

RENAISSANCE NEWS

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Thomas More's 1518 Letter to the University of Oxford

BY T. S. K. SCOTT-CRAIG

IN the spring of 1518, the humanist and lawyer More was in Abingdon near Oxford, in attendance on his royal master, Henry VIII, the humanist prince. Since More was present in his capacity of Master of Requests or examiner of petitions, it is likely that he drew Henry's attention to the current attack on Hellenism in the University of Oxford, and wrote the following letter, more or less in the course of his duties. In any case, the whole tone of the letter which More composed to deal with the barbarians reflects the early Tudor situation at its best—a general humanistic critique of a church-dominated and intellectually backward society, combined with a very real sense of the interests of the State, through the monarch and his advisers, in a sound humanistic education for its future scholars, lawyers, and churchmen.

More begins with the ironic bow of a man of affairs to the world of

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teachers and dons, and proceeds to give a vivid picture of a recent piece of tomfoolery in the university, the activities of a faculty club called the Trojans or Anti-Hellenists, culminating in a scandalous university sermon. He then touches on the political scandal. The preacher, in order to buttress his argument against Hellenic studies, had preached from some British proverbs as his text; and one suspects that the humanist and Welshman Henry Tudor had not liked the implication that in order to be British, to be true to one's descent from Brutus and the line of Troy, one must be anti-Hellenic and anti-humanist.

The ecclesiastical scandal was also great; the preacher had abandoned the Scriptures for his text, and that in a penitential season and in a sacred building graced by the very presence of Christ on the altar. It was not as if the intent had been the lofty one of suggesting retreat from the world and even from the pursuit of knowledge; it had been meant to give counsel to scholarly men in the scholarly world, and its dismissal of Hellenic and humanistic studies was therefore not a spiritual discourse but an exhibition of at least three deadly sins—pride, envy, and sloth.

More than answers the main pedagogical scandal, that humanistic and Hellenic education is secular, by pointing out that Oxford is not in the first place meant to save souls or train clergymen clerically. Its chief purpose is humanistic, and that training also serves as the right preparation for careers in the law and in the church; and as a matter of fact the study of theology itself would be improved by a return to the method of the great dogmatic teachers of the West like Augustine, who saw in humanistic studies, including Greek studies, the mainstay of theological understanding. (There are striking parallels at this point to St. Augustine's *Christian Instruction*; see the translation by J. J. Gavigan in *Fathers of the Church*, vol. iv, esp. pp. 22,73,112-113.) But even if the preacher's argument were sound it was disgracefully immoderate on a matter which was pursued in the university with moderation. And the letter concludes by contrasting the very different attitude in the rival University of Cambridge, and threatens that the ecclesiastical and political authorities will have to take action unless the faculty comes to its senses.

My somewhat popular, but I trust not misleading, translation of the letter, was prepared at the request of Miss Elizabeth Nugent for inclusion in her almost completed volume of some seventy-five selections from Early Tudor Prose—illustrating the New Learning, The Law, the Sermon, and the History at this period. Some of the material has never been in print before; some indeed only recently discovered; and the texts are those of the earliest editions and best mss. My own version of More's letter is based on a photostat, which Miss Nugent kindly supplied,

of the 1633 edition of the Latin text. Since the translation was made, a somewhat eclectic text has been made generally available in Miss E. F. Rogers' edition of the *Correspondance*. But the 1633 text has virtues of its own, including the absence of paragraphing. At one point indeed, Miss Rogers' preference for a new paragraph (p.116,l.i.) where the 1633 edition has only a comma, seems to disturb the course of the argument.

Despite a well-embedded tradition to the contrary, there exists no modern English translation of the letter. What do exist are two extremely inadequate and inaccurate *abridgments*. The more influential has been that in Froude's *Life and Letters of Erasmus*, which appears still further abridged in Routh; but also influential has been that in Bridgett's *Blessed Thomas More*, employed apparently by Hollis and Sargent, and the source of the perplexing canard that in More's view the study of Greek would enable preachers to sing more agreeably. I would not claim that my version is a final one, but it may serve to make clear and interesting a vibrant communication that has been sadly treated by the exact scholars of the last few generations.

