

The Recusant Reputation of Thomas More

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There can be few here today who will not recognize the judgement that with the beheading of More and Fisher, “all learning felt the blow and shrank.” This memorable comment of Professor Chambers, whatever its deeper merits, at least serves to illuminate a long-neglected truth: that the death of Thomas More was not simply a religious and political event, but a momentous challenge to the English scholarly community. It divided it as the doctrines of Luther never threatened to do. It exacted from every scholar, whether he was confronted with the Oath of Supremacy or not, a decision on the rightness of the King’s policies. And it left both those who followed Henry and those who turned away with a need to justify to posterity the stand that they had taken. The attitude adopted by the vast majority of those who might be termed “English loyalists” was indicated by Professor Chambers on more than one occasion, and it is perhaps sufficiently well-known to need no further discussion. It is with the other group of “Roman loyalists” that we are concerned here.

Almost thirty years ago a French scholar, Mme Marie Delcourt, asserted in two articles which have found a fairly wide – if often unacknowledged – acceptance, that the recusant heirs of More distorted the facts of his life to meet the needs of their propaganda, and that this distortion had exercised undue influence on English scholarly opinion about More. At the same time she pointed to another “continental” tradition, stemming from the Basle edition of his works, the Froben *Lucubrationes* of 1563, in which More was presented simply as a humanist and reformer. The main point of contention between these two traditions, she asserted, was More’s relationship with Erasmus, that devious knight-errant of Reformation humanism, who at the height of Tridentine reaction was placed on the Roman Index, judged a heretic *primæ classic*. Here then is a challenge worth examining, but I do not propose simply to consider Mme Delcourt’s assertions. Behind these lies the more fundamental problem of the nature of the community which guarded the inheritance of Thomas More, of its learning and integrity, and of the degree to which we can rely upon its testimony about these momentous events at the very outset of the English Renaissance.

Traditionally, the study of “recusant history” begins in 1558. It is the wrong date, although it is easy to see why it is chosen. Recusant history actually begins with the death of the first martyrs, who were the first to refuse the Royal Supremacy. And the first phase of English recusant tradition is the work of the contemporaries of More and Fisher who went into exile under Edward, as their

more celebrated successors did under Elizabeth. I propose to spend most of my time discussing this group, who were responsible for preserving almost everything we know of More. They have not in fact received much attention, but some grasp of their history is essential if we are to understand both More's own position and the later development of recusant tradition.

To begin with, I think it is extremely doubtful that any of More's family or circle of friends really understood his attitude at the time of his trial and death. The correspondence of More himself points to this, as I shall argue shortly. Certainly the apparent failure of his daughter Margaret to grasp his stand is more eloquent than any other testimony. No one else so fully shared More's confidence, yet her recorded opinions are closer to her mother's views than they are to More's. She took the oath her father refused, and at a later date, she tried to hire the distinguished Protestant humanist, Roger Ascham, as tutor for her children.

At the same time, the sheer loyalty of the family to More's memory cannot be called in question. Margaret Roper gathered More's relics and letters with the same courageous obstinacy that drove Margaret Giggs to the relief of the imprisoned Carthusians. It is to this family resolve that we owe most of what we know about More. As the consequences of Henry's policies became more clear, we seem to see comprehension dawning among his descendants. Within a decade of his martyrdom, the family makes a conspicuous declaration of faith by its part in the "Plot of the Prebendaries" against Cranmer. Cranmer stood for the threat posed by the Royal Supremacy to the traditional Catholic doctrines of the church in England, and in 1544 More's son John, his surviving sons-in-law William Daunce and William Roper, along with such close associates of the Chelsea family circle as John Heywood, John Larke (the parish priest) and John Ireland, a family chaplain, were indicted for denying the Supremacy. And in the same trial were Stephen Gardiner's nephew, evidently the moving spirit of the plot, and the Oxford Greek scholar, John Bekinsaw.

The appearance of John Bekinsaw deserves comment, since it draws attention to an important segment of the scholarly community which in the later years of Henry's reign showed signs of serious discontent. We can do little more here than record names, but the list represents impressive scholarly weight. There is Richard Smith, DD, first Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, who fled to Louvain in 1549 and became first Chancellor of Douay. There is John Harpsfield, brother of More's biographer, like so many recusant scholars a product of Winchester and New College, who seems to have been lecturing on the King's foundation at Oxford as early as 1541. Another was George Etherige, who succeeded Harpsfield, it appears, when the King's College was refounded as Christ Church in 1546. He was eminent in many fields of study, including mathematics, Hebrew, Greek and medicine, and after being deprived in 1550. he was restored to his chair by Mary. Yet another eminent Oxford scholar of

markedly conservative religious views was John Morwen of Corpus Christi College. Reader in Greek in his College, he taught both John Jewel, the eminent Elizabethan divine, and Mary, daughter of the Ropers. He ended his career imprisoned by Elizabeth for preaching in favour of the Mass.

