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# SIR THOMAS MORE

## (1478-1535)

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Sir Thomas More, or more accurately Saint Thomas More, since he was beatified by the Roman Catholic Church in 1886 and canonized as a saint in 1935, has been variously described as ‘the most attractive figure of the early sixteenth century’,<sup>2</sup> ‘the voice of conscience’ of the early English Reformation<sup>3</sup> and ‘one of the three greatest figures of the English Renaissance’.<sup>4</sup> He was a scholar, lawyer, theologian, statesman and eventual martyr, whose influence was less on the development of the Reformation in England as upon creating a particular genre of futuristic and idealistic writing about society. His most famous book, *Utopia*, has come to be accepted as an everyday term in the English language and ‘utopian’ is often used to refer to an idea or concept that is idealistic and highly desirable, but which at the same time is completely impracticable and unrealistic. In terms of political science, both liberals and socialists lay claim to Thomas More as a founder of some of their ideas. There has even been a room in the Kremlin devoted to Thomas More because of his apparent espousal of communism as a political ideal.<sup>5</sup>

He was born into a period of intense political and social turmoil in English history as the House of York was overthrown by Henry Tudor in 1485 and as a new, ruthless dynasty was established, a dynasty that was to have a profound influence not only on the future shape of Church/State relations, and consequently on the development of parliamentary democracy in England and Wales, but above all on the future development of the Reformation in England. It is generally as a political theorist and opponent of King Henry VIII in his attempt to supersede the Pope as head of the Church in England that Thomas More is best remembered. As a result, his contribution to educational thought in sixteenth century England and Europe is often overlooked. This profile seeks to redress that balance and to show that More was as much a farsighted visionary as he was a critic of contemporary society.

### **The context of More’s life**

To understand the importance and stature of Thomas More and why he is still venerated as a man of outstanding courage and integrity, it is necessary to appreciate some of the political and historical context of his life. For much of the fifteenth century England was in a state of political turmoil as the Houses of York and Lancaster fought, with different nobles lined up on both sides for political supremacy. Henry IV (1399–1413) deposed King Richard II and became the first of the Lancastrian rulers. His son Henry V (1413–22), immortalized by Shakespeare in his play of that name, defeated the French at the battle of Agincourt (1415), became regent of France and heir to the French throne. Unfortunately, his son Henry VI (1422–61) was more interested in religion and asceticism than in political and military warfare. While Henry VI’s legacy is Eton College and King’s College, Cambridge, his political legacy was less prestigious. He lost the French possessions

and eventually the Wars of the Roses,<sup>6</sup> leaving the Yorkist Edward IV (1461–83) on the throne. Although his son, Edward V, was named king, his position was usurped by his uncle, Richard, Duke of York, who became King Richard III (1483–85). Even so, Richard's position was far from secure, partly because of uncertainty about what happened to the young princes, Edward V and his brother Richard.<sup>7</sup> When Richard III was defeated at the battle of Bosworth in 1485 by Henry Tudor (Henry VII, 1485–1509), whose claims to the English throne were also pretty tenuous, a new era broke out in English history. Henry VII secured his position by ruthless suppression of potential rivals, by shrewd treaties with neighbouring European countries and by fiscal austerity. His son, Henry VIII (1509–45), not only consolidated the Tudor dynasty by dynastic and other treaties, by ruthless suppression of critics, but he also embarked on a number of foreign wars that severely strained the English Exchequer. The result was not only rampant inflation and considerable social unrest, but periodic requests for additional taxation to be levied by Parliament. In 1509 Henry had married Catherine of Aragon, widow of his elder brother, Arthur. Unfortunately, she was unable to provide Henry with the son he so desperately needed to secure the dynasty through the male line.<sup>8</sup> Unable to get a divorce from the papacy on the grounds that he should never have married his brother's wife in the first place, arguing that this was adulterous (*Leviticus* 20.10), he came into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church. A solution to the impasse was suggested by his then secretary, Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540): if he could only make himself, instead of the Pope, Head of the Church in England, Henry could easily grant himself the divorce he required. The Act of Supremacy of 1531 did precisely that. Subsequent legislation was to launch the Reformation of the Church in England, finally consolidated in the reign of one of Henry VIII's daughters, Elizabeth I (1558–1603). It was over the issue of the King's divorce and Henry's claim to be Supreme Head of the Church that the conflict arose between Henry and Thomas More, and ultimately to the latter's execution in 1535. However, More was not beheaded because of the stand he took on religious issues directly but because of treason. Refusal to accept the Act of Supremacy was a treasonable offence, as Henry was at pains to point out subsequently to the Pope and to the Hapsburg Emperor, Charles V, who, according to William Roper, More's son-in-law, said to the English Ambassador, Sir Thomas Eliot:

'My Lord Ambassador, we understand that the King your Master, hath put his faithful servant and grave wise councillor Sir Thomas More to death'. Whereunto Sir Thomas Eliot answered, that he understood nothing thereof. 'Well', said the Emperor, 'it is very true, and this will we say, that if we had been master of such a servant, of whose doings ourselves have had these many years no small experience, we would rather have lost the best city of our dominions, than have lost such a worthy councillor.'<sup>9</sup>

It is a measure of the antagonism of so many leading officials against the corrupt state of the church in the early sixteenth century that Henry was able to push through so much anti-clerical legislation in the 1530s and 1540s including the dissolution of the great monasteries and chantry houses. There had been considerable criticisms of the corrupt practices of the clergy; that they often had mistresses; that they exploited the poor and the gullible; that their influence on education was dull and sterile. Leading critics of this state of affairs were men like Erasmus (1466–1536)<sup>10</sup> and Thomas More. However, while both wanted reform of the church, unlike Luther in Germany and Zwingli in Switzerland, they did not seek to break from the Roman Catholic Church. They wanted reform from within. Indeed, More feared that the excesses of Luther would lead to social upheaval and civil war. In many ways, while More was a Renaissance man and was keen on new ideas and new thinking, and while he welcomed the new horizons opened up by a study of the Greek and Latin classics, he was at heart a conservative in terms of spiritual and even political control. Above all he was a man of the utmost honesty and integrity.