Thomas More, to the Most Reverend Fathers, the Vice-Chancellor, Proctors, and Faculty of the University of Oxford, Greetings:

I HAVE been wondering, gentlemen, whether I might be permitted to communicate to scholars of your distinction, certain conclusions to which I have recently come. Yet I have hesitated in approaching so brilliant a group, not so much on the ground of my style, as on that of seeming to give an exhibition of pride and arrogance. Who am I, the possessor of little prudence and less practice, a scholar of mediocre proportions, to arrogate to myself the right to advise you in anything? And how can I dare to offer advice in the field of letters especially, when any one of you is fitted by his wisdom and erudition to give advice in that field to thousands? At first sight, Venerable Fathers, I was therefore deterred by your unique wisdom. But, on second thought, I was encouraged; for it occurred to me that only ignorant and arrogant fools would disdain to give a man a hearing, and that the wiser and more learned you

were, the less likely you would be to think of yourselves or to scorn the advice of others. I was further emboldened by the thought that no one was ever harmed by just judges, such as you are above all, simply on the ground that he offered advice without thinking of the consequences. On the contrary, loyal and affectionate advice, even if imprudent, has always deserved praise and thanks. Finally, when I consider that, with God's help, I ought to offer you whatever slight learning I have acquired, since it was at your university that my education began, it seems the duty of a loyal friend not to pass over in silence what I deem it serviceable to bring to your attention. Since, then, the only danger in my putting pen to paper seemed to lie in the fact that a few might deem me too audacious, while I know that my silence would be condemned by many as ingratitude, I have preferred that the whole world should

condemn my audacity rather than that anyone should have the chance to say that I showed myself ungrateful to your university, the honor of which I feel myself bound to defend to the uttermost. Moreover, no situation has, I believe, arisen in recent years, which, if you desire to maintain the honor of that institution, more urgently requires your serious attention.

The matter is as follows. When I was in London recently, I rather frequently heard that some members of your faculty, either because they despised Greek, or were simply devoted to other disciplines, or most likely because they possessed a perverse sense of humor, had proceeded to form a society named after [those ancient enemies of the Greeks] the Trojans. The senior sage christened himself Priam; others called themselves Hector, Paris, and so forth; the idea, whether as a joke or a piece of anti-Greek academic politics, being to pour ridicule on those devoted to the study of Greek. And I hear that things have come to such a pass that no one can admit in public or private that he enjoys Greek, without being subjected to the jeers of these ludicrous "Trojans," who think Greek is a joke for the simple reason that they don't know what good literature is. To these modern "Trojans" applies the old saw [concerning the unsuccessful defenders of ancient Troy] "Trojans always learn too late."

The affair aroused much comment, all very critical; and I myself felt somewhat bitter that even a few academics among you had nothing better to do in their spare time than to cast slurs on their colleagues' subjects. But I kept in mind that one could not expect the whole crowd of academics to possess wisdom, temperance, and humility; and so I began to dismiss the matter as a triviality. However, since I have been here in Abingdon in attendance at the

court of His Victorious Majesty [Henry VIII] I have found that the silliness is developing into a form of insanity. For one of these "Trojans," a scholar in his own estimation, a wit of the first water in that of his friends, though a lunatic in that of anyone observing his actions, has chosen during Lent to babble in a sermon against not only Greek but Roman literature, and finally against all polite learning, liberally berating all the liberal arts. His whole performance was of a piece. Perhaps such a body of nonsense could not be preached on the basis of any sensible text; in any case, he followed neither the old custom of elucidating a whole passage of Scripture, nor the recent one of expounding some few words of Scripture; instead he elaborated on some stupid British proverbs. So I have no doubt that his frivolous sermon very deeply disturbed those who heard it; since I see that all who have heard fragmentary reports of it are unfavorably impressed. What man in the audience, in whose breast burned even a spark of Christianity, would not groan at this degradation of the royal office of Sacred Preaching, which gained the world for Christ—above all at the hands of those whose supreme duty it was to protect it with the authority of their office? Who could possibly have devised a more outrageous insult than for an avowed preacher, during the most solemn season of the Church's year, in the presence of a large Christian congregation, in the sanctuary itself, from the elevation of the pulpit (as it were from the throne of Christ), and in view of the Sacred Body of Christ, to turn a Lenten sermon into Bacchanalian ravings? What a look must have been on the faces of the audience, who had come to hear spiritual wisdom, and saw the pantomime this grinning ape put on in the pulpit! They had expected to listen in reverence to the Word of Life; when they departed,

