

# The Catholic Lawyer

---

Volume 29  
Number 4 *Volume 29, Autumn 1984, Number 4*

Article 2

---

September 2017

## Thomas More, A Man For Our Time

William Kinsella

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

William Kinsella (1984) "Thomas More, A Man For Our Time," *The Catholic Lawyer*. Vol. 29 : No. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl/vol29/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Catholic Lawyer by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [selbyc@stjohns.edu](mailto:selbyc@stjohns.edu).

# Thomas More A Man for Our Time†

WILLIAM KINSELLA\*

In any talk on Thomas More, the question naturally arises as to what not to include—for any comprehensive discussion of More would require not hours or even days but rather weeks. Most of us are aware of how very full a life Thomas More lived—a life of letters, of learning, of professional duties, of statesmanship, of domestic activity, and not least, of sanctity. In fact, it requires quite a full life to study and appreciate all the ground he seems to have covered. This short discussion is therefore, necessarily, sketchy, and must fail to survey many aspects of More's life and works. Such items as I have chosen are designed to give a general, rather than complete, view of this man who has so rightly been dubbed a man for all seasons.

When we learn that More at a certain stage of his life allowed himself but two hours of sleep out of every twenty-four, we marvel at his routine and output: how he could possibly have been able to find even two hours for rest? One of his biographers, Stapleton, tells us that he was helped considerably in the maintenance of his routine by wearing a hair shirt and sleeping on planks, with a log for a pillow.

## A CHRONICLE FOR MORE'S LIFE

Thomas More was born on 6 February 1478 in Milk Street, Cripplegate, London, being the second child of John and Agnes More. At the time of Thomas' birth his father has been described as "Skinner"—Alderman and Sheriff—of London.

The next date of significance is 1488, when we learn that Thomas attended St. Anthony's School at Threadneedle Street, under a Master Nicholas Holt. Some two years later, in 1490, More is to be seen as a page at Lambeth Palace, in the household of Archbishop Morton, Lord Chan-

---

† Copyright 1984 by William Kinsella. The Article consists of the text of an address to the St. Thomas More Society in Dublin on October 13, 1982, and is reprinted from copy number 39 of 100 numbered copies signed by the author and published privately by The Saint Thomas More Society.

\* Honorable President, Saint Thomas More Society of Ireland.

cellor. Morton's assessment of the boy at that early age is widely known, and he backed his judgment of the boy by having him sent to Oxford University after spending some two years in his household.

Thomas More's father, as we have mentioned, was an alderman and sheriff, and no great imagination is needed to appreciate why some years later, while Thomas was caught up in the Classics and studying Greek and Latin, his father saw little future in that pursuit and quietly but firmly made Thomas embark on a legal career at New Inn. In keeping with filial tradition, Thomas, though apparently not enamored of the law, assiduously pursued his legal studies and within two years of commencement was admitted to Lincoln's Inn. He would now be about eighteen years of age.

More's great friend, Desiderius Erasmus, has written that the "study of English Law is as far removed as can be from true learning but in England those who succeed in it are highly thought of—and there is no better way to eminence there, for the nobility are mostly recruited from the law." Withal, More, who had indeed little enthusiasm for legal studies, became so skilled in law that none who dedicated himself entirely to it had a better practice.

Despite practicing, evidently quite successfully, as a barrister from 1499 to 1503, More himself had *not* fully decided that a career in the law was to be his final vocation. During those years More lived almost as a cloistered monk—at least as a monk without vows—in the London Charterhouse (a Carthusian monastery), where, it is believed, he observed all the monastic ordinances. He also gave lectures on St. Augustine's *City of God* as well as translating from William Lily's Greek Anthology.

In 1504—a date of great significance—More was elected a member of Parliament for the first time, but research has been regrettably unable to ascertain what constituency he represented. The significant event of this year was that when the King sought a lawful subsidy for the marriage of his daughter to the King of Scots, Parliament raised difficulties. It appears that the amount the King had in mind was £ 90,000 but due to arguments made against the subsidy by "a beardless boy," as the official record roll describes More, the King had to be content with £ 40,000, "whereupon the King, conceiving great indignation towards him, could not be satisfied until he had some way revenged it and, forasmuch as he (More) nothing having, nothing could he lose, his Grace devised a causeless quarrel against his father, John More, keeping him in the Tower, until he had made him pay to him a hundred pounds fine," a considerable sum in those days.

The following year More married Jane Colt, eldest daughter of Sir John Colt, M.P. for Netherhall, Roydon, Essex. There seems to be good reason for believing that Jane, the eldest daughter, was not his original choice but that he had opted for the second eldest, for it is recorded that,

when he saw that "it would be both grief and shame" for the eldest to see her younger sister married before her, he framed his fancy towards her and soon after married her. I cannot find any reference to a dowry in any work on More and I would not be surprised if Jane brought none, for we learn that More's father-in-law, John Colt, was married twice and that Jane was one of a family of eighteen.

Initially, More settled down in married life in Bucklesbury at The Old Barge, in the Parish of St. Stephen Walbrooke, at which home, in October of that year, 1505, his daughter Margaret was born.

The following year Erasmus stayed at More's house, preparing for the great work of publishing the Greek New Testament. More, despite all his legal work and domestic activity (his second daughter Elizabeth was born at this time), managed to find time to translate Lucian. In the following year he visited Paris and Louvain Universities.

In 1509 More's only son John was born and in this year, too, More was granted the freedom of the Mercers' Company. On 24 January of the same year Henry VIII was crowned, and More availed of this event to compose many epigrams in Latin fittingly to commemorate it. Eleven days after the coronation, More, now aged thirty one, received his first royal commission. In the following September he was conducting negotiations on behalf of the Mercers' Company with the Pensionary of Antwerp.