Cambridge, too, supplies such names from the very Colleges where the new learning flourished most. Among these, John Seton, DD, of St. John's College, chaplain to John Fisher, was the author of a standard work on logic and perhaps holds first place in later public reputation. He was an associate at St. John's of Thomas Watson, who held similar views on religion and was described by Ascham as "one of the best scholars that ever St. John's College bred." Watson was also an intimate of Cheke, Redman and Thomas Smith, and became a conspicuous Catholic controversialist, described by Pollard as "perhaps, after Tunstall and Pole, the greatest of Queen Mary's bishops." Another St. John's man, John Christopherson, was an original fellow of Trinity College by the King's foundation charter in 1546, and "one of the first revivers" of the study of Greek in the University. The college itself supported his exile under Edward VI, and in return received the dedication of his translation into Latin of Philo Judaeus, done at Louvain. He too became a Marian bishop, and so did Ralph Baynes, who might be taken to round out this picture of Cambridge recusant scholars. Baynes was famous as a public opponent of Latimer, and during his exile under Edward his learning was recognized with an appointment as Professor of Hebrew in the University of Paris. Finally, the greatest of them all, of course, was John Clements, the only Englishman who could wear the mantle of Linacre, the dean and inspiration of the entire Catholic scholarly community in exile.

Further pursuit of this subject would lead us far afield, although more names could be added to this list. Enough has been said, however, to make clear a first point, that this original recusant community recruited its members from the top rank of the English intelligentsia. They were men fortified with scholarship and common loyalty to the greatest man and scholar they had known, Thomas More. Unlike the later generation of recusant scholars, which includes the names of Nicholas Sander, Thomas Stapleton, and of Edmund Campion and Robert Parsons, they were all in their productive years under Henry's rule, and in the first period of Catholic exile under Edward VI they established the precedent and, to a large degree, the tradition of recusant learning and apologetic.

What was their version of the matter? The possible sources of information about this include accounts of More's death known to have issued from this group, biographies, and the great monument of their common enterprise, the Marian edition of More's *English Works*. Only the second and third of these can give us certain evidence. We are still much in the dark about the first accounts of More's martyrdom, and Professor de Vocht's complicated and highly conjectural reconstruction of the history of the *Expositio* and of its first cousin,

the *Ordo Condemnationis* seems to me to raise as many questions as it answers. There is no denying the intrinsic authority of the *Ordo*; the suggestion that its original author was William Rastell also seems to ring true. But the problems are legion, and not the least of them is the corollary that the later biographers of More, having Rastell's vastly more accurate and sophisticated account of More's trial on hand in their circle (is it conceivable that he would have sent his only copy to the Netherlands?) preferred the emasculated version of the *Expositio*.¹

We are on safer ground with the *English Works* and the two biographies written while the great edition was in preparation, those of Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield. The materials gathered in the *Works* seem to have been collected by the entire group and preserved principally by the final editor, William Rastell. His career in England, it should be recalled, flourished – as did that of John Clements – in the later years of Henry's rule. It is not difficult to imagine the growing concern of the group for this little archive. It was the bond of their common identity and the pledge of their loyalty to More, as they moved from initial bewilderment to a growing sense of unease and finally into exile in protest against the implications of the Royal Supremacy. Under Mary they had their opportunity to publish, and it took the form of an astonishingly compendious edition of those works which could most quickly be grasped by their fellow countrymen, those written in the vernacular. The edition of Latin works, aimed at the international world of learning, came later in less happy circumstances.

Rastell's Preface to Queen Mary would serve as the common preface to all recusant accounts of More. He is commended for his eloquence, great learning, moral virtue, and his 'trewe doctryne of Christes catholyke fayth'. Naturally, the editors were chiefly interested in More the martyr, the confuter of that very movement of heresy which by now had convulsed Europe and shattered Christendom. Did this lead them to distortion?

So far as is known, they omitted none of More's English works. In including even his occasional pieces, they provided one of his last recreations, an ironic poem on the dangers of a 'pedlar' meddling in theology which is remarkably in tune with the weary comment made by Erasmus on learning of More's imprisonment, that he wished More had left theology to the theologians. By confining the edition to English works Rastell had escaped the obligation of publishing most of More's non-apologetic and non-religious writing, scheduled for the later edition of Latin works. The English collection alone was a natural and legitimate answer to the vernacular propaganda of the government. The *Life* of Pico della Mirandola is thus the one interesting clue to More's earlier preoccupations with humanism and reform, in a work where the image of More

¹ I am informed by Mr. E. E. Reynolds that he intends to re-examine the evidence in a book to be published in the spring of 1964.

is predominantly one of great and militant orthodoxy based on profound piety and on humanism.