## Life and history of More

Thomas More was born on 6 February 1478, in London, the son of John More (died 1530), a member of the legal profession. It has sometimes been suggested that he was a judge but it is more likely that he was a legal attorney. Certainly he influenced Thomas' thinking about the law. Thomas was educated at St. Antony's School, then the best in London, before being sent at the age of about 12 to live in the household of John, Cardinal Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England. More was obviously profoundly influenced by Morton, whom he praises in his *History of King Richard III* and indirectly praises in his *Utopia*. For his part, Morton sent the young More to Canterbury College (later Christ Church College), Oxford in 1492, to study law. While at Oxford More studied under Linacre (1460–1524), one of the leading Renaissance humanists of the time. He was both a classical scholar, tutor to Henry VII's eldest son, Prince Arthur, as well as a physician who later founded and became the first President of the Royal College of Physicians (1578). Linacre, after whom an Oxford College was later named, taught More and a fellow student, Erasmus, Latin and Greek and an enthusiasm for what was then known as the New Learning, subsequently referred to as the Renaissance, a broad intellectual interest in the classics, the humanities, literature, poetry and music. John Colet (1467–1519) was also lecturing at Oxford at the time. He shared many of the new Renaissance ideas, though his influence on More was through his theological writings and preaching. He attacked many of the current ecclesiastical abuses and scholastic views about the teachings of St. Paul, seeking to open up a new form of Biblical scholarship that looked at the original Greek texts.

On leaving Oxford More completed his legal studies at the Inns of Court in London, first at New Inn, then at Lincoln's Inn, before becoming a reader at Furnival's Inn. He obviously had a sharp legal mind for he was much sought after and was clearly destined for higher things.

For a brief period he contemplated becoming a priest. From 1501 to 1504 he stayed with the Carthusian monks in the Charterhouse in London in 'devotion and prayer'. It was here that he began to wear a horsehair shirt as a form of penance. He only removed it on the day before his execution over thirty years later! Erasmus said of More that he left the Charterhouse and abandoned his religious vocation because he would rather be 'a chaste husband than an impure priest'—and because he was in love. According to Cotterill,<sup>11</sup> it was also because of what he regarded as the gross caricature of Christianity as presented by the church and because Pico di Mirandola, whom More greatly admired, had also refused to become a monk.

Whatever the real reason—and there may have been several—More wooed and married Jane Colt of Netherhall, Sussex, in 1504.<sup>12</sup> During the next five years she bore him four children, three daughters and a son. The eldest daughter, Margaret, was also his favourite and it is through the work of her husband, William Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas More*, which first appeared in 1553, that we have such a detailed portrait of the man and his career. His first wife died in 1511 and, realizing that his children needed a mother figure, he quickly remarried a widow, Alice Middleton, seven years his senior. Despite being short tempered and sharp tongued, she proved an excellent mother for the children and a bulwark for the family, an institution greatly favoured by More. Indeed, from the picture painted by Erasmus through his letters, More had an exceedingly happy family life in which he not only enjoyed his children's company, but sought to develop their thinking and intellectual skills.<sup>13</sup> In one letter to his daughter Margaret, who kissed him just prior to his death and who kept his head until her own death, More wrote, 'I assure you that rather than allow my children to grow up ignorant and idle I would sacrifice all, and bid farewell to business in order to attend them—among whom none is more dear to me than you, my beloved daughter.'<sup>14</sup>

More was a remarkable man in many ways, not only because he lived a fulfilling public and professional life, not only because interspersed with his public duties, he was a prodigious writer, in both Latin and English, but because he was able to maintain a family life in which he put into practice many of the educational ideas in his 'Academy' (i.e. his household). It is because of this

interweaving of both public and private aspects of life that it is not always easy to unravel the man and his ideas from the official positions he held. Nor is it always easy to unravel Thomas More from Erasmus, Europe's most famous man of letters of the early sixteenth century. From 1499, or thereabouts, they became firm friends and Erasmus was to become a frequent visitor at More's home during the next twenty years. In 1506, for example, they translated Lucian's works, one of which, *Mennipus Goes to Hell*, must have given More some inspiration for his own *Utopia*. In 1509, while staying with More, Erasmus wrote his famous 'In praise of folly' (*Ecomium moriae*), while in 1518 he printed More's Latin poems because he believed that 'England's only genius' had not enough time to do so himself, let alone write all the creative works that he wished. This was partly because More's legal and political career were encroaching upon his thinking time. In the last year of Henry VII's reign, 1509, More became a Member of Parliament and under-sheriff of London. Cardinal Wolsey soon introduced him to the new king, Henry VIII. Thereafter, More had a rapid elevation to senior political positions. In 1514 More was made Master of the Requests. The following year, he was sent on the first of several foreign missions. This one was a commercial embassy to Flanders, during which time he wrote the second book of *Utopia*, completing the first book on his return to England later in the year. Other foreign missions using More's diplomatic skills included attendance in Calais (1520) following the meeting of Henry VIII with Charles V and Francis I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold,<sup>15</sup> embassies to Bruges and Calais (1521), an embassy to Paris (1527) with Cardinal Wolsey, and a representative of the King at the Treaty of Cambrai (1529), which kept England out of a continental war for the next thirteen years.

