



Merton and Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax and Edward Rice

James Harford

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Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice were college buddies who became life-long friends, literary innovators, and spiritual iconoclasts. Their friendship and collaboration began at Columbia College in the 1930s and reached its climax in the widely acclaimed magazine, which ran from 1953 to 1967, a year before Merton's death.. Rice was founder, publisher, editor, and art director; Merton and Lax two of his steadiest collaborators. Well-known on campus for their high spirits, avant-garde appreciation of jazz and Joyce, and indiscriminate love of movies, they also shared their Catholic faith. Rice, a cradle Catholic, was godfather to both Merton and Lax. Merton, who died some 30 years before the other two, was the first to achieve fame with his best-selling spiritual autobiography, *The Seven-Story Mountain*. Lax, whom Jack Kerouac dubbed "one of the great original voices of our times," eventually received recognition as one of "America's greatest experimental poets, a true minimalist who can weave awesome poems from remarkably few words" (*New York Times Book Review*). He spent most of the last 35 years of his life living frugally on one of the remotest of the Greek isles. After *Jubilee* folded, Rice wrote 20 books on world culture, religion, and biography. His 1970 biography of Merton, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, was judged too intimate, forthright, and candid by those who, in Lax's words, "were trying so hard to get pictures of [Merton's] halo that they missed his face." His biography of the 19th century explorer and "orientalist" Sir Richard Burton became a *New York Times* bestseller.

This book is not only the story of a 3-way friendship but a richly detailed depiction of the changes in American Catholic life over the past sixty-some years, a micro history of progressive Catholicism from the 1940s to the turn of the twenty-first century. Despite their loyalty to the church, the three often disagreed with its positions, grumbled about its

tolerance for mediocrity in art, architecture, music, and intellectual life and its comfortableness with American materialism and military power. And each in his own way engaged in a spiritual search that extended beyond Christianity to the great religions of the East.

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