The year 1510 saw More as M.P. for London in the first parliament of Henry VIII and his appointment as undersheriff of the City of London and More was also autumn reader at Lincoln's Inn. In this same year More's first book, his *Life of Picus, Earl of Mirandola*, was published by More's brother-in-law, John Rastell.

In 1511, six and a half years after his marriage, his wife Jane died at the age of twenty three, leaving More with a family of four children, the eldest of whom, Margaret, was not quite six years of age.

Much has been written and said of the apparent haste which Thomas More entered his second marriage — he remarried in very little over a month — yet, if one considers his domestic scene at the time, there is little cause for speculation or surprise: a busy lawyer, a very busy author, an up and coming parliamentarian, is left with four extremely young children ranging from less than two years to six years of age. He married a widowed lady (whose husband had died two years previously) by the name of Alice Middleton who was some seven years senior to More. Erasmus remarked at the time that More married to provide a mother for his children, and this seems clear enough. Erasmus also indicates that Alice was a vigilant housewife and, although More's biographer Nicholas Harpsfield states that she was aged, blunt and rude, he also adds "that More full entirely loved her."

Meanwhile, More's career progressed: his successes with the Mercers' Company had established his reputation as an extremely able negotiator

and resulted in his being elected to act for the Merchants of the Staple. In this year also he was requested to serve on several legal committees — on the lines perhaps of our own Law Reform Commission — on which his father, Judge More, was also serving.

In 1514 he was Lenten Reader at Lincoln's Inn, also being admitted to Doctors Commons in the same year, and was also rewarded by the City for the work he did on its behalf. In addition, he began work on the Latin and English versions of *King Richard III*. He was never able to finish this work; many reasons are advanced for this, not least that the atmosphere around Henry at this particular time was hardly conducive to accepting the plain speaking that More has put into the work; perhaps More felt the need for more caution in order not to jeopardize his career. Political considerations aside, this work illustrates More's extraordinary narrative and dramatic art and is regarded as a noteworthy breakthrough in English composition; historians leave us in no doubt as to how much Shakespeare drew upon this work when completing his own play on the subject. It was, I believe, to English literature what Beethoven's completion of the form of the sonata was to music, if I may be permitted the analogy.

Next year, 1515, saw More's first mission abroad — to Flanders. (The Court of Aldermen permitted More to occupy his office of under-sheriff by deputy when he went on the King's embassy to Flanders. More made this famous by his allusions to it at the beginning of *Utopia*.)

It is of interest to note that his meetings with Erasmus at Bruges, Peter Gillis at Antwerp and Jerome Busleyden at Malines inspired him to commence his *Utopia*. Less than one year later *Utopia* was completed and published in Louvain. Indeed, whilst we will be discussing *Utopia* later on more specifically, it is only fair to remark that 1516 seems a red letter year in many ways. He was asked to assist the City of London committee on the price of victuals; he was very frequently at court; and in this year, in the month of December, he won the case of the Pope's Ship against the Crown, as a result of which he was eventually pressed into royal service. (Unauthenticated sources suggest that Henry had said he was not going to allow a position to continue whereby the best brains of the realm might be used to expose its weakness and that he would no longer allow that More be not in his service.)

From this on More's career, and indeed his whole life, took on a totally different aspect, and for the next twelve years he served the King, eventually reaching the zenith of his career, succeeding Wolsey in the chancellorship.

Whilst More was to become understandably much more concerned and involved with the King's business, he did not instantly sever all his connections with his former non-governmental associations. He was concerned at this stage with the London office of Gaugership and Tithes, but his first real test of authority and strength arose over the famous, or per-

haps better-termed infamous, May Day Riots. Described by many historians as the "Evil May Day Riots," this event really marks the man More as a power in the land for the first time. The year was 1517. Those of us who have studied More can see the great analogy that this incident has to our present-day racial problems; but how More was chosen to quiet the very threatening situation which had arisen is perhaps the most telling and interesting bit of information we have concerning his wide popularity — in this case, with the underdog. The recently discovered chronicle play (the authorship of which is attributed to William Shakespeare) lays great emphasis on the choice by the people of Thomas More to judge them; it seems that they would not listen to anyone else.

More was then acting as royal secretary, and although he still advised the Mercers' Company, he found it more and more difficult to cope with all the responsibility attaching to his royal service and be an author. *Utopia* was printed at Basel in this year, 1518, and his famous *Letter* to the University of Oxford reproving its opposition to the study of Greek was also penned. Pressure of work causes him to resign as under-sheriff of the City of London after eight years service. He received the King's pension at this time of one hundred pounds a year.

The famous Anglo-French negotiations which More and Wolsey had been conducting for some months received More's signature; in this connection it is interesting to note that the Venetian ambassador regarded himself as a very full and frank friend of More even though he was on the other side of the political fence; More observed a strict diplomatic reserve, while at the same time retaining the goodwill of the Venetian ambassador.

In his role of royal secretary More's routine seems almost incredibly busy; yet he finds time for other activities, most of them not financially rewarding, such as his famous *Letter to a Monk*, written following his visit to his sister Elizabeth (Rastell) at Coventry, who had a dispute with the said monk.

The following year, 1520, Charles V visited Canterbury and London and More was in attendance on Henry all the time. It is hardly imaginable what the state visits of the time involved by way of pomp and pageantry; they make even the most regal and pompous visits of present-day statesmen merely a passing event of little consequence.

It was also in 1520, some four years after More had entered royal service, that Robert Whittinton in his famous *Vulgaria* showed us by his praise of More how, despite his lofty position as royal secretary, his appearance at the Court of Star Chamber and the many other activities he engaged in, he was still *very much* a man of the people. It was Whittinton who coined the famous lines:

More is a man of Angels wit and singular learning, I know not his fellow.