It is in the correspondence of this edition that we find first evidence of direct distortion. Almost all of the English letters of More which survive were in this collection, but there were significant omissions. John Palsgrave's letter, attributed to 1529, in which he appealed to More for assistance in the education of the Duke of Richmond against 'our shavyn folk who wold in no wyse he schoulde be lernyd,' is the first of these. As it is now among the State Papers, separate from the rest of the collection, it is conceivable that it was unknown to Rastell, and no certain importance can be attached to the omission.

More certain is Rastell's intent with two letters concerning the Nun of Kent, both omitted from the *English Works*. The first of these (Rogers, letter 192)² is More's letter to Elizabeth Barton herself, in which he made clear his refusal to hear anything "of princes or of the realme," reminded her of the part played by a Carthusian (alleged to have prophetic powers) in the treason of the Duke of Buckingham, and of the scandal so brought on religion, and exhorted her "onelye to common and talke with any person highe and low, of suche maner thinges as maye to the soule be profitable for you to shew and for them to know."

The second letter, (R. 197) from the text of which the first is taken, was written to Cromwell by More. Burnet's accusation that Rastell suppressed it was almost certainly correct. Here More states in explicit terms his distaste for "the lewde Nonne of Caunterburye" after the recent revelations about her career. He gives a characteristically judicious account of his relations with her, in which he quotes the previously-mentioned letter, explains his generally favourable impression, and congratulates Cromwell for exposing her deceit: "Wherin you have done, in my minde, to your greate laude and prayse, a verye meritorious deed in bringinge forthe to lighte suche detestable ypocrisie, wherebye eveyre other wretche maye take warninge, and be ferde to sett forthe theire owne devilshe dissimuled falshed, under the maner and colour of the wonderfull worke of God..."

Two other English letters are known which were not included by Rastell. The first of these, unknown until the 18th century, is a moving appeal by Lady More to Cromwell in May of 1535 for financial aid (R. 215). The second, which is found in the same manuscript collection in which the others used by Rastell are gathered (Royal M.S. 17 D. xiv) is her appeal a few months earlier to the King himself. Like the appeal to Cromwell, this letter to the King now seems to add to the pathos of the family's situation once More had been imprisoned. If Rastell suppressed it, it must presumably have been through desire to avoid publishing the heart of her plea for her husband's pardon: "his offence ys growen

² All references to More's correspondence are to the edition by E. F. Rogers, Princeton, 1947.

not of eny malice or obstinate mynde, but of suche a longe contynued and depe rooted scruple, as passethe his power to avoyde and put away...”

Although in absence of direct proof that Rastell knew of these letters we can only conjecture about their omission, there is at least a strong probability that he wished to avoid any suggestion that would show disharmony of opinion within the Catholic camp. This conjecture is confirmed by editorial changes which are susceptible of proof.

More’s letter of March 5th, 1534 (R. 198), in which he protested his innocence in the affair of the Nun to Henry VIII, was altered to replace his phrase, “the wykked woman of Canterbery” with “Nunne of Canterbury.” Even more extensively altered was the letter which he wrote to Cromwell on the same day, which is so invaluable for the history of his religious opinions. Once again his phrase, “wykked woman” was replaced by “the nonne.” But the most striking distortion is the omission of a long and, for the Catholics, embarrassing passage on Anne Boleyn. More has been protesting his incompetence to decide the grave matter of the King’s marital status, and continues (l. 191) “...so am I he that among other his Gracis faithfull subgiettis, his Highnes being in possession of his mariage and this noble woman really anoynted Quene, neither murmure at it, nor dispute uppon it, nor neuer did nor will, but with owt eny other maner medlyng of the mater among his other faithfull subgiettis faithfully pray to God for his Grace and hers both, long to lyve and well and theyr noble issue to, in such wise as may be to the pleasure of God, honor and surety to theym selfe, reste, peace, welth and profit unto this noble realme.” Rastell’s version of the same passage is as follow : “... so am I he, that among other his graces faithful subiectes, his highnes being in possession of his mariage, wit most hartely pray for the prosperous estate of his grace, longe to continue to the pleasure of God.” At the time of More’s writing, in March of 1534, Queen Catherine was of course still alive, and the Louvain group clearly found intolerable the apparent condoning of the second marriage, especially since Catherine of Aragon’s daughter, now Queen, was patroness of the edition they were preparing.

