

Thomas Merton: New Camaldoli and Redwoods Ron Dart

I. Noonday Demons and Hermitages

Most on the Thomas Merton Society Canada (TMSC) national executive had planned on doing a week retreat at Redwoods Monastery (where Merton twice visited in May & October 1968) the week of April 13 2015. The closer we inched towards commitment and arrival date, the fewer on the journey. There were, finally, only three of us (Angus Stuart, my wife Karin and myself) who arrived for the weeklong retreat.



I was interested, though, in visiting the Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur before the trip to Redwoods for three reasons: 1) there has been a lingering myth that Merton visited the Hermitage, 2) there was, also, the controversy in the 1950s about Merton longing to leave the

Cistericans and join the Camaldoli monks so well recounted in Don Grayston's recent book, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* and, 3) there was Merton's interaction and correspondence with the Beats of the Big Sur area such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac and William Everson. I was interested in doing more sleuth work to get some further answers to my questions. So, Karin and I left our West Coast Canadian home Easter Sunday (April 5) and headed southward to California. Our trip to the Hermitage in Big Sur took us three days (stopped in Ashland/Oregon, site of one of the best Shakespearean Festivals, onwards to Santa Cruz, then to Big Sur on April 7 after a fine trekking day on some of the Big Sur coastal trails and pathways in Andrew Molera State Park and Pfeiffer Beach). Big Sur was the setting for the much acclaimed and award winning 1965 film, *The Sandpiper*.



The Big Sur Hermitage is perched high above the ocean on an upper mountain ridge facing westward—exquisite sunsets from our hermitage rooms, stars packed the sky the deeper the night. There is an oral tradition that when Ping Ferry and Merton were driving from Santa Barbara to San Francisco in October 1968, they started up the narrow winding road to the hermitage, but Merton urged Ferry to turn back to the main road. Could this tale be true? I met with one of the elder monks (Father Thomas Matus) to get his read on such a possibility—he seemed to think it might be true, but he was in Rome in 1968 and could not confirm the hard facts—there is a photo of Merton owned by the hermits, but there is no real reason to believe it was taken at the hermitage. The facts do, though, answer such a lingering question. When Merton visited Ping Ferry in Santa Barbara in October 1968, the road driven northwards to San Francisco was the faster highway #101 rather than the Big Sur-Coastal route #1.

This means Ferry-Merton bypassed The Hermitage in Big Sur by taking the inland route on October 5 1968. Merton lingered in San Francisco for a couple of days, then it was northward again to Redwoods Monastery where he stayed from October 8-13. The obstinate travelling facts are covered in *The Journals of Thomas Merton: Volume 7, 1967-1968* (pages 199-201)—so, obviously, no visit by Merton to the Big Sur hermitage.

I had a long and lovely chat with Father Thomas Matus about Bede Griffiths (whom he has written much about, living as he did with Griffiths in India at various times). We chatted much about Merton and Griffiths and often pondered why there was no correspondence between them (given the fact both were significant writers on the contemplative life, spiritual directors, interfaith pioneers and prolific letter writers—I have a couple of lengthy letters from Griffiths from the late 1980s in which Griffiths mentions Merton).