For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability. And as time requireth a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, and sometimes of a sad gravity . . . A Man for All Seasons.

On 2 May 1521, More succeeded Sir John Cutte as Sub-Treasurer of England, and simultaneously received a knighthood. A great family bond between the Ropers and the Mores was forged exactly two months later, on 2 July, when William Roper married Margaret More, Sir Thomas's eldest daughter. Three days later More was present at the London Court of Alderman, but this time representing the King, whilst the month following he travelled to Calais and Bruges with Wolsey.

His famous *Responsio ad Lutheram* was commenced in 1523. Although I intend later to discuss More's written works, it is quite impossible to refer merely *en passant* to this giant volume: the Yale University edition of the complete works of Saint Thomas More takes 1,036 pages in two fairly massive volumes to encompass this text. In this year More was elected as Speaker of the House of Commons, attended the Court at Woodstock and published the *Responsio*, less than a year after embarking on this great work.

The following year, 1524, More bought land at Chelsea to build his great house and also acted as High Steward at Oxford University.

It is quite apparent that More, whilst perhaps not overpaid in the King's service, did not entirely overlook the possibility of availing of some of the perks of office or perhaps using information available to him to obtain some: in 1525, for example, he obtained the grant of the three manors of Ducklington, Fringford and Barlypark, as well as becoming Steward of the Duchy of Lancaster for life. Later that year he became Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in succession to Sir Richard Wingfield.

In 1524 his rise was actually recorded in Court circulars. The Ordinances of Eltham proclaim that More, as one of the Council, is always to be about the King. This year, too, Hans Holbein stayed in More's house and made drawings and paintings of the More family. (These are now retained in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle and would appear to be the property of the reigning monarch in the United Kingdom. There are eight drawings by Holbein in the Royal Collection of members of the family of Sir Thomas More. They are recorded as being in Holbein's studio in Whitehall in 1543, at the time Holbein died, which is eight years after our subject, Thomas, was executed. It is not known whether the King acquired them at this stage or indeed whether he ever owned them. However, a few years later they are recorded as being in the possession of King Edward VI, but how they were acquired — More having specifically commissioned them originally — it is difficult to say.)

In 1527 More was commissioned with Stephen Gardiner to treat with

France and accompanied Wolsey to Calais and Amiens. This was a fateful year, too, in so far as on his return from this mission in October the King consulted More on the great matter of the Divorce.

Fifteen twenty eight seems to have been a comparatively uneventful year by More standards, but the next year makes up for it: it witnesses the resignation of Wolsey and, on 25 October, the acceptance by More of the Great Seal and his taking of the oath as Lord Chancellor. He opens what is now termed the Reformation Parliament and signs (this has always been a divisive point in the life of More) the forty four articles against Wolsey.

#### LAWYER AND LORD CHANCELLOR

More did not without very serious persuasion from his father choose law as a career. His undeniable success is a tremendous tribute to his industry and to the seriousness which he tackled this very exacting profession. I do not totally concur with More's great public career biographer, J.A. Guy, who opens his book with the sentence, "Sir Thomas More was meant to be a Lawyer" (he then partly counters this some two lines later by stating that it was a move which owed everything to parental ambition, as John More, our subject's father, was anxious that his son should achieve both place and ambition in his own profession).

More's career as a judge began in September 1510, following appointment as under-sheriff of London. Mr. Guy makes the curious statement that this position must have come his way partly through influence.

William Roper, More's son-in-law, asserts that More at the age of thirty three was earning four hundred pounds per annum, which at that time was regarded as a very considerable sum. Roper also asserts that "in none of the Prince's courts of the law of this realm is any matter of importance in controversy wherein he (More) was not with the one part of counsel."

As an under-sheriff More was a permanent legal official who advised the sheriffs and sat as judge in the Sheriffs' Court. This Court was ancient and greatly respected, its existence going back to the reign of Henry I. It met at Guildhall on Thursday mornings and the profits of its jurisdiction went to the Sheriffs. It seems More greatly enjoyed this role, as Erasmus notes that no judge ever disposed of more cases or showed greater integrity.

The predominance of secretarial duties as a Counsellor in the 1520's is best illustrated by reconstructing More's personal itinerary for the year 1525, seven years after he first took on the function of royal secretary. It will be helpful, too, if we remark here that due to the political instability arising from rebellions in the South East, the Midlands and East Anglia over the famous Amicable Grant of Wolsey, it was essential, because of



the fear of intrigue, that no one person be allowed unnecessary proximity to the King.

It seems that from the following table it is very clear that More at this time was first and foremost Henry's secretary. He was therefore in a position of extreme trust, and his selection was unquestionably at Wolsey's behest and of course had Henry's fullest approval.

In addition to More's court duties as resident humanist, royal secretary and diplomat, there was quite a lot of routine judicial work. Since the reign of Edward IV a tradition had developed by which the counselors who travelled with the King dealt equitably with bills of complaint brought to them by the King's subjects. In fact, the large Council attendant upon Henry VII had formalized this arrangement and initiated the Council of Requests, which greatly resembled a travelling version of Star Chamber.