Finally, Rastell made a rather inconclusive attempt to explain away the important letter of More to Margaret Roper from the Tower. In this letter (R. 202) More refers unmistakably to the pain which her attempts to dissuade him from his stand on the Supremacy had caused him. Rastell added a preface explaining that her letter was secretly intended to ingratiate her with Cromwell, “that she might the rather get liberties to haue free resorte unto her father . . .” The letter to Alice Alington, however, indicates that Margaret Roper’s opinions went deeper than Rastell’s editorial comment suggested. Whether More or Margaret wrote this letter, it is clearly an eloquent testimony to the literary achievement of the whole More circle, and may have been intended to circulate in manuscript, exploring for the benefit of that group all the doubts which troubled them. Margaret Roper is represented in earnest and sorrowful

disagreement with her father, and the dialogue dwells at length on the objections which could be brought against More's views. The result is an eloquent apology in which More urges the right – and duty – of each to follow the dictates of his own conscience. He also hints at recent changes in the opinions of some he had formerly counted as supporters of his views, and for the last time, he refuses to divulge the exact reasons for his stand: "But Margaret, for what causes I refuse the othe, the thinge (as I haue often tolde you) I will neuer shewe you, neither you nor no body elles, excepte the Kynges Highnes shoulde like to commaunde me."³ Few documents even from the life of Thomas More can rival this for drama, when the confrontation of the two is presented with such skill, and More, who teasingly refers to his daughter as "mother Eve," learns from her that she had herself taken the oath which he refuses.

The fact that this letter was left intact, and the general faithfulness of the collection in Rastell's edition must be taken into account. There was no attempt to misrepresent More's general position; such partiality as can be detected seems intended to emphasize the solidarity of the group as a whole. Palsgrave's letter may have been suppressed to prevent an impression that More's support could be sought against the conservative clergy, and it is clear that they wished to exclude the evidence that he strongly disapproved of Elizabeth Barton's later activities and fully endorsed her arrest. But above all, it seems that they did not want it known that More's most intimate associates in the family circle itself could not understand his views on the Royal Supremacy.

Apart from this, Marian publication suggests that the repudiation of Erasmus and the attempt to dissociate More from him was a product primarily of the second exile and not of the period of revived Catholic power in England. Of the two biographies which complement the *English works*, that of Roper is so brief that we can overlook the omissions from More's early career. Harpsfield's work is more important, and although in his own account of More's education and marriage he makes no direct mention of More's literary work or of his relationship with Erasmus, he adds to Roper principally from the correspondence of the two men. After an outline of More's career the friendship is introduced, if only briefly, in connection with More's writings. The epigrams and the Brixius affair are also mentioned, because More is "herein slandered" by some Protestants, and the *Utopia* is said to bear "the pricke and price of all his other latine bookes of wittie invention." It is something, but it is not a great deal, although Harpsfield does say plainly, when speaking of More's classical scholarship, that "the said Erasmus of all men in the world [most] delighted in

³ In connection with the present conjecture about the real purpose of this letter, notice that More, in a circular letter at the time of his imprisonment, told his friends that he was forbidden to see anyone but his daughter Margaret, and referred them to her for information about his needs (Rodgers, letter 204).

the companie of Sir Thomas More, whose helpe and frendship he muche used when he had any affaires with kyng Henrye the eight.”

The best evidence that Harpsfield was not personally anti-Erasmian sheds light on the recusant tradition itself. His *Historia Ecclesiastica Anglicana*, written in the 1570's but not published until about fifty years later at Douay, was purged of an extended passage dealing with the friendship of Warham and Erasmus. In the course of a most complimentary account of Erasmus and his many friends and patrons in England, Harpsfield had mentioned by name, among others: Reginald Pole, Cuthbert Tunstall, John Fisher, William Mountjoy, and Thomas More himself, all men who for various reasons were heroes of the recusant tradition. The source of Harpsfield's account was evidently Warham's *Register* combined with published correspondence of Erasmus, and although his assertions were widely known to be true, they proved to be too much for the sensibilities of the Douay editors.

