation that those who are living have with their friends, the dead. In Thomas Merton – Faithful Visionary, Michael W. Higgins presents a lively biographical dialogue that is rich, and deep, and instantly engaging. Higgins reminds us that we rarely know even those people who may be familiar to us. In these pages, Higgins removes any superficial image of Merton to present a restless seeker, someone who could never fit easily into a formulaic biographical box. This Merton is complex, remarkably gifted, and deeply human because of his vulnerabilities. The gift of this short biography is the way Michael W. Higgins filters decades of scholarly material about Merton and effortlessly guides readers right to the heart of the matter: Thomas Merton himself, that truly faithful visionary and, through his books, a generous friend to all his readers.”

—Kevin Burns, writer and producer, Ottawa

“In this carefully crafted biographical account of Thomas Merton, the faithful visionary, Michael Higgins combines his scholarly erudition with a palpable enthusiasm for his subject to produce an engaging text that will be well received by Merton devotees while being simultaneously meaningful to those new to the life and trials of Merton as radical recluse and life-long pilgrim. Indeed, Higgins’ unfolding of a troubled soul on a personal quest will speak very pointedly to generations of those in search of inner peace and personal fulfillment in our turbulent world. Faithful Visionary is a dramatic reminder of the timeless wisdom of Augustine’s assertion that ‘our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.’”

—Douglas Letson
President Emeritus of St. Jerome’s University
Waterloo, Ontario
“With the charm of a storyteller, the skill of a fine writer, and the wisdom of a seasoned scholar, Michael Higgins spins a narrative of an exceptional monk’s life and work from conversations, journals, and letters. *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* offers the reader an opportunity to observe how one person sought and discovered an authentic life in Christ that embraced all humanity and addressed the social issues facing the modern world. With the centenary celebration of Merton’s birth approaching, this is a timely publication beneficial to both scholars and laypersons.”

—Professor David Joseph Belcastro  
President of the International Thomas Merton Society  
Co-Editor of *The Merton Annual*

“Thomas Merton was a wise, complex, playful, and at times, paradoxical poet-monk. As a public intellectual grounded in Catholic history and theology and accustomed to clarity, Michael W. Higgins lucidly charts Merton’s life from his birth in France to his death in Thailand. *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* admirably envelopes the shifts and swerves in Merton’s layered life in a warm and welcoming conversation.”

—J. S. Porter  
Author of *The Thomas Merton Poems* and *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things*

“Thomas Merton is the most significant spiritual writer of the twentieth century. His writings are already classics that will have influence well into the twenty-first century and beyond. Michael Higgins captures not only the significance of Merton’s life but also his spirit. Thomas Merton was a literary genius and so is Michael Higgins. Merton comes alive in the pages of this beautifully written book that you will find both informative and inspiring.”

—Anthony Ciorra, PhD  
Assistant Vice President for Mission and Catholic Identity and Professor of Theology  
Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut
To the memory of two priests who died within a week of each other during the time of this book’s composition and who represented in their lives and ministry something of the genius of Merton’s personality and intellectual interests: Alex McCauley, who shared Merton’s impish sense of humor, and Joe Kelly, who shared Merton’s appetite for literature.
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Preface

In the fall of 2013 Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, bestowed an honorary doctorate on an Argentinean scientist and rabbi. But not just any distinguished rabbi: Abraham Skorka is a close friend of Pope Francis, and his affection for his intellectual and spiritual companion, his “Jorge,” is palpable.

I had the privilege of spending some private time with Rabbi Skorka at the luncheon arranged in his honor, and during our animated conversation he referred to the great American monk, Thomas Merton, and Merton’s special friendship with Abraham Joshua Heschel, the equally towering Jewish thinker. Skorka was full of admiration for Merton—not without some reservations, I am sure—an admiration grounded in his appreciation of the monk of Gethsemani’s capacity for “deep thinking.” He dispensed with superficialities, argued Skorka, and was not fearful of going into the substance of issues.

Rabbi Skorka is right.

Thomas Merton—monk, poet, essayist, public intellectual, and contemplative—was an arresting figure by any measurement. A vivacious, witty, and sociable solitary; a monk withdrawn from the world and yet an engaged bystander who thrust himself into the moral controversies of
his day; a man grounded in the organic traditions of his religious culture and history and yet fully open to the religious sensibilities of distinctly different faiths; a spiritual figure identified fully with a specific stream within Christianity he was at the same time by temperament and imagination a genuinely postmodern and extraterritorial quester.

