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Towards Understanding St. Thomas More

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The intense interest in St. Thomas More in contemporary England, America and other English-speaking countries is evidenced by the literature which is surveyed in the following article.

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING ST. THOMAS MORE*

A Survey of Recent More Studies in America

R. J. SCHOECK†

ONE MAY WELL BEGIN A SURVEY of recent studies of St. Thomas More with the year 1935, doubly appropriate because it is the year of his long overdue canonization and because it is the year in which the biography by the late Professor R. W. Chambers appeared. As to the first, the fact of canonization has done more than to put an official seal on a long tradition of popular feeling—for non-Catholics like Professor A. L. Rowse have long recognized that More's martyrdom not only made a splendid story but also added "to the slender stock of English saints in Heaven"; More's canonization has given an indication of his enormously significant position in the Reformation at its most crucial phase. For the second, Chambers has written what will doubtless long remain the standard life of More, "the fountain head for all understanding of More": not only is it magnificent reading, scholarly and fascinating, deeply thought out and intensely human in the details of the

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This survey was written late in 1952 (and published in January, 1954), and there have been some notable contributions since that time, including several full-length biographies. One important addition to our knowledge about More's family was made by Prof. Margaret Hastings, an excellent historian of the common law; her suggested identification of More's grandfather and great-grandmother gives a strengthened and deepened sense of legal tradition in the More family (*Times. Lit. Supp.*, 12 Sept. 1952). Mention ought to be made of Frank Sullivan's pioneering 'first bibliographical notebook,' *Sir Thomas More*, published in 1953.

If I had been writing for an audience of lawyers, I should have felt free to stress far more than I did the importance of the law in More's life and thought – to try to do something of what Richard O'Sullivan, Q. C., has done so well in England.

One final note: in another paper I have attempted to suggest one aspect of the enormous impact of the law upon the intellectual life of Renaissance England – "Rhetoric and Law in Sixteenth-Century England," *Studies in Philosophy*, L (1953), 110-27 – and it is within this larger view of the English common law that I believe we must see and evaluate More's work and thought as a great common lawyer.

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portraiture—it confirms the end of a long period of largely second-rate scholarship and it bridges the gap between Catholic and non-Catholic historians and More scholars. We may of course say that More is of all England and belongs to all of the English heritage, but we must recognize that much of the best of More scholarship has been done by non-Catholics and a considerable amount by American scholars, on whom I shall concentrate.

It is a large order, to survey More's studies of some eighteen years and attempt an evaluation of them; and it is still more difficult if one wishes to indicate their part in our ever growing knowledge of the life and works of St. Thomas of Chelsea, and if one wishes to suggest areas of weakness. Let me begin by dividing all into three parts: More's life and career, *Utopia* and some recent interpretations of it, and More's other writings.

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Having already mentioned the standard life by Chambers (there are others, of course, by Christopher Hollis and Theodore Maynard, for example, but all at a rather popular level), one may well turn to a work that is also the product of many years of devoted and steady scholarship: Professor Elizabeth Rogers' definitive edition of *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton, 1947), which is a pleasure to use and a blessing to have at one's elbow; and if one is permitted to sigh gently a single regret, it is that the correspondence with Erasmus, though it is calendared, is not reproduced, for we might then have all the correspondence together. One may surely pause to comment on the richness of thought in politics, education, religion and letters which is unfolded in this correspondence, and Miss Rogers has not only added enormously to our knowledge of More's activities and friends but has also given us a model of patient scholarship.

Of a different kind but superb in that genre are the essays in the two volumes of papers read to the Thomas More Society of London, edited by Richard O'Sullivan,[1] and though none of these is by an American —it is an area in which American scholarship is weak—no survey of present efforts towards further understanding of More could be complete without mention of them, because they contain the best that has been said about More the lawyer.

One must find time to speak of the studies of More's family and friends which have cast so much light on More himself, and which have so clearly shown how firm and lasting a bond of loyalty and devotion, of *caritas,* held the members of the More and Rastell and Heywood families, and their friends, together through the years of trial and exile that followed More's martyrdom. Nearly thirty years ago Professor Reed opened many avenues of possibilities in his essays of bibliographical and public records research; Miss Pearl Hogrefe followed one avenue in her valuable paper[2] on Thomas More's connections with the Roper family; and Miss E. M. G. Routh developed this approach and consolidated the then known material into her *Sir Thomas More*

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1 *The King's Good Servant* (London 1948) and *Under God and the Law* (London 1949). Papers read to the Thomas More Society of London and edited by Richard O'Sullivan, Q.C.