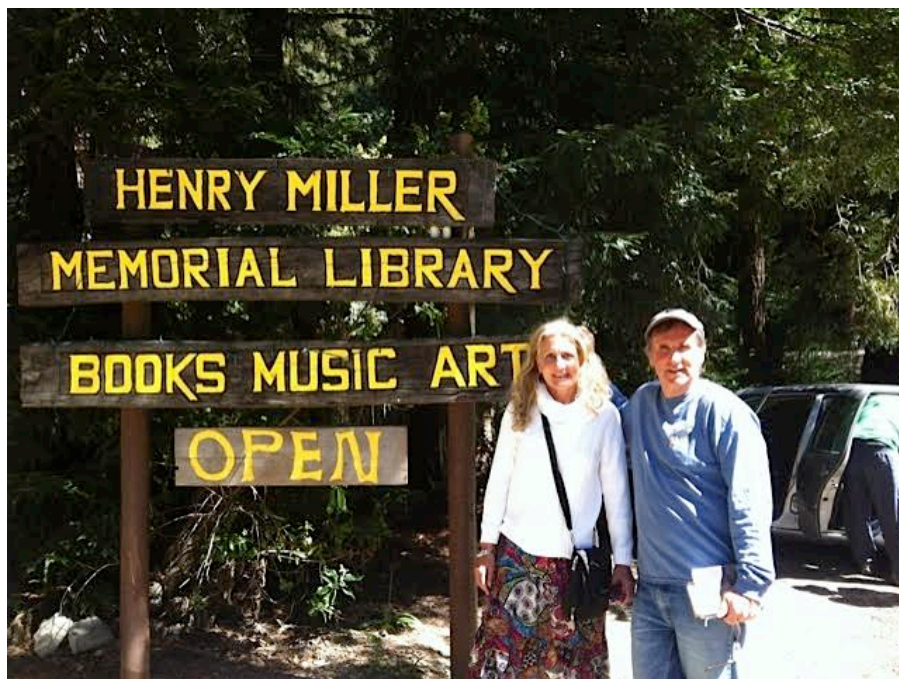
The more significant point, though, was Merton's restlessness in the 1950s at Gethsemani and his initiation of a correspondence with Dom Anselmo Giabbani in Italy—Merton had idealized hopes about becoming a Camaldoli hermit. I had an in depth chat with Father Matus about the folly of such a decision at a variety of levels---the complex tensions within the Camaldoli order in the early 1950s that Merton was unaware of, Merton's romanticization of the eremitical life, and, as Don Grayston has so well tracked in *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, Merton's unresolved restlessness that, in time, tempts all to leave the very place that is meant for their transformation and deification. Both Don Grayston (in his searching book) and Father Thomas Matus have written about the way the noonday demon whispers tantalizing options to those who do not see how a place of frustration can become the means of a deeper and more demanding conversion. The classical monastic vow of stability was meant as a corrective to those who heeded all sorts of internal whims and desires in the search of some idealized community, teacher or context. The noonday demon that so tempted Merton in the heat of his dissatisfaction with Gethsemani was but another distraction and diversion on the pilgrimage—stability of place and community is a spiritual discipline that, when frustrations and disappointments occur, can become, a means of deeper understanding, insight and a bearing the beams of Divine Love. The flyer to *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon* summed up the double dilemma of Merton: "his (Merton's) attempt in the mid-1950s to move from his abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky—a place that had become, in his view, noisy beyond bearing—to an Italian monastery, Camaldoli, which he idealized as a place of monastic peace. The ultimate irony: Camaldoli at that time, bucolic and peaceful outwardly, was inwardly riven by a pre-Vatican II culture war; whereas Gethsemani, which he tried so hard to leave, became, when he was given the hermitage there in 1965, his place to recover Eden". In short, if Merton had been given the freedom to indulge his noonday demon, he would have entered a bitter feud in

the Camaldoli monastic tradition in Italy that, in some ways, had an early impact in the early years of the founding of New Camaldoli in Big Sur. The noonday demon was stared down and Merton was the better for it.

II. Merton and Big Sur

Ping Ferry speaks of getting land at Big Sur and intimates that there could be a place for me on it. But Big Sur sounds too popular. Not only are hippies moving there, not only are the Camaldolese there, but also several ex-Gethsemani Trappists are priests in that vicinity.
June 17 1968

I may arrange a conference for the Esalen Institute there. They invited me to Big Sur but I replied—as I now do—that I can't do anything outside a house of our Order.
July 19 1968



Karin and I remained at The Hermitage in Big Sur from April 7-10.

