

THE SURVIVAL OF BLESSED THOMAS MORE

ONE of the noteworthy features of our time is the revival of interest in the life and letters of Blessed Thomas More.

These two new *Lives* of the Beatus are added evidence of this interest, and of its universal character. The one¹ is by a non-Catholic Englishwoman, who is a scholar of the University of Oxford, the other² is by a Catholic American, who is a member of the English Faculty at Harvard.

Though there are already (we are told by Miss Routh) twenty-four English *Lives* of More of different periods, one could not spare either of these new volumes. Of a truth, as Dame Elizabeth Wordsworth is here reported to have said, Sir Thomas More is one of the figures of abiding interest in History.

This multiplication of *Lives* of Thomas More goes with the reproduction of his English works in the elegant edition that is in course of publication by Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode under the general editorship of W. E. Campbell, with the co-operation of Professor A. W. Read, Professor R. W. Chambers and Mr. W. A. Doyle Davidson: a notable constellation of Catholic and non-Catholic scholars. The publication in this series of Harpsfield's *Life of Thomas More* has given us, from the pen of Professor Chambers, an enduring essay 'On the Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School,' the main thesis of which may be said to be that the English of Alfred survived as a literary language, during the centuries when French and Latin were the official languages of Law and Government, through the religious writings of Englishmen who wrote on mystical subjects for the use of English communities of religious women. To these men, says Professor

¹ *Sir Thomas More and His Friends*. By E. M. G. Routh. (Oxford University Press; 15/- net.)

² *Thomas More*. By Daniel Sargent. (Sheed & Ward; 7/6 net.)

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Chambers, 'English was the language of instinctive and passionate utterance Our English prose has been handed down to Tudor times from the days of King Alfred and Abbot Aelfric, not by Clerks working in the Royal Chancery, but through books originally written to be read in lonely anchor-holds or quiet nunneries.' In this tradition of writing were the English works of Blessed Thomas More who, in the judgment of Professor Chambers, is entitled to be called the Father of modern English prose.³

And yet the achievement of Blessed Thomas More, as a master of English (and also of Latin) prose, is perhaps the least of his many titles to fame and admiration. Beyond his interest in literature lay a deeper interest in practical and speculative philosophy and theology. And beyond all these things lay the spirit of contemplation and his love of God. The learning that he had in the Fathers is self-confessed and is recorded by Miss Routh and by Mr. Sargent in many passages: 'He had studied deeply the works of the early Fathers; he could illustrate and enforce a point by apt quotation from Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, Cyril, Hilary, Bernard or Gerson; he was familiar also with the arguments of scholastic writers, and Stapleton, himself a practised theologian, was astonished by his knowledge and almost professional accuracy in theological subjects.' So Miss Routh, and Mr. Sargent adds, 'Although he is not usually thought of as a Thomistic theologian, he knew St. Thomas Aquinas so well that it is said when he heard the argument of some opponent he would comment "That is merely the objection which St. Thomas at such and such a chapter quotes in order to refute it."' The original passage is in Stapleton: 'The arguments which this villain has set forth are the objections which St. Thomas puts to himself in such and such a question and article of the *Secunda Secundae*, but

³ One may note in passing the arresting statement of Professor Heinrich Brunner that since the time of the Tudors there has been a progressive decline in the language of the English Statutes.

the rogue keeps back the good Doctor's solution.⁴

The acquaintance that Blessed Thomas More had with the *Secunda Pars* appears most clearly in those passages of the *Utopia* that have to do with the institution of private property. Against the advocacy of Hythloday in favour of communism Blessed Thomas More in his own name opposes a plain paraphrase of the arguments that are used by St. Thomas Aquinas in favour of private property; 'For how can there be abundance of goods or of anything where everyman withdraweth his hand from labour? Whome the regard of his owne gaines driveth not to work, but the hope that he hath in other mens travayles maketh him slowthfull. Then when they be pricked with povertye, and yet no man can by any lawe or right defend that for his owne, which he hath gotten with the labour of his owne handes, shal not there of necessitie be continual sedition and blodshed? speciallye the authority and reverence of magistrates beinge taken awaye, whiche, what place it maye have with such men amonge whome is no difference, I cannot devise.'

The institution of property is based upon the rational and social nature of man, and the necessities of Natural Law. In defending the philosophy of St. Thomas against the assaults of Luther and his successors, Thomas More was defending also 'the good character of natural man.' From the social and political point of view the deepest tragedy of the Reformation has been in the denial of this good character; in the denial of the tie of friendship that is native to mankind '*ac si omnis homo omni homini esset familiaris et amicus*'; in the contrary affirmation of the radical degradation of human nature and of the enmity that is proper

⁴ Henry VIII had also been inclined to be a Thomist in Philosophy. His Defence of the Seven Sacraments against Luther was in line with the teaching of St. Thomas. Luther read the book and fell into a fury. In his own genial way he called Henry 'a nit that had not yet turned into a louse, a hog's excrement thrown on the Thomistical dung-hill.' Since Henry could not with dignity reply to such an attack, Thomas More was asked to take up, and did, under the pen-name of Rossaeus, take up the defence of the King.

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to the relations between men and States. Thus Luther; thus Hobbes, and all their successors who affirm the existence in the natural order of a state of warfare between individuals or between classes or peoples. It was perhaps to be expected that a living professor of Jurisprudence of this tradition in an English University should have formally stated only the other day that the medieval notion of Natural Law is 'an idea that has long ago had its brains knocked out.'

This loss of the idea of Natural Law is perhaps the greatest loss that the Reformation brought us in the purely intellectual and moral order. The Canonists, who peopled the Chancery in the days when Thomas More was Lord Chancellor, were all of them exponents of the theory of Natural Law that was common to St. Thomas and to his disciple Franciscus de Vittoria at Salamanca: and, among English lawyers, to Bracton and Fortescue and Thomas More. The most characteristic act of Henry VIII when he broke with the Church was to forbid the teaching of Canon Law at the English Universities.⁵ The expulsion of the Canonists meant the introduction of the Civilians. And the Civilians were ready to exalt the King and in later days the State to a divine status. In this exaltation of the governing Authority the idea of Natural Law, which would have restrained the sovereignty of King or Parliament, inevitably perished.

The life and death of Thomas More are witness to the principle of limitation of the power of King or of Parliament, and the writings and the judgments of a constellation of Catholic and non-Catholic historians and lawyers in our own time have led to a reaffirmation of the principles of Natural and Divine Law for which he lived and died. There is room for the mention only of a few names and of names taken almost at haphazard: the names of Maitland and of Holdsworth, and (in an odd combination) of Lord Birkenhead and Lord Justice Slesser, of Professor Ernest Barker

⁵ The act of Henry has, we understand, been undone at the University of Oxford during the current year.

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and of James Brown Scott. To these names let there be added in honour the name of Lord Campbell, who, protesting his Protestantism, wrote in his Lives of the Lord Chancellors, of the death of his predecessor in office, Blessed Thomas More: 'After three centuries . . . we must still regard his murder as the blackest crime that ever has been perpetrated in England under the forms of law'; and Sir Thomas Macintosh who added, 'No such culprit as More had stood at any European Bar for a thousand years: the condemnation of Socrates is the only parallel in History.'

All these and others like them have wittingly or unwittingly conspired to restore to English Law and Politics those conceptions of Right and Justice that Thomas More inherited from the great philosophers of the Middle Ages. They are all members of the Open Conspiracy that exists everywhere among men and women of good-will to establish or, more properly, to re-establish the fame of Blessed Thomas More and the philosophy in which he lived and died. In the preface to her delightful volume Miss Routh tells us that Dame Elizabeth Wordsworth wrote to her, 'I am glad that you are going on with Sir Thomas More. I hardly want you to finish it just yet, for I know how dreadfully you will miss him when you have done.'

Has Miss Routh done with the Blessed Thomas? Has Professor Chambers done with him? Or any of the great non-Catholic scholars who for our good have employed themselves in his service? One may hope that some, even that all of them, may at the end of their labours find him again and forever in the company of his friends and in the Communion of One in Whose love he strove to live and for the love of Whom he merrily died.

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