all they could record they had heard was an attack on humane letters and a defamation of the preaching office by a fatuous preacher.

It would have been no reproach to secular learning if some good man, who had retired from the world to the monastic life, suddenly returned and used this speaker's phrases: "much in watchings, much in prayer" or "the path to be trod by those who seek for heaven," or "other matters, like humanistic education, trivial if not a positive hindrance to the spiritual life," or "simple country folk, and the unlettered, flying quicker to heaven" etc. etc. All this could have been borne from such a man. His simplicity would have been pardoned by his audience. They would have generously admitted his saintliness, and given serious consideration to his piety, devotion, and righteousness. But when they saw a man with the academic ermine over his shoulders, step on to the platform in the midst of a gathering composed solely of academics, and calmly proceed to rant against all humane learning, one would have had to be stone-blind not to notice a signal pride and wickedness, a positive hatred of the higher arts. Many must have wondered indeed how such a man could get the idea that he had to preach either about Latin of which he did not know much, or about the liberal arts of which he knew less, or about Greek—in which he could not even grunt that it was "all Greek" to him! If such an abundance of material had been supplied by the seven deadly sins, an altogether suitable theme for sermons, who would have believed him totally inexperienced therein! Though, as a matter of fact, what is it but [the deadly sin of] sloth, when one is in the habit of denouncing rather than of learning that of which one is ignorant? And what is it but [the deadly sin of] envy, when one defames those who

know what one deprecates but does not comprehend? And what is it but [the deadly sin of] supreme pride, when he wishes no kind of knowledge to be prized save what he has falsely persuaded himself that he knows, and when he even—not from modesty, as might be the case with other people—arrogates more praise to himself for his ignorance than for his knowledge?

Now as to the question of humanistic education being secular. No one has ever claimed that a man needed Greek and Latin, or indeed any education, in order to be saved. Still, this education which he calls secular does train the soul in virtue. In any event, few will question that humanistic education is the chief, almost the sole, reason why men come to Oxford; children can receive a good education at home from their mothers; all except cultivation and book-learning. Besides, not everyone who comes to you does so immediately to pursue theological studies. It is proper that some should also pursue law, in which case the wisdom that comes from the study of humane things is requisite; and in any case it is something not useless to theologues; without such study they might possibly preach a sermon acceptable to an academic group but they would certainly fail to reach the common man. Now, from whom could they acquire such skill better than from the [classical] poets, orators, and historians? Moreover, there are some who through knowledge of things natural [*i.e.* rational] construct a ladder by which to rise to the contemplation of things supernatural; they build a path to Theology through Philosophy and the Liberal Arts, which this man condemns as secular; they adorn the Queen of Heaven with the spoils of the Egyptians! This fellow declares that only theology should be studied; but if he admits even that, I don't see how he can accomplish his aim without some

knowledge of languages, whether Hebrew or Greek or Latin; unless, of course, the elegant gentleman has convinced himself that there is enough theology written in English or that all theology can be squeezed into the limits of those [late scholastic] "questions" which he likes to pose and answer, for which a modicum of Latin would, I admit, suffice. But really, I cannot admit that Theology, that august Queen of Heaven, can be thus confined. Does she not dwell and abide in Holy Scripture? Does she not pursue her pilgrim way through the cells of the holy Fathers: Augustine and Jerome; Ambrose and Cyprian; Chrysostom, Gregory, Basil and their like? The study of theology has been solidly based on these now despised expositors of fundamental truth during all the Christian centuries until the invention of these petty and meretricious "questions" which alone are today glibly tossed back and forth. Anyone who boasts that he can understand the works of the Fathers without an uncommon acquaintance with the languages of each and all of them will in his ignorance boast for a long time before the learned trust his judgment.