Political honours were also showered upon him. Having successfully defended a group of London apprentices who had rioted in 1517 he was, the following year, on Wolsey's recommendation, made a Privy Councillor. In 1521, he was knighted and became Treasurer of the Exchequer. In 1523 he was elected Speaker of the House of Commons. It is said that on appointment he told Wolsey that he could not and would not do anything simply to please himself for he had 'neither eyes to see nor ears to hear but as this House [of Commons] shall direct me whose servant I am'.<sup>16</sup> He was subsequently elected High Steward of Oxford University (1524), High Steward of Cambridge University (1525), made Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1525) and in 1529, on the downfall of Wolsey, he reluctantly became the King's most senior and respected adviser when he was appointed Lord High Chancellor, the first layman to hold this great office of State. In human terms this was the pinnacle of his career.

Up to this point More's fame rested as much upon his prolific writings and his theological discourses, as upon his virtues as a man of integrity, honesty and simplicity. Apart from his joint work with Erasmus, previously mentioned, numerous Latin poems, and *Utopia*, he wrote several letters of scholarly controversy, for example, to Marin Dorp (1515); to the university authorities in Oxford (1518) in which he brilliantly argued for the place of humanistic learning in the university, especially Greek and what would now be called 'liberal arts' subjects; and 'to a monk' (1520), in which he criticized the corruption of the clergy. In 1520 he helped Henry VIII to compose *Assertio septem sacramentorum*, an attack on Luther and all he stood for, which earned for Henry the title 'Defender of the Faith' from Pope Leo X.<sup>17</sup> When Luther responded, Henry delegated More to reply, which he did with his *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523). In 1522 he began a devotional treatise, *The Four Last Things*, a meditation on death, doom, pain and joy. It was never finished, but it reflected More's despondency at the cruel and vindictive political and economic conditions of early Tudor society. It also perhaps reflected the personal anguish he felt that the more he became involved in Henry VIII's service the less time he had to devote to his family and his 'Academy'.

The measure of the esteem in which he was held by Henry VIII can be seen from the following comment by William Roper:

and so from time to time he [More] was by the Prince [Henry VIII] advanced, continuing in his singular favour and trusty service twenty years and above, when he had done his devotions to send for him into his private room and there

some time in matters of Astronomy, Geometry, Divinity and such other Faculties, and some time in his worldly affairs, to sit and confer with him, and other whiles would he in the night have him up into the leads,<sup>18</sup> there to consider with him the diversities, causes, motions, and operations of the stars and the planets.

Perhaps it was that More was able to live in the world and yet appear to be detached from it in his observances that appealed to so many people. He was clearly able to see both sides of an argument and, as Lord Chancellor, he was regarded as impartial, quick and fair in his judgements, though it is suggested that he was unnecessarily harsh in sentencing those with different religious opinions. Herein lies the clue to his conflict with Henry VIII, and the reason for his downfall and death on the scaffold for treason.

## More in the context of the English reformation

By the time More was appointed Lord Chancellor, he had a reputation throughout Europe as a man of wit, charm, intelligence and honesty. Henry regarded him as a friend and counsellor. He believed that he had made the perfect appointment to secure his personal desire—divorce from Catherine of Aragon—while at the same time reforming the church but not destroying it.

More shared Henry's fears about the Lutheran Reformation, that it could overthrow the old established faith and order. Theologically, he was conservative. Like Colet and Erasmus, More believed that there was a need for greater religious tolerance, for a more rational theology and for reform in the manners and behaviour of the clergy, but he was opposed to any need for a break with the historic church. It is not without significance, therefore, that Henry used More to dispute with Luther, and that the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, used him to write pamphlets and critical commentaries on Protestant books and arguments. In 1529, for example, More wrote a *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* as a rebuttal of the doctrines of William Tyndale, and *Supplication of Souls* against Simon Fish's attack on the clergy. In 1532 and 1533 he wrote a *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* and an *Apology* for the Catholic position. In 1533 he wrote his *Debellation of Salem and Bizance*, against two works by the lawyer, Christopher Saint-Germain, and an *Answer to a Poisoned Book*, against an anonymous work entitled *The Supper of the Lord*, which was for many years attributed to Tyndale, but more recently is believed to have been written by one George Joye.