The most troublesome matter in Harpsfield's account is his claim that More counselled Erasmus to retract some of his early radical opinions, and to this we shall return shortly, since it becomes a firm conviction of the recusant tradition about More. In general Harpsfield's account of More the reformer, if perfunctory, is at least sufficiently honest not to detract too seriously from the high standard of the rest of his work. It is a distortion, but it is a distortion which reflects the shift in emphasis experienced by More himself under the impact of the reformation controversies. Harpsfield says of his hero: “He was the first of any layman in Englande that dyed a martyr for the defence and preservation of the unitie of the Catholike Churche. And that is his special peerelesse prerogative.” It could not be better put. What is really striking about the first recusant testimony emerging under Mary is not its evident bias, but its substantial integrity. Harpsfield is even candid about the secret divisions in the camp: he promises his treatise on the divorce to explain More's stand more fully, “because the Protestantes thinke it a great folye for him that he stoode in the matter. . . and many of the Catholikes doubt, for lacke of knowledge of the whole matter, and being somewhat abused with englishe bookes made for the defence of the newe mariage...” Harpsfield's temperate voice is that of More's own generation. Later recusants would be more strident.

To the second period of exile under Elizabeth we must now turn. The core of testimony produced by these writers is to be found in the Louvain edition of More's Latin works, the *Opera Omnia*, the biographies of “Ro: Ba:” and of Stapleton, and less centrally, in the writings of such Elizabethan controversialists as Nicholas Sander, Parsons and Campion.

The *Latina Opera* of More, first published in Louvain in 1565, bridges the two eras of recusant activity. The collection seems undoubtedly to come from the same common archive which supplied the *English Works*. William Rastell died, once more in exile, while the work was at the printers, and Professor Reed

suggested that the collection, especially the first printing of the Latin Richard III and pieces written by More in the Tower, was substantially his work also. At any rate, it came two years after a similar production, a collection of More's Latin works entitled simply *Lucubrationes*, which emerged from the Erasmian atmosphere of the Froben press at Basle. The Louvain *Opera* claimed to represent all the Latin works known to its editors. The *Lucubrationes* claimed to purge such works as it included from many errors in previous printings. The two books make a striking contrast.

Both editions printed the *Utopia* (with related correspondence), More's *Epigrams*, and the translations from Lucian. The *Opera Omnia* included beside these the Latin text of the Richard III, More's reply to Luther under the name of Rossaeus; other controversial work against Luther; the *Expositio Passionis Domini*, and the two accompanying Latin works written in prison – the "Quod pro fide mors fugienda non est" and the "Precatio ex Psalmis Collecta" – -like the Richard III both appearing for the first time. The *Lucubrationes* contained none of this last material, but included sixteen important letters, mostly of More and Erasmus.

The purpose of the *Lucubrationes* is obvious: it is to present the Erasmian, humanistic More. Everything it prints is printed accurately, with standards befitting Erasmus' publishers. This is most immediately apparent in comparing the *Epigrammata* here with the version in the *Latina Opera* from Louvain. Apart from questions of editorial bias, the Froben version is simply more accurate and sophisticated. Combined with the *Utopia* and with the Lucian translations, the Epigrams of More fully proclaim his early humanistic, reforming temper, and this is all of More that the reader of the *Lucubrationes* would have in the way of major pieces. To supplement them and drive home the point there are the sixteen letters tracing the relations between More and Erasmus. They make amply clear their close agreement on matters of religious and political reform, their shared love for salutary satire of contemporary decadence, More's hearty approval of the now-deplored New Testament, and their love of the Fathers. Above all, the collection includes the last two letters of More to Erasmus which shatter the recusant version of their relationship in the years after Luther. Before dealing with this important problem we should give a general account of the Louvain *Opera*.

Here the hand of the censor can be discovered at work as it was in the *English Works*. The text of the *Utopia* was purged of a famous and very characteristic anecdote concerning an ignorant friar at the table of Cardinal Morton. The epigrams were taken from the first and unrevised edition of 1518, and were also censored slightly. Although the recent editors of the epigrams concluded that the sponsors of the Louvain *Opera* were unaware of the 1520 edition, their purging cannot be explained simply on that supposition. From the

1518 text four “sexually indelicate” epigrams were omitted, as were three poems praising Erasmus’ edition of the New Testament. However, it was by no means bowdlerized. The Louvain printing included the six complimentary poems addressed by More to Henry VIII at the time of his coronation, and retained some fairly trenchant material attacking superstitious religious practice and ignorant, scandalous clergy. Similarly, More’s prefatory letter to the translations from Lucian, printed intact by both the Louvain and Basle editions, is a prime source for his approach to religious reform through sound scholarship and Lucianic satire.