*More's Itinerary in 1523*

January 3-7	Royal Secretary, Greenwich.
January 19-22-23	Royal Secretary, Ampthill.
January 26	Council in Star Chamber.
January 27	Royal Secretary, Ampthill.
February 13	Council in Star Chamber.
March 18	Royal Secretary, London.
March 24	Royal Secretary, Greenwich.
April 8	Diplomatic Duties, Greenwich.
April 14-29	Royal Secretary, Greenwich.
May 8-17-26	Royal Secretary, Windsor.
June 6	Public Orator, Windsor.
June 18	Public Orator, Budewell.
June 23	Council in Star Chamber.
June 28	Royal Secretary, Greenwich.
July 10	Council in Star Chamber; then Royal Secretary, Greenwich.
July 20th	Royal Secretary, Windsor.
July 21-25	Oyer et terminar commissioner in Berkshire.
July 29	Diplomatic duties, Richmond.
July 31	Diplomatic duties, Anglo-French negotiations.
August 14	Diplomatic duties, Anglo-French negotiations.
August 20	Royal Secretary, Hunsdon.
August 23	Royal Secretary, Hatfield.
August 27	Royal Secretary, Dunstable.
August 28-30	Diplomatic duties, Treaty of the More.
September 3-8- 10-11-13	Royal Secretary, Stony Stratford.

September 17	Royal Secretary, Olney.
November 1-8-19	Royal Secretary, Windsor & Reading.
December 10	Royal Secretary, Greenwich.
December 12	Royal Secretary, Windsor.
December 27	Royal Secretary, Eltham.

Still following on the theme of More and the Law, it may be helpful to acquaint ourselves with the system obtaining immediately prior to More's election to the chancellorship. The former chancellor, Wolsey, would appear to have remained in control as lord chancellor until the failure of the Legatine Court at Blackfriars to pass sentence for Henry's divorce. Henry faltered over Wolsey's dismissal (he had been in the position more than fifteen years at this time); but the charge of *Praemunire*, which was Wolsey's destruction, was filed in the Court of King's Bench and nine days later he resigned as lord chancellor, handing back the great seal to Norfolk and Suffolk in a high chamber at York Place. Thus commenced a most vigorous and searching debate on the successor, and the real struggle for power began in the Council in great earnest.

Strange to relate, Thomas More was not involved in these high politics, and the real scene took place with the King at Greenwich on 23 October "for a meet man to be his chancellor." Opinion (no doubt as a result of the Wolsey reaction) favored the choice of a layman and, to give Wolsey his due, he had recommended More: Wolsey is believed to have stated that though he had "lack of true hearty affection for him [no doubt Thomas was glad of that] yet he confessed that Sir Thomas More was the aptest and fittest man in the realm."

Henry VIII was most enthusiastic, despite the fact that Thomas was already a declared opponent of the Divorce. More himself already recognized the Divorce as the greatest political issue of the future.

So, at 3 p.m. on Monday, 25 October 1529, Sir Thomas More entered Henry's inner chamber at Greenwich, took the great seal from the King's hands and was created Lord Chancellor of England. His salary was fixed at £ 542 per year plus £ 200 for attending the Court of Star Chamber, £ 64 in lieu of twelve tuns of wine and £ 16 for wax—a total of £ 822. He formally took the oath of office in Westminster Hall after Norfolk's announcement of the new Chancellor.

More was now fifty two and, by accepting the chancellorship, had scaled the summit of ambition, the climax of his public career.

From the point of view of the legal profession the timing of More's appointment seemed auspicious indeed for by 1529 a large question-mark hung over the traditional legal system and the future shape of English royal justice was in grave doubt. The business of the Central Law Courts of King's Bench and Common Pleas had been declining steadily since 1440, due to dynastic upsets, economic depression and notable demo-

graphic stagnation. It was to Chancery that both old and new legal business was extensively deflected after 1475, chiefly that business generated by complex commercial practices, modern methods of property settlement, recent investments in farms, exploration of mineral resources and the expansion of foreign trade. The final consolidation of Chancery in its classical, late medieval format was accomplished under Henry VIII by More's predecessor Wolsey, when the Court's work-load increased to an annual average level of 535 suits as compared to the 500 or so petitions filed each year between 1487 and 1515.

The rise of Star Chamber attracted numerous litigants. Rarely, writes Professor Guy, do judges advertise their willingness to provide justice; but Wolsey did, and the impact on Star Chamber was immediate. In the reign of Henry VII 300 or so suits had been initiated before the Council in Star Chamber: 12.5 per annum; during Wolsey's government the figure was 1685: 120 per annum.

What happened after More became chancellor was that the choice of a common lawyer to succeed Wolsey gave great rise to speculation regarding future policy between competing factions in the legal profession itself: after all he was the first common law lord chancellor for one hundred and fifty years.

Many lawyers interpreted More's accession to the chancellorsip as a triumph for reaction (forgetting perhaps that More had been tutored for twelve years in Wolsey's nursery). But the common lawyers practicing in Chancery and Star Chamber work were greatly concerned lest the conservative interests attaching to Common Pleas be supported, thus causing a serious decline in their own business. The great defender of Equity and Chancery, Christopher St. Germain (whose fame as an intellectual dynamo of the period is well-known) was determined to do what he could to improve the situation, as his great work *Dialogues*, published in 1530, evidences. Yet, whilst St. Germain held that unregulated competition between parallel jurisdictions raised a truly awful prospect of perpetual litigation, general legal business—especially real property suits—had already begun to transfer into Chancery and Star Chamber, and recent years had been bedevilled by litigation about land, the difficulties of making family settlements, the problems of mortgages, forged deeds, false claims as well as a busy traffic of pretended titles. Chancery did seem best able, with Star Chamber, to provide the legal services that men of property needed to keep their affairs in order, a very major attraction being that many cases succeeded in Chancery which, albeit theoretically remediable, would have failed at common law.

"A lamentable truth, played down equally by Replication and St. Germain, was that litigants—the most potent force for change in all the courts—did not themselves care whether their judgments were in accordance with God's law, Reason or Conscience, as long as they met immedi-

ate personal needs and were enforceable. Parties wanted tangible results, not lectures in jurisprudence. They would flock to whichever court was offering a public service, oblivious of altruism.