It is perhaps ironical that in the last few years of his life More's writings on the theological stance of the church should have been so prolific, while the King, whom he loyally served to the end, was busy passing legislation that would change for ever, though not destroy, the position of the church in England. It is also ironic that Henry, who had used and befriended More, should have turned so forcefully against him. This was as much because he misunderstood More's personality as because he feared his influence. As Lord Chancellor, More was *the* leading figure in the land after the King. People took note of his views as much for *what* he was, as for *who* he was. As Henry's determination to secure a divorce increased, so did More's reluctance to go along with him, not so much because of the divorce *per se*, but because he saw this as a direct challenge to the papacy. This situation became more acute as Henry moved to be proclaimed Supreme Head of the Church in England (1531). More's position was that Christ was Head of the Church and that Henry was usurping the place of Christ's vicar on earth, the Pope. Accordingly he resigned his seal of office on 16 May 1532 hoping for a quiet life with his family and his books. This was not to be, at least not for very long, since Henry was determined to win his support, knowing that More's approval would secure his own actions. On 12 April 1534, More was summoned to Lambeth to swear an Oath of Allegiance to the Act of Supremacy, which impinged the Pope's authority and upheld Henry VIII's divorce. More twice refused on legal grounds. He was committed to the Tower of London on 17 April and was attainted for 'misprision of Treason' on 1 July 1535 on perjured evidence from Sir Richard Rich, the Solicitor-General, who had previously been helped by More

but who now owed allegiance to Thomas Cromwell. According to Roper,<sup>19</sup> the dialogue between More and Rich, which finally crystallized the issue, went as follows:

MORE: I will put you this case. Suppose the Parliament would make a law that God should not be God, would you, Mr Rich, say God were not God?

RICH: No, Sir, that would I not since no Parliament can make any such law.

MORE: No more could the Parliament make the King Supreme Head of the Church.

More was, of course, wrong. He died on the scaffold on 6 July 1535, professing loyalty to the King, but acknowledging a greater loyalty to the King of Heaven.<sup>20</sup> As Bindoff has written:

More was the victim, as he had been an exponent, of the stubborn illusion that any human institution possesses a monopoly of truth or the power to impose its dogmas upon all who are subject to its man-made authority. In More's case the offending institution was a Parliament.<sup>21</sup>

To many people More was, and remains, an enigmatic figure. As Speaker of the House of Commons, for example, he used his position, and his own anti-clerical views, to persuade Parliament to pass several laws limiting the powers of the clergy. For example, clerical fees charged for funerals and wills were to be fixed by Parliament. Clerics were not allowed to take on more than one clerical role.<sup>22</sup> In his *Utopia*, More accused the great abbeys and monasteries of 'turning tillage into pasture', i.e. of enclosing land for sheep pasture, thus displacing agricultural workers from arable land. However, as Robert Bolt brilliantly shows in his play *A Man for All Seasons*,<sup>23</sup> More was, above all, a man of integrity who was not prepared to put the wishes and whims of an absolute monarch above his own conscience. He was not a social or political climber. Many posts he was offered he did not want but was forced to accept. He opposed hypocrisy and corruption wherever he found them, especially in high places. To More, Cardinal Wolsey epitomized all that was corrupt about the contemporary church. For this reason, he has often been described as 'the voice of conscience' of the time because, as Speaker of the House of Commons, he championed the cause of freedom of speech. Roper says that when he became Speaker he wished that every man could 'discharge his conscience, and boldly in everything incident among us to declare his advice' without fear of penalty.<sup>24</sup> Hoffmann has also said that More put conscience above all else,<sup>25</sup> while Erasmus, on learning of his execution, commented on the man 'whose soul was more pure than snow, whose genius was such that England never had and never will again have its like.'

This nobility of character is perhaps nowhere better revealed than when he was sentenced to death by the judges in the Tower of London. His final words to them were measured, restrained and honourable:

In this world there will ever be discord and variety of opinion. But I trust that as Paul persecuted Stephen even to death yet both are now united in heaven, we too who are now at variance in this world and differ in our opinions may be one in heart and mind for ever in the world to come. In this hope I pray to God to preserve you all, and especially my Lord the King and to deign always to send him faithful counsellors.<sup>26</sup>

Winston Churchill, writing about More's place in the *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, observed that:

The resistance of More and Fisher to the royal supremacy in Church government was a noble and heroic stand. They realised the defects of the existing Catholic system, but they hated and feared the aggressive nationalism which was destroying the unity of Christendom. [...] More stood as the defender of all that was finest in the medieval outlook. He represents to history its universality, its belief in spiritual values and its instinctive sense of other-worldliness. Henry VIII with cruel axe decapitated not only a wise and gifted counsellor, but a system, which, though it had failed to live up to its ideals in practice, had for long furnished mankind with its brightest dreams.<sup>27</sup>

Given the conditions that More faced in the Tower of London during his last year it is all the more remarkable that he continued his writings. Towards the end, when paper and pen had been taken from him, he still managed to write letters in charcoal to the family. His *Treatise on the Passion* and the Latin version, *Exposito passionis*, give a vivid account of Christ's last hours before his death on the Cross, and his *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* is sometimes regarded as his finest work in English. On his death all his works and papers passed to his daughter Margaret (died 1544) and then to a nephew, William Rastell, who compiled the complete *English Works* in 1557. More's Latin works were collected and printed partly in Basel under the title *Lucubrationes* in 1563 and more fully in Louvain in 1565–66 under the title *Opera omnia*. Such was the revulsion at the manner of his dying and the recognition that he had been a man of genius that many biographies appeared in the late sixteenth century, led by the example of son-in-law William Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas More* (1553).