We had lovely chats with the Prior (Cyprian Consiglio) and we trekked the Fence Trail loop (plenty of scitterish lizards of various colours, shapes and sizes on the trail) in the Ventana Wilderness area with the Santa Lucia Mountains as an enticing backdrop. Condor vultures were aplenty under the blue canopy sky and the weather remained warm and clear, the ocean to the west our evening delight. We departed on the 10th up Big Sur Coastal Route #1 past Esalen Institute and stopped at the Henry Miller Library to soak up the ethos of Miller and his years in Big Sur. There are plenty of connections between Merton and the Beats of Big Sur. The publications of Robinson Jeffers' *The Women at Point Sur* in 1927, Henry Miller's *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymous Bosch* in 1957 and *Big Sur*, by Jack Kerouac in 1962, played significant roles in establishing Big Sur as a counter cultural icon for many in the 1960s. Merton corresponded with Miller from 1962-1964, Ferlinghetti from 1961-1968 (Merton stayed with Ferlinghetti in May 1968 at City Lights in San Francisco), Kerouac contributed to Merton's short lived *Monk's Pond* and the Merton-Everson interaction (not much discussed) is part of the Monterey-Carmel by the Sea (Robinson Jeffers)-Big Sur poetic and spiritual landscape that Merton had much affinity with on his journey.

Karin and I travelled ever northward, nights spent at Pigeon Point Lighthouse hostel and Point Reyes Hostel (excellent hiking on rolling, flowers abloom in scent and colour, hills similar to the Lake District in England)---Point Reyes Lighthouse is a site not to miss— whales cruising diving deep and blowing water from spouts on their way to Alaska---the rhythm was quite mesmerizing. We made it to Redwoods Monastery April 13 and Angus joined us later in the day. I was quite interested in unpacking, in more depth and detail, Merton's two visits to Redwoods in May & October 1968, going to the places he described in *Woods, Shore, Desert* and *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton: Volume 7, 1967-1968* and thinking with him his thoughts about settling in the area as a hermit—it was essential that

the sights Merton saw and his attraction to the area was recorded. Angus had been at Redwoods a few times, so he was a fine guide to the varied places Merton so poignantly described and returned to in later reflections. The goal was to stay at Redwoods from April 13-18 and take in as much of the history of the place (a few aging nuns were still at the monastery who were, when much younger, there when Merton visited twice in 1968. Needless to say, we had many a fine conversation with them, their memories still keen and alert.

III. Redwoods Monastery

Northern California was unforgettable. I want very much want to go back. Especially to Bear Harbour, the isolated cove on the Pacific shore where the Jones house is and, I think, can be rented.
May 21 1968

Useless nostalgia for Needle Rock, Bear Harbor, the Redwoods.
June 4 1968

Certainly the shore at Needle Rock etc. offers no really permanent solitude. Already full of hippies. The Indian caretaker trying unsuccessfully to run them off etc.
August 13 1968



We arrived, as mentioned above, late afternoon on April 13—Karin and I were given the rooms Merton stayed in when at Redwoods— compact and simple—a bathroom between the two rooms. Merton mentioned his sharing the bathroom in his diary: “A Passionist shares my bathroom and is in there now showering, shaving, etc. but I haven’t yet seen him (October 11 1968). Fr. Maurice Flood had been the chaplain and beekeeper at Redwoods (the monastery sells creamed honey) for fourteen years (although, from what I understand, he was a better chaplain than beekeeper). There is a fine wall hanging and tapestry of sorts in the sanctuary of the “Oriental Christ” that Merton sent Redwoods when in India—a most meditative pose and posture—quite fitting for contemplative nuns. The area where the Redwoods Monastery is located is called the “Lost

Coast” because it is so deserted in comparison to other parts of Coastal California. In fact *National Geographic* (September 1977) did a special feature on the area called “California’s Redwood Coast”— Merton’s attraction to the area as a hermitage site is most understandable.

Angus and I did an afternoon trip on April 14 to Shelter Cove (a touristy upscale place) that Merton had no interest in—the developers were winning the day contra ecologists in the area and have emerged the decided victors since 1968. Angus and I walked the beach, tide being out, into Shelter Cove, then drove the twisting uphill drive back to the monastery for a late hour long meditation session—the nuns practice communal meditation in the sanctuary quite often. After dinner, we watched the recent DVD on Merton, *Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton*. The 10 minute trek from the monastery, headlamps on, night sky thick with stars, was a delight not to miss.

April 15 was the much anticipated day. The post dawn day began as I assisted Sister Claire Bouttin in moving some books to the library. One of the books on the top of a box was the letters of Abelard and Heloise. Bernard of Clairvaux was rather hard on Abelard in the Abelard-Heloise relationship—I asked Sister Claire about this—she mentioned that even the best of saints had their blind spots and there was much in Abelard to admire. Merton gave a lecture on Peter Abelard, and he was quite willing to see the good in Abelard and the failings of Bernard---it was good to ponder the insights of Merton and Sister Claire on the tensions between Bernard and Peter Abelard.