"As regards legal doctrine, the 'rival' forum's rise was the consequence of Common Law's failure to adapt. In both its civil and criminal aspects, Common Law was derived from an admixture of feudal practice and the King's Peace which enabled it to tackle ancient but not current socio-legal problems. Common Law had become settled in an age of force rather than of cunning; it was conspicuously underdeveloped by 1529 in respect of fraud, perjury, the rules of evidence, maintenance, champerty, embracery, subordination and conspiracy. In a lawyer's words, 'as English society was becoming increasingly sophisticated economically and socially, so wrongdoing was becoming more sophisticated.' Or at least, contemporary man apprehended better the nature of that wrongdoing. Acts of Covin and Oppression, notably pretended title and multiple pursuit of actions designed to get an opponent to sell interests in land cheaply, were more significant offenses in Tudor society than disseisin, forcible entry and trespass. But because the law had not adapted, many aggrieved parties had no recourse other than to petition the Chancellor to compel wrongdoers to act in accordance with good conscience. Traditionally, he had acceded to such requests if he believed them to be genuine. Conscience was a Chancellor's sufficient warrant to scrutinize the moral acceptability of men's taking advantage of the supposed 'legal' rights and to enjoin them from doing so unfairly" (J.A. Guy).

A major program of common law reform was needed in 1529, and therefore More's tenure in Chancery and Star Chamber marked a most decisive era for lawyers; it now remained to be seen whether More would succeed in making smooth transition.

Examination of the Public Records pertaining to More's chancellorship appears to indicate that, volume apart, the scope of the work discharged by him was directly comparable with that of his predecessor Wolsey. The bulk of the litigation was in the sphere of real property, as litigants were being constantly advised by their legal professionals to bring their unquiet titles and claims to land into the Chancellor's Courts for adjudication.

St. Germain in his work entitled *A Little Treatise Concerning Writs of Subpoena* had stated that chancellors were bound in conscience either to amend erroneous decisions or to make restitution out of their own pockets, and it is reasonable to assume that such admonition was not lost on More, who almost certainly would have read this work. Thus, despite More's capacity to get through an enormous workload he was nonetheless quite cautious to ensure that each case was dealt with painstakingly and thoroughly. More was not an innovator, despite the vast amount of work he seems to have undertaken. Indeed, the most exhaustive research on

this aspect of More's legal career suggests that he most rigorously applied the traditional Chancery procedures of surety, security and scrutiny. The ancient theory that judges had a personal duty in conscience to see right done by all whose business was conducted in the courts they directed had become obsolete in practice, and it is to More's credit that he revived this theory. To do so called for great courage and determination and enhanced his reputation for rectitude, integrity and discretion.

#### MORE AS A FAMILY MAN

One biographer of More rates him as having eighty three persons in his household at Chelsea; J.A. Guy in his great work on the public career of St. Thomas More, to which I have referred earlier, asserts that More was feeding over one hundred per day. It does not greatly matter which is correct, as either figure illustrates that it was a fairly large establishment and was run by all accounts on hospitable lines.

It would be quite nice to be able to develop fully the theme of More's household. (Much has been written about it and of the great people who met there, some of them quite famous in their own right) and also to refer to More's immediate relations.

Erasmus was a frequent visitor (on one occasion the visit lasted about two years) who, as well as being a scholar like More, was also a very shrewd observer. He described More's household as Plato's Academy on a Christian footing. Dice, cards and flirtation were forbidden to the retinue of men and women but gardening, study and music were encouraged. There was household prayer every night that the master was at home, compulsory churchgoing on Sundays and feast days, and at the great feasts everyone had to rise to attend the midnight office (this suggests that all the members of the household probably retired before midnight).

As a rule More himself rose at 2 a.m. and spent the time until 7 a.m. at study and devotion. He heard mass every morning, and we are all familiar with Stapleton's story that on one occasion, despite an urgent summons from the King, More refused to leave until mass was ended—a refusal, which Stapleton hurries to add, the King took in good part.

With its great gallery, library and chapel it was a fine house indeed. Part of the old original red brick wall which adjoined the house is still extant—largely or perhaps wholly because there is a preservation order on it. It sits awkwardly astride the present building. We are informed that at ordinary meal times one of the family—particularly Margaret Gigs (an adopted daughter)—read scripture, intoned in the monastic fashion with the commentaries of Nicholas de Lyra. After scripture had been discussed, Master Henry Patenson, More's domestic fool, was permitted to bring the conversation down to a lower level.

More had set to work very intently to teach his first wife (who died

so young) and, nothing daunted, he undertook a similar program with Dame Alice: it is recorded that he failed to teach her, as far as science was concerned, "but that his efforts to teach her to sing were not totally unavailing."

However, as the great recorder Erasmus informs us again—and we know he was not prejudiced in her favor—Alice did help by insisting and seeing to it that everyone performed their allotted tasks: as Chambers so blithely puts it, if she was not exactly a scientist Dame Alice had the makings of a headmistress. It is clear at any rate that a very large part of the business management lay in her hands. This much can be gleaned from the letter which More wrote to her when he learned of the accidental burning of his barn: Dame Alice is to compensate the neighbors to whom the fire has spread—for, "an I should not leave myself a spoon, there shall no poor neighbor of mine bear no loss by any chance happened in my house—I pray you be with my children and your household merry in God."

We are glad to learn, however, that More had better success in the education of his children than he had with Dame Alice. Margaret, Elizabeth, Cecily and John were taught Latin, Greek, logic, philosophy, theology, mathematics and astronomy. It is of interest to note that all More's correspondence with his children, till they were quite grown-up seems to have been in Latin. Giving the daughters the same education as the son was a new departure and More was not aware that such procedure would come in for severe criticism.