Merton was a bundle of contradictions; he was a visionary who sought a new balance, a new harmony, of the creative tensions that define us.

For not a few Merton is a sectarian figure, a tribal possession, a venerable memory, an icon we honor rather than an enduring prod to our spiritual and intellectual complacency.

For others he is a renegade monk, a shameful roué in a religious habit, a dilettante who alighted on the fashionable and delighted in the sensational, and a tiresome narcissist who chronicled his every thought and impulse in print.

These are caricatures of a complex, evolving, pioneering, flawed and deeply attractive spiritual eminence, and they represent a range of opinion about Thomas Merton that should be acknowledged and corrected. Merton wrote, following the death of his correspondent, fellow writer and friend, the Russian novelist Boris Pasternak (author of *Doctor Zhivago*), that “his story is finished. It now remains to be understood.”

*Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* is my effort to shape a brief biographical introduction to the man and the monk, the thinker and the spiritual guide for millions. What made Merton tick and why do we continue to care? His story needs to be understood.

Ross Labrie, a Merton scholar, rightly sees Merton’s legacy connected to his romanticism:
I think that what Merton has done for countless numbers of Catholics is to allow them to feel the value of their religion at a time when many are embattled with their church, with its ecclesial policies, etc. He allows them to experience their religion in a way that is liberating and in doing so he grafted onto Catholicism his romantic consciousness, which many Catholics find appealing.*

Merton’s fidelity is aligned with his visionary thinking; he was rooted in the past and yet was also a spiritual pioneer. Merton’s dear friend of long standing, Robert Lax, insightfully recognizes Merton’s exceptionality as a gift for all of us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike:

I think Merton lifted the level of debate on all philosophical, theological and spiritual matters to a point where it had never been before except in the minds of certain individuals throughout history. This task was always there to be done for the world at large and Merton, following his own light, upward into infinity, with heaven’s constant and unfailing help, did it.

And that is why we read Merton still.

* The extensive quotations that appear throughout the text and lack citations are the result of oral interviews listed separately in the bibliography.
Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary draws very heavily on much of my previous work: published scholarly texts, radio documentaries, television commentaries, public lectures, and so on. These include Heretic Blood: the Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton (Stoddart, 1998) with French and Italian translations appearing in 2000 and 2001, respectively, Thomas Merton: La voie Spirituelle d’un hérétique (Bellarmin), Sangue Eretico: la Geografia Spirituale di Thomas Merton (Garzanti); scholarly articles in American Benedictine Review, Cistercian Studies, and the Merton Annual; the St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan Keenan Lecture of 1988; Heretic Blood: a Spiritual Audiobiography, Out of Silence—A Voice, Laboratory of the Spirit, Monk on the Run, and Monasticism as Rebellion, for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; and Now You Know Media’s “The Seven Story Mountain and the Rest of the Story.”

In addition, I am indebted to CBC Ideas Executive Producer Emeritus Bernie Lucht, Merton aficionados composer Peter Togni and editor Kevin Burns, and numberless Merton scholars throughout the world.

The painstaking and meticulous transcriptions of the various radio documentaries and interviews were the result
of the discerning and intelligent labors of Rebecca Higgins, while much of the organizational and scheduling duties were orchestrated by my very able administrative assistant, Ami Neville.

As is always the case, the support, both critical and affective, I can rely on from my spouse for four decades, Krystyna, is my foundation stone.
The travel writer Bruce Chatwin argued that people are at their most sane and contented when journeying, observing that as a general rule of biology migratory species are less aggressive and more egalitarian than their sedentary, home-hugging counterparts.

There is one obvious reason why this should be so. The migration itself, like the pilgrimage, is the hard journey: a “leveler” on which the “fit” survive and stragglers fall by the wayside.¹

Thomas Merton would perfectly appreciate Chatwin’s analysis as it applied to his own condition: a perpetual wanderer and seeker of origins. Merton regarded humanity as instinctive wanderers. He saw the spiritual journey or pilgrimage as a metaphorical peregrinatio, or “going forth into strange countries.”² He himself undertook the hardest of journeys, and as a consequence became by the time of his death the most spiritually fit of his age.