## More, the Renaissance man and educator

It was as much because of his intellectual ideas as because of his religious writings that Thomas More was so highly regarded by his contemporaries. Writing in 1520, Richard Whittington, a London schoolmaster, said of him: 'More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning; and as time requireth, a man of marvellous mirth and pastimes and sometimes of as said gravity, as who say, *a man for all seasons*'.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas More, 'whose integrity, personal charm, gentle determination and miserable fate make him the most attractive figure of the early sixteenth century,'<sup>29</sup> along with his great friend Erasmus, gave emphasis to the moral and religious thinking in Renaissance studies, not just to the pagan or artistic influences that predominated in and from Italy. They were as concerned with the philosophical and moral issues raised by the Greek writers like Plato and Aristotle as they were with history and legends. This was one aspect that was to distinguish England from the rest of continental Europe. Not only did More help preserve English common law at the expense of Roman law, but in educational matters he encouraged a religious/moral dimension as well as an academic one.

It was More's versatility in languages—English, Latin and Greek—his intellectual curiosity into different aspects of culture, painting and music, his willingness to discourse on diverse matters of importance, as well as to engage in light-hearted banter, that set him apart from so many of his contemporaries. More would have called himself a humanist, not in the modern sense of the word as being man-centred and anti-God, but as a person who was concerned about humanities and the state of the world. The growth of the Renaissance, especially in the fifteenth century when Greek and Latin manuscripts were discovered and were reproduced on the newly invented printing presses, set off a wave of admiration for classical ideas and writers. It was recognized that both the world and mankind has aspects of beauty and that there was enormous scope for creativity. It was into this pattern of thinking and perceiving the world that More and his friends fitted. Strictly speaking, humanists were university experts in Greek and Latin, men like More, Colet, Linacre, Erasmus and Roger Ascham, but the Renaissance humanists believed that they also had a breadth of interest in other fields—religion and moral philosophy, the humanities and the liberal arts, science and natural philosophy, and a sympathy for all subjects of human interest. Many, like More, would not only read and converse in Greek and Latin and the mother tongue, in this case English, but they would also know other languages—French, Italian or Spanish. More's sympathy for this view shows through in the following extract from *Utopia*:

You may see our friend Raphael—for that's his name, Raphael Hythlodæus—is quite a scholar. He knows a fair amount of Latin and a tremendous lot of Greek. He's concentrated on Greek because he's interested in philosophy and he found that there's nothing important on that subject written in Latin, apart from bits of Seneca and Cicero.<sup>30</sup>

More set out some of his views on education in a letter to Peter Gilles, who was Chief Secretary of Antwerp at the time.<sup>31</sup> ‘As you know’, he wrote, ‘my young assistant John Clement<sup>32</sup> was with us at the time. I never let him miss any conversation that might have some educational value, for he has already begun to show such promise in Latin and Greek that I expect great things of him one day.’ Later he says: ‘I am extremely anxious to get my facts right [...] for I’d much rather be thought honest than clever.’ He is equally scornful of some of his fellowmen.

Most readers know nothing about literature—many regard it with contempt. Lowbrows find everything heavy going that isn’t completely lowbrow. Highbrows reject everything as vulgar that isn’t a mass of archaisms. Some only like classics, others only their own works. Some are so firmly serious that they disapprove of all humour, others so half-witted that they can’t stand wit [...].<sup>32</sup>

In letters to a tutor of his children (Peter Gunnell), More gives very careful directions about their education. He strongly advocates the higher education of women especially in the classics and philosophy, an antidote to boring lessons in music, needlework and cookery. Indeed, More’s daughters wrote and frequently discussed issues at home in Latin. The trouble was that the form in which education existed at the beginning of the sixteenth century was sterile and dull, church dominated, and consisted of rote learning of the catechism and Latin conjugations, some number work and some translation from Latin to English and vice versa. The growing awareness of a whole new way of perceiving the world as a place of beauty, and of people as persons of beauty and personality which came from the Greek literature, transformed attitudes towards education and More sought to put these into practice in his ‘Academy’.

## More’s academy

More moved house several times during his career, but he had a house built in Chelsea to which he moved in 1517, though all the buildings were not finished until 1523. When completed the household consisted of an extended family of twenty-one, plus numerous other inmates. More had built for himself a separate building with a chapel, a library and a gallery. On Fridays he spent his time there in study and prayer. However, the whole of his home was an educational experiment. He taught his wife and family how to sing and play different musical instruments, how to read and discuss philosophical and theological issues in both Latin and English, and occasionally in Greek. There was no distinction between men and women, and it has been suggested that More’s household was ‘a model to all ages of domestic felicity.’<sup>34</sup>

The clearest picture we have of More’s domestic life is from Erasmus,<sup>35</sup> a great friend and long-term visitor. He says:

You might say of him that he presides over a Second Academy like that of Plato, only that instead of geometry and figures you meet there the domestic virtues. All the members of his household find occupation. No harsh word is uttered but discipline is maintained by courtesy and kindness. [...] in More’s household you would realise that Plato’s academy was revived, except that in the Academy the discussions concerned geometry and the power of numbers, whereas the house at Chelsea is a veritable school of Christian religion. [...] In it is none, man or women, but readeth or studieth the liberal arts. Yet it is their chief care of piety. There is never any seen idle. The head of the house governs it, not by lofty carriage and frequent rebukes, but by gentleness and amiable manners.

This was in stark contrast to the frequent floggings that boys would have received in the public schools for forgetting their lessons.