In a brief review such as this of More's great household it is of very human interest to note that Thomas was not blind to the advantages of property in seeking marriages for his children. Roper, of course, who married More's eldest daughter, belonged to the aristocracy of the law like More himself, but with much longer ancestry behind him, and when, at the age of twenty three he married Margaret, there would have been reasonable grounds to believe that his relations, both actual and acquired, would not have exactly stood in his way for preferment if it arose. The second daughter, Elizabeth, married William Dauncey, son of Sir John Dauncey, Knight of the Body to Henry VIII, and Cecily married Giles Heron, son and heir of Sir John Heron, Treasurer of the Chamber to Henry VIII (Giles Heron had been a ward of Sir Thomas More).

More's, writes Professor Chambers, was a charitable household, for he invited the poor rather than the rich to his table: he established an almshouse at Chelsea which he placed under the administration of his daughter Margaret. It is of more than passing interest to note that his son-in-law William Roper, his first real biographer, later bespoke charities on his own on a truly magnificent scale.

What we have said might suggest that all the children, actual and acquired, in the More household were models, but such is far from the

case. We are all familiar with "Son Roper's" Lutheranism, which in the household of a great court official like More amounted to nothing less than a public scandal. And this was very grievous for More—knowing so well that "Son Roper" was very capable of holding his own in argument with doctors of divinity; and we can be sure that his brazen companionship with Lutheran merchants and Hanseatic traders, all of whom favored the new religion, caused More many a sleepless night. Eventually Roper was converted to orthodoxy, not by argument apparently but, according to the historian Nicholas Harpsfield, "by the hand of the Most High"; he has good grounds for saying this, as we are told that More, calling his daughter Margaret aside, said to her: "I have borne a long time with thy husband: I have reasoned and argued with him in these points of religion, and still given to him my poor fatherly counsel, but I perceive none of all this able to call him home, and therefore Meg I will no longer argue nor dispute with him but will clean give him over, and get me another while to God and pray for him."

Thus, although there was inevitably a disparate element in thought at times in this great household, it was big enough to sustain it — always provided one could intellectually support one's views.

For More his home and his family constituted a very real and very major place in his life: nothing is too good for them, yet withal there is no undue indulgence either; each had a specific role allotted and each one has to carry it out; but we do know that More really favored his first-born child, his daughter Margaret. However, he did not let this detract from the love and attention he gave the others — an incredible spirit of unity and goodwill seems to have obtained, which we can be sure was generated by More, who fully realized that true personal development was achieved more satisfactorily by filial love and protection than by coercion.

This great household surely did not, at this stage, have any idea of the great tumult and upheaval which lay in store for it: as we know, many were executed for their loyalty and many again had to flee abroad, their most proud and happiest boast was always the fact that they had been attached to the great household of Sir Thomas More.

#### MORE AS AUTHOR

The Spanish Dominican Pedro de Sato, writing in 1557, stated of Thomas More's works "that our flagging feelings and perceptions, dampened and depressed by the torpor of our times are revived by the odor and fragrance of this man — like that of a rich field blessed by the Lord." For in that year appeared the monumental folio of Thomas More's English works, of which the first complete facsimile edition was not to appear until 1978 — four hundred and twenty one years later.

Again regrettably all one can do here is to allude briefly to the more

important works.

The editor of the 1557 folio, William Rastell, was the son of More's sister, Elizabeth, and John Rastell, the printer. We know that the house of Rastell were virtually family printers to More.

More's first serious book was the *Life of John Picus, Earl of Mirandola*. This was printed by John Rastell at about 1510. Three years later the famous *History of King Richard III* was published, after which came a treatise upon the *Four Last Things*.

It could be tedious to detail specifically the many varied works which Thomas More wrote and which were published during his lifetime. Some of them, like the first and second part of the *Confutation of Tyndales Answer*, are quite voluminous indeed. Many treatises on sacred subjects include:

*Dialogue Concerning Heresies*  
*Supplication of Souls*  
*Letters impugning John Frith*  
*Apology*  
*Dialogue of Comfort in Tribulation*  
*Debellation of Salem and Bizance*

To refer to his quite famous (albeit unfinished) *History of Richard III*: we note that in Elizabeth's reign it was reprinted no less than five times within twenty years. We are advised that for more than a century after its composition — until in fact Bacon's *Henry VII* appeared — More's *Richard III* was regarded as the one outstanding pattern of historical writing in the English language. As one modern writer has put it "the book from which our art of history must date its beginnings." Ben Jonson, for example, in his *English Grammar* quotes More's *Richard III* more frequently than any other prose work. A modern version of this work, edited by Richard Sylvester, is available in the Yale University Press edition published in association with the Grace Trust.

There is no time to touch on More's Latin works — now readily available in English translation — nor on his very many controversial writings such as the *Confutation of Tyndales Answer*. I must, however, refer to what I believe to be the book by which he is best known; it may not be considered a masterpiece of prose but there is no gainsaying its popularity. I refer, of course, to his work *Utopia*, which he first had published in Louvain in 1516.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable features of this work is that today, some 450 years after its publication, it is still read and discussed. Many readers of the book emphasize aspects of it which support or appear to support their own particular doctrine or ideologies: Marxists claim it as the first attempt to define a socialist state and many of them



regard, therefore, Thomas More as the first socialist.

Many who have read *Utopia* are tempted to believe that it can show the way to a sort of heaven on earth — a state wherein all can be happy because all are regulated. However, in my opinion this is not at all what *Utopia* sets out to do.

It affirms, beyond any measure of doubt, that men must not allow themselves to be governed by their ideals — a very easy and commonplace mistake to make; rather they must govern their ideals. Thomas More addresses his *Utopia* to the individual conscience, not at all to false and misguided hope in a smooth and easy perfection.

