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**English Historians' Treatments of Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher
in the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries**

by

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Abstract

The sixteenth-century personages of Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher have repeatedly appeared as significant figures in historical works. Theirs was a didactic role, with sixteenth-century authors using them as examples of Christian conduct, either virtuous or immoral. Nineteenth-century historians preferred to address the wisdom of More's and Fisher's decisions to oppose the will of the state. In both cases, the religious affiliations of the authors influenced the way in which they perceived More's and Fisher's moral roles.

This thesis provides an historiographical analysis of the ways in which the two groups of writers diverged and corresponded in their assessments of More's and Fisher's respective functions as historical figures. It also takes into account two major historical trends; the changes in the art of biography felt in the sixteenth century and the whig interpretation of history dominant in the nineteenth. The increased secularization of the biographical literary form led to the creation of Roman Catholic hagiographies of More and Fisher which were distinctive in their combination of mundane factual material with religiously-inspired interpretations. Protestant writers were also affected in that they were obliged to acknowledge More's and Fisher's learning and intellectual gifts, and were no longer able to dismiss them as superstitious papists. The images of More and Fisher, as created by these biographies, were used by nineteenth-century historians to persuasively convey

moral lessons. Although the images remained constant, the functions were altered to include the teaching of honourable conduct as well as dramatic illustrations of the tyrannical power of the monarch.

Although differing from one another in certain aspects, these writers all converged in their didactic treatment of More and Fisher. Regardless of political or religious persuasion, they all employed the two as examples in an attempt to provoke meritorious conduct in their readers. In their approaches to and uses of Thomas More and John Fisher, historians of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, despite their disparate agenda, remained remarkably close in their basic attitudes towards the two men.

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Introduction

Among the colourful figures of Tudor history, few loom larger than Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher. These two, executed for treason in 1535, were influential during their lives and their legacies remained long after their deaths. Thomas More was, in his time, a successful lawyer, humanist scholar, politician, Lord Chancellor, and friend to King Henry VIII, while John Fisher, a humanist scholar as well, was also Chancellor of Cambridge University for most of his adult life, chaplain to Lady Margaret Beaufort, and Bishop of Rochester. Their productive lives were cut short by their convictions for treason upon their refusal to take the Oath of Supremacy and acknowledge Henry VIII as the rightful head of the English Church.

Through the centuries since their deaths, More and Fisher have been the subjects of much controversy. Many historians simply did not know what to make of two extraordinarily learned men who suffered beheading rather than swear an oath which the rest of the country had largely accepted. In general, the reactions to More's and Fisher's intransigence were divided along religious lines, with Catholic writers upholding them as martyrs, while Protestant authors deplored the bad decisions made by otherwise intelligent men. In the sixteenth century, while More and Fisher became direct examples of conduct and behaviour, either good or bad, depending on one's denomination, many writers, rising above religion, admired these intelligent men who preferred death to a

compromising of their beliefs. As such, their stories had moral value and were thus worth recording. Some three hundred years later, nineteenth-century English historians took a very similar view of the issue, judging the two on the political aspects of their decision to stand against a process that played a large role in the establishment of their own nation-state. Overall, an exploration of the attitudes of writers towards More and Fisher in both the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals the constancy of their reputations despite the changes wrought in the study and use of history.

The choice of these two periods demands explanation. The sixteenth century saw the genesis of the legends of More and Fisher, for the books written about them in this period established the base upon which all subsequent research was done. Furthermore, the images of More and Fisher created in these first works affected to a very great degree the work of later centuries.

The nineteenth century was an equally formative period in English historiography. In this case, the nineteenth century shall be extended up to the eve of the First World War, for many books written in those fourteen years owed much to the old century. With the boundless confidence of the whig historians, the influence of Ranke, and the ongoing tension between Protestant and Catholic, history in the 1800s was a dynamic, significant study, in which More and Fisher played no small part.

The discipline of history, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries carried as one of its primary qualities a powerful didacticism. The study of the past taught people how to live better, more virtuous lives. In the sixteenth century, this was accomplished through the chronicling of the lives of successful, powerful people who reached their high stations without compromising their Christian ethics.¹ Nineteenth-century historians possessed the same desire for subtly different ends; instead of teaching religious ethics alone, they hoped to strengthen the administration skills as well as the moral backbone of students who would later enter the government and bureaucracy.²

The sixteenth century saw a large amount of material written on More and Fisher, from both the Catholic and Protestant viewpoints. By the century's end, four Catholic writers had completed biographies of More and one biography had been collectively authored about Fisher. In addition, three major Protestant chroniclers had mentioned the two in their works.

The two genres of works listed above, biographies and chronicles, changed greatly in the sixteenth century under the influence of the Renaissance. Although each experienced alterations peculiar to its type, both were deeply affected by that doctrine of humanistic scholarship which taught that history was an important subject of study, for it provided examples of practical virtuous

¹ F.J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Martino: The Huntingdon Press, 1967) pp. 35, ix.

² Joseph Hamburger, *Macaulay and the Whig Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) pp. 104-105.

living in the secular world. History taught that it was indeed possible for a person to lead a Christian, relatively sinless life outside the walls of an ecclesiastical institution.³

The sixteenth century was a time of great religious upheaval and uncertainty, as Protestantism struggled to establish itself, while Catholicism reacted defensively against this greatest challenge to its monopoly of the souls of Europe. As such illustrious men as Thomas More and John Fisher were among the first to accept death rather than compromise their beliefs, they quickly became symbols for both Catholics and Protestants. To Catholics, they were shining recipients of the grace of the Almighty and to Protestants, curious enigmas, to be admired for their learning and erudition but despised because of their religion. In either case, More and Fisher brought out the passion and fervour people felt about their religion.

The nature of learning and scholarship also changed during the century and in this area as well, a study of More and Fisher provides enlightenment. History had established a niche for itself as a set of examples of good and bad conduct, and the stories of More and Fisher seemed tailor-made for such a purpose. They could either be men worthy of emulation or serve as examples of otherwise decent men led astray by a false faith. It depended on the writers', and readers', religious persuasion.

³ Levy, *Tudor Thought*, p. 35.

Bridging the chasm of three hundred years would prove a difficult undertaking were it not for the common attitudes of historians towards More and Fisher. Although the reasons for historians' interest in the two changed with the passage of time, the reputations established in the sixteenth century held true all through the nineteenth. Catholics still regarded More and Fisher as worthy of sainthood, while most Protestants thought that their zeal had been misplaced.

One of the most pervasive influences on nineteenth-century history writing was the whig interpretation of the past. This type of historical analysis was characterized chiefly by the notion of progress, the belief that the inexorable passage of time brought humanity closer to achieving the ideal society, the nineteenth-century nation-state. Whig historians tended to be an overwhelmingly optimistic and confident lot, for they were firmly convinced that the whole story of the English past was a smooth ascent from the primordial ooze to their great Empire. The British were constantly improving themselves, century after century, as their government and society evolved towards the climax of Victoria's reign.⁴

One of the most important events in this process was the English Reformation. According to whig historians, Henry VIII's removal of England from the Roman Catholic communion was a great stride forward in the evolution

⁴ H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell, 1959) pp. 14, 12.

of humanity. It not only brought England out from under the shadow of the papacy and into a more enlightened time in which the country controlled its own religious destiny, but also established one of the cornerstones of nineteenth-century culture. For this reason alone, the whig historians revered the Reformation.⁵

Although the whig interpretation of history retained its dominance throughout the 1800s, there existed an undercurrent of thought which adopted quite the opposite tack on the Reformation. The Tory view held that the medieval period was a golden age, with benevolent feudal kings ruling the land and the shepherds of the Catholic Church gently keeping its flocks in line. To these writers, the sixteenth century was a time of tragedy, as a rapacious Henry VIII ripped England from the bosom of the Pope and destroyed the monasteries, the havens of those most devoted to God. Needless to say, the Roman Catholic Church of the nineteenth century was extremely sympathetic to this line of thinking and ecclesiastical writers accounted for much of the work following this philosophy.⁶

In the mid-nineteenth century, the historical discipline underwent a remarkable change. Before 1850, history was not a professional academic discipline; the men who investigated the past came from other walks of life and

⁵ Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (London: Methuen, 1986) pp. 56.

⁶ J. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 240-41.

thus wrote as amateurs. To early Victorians, the purpose of a study of the past was to gain in moral fibre from the lessons to be found therein. This being the case, a good early-Victorian historian was a learned man of unimpeachable character, who could, through vivid and lively prose, outline for his reader the past's examples of upright, virtuous living.⁷ Even the professional historians of the later 1800s took great care to ensure that their research did not undermine the teaching value of their subject.⁸

In this century, More and Fisher served a purpose similar to their roles in the sixteenth, for their lives became once again the focus of considerable attention from historians. More's and Fisher's decisions to oppose the supremacy were analyzed in a political light, their strengths and weaknesses laid out for the edification of future policy-makers.

The similarities between the attitudes towards More and Fisher in the two centuries is an intriguing phenomenon. In both the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, More and Fisher fulfilled the same roles as examples for moral and practical education. Only the motives changed; from the sixteenth-century desires to portray lives worthy of emulation or to illustrate the tragedy of learned men gone wrong, to the nineteenth-century need to illuminate the dramatic consequences of ill- or well- considered decisions.

⁷ T.W. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982) pp. 126-131.

⁸ Heyck, *Transformation*, pp. 143-45.

Chapter One

The Lives of More and Fisher

1.1 Sir Thomas More

In order to investigate the effects of the deaths of More and Fisher, it is necessary to first briefly examine their lives. Thomas More lived in the reign of Henry VIII and was immortalized in the reigns of that monarch's children. More was born on 7 February, most likely in 1478,⁹ at London, the son of Justice John More and his wife Agnes.¹⁰

Young More was sent by his father to St. Anthony's School for a solid grounding in the liberal arts which formed the core of education in the fifteenth century. Here he learned the *trivium*, the first three of the seven liberal subjects: Latin grammar, logic, and rhetoric. This early education developed some of More's greatest talents; his facility with language, both Latin and English, and his outstanding skill at oratory and debate.¹¹

About 1490, John More secured for his son, now around twelve years old, a place in the household of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Chancellor, and later Cardinal. It was the time in the Archbishop's house that

⁹ More's father was unclear as to the exact date of the birth of his son.

¹⁰ Anthony Kenny, *Thomas More* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) p. 6.

¹¹ Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1984) pp. 15-16.

awakened in More the intense religious feeling which played such a large role throughout his life. Worshipping in the great Canterbury Cathedral, surrounded by the feast for the senses that was the Mass, More embraced the Catholic Church with his all heart and soul, becoming one of its most devout sons.¹²

From Morton's house, More went on to the university of Oxford, where he studied the *quadrivium*, the last four of the seven liberal arts, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. Although he had a flair for his studies, he was taken by his father out of Oxford entirely after only two years, as John More preferred that his son enter the legal profession. Continuing at university would most likely have led to his taking holy orders. Thomas More thus began his training in the law about 1494, and was admitted to the bar in 1503.¹³

From about 1501 More led an ascetic life, worshipping with the disciplined Carthusian monks of London's Charterhouse monastery. While it is not clear if he actually lived in the monastery, or merely boarded nearby, it is certain that he followed the monastic ritual with devotion. During this sojourn, he suffered through an intense spiritual conflict between the soul and the flesh. He yearned to enter the priesthood and devote his life to the service of God. The depth of this passion is nowhere better illustrated than in the order of monks to

¹² Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 20, 23-24.

¹³ Gordon Rupp, *Thomas More: The King's Good Servant* (London: Collins, 1978) p. 11.

whom he attached himself, for the Carthusians were the most austere, the most rigorous of all the monastic groups, spending much time in total silence and isolation, praying for hours on end. Aside from More and Fisher, some of the Charterhouse Carthusians were the only others executed for defying the Supremacy, and they died in unspeakable agony. All through his life, More wore a hair shirt and flagellated himself, striving to retain some aspect of the severe piety practised by the monks. More may well have desired to join the Carthusians, but he was desperately afraid that he would be unable to control his burgeoning sexual desire, thus putting in dire peril his immortal soul.¹⁴

In the end, the call of the world proved the victor, and he married Jane Colt in 1504 or 1505. She bore him four children and died in 1511 at the age of twenty-three. Only one month later, More married Dame Alice Middleton, with whom he remained for the rest of his days.¹⁵

Shortly after his entrance into the legal profession, Thomas More made his first foray into the sphere of public life and politics, in 1504, becoming a Member of Parliament. During this time, he also represented in various negotiations a number of different merchant companies, as well as serving as a delegate from the city of London to the royal government. In 1510, he was appointed under-sheriff for the City.¹⁶

¹⁴ Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 34-35, 14-15.