But if this stupid preacher pretends that he was not condemning humanistic education in general but only an immoderate thirst for it, I can't see that this desire was such a sin that he had to deal with it in a public assembly, as if it were causing society to rush headlong to ruin. I haven't heard that many have gone so far in such studies that they will soon be overstepping the golden mean. Further, this fellow, just to show how immoderate *he* could be in a sermon, specifically called students of Greek, "heretics"; teachers of Greek, "chief devils"; and pupils in Greek, "lesser devils" or more modestly and facetiously as he thought "little *devils*"; and the zeal of this holy man drove him to call by the name of devil one whom

everybody knows the Devil Himself could hardly bear to see occupy a pulpit. He did everything but name that one [Erasmus], as everybody realized just as clearly as they realized the folly of the speaker.

Joking aside—I have no desire to pose as the sole defender of Greek learning; for I know how obvious it must be to scholars of your eminence that the study of Greek is tried and true. To whom is it *not* obvious that to the Greeks we owe all our precision, in the liberal arts generally and in theology particularly; for the Greeks either made the great discoveries themselves or passed them on as part of their heritage. Take philosophy, for example. If you leave out Cicero and Seneca, the Romans either wrote their philosophy in Greek or translated it from Greek. I need hardly mention that the New Testament is in Greek, or that the best New Testament scholars were Greeks and wrote in Greek. I am but repeating the consensus of scholarship when I say: however much was translated of old from Greek, and however much more has been recently and better translated, not half of Greek learning has yet been made available to the West; and, however good the translations have been, the text of the original still remains a surer and more convincing presentation. For that very reason all the Doctors of the Latin Church—Jerome, Augustine, Bede and a host of others—assiduously gave themselves to learning Greek; and even though many works had already been translated, they were much more accustomed to reading them in the original than are many of our contemporaries who claim to be erudite; nor did they merely learn it themselves, but counselled those among their successors who wanted to be theologians above all to do the same.

So it is not as if I were just giving your Worships good advice about pre-

serving the study of Greek. I am rather exhorting you to do your duty. You should not allow anyone in your university to be frightened away from the study of Greek, either by public assemblies or private inanities, since Greek is a subject required in every place of learning by the Church Universal. Common sense is surely enough to convince you, that not all of your number who give themselves to the study of Greek can be blockheads; in fact, it is in part from these studies that your university has acquired its pedagogical prestige both at home and abroad. There seems to be an increasing number of cases where Oxford has benefited from the presence of men nominally studying Greek only, but really taking the whole liberal arts course. It will be a wonder if their enthusiasm for you does not evaporate when they realize that so serious an enterprise is held in such contempt. Just think, too, what they are doing at Cambridge, which you have always outshone; those who are *not* studying Greek are so moved by common interest in their university that they are actually making large individual contributions to the salary of the Greek professor!

You see what I mean; and much more could be said to the point by men with better minds than mine. All I am doing is warning you of what others are saying and thinking, not telling you what it behooves you to do. You see much better than I that, if wicked factions are not suppressed at birth, a contagious disease will spread, and the better half be slowly absorbed by the worse, and that outsiders will be forced to take a hand in helping the good and wise among you. Any former student of the university takes its welfare as much to heart as you who are its living members. And I am sure that the Reverend Father in Christ who occupies the See of Canterbury [Warham], who is the Primate of