More in *Utopia* reveals himself as a man who fully shares our feelings, the feelings of the ordinary, very ordinary mortal who yet seeks to come to grips with himself and his real world. Again one could perhaps say that the symbolic journey to Utopia is the image of life that More conveys to readers of all epochs.

It is extremely difficult to be definitive about this work: it provides a delightful opportunity for readers to indulge in their own definitions, many whom have not been slow to put these into print. More's "best state of a commonwealth," or, as More originally cited it, "De Optimo Statu Republicae," evolved through several stages of composition. First came the "Discourse on Utopia" what is now Book II; later More added the "Dialogue of Counsel" and the dialogue within a dialogue set at Cardinal Morton's table (which dialogues are now in Book I).

In reviewing the ground from which Utopia has grown one becomes very aware of the fact that More, at the time of writing, was extremely busy both as a lawyer and as a family man, as he himself describes: "When I have returned home I must talk with my wife, chat with my children and confer with my servants. All this activity I count as business when it must be done, and it must be unless you want to be a stranger in your own home. And all of these duties, business and affairs of the household come before the writing of *Utopia*." Instead of deducing from this that art should be valued below many of the pedestrian aspects of life, one's attention is drawn to the relation of art to life. So much has been written on *Utopia*: on its historical milieu; on Utopia and the middle class; on Utopia and the family . . . It is indeed quite difficult to understand how socialists can come to terms with the book: in Utopia the family unit is truly ubiquitous and the agricultural units are certainly not collective or state farms but farms of extended families of up to forty adult members. Industrial activity in Utopia is neither a state-sponsored body nor a multi-national; it is organized on a family unit basis, with a son ordinarily succeeding "father" in the family trade. Perhaps most significant of all is the fact that the family is the political unit: every thirty families are said to choose one magistrate. And even in war the Utopian soldier is expected to go out fighting accompanied by his wife, children

and other relatives.

### A MAN FOR OUR TIME

As I indicated at the beginning I propose to deal, in this final section, with the all-embracing title I have chosen — ‘Thomas More, a Man for our Time.’

In what sense can More’s thoughts, works, views, career, sanctity — and not least his end — be relevant to this day and age, so many hundreds of years later? To attempt to relate the life and work of More to our time we must first look at our time, our own lives and our own work.

Today, perhaps as at no other time, have so many fundamental aspects of our living been placed under siege — and indeed all too many citadels are breaking down and crumbling around us.

Let us take initially one quite serious doctrine which is being threatened not alone in our own country but in practically every country in the world: the primacy of law and order, which is being dismissed by so many who resort to solve difficulty or imagined difficulty by means of violence.

Violence is fast becoming the accepted manner and way of achieving things — whether it be violence to the person (probably its most primitive form) or violence to the intellect (such as telling lies or half-truths) or violence to the spirit (to the very core of man’s living whereby he is robbed of hope, of belief in goodness and in the need for virtue, and ultimately of the fundamental belief in the existence of a Creator).

I might here hark back to my earlier remarks on the “Evil May Day Riots.” There was a case where a group of people believed they were suffering an injustice: they took exception to the number of immigrants allowed work in London, feeling (rightly or wrongly) that the said immigrants were cornering the good jobs, to the discomfiture and great annoyance of the indigenous workers.

I do not intend to discuss here the very tricky question of racialism, but I should like to use this as an example of a group determined, as they said themselves, to “settle it.”

The facts of the matter are well known; what I particularly want to bring out here is More’s absolute abhorrence of violence. The mob in this particular case would not be quelled — and it seems that all the officials could do was to try and contain it, and that only with great difficulty.

Unlike present-day rioting or disturbance, such behavior was regarded as seditious and almost inevitably led to summary execution after a very brief trial. On this occasion, when the rioters were still at fever pitch, someone shouted for More. I should like to quote from the famous chronicle play of Sir Thomas More because I think it conveys very well More’s reasoning as to why violence is simply useless. More sees that vio-

lence does not work, that it cannot work and that it never will work (I would not wish to deny that on a temporary basis it may give the impression that it can work, but More never had any time for temporary expedients). Here are the words of the play:

Yes — grant them removed, and grant that this your noise  
 Hath chid down all the majesty of England  
 And that you sit as kings in your desires,  
 Authority quite silenced by your brawl  
 And you in ruff of your opinions clothed.

What had you got? I'll tell you — you had taught  
 How insolence and strong hand should prevail,  
 How order should be quelled; *and by this pattern*  
*Not one of you should live an aged man,*  
 For other ruffians, as *their* fancies wrought,  
 With self-same hand, self reason and self right  
 Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes  
 Would feed on one another.

Whence does this philosophy of violence emanate? According to Thomas More, it is engendered in the home and at the hearth of each individual and extended from there.

Professor Howard Eugene Root of the University of Southampton caused quite a stir in London in 1978 when in a lecture on Thomas More he used the following words which convey very well what I wish to say at this point:

Simply to remember Thomas More is enough to humble any Man. (. . .) You could say that what we are admiring is just a noble spirit, who as it happens took certain religious matters rather too seriously. You know, just a little bit unbalanced. It would have been much happier if he had not made such a fuss about the royal supremacy, just accepted it. Then his life would have been spared, and think how much good he could have done, and what great influence still he might have exerted. But this is, is it not, only a variant of the common appeal to political expediency. What is the point in resigning from the Government, just because you disagree with this or that policy? Keep your job and then see how much more good you can do from inside instead of landing yourself outside. It's the kind of argument we hear time and time again in connection with politics, or with business, or even with the church and religion.