¹⁵ Anne Murphy, *Thomas More* (London: Fount, 1996) pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Rupp, *Good Servant*, pp. 11-12.

In 1517, More entered the king's service as a royal councillor, becoming a personal secretary to Henry VIII¹⁷, exchanging letters with Cardinal Wolsey and others in which he set forth the king's orders. More became a close confidante of Henry's, often accompanying him on journeys. The two would often walk together late at night, discussing anything from policy to astronomy. Here his facility with words served him well, for Henry intensely disliked writing. More also assisted the king in the creation of Henry's 1521 attack on Luther, *The Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*. As this effort earned the king the title of "Defender of the Faith," Henry must have come to value not only More's eloquence, but his theological learning as well.¹⁸

During his life, More earned a reputation as a humanist scholar, which was enhanced by his friendship with Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, one of the most influential writers of the period. Concentrating on Greek and Latin classic works, the humanists, studying grammar and rhetoric, sought to bring these ancient texts to again light the world with their wisdom. They also investigated the Bible and other early Christian writers, hoping to better understand their religion. More's most important humanist work, *Utopia*, which attained European-wide fame from its first publication in 1516.¹⁹

¹⁷ Henry VIII was born in 1491 and reigned from 1509 until his death in 1547.

¹⁸ Rupp, *Good Servant*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁹ Kenny, *Thomas More*, p. 8.

One of the more controversial elements of *Utopia* was its attitude towards religious tolerance, especially when considered in light of More's later hard stance on heresy. The Utopians believed in a single deity, but permitted a variety of forms of worship, for "it was arrogant folly for anyone to enforce conformity with his own beliefs by threats or violence." One who did not believe in God, however, was seen as a threat, and exiled from the island, but not physically disciplined.²⁰

Upon Wolsey's fall from grace in 1529, the office of Lord Chancellor lay open. Thomas More was offered the position for a number of reasons, the most important of which was simply that he had been long in government service without incurring the enmity of any influential individuals or groups. Henry also trusted More implicitly. As for More's reasons for accepting the office, aside from personal ambition, it is possible that More may have seen it as an opportunity for the power to better protect the Catholic Church from its many enemies in England. He certainly must have been aware that the divorce proceedings were uppermost in the minds of the king and his closest advisors. While what More told the king of his thoughts on the divorce is unknown, it appears that it was noncommittal enough, for Henry, secure in his righteousness, probably believed that More would inevitably cast his lot on the kingly side of the controversy. Regardless of his motives, in October 1529,

²⁰ Murphy, *Thomas More*, pp. 36-38.

Thomas More officially accepted the office of Lord Chancellor, together with the king's Great Seal.²¹

In this capacity, More served his king to the best of his ability, but over time found the problems and duties of the office both insurmountable and distasteful. Although the loss of many of his personal papers from this time precludes a detailed account of his activities, it is clear that he did not have nearly the influence in government which Wolsey had wielded. Foreign ambassadors dealt more with Thomas Cromwell, who by now had made himself indispensable to the king, and More was increasingly isolated from the policy-making arm of the government.²²

To make matters worse, it was at this time that Henry increased the intensity of his campaign to obtain his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. As one of the preliminary steps towards this end, in February 1531, Henry forced Convocation, the ruling body of clerics in England, to acknowledge him as the Supreme Head of the Church in England. Chapuys, the Imperial ambassador, wrote to his emperor in that same month that the Lord Chancellor was so deeply troubled by this latest development that he wanted to resign at the earliest possible opportunity.²³

²¹ Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 360-365.

²² Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 376-378.

²³ Marius, *Thomas More*, p. 379.

One duty of his position over which More did exert some control, and to which he applied himself with a good deal of enthusiasm, was the investigation and prosecution of heretics. More questioned dozens of people suspected of renouncing the Catholic faith for Protestantism and he sent many of these to Smithfield there to burn for their dangerous beliefs. He was a savage defender of the faith, frequently imprisoning in his own house those suspected of heresy until they confessed or recanted. Those who refused to abjure their false convictions he invariably sentenced to death, while those who begged for forgiveness he granted one last chance, as was the custom. A second condemnation of heresy, however, meant that, even if the accused recanted again, he would still be burnt at the stake. While many modern scholars have valiantly defended More, Richard Marius contends that More hated all heretics, seeing them as tools of Satan, and felt no impulses of mercy as he questioned and condemned them. He felt no compunction about sending them to prison or the stake, for he was determined to eradicate them from England.²⁴

Despite the fact that both Chancellor and King stood on a united front against heresy, More continued to be drawn further away from Henry's good graces as the king's divorce, known as the Great Matter, progressed. Henry was determined to win his separation from Catherine at any cost and in the early

²⁴ Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 404-407.

1530s he began a systematic campaign to remove ecclesiastical authority from the pope into his own hands.

Thomas More was outraged by the entire debacle: he disapproved of Henry's annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, intensely disliked Anne Boleyn, and was aghast at the concept of a Church without the Pope. The final blow came in 1532, when Convocation accepted the Act of the Submission of the Clergy, which placed the entire clerical organization under Henry's direct control. The next day, 16 May, More deposited the Great Seal of the realm into the king's hand and resigned his office of Lord Chancellor.²⁵

About this time, More encountered Elizabeth Barton, also known as the Holy Maid or the Nun of Kent. Through the late 1520s, this young woman had been experiencing divine visions which frequently prophesied the future, and she had become so popular that a small group of priests and others had, in effect, become her followers and disciples. By 1528, she had begun to have visions concerning the king's marriage. She foresaw, among other dire consequences, that if Henry married Anne Boleyn, he "should not be king of England seven months after." When the Nun's revelations began to appear in printed books, Henry had her and her associates attainted of treason and executed in April 1534.²⁶

²⁵ Rupp, *Good Servant*, pp. 43-44.

²⁶ Sharon L. Jansen, *Dangerous Talk and Strange Behavior: Women and Popular Resistance to the Reforms of Henry VIII* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996) pp. 46-47, 53-56.

Before the Nun's arrest, she met with the king on several occasions, always threatening his downfall if he put Catherine aside. She also met with Thomas More, during which conversation the ex-Chancellor warned her of the danger of such political prophecies. More was seemingly fascinated by Elizabeth Barton, listening to many different people tell of her visions. He, refused, however, to hear any talk of those which attacked the king, for he was well aware of the perilous path followed by the Nun and her friends. His caution served him well, for his name was put on the bill attainting Barton and her circle of treason. It was removed only when Henry's councillors begged the king not to include More on the bill, for fear that it would not otherwise pass in the House of Lords, the members of which knew very well that Cromwell did not have a solid case against the ex-Chancellor.²⁷

In March 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Succession, which required all Englishmen to take an oath that they acknowledged the legality of the king's marriage to Anne Boleyn as well as Henry's title of Supreme Head of the Church. While More was willing to accept the marriage as legal, he could not agree to the second tenet of the Act. When asked to swear the oath, he refused point-blank, believing that an earthly prince had no power to withdraw his country from papal dominion. When pressed to divulge his reasons for his unwillingness to take the oath, More asked for a guarantee that he would not be

²⁷ Jansen, *Dangerous Talk*, pp. 49-50; Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 451-455.

prosecuted if he explained himself. Upon learning that no such promise could be made, More observed that it was no crime to avoid putting himself in jeopardy. After continued exhortations by the royal commissioners, none of which succeeded in swaying his mind, More was imprisoned in the Tower of London on 17 April.²⁸

Initially, More's confinement was not harsh, for he was permitted a servant, John a Wood, and was allowed to retain his books and writing materials. Over the course of his imprisonment, More's mind turned to death and the state of his soul. He had had much of the world and was looking forward to the day when he would be released from it. Indeed, he almost treated his sojourn in the Tower as a chance to live the ascetic life he had longed for in his youth. Uppermost in his thoughts were matters spiritual rather than temporal. His conscience did not bother him about his refusal to swear the oath; rather, he was worried that he was committing the sin of suicide by locking himself into a course of action which could only lead to his death. More never claimed for himself the distinction of conscious martyrdom, never asserted that his actions were motivated by divine commands from God. He instead ended his life through a rational decision based on his own beliefs and principles, and thus had no celestial assurance that his choices were sanctioned by God and met with the Almighty's approval.²⁹

²⁸ Murphy, *Thomas More*, pp. 73-75.

²⁹ Kenny, *Thomas More*, pp. 75-77.

In May 1534, the government increased the pressure on More in a further attempt to break his will. He was denied visits from his family and was no longer permitted to take the air in the garden of the Tower. The Act of Treasons passed in November made guilty of treason anyone who spoke "maliciously" against the Crown, with the definition of malice left suitably vague so as to cover a broad spectrum. Even this Act, however, was not enough to convict More of treason, for he actually had not said anything against the king or his statutes. Ever since he was first called upon to take the oath, he had simply maintained a stubborn silence on the subject. The government could keep More in prison for misprision of treason in his refusal to take the oath, but as long as kept silent as to his motives, they could not execute him.³⁰

Despite Cromwell's best efforts to trick him into confessing, More continued to say nothing on the subject whatsoever. By June, Cromwell was desperate enough to employ harsher tactics.³¹ On the twelfth of that month, Sir Richard Riche, the Solicitor General, visited More to take away his books and writing materials, in a move calculated to wear down More's morale and fortitude. He succeeded, for Riche's version of the conversation they exchanged was sufficient to send More to the block.³² When asked if he thought Parliament could legally declare the king to be the Supreme Head of the Church, More at

³⁰ Kenny, *Thomas More*, pp. 80-81

³¹ Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 492-493, 498-499.

³² The veracity of Riche's account is uncertain.

last asserted that "to the case of primacy, the subject cannot be obligated to give his consent to such a thing in Parliament." It was enough for the government. On 1 July, More was brought to trial.³³

A trial for treason in the sixteenth century was hardly an impartial sifting of evidence. It was instead a process in which the accused heard the charges against him for the first time, and was indeed offered a chance to refute them, but all that was required for a conviction was the testimony of one person. The judges, often picked for their loyalty to the prosecution, frequently bullied the juries into issuing the verdict desired by the Crown. Given these conditions, it was not surprising that, despite a spirited defence, More was convicted on Riche's evidence and sentenced to die. On the morning of 6 July 1535, Thomas More was executed with one stroke of the headsman's axe.³⁴

1.2 Bishop John Fisher

Bishop John Fisher led an equally eminent and influential life. He was born in 1469 in the town of Beverly, Yorkshire, to Robert Fisher, a mercer, and his wife Agnes. John was the eldest of four children; little is known about the

³³ Rupp, *Thomas More*, pp. 55-59.

³⁴ E.E. Reynolds, *The Trial of St. Thomas More* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964) pp. 70-71, 118, 152.

rest of his family. Even though Robert Fisher died in 1477 when John was about eight, the family was wealthy enough to send him to the local grammar school, where he stayed for about five years, learning Latin and becoming acquainted with both the Scriptures and the classical authors. His talent and love for learning must have manifested itself even at this early age, for it was decided that he should pursue further studies at the university of Cambridge, with an eye to joining the clergy. In or about 1482-83, he set off for the university town.³⁵

At the college of Michaelhouse, Fisher studied under William de Melton, a noted scholar and theologian. Fisher, like More, received the standard medieval education of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. By 1491, he had earned his Master of Arts, which signified proficiency in both the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. To achieve this degree was a fairly rare feat, as most students could earn a decent living by completing the *trivium*, which earned them a Bachelor of Arts.³⁶

In this same year, 1491, Fisher applied for, and received, a special dispensation from Rome which permitted him to enter holy orders even though he was underage for the priesthood. At twenty-two, he was ordained in York, and returned straightaway to Cambridge to begin the ten-year doctorate of

³⁵ Michael Macklem, *God Have Mercy: The Life of John Fisher of Rochester* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1967) pp. 3-5.