all our Clergy and who is also the Chancellor of your University, will not fail to do his part. Whether for the clergy's sake or yours, he rightly feels interested in preventing the decay of learning; and learning will perish if the university continues to suffer from the contentions of lazy idiots, and the liberal arts are allowed to be made sport of with impunity. And what about the Reverend Father in Christ, the Cardinal of York [Wolsey], who is both a patron of learning and himself the most learned of the episcopate? Would he endure patiently if aspersions be cast in your university on the liberal arts and the study of languages? Will he not rather aim the shafts of his learning, virtue, and authority at these witless detractors from the arts? Last but not least: what of our Most Christian King? His Sacred Majesty has cultivated all the liberal arts as much as ever king did; indeed, he possesses greater erudition and judgment than any previous monarch. Will his wisdom and piety suffer him to allow the liberal arts to fail—through the interests of evil and lazy men—in a place where his most illustrious ancestors wished that there be an illustrious seat of letters, a place which is an ancient nursery of learning whose products have been an ornament not only to England but to the whole Church, a place which possesses so many colleges that have perpetual endowments specially designated for the support of students (in which respect there is no university outside the kingdom that can compare with Oxford), a place in which the aim of all its colleges and the purpose of all its endowments is none other than that a great body of academics, delivered from the necessity of earning their daily bread, might there pursue the liberal arts?

I have no doubt that you yourselves will easily in your wisdom find a way to end this dispute and quiet these stupid

factions, that you will see to it not only that all the liberal arts may be free from derision and contempt but that they shall be held in dignity and honor. By such diligence in intellectual pursuits you will reap benefit for yourselves; and it can hardly be said how much you will gain favor with our Illustrious Prince and with the above-mentioned Reverend Fathers in Christ. You will forge an almost miraculous bond be-

tween yourselves and myself, who have thought that all this had to be written now in my own hand out of my deep personal affection for you. You know that my services are at the disposal of each and all of you. May God preserve your glorious seat of learning unharmed; and may He grant that it flourish continually in virtue and in all the liberal arts.

29th March [1518]

Library News

ACQUISITIONS

BRITISH MUSEUM

Ms., Register of Glastonbury Abbey (14th and 15th cent.).

Ms., Account Book of Sir John Howard, afterwards the first Duke of Norfolk (1462-1469).

Richard Spicer, *Oration to Queen Elizabeth at Sandwich*, 1573 (the second part, the first having been acquired earlier).

(Anon), *Certain questions demanded and asked by the Noble Realme of England* 1555 (probably printed at Zurich, a Protestant piece, very rare).

Pope Sixtus V, Proclamation issued and printed in anticipation of the success of the Armada.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Among the more important recent additions to the rare book division are the following items, reported at some length in the Quart. Journ. of Curr. Acqu. for May 1948.

Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection.

Jacobus de Cessolis. *The game and playe of the Chesse*. [Bruges: William Caxton, after 31 March 1474.]

Boethius. *De consolacione philosophie*, Geoffrey Chaucer's translation. [Westminster] William Cax-

ton [about 1478]. Sir Thomas Brooke's copy.

Ranulphus Higden. *Polychronicon*. [Westminster] William Caxton [after 2 July 1482]

John Gower. *Confessio amantis*. Westminster: William Caxton, 2 September '1493' [i.e. 1483]

Joannes von Hildesheim. *The moost excellent treatise of the thre kynges of Coleyne*. London: Wynkyn de Worde [after July 1499] Only perfect copy known.

Helyas, The Knyght of the Swanne. London: Wynkyn de Worde, 6 February 1512. Robert Hoe's copy.
Bidpai. *The Morall Philosophie of Doni* . . . London: Henry Denham, 1570.

Christopher Saxton. *Survey of England and Wales*. [London] 1579. Only known copy on vellum.

Psalterium cum Canticis. [Lyons: Guillaume Le Roy, about 1486] Possibly a unique copy.

L'Art de Bien Vivre: et de Bien Mourir. Paris: [Antoine Vérard for] André Bocard, 12 February '1453' [probably 1493/94] C. W. Dyson Perrins' copy, one of only four known to be in existence.

Pierre Gringore. *Le Chasteau de labour*. Paris: Jean Trepperel [about