In his fifty-three years of earthly life Merton was not unaccustomed to journeys. He took many of them, from
France to England, from Long Island to Bermuda, from Cambridge to Columbia University, from New York to Havana, culminating in the journey that brought him from St. Bonaventure’s College in Olean, New York, to the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. What inspired these journeys was no doubt a combination of emotional restlessness, intellectual curiosity, and spiritual longing; even when Merton had presumably found, in the Trappist vow of stability, palliative for his disquiet, he yearned still for the wisdom of the Rinpoche and the insight of the lama, prompting one final journey to the East.

To begin at the beginning: the First World War was in progress when Merton began his first life on January 31, 1915, in Prades, France. He was the elder of two boys, the son of an American, Ruth Jenkins, and a New Zealander, Owen Merton. From the outset there was a difference in religious sensibility as noted by Merton’s close friend and biographer John Howard Griffin:

> At the end of the first year of his life, Merton was baptized even though this was probably the father’s doing only because his mother didn’t want any spurious religious influences brought to bear until he was of an age to decide for himself.³

The Second World War was in progress when he began his second life on December 10, 1941, in Trappist, Kentucky, by entering the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO) at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. He began his third life—the nature of which I will leave to the speculations of theologians—on December 10, 1968, in Bangkok, Thailand.

Merton was even born en route. His parents were both artists and they succeeded in conveying to him something
of the integrity and respect of the artist’s vision of things. Of his father in particular, Merton noted the parallels with Paul Cézanne. Owen painted like the nineteenth-century French artist and possessed a vision of the world that was balanced, deeply respectful of structure, and deeply impressed by the integrity of all created matter.

Owen was, in the words of Merton’s official biographer Michael Mott, “a painter of great promise up to the age of nineteen, at which point he seems to have slowed down.” Certainly Owen had an unsteady, though romantic, start in life. He met Thomas Merton’s mother at an art school in Paris, and after they married they moved to the small Pyrénées town of Prades, a site where Owen could indulge his love for the life of the French peasant and make a living from the tourist trade. But war interceded. The tourists stopped coming and the peasants were conscripted. Ruth was drawn to the Quaker tradition of pacifism and persuaded Owen, possibly against his better judgment, not to join the French forces in the war effort. This stance was not appreciated by the New Zealand side of the family.

Merton’s mother was a strong person and she left her stamp on young Tom at the very beginning. As Michael Mott observes:

Thomas Merton’s earliest memories were of his mother writing down everything that he did in a book. The record, the long record of Thomas Merton, begins with his first biographer, his mother, Ruth Jenkins. And the fact that everything he did was worthy of writing down, I think, had a profound influence on his life. Without playing the game of pop psychology, I think you can see Merton’s autobiographical impulse growing out of his mother’s attention to his singularity. Throughout his life he was certainly convinced that everything he did was of
sufficient importance to write down. All his life. He was fascinated by himself. Sometimes that brought an acute self-consciousness, a sharp egotism, but it also sharpened his memory. I have one bit in my biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* where I show how Merton was able to reconstruct from memory, about seven years after it happened, a bus trip that he had taken in England going from home to school, with every shop and important sight recorded. I don’t know many of us who have that kind of memory whereby we can reconstruct whole streets—buildings, shop signs, and the rest—seven years after we’ve left the location.

One other thing that I think is very important about Ruth’s influence on her son can be found emerging from her skill as a decorator. She was persuaded of the extreme importance of place or environment in shaping our lives. To that end she worked very hard, even though they had no money at all in Prades, to make the little room in which Tom was living as “right” as it could be. She would do this later when they were even in more straitened circumstances. The importance of place in his life he clearly inherited from Ruth.

His parents also managed to convey that need and taste for creative mobility that in other circles might be called instability. In 1916, barely a year after his birth, the family moved to the United States, living variously in Maryland and New York. Eventually the Mertons settled in Douglaston, Long Island, with Ruth’s family. This was not a happy situation for Owen. He was a proud man, determined to keep his family fed and housed. Tension arose between Owen and Ruth’s father, the formidably practical “Pop” Jenkins, who had made a small fortune in films, book publishing, and sales. Owen and Ruth moved to a “little shack of a place.” On November 2, 1918, John Paul Merton was
born. Tom’s unassailable primacy of place in his mother’s affections was at an end. In three years she would be dead, but it would take him a lifetime to come to terms with her death. Mott does not underestimate the powerful effect her death had on the impressionable Tom:

Merton is still reeling from what must have appeared as the willful withdrawing of his mother’s affections following the birth of his brother and rival, John Paul, when she gets ill and leaves home. She was admitted to a public hospital with stomach cancer. And once again we are reminded of Owen’s precarious financial state. It is a public and not a private hospital, although her parents stepped in to provide support for the funeral and burial.