The Louvain *Opera*, then, if slightly pruned, is hardly the propaganda vehicle it has been represented to be.⁴ The recusants, like the Basle editors, made their most telling points by discreet silence. For the former, it was silence about More’s Erasmianism; for the latter, silence about his deep piety and vigorous defence of Catholic orthodoxy. One particular charge made against the Louvain *Opera* by Mme. Delcourt must receive our attention, since it has not to my knowledge been commented upon elsewhere. Mme. Delcourt asserted that the editors separated More and Erasmus by suppressing evidence of their early common activity, representing the period to 1520 only by the *Utopia*, the *Epigrammata*, and the translations of Lucian. It is difficult to see what else could have been included, apart from correspondence. Moreover, apart from the rather minor deletions we have already noticed, these classic utterances of More’s evangelical and reforming humanism were published intact. Mme. Delcourt however wished to hold the editors of the *Opera Omnia* to the letter of their word. She therefore insisted that they should have included More’s Latin correspondence. She also asserted that in the Latin epitaph composed by More for himself, which the editors used to open the volume, she had evidence that they had deliberately suppressed important material proving that More’s support of Erasmus continued to their final years.

This accusation is worth examination, since it involves a matter we have touched on more than once already: the recusant tradition that More reproved Erasmus for his earlier extravagances, a charge which first appears in Harpsfield, and was first published by Stapleton in the *Tres Thomae*, where Stapleton adds that Erasmus destroyed the letter in question.

The case presented by Mme. Delcourt is as follows. The Epitaph, she claimed, was taken from a letter by More to Erasmus written in 1532, in which More went out of his way to praise Erasmus’ astonishing energy in the cause of a reformed and revitalized Christianity and said that he should disregard the

⁴ Notably by Mme Marie Delcourt: “L’amitié d’Erasmus et de More entre 1520 et 1535,” *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé* (Paris, 1936) and “Recherches sur Thomas More: la tradition continentale et la tradition anglaise,” *Humanisme et Renaissance*, III (1936).

criticism of the ignorant. If Erasmus had foreseen the troubles of the age, More asserts, he would no doubt have said the same things with more moderation. However, anyone objecting to his vigorous spirit will also find it difficult to justify the holiest doctors of the early Church, who themselves, like the Apostles and even Our Saviour, have been misinterpreted in the light of present difficulties.

Mme. Delcourt comments: "The editor, careful to efface everything which could recall the detested name [of Erasmus], printed the epitaph but not the letter, which was the more embarrassing to him in that it contained unreserved praise of Erasmus' works, and was written in 1532." It was, therefore, "une véritable fraude par omission." In her own phrase, "Que disent les textes?"

In the first place, the curious assumption that the editors of the Louvain *Opera* could have had no other conceivable access to the text of the famous Epitaph in Chelsea church deserves a passing comment. It is beyond belief that no member of the family in exile had private record of it. More important is the fact that the epitaph by itself forms an eminently suitable introduction to the edition, which the letter as a whole would not have done.

Mme. Delcourt, however, was apparently misled by the Louvain edition of Erasmus' works, the standard Clericus edition of 1720, in which the epitaph is indeed printed after the letter mentioned, but incorrectly. This letter of 1532 (later numbered 2659 in the Allen edition) contains nothing in the text referring to the Epitaph or to More's intention to send it. However the Epitaph is plainly explained in a letter belonging to the following year, 1533 (a letter numbered by Allen 2831). This is where Allen placed the Epitaph, following the indications of the text and the 16th century editions of More's letters. In this later letter of June, 1533, More discusses the Epitaph, but says nothing to Erasmus about his reform work or reputation. It is worth noticing, however, that in the Froben *Lucubrationes* which attracted Mme. Delcourt's admiration for its editorial accuracy, this matter also was handled correctly. Of this particular charge of editorial connivance, then, the Louvain editors can be cleared.

The more important problem remains. What were the relations of More and Erasmus in the years after 1520? The letter discussed by Mme. Delcourt is indeed a highly significant document, and suggests strongly that after the vexed and preoccupied years of More's battle against heresy and of his Chancellorship, he went out of his way to write his old friend a virtual testimonial to assist him in the severe attacks which were rained upon him from the conservative Catholic camp, as well as from the Protestant party. The second letter of June 1533 (Allen 2831) contains conspicuous assurance that Erasmus should feel free to publish the earlier one, with its warm endorsement of his reform activity. The ostensible occasion for the 1532 letter had been to provide Erasmus with accurate information about the circumstances of More's resignation from the Chancellorship. He carefully insists that it was his own doing, and that the King

had been reluctant to part with him, and assures Erasmus therefore that despite rumours that he had resigned against his own will and at the King's insistence, Erasmus need not for that reason hold back the earlier letter.