Don't take it all seriously. Life's too short. Accommodate yourself. A bit of realism now, a bit of compromise now, and you will be able to do all sorts of good things later on. The philosopher, Immanuel Kant, was fond of saying that mankind could not too often be reminded that there once lived a man called Socrates. And what he meant was that when everybody is saying "After all I've got to live," remember that Socrates said, "No, I haven't got to live; not if the price is too high." Thomas More's answer is the same, and we deceive ourselves if we think that he was just a very good man who,

unfortunately, was a bit fanatical. We must try no such evasion. But I think we must allow ourselves to be confronted and our faith judged by the witness of Thomas More. Our faith, if its foundations are secure, is not threatened by that witness but, it may, God willing, be cleansed and renewed and made more worthy.

Perhaps less violent in appearance but no less insidious is the great domestic problem of disunity and disharmony in the home. No one needs to be reminded that if the domestic, the household, affairs of a family are harmonious, the affairs of the state outside the realm of the household are equally so. A well ordered household, a properly established and ordered family unit, is the true basis of ordered society: whereas without that order, without the law of mutual understanding and felicity in domestic matters, only anarchy can be the result.

How then, in the light of the foregoing, can Thomas More be a man for our time?

From the very brief outline of the man's life and work it is, I suggest, patently clear that the great principles he stood for, the principles for which he lived and died, are not less relevant today than in his time — particularly the rejection of violence as a means to achieve lasting results.

A *propos* of household harmony, we are reminded of the application More made of scripture in his reference to situations pleasing to the Lord.

Brothers who co-operate with each other  
Neighbours who are friendly  
And a man and his wife who live in harmony.

However, I think the highlight of all the domestic activity in More's household, to which first Erasmus and then Roper testify, is More's even temper. Erasmus states that he lived in More's house for two years and never in that time saw More in a fume. This evidence fades into insignificance before the statement made by Roper that in his sixteen years of living in More's house he had never seen his father-in-law lose his temper. However, I would imagine that, despite More's gentle spirit, no member of that household was under any illusion as to who was the boss or who in the final analysis made the real and lasting decisions.

To revert to More and his application for our own day: his example would seem to propose less aggrandizement, closer liaison with our families, more even distribution of work, leisure and money — and perhaps less emphasis on the achievement of the temporal: it is of significance to note that More, a very able and successful careerist, lived what he preached, i.e. that when any matter relative to one's commercial prospects or career upsets or diminishes the great career and vocation of married life, then it is the commercial that is to suffer, not the household. In other words, More simply had his priorities right.

We should not think that More was joking when he considered going

out and chanting the *Ava Maria* in the streets with the members of his family in order to have something to eat. At the difficult time of his imprisonment More had no one to turn to: his wife did not understand the situation (it was far too much for almost any wife to understand), his daughter Margaret was unable fully to accept it (whether she understood it or not); and none of his great court colleagues would countenance his behavior at this time. 'The wrath of the King is Death': We have the very man known as Sir Thomas Elyot who in his famed book named the *Gouverneur* (written in 1531) defined friendship as 'a blessed and stable connexion of sondrie willes, making of two persons one in havinge and suffringe [sic],' speaking another language in a letter to Cromwell in 1536: 'I therefore beseech your good lordship now to lay apart the remembrance of the unity between me and Sir Thomas More which was but *usque ad aras* as in the proverb, considering that I was never so much addicted unto him as I was unto truth and fidelity towards my sovereign Lord as God is my judge.' The letter concludes with a request for a share in the lands of the suppressed monasteries.

Of course, the average Irishman is not a bloody-minded revolutionary; but he may be getting closer to it than he thinks. We are reminded here of something written by Professor A.F. Pollard, who has been described as the greatest historian of More's period:

Political movements are often as resistless as the tides of the ocean; they carry to fortune and they bear a ruin *the just and the unjust* with heedless impartiality. That political movements founded, activated and nurtured on violence can from past historical experience attain no satisfactory solution would seem indisputable; but anyone can ignore this — that is what free will is greatly about after all. What really matters is the growth of the materialistic knowledge coupled with the powers of destruction which such knowledge postulates.

And, finally, by way of a total view of what More really meant when he implied that if a man's domestic happiness is endangered by outside interests it is the latter which must give way, let us listen to what he had to say about prosperity:

But surely this worldly prosperity, wherein a man so rejoiceth and whereof the devil maketh him so proud, is but even a very short winter day. For we begin, many full poor and cold, and up we fly like an arrow that were shot up into the air; and yet when we suddenly shot up into the highest, ere we be well warm there, down we come into the cold ground again and then even there stick we still. And yet for the short while that we be upward and aloft, Lord! how brave and how proud we be buzzing above busily like as a bumble bee fieth about in summer, never aware that she shall die in winter. And so fare many of us, God help us. For the short winter day of worldly wealth and prosperity this flying arrow of the devil, this high spirit of pride, shot out of the devil's bow and piercing through out heart, beareth us up in

our affection aloft into the clouds, where we think we sit on the rainbow and overlook the world under us, accounting in the regard of our own glory such other poor souls as were peradventure wont to be our fellows, for foolish poor ants.

I realize that this great complex figure of history, this splendid lawyer and lawgiver, this happy homely, jolly, laughing person called More, this ageless symbol of all that a loving husband and father should be and about whom so much has been told, cannot be wrapped up in a few tidy quotations. All I can hope for from my remarks is that some facet of his rich personality may appeal to this audience, and that from such appeal may grow a curiosity to discover just what made this astonishing personality *a man for all seasons* and to learn what he is trying to tell us today.

Despite More's life long detestation of violence, or perhaps even because of it he himself succumbed to one of the most violent men of history when at nine o'clock on the morning of 6 July 1535 he laid his head on the block in response to the executioner's command, making the now historic statement: 'I am the King's good servant, but God's first.' I hope we can all say the same at the end.