Although he visited Ruth frequently, Owen takes Tom to see his mother, I believe, only once. And then one day Owen comes back from the hospital with a letter to Tom from his mother saying goodbye and telling him that she will never see him again. He goes and sits under a tree and reads the letter. The effect is devastating. In a later scene that he recounts you see a similar response. After he goes to the Fresh Pond Crematory he sits in the car while everybody else goes into the wretched little chapel and he realizes somehow what is happening, that his mother is being turned into ashes. He has nobody to talk to; he smells the leather of the car; looks at the brick wall; and feels utter desolation.

A year after the death of his mother in October of 1921, Tom left with his father for Bermuda, while John Paul remained behind in the care of his maternal grandparents. Bermuda was a nightmare. Owen was having an affair with the novelist Evelyn Scott, who was the wife of his friend and fellow artist, Cyril Kay Scott, and Tom found himself under the disciplinary thumb of a woman whose claim on his
father’s love he saw as both a threat and a betrayal. He identified in her many of the characteristics he had loathed in his mother—she was cerebral, detached, and cold—and because of his hostility, indeed hatred, the affair was doomed. At the age of ten, Tom returned with his father to the country of his birth, minus his mother and brother.

They lived in the ancient and picturesque Midi town of St. Antonin Noble Val, a site that Mott calls “a wonderful little medieval town” perfectly suited to the needs of the romantic Mertons:

Owen loved France; he did not like England, and he loathed the United States. He loved France for its peasants and any country that did not have peasants was simply out of the running as far as Owen was concerned. St. Antonin was as near paradise as anyone was likely to get with its marvelous wood smoke smells and rich aroma of rabbit stews done in wine. Everyone in St. Antonin was either a saint or aspiring to be a saint, although everything was touched in some way by the spirit of the Rabelais. Those splendid parties!

Merton found himself immersed in a world still marked by medieval culture. He was “constantly in and out of old churches, and stumbled upon the ruins of ancient chapels and monasteries.” In addition to the landscape, he had a three-volume set of picture books of the region, which he would peruse for hours, charmed by the mystique of ruins, rural isolation, and imposing majesty. He was riveted by the pictures of the Grande Chartreuse, nestled in an inaccessible valley surrounded by a mountain of forests and awe-inspiring summits. Although in no sense conscious of any kind of religious calling, he was attracted by the serene loneliness and breathtaking silence of the scenery.
France instructed Merton in the peace, beauty, and serenity of a chosen solitude, for at an early age he was to suffer once again the pain of an enforced independence and self-reliance. Though surrounded by the generous spirit of a medieval peasant Catholicism, simple, faithful, and devout, the Mertons remained solidly non-Roman in their theological persuasion, or at least in their ecclesiastical sympathies.

In 1926 Merton was enrolled in the Lycée Ingres in Montauban. He found himself lifted from the warm tranquility of life with his father in St. Antonin and dropped into the cold dormitories of the Ingres. He didn’t speak the argot, he didn’t know the rules of the game, and he was dismissed by his French peers as a snotty little English schoolboy. It was torture. The wounds would take some time to heal; perhaps they never did. He was daily beaten by his classmates; the teachers appeared indifferent to his plight; it was an ugly world of bullying and abuse of power. And then one day in the spring of 1928, Tom was plucked from the school by his father.

To Tom this was the greatest jail delivery his father had ever organized. The very walls of the familiar houses on the way to the Villenouvelle station cried, “Liberty! Liberty!”