There was much the day had yet to deliver, though. Merton often mentioned in his journals his attraction to the more isolated Needle Rock-Bear Cove area. So, the plan for the day was to drive into the Sinkyone Wilderness State Park and linger at the Needle Rock-Bear Cove hilly region (some of the narrow road has eroded since Merton went to Bear Cove from Needle Rock, so we walked the 3 miles). The nuns, true to form and Merton's experience of them, made Angus, Karin and I a packed lunch. It's a 12 KL drive from Redwoods to the deserted home Merton was interested in using as a hermitage, and the last 5 KL are down a steep one lane rutted pathway---quite a tricky trip

up and down in a vehicle. Merton was quite keen on the empty and deserted house that overlooked the ocean on his early trips to Needle Rock and Bear Cove. If the developers have won the day in Shelter Cove, the environmentalists have won the day at Needle Rock-Bear Cove—much hung in the balance in 1968, though. Merton had a much greater draw Bear Cove than Needle Rock for a variety of compelling reasons—even more so today when a vehicle cannot do the trip. We had a lovely lunch at Bear Cove (surrounded by a bouquet of wild flowers), clambered up to the rocky ridge overlooking the ocean (seals frolicked in the foaming waters), took photos, then did the walk back to Needle Rock (Merton described some charming scenes where he stopped for a couple of hours). We spent the remainder of the afternoon at the home of the Jones family that Merton had hoped to use as a hermitage—plenty of hummingbirds by the lush plants, white gulls cruising under the blue canopy, the now fallen white tree before us, the rhythm of the ocean in the distance.

We had had plenty of brief conversations with some of the nuns the previous few days, but Sister Karen arranged for Angus, Karin and I to meet with two of the nuns (Sisters Veronique Geeroms & Godelieve Theys) to discuss their memories of Merton's visits in 1968. Sister Veronique was one of the founding sisters of Redwoods in 1962 with the Abbess Myriam Dardenne (who Merton, again and again, paid the highest compliments to). Veronique mentioned that the nuns had stopped at Gethsemani in 1962 on their way to founding Redwoods—Sister Godelieve arrived at Redwoods in 1963. The former Abbess of Redwoods, Myriam Dardenne, died in 2002 and there is perfectly positioned burial site for her by a large redwood near the Monastery sanctuary. A tender and probing book of Myriam's poetry, *Fragments for an Autobiography* was published in 2008 and two of the poems were dedicated to Merton: "Mourning Tom Merton" and "Cemetery". Sister Kathy De Vico has replaced Myriam as the new Abbess of Redwoods, and she was most friendly, hospitable and

gracious to us. Our lengthy discussion with Sisters Veronique and Godelieve covered much Merton terrain and were ample with historic and personal reflections—so many tales to tell of Merton when at Redwoods in May and October 1968 that, of course, cannot be found in the journals—a most interesting reflection of the October 1968 visit when David Stendl-Rast kept encouraging Merton to say a few words at the retreat, but Merton was more than eager to disappear from the multiple expectations and star status placed on him. Sister Godelieve is in a wheelchair, hence not as nimble, but she mentioned to me when we were leaving, she had much more to say about Merton—perhaps another visit will reveal a fuller story. Sister Veronique, after our conversation, was most generous and kind to us, visiting us for lunches daily and filling us in on many a detail of Redwood’s history and Merton’s impact on the Roman Catholic and monastic life of the 1960s (and afterwards)—much wisdom gleaned from her many time tried insights. A slow and meditative read through Myriam Dardenne’s poetic *Fragments For An Autobiography* speaks much about why Merton held her in such high esteem and why he was drawn to Redwoods monastery, Needle Rock and Bear Cove.

