

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF  
THOMAS MERTON

# ELECTED SILENCE

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
EVELYN WAUGH

Evelyn Waugh : *"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."*

Graham Greene : *"It is a rare pleasure to read an autobiography with a pattern and meaning valid for all of us. It is a book one reads with a pencil so as to make it one's own."*

WEM

WE HAVE NO hesitation in saying that *Elected Silence* is a book in a decade, perhaps in a generation—the book of a generation in the sense that it portrays the growth in years and experience of a young man who is typical of the period between the wars in every superficial aspect, however singular in his own personality and destiny.

Merton's manner is homely, confidential, simple to the point of naïveté—with sudden, almost unexpected flights of poetic insight and writing of real power. His tale is honest, with a self-knowledge that is never mere exhibitionism. The theme might have been nothing but the catalogue of emotional lapses and literary struggles common to thousands, except that there is a tension running through it which pulls it, and pulls the narrator, into quite another world of values: from an adolescent decadence and ignorance to the heights of contemplative religion.

As the portrait of an American generation it is comparable to *The Education of Henry Adams*, in its purport and strength it recalls inevitably the *Confessions* of St. Augustine.

Originally entitled *Seven Storey Mountain* in its American edition, *Elected Silence* was chosen as the October selection by three book clubs. By the end of 1948 it was reprinting for the eighth time.

1 5s. net.

ELECTED SILENCE

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF  
THOMAS MERTON  
WITH A FOREWORD BY EVELYN WAUGH



# Elected Silence

*Elected silence sing to me  
And beat upon my whorled ear,  
Pipe me to pastures still and be  
The music that I care to hear*

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS



HOLLIS AND CARTER

ELECTED  
SILENCE

THOMAS  
MERTON

HOLLIS & CARTER

W

sense the  
perience  
between  
singular

Merto  
to the p  
expected  
power.  
that is n  
have be  
lapses ar  
except t  
which p  
another  
cadence  
religion.

As th  
compara  
purport  
*fessions* o

Origin  
America  
October  
of 1948

CHRISTO  
VERO  
REGI

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY CHARLES BIRCHALL & SONS, LTD.  
FOR HOLLIS & CARTER, LTD.,  
25 ASHLEY PLACE,  
LONDON, S.W.1.

*First published 1949*

## FOREWORD

by

EVELYN WAUGH

This very remarkable autobiography has, under the title of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, enjoyed prodigious success in the U.S.A. The present text has been renamed and very slightly abridged in order to adapt it to European tastes. Nothing has been cut out except certain passages which seemed to be of purely local interest. It remains essentially American. Despite a cosmopolitan childhood, "Thomas Merton"—Father Louis, as he is now named—is typical of what is newest and best in his country. Columbia not Cambridge formed his literary style. His spirituality, though French in discipline, is a flower of the Catholic life of the New World. Americans no longer become expatriates in their quest for full cultural development. They are learning to draw away from what is distracting in their own civilization while remaining in their own borders.

Here in fresh, simple, colloquial American is the record of a soul experiencing, first, disgust with the modern world, then Faith, then a clear vocation to the way in which Faith may be applied to the modern world. The word "prodigious" is used with full intent. It is a prodigy of the new spirit of the New World that this book should have been read by hundreds of thousands. For several generations American Catholics have abounded in works of corporate charity such as still flourish everywhere, and in recent years have produced such typically contemporary enterprises as Friendship House in Harlem and the House of Hospitality in Mott Street. The contemplative life has until very lately drawn few in proportion to the numbers. Now Carmelite Convents can barely cope with the press of postulants, and the Trappists are opening new houses in the deep South and in the hills of Utah. But the life of these communities is by its nature unostentatious, and *The Seven Storey Mountain* came as a startling revelation to most non-Catholic Americans who were quite unaware of the existence in

their midst of institutions which seemed a denial of the American "way of life". The book suddenly made remote people conscious of warmth silently generated in these furnaces of devotion. To one observer at least it seems probable that the U.S.A. will shortly be the scene of a great monastic revival. There is an ascetic tradition deep in the American heart which has sometimes taken odd and unlovable forms. Here in the historic Rules of the Church lies its proper fulfilment.

In the natural order the modern world is rapidly being made uninhabitable by the scientists and politicians. We are back in the age of Gregory, Augustine and Boniface, and in compensation the Devil is being disarmed of many of his former enchantments. Power is all he can offer now; the temptations of wealth and elegance no longer assail us. As in the Dark Ages the cloister offers the sanest and most civilized way of life.

And in the supernatural order the times require more than a tepid and dutiful piety. Prayer must become heroic. That is the theme of this book which should take its place among the classic records of spiritual experience.

*January 1949*

V  
sen  
per  
bet  
sing  
M  
to  
exp  
pow  
that  
have  
laps  
exce  
whic  
anot  
cade  
relig  
As  
com  
purp  
fessio  
O  
Ame  
Octo  
of 19



## CONTENTS

### PART ONE

<i>Chapter</i>		<i>Page</i>
1	Prisoner's Base	3
2	Our Lady of the Museums	27
3	The Harrowing of Hell	60
4	The Children in the Market Place	110

### PART TWO

1	With a Great Price	137
2	The Waters of Contradiction	182

### PART THREE

1	Magnetic North	211
2	True North	252
3	The Sleeping Volcano	287
4	The Sweet Savour of Liberty	325

### EPILOGUE

	Meditatio Pauperis in Solitudine	361
	Index	377

## About the Author :

Thomas Merton was born in the Pyrenees in 1915. Both his father and mother were artists, his father having come from New Zealand and his mother from America. In his early years the boy travelled around with his parents, picking up an education sometimes in French schools, sometimes in English. Both his parents died while he was under age and after a restless year at Clare College, Cambridge, he went to America to join his mother's family and finish his studies at Columbia University. At the university he did some reviewing for the "New York Times" and the "Tribune" and was generally considered a young hope of American letters. It was while he was on the staff of St. Bonaventure College, New York, teaching English Literature that he made his famous retreat at the Trappist monastery at Kentucky which determined his career. He was clothed in the habit of the Trappists in 1942 and he is now studying for the priesthood.

*Other books by Thomas Merton include :*

Thirty Poems

A Man in the Divided Sea

Figures for an Apocalypse

Exile ends in Glory

Seeds of Contemplation

# ELECTED SILENCE

## *Critical Opinion*

CLARE BOOTHE LUCE.—“It is to a book like this that men will turn a hundred years from now to find out what went on in the heart of man in this cruel century.”

SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE.—“It stands as a more human document than the comparable *Apologia pro vita sua* of John Henry Newman. It has warmth and gusto and Augustinian wit.”

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE.—“One of those either/or books which come right out of the centre of our lives. . . . The fervour of Merton’s progress on to the Trappist monastery is deeply moving. . . . There will be many who, however alien the experience may remain to them personally will put the narrative down with wonder and respect. . . . Merton’s book is of value by reason of his clear realization of his own intellectual and moral girth.”

THE MAGNIFICAT.—“This is no ordinary autobiography. ‘Who touches this book touches a man’ . . . . The easy, flowing style of the author . . . holds the interest of the reader so firmly that he will find himself re-reading and re-reading the book . . . . The description of the struggles . . . . are so real that the reader may find in them an account of his own inner struggles.”

CHICAGO TRIBUNE.—“Engrossing from first page to last, a contribution to man’s knowledge of man . . . . of intense interest and lasting value.”

THE COMMONWEAL.—“This book is written simply; the sensory images of boyhood are wonderful, and the incisive quality of his criticism, that tartness of his humour have not been sentimentalised by Merton’s entry into a monastery. There is never an attempt to exploit religious experience for an artistic purpose, there are no pietistic platitudes. . . . *Elected Silence* is a book that deeply impresses the mind and the heart for days. It fills one with love and hope and shame—shame for oneself.”

NEW YORK TIMES.—“Of timely importance in intellectual, emotional and literary affairs.”