Unable to make a living in France, and with an offer of support for Tom’s schooling made by the Jenkins family, Owen decided to take up the opportunity to go to England and place Tom in Ripley Court, a private preparatory school in Surrey. He would be at Ripley for only a short time before moving on to Oakham School in Rutland, a public school of second-tier distinction. The headmaster, one F.C. Doherty, carefully prepared Merton, whose education was nothing if not diverse, for a Cambridge scholarship. The Oakham
experience, as Mott notes, was very different from that at the Lycée Ingres:

Oakham was a very small school. You would not be lost at Oakham. As soon as you arrived, even at the lowest form, you were going to be an insider. Merton was never an insider at Ingres. As well as the solicitous attention provided by the masters of the school you had the pastoral setting, which greatly appealed to Merton—in fact, its rural beauty contrasted sharply with the dark, Satanic mills of William Blake’s London. At this juncture in Merton’s life London held little appeal. But that would change with the Bennetts.

Dr. Tom Izod Bennett, Merton’s godfather and ultimately guardian, and his wife Iris Weiss accepted responsibility for the cultural education of their young charge, in addition to providing oversight for his financial well-being. Bennett was an old friend of Owen’s from their boyhood days in New Zealand. But whereas Owen enjoyed little public success with his artistic life, Izod had made a considerable reputation as a Harley Street surgeon. But all his skill could not save the life of his friend, for Owen was developing within him a malignant tumor of the brain. Although he had shown signs of being ill as early as 1928 at the time Tom was admitted to Ripley Court, the progress of the disease was slow and undetectable. With Tom happily ensconced at Oakham and with Izod and Iris ably overseeing his son’s welfare, Owen pursued every avenue to find his artistic voice. But by 1930 he was confined to London’s Middlesex Hospital with little hope of recovery. As in the case of Merton’s mother, his father died at a distance, isolated and sealed off. But there are differences between the two deaths, as Mott makes clear:
There is this desperate scene in Merton’s autobiography when he describes receiving a call from his father saying that he will not be able to stay with him in Yorkshire and has to get back to London. Later he rings up Tom, who at the time is alone in the house where he is staying, and his son listens to his father make no sense at all on the phone. He knows that his father’s mind is gone. The smell of leather returns. He recalls the car, the crematorium, the death of his mother. He is absolutely devastated. He goes to see his father at Middlesex; there is no letter saying goodbye. His father is sitting up in bed drawing Byzantine saints and not his trademark landscapes. Tom is puzzled and pained but Owen insists that he has discovered a new style, one that will make him famous. It is pathetic. And then a few days later he is at his father’s funeral.

Tom owed Owen much more than he at first realized. There is no indication that he ever felt his father had deserted him as his mother had done; he knew in his heart that his father was a warm, kind man who would be there if he could to spring him from such miserable prisons as the Lycée Ingres. Even though his admiration and affection for Owen were tempered by the episode in Bermuda with Evelyn Scott, he believed that his father was a man of struggling integrity, a “complicated hero,” indeed a man of faith, of deep spirituality. It was Owen who introduced Tom to an artist whom he loved and wanted his son to love, the poet and revolutionary William Blake. At the time he could not have known that this peerless visionary, poet, visual artist, religious rebel, and lonely prophet would become his intellectual and spiritual model, that he would find in Blake’s defiance of the rubrics and conventions of his time and his tenacious commitment to a new aesthetics—a mystical con-joining of art and faith that would put him at odds with the
orthodoxies and authorities of his period—a template for Merton’s own elected destiny.

Blake was seared into Merton’s soul by his own artist-father, whose death proved to be the occasion for a new restlessness and a new liberty. Following Owen’s death, Pop Jenkins once more entered the stage, this time in a more directly interventionist way: he provided Merton with a private income, encouraged him to travel in Europe and learn new languages (this was one legacy that lasted: in addition to English and French, Merton eventually became fluent in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin, and acquired a reading knowledge of Greek and German), and insisted that he come to the United States every second year. With Izod’s agreement, the making of the cosmopolitan Merton was assured. From the Bennetts he would acquire a taste for jazz, modern writers, Russian movies, and the art of Marc Chagall, in short, a feel for the cultivated and for the au courant.

The freedom, or at least financial independence, that Pop and the Bennetts made possible for Tom in the wake of his father’s death was a gift that he would squander in the years to come. But his family’s and guardian’s generosity allowed him experiences that would be fodder for both his spiritual and his artistic life. During the Easter holiday break of 1932, at the age of seventeen, he wandered through the Rhineland reading Spinoza. Arguably a tactless thing to do and, not surprisingly, he encountered the Nazis. He was meandering rather distractedly along some roads in the countryside near Koblenz when a car came speedily upon him crammed full of several youths clenching their fists and hollering at him. They were Hitler Youth and very likely future officers of the SS and they were inviting him in their thuggish way to vote for Hitler as the next German Chancellor. As quickly as they descended upon him, they disappeared. Everything was re-
stored to normal: the peace, quiet and bucolic beauty. But for an instant the young Merton had a potent if brief taste of the Nazis’ sensibility. Seven youth had demonstrated their willingness to destroy him.

