

While all of Thomas Merton's letters shed light on his life and work, writing a letter was, on some occasions, an opportunity for him to tell his story in brief. The earliest of such letters was one that Merton wrote to Abbot Frederic Dunne in January 1942, a little more than a month after Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. Writing to fulfill the canon law requiring him to identify the dioceses in which he had lived before coming to the monastery, Merton traced the story of his conversion and previewed the narrative line of his best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In brief accounts of his life more than two decades later, Merton struck quite a different chord, as illustrated by the letters and excerpts that follow. In 1963, Merton drafted a form letter that he sent to those requesting information about his life and writings. He sent a copy to Tommie O'Callaghan, a friend in Louisville whom Merton chose as one of three trustees of his literary trust, and quipped: "This might amuse you—I send it to High School kids who want me to write essays for them." In May 1967, he included a short curriculum vitae in a letter to poet Jonathan Williams and prefaced it this way: "I am bad at writing these things, 'born on a chimney top in Strasbourg in 1999' etc., but you can select what you want from this one: there is plenty of choice." In June 1968, in a letter to Sister J. M., Merton offered a cogent reprise of the periods of his life as a monk and writer.

TO ABBOT FREDERIC DUNNE, O.C.S.O. *Frederic Dunne, O.C.S.O., was Merton's first Abbot. When Abbot Dunne died on August 4, 1948, just two months before the publication of The Seven Storey Mountain, the autobiography the abbot had directed Merton to write, Merton noted in his journal that Abbot Dunne "is very close to me and will remain so all the rest of my days. . . . His sympathy was deep and real. . . . I don't know who was ever kinder to me."*

[GETHSEMANI NOVIATE] JANUARY 2, 1942

At the suggestion of my Father Master, I am writing out for you this outline of the main facts of my life and education, including, in particular, the circumstances of my conversion and vocation.

I was born Jan. 31, 1915, in Prades, France, in the diocese of Perpignan, of Protestant parents. My father was a native of New Zealand, my mother an