These two letters, the last we have from More to Erasmus, are the more interesting for the perfunctory exchanges between them after 1520 and up to this sudden break. What is the reason for the abrupt change? No doubt in part it was simply More's sudden release from the many worries which had consumed so much of his time and energy in those years; he was disposed to resume a valued link which suffered from neglect. It is not easy to avoid the feeling that the sparse correspondence of that period may also reveal a real estrangement between the two men who were reacting so differently to the challenge of the times. But probably the most important explanation is that noticed by Professor de Vocht: in a time of dangerous controversy, when every letter was prey to pirated publication, More and Erasmus and others in their circle were exchanging the important news verbally by those messengers whose reliability and responsibilities for verbal communication they so carefully note to one another.

All of this tends to reinforce the earlier suggestion that More's sudden return to the easy and fulsome communication of the earlier and happier days is intended to provide Erasmus with a public vindication from a most distinguished friend who was also known throughout Europe as a champion of Catholic orthodoxy.

What then, of the recusant tradition, common to Harpsfield and Stapleton, that More reproved Erasmus for his early indiscretions? Some additional light is shed by More's famous remarks about his friend Erasmus written in 1532 (in the same year of the letter we have been considering) in *The Confutation of Tyndales Aunswere*. More replies here to Tyndale's charge of partiality towards Erasmus "his derlyng," in that More had attacked Tyndale for substituting "congregation" for "church" in his translation of the New Testament, while he had been content to let Erasmus change *ecclesia* to *congregatio*. More's reply is worth considering in some detail. "I have not contended with Erasmus my derling, because I found no suche malicious entente with Erasmus my derling, as I fynde with Tyndall. For hadde I founde with Erasmus my derling the shrewde entent and purpose that I fynde in Tyndall: Erasmus my derlyng should be no more my derlyng. But I fynde in Erasmus my derlyng yt he detesteth and abhoreth the errours and heresies that Tyndall playnly teacheth and abideth by, and therefore Erasmus my derlyng shalbe my dere derlyng stil."

More then goes on to elaborate, touching on his own Erasmian writings, but especially considering the *Praise of Folly*, which he explains was to reprove faults and follies of people of every state, lay and spiritual. He denies that he, personally, ever intended to hold saints' images and relics as such "out of reverence." And the *Praise of Folly*, and like writings by implication, from the pens of both More and Erasmus, jest only at abuses of these practices. There

follows then a very significant remark: More regrets that the growth of heresy has been such, “that menne cannot almoste now speake of suche thynges in so much as a playe, but that suche evill hearers ware a great deale the worse...” (*Workes*, p. 422 F). And he concludes that he would himself burn his *Utopia*, or such like works, if there were any prospect of these now being translated into English, “rather then folke should (though through theyr own faut) take any harme of them, seyng that I se them likely in these dayes so to doe...” (423 A).

The general spirit of this passage is entirely in harmony with the letter which we summarized in which he endorses all of Erasmus’ work, with a caution about prudence in altered conditions. But his reply to Tyndale adds valuable information about his attitude to his own work, and elaborates his views about the changes which the appearance of Protestant heresy had wrought in the prevailing mood of Europe.

Now there is perhaps nothing here or in his letter to Erasmus which is strictly incompatible with the recusant tradition. In that same crucial letter of 1532 he does refer to Erasmus’ open admission that he had handled some points with too little restraint, and he indicates that Erasmus should defer to the sensibilities of critics who are sincere and learned, but who are scandalized by his freedom.

On the positive side, however, there is no evidence for the tradition except the general integrity of Harpsfield and Stapleton themselves. Their presumptive common source is John Harris, More’s secretary, who might be expected to have known if such a letter had once existed. It is Stapleton, the last voice of the More circle, who gives the most detail (*Vita Thomae Mori*, Coloniae Agrippinae, M. DC. XII, p. 192). He says that More urged Erasmus to follow the example of Saint Augustine in his *Retractationes*, and correct and explain his earlier views. When one thinks of the scale of effort required, it is not surprising that Erasmus ignored such advice, if it were ever given. Stapleton then goes on to say that Erasmus, who was as remote from the humility of Saint Augustine as he was from his doctrine, did not wish to do so, and would not permit the letter to survive.

For the present at least, the evidence ends here. Stapleton’s account of More is in general an impressive achievement, and his candour and lack of bitterness suggest a temperament above partisan bias. However, he was not above suppressing unpleasant truth. In his account of More’s trial, for example, he omitted More’s admission that he placed the authority of a General Council over that of a Pope.⁵ Similarly, Stapleton’s handling of More’s reply to Tyndale concerning the episode of “Erasmus his derlyng” (which begins the above account of the estrangement of the two men) does not inspire confidence.

⁵ Rogers, letter 199, 11. 260-262, and note.

Stapleton simplifies to the point of serious distortion, saying that where More could not excuse the fact of Erasmus' translation, he excused it because of its intent.