IV. Chakravarty, Tagore, Merton and Redwoods

Merton dedicated *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* to Amiya Chakravarty, and there is an informed correspondence between Merton and Chakravarty (1966-1968). *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process* has an informed and incisive “Epilogue” Chakravarty on Merton. Chakravarty was a much respected Indian scholar, teacher and friend to many—he did exquisite work on Gandhi and Tagore, and in 1961 his discerningly chosen overview and wisely edited tome of Tagore’s writings, *A Tagore Reader* was published. Much has been written on Merton and Gandhi—much lesson Merton and Tagore. Chakravarty gave Merton a signed copy of *A Tagore Reader*, and Merton brought his copy of the book to Redwoods in 1968. We were quite thrilled on one of Sister Veronique’s

many visits with us that she loaned us a copy of *A Tagore Reader* that Chakravarty gave to Merton who, in turn, gave it to Redwoods Monastery—the momentary gift made for much fine contemplative reading. I have been drawn to Tagore and read most of his writings over the last few decades, so it was a feast of sorts to make the Tagore-Chakravarty-Merton-Redwoods dot connection. The fact that Chakravarty worked with Gandhi and Tagore as a young man in India (and wrote insightfully about both men) meant he was a real bridge to the West and Merton. I think, in some ways, even though Merton had published a small book on Gandhi, he had, in many ways, more affinity with Tagore, hence the beauty of Chakravarty’s book to Merton (and the Redwoods) on Tagore. I have some lovely chats with Sister Veronique about Tagore (whose writings assisted her through a difficult place in her faith pilgrimage).

Merton noted in his diary (October 22 1968), “Yesterday, I drove with Amiya Chakravarty and his friend, Naresh Guha, to the home of the Painter Jamini Roy ... Amiya bought a Christ which he will take to the nuns at Redwoods”. The brief footnote states, “One of Roy’s paintings of the crucifixion was purchased and delivered to Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey in northern California by Chakravarty following Merton’s death.” There can be no doubt that Merton had a pronounced fondness for the nuns at the Redwoods, but his interest and commitment in finding a hermitage in the area (particularly Bear Cove) waned as his trip to the Orient waxed. In a somewhat amusing side note to the Bear Cove area, Merton mentioned (August 13 1968) that Fr. Flavian had gone to the area, thinking he might rent or buy the hermitage site Merton had so desired, but “he was turned off by Bear Harbor which he found to be full of snakes. (Amazing description of Fr. Roger kicking snakes aside right and left saying, “Oh! They’re all harmless.”

V. Redwoods Finale

There is another side of...every mountain—the side that has never been photographed and turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing.

Thomas Merton

Merton began the entry in his journal on May 7 1968 as he landed in airport in Eureka California with these words: “It was quiet flying to Eureka yesterday afternoon in a half empty plane. One jet flight a day to this forgotten lumber town. Distant presences of Lassen Peak and Mount Shasta, especially Shasta...like great silent Mexican gods, white and solemn. Massively suspended along, over haze and over thousands of lower ridges”. The final volume of Merton’s journals is called, *The Other Side of the Mountain*. I have been quite fortunate to climb both Mount Shasta and Lassen (the former a more demanding crampons and ice axe two day climb, the latter not much more than a good leg stretcher). Merton had a fascination with mountains as a metaphor and portal of the faith pilgrimage which I have discussed in “Thomas Merton and Mountains” (*The Merton Journal: Journal of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain & Ireland: Advent 2007: Vol. 14, No. 2*). The interior restlessness that the Noonday Demon fans into erratic impulses and desires can also be, at its best, when disciplined and ordered by divine love and light, part of a deeper questing spirit. The metaphor of the mountains can be a counterpoint metaphor to the Noonday Demon—part of the pilgrimage to live into the mystery of Divine Love, to seek out what is on the other side of time and history, of the finite—the other side of the mountain draws as does Divine Love to those place we know not of, but a healthy divine discontent and longing, when understood aright, is a way of silencing and dispelling the Noonday Demon.

Merton bid adieu to Redwoods Monastery in October 1968, but he still treasured many fond memories of the place. Our visit with the nuns in

April 2015 (and their stored tales) was more than worth the hearing. Our treks to most of the places Merton mentioned when at Redwoods such as Shelter Cove, Needle Rock, potential hermitage home and Bear Cove put visual flesh on textual descriptions.