2 Pearl Hogrefe, "Sir Thomas More's Connections with the Roper Family" in *Publ. of Mod. Lang. Assoc.,* xlviii (1933), pp. 523-33.

and His Friends (Oxford 1934), which is an essential work. There is of course a considerable amount of information in the first two volumes of *The English Works of Sir Thomas More,* and in the work of Professor Rogers and Professor de Vocht, but there is pressing need of a carefully compiled genealogy of the More family that would make use particularly of the data in the recent Catholic Record Society volumes, so that we might have the biographical materials of the More family together. The present writer has made some efforts in this direction; a number of small pieces in *Notes and Queries* on the Heywoods, Christopher Stubbes, Anthony Bonvisi, William Rastell, and others of the More circle, are in preparation for a larger study.

Turning to consideration of More's career, in such specialized articles as Professor Dunham's study of the whole council of Henry VIII from 1509 to 1527[3] we continue to learn about Sir Thomas in his political environment, and we find here some reinforcement of the belief that More had relatively small influence in political matters before he became Lord Chancellor.[4] Perhaps the best essay on a single aspect of More's career is that of William Nelson,[5] which (while it suffers from a necessary over-emphasis on only one part of the whole) does well to emphasize More as a grammarian and orator. To my own paper on More's participation in the entertainments and other activities of Lincoln's Inn[6] one would want to add George Williamson's estimate of More's views on the drama, yet none of these comes close to a full view of More as a man of letters, and in this Professor A. W. Reed's treatment in *Early Tudor Drama* is still pertinent and necessary, as is Chambers', for the achievement of More and his circle in the drama has not yet had anything like full treatment, and one waits for the essay that will give us a rounded understanding of More's stature as a man of letters.

There have been several biographies intended for the general reader—Maynard's *Humanist as Hero* is most recent and perhaps the best—and many More lovers have probably not yet discovered Olive White's fine historical novel, *The King's Good Servant* (1936). My friend Leo Brady of the Catholic University of America informs me that he has read in manuscript many plays dealing with More's life: it is curious that since the ill-fated *Play of Sir Thomas More* there have been so many attempts to dramatize his life, but as yet none of any real success.[7]

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One must accept that the concepts and ideals of Christian faith and philosophy are deeply embedded in *Utopia,* that they were beyond doubt or cavil a part of the author's intentions—if one does not, one is lost in the materialistic interpretations and un-

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[3] W. H. Dunham, "The Members of Henry VIII's Whole Council 1509-27," in *E.H.R.*, lix (1944), pp. 187-210.

[4] By which I do not mean that he had no personal favour with the King, or that he did not perform important diplomatic missions.

[5] "Sir Thomas More, Grammarian and Orator," in *Publ. of Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, lviii (1943), pp. 337-52.

[6] "Sir Thomas More and Lincoln's Inn Revels," in *Phil. Quart.*, xxix (1950), pp. 426-30—on other connections between More and his circle and Inns of Court entertainments see *N and Q.*, 17 March, 1951, and 24 May, 1952.

[7] Charles Brady's novel, *Stage of Fools,* has appeared since the writing of this article.

grounded speculations of Karl Kautsky and his followers—and if one did not, not only would *Utopia* become a vastly different book from the one More wrote but we would have to regard More himself as either frivolous or hypocritical or unchristian. There can be no doubt that though he was clever and loved irony and humour and *jeux-d'esprit,* he was not a frivolous man; that although he developed in some lines of thought and modified his views in others (and was at times wrong), he was not hypocritical but deeply sincere; and that from the period of his Charterhouse years through his lifelong practice of devotions and penances to the death which he suffered for his faith, Thomas More was an ideal Christian and, indeed, a saint.

More obviously intended his *Utopia* to profit its readers by its teaching but at the same time to amuse them—the prevalent thinking, as with Sidney, was that the end of poetry is to teach and delight, and the *dulce* is not to be subordinated to the *utile*[8] —and as one of *Utopia's* contemporary critics, Beatus Rhenanus, commented in 1518, More "teaches perhaps less as a philosopher and more as a Christian" (*et docet minus forsan philosophice, quam illi, sed magis Christiane*). Chambers has brilliantly presented an exposition of the meaning of *Utopia* that may be briefly summarized in his own words: "the underlying thought of *Utopia* always is, *With nothing save Reason to guide them, the Utopians do this; and yet we Christian Englishmen,* (Oxford, 1904), I, xxv.

Utopia is, as Father Surtz has argued,[9] "essentially a document of reform" that is of a kind with Erasmus' exhortation to the future Emperor Charles V: "Whenever you think of yourself as a prince, remember you are a Christian prince! You should be as different from even the noble pagan princes as a Christian is from a pagan."

Still following Father Surtz's argument, *Utopia* is not a *programme* but rather a *document,*

> a pre-Reformation humanistic document with an eye to the reform of all phases and departments of the Christian state. If an ideal pagan state like Utopia which is based solely upon Nature and philosophy can attain such glory and triumph, what a paradise upon earth could not a Christian nation create, which has, besides the finest products of reason and antiquity, the surpassing treasures of revelation and grace to aid and sustain it!

Measured against such a full view of the meaning of *Utopia,* such partial and partisan interpretations as the recent *Citizen Thomas More and His Utopia* (Princeton 1947) of Russell Ames are seen as shallow. More's work is not "a protective disguise for the satire and the dangerously progressive projects[10] of a humanist reformer and middle-class English citizen": it is not primarily a project, as we have seen, and to call More a middle-class citizen fighting feudalism and attempting to bring about the Industrial Revolution is to impose post-

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[8] Cf. G. G. Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*

we Europeans . . ."

[9] Edward L. Surtz, S.J., "Interpretations of *Utopia,"* in *Cath. Hist. Rev.,* xxxviii (July 1952), pp. 156-74.

[10] As Professor Hexter has commented (*More's Utopia,* p. 12*n.*), the circumstance that *Utopia* was not printed in England but on the continent has been used with false knowledge and reasoning to suggest that More feared the consequences of its publication.

Marxian concepts upon what was, all in all, an extraordinarily homogeneous Christian society. In Father Surtz's words again:

> The Christian faith and the Christian philosophy cut across lines of class distinction. Basic principles, *e.g.*, those of social justice, political integrity, and religious purity, should therefore be common to proletarian, bourgeois, and noble.

And one must grant that these principles not only should be common but were doubtless equally idealistic to all three groups.

The more recent book by Professor Hexter (*More's Utopia—The Biography of an Idea*) is not so limited by personal preconceptions and prejudices as Ames', and it is stimulating and challenging, but it fails to place *Utopia* firmly in its Christian framework of values, as I have tried to point out in a recent review in *Modern Language Notes;* for one cannot talk about More's sources for his *Utopia* and omit St. Augustine and his *City of God,* and one cannot claim to present More complete and fail to do justice to his religious interests. When the Pope who canonized More exclaimed, "che uomo completo," it was in a far more significant sense, and in a vaster context than is conceivable to Professor Ames or (to judge from his book) than is considered by Professor Hexter. For other interpretations of *Utopia* one may refer to Father Surtz's excellent survey-article, which admirably makes in greater detail than is possible here an appraisal of some current interpretations, and with some reluctance I can only mention and must forgo evaluation of the extended argument of Robert P. Adams for the philosophic unity of *Utopia,*[11] and other articles of Father Surtz —but I must confess equal relief and gratitude in being able to refer to another survey.

Again and again one realizes how much of the best work on More has been done in larger studies, of which I select for this present discussion of *Utopia* only one, Professor Helen C. White's emphasis (in *Social Criticism in Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century,* 1944) on the wide range and flexibility of imagination of *Utopia* at the head of the Utopian tradition. Her understanding of the tone of More's work is sound—and with it is to be placed J. A. K. Thomson's suggestion that Erasmus' greatest contribution to European culture was with More to bring irony back into literature (though that perception needs both historical and critical qualification)—and Miss White declares that "one of the most exhilarating qualities of the wit of More's time was its capacity for trying on points of view without any responsibility for rejection or adoption," and her next point (though dialectically perhaps danger-

xlii (1945), pp. 131-45.

> It is not so much the position that he takes on controversial issues as the approach that is important. That is rational, humane, and, again, in a larger sense, statesmanlike.

These things—the concepts and ideals of Christian faith, More's humour and irony and his sincerity of purpose—one may some day, perhaps, be able to take for granted in talking about his great and in-

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[11] "The Philosophic Unity of More's *Utopia*" in *Studies in Phil.,* xxxviii (1943), pp. 45-65; one should also see his "Designs by More and Erasmus for a New Social Order" in the same journal, vol.

ous) is well taken:

exhaustible book, and thus be able to go further in the enterprise of criticism and the experience of enjoyment, but not yet: one must still justify what one ought to be able to assume with More, and one must expend much time and energy in answering absurd speculations and ungrounded interpretations of the Ames' of current More scholarship; and all this is especially true in dealing with *Utopia,* a Renaissance Christian document which has in the past century been claimed by many partisans and torn from its proper context and framework.

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There is much room for criticism and scholarship in More's other writings. We have the basic tools: the edition of his English works proceeding under the guidance of W. E. Campbell (though a comprehensive selection is needed for students, and a more suitable working edition), the Rogers' edition of the letters and a standard life for the main lines of his biography; we have Delcourt's scholarly survey of his language (though there is need for much filling out of that general picture), the very useful check-list of the Sullivans',[12] and even a study of the cursus in his prose. But for his controversial writings we have little beyond Mr. Campbell's recent treatment in terms of More's controversies with Tyndale, his *Erasmus, Tyndale and More.* For More's significance as a biographer there has been almost nothing since the late Donald Stauffer's appraisal in *English Biography Before* 1700 (Harvard 1930); there has been a considerable amount of work especially in America on concepts and techniques of biography which ought to be applied to More's own biographical writing and to biographies of More. For his importance in the epigram we have Hoyt Hudson's delightful but, unhappily, never completed monograph on *The English Epigram* (Princeton 1947)—we need to have all this put together so that we can see the stature of More as a man of letters. In that field which is nearly closed to the layman, theology, we have had little: Father Surtz has shown the closeness in essentials of More and the other Oxford reformers to the scholastic tradition,[13] and several of the writers in *The King's Good Servant* and *Under God and the Law* have further demonstrated More's familiarity with scholastic philosophy and canon law—but here too we need a comprehensive treatment of the whole area, which may be possible only after more specialized essays like Marshall Smelser's analysis of More's political philosophy in his theological controversies.[14] It is surprising that a major study of More and St. Augustine has not been made; we know that he lectured on the *City of God* but his lectures are apparently lost (Vives' references to More, in his commentary, are therefore disappointing), and some Augustinian ideas are obviously important in *Utopia;* but a scholar with some theological training is needed to trace Augustinian thought through More's career and writings.

By way of concluding this survey, it may

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12 Frank and Majie P. Sullivan, *Moreana* 1478-1945—*A Preliminary Check List* . . . (Kansas City, Mo., 1946)—I have pointed out some omissions in this list in a forthcoming article in *English Studies,* in writing of a Renaissance biographical sketch of More.

13 Fr. Surtz, " 'Oxford Reformers' and Scholasticism" in *Studies in Phil.,* xlvii (1950), pp. 547-56.

14 In *St. Louis University Studies in Honour of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1943), I, pp. 12-32.

be said again that much good work has been done in larger studies in the Renaissance or Reformation, or in various areas of sixteenth-century English intellectual life; one can single out only a few such studies. Miss White's study of social criticism emphasizes, as I have already indicated, "the wide range of More's mind, the flexibility of his imagination" when later works in the Utopian tradition are compared with More's archetypal book. In *Musae Anglicanae* (1940) Leicester Bradner has done well to emphasize More's position in the Latin tradition, which always needs to be pointed out in America, and F. L. Baumann's articles and reviews situate More firmly in the historical movements and politics of Henrician England.[15] But there are gaps and needs: one would like, for example, a more restrained and impartial treatment than Ogle's of More's part in the Hunne affair, and of the impact of that business upon the England of the next two decades.

Perhaps the biggest gap, and the most surprising, in More studies is our lack of an informed and comprehensive study of his legal career and of legal elements in his works; I understand that two American scholars are busy in this field. Mention has already been made of an essay by the present writer which records all More's activities at Lincoln's Inn: the conclusions are not startling, but the picture of More the reveller does emerge (with some support for his conjectured hand in the Inn's entertainments and dramatic activities), and More's long-continued participation in the affairs of Lincoln's Inn should at least compel us to remember that despite his protests and complaints against legal business and litigation—and which of us does not groan against the daily chores of his profession? —More was deeply interested and involved in the law, and for all of his adult life it was an important and inseparable part of his intellectual activity.

Of all the saints of the Renaissance none seems at once more comfortable and comforting in our twentieth-century world, and of all the gifted Oxford humanists of early Tudor England none is more alive to-day, and the writings of none more readable, than St. Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor who was the King's good servant but God's first. No one can be surprised then at the devoted labours of a Chambers or a Rogers, and we may hope that of others continuing in their high tradition of More scholarship not the least of these will be in America.

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15 In *Journal of Modern History*, iv (1932) and viii (1936). Perhaps I might here add that this historical research is a necessary corrective for some distortions and over-simplification in Chambers. For, as Professor Rowse has commented, although Chambers has a definite point of view "his sympathies are wide and his prejudices usually under control," but Henry's reign is apparently divided into two halves; the first Catholic and tolerable, the second "one of complete frustration, ruin, and national degradation."