More believed strongly that children are gifts from God, to the parents, to God and to the nation. It is important, therefore, that they receive not only a good training and upbringing from their parents but also from the State and from the church which should provide an adequate supply of well-qualified teachers of the young. These views are developed in *Utopia*. One of the problems

of schooling in the early sixteenth century was that teachers lacked adequate training. More felt that the State had a clear moral responsibility not only to provide adequate teacher training but, by implication, that it should also provide the school system itself.<sup>36</sup>

More not only acted as a focal point for many of the Renaissance humanist scholars of the time but his 'Academy' was where he loved to hold court, because there he could put into practice many of his personal beliefs—easy discourse with his wife, children and friends without reference to class or gender distinction; discussion of the arts and literature, as well as religion and external values.

He was as much concerned for discipline in the context of a civilized and polite atmosphere as he was for open discussion between the sexes. Apart from Erasmus, his friends and followers included John Colet (founder of St.Paul's School, London); Hans Holbein the Younger, who painted a portrait of More in 1527 which still hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery; Fisher, the founder of several Cambridge colleges; Linacre, the Greek scholar, founder of an Oxford college after that name, and founder and President of the Royal College of Physicians. Two friends who were particularly impressed by what they heard and saw were Sir Thomas Elyot (1490–1546), author of *The Boke Named 'the Governour'* (1531), the first educational book written in English rather than Latin, and Roger Ascham, tutor to Queen Elizabeth I and author of *The Scholemaster* (1570). These books were to have a profound influence on the shape of schools and the curriculum well into the seventeenth century.

From some of Erasmus' observations of More the man, it is easy to see why he attracted such a following. In one letter he says that 'from earliest childhood [More] had such a passion for jokes, that one might almost suppose he had been born for them.'<sup>37</sup> In another letter to Ulrich von Hutton, a German Knight, dated Antwerp, 23 July 1519,<sup>38</sup> Erasmus says of Thomas More:

His expression corresponds to his character, always showing a pleasant and friendly gaiety, and rather set in a smiling look; and to speak honestly, better suited to merriment than to seriousness and solemnity, though far removed from silliness and buffoonery. [...] In social intercourse he is of so rare a courtesy and charm of manners that there is no man so melancholy that he does not gladden, no subject so forbidding that he does not dispel the tedium of it. [...] In human relations he looks for pleasure in everything he comes across, even in the gravest matters. If he has to do with intelligent and educated men, he takes pleasure in their brilliance; if with the ignorant and foolish, he enjoys their folly.

## Utopia

More's educational philosophy was strongly influenced both by his friends and colleagues and by their open discussions, but also by his own readings, observation and political convictions. He had a strong belief in man's ability to achieve and to rise above adversity; to become involved in the arts, literature, music and philosophy, as well as to be aware of scientific developments. While most of his views were orally expressed and influenced future writers, and while we know what he felt and thought from some of his letters and from Erasmus' observations, no profile of Sir Thomas More would be complete without reference to two of his published works for which he became most famous, *Utopia* (1516) and his *History of Richard III* (1543).

*Utopia* first appeared in its Latin version in 1516. The English translation did not appear until 1556, but by then its main arguments were widely known and had been widely debated. *Utopia* must mark out More as one of the most eminent humanist thinkers and visionaries of the Renaissance period. It is still hotly debated. According to Turner,<sup>38</sup> there are two schools of thought concerning its content and purpose. One view is that *Utopia* is predominantly a Catholic tract, in which the author sets out his own views and anything resembling communist propaganda is mere allegory. The other view is that it is a political manifesto in which all references to religion should be ignored. Both views are only partly true.

Although *Utopia* is a political satire it is also an allegorical, romantic piece of writing. 'It professes like Horace's Satires to "tell the truth with a laugh", or like Lucian's True History, "not merely to be witty and entertaining, but also to say something interesting".'<sup>39</sup>

The story is set on an imaginary island where there are no wars, poverty, crime, injustice or any other ills that so beset contemporary Europe. Everyone has an equal stake in wealth, food and poverty. No one has more than any others. The State oversees and ensures a fair distribution of resources, including health care. The working day is limited to six hours, while the remaining leisure time is devoted to the study of the arts, literature and science. Crafts and vocational courses are available for all, so that everyone has at least mastered one practical skill. Fighting is permitted only in self-defence and law-breakers are condemned to slavery. Religion is an undenominational theism and priests are chosen for their holiness. Every child, boy or girl, is entitled to a comprehensive education. This would include a study of literature, the classics, the arts, science and mathematics, what today would be called 'a balanced curriculum'. Children should also be made politically aware in civics classes. The State should be responsible for both providing education and for ensuring a supply of trained teachers. Girls should be treated no differently from boys.