This experience of the sinister would remain with him for decades.

After having acquired a Higher Certificate from Oakham and a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge, in the same year, he returned to Europe in 1933.

Until now, Merton’s religious training had been desultory—Episcopal through his maternal grandparents, Anglican through his education in England, and a smattering of Catholic influences in France. As noted by John Howard Griffin:

Merton was a man who had no deep religious background whatsoever besides the fact of having been baptized when he was one year old. He began to be deeply attracted to certain aspects of the Catholic faith, largely through his love of art. He fell in love, in fact passionately in love with the frescos in the churches. He would try to visit the churches when they were empty and would flee at the first sign of anyone. This is also the time when he had a strange kind of vision when he was getting ready to sleep. He never knew what it was, but he had an immense impression of his father’s presence in the room. This contrasted starkly with the kind of life he was trying to lead, which was a life entirely of the senses and the exploration of the senses. It was a fairly shattering experience for him.

Also shattering but of a different nature was an experience that derived from a visit to the Dominican church of Santa Sabina in Rome where he underwent “a capitulation, a surrender, a conversion,” not radical but subtle, not overwhelming
but suggestive, poetical but unpersuasive, and not lasting. His religious instincts were ignited by Catholic art undoubtedly, but the fervor quickly waned. His impressions of Rome were warm and imaginative and he occupied himself, as he had done when a young child in France, with visits to churches, cloisters, and abbeys, seldom searching out the ruins of that other Rome—classical and imperial.

In the summer of the same year, still a teenager unsure of himself but hungry for experience, he left for the United States where he visited his mother’s family, travelled widely, worked, lost the interest in religion he had briefly discovered in Europe, and returned to England on the Manhattan, “a garish and turbulent class steamer full of Nazi spies working as stewards and detesting the Jewish passengers.” Once again the Nazis. No wonder he wrote about them—however obliquely—in his one published novel, My Argument with the Gestapo, or as it was originally titled, Journal of My Escape from the Nazis.

He arrived in Cambridge sour and apprehensive. Cambridge itself was a “planned disaster.” Nominally studying modern languages, he made the wrong sort of friends, spent inordinate amounts of money in the company of rich rowdies, acquired unmanageable book debts, and womanized like mad—or so he would have us believe. The story that while at Cambridge he fathered an illegitimate child who subsequently perished, with his mother, during the Blitzkrieg seems, in the view of his official biographer at least, to be of dubious veracity. Mott is persuaded that a good deal of his reputation for carnal exuberance, for womanizing, is simple boasting:

Merton’s close friend and fellow convert and poet, Bob Lax, told me that when he and Merton were students at
Columbia University in the mid-1930s he had heard, long before he actually met Merton, that he was forced to leave Cambridge because of his having fathered at least one, and very possibly two, illegitimate children. Merton himself told many people that his son, not a daughter, mind you and in the singular, died during the Blitz. Well, to be honest, the only solid evidence that I have for any of this is a letter from Iris Bennett talking about it, although the letter proper is lost and all we have are extracts in one of Merton’s journals. In and of itself, not very reliable. But there is some rather more compelling evidence with the will that he was required to make out prior to taking his Simple Vows as a Cistercian monk on March 19, 1944. In the will he makes provision for money to be given to a person known to Tom Bennett. That’s about all we’ve got.

Certainly Merton’s career at Cambridge was less than auspicious. He had a falling out with the Bennetts, provoked the academic authorities at Clare College once too often with his wayward behavior, and generally made a muck of it all. In Mott’s words:

There he was the red-hot scholar. They sent him up to Clare to get a first as they had very great hopes for him. Merton himself admits that he knew less at the end of his first year at Cambridge than before he arrived. He did absolutely no work at all. He was goofing off. And when the spring comes around he has a horrible awakening: Clare doesn’t want him anymore.

The star student from Oakham is a dud. And so in November of 1934 he left England and the Europe of his birth and his travels, “a sad and unquiet continent, full of forebodings.”7