The truth is that by the time Stapleton was writing, the atmosphere was much more dogmatic. Stapleton is remarkably moderate beside the young men who were the shock troops of Counter-Reformation training. Toughened by the rigours of Elizabethan persecution, and armed by Trent with dogmatic certainties of which More and his contemporaries had no inkling, they rode roughshod through the tentative opinions and honest confusions of an earlier generation, confident that More's final stand had made him a martyr of Trent by anticipation. Thus, according to Nicholas Sander, More found the Nun of Kent without "any trace" of the fanaticism alleged against her.⁶ Robert Parsons, S.J., berated Erasmus with a severity which made impossible any accurate appraisal of More's career before 1520: "Whersoever Erasmus did but point with his finger, Luther rushed upon yt, where Erasmus did but doubt, Luther affirmed. So as upon Erasmus dubitations, Luther framed assertions and asseverations; And not only Luther and Lutherans, but all the pestilent sect of new Arrians in our dayes, began upon certayne doubtfull questions and interpretations of Erasmus, whether such, or such places of scriptures used against them by the auncient Fathers, were well applied, or no?" (*Three Conversions*, 1604, III, p. 307-308).

Parsons here proclaimed the standard post-Tridentine attitude to Erasmus, not heard before in England even under Mary. His colleague Edmund Campion aired similar views in his *Narratio Divortii Henrici VIII*. And here, I believe, we have reached the most serious deficiency in the recusant tradition about Thomas More.

The men and women whose task it was to preserve the memory and records of More's life were a remarkable group. They reflected the scholarship and devotion of their martyr hero, and were recruited from the most distinguished members of England's humanist community. The most striking quality of their achievement is the distinction of the biographies, and the invaluable and even heroic service to later generations represented by the *English Works* and the Louvain *Opera Omnia*.

Like historians in any age, they had their characteristic preoccupations. We cannot blame them for that, but we cannot ignore it either. What interested them was More the martyr-statesman, the great humanist who became the most widely-respected Englishman of his day and died for the tie with Rome, as proto-martyr of the English laity. In More the reformer they were less interested, and as the tide of Tridentine reaction swelled, they were tempted to ignore his early evangelical commitments almost entirely.

⁶ *De origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani* (Cologne, 1585), I, c. xv.

The charges of direct distortion which have been brought against them are not ultimately very serious, as we have seen. They were most guilty in trying to preserve the fiction of the retrospective unity of the group, especially where the Nun of Kent was involved. The mild pruning of the Latin *Opera Omnia* seems now more pathetic than culpable, and the general charge of editorial distortion is without foundation.

Their great failing – the distinctive failing, perhaps, of all sectarian scholarship – was *suppressio veri*. I am not myself too concerned at their failure to include More's Latin correspondence in the *Opera Omnia*, although it certainly belied the strict claim of their title: "Omnia, quæ huiusque ad manus nostras pervenerunt, Latina Opera." No one interested could fail to know of the many contemporary collections of humanistic correspondence where the letters of More could be found. The biographers, however, did a real disservice in separating More from Erasmus. The separation is not complete, and one might disagree with Mme. Delcourt that all More's biographers were "radically anti-Erasmanian." No final judgement can be made as yet about their claim that More urged Erasmus to make public emendation of his earlier and more impudent writings. But it is clear that they deliberately ignored what they must have known: that More and Erasmus before Luther were closely united in a common enterprise of evangelical reform based on humanism and Lucianic satire, that More never in his life retracted this commitment, however much he may have regretted some of its unforeseen consequences, and that in the final years of his life, he issued a striking endorsement of all that Erasmus had done. The whole meaning of his reply to Tyndale on this subject is that Erasmianism did not necessarily lead to heresy, and that in itself it was a highly salutary, if tragically unsuccessful attempt to awaken the Church to urgent reform.

The Protestants did no better. With their simplistic view that humanism led inevitably to Protestant reform, they were committed to the view that More was either inconsistent or a fanatical hypocrite or both. The Basle editors of the *Lucubrationes* stand as the only witnesses in that age for a truth about More and Erasmus as important as the Louvain assertion of More's indomitable orthodoxy, but it was a truth which was imperilled by the doctrinaire controversies of both Protestant and Catholic apologists. In both camps, men were inclined now to reinterpret the pre-Reformation reform movements to favour their own interest in those events, and to read into the debates before Luther the issues of their own day. For the recusants, it meant that More the reforming satirist was to be masked by More the champion of doctrinal purity, who gave salutary but futile warnings to his erstwhile friend, and died an isolated witness for Rome. At best it was only part of the truth, and in losing the rest, they lost much of the true greatness of More.