More's purpose in writing *Utopia* was quite clearly to open people's eyes to the social and political evils of the world around them, e.g. inflation, corruption, maltreatment of the poor, wars for little or no purpose, courtly ostentation, the misuse of power by absolute monarchs, etc. More used works of Greek derivation to make his point. 'Thus, Hythlodæus means "dispenser of nonsense"; Utopia means "not place"; Anydrus, the name of a river, means "not river"; and Ademus, the title of the Chief Magistrate means "not people".'<sup>42</sup> It is clear from a letter to Peter Gilles that More expected his educated readers to understand the significance of these names because he deliberately used Greek names for places and official titles and also because he wished his readers to realize that they were imaginary. Difficulties have arisen for many readers because More, a devout Roman Catholic, advocated euthanasia, marriage of priests, divorce by mutual consent on grounds of incompatibility, allowing future husbands and wives to see each other naked before agreeing to marriage. Many readers also believe that the basic ideas expressed in *Utopia* are communistic. Even in the 1990s, *Utopia* remains a highly readable book, but it must be noted that it does not represent a positive ideal, but a negative attack on European wickedness as perceived by More. Its object was to shame Christians into behaving not worse, as they did then, but far better than the poor Utopian heathen. 'It is expressed in a timeless medium, which cuts it loose from its own particular age and saves it from ever seeming linguistically old fashioned or difficult.'<sup>41</sup>

Although there are references to Plato and some of More's ideas are clearly drawn from the *Republic* and *The Laws*, his basic approach is quite different. Both agreed that the role of the State in educational provision should be paramount, but whereas Plato only hinted at communism, More saw it as a basis for society. Whereas Plato was largely concerned with the education of the ruling classes, More regarded the producers, especially agricultural labourers as of high value. 'Admittedly only a few bright children academically should be allowed to be students. But every child receives a primary education and most men and women go on educating themselves all their lives during those free periods that I told you about. Everything's taught in their own language for it has quite a rich vocabulary.'<sup>42</sup> This is a quite clear attack on the use of Latin rather than English for schooling. While Plato encouraged warfare and regarded the virtues of martial arts highly, More sought to uphold peaceful values. Rather than wasting time, 'most people spend those free periods on further education for there are public lectures first thing every morning. Attendance is quite voluntary, except for those picked out for academic training, but men and women of all classes go crowding in to hear them—I mean different people to different lectures, just as the spirit moves them.'<sup>43</sup> Plato largely ignores family life, but for More the family is the basis of society; women are accorded a high place in the family and are encouraged intellectually, although More never recognizes equality in all things. Where Plato is serious, More is satirical, and whereas Plato banished art, poetry and music, More positively supports the arts.

Three other educational ideas emerge from *Utopia*. The first is that:

In *Utopia*, where everything is under state control [...] they never force people to work unnecessarily, for the main purpose of their whole economy is to give each person as much free time from physical drudgery as the needs of the community will allow; so that he can cultivate his mind, which they regard as the secret of a happy life.<sup>44</sup>

The second is that children and adults should freely intermix and learn from one another, an idea only really developed in the late twentieth century. The third idea is that all education should have a strong moral element imparted by priests who are 'responsible for the education of children and adolescents'. If moral ideas 'are thoroughly absorbed in childhood, these ideas will persist throughout adult life and so will contribute greatly to the safety of the State, which is never seriously threatened except by moral defects arising from wrong ideas.'<sup>45</sup>

Although *Utopia* was to become a best seller and ensured More a reputation throughout Europe, it was not until after his death that it was realized that More also had another gift, that of historian. His complete *History of Richard III* first appeared in 1543 as a continuation of Hardyng's *Chronicle* and Polydore Vergil's *Angelica historica*. It portrayed Richard as an arch villain and was to influence the perception of Richard held by subsequent generations, while Shakespeare's play, *Richard III*, drew heavily on More's interpretation and provided a vivid, if inaccurate, picture of the king. There are two remarkable aspects of the *History* which tell us much about More. 'More's *Richard III* is the first great work of prose in the English language; it initiates modern historical writing—for all the glories of the Elizabethan Age, there is nothing that comes close to matching it until Bacon's *Henry VII* (1622) and as a bilingual narrative it is unique.'<sup>46</sup> That it was the first historical work of any literary value which we possess in the English language is one thing; that it was written in both English and Latin at the same time is a touch of genius.

More was able 'to shape recent events into the sort of history his humanist training and his humanist friends approved, that is, a dramatic, boldly patterned narrative, soaring beyond actualities into art and seeking psychological verisimilitude rather than factual accuracy.'<sup>47</sup> In writing in this way, he inspired subsequent generations of historians to write in a similar vein and he influenced perceptions about Richard III until a reassessment began in the eighteenth century with Horace Walpole's *Historic Doubt on the Life and Reign of King Richard III* in which he challenged More's views. Since then numerous 'Friends of Richard III' societies have sprung up on both sides of the Atlantic. To be fair, More was strongly influenced by Archbishop Morton and other contemporary views, and while part of the purpose of writing the history was to criticize the brutality of contemporary kingship, he stopped writing for fear of impugning both Henry VII and Henry VIII as tyrants. Instead he used the satirical *Utopia* to get across his message.

## More's legacy

More's place in English and European history is secure, not only because of his *Utopia* but because of his principled stand against tyranny and his clear example that conscience and morality can triumph over evil. That he could only slow down, but not prevent, the course of the English Reformation was, in hindsight, inevitable. That he influenced future perceptions about Richard III, that he inspired parliamentarians in the seventeenth and later centuries to strive for freedom of speech and the preservation of English Common law, and that he gave a name to an idealized world of the future, *Utopia*, are no mean achievements.

His two greatest legacies, however, must be in his manner of writing and in his educational views. More inspired a whole genre of literature, of idealistic and futuristic writing and of fantastic traveller's tales. Well over 100 titles have been published adopting this style. If we were to name but a few, the list would include: Joseph Hale's *Another World and Yet the Same* (1600); Andrae's *Christianopolis* (1619); Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626); Harrington's *Oceania* (1656); Swift's

*Gulliver's Travels* (1726); Voltaire's *Candide* (1759); William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890); H.G Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895); Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932); James Hilltop's *Lost Horizon* (1933); George Orwell's *1984* (1949); and the list could go on.

Regarding his educational ideas, many of these now seem commonplace to us—State provision; the education of both boys and girls, as well as of adults; a balanced curriculum; moral as well as academic schooling; the use of the vernacular for instruction—but their roots, especially in English educational tradition can easily be traced back to More's *Utopia*, and Erasmus' descriptions of More's 'Academy'. That socialists can lay claim to More's ideals of State control and provision of education, and that liberals can claim that the idea of a broad and balanced curriculum was originally More's, is no small feat. Sir Thomas More was truly 'a man for all seasons'.

## Notes

1. Keith Watson (United Kingdom). Professor of education at Reading University, where he is director of the Centre for International Studies in Education, Management and Training. He spent many years with the British Council in Poland, Bangladesh, Thailand and London, before joining the university. His main research papers are on comparative and international education. His published works include: *Educational development in Thailand* and *education in the Third World*. He is chief editor of the *International journal of educational development*.
2. G.R. Elton, *England under the Tudors*, London, Methuen, 1957, p. 139.
3. Reader's Digest Association, *Milestones of history*, Vol. 5, *Reform and revolt*, 1974, p. 55.
4. The other two were Colet and Erasmus.
5. There is some confusion about whether or not he really did sympathize with communism. See the Appendix of Paul Turner's translation of *Utopia*, Harmondsworth, UK, Penguin Books, 1965.
6. Two of the best books on this period are Paul Kendall's *Richard III* (London, Book Club Associates, 1955) and Charles Ross' *Edward IV* (London, Book Club Associates, 1975). The Wars of the Roses were so called because the emblem of the House of Lancaster was a red rose, and that of the House of York a white rose.
7. It is suggested that the princes were murdered in the Tower of London on the orders of Richard III. See Paul Kendall for a discussion of this in his 'Introduction' to *Richard III: the Great Debate*, London, Folio Society, 1965.
8. Until the reign of Mary Tudor (Mary I, 1553–58) the law of primogeniture prevailed whereby only a male heir could be crowned king.
9. See the 'Everyman edition' of William Roper, *The life of Sir Thomas More*, London, Dent, 1932, p. 70.
10. A profile of Erasmus can be found in the first volume of this series.
11. H. B. Cotterill in his 'Introduction' to R. Robynson, *The 'Utopia' of Sir Thomas More*, London, Macmillan, 1908.
12. According to Erasmus, More preferred the second daughter but, feeling that the first would have lost face, he decided to marry her instead!
13. Evidence comes from Erasmus' letters, see: P.S. Allen, H.M. Allen & H.W. Garrod, *Opus epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi*, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 1906–58. 12 v.
14. W. Rastell, *The complete English works of Sir Thomas More*, 1553; reprinted by Oxford University Press, 1931.
15. So called because of the pomp and glitter resulting from so many European monarchs being present together.
16. William Roper, op. cit., p. 35.
17. 'Fid.def' (Defender of the Faith) has appeared on all subsequent English coinage around the monarch's head.
18. On the roof. Most Tudor houses had sheets of lead below the roof tiles to act as rainwater guttering. William Roper, op. cit., p. 7.
19. William Roper, op. cit., p. 103.
20. At his execution More said: 'I die loyal to God and the King, but to God first of all'.
21. S.T. Bindoff, *Tudor England*, London, Penguin Books, 1952, p. 103.
22. Clerics in Tudor England were not necessarily clergymen. They would have been 'hangers on' in abbeys and monasteries serving as vergers, clerks, finance officers, etc.
23. Robert Bolt, *A man for all seasons*, London, Heinemann, 1955.

24. William Roper, op. cit., p. 64.
25. Ann Hoffmann, *Lives of the Tudor age, 1485–1603*, London, Osprey Publishers Ltd., 1977.
26. William Roper, op. cit., p. 102–03.
27. W.S. Churchill, *A History of the English-speaking peoples*, vol. 2, London, Cassell, 1956.
28. Cited in *Collier's Encyclopedia*, Vol. 16, New York, NY, Macmillan & Collier, 1976, p. 542.
29. G.R. Elton, op. cit., p. 139.
30. Paul Turner's edition of *Utopia*, op. cit., p. 38.
31. Peter Gilles was Town Clerk of Antwerp, 1515–20.
32. John Clement (died 1572) was taken into More's household as a tutor to his children, one of whom, his adopted daughter Margaret Gigs, he married in 1526. He later became Mary Tudor's physician.
33. Letter to Peter Gilles in *The correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, edited by Elizabeth F. Rogers, 1947, p. 91.
34. S.T. Bindoff, op.cit., p. 103.
35. P.S. Allen, op. cit., p. xxv.
36. William Boyd, *The history of Western education*, London, Adam & Charles Black, 1947, pp. 237–38.
37. P.S. Allen, op. cit., vol. IV, p. 17.
38. Quoted in C.R.N. Routh, *They saw it happen, 1485–1588*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1956, p. 26.
39. Paul Turner, 'Introduction' to *Utopia*, op. cit., p. 7.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 78–79.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
47. Paul Kendall, op. cit., p. 24.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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*Treatise on the Passion*, 1535.  
*The English works of Sir Thomas More*, 1557. Ed. William Rastell. Reprinted 1931 by Oxford University Press.  
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