³⁶ E.E. Reynolds, *Saint John Fisher* (London: Burns & Oates, 1955) pp. 3-6.

divinity programme. During this course of study, he became more involved in the university's administration. He was appointed to be one of the two Proctors in 1494, and, in 1497, he succeeded William de Melton as the Master of Michaelhouse college. He received his doctorate in 1501, the same year he was elevated to the position of Vice-Chancellor.³⁷ Clearly, Fisher was a man of unusual talent and tenacity, committed not only to learning itself, but to its institutions as well.

During the 1490s, Fisher cultivated the friendship of the Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of King Henry VII. As they shared the same loves of God and learning, it was not long before Fisher became her chaplain, and in 1497, she appointed him her personal confessor.³⁸ Under Fisher's guidance and advice, Lady Margaret ceased to support the already-wealthy Westminster Abbey and instead turned her attention to the state of the secular clergy. She established readerships in both Oxford and Cambridge as well as a preachership at Cambridge. For a stipend, the readers were required to read aloud to any listeners for one hour in each of the divinity schools. The preacher was obliged to travel throughout England, preaching six sermons each year of his three-year appointment. It was Fisher's great ambition to create a new brand of priest, a

³⁷ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, p. 7.

³⁸ Reynolds, *Saint*, p. 12.

literate preacher who could competently explain the word of God to the laity at large.³⁹

In 1504, Henry VII granted to Fisher the bishopric of Rochester, for the king, noticing Fisher's exceptional virtue and piety, wished to reward him, and, in addition, hoped that Fisher would serve as a good example to the kingdom as a whole. The new bishop was delighted with his see in a way not common to many of his predecessors. Rochester was tiny, with an annual income of only £300, whereas some sees earned their holders £1500 or more. Still, it suited Fisher perfectly, for he was not interested in monetary gain, but the cure of souls and the advancement of knowledge. Indeed, when he was offered richer bishoprics, such as Lincoln or Ely, he turned them down, content to remain in his own little see. He took a personal interest in his diocese, and while he took part in the meetings of Parliament and Convocation, his first love was the spiritual care of his people. He tried to take care of his diocese himself as much as possible, regularly visiting each section of it. He personally judged as many cases of heresy and other ecclesiastical transgressions as he could, for he greatly desired to show his flock their errors and help correct them, rather than simply to punish them. In his personal life, Fisher was equally rigorous, eating simply and sleeping on a hard pallet.⁴⁰

³⁹ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, pp. 11-15, 44.

In his enthusiasm for Rochester, Fisher did not forget Cambridge. Indeed, Cambridge would not forget him, for despite the fact that he resigned his academic positions upon his elevation to bishop, the university administration elected him Chancellor, a post he filled for the rest of his life. Armed with the power of his office and the wealth of the Lady Margaret, Fisher set out to create a new breed of secular priests, who were not only devout and sincere, but trained preachers, well-versed in the Scriptures, eloquent, and able to refute the arguments put forth by enemies of the ancient Church. The first school for such priests was Christ's College. Established in 1506 on the premises of the decrepit Godshouse, its new charter provided means to support a Master, a large teaching staff, and forty-seven students.⁴¹

A second, larger college was founded by Fisher in 1516, from money left for that purpose by Lady Margaret. Fisher's patron and friend had died in 1509, but she remembered him and his university in her will. St. John's College supported thirty-one fellows, who lived under the strictest discipline. The students, who were all priests in training, studied the traditional arts of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, though excluding music, and in addition, philosophy, theology, Greek, and Hebrew. The two languages had only recently been introduced to Cambridge, for Fisher had brought over Erasmus himself to begin the teaching of Greek.⁴²

⁴¹ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, pp. 16-17.

⁴² Reynolds, *Saint*, pp. 49-53.

When Lutheranism began to spread through England, John Fisher was hit by a blow that cut to the very core of his being. All his life, Fisher was convinced that education, and especially the knowledge imparted by the New Learning, was a direct path to the salvation of a man's soul. That the New Learning could actually lead a man away from the Holy Catholic Church was almost beyond comprehension. Fisher's reaction to Protestantism was over the rest of his life to become more conservative. He came to look longingly back at the doctrines of the medieval Church, with its mystical reverence for a God who spoke through the priests and the saints. His reforms and advances in knowledge had always been directed primarily to this end, a better understanding of the existing and immutable relationship between God and man. He never sought to change, but to illuminate, and with Protestantism on the prowl, Fisher set his teeth and made his stand for the old order.⁴³

As Henry VIII's Great Matter gained momentum, the Bishop of Rochester cast his lot firmly with Queen Catherine of Aragon, becoming one of her principal advisors, and certainly one of the most outspoken. In the legatine court at Blackfriars in 1529, Henry told the court that once his mind had been stirred by the possibility that his marriage to Catherine was illegal, he put the question to his bishops of whether he could put the Queen aside. He then showed the papal legates the signed and sealed document in which the bishops

⁴³ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, pp. 48-49, 22-23.

agreed with the king. Archbishop Warham commented that he had no doubt that all of his brethren present supported Henry. Whereupon, John Fisher, whose signature and seal were on the document, rose and stated that he did not affirm the king's position, and, furthermore, that his identifying marks had been placed on the document by Warham, without Fisher's consent.⁴⁴ It is a measure of Fisher's convictions and integrity that he dared to beard both the King of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury in a court set up solely for their benefit.

By 1533, England had been severed from the Catholic communion, Catherine had been put aside, and Anne Boleyn had been crowned Queen. Fisher was not in the best of spirits, but he had not given up hope that the situation might be corrected, though the means he was now proposing were much more drastic. The Imperial ambassador, Chapuys, wrote to his sovereign, Charles V, urging his master to invade England to forcibly return the country to the bosom of the Pope. Many Englishmen, he wrote would be in favour of such a move, not the least the Bishop of Rochester, who had beseeched Chapuys time and time again to write such a letter. To Fisher, the divorce was an unimportant concern compared to the horror of a schism within the Holy Catholic Church. He was even willing to commit treason to maintain the connection.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Reynolds, *Saint*, pp. 150-51.

⁴⁵ Reynolds, *Saint*, pp. 191-194.

Fisher was sorely hurt in the affair of the Nun of Kent, for, during her interrogation by Cromwell, she revealed that Fisher had believed and supported her when she told him of her visions. The bishop was summarily attainted of treason in that same bill which condemned Barton and that More so narrowly escaped, the reason for his inclusion being that he had wilfully kept knowledge of this treasonous speech from the king. Fisher, aware of the extreme danger in which he lay, defended himself mightily, claiming in numerous letters to Cromwell that he had kept silent only because he believed Henry to be already aware of the content of the Nun's prophecies. He strove in vain, for he was convicted in March 1534, with all his lands and revenues forfeit to the Crown. Henry commuted his sentence, though, merely fining him £300, a year's income of his bishopric.⁴⁶

Having striven and failed with every means at his command to keep England within the Roman Catholic communion, Fisher received with a heavy heart, in April 1534, the summons to Lambeth to take the Oath of Supremacy. As he stood with his friend Sir Thomas More in Lambeth Palace, Fisher wryly commented that "the way they had chosen was certainly strait and narrow enough to be the way to heaven." Fisher, like More, refused to swear the Oath, and was sent to the Tower.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Reynolds, *Saint*, pp. 197-198.

⁴⁷ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, pp. 177-180.

Now in his sixties, Fisher felt acutely the cold of a winter in the Tower of London. In December of 1534 he wrote to Cromwell, begging for relief. He described how his clothes were thin and torn, his body cold all the time, and his diet inadequate. In addition, he was suffering from various illnesses and infirmities. Whether Cromwell succoured him we have no knowledge. Deprived of everything of this world, from the bishopric of Rochester to the clothes on his back, John Fisher had nothing left of his own but his fierce, abiding faith in God and the Church, which now waxed stronger than before.⁴⁸

In May 1535, Fisher was examined by Cromwell and the same council which had tried and failed to break Sir Thomas More. They had no more luck with the bishop. The frail old man of God stood silent, simply refusing to comment on his reasons for not swearing the Oath. After the council had given up and Fisher was removed to his cell, he was visited by Sir Richard Riche, who told him that the King, desirous of spiritual guidance, wanted to know Fisher's thoughts on the Supremacy. Fisher, thinking that the king had sent Riche to him and that the sanctity of the confessional would protect him, fell into the trap and told Riche that the king could never be the Supreme head of the English Church. Still, Cromwell tried one last time to persuade Fisher to take the oath, for it would be a great victory for the government if they could state that such a

⁴⁸ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, pp. 187-189.

learned and respected man had come round to their view. The effort failed, and Fisher was ignored for days on end.⁴⁹

It was only when Pope Paul III created Fisher a cardinal, that Henry stepped up the proceedings to put him on the block. He took no notice of Fisher's claim that he would have refused the honour in any case. At his trial, Fisher was accused of maliciously denying the king to be the Supreme Head of the English Church. He declared himself not guilty and was thoroughly shocked when Richard Riche was called. Despite an outraged defence, in which he asserted that he had spoken under the sacrament of confession and so he should come to no harm, he was convicted and sentenced to the terrible punishment of being hanged, drawn, and quartered. Fisher waited five days. On 22 June, 1535, he was informed that the fateful day had dawned, and also that the king had commuted his sentence to a more merciful beheading. John Fisher, late Bishop of Rochester, went to his death with a contented smile and a prayer upon his lips.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Reynolds, *Saint*, pp. 258-261.

⁵⁰ Macklem, *God Have Mercy*, pp. 195-207.

Chapter Two

More and Fisher in the Sixteenth Century

Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher certainly led distinguished lives. More was a lawyer, orator, politician, and one of the foremost scholars of his day, while Fisher, an accomplished writer himself, was also a patron of learning with a towering reputation for wisdom and sincere faith. Despite these many accomplishments, Henry VIII executed them for refusing to acknowledge the king as Supreme Head of the Church of England. Their fates fired the imaginations and pens of historians after their deaths. These writers added two new aspects to the memories of More and Fisher; they became saintly heroes to the Catholics and grim object lessons for the Protestants. Full comprehension of the reasons behind these portrayals necessitates a brief overview of the nature and purpose of biography and history in the sixteenth century.

In the early years of the Renaissance, the purpose of studying history underwent a shift in emphasis. Medieval history was largely moralistic in tone; many chroniclers illustrated past events and lives in order to provide examples of the type of behaviour which earned salvation after death. The chronicles were, in part, a guide to a life of virtue which would guarantee one ascension to heaven in the next life. The emphasis, therefore, was placed on adhering to a

high moral standard, and removing oneself as much as possible from the corruption of the world.⁵¹

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the purpose of history changed subtly. Its study still imparted lessons for virtuous living, but with more significance being placed on leading an honourable life in the world. The upper classes realized that a good education made them better rulers. Trends in learning swung slightly away from the theological to the secular. History taught people to lead an active, virtuous life in society by exemplifying the lives of successful secular personalities, such as monarchs and other important personages.⁵² Complementing this shift in the nature of history, the art of biography also entered a new realm.

In the later Middle Ages, the recording of a saint's life served two main purposes. It united the oral tradition surrounding the saint, lending an air of authority to the stories. More importantly, as it became more widely known among the faithful, the book gradually increased the growth of the saint's cult.⁵³ Eventually, this process led to hagiography which was mostly composed of lists of the saint's virtues and miracles performed by him or her, both before and after death. These lists gradually blurred the personality of each saint, until many of

⁵¹ Levy, *Tudor Thought*, pp. 11-12.

⁵² Levy, *Tudor Thought*, pp. 35, ix.

⁵³ Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 35-36.

them had their individuality submerged in the overwhelming presence of their sainthood.⁵⁴

The advent of the Renaissance heralded a shift in emphasis in the way biographies were conceived of and written. Secular lives were deemed worthy of recording. This revaluation broke the monopoly of the genre by the ecclesiastical world. Freed from the obligation of proving the holiness of their subjects, biographers concentrated now on specifics of personality and the whole of a person's life. The particular character traits which made a subject unique were explored in detail, as opposed to those which made him or her a better candidate for canonization. Possibly the most significant trend of the Renaissance was the concept of biography as a means of showing reverence for the dead. Writing the life of a person became an excellent method for paying him honour, for it demonstrated the author's high opinion of his subject. All this had the overall effect of producing biographies which greatly enhanced the subject's reputation in all facets of his life.⁵⁵

Immediately after their deaths, More and Fisher were popular subjects for both biographers and chroniclers. Over time, the reputations and the legends of More and Fisher developed, becoming extremely complex by the end of the

⁵⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, "Major Currents In Medieval Devotion", *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, Jill Raitt, ed. (New York: Crossroads, 1989) p. 96.

⁵⁵ Donald A. Stauffer, *English Biography Before 1700*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964) pp. 121, 34, 61.

sixteenth century. More importantly, however, these initial writers established the facts and traditions used by future historians. Nineteenth-century authors approached and analyzed More and Fisher from much the same foundation as their Tudor forebears. In essence, the sixteenth-century assessments saw formed the basis of much of the subsequent work on the two men.

It was in the turbulent religious atmosphere of the sixteenth century that the legends of More and Fisher began to grow. By 1600, four Catholic writers had produced biographies of More, while another Catholic author had written a life of Fisher. In addition, three major Protestant chroniclers had mentioned them in their works. William Roper, More's son-in-law, wrote *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, knyghte* in 1553, to assist his friend Nicholas Harpsfield, who was working on his own biography of More, *The life and death of Sr Thomas Moore, knight, sometymes Lord high Chancellor of England*, completed in 1557. In 1588, Thomas Stapleton wrote a Latin volume, *Tres Thomae*, which contained biographies of the Apostle Thomas, Thomas Becket and Thomas More, the last being entitled *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*. The last Catholic biography of the sixteenth century, *The Life of Syr Thomas More, Somtymes Lord Chancellour of England*, was written in 1599 by an anonymous author known only as Ro. Ba. As for John Fisher, a *Life of Fisher* was compiled from three sources in the late sixteenth century. The Protestant chroniclers included Edward Hall's 1550 *Chronicle of England*, John Foxe's 1563 *The Acts*

and Monuments of John Foxe, and Raphael Holinshed's 1577 *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. In addition, a final biography, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore*, was published by Cresacre More in the 1620s.⁵⁶

These different writers held an amazingly wide range of opinions about Thomas More and John Fisher. Even in the relatively short span of time from their deaths to the end of the century, they proved to be figures of controversy. While the Catholic biographers presented the images of men who were saints in all but name, the Protestant chroniclers saw learned, respected men who had foolishly flung their lives away for a false belief. These authors are particularly significant because their works are the only sources available for a study of More's and Fisher's personal lives and motivations. In addition, these writers' interpretations, stories, and images formed the basis of all later scholarship on the men.

Since their deaths, More and Fisher have become inextricably linked in history. Aside from the earlier More biographies, in which Fisher appeared as a

⁵⁶ William Roper, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, knyghte*, Elsie Vaughn Hitchcock, ed. (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1958); Nicholas Harpsfield, *The life and death of Sr. Thomas Moore, knight, sometymes Lord high Chancellor of England*, Elsie Vaughn Hitchcock, ed. (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1963); Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Thomas More*, Philip E. Hallett, trans., E.E. Reynolds, ed. (London: Burns and Oates, 1966); Ro. Ba., *The Life of Syr Thomas More, Somtymes Lord Chancellour of England*, Elsie Vaughn Hitchcock and P.E. Hallett, eds. (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1957); "Richard Hall", *The Life of Fisher*, Ronald Bayne, ed. (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1921); Edward Hall, *Chronicle of England* (English Books Before 1640, Reel 46, no. 1289, 1550); John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, Vols. IV, V, VIII, (New York: AMS Press, 1965); Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, Vol. 3 (New York: AMS Press, 1965); Cresacre More, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore*, D.M. Rogers, ed. (Menston: The Scholar Press, 1971).

very minor character, they were very often mentioned together as victims of Henry VIII's supremacy. In all these works, however, More was usually accorded a little more emphasis, with a little more detail as to his life and personality. The resulting picture often paints Fisher as a follower of More, respected in his own right, but overshadowed by the ex-Lord Chancellor. The most comprehensive view of Fisher throughout the century is thus achieved by the examination of his role in the biographies of Thomas More.

The reasons for More's dominating Fisher in the literature appear to be twofold. Firstly, even by the late sixteenth century, there was far more biographical material available on More than Fisher. With more known about his life, it is logical that later writers should have granted more space to More in their works, leaving Fisher to be interpreted as More's clerical counterpart. Secondly, More appealed to a wider audience than Fisher through the ex-Chancellor's status as an accomplished member of the laity. Fisher's resistance to the supremacy, although heroic, could be seen as part of his obligations as a steadfast member of the priesthood. Having lived nearly the ideal clerical life, it was perfectly in character for Fisher to die for his faith. More, on the other hand, had led a full life in the world, distinguishing himself in many ways. It was therefore not incumbent upon him to martyr himself, and, as a result, his sacrifice was that much greater. From a Protestant point of view, More was

more foolish than Fisher, for he threw away that much more in choosing death over life.

The Catholic biographies of More and Fisher contained a curious mixture of some elements of the medieval saint's life modified by the Renaissance influences on the genre. As the century progressed, the biographies became increasingly hagiographic, until Ro. Ba., with all the confidence of his medieval counterparts, boldly placed More among the other saints in heaven, while *The Life of Fisher* proclaimed that England should soon return to Catholicism through the "intercession of this holy Martyr."⁵⁷ The hagiography was tempered, however, by the Renaissance inclination to record a life in its entirety, so that Sir Thomas, writer and politician, and Bishop Fisher, priest and educator, were never obscured by Saint Thomas and Saint John, holy martyrs of the Roman Catholic Church.

The first of the sixteenth-century biographies, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, knyghte*, was written by William Roper (1496-1578), More's son-in-law. Roper took up residence in More's house in 1518 and, in 1521, married Margaret, the family's eldest child. At the time of the wedding, Roper was an enthusiastic, passionate Protestant who refused to recant even when charged with heresy by Cardinal Wolsey. Released because of Wolsey's friendship with his father-in-law, Roper converted to Catholicism only after much argument,

⁵⁷ Ba., *Life*, p. 12, *Life of Fisher*, p. 146.

pleading, and prayer on More's part. Thereafter, the two men were the best of friends for the rest of More's life. Prudently, Roper waited until Mary came to the throne of England before he set pen to paper.⁵⁸

Roper's book was essentially a memoir, the personal recollections of a man who had known Thomas More for a long time. Certain of his anecdotes contained important observations on More's character and attitude to life. On one occasion, as More and Margaret watched three Carthusian monks⁵⁹ leaving the Tower for their journey to the block, More commented that the monks looked contented and lamented the fact that due to his having spent his life "in pleasure and ease licentiouslye," God was forcing him to remain in the miserable world, while the clerics were being gathered to the gentle hands of their Father.⁶⁰ This story clearly depicted a man still yearning for the celibate, disciplined life of the cloister even after a long, successful secular career.

A popular view of Roper's book, mainly derived from stories such as the preceding, is that it took its cue from the tradition of medieval saint's lives, presenting the image of a man who exemplified the Roman Catholic ideal of virtue and faith.⁶¹ Roper omitted any mention of *Utopia* and skimmed briefly

⁵⁸ Richard S. Sylvester and Davis P. Harding, eds., *Two Early Tudor Lives* (London: Yale University Press, 1962) pp. xiv-xv; Roper *Lyfe*, p. xxxiii.

⁵⁹ These men had also refused the Oath of Supremacy.

⁶⁰ Roper, *Lyfe*, p. 80-81.

⁶¹ See for example Stauffer, *English Biography* and Michael A. Anderegg, "The Tradition of Early More Biography," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, R.S. Sylvester and G.P. Marc'hadour, eds. (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977).

over More's friendship with Erasmus, two extremely significant aspects of his life.⁶² It would be misleading, however, to attribute to Roper a wholly hagiographic motivation. Nowhere in the book did Roper refer to More as a saint or martyr,⁶³ instead referring to him as "a man of singular vertue and a cleere vnspotted consciens."⁶⁴ Roper saw in More an exceptional man of the world, whose spotless character and unyielding morals could inspire a new generation of Catholics.

Roper's references to John Fisher were necessarily scanty, due to his book's personal nature. He only mentioned the bishop twice, both in connection with the affair of the Nun of Kent. In the first instance, he recorded how Elizabeth Barton went to Rochester to seek Fisher's advice as to her visions, for she knew of the bishop's reputation as a man of "notable vertuos livinge and learninge." The second time Fisher entered Roper's narrative was when his name appeared next to More's on the bill which attainted them of misprision of treason and the Nun of Kent and her companions of high treason.⁶⁵ Roper made no attempt to follow Fisher's story past that point, but the bishop did serve a small, yet important role in Roper's account. His fame as a wise man of impeccable character lent some

⁶² Stauffer, *English Biography*, p. 129.

⁶³ R.S. Sylvester, "Roper's *Life of More*," in *Essential Articles*, p. 194.

⁶⁴ Roper, *Lyfe*, p. 3.

⁶⁵ Roper, *Lyfe*, pp. 60, 64.

additional assurance to Elizabeth Barton's legitimacy as a divinely-inspired visionary. In this way, Roper shifted the burden of proof from himself to Fisher, whose credentials were far more impressive for the judging of such matters.

Although Roper's *Lyfe* offered an intimate look at More, its very nature created some problems for the historian. The first is that much of the book was based on the memories of the author and his wife and therefore cannot be confirmed. More's comments on the Carthusian monks reveal much about his view of the world near the end of his life, yet are unsubstantiated outside of Roper's book, whose plausibility the historian must evaluate, weighing it against More's character as a whole.

Closely related to the above dilemma is Roper's own admission that the passage of years had clouded his mind. "Very many notable things," he wrote, "(not meete to haue bine forgotten) throughe neckligens and long contynuanes of tyme are slipped out of my mynde."⁶⁶ Right at the outset, Roper confessed that his book was not the definitive work on Thomas More. This may not have troubled him overmuch as one of his main purposes for writing was to assist another biographer of More, Nicholas Harpsfield.⁶⁷

Harpsfield (1519-1575) fled England for France in 1550 to escape the Protestant edicts of Edward VI. Returning upon Mary's accession, he held a

⁶⁶ Roper, *Lyfe*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁷ Anderegg, "Tradition," p. 6.

variety of ecclesiastical positions until 1559, when he refused to accept Elizabeth's supremacy. He was thrown into prison, remaining there until 1574, when he was released on account of ill health. He enjoyed only one year of freedom, dying in 1575. While in exile, Harpsfield met Thomas More's adopted daughter, Margaret Clement, his first connection to the family. He and William Roper became close friends, as Harpsfield noted in his "Epistle Dedicatorie."⁶⁸

By 1557, Harpsfield had finished *The life and death of Sr Thomas Moore, knight, sometymes Lord high Chancellor of England*. This resoundingly-titled work is nearly twice as long as Roper's book and contains nearly all the text of that book, with considerable addition and embellishment. Harpsfield made judicious use of sources such as the correspondence between Erasmus and More, as well as extending and elaborating on Roper's efforts.⁶⁹

Harpsfield was far more concerned than Roper with creating the image of More as a martyr for the Catholic Church. In great detail, he compared Thomas More with St. Thomas of Canterbury,⁷⁰ noting that More's death held more significance, for, while St. Thomas of Canterbury died rather than permit a reduction of the Pope's influence in England, More perished fighting the complete abolition of papal authority in the country.⁷¹ He also observed that as

⁶⁸ Marius, *Thomas More*, p. xvi; Harpsfield, *Life*, pp. clxxx-cxci, 3.

⁶⁹ Anderegg, "Tradition," pp. 6-7.

⁷⁰ Also known as St. Thomas Becket.

⁷¹ Harpsfield, *Life*, p. 215.

Bishop John Fisher died for the priesthood, so More died for the laity, to symbolize the people's desire for unity under the Catholic Church.⁷² With examples and analogies such as these, Harpsfield painted a portrait of a saint who had yet to be canonized.

As in Roper, John Fisher played a small role in this narrative. In his cursory treatment of the Bishop's committal to the Tower and subsequent execution, Harpsfield mentioned that Fisher was "good" and "learned." Aside from this general opinion, he related that at More's trial, the ex-Chancellor denied the accusation that he and Fisher must have conspired to deny the supremacy because they both had separately referred to the Act as a double-edged sword. More's defence was that they, due to their similar education and patterns of thought, coincidentally framed the same metaphor.⁷³ With this observation, Harpsfield evaluated Fisher's intellect to be at least as powerful as More's.

In this fashion, Harpsfield established in the reader's mind John Fisher as a man who, in most respects, was the peer of his main subject, Sir Thomas More. In the book's conclusion, when Harpsfield set out to propose More as a candidate for sainthood, he expanded on Fisher's character, proclaiming him to be the premiere cleric of his day, foremost in intelligence and piety. It was no large

⁷² Harpsfield, *Life*, pp. 210-11.

⁷³ Harpsfield, *Life*, pp. 168, 179, 187-188.

step, then, to install Fisher as the ideal cleric's martyr. Having already asserted that Fisher and More were equal to each other in many ways, Harpsfield now proceeded to introduce the concept of More as the martyr representing the laity.⁷⁴ In essence, Fisher was a tool used by Harpsfield to anchor a connection between Thomas More and the Church, the better to begin his argument for More's holiness.

Harpsfield was less interested in writing the history of a man's life than in portraying a martyr of the holy Church of Rome. Having taken that step, though, Harpsfield was rather cautious about actually labelling More as a saint. He did so only once, in the very last paragraph of the book.⁷⁵ In other sections, the author used the word "martyr" with great vigour and enthusiasm, even to the point of upholding More as the "blessed Protomartyr of all the laitie."⁷⁶ In this respect, Harpsfield differed from Roper in that the latter depicted More as a good Christian worthy of emulation, while the former portrayed a paragon of the faith, a man who attained such "woorthiness, fame and glory as neuer did in Englande before, and mucche doubt is there whether anye man shall hereafter."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Harpsfield, *Life*, pp. 211-212.

⁷⁵ Harpsfield, *Life*, pp. 217-18.

⁷⁶ Harpsfield, *Life*, p. 213.

⁷⁷ Harpsfield, *Life*, p. 11.

It appears that Harpsfield was reluctant to name More a saint, yet wished to impress upon his readers the man's beatific qualities.⁷⁸ More had not been canonized, and it is probable that Harpsfield wished to draw ecclesiastical attention to this oversight in a circumspect manner. He emphasized More's saintliness of character and devotion far more heavily than did Roper, yet still avoided the introduction of any of the miracles so common to medieval hagiographies. Harpsfield's More is partway between a worldly ideal and the overt saint of Thomas Stapleton and Ro. Ba.

Thomas Stapleton (1535-1598), was born in the same year that More died. Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1558, he was required in 1559 to swear that Queen Elizabeth was the supreme head of the Church of England, and, like his eventual subject, refused wholeheartedly. Instead of calling for his head, the queen permitted Stapleton and his family to go into exile on the continent. He never returned to the land of his birth.⁷⁹

The fact that it was composed abroad is one element which separates *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More* (1588), from its predecessors. The second major difference is that it was composed in Latin as opposed to English. Stapleton's book was also far more hagiographic than Harpsfield. The author asserted that More not only looked forward to dying for

⁷⁸ Anderegg, "Tradition," p. 9.

⁷⁹ Stapleton, *Life*, p. vii-viii.

his faith, but actually expected to "receive the crown of martyrdom" upon his execution day.⁸⁰ To further press his point home, Stapleton recorded a few miracles. After its removal, More's head was placed on a pole on London Bridge, where it remained for nearly a month. When it was finally taken down, Margaret Roper took her father's head home with her, where it was noticed that the beard had turned from an aged white to the reddish-brown colour of More's youth. Similarly, money inexplicably appeared in the previously empty purse of Margaret's maid when the girl was sent to purchase a shroud on credit. The amount of money was precisely enough to buy the linen.⁸¹

In his preface, Stapleton asserted that he wished to write a true, complete life of Thomas More, to which end he had conferred with a number of people who had known More personally. The story of the shroud-money the author heard "again and again" from Dorothy Harris, the maid involved in the incident.⁸² This thorough citation of eyewitnesses suggests that Stapleton was trying to demonstrate an incontrovertible factual basis for these anecdotes.

The reasons behind this desire may lie in the terrible state of Catholicism in England at the time. Since 1559, English Catholics had been without strong leadership from either the Church of Rome or the native clergy with the result

⁸⁰ Stapleton, *Life*, p.185.

⁸¹ Stapleton, *Life*, p. 191, 192.

⁸² Stapleton, *Life*, pp. xvi, 192.

that, by 1580, there was a steady flow of Catholics into the Anglican Church.⁸³ This loss of the faithful must have been horrifying to Stapleton, for he wrote out of "pity for [his] country in its present deep affliction,"⁸⁴ a sentiment which indicates his desire to reassure his compatriots that the traditional elements of Catholicism were still alive and well within living memory. By recording the names of the people who told him these miraculous stories, he sought to bring a new relevance to old elements of Catholicism, and remind people of the last shining champion of the faith produced by his now-benighted country.

Although the accounts of miracles and fulsome praise of More in Stapleton's work harked back to medieval biographies, the book still contained strong influences from the Renaissance changes in biography. Medieval miracles tended to be fairly dramatic occurrences, such as those surrounding the translation⁸⁵ of St. William of Norwich in the mid-twelfth century. When he was exhumed, it was found that his body had not decayed and more spectacularly, his coffin rose out of the grave of its own accord, floating above the ground.⁸⁶ In comparison, Stapleton's miracles were much more subdued, as

⁸³ William Raleigh Trimble, *The Catholic Laity in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964) pp. 5, 131.

⁸⁴ Stapleton, *Life*, p. xv.

⁸⁵ The moving of a saint's relics from one place to another.

⁸⁶ Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) p. 72.

though the author were striving to find a balance between the necessity for including the miracles while not destroying More's exceptional human nature.

A second reason for Stapleton's sedate miracles was the overall attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to saints in the sixteenth century. Humanist scholars of the early 1500s had levelled blistering attacks on the veneration of saints, Erasmus in particular comparing it to the veneration of ancient Greek heroes such as Heracles. The immediate response of the Catholic authorities to this criticism was defensive; after St. Antonino of Florence was canonized in 1523, no more saints were named for the next sixty-five years. It was not until 1588, the same year in which Stapleton's book was published, that the Catholic authorities convened a powerful committee of cardinals, which, among other matters, reviewed the canonization process. In the early seventeenth century, they produced a set of rigorous requirements for the making of saints.⁸⁷ In this atmosphere of uncertainty and scepticism Stapleton was obliged to proceed cautiously in his bid to have More canonized. Rather than rapturously proclaim More's posthumous miraculous doings boldly and openly, Stapleton carefully laced them into his narrative, surrounding them with a prosaic utterly ordinary context. He also indicated the source of each story. Stapleton thus protected his credibility while emphasizing More's holy nature in the circumspect manner demanded by the prevailing religious climate.

⁸⁷ Peter Burke, "How To Be a Counter-Reformation Saint," in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe*, Kaspar von Greyerz, ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984) pp. 45-46.

Stapleton addressed John Fisher in no uncertain terms, upholding him as a paragon of his profession, asserting that if the rest of the clergy had but followed Fisher's lead, the "anti-Christian title of the King would not have brought religion in England to such universal ruin."⁸⁸ Another passage revealed the high esteem in which More held Fisher. More's daughter Margaret told her father that Fisher stood alone in his defiance, and that she was worried that her father was being led to his denial of the supremacy by the bishop. More responded that even though the bishop was without peer in "wisdom, learning and long-appointed virtue," he, More, would take his own stand for his own reasons, not being led by anyone.⁸⁹

Stapleton's final comparison between More and Fisher was of their emotions upon the scaffold. Fisher, he wrote, met his death full of "joy and exultation" and praised God with a *Te Deum*. More, in contrast, approached his last day in "the spirit of humility and holy fear." He prayed to God for forgiveness before laying his head on the block. Stapleton then quickly assured his readers that each man also felt the dominant sentiment of the other, namely that Fisher was as full of "holy fear" as More was of "holy joy."⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Stapleton, *Life*, p. 179.

⁸⁹ Stapleton, *Life*, pp. 150-152.

⁹⁰ Stapleton, *Life*, p. 189.

Essentially, to Stapleton, Fisher was a mirror to reflect Thomas More's resolution and godliness. Having scattered allusions to the bishop's unimpeachable character and deep piety throughout the work, Stapleton could easily bring the two together in order to heighten the impression of More's sanctity. If Fisher, a holy priest, was as learned as More, then, to Stapleton, it followed logically that More was as blessed as Fisher. Fisher provided a character ideally suited to the task of highlighting More's spirituality. At the last, however, the author took care that the bishop would not outshine the book's protagonist, for Stapleton commented that so respected was More, so great his learning, even John Fisher sought his opinion on the matter of the divorce.⁹¹

In short, it appears that Stapleton, fired by righteous indignation at the heretics who had exiled him and having access to men and women who had known Thomas More well, was the perfect candidate to compile a new biography of the man. Caught up in the passion and tragedy of More's life, he set out to tell the story of a noble Catholic Christian who had about him the mysterious touch of the divine, and deserved to be recognized as a saint.

No less impassioned a writer than Stapleton was Ro. Ba., who in 1599 produced *The Life of Syr Thomas More, Somtymes Lord Chancellour of England*. The first problem associated with this book is obviously the anonymity of the author. He is identified only by the four-letter signature at the end of the book's

⁹¹ Stapleton, *Life*, p. 194.

epistle.⁹² R.W. Chambers, in his introduction to the Early English Text Society's edition, observed that the book appeared to have been written in England and that Ro. Ba. requested his reader to be lenient with a "young beginner."⁹³ Beyond this meagre information, he is completely unknown.

Ro. Ba. was not so much an author as an editor. His book was a compilation of Harpsfield and Stapleton, with very little original material. The account of the execution was taken virtually unchanged from Harpsfield, with a little more detail on the actual death from Stapleton's book.⁹⁴ Thus the primary difficulty in analyzing this text is the winnowing of Ro. Ba.'s opinion out from under the massive presence of his literary forebears. Fortunately, marginal notes in the edited edition indicate the source of each paragraph, a feature which renders the job much more manageable.

The portion of the book which best allows Ro. Ba.'s voice to shine through is in the introductory "Epistle to the Courteous Reader." The author proclaimed his intention to "match [More] with his like, with Sainctes and holies." He further avowed that More had all the virtues of all the saints in heaven, from Job's patience to Abraham's faith.⁹⁵ This small passage comprised one of the

⁹² Ba. *Life*, p. 15.

⁹³ Ba. *Life*, pp. xix, xxiv.

⁹⁴ Ba. *Life*, pp. 261-62.

⁹⁵ Ba., *Life*, pp. 12-13.

largest continuous examples of Ro. Ba.'s original writing in the entire book. His view of More concurs with Stapleton's, but finding the author in this work is next to impossible.

Another small way in which Ro. Ba. may be discerned from his predecessors is to note the often minor changes which he made to their words and phrasing. A case in point was his treatment of John Fisher. Ro. Ba. himself offered no original thoughts on Fisher beyond those of Roper, Harpsfield and Stapleton. He did, however, rephrase their comments, to better mesh with his much more overt adulation of Thomas More. When reiterating Harpsfield's observation that More was as worthy an "ambassadour for the laitie as was the good Bisshopp of Rochester for the Clergie," Ro. Ba. increased the sentence's intensity by proclaiming that "god appointed that worthy man Iohn Fisher, Byshop of Rochester, to be the Champion of the Clergie." Similarly, while Harpsfield made no reference to Fisher during his recounting of the commencement of More's trial, Ro. Ba. took the opportunity to remind his reader that "Byshope Fisher of Blessed memorie" had met his end some days earlier.⁹⁶ Having established Fisher's credentials early in the work, Ro. Ba. was then able to easily insert a comparison between the two whenever he thought it appropriate.

The overall effect of Ro. Ba.'s tinkering with the words of his literary ancestors was to intimate that More's official canonization would not make him

⁹⁶ Harpsfield, *Life*, pp. 211, 183; Ro. Ba., *Life*, pp. 26, 228.

a saint, but merely confirm his obvious sanctity. There was none of Stapleton's diffidence in Ro. Ba., but an unshakeable conviction trumpeted aloud that Thomas More was a member of the holy elite, lacking only papal recognition of the fact.

While the above analysis reveals something of Ro. Ba.'s techniques of persuasion, it does little to illuminate his motives. A more profitable line of conjecture is the historical context in which the book was compiled. In the closing years of Elizabeth's reign, Catholics were regarded with intense suspicion, indeed, barely tolerated. Any civil unrest in London, for example, was popularly blamed on subversive Catholics and, in 1599, the government initiated a campaign against Catholics in northern England, traditionally an area strong in that faith. In addition, while the Counter-Reformation was making great gains on the Continent, very little had been achieved in the reconversion of England.⁹⁷

Ro. Ba., living through these dark days, probably decided that English Catholics desperately needed a hero, a martyr to rally their flagging spirits, and so embraced Thomas More as a natural choice. That his legend was still current even at the end of the sixteenth century may be perceived by the fact that the 1593 play, *Sir Thomas More*, sympathetic to the title character, was censored to

⁹⁷ Adrian Morey, *The Catholic Subjects of Elizabeth I* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978) p. 209.

the point where it could not be staged.⁹⁸ Indeed, More's story was particularly appropriate for the end of the sixteenth century. More was an Englishman of the recent past who had died defending the Catholic faith against a Protestant monarch. Bringing the martyrdom even closer to home was the fact that it was Henry VIII's daughter who was now threatening the Catholic faith. Thomas More was the perfect standard with which to unite and hearten English Catholics.

In addition to rousing the English, Ro. Ba. may also have wanted to draw papal attention to Thomas More himself. The canonization of an English saint of such recent times would have proven extraordinarily valuable to the Catholic cause in England. To that end, Ro. Ba. used in his introductory epistle the definite, authoritative language which left no doubt that he considered More a saint, lacking only the Pope's endorsement.

When juxtaposed with the numerous lives of More, the one full-length life of John Fisher seems to woefully under-represent the good bishop. *The Life of John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester*, however, with its most intricate history more than compensates for More's numerical superiority in biographies. For many years, scholars accepted that the author of the *Life* was Richard Hall (d.1604), a Catholic priest and teacher who entered voluntary exile in France in the early

⁹⁸ Anthony Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and William Shakespeare, *Sir Thomas More*, Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) p. 27.

years of Elizabeth I's reign. In truth, it appears that Hall merely translated from English into Latin a manuscript of the *Life* which he found in the Benedictine monastery of Dieulouard in Lorraine. This translation later found its way into the hands of Thomas Bayley, who, after making many alterations, had it published under his own name in 1655.⁹⁹ With this multiplicity of editors, it is little wonder that the authorship of the work became confused. In reality, it appears that *The Life of John Fisher* was a collective work by an unknown number of authors and completed between 1576 and 1604.¹⁰⁰ Of these authors, one has been identified outright as Judge William Rastell, the second, though his name remains a mystery, has been recognized as a correspondent from Cambridge university, and the third is wholly unknown, identified only through the miraculous nature of the stories which he contributed to the book.¹⁰¹

One of this book's most interesting features is the ease with which the various authors may be distinguished according to the type of contribution. Judge William Rastell (1508-1565) was a nephew of Thomas More and a contemporary of John Fisher. Catholic by faith, he lived in exile during Edward VI's reign, returned to England upon Mary's accession, and was appointed to the

⁹⁹ Thompson Cooper, "Richard Hall, D.D." *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. VIII (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 968.

¹⁰⁰ François Van Ortroy, "Vie Du Bienheureux Martyr Jean Fisher Cardinal, Évêque De Rochester," in *Analecta Bollandiana*, Tomus XII, 1893, p. 159; R.W. Chambers, "Rastell's Life of More," in Harpsfield's *Life*, pp. ccxv and ccxvi.

¹⁰¹ Chambers, "Rastell's Life," pp. ccxvii-ccxviii.

bench late in her reign. He remained a Justice of the Peace into Elizabeth's reign, despite his religious persuasions, until his retirement in 1563.¹⁰² By his own account, he was present at the execution of John Fisher, and, in keeping with that proximity to his subject, his account of Fisher's life had an immediacy, a familiarity similar to Roper's personal anecdotes about Thomas More. The bulk of Rastell's work comprised a detailed chronology of the bishop's life, with great attention given to Fisher's relationship with the government and the courage and fortitude he exhibited during the long ordeal which ended in his death. At his trial, the bishop "appered with a cherefull countenaunce and a godlie constancye," and during his defence, "shewed hymeself excellentlie and profowndlie lerned," so that upon his conviction, many present wept "to see such a famouse clarke and vertuouse byshopp" unjustly condemned.¹⁰³

It appears that Rastell's primary concern was to denote, through such glowing accounts, those qualities which made Fisher a morally upright Christian, an exemplary clergyman, and a possible candidate for canonization. To achieve the final goal, Rastell was required to include at least one miraculous occurrence. To that end, he recorded that after Fisher's head had been boiled and placed on a spike upon London Bridge, it did not decay in the slightest, but remained "as Freshe and lyvelie, as though it had been alyve.....above the course

¹⁰² James McMullen Rigg, "William Rastell," *DNB*, Vol. XVI, p. 748.

¹⁰³ William Rastell, "The Rastall Fragments, being 'Certen Breef Notes Apperteyning to Bishop Fisher, Collected Out Of Sir Thomas Moores Lyfe,'" in Harpsfield, *Life*, pp. 244, 237, 240.

of nature."¹⁰⁴ In this tentative, circumspect manner, after the fashion of Stapleton, Rastell hinted that Fisher was a saintly man deserving of recognition by the Church hierarchy.

The second author of *The Life of John Fisher* has proven to be a much more elusive character, for he has resisted identification for some three centuries. He wrote several letters containing information on Fisher, which found its way into the final version of the *Life*. In one missive, he notes that he did not know Fisher personally, as he was a student at St. John's College, Cambridge, when the bishop died. For this reason, he has been labelled by scholars as the Cambridge correspondent.¹⁰⁵ The letters penned by this man were comprised largely of a series of unconnected observations and anecdotes about Fisher's life and personality. In the final version of the book, these stories served mainly to add more detail to the core provided by Rastell. The Cambridge correspondent noted that, on his way to the scaffold, Fisher caught up a New Testament and opened it to a random page, asking the Lord for guidance and remarking that it was the last time which he would ever read the Bible. The passage chanced to be John 17:3-5, in which Jesus said that he had accomplished the work which God had sent him to do, and asked God to "glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the

¹⁰⁴ Rastell, "Fragments," pp. 246-247.

¹⁰⁵ Chambers, "Rastell's Life," pp. ccxvii-ccxviii.

world was made." Fisher snapped the book shut, and commented that the reading was "learning ynough for me to my lives end."¹⁰⁶

This little scene was highly evocative, bringing to the reader's mind the pathos of an old man's never-ending quest for learning, the quiet strength of his faith, and the nearness of his death. While these stories in no way contradicted Rastell's account,¹⁰⁷ they added relatively little fact to the narrative as a whole. Woven throughout the book, they softened the often legal, reserved tone which ran through Rastell's work. The overall effect was to emphasize Fisher's humanity, to reinforce the idea that while he was learned, virtuous, and worthy of sainthood, he was also an ordinary man in the sense that he fell ill, grew old, and, despite his unshakeable faith, still sought comfort from Holy Writ in the hour of his death.

The third author of *The Life of John Fisher* remains totally unknown. Although there may well have been more than one person who contributed the last set of stories to the book, it is much less cumbersome to refer to a single writer. However anonymous may be the author, the tales which he included are among the easiest to discern from the surrounding material, for they are stories of miraculous happenings centred on Fisher. One such anecdote told how Anne Boleyn, upon seeing Fisher's head, struck it a contemptuous blow with her hand,

¹⁰⁶ Van Ortro, "Vie," p. 193.

¹⁰⁷ Chambers, "Rastell's Life," p. ccxviii.

jeering that the head would never again insult her. A scratch she received from one of Fisher's teeth festered, causing her great pain, was only healed after much effort, and left a scar which she bore to her dying day. Another series of paragraphs related how each of Fisher's persecutors, from Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell to such lesser lights as Richard Riche, all suffered various misfortunes ranging from ill-health to gruesome deaths. The author explicitly stated that these fates all stemmed from divine punishment for their treatment of the holy bishop.¹⁰⁸

The story of Anne Boleyn's wounded finger demands a little explanation before its nature becomes clear. It is an ancient story, found in many different forms in as many different saints' legends. Sister Benedicta Ward refers to these tales as miracles of vengeance, in which the saint avenges a slight against his memory or person. A medieval version of the story would likely have resulted in Anne's death, as in a case connected with St. Thomas of Canterbury, in which, after the saint had cured a man's son of the plague, the man delayed his promised donation of four pieces of silver. In retribution, the saint withdrew his blessing and the boy subsequently sickened again and died.¹⁰⁹ Anne, however, obviously survived, so that the author was obliged to reduce her punishment to a large degree of pain.

¹⁰⁸ Van Ortro, "Jean Fisher," in *Analecta Bollandiana*, Vol. XII, Brussels: 1893, p. 199, 232-239.

¹⁰⁹ Ward. *Miracles*, pp. 67, 93.

The second set of stories, detailing the fates of Fisher's enemies, are much more straightforward, as the author took his inspiration directly from any number of similar medieval stories of miracles of vengeance. The murderers or malefactors of the saint frequently met bad ends as divine justice caught them up. A group of Jews was suspected of murdering the twelfth-century St. William of Norwich. The fate of these men was recorded by a monk named Thomas of Monmouth, who wrote that "the rod of heaven in a brief space of time exterminated or scattered them all."¹¹⁰ The sometimes grisly deaths of Fisher's persecutors neatly paralleled this tradition of saintly revenge.

This set of tales put the finishing touches on the book's case for Fisher's canonization. Since the traditional stories, especially the recounting of the deaths of the saint's enemies, required little adaptation to fit Fisher's circumstances, the link forged between the bishop and the unquestioned saints of centuries gone by was all the stronger. This was perhaps the most telling argument which could be made for Fisher's qualifications for sainthood, for the miserable lives and deaths of his persecutors firmly established that the bishop had a tangible, proven kinship with the heavenly fraternity.

In essence, *The Life of John Fisher* is equivalent to Ro. Ba.'s work on More, with the authors or editors, at the last, moving from the circumspect to the blatant in their bid for the bishop's sainthood. Indeed, there was even a parallel

¹¹⁰ Ward, *Miracles*, p. 68.

in the development of sources. At the centre of the work lay a core of information from a man who knew his subject personally and wrote a memoir of what he considered to be an exemplary Christian, a man whose life was worth emulating. This source was Roper for Thomas More and Rastell for John Fisher. Surrounding this nucleus of information were a group of stories which had been gleaned from people who knew the subjects, but were recorded by someone who did not have More's or Fisher's acquaintance. Harpsfield and Stapleton occupied this niche for More, while the Cambridge correspondent filled it for Fisher. These second-hand anecdotes, while they kept their subjects earthbound for the most part, tended to idealize certain aspects of the men's personalities, so that the figures both emerged as paragons of Christianity who led blameless lives until their unjust executions. The closing contributors, Ro. Ba. for More and the unknown one for Fisher, had the job of adding the last strokes of the brush to complete the picture of sanctity. Their miraculous tales provided the final proof that More and Fisher belonged among the saints.

The Catholic biographies of Thomas More became increasingly hagiographic as the years passed, until they bore a great resemblance to the medieval saints' lives. Roper produced a More whose spotless character and unyielding convictions made him an inspiration for Catholics of this world, while Harpsfield intensified this image, turning More into a paragon of

Christianity. Stapleton and Ro. Ba. both marked More as a saint, introducing miracles into his story to reinforce their argument.¹¹¹

Similar treatment was granted to John Fisher, who in Roper functioned almost in the role of an expert witness called in to verify the Nun of Kent's legitimacy. Subsequent authors expanded Fisher's character in order that he might lend a clerical air to Thomas More, until Stapleton and Ro. Ba. expounded at great length the bishop's sanctity. In this respect, Fisher became the ideal partner for More; as a member of the Church hierarchy, he had a stronger initial claim on sainthood than More, who had the burden of being a layman to overcome. The closer in character that More and Fisher appeared, the greater was the chance that the reader would come to associate Fisher's official holiness with More's life.

Running through these works, however, was a element which tempered their hagiographic tendencies. More's humanity was never swallowed up by the increasing emphasis on his saintly characteristics, because of the Renaissance changes in the craft of biography which stressed secular existence. Renaissance biographers sought to illustrate the whole of their subjects' lives, not just those aspects which made the person worthy of sainthood. In the More biographies, this was largely due to Roper's personal memories of his father-in-law, which were incorporated into all subsequent works. Even Stapleton and Ro. Ba. did not

¹¹¹ Anderegg, "Tradition," p. 25.

excise these details, but instead worked their miracles into the existing structure set down by Roper. The end result was a collection of books which gradually took on a medieval flavour while still retaining strong links to the prevalent literary trends.

The same effect took place in the development of the *Life of Fisher*. William Rastell provided the core information on Fisher's life which incontrovertibly established his humanity. While the Cambridge correspondent and the anonymous miracle-author expanded Fisher's reputation and legend into that of a saint, their trappings did not obliterate that central portrait which presented a man, devout and practically flawless, but a mortal man nonetheless. John Fisher remained a composite character, and was never reduced to a one-dimensional miracle-worker like so many medieval saints.

Entirely different estimations of More and Fisher were produced by three Protestant writers, Edward Hall, Raphael Holinshed, and John Foxe. The first two, Hall and Holinshed, were general chroniclers, respectively composing *Hall's Chronicle of England* and *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, while Foxe penned a record of martyrs palatable to Protestantism, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*.¹¹² None of these writers dealt with More and Fisher in nearly as much detail as the biographers, for their eyes were on the

¹¹² Edward Hall, *Chronicle of England*, 1550; John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, Vol. V, (New York: AMS Press, 1965, 1559); Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, (London: for J. Johnson *et. al.*, 1808, 1586).

larger picture of the whole of English history up to their present. Nonetheless, their books contain capsule portraits of the two men which are oddly complex, especially given their brevity. The images of More and Fisher created by these writers were often reproduced by later writers.

None of the authors hated More and Fisher as much as the Catholics loved them. Even though they died for a faith the writers despised, there was a certain admiring tone in these works, which stemmed from the Renaissance urge to incorporate into the account all aspects of the subject's life, whether or not they were relevant to the author's thesis.

Although Edward Hall died in 1547, his *Chronicle of England* was completed and published in 1550 by Richard Grafton. In 1555, it was banned by Queen Mary, on account of its laudatory passages on "the triumphant reigne of Kyng Henry the VIII."¹¹³ Given Hall's stance on Henry, his opinion of More was oddly ambivalent, for he commented disparagingly that More was a great persecutor of those who disliked the Pope, yet, in the same sentence, remarked on the man's great learning. In the end, Hall was unable to decide whether More was "a foolishe wyseman, or a wyse foolishman." He claimed that More had a great fondness for wordplay and witticisms and could never pass up a chance to slip a joke or a snide remark into a conversation. Hall reinforced this by listing several examples of More's gibes during his last days, ending with a description

¹¹³ Mandell Creighton, "Edward Hall," *DNB*, Vol. VIII, p. 947; *Hall's Chronicle*, p. 1.

of how he laid his beard carefully in front of the block to prevent the executioner from cutting it. "Thus," wrote Hall, "wyth a mocke he ended his lyfe."¹¹⁴

Hall presented an unusual opinion of More. He was obviously not enamoured of the man, yet he could not bring himself to condemn More out of hand. He instead resorted to building up More's love of word-craft until it dominated his personality, thereby reducing his significance to that of a mere jester. In assaulting More's character in this fashion, Hall could still acknowledge More's education and erudition while diminishing the importance of his sacrifice. To Hall, More was an intelligent man whose love of the ridiculous led him to waste his life for the sake of a joke and a mistaken religious conviction.¹¹⁵

Of John Fisher's characteristics, Hall addressed the bishop's reputation for wisdom as well as his faith. The author did not so much grudgingly praise these as subtly deride them. In his recounting of Fisher's death, Hall observed that the bishop was "accoumpted learned, and that very notably learned," yet was still deceived by the Nun of Kent. Hall followed this volley with the snide comment that it was "wonderful that a man beyng lerned should be so blind in the

¹¹⁴ *Hall's Chronicle*, fol. 226v.

¹¹⁵ Warren W. Wooden, "Thomas More in Hostile Hands: the English Image of More In Protestant Literature of the Renaissance," *Moreana* XIX, Vol. 76, Dec 1982. p. 81.

scriptures of God that proveth the supreme authoritie of princes so manyfestly."¹¹⁶

With these words, Hall acknowledged Fisher in much the same way he treated More, by ridiculing a couple of the man's traits to the point of making his entire character seem trivial. Fisher was even less important to Hall than was More and thus the chronicler felt no compunction in degrading the bishop with the most biting sarcasm. Unlike More, whose secular reputation demanded a little more circumspection, Fisher could be attacked without reservation, for he was an ordained member of the Protestants' ecclesiastical enemies.

John Foxe (1517-1587), was a learned man, a tutor to the grandchildren of the Duke of Norfolk until Queen Mary's accession to the throne in 1553, when he prudently left the country. Returning in 1559, under Protestant Elizabeth, he at once set to work on his *Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, a masterpiece which was tremendously influential in its day as well as in later years. The more immediate benefits for Foxe were the lifelong friendship of the queen and the position of rector of Shipton, which included a generous stipend from Salisbury Cathedral.¹¹⁷

The Acts and Monuments elaborated slightly on Hall's evaluation, expanding upon both the positive and negative aspects of More's personality.

¹¹⁶ Edward Hall, *Henry VIII*, Vol. II, Charles Whibley, ed. (London, 1904) pp. 264-265.

¹¹⁷ J.F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970) pp. 37-39, 66-67.

On the one hand, Foxe castigated More as a "wretched enemy against the truth of the gospel" and enumerated all the good Protestants whom he had brought to ruin. Foxe also retold the stories of More's imprisoning Protestants in his house at Chelsea and torturing them until he forced from them a confession of heresy. One man, John Tewkesbury, when arrested, so confounded his examiners with his knowledge of Scripture and Protestant theology that they could not persuade him to confess and reveal other Protestants as well. Tewkesbury was thus sent to More's house, where he was locked in the stocks for six days, then tied to a tree and flogged. Still he remained steadfast and had to be sent to the torturers of the Tower. Revelling in More's death, Foxe observed that "they that stain their hands with blood, seldom do they bring their bodies dry to the grave."¹¹⁸

Foxe pulled no punches in portraying More as a heartless persecutor of Protestants. From these stories, it appeared that the author had assessed More as a wholly evil villain, a champion of the godless papacy. Indeed, the vast majority of Foxe's references to More fell into this category. In his coverage of More's death, however, Foxe regarded the ex-Chancellor in a slightly different light.

Foxe did acknowledge Hall's dilemma of being unable to judge More's wisdom or foolishness, quoting that passage in full. Furthermore, he recognized the likelihood of More's being sainted in the next century and posited that even

¹¹⁸ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, Vol. V, p. 99, Vol. IV, p. 69, Vol. V. p. 99.

though he would never be accepted as a martyr in "Christ's kingdom," he would certainly be welcome in the pope's, after such meritorious service.¹¹⁹

Foxe, therefore, adopted a curiously tempered view of More. Writing of the Protestant martyrs as he did, Foxe had even more reason to vilify More than did Edward Hall. The martyrologist, however, softened his attacks with Hall's account of More's wit, from which emerged the picture of a frivolous joker. More must have presented quite the conundrum to Foxe. On the one hand, More was an ardent opponent of everything Foxe held sacred, a man deserving only the strongest condemnation. On the other, More was a learned man, well-respected for his intellectual achievements. The first aspect was no doubt the easier for Foxe to address, for it fitted perfectly with his overall plan of uplifting Protestantism and denigrating Roman Catholicism. The other facet proved a knottier problem, for Foxe had no desire to sing More's praises. The author thus adopted a more devious approach, playing down More's intelligence by painting him as a mocker and a foolish joker.

There was no need for Foxe to mention anything complimentary about More, for he was a committed Protestant, with all the weight of the Elizabethan Settlement and the powerful queen's favour behind him. While he was hardly sympathetic towards More, he did take care to give More credit for his devotion to his religion. In Foxe's eyes, it was both admirable that More was so ardent in

¹¹⁹ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, pp. 99-100.

his love of God and unfortunate because that zeal was so misguided.¹²⁰ In addition, his comment on the probability of More's canonization has a tone of grudging respect about it, as though Foxe was gloomily acknowledging More's popularity among Catholics.

The martyrologist addressed John Fisher in a different manner. In his recounting of Fisher's demise, Foxe noted that some thought well of the bishop for his wisdom and personal virtue. With that brief acknowledgement, Foxe plunged into a scathing assault on Fisher's life and character, lamenting the fact that such a learned man "should be so far drowned in superstition...so obstinate in his ignorance." Worst of all, Foxe wrote, was "that he so abused the learning he had, to such cruelty as he did." The author also had a place for Fisher at the end of his book, in a listing of persecutors and their dreadful fates. He remarked that the "sword of God's vengeance" struck off the bishop's head due to his lack of consideration of the lives of others.¹²¹

Perhaps because he was a member of the clergy, Foxe was harder on Fisher than on More. Having little reputation for accomplishment outside the ecclesiastical world, Fisher was more clearly defined as a sworn foe of the Protestant cause. While the bishop was an educated man, Foxe considered

¹²⁰ Wooden, "Hostile Hands," p.85.

¹²¹ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, Vol V, p. 99; Vol. VIII, p. 635.

Fisher's primary characteristic to be his priestly status, an attribute which greatly overshadowed any reputation for knowledge he may have had.

Raphael Holinshed (d. 1580?), was a chronicler by trade, spending a good part of his life working on the massive *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. Although sections of the book were written by others, Holinshed oversaw their work and composed the major part of the work himself. It was published in 1578, two years before its primary author's death. A second, updated edition came out in 1586-87, but again, Holinshed's own writing formed the core of the work.¹²²

Holinshed's Chronicle also adopted an irresolute view of More. The author quoted Hall's demeaning summary of More's eleventh-hour jests, but then proceeded to explain why he should not be entirely dismissed. Holinshed argued that More was "a man for his zeale to be honored, but for his religion to be abhorred." Commenting on More's successful career and happy family life, this author noted that God showers blessings on everyone, good and evil alike, but in the end, evil men such as More are inevitably cast down, no matter how fruitful their lives.¹²³

In essence, Holinshed thought that More's life had value to Protestants in that it taught the moral lesson of keeping the same level of faith in God that

¹²² Sidney Lee, "Raphael Holinshed," *DNB*, Vol IX, pp. 1024-1025.

¹²³ Holinshed, *Chronicles*, pp. 793-795.

More did in the Pope. While Foxe was realistic enough to realize More's appeal to English Catholics, Holinshed developed this idea a little further. According to Holinshed, More served not only as a warning against the evils of belief in the papacy, but also as a positive role model, exhorting Protestants to strive for a conviction in their own religion as deep as that of Thomas More.

Holinshed barely mentioned John Fisher at all. The first recording of the bishop's actions was in connection with the Nun of Kent, in which Fisher's reputation served as a yardstick. So skillful was Elizabeth Barton's deception, that "not onelie the simple, but also the wise and learned sort" such as "Iohn Fisher bishop of Rochester" were fooled by her lies.¹²⁴

In this way, Holinshed employed Fisher in a curious inversion of his role in the Catholic biographies of More. Instead of his wisdom and learning adding force to the case of More's sanctity, as in Harpsfield, they served to highlight Elizabeth Barton's talent at deceit and fraud. Holinshed assumed the Nun to be a false prophet, and the very fact that Fisher was known to be a wise man reinforced this contention, for if the bishop, in spite of his wisdom, was still beguiled by the Nun, then she and her associates must have been swindlers of the highest order.

When Holinshed next mentioned Fisher, it was merely to record the bishop's death. The author noted that Fisher was "of manie sore lamented, for he

¹²⁴ Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p. 791.

was reported to be a man of great learning, and of a very good life." Holinshed also inserted a wry comment to the effect that Fisher's cardinal's hat, by the time of his execution, had been sent as far as Calais, "but the head was off before the hat was on: so that they met not."¹²⁵

In the Elizabeth Barton affair, Fisher's education and reputation were very important to Holinshed and he treated them accordingly. It was contrary to his purpose, however, to do so when writing of the man's execution. Therefore, by use of the word "reported," Holinshed distanced himself from this favourable opinion of the bishop, laying the responsibility for that assessment squarely on other, unspecified shoulders. The jest made at Fisher's expense also helped remove from the author any hint of sympathy for a traitor.

To Holinshed, Thomas More was a man whose life and death held some meaning to Protestants; John Fisher enjoyed no such distinction. Fisher's status as a bishop prevented his story from becoming an effective admonitory example to Protestants. More had some small hope of redemption all through life; Fisher, in contrast, was a lost soul from the day he entered holy orders.

In all three of these works, Thomas More occupies an unusual position of being at once a figure of derision and of guarded admiration. Hall, Foxe, and Holinshed agreed that More was a heretic whose death accomplished nothing. Yet they did not insult, beat down and discard him to the same extent that the

¹²⁵ Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p. 793.

Catholics raised him on high and sang his saintly praises. In his rather feeble attempt to discredit More, Hall was obliged to turn him into a trivial joker, instead of portraying him as an infernal spawn of Satan. Foxe and Holinshed respected him for his dedication to his religion, even though he was devoted to a false ideal.

The way in which these three authors approached John Fisher, however, was much more sharply defined. As a clergyman, Fisher was clearly the enemy and so rigid was he in his defence of the Catholic Church that he proved an easy target for Protestant pens. Hall simply treated him in the same fashion as More, deriding and sneering him into obscurity. Foxe took a more serious view of Fisher, treating him as a dangerous foe of England, damned by God for his unspeakable acts in the Pope's service. Holinshed, on the other hand, adopted a much more literary use of the man, employing his wisdom to emphasize the Maid of Kent's craftiness, then dismissing him with a jest when he was no longer needed.

Hall, Foxe, and Holinshed were all affected by the Renaissance trends in biography which compelled authors to record the complete, unabridged life of their subject. Even though they began their examinations of More from a decidedly prejudiced position, they could not thoroughly maintain this viewpoint as their accounts progressed. More's qualities of education, wit, and loyalty proved too pervasive for these authors to ignore, and while Hall's

derogatory comments remained an integral part of the literature, they were softened by the more moderate judgements of Foxe and Holinshed. There was a mysterious quality to Thomas More, something about his life that touched a chord in even such pious Protestants as John Foxe. The pathos of the successful man brought so low by his erroneous religious convictions touched a chord in these writers, preventing them from heaping savage vituperation upon his severed head.

John Fisher was not accorded as balanced a treatment as More for a number of reasons, the first being that the bishop simply had not been as important in life as the ex-Lord Chancellor. Aside from More's political career, he had been in the public eye as a lawyer and scholar, while Fisher had led a much more retired life. To the chroniclers, he merited much less attention than the higher-profile More. Secondly, Fisher was one of the most fervently devout clergymen of his day. That deep commitment to Roman Catholicism rendered him useless as a cautionary tale to Protestants, for he had formally cast himself beyond redemption. These two factors caused the chroniclers to grant the bishop less detail in their narratives; they still covered the most significant aspects of his personality in obeisance to biographical convention, but overshadowed his learning with his priestly status, thereby creating an easy target for ridicule and dismissal.

The last book which merits mention is a rather special case. Around 1626, Cresacre More¹²⁶ published *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore*. Such a late work would normally fall outside the boundaries of this paper, but it demands attention for one essential reason. This work had the widest distribution of all the biographies, being readily available from the time of its first publication through to the nineteenth century. Although Roper was published at intervals up to 1817, this *Life* was printed as late as 1828. Furthermore, C. More's book was comprised not only of the complete text of Roper, but also of the first English translation of the bulk of Stapleton as well as some original material.¹²⁷ In all ways, this last work offered the nineteenth-century reader a much more complete picture of More.

Cresacre More was the great-grandson of the ex-Lord Chancellor. His family had remained staunchly Catholic, many of them entering the priesthood, despite continuing persecution from the authorities. The only son of his family to have children, C. More also was frequently harassed by the government on account of his religion. His fortunes varied considerably over the course of his life, for while he underwent hardship at some points, he eventually became wealthy enough to establish a Benedictine convent at Cambrai. He died in 1649, secure in the state of his soul.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Anderegg, "Tradition," pp. 17-20.

¹²⁷ Sidney Lee, "Sir Thomas More," *DNB*, Vol. XIII, p. 896.

¹²⁸ Anderegg, "Tradition," pp. 16-17.

C. More produced quite a comprehensive portrait of Sir Thomas More through his complete use of Roper and a slightly edited translation of Stapleton.¹²⁹ From the latter he modified such passages which implied that More yearned for martyrdom so that they instead revealed a man resolute in his faith, but not caring a whit for sainthood. At one point in his narrative, Stapleton wrote at great length that More, the better to attain martyrdom, longed to die on that day which was both the anniversary of the translation of St. Thomas Becket, More's patron saint, and the octave-day of St. Peter, whose authority as the first pope Henry had usurped. Cresacre More simply explained this as a desire of More to die on the "eaue of his speciall patron."¹³⁰

The image of More which emerged from his descendant's hands was more reminiscent of Harspfield's than any other. From Roper, Cresacre garnered the picture of the worthiest of men, one who lived a life worth emulating, while from Stapleton he gathered the stories surrounding a saint. Cresacre openly told his readers the reasoning behind this particular construction; his line of the family having been specifically blessed by More, he wished to set down a record of the man's life "for the spirituall [benefit] of my selfe and my Children." Cresacre's was thus a very personal book, intended to be read primarily by the family, in order to help sustain his family's faith with this tale of their heroic

¹²⁹ Anderegg, "Tradition," p. 22.

¹³⁰ Cresacre More, *Life*, p. 348.

ancestor. Consequently, the characterization of More which descended to the nineteenth century depicted a man who lived thoroughly in the world, but whose unshakeable religious beliefs permeated his every deed, until he was forced to choose between the demands of the world and those of his soul. He elected to remain true to the tenets of his faith and was thus rewarded with admittance into the ranks of God's chosen.

In summation, the common theme uniting all these authors was the desire to portray as complete a picture of Thomas More as possible without undercutting their own agendas. Driven by the compulsion to record the whole of More's life, the Catholic writers produced a portrait of a very human saint, while the Protestants depicted a man misguided, yet outstanding, committed, and steadfast in his beliefs. The change in the art of biography caused the Catholics to play down More's connection with the divine and the Protestants to soften their condemnation of him.

This new biographic convention also touched upon the way in which these authors presented John Fisher. While he was a rather flat character in the Catholic biographies of More, fulfilling the limited function of providing More with an ecclesiastical counterpart, he still emerged with a little depth. His full-length biography followed much the same lines as Stapleton's and Ro. Ba.'s, being hagiographic while remaining human. The Protestant writers treated the bishop much more harshly than they did More, yet still acknowledged his

towering reputation for wisdom and virtue, even though it ran against their own purposes.

Thomas More and John Fisher continued to arouse controversy and contention for many years after their deaths. To the Catholic writers, they were symbols of the English spirit of steadfast resistance to the heresy and dark times of the Protestant ascendancy. They were heroes of recent memory in a time when English Catholics desperately needed them. To Protestants, More was an honourable enemy, to be accorded respect for his loyalty, but to be exhibited as an example of the danger of misplaced devotion, while Fisher was to be summarily dismissed as a thoroughly lost cause. The key to understanding these complex and compelling stories is in the investigation of the authors who first recorded them. More and Fisher brought out the passion and intensity which pervaded the religious crises of the age, feelings reflected in their biographies and the chronicles of the day.

Chapter Three

More and Fisher in the Nineteenth Century

In the two hundred years separating the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the discipline of history continued to evolve. The choice of secular topics continued to expand, for Lord Clarendon (1609-1674) was instrumental in the moving of historical writing past the restrictions placed upon it by a solely religious outlook. The great writers of the eighteenth century, such as David Hume (1711-1776) and Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) still believed that history primarily served an instructive role, but placed a far greater importance on the teaching of morality for the mundane world rather than the spiritual. These latter writers also pioneered in England the philosophical component of history, which required the historian to present his facts in such a way that they communicated a comforting and enlightening message to the reader. This new addition to the discipline heralded the development of the whig interpretation of history in the nineteenth century.¹³¹

In the nineteenth century, the discipline of history truly came into its own, for the Victorians were exceptionally interested in the past. The then-high tide of nationalism encouraged people to study and take pride in their history and the English were justifiably proud that their country had escaped the

¹³¹ J.R. Hale, ed., *The Evolution of British Historiography* (New York: Meridian, 1964) pp. 20-22.

violence of a French Revolution as well as the bloodshed of the 1848 uprisings.¹³² Victorians tended to use history to affirm the value and worth of their own society, finding in the past justification for their various philosophies and ideologies.¹³³ They were also quite cognisant, perhaps for the first time, that theirs was an age in transition from the past to the future.¹³⁴ Presented with such a malleable, constantly changing world, the Victorians concluded that such a well-ordered society as theirs could never have occurred through mere happenstance. Therefore, to explain their place in the world and to perhaps obtain a glimpse of things to come, thinkers and historians searched for some sort of guiding force which directed and controlled the course of human history.

Most nineteenth-century writers found a philosophical haven in the whig interpretation of history. This philosophy's adherents approached the past with the notion of steady historical progress, each generation successively improving on the previous in all aspects of human achievement. The nineteenth century represented the highest point humanity had yet reached. Whig historians, therefore, tended to analyse past events in light of their contribution to the

¹³² John Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983) p. 144.

¹³³ Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985) p. xiv.

¹³⁴ A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (London: Yale University Press, 1985) p. 6.

overall betterment of civilisation, praising those which were beneficial and heartily condemning any inhibiting progress.¹³⁵

As in the sixteenth century, history in this period was written with a strong didactic quality, for historians saw themselves not only as interpreters of the past, but teachers as well. Historical writing had a pervasive moral overtone, for its creators strove to illuminate examples of such qualities as noble conduct, honour, and good government, while simultaneously detailing and denigrating their opposites. With tales of virtue, historians hoped to help strengthen the moral fibre of Great Britain's population as a whole,¹³⁶ but they spoke especially to the current and future members of the educated governing classes. Through the study of history, civil servants and government officials could glean the secrets of both good and bad administration, as well as the ability to make sound moral judgements on complex issues.¹³⁷

Aside from scholarly ambitions, historians also sought to entertain. Many attempted to write in a lively, imaginative style designed to amuse as well as instruct. Lord Macaulay even declared that he would “not be satisfied unless [his work] supersede[d] the latest fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies.” Through the use of literary devices, historians strove to render their

¹³⁵ Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, pp. 14, 12.

¹³⁶ Jann, *Art and Science*, pp. 207-208.

¹³⁷ Hamburger, *Whig Tradition*, pp. 104-105.

material clearly, and in a manner appealing to the reader. This allowed them to impart their lessons that much more forcefully.¹³⁸

A particular area of interest for certain whig historians was the ancient constitution, a belief that the roots of the English system of government could be traced back in a steady line over a thousand years to the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The British took pride in their Parliament, considering it one of the hallmarks of their great society. The constitutional historians thus investigated the development of the British government in great detail, noting with approval those rulers who through their legislation helped the constitution mature and heartily condemning those who collected power into their own hands, wielding it with dictatorial authority.¹³⁹

The mid-nineteenth century saw history enter the universities as a discipline in its own right. In 1853, Oxford established the School of Law and Modern History, which was later split into separate schools for its respective disciplines. Cambridge taught history as a part of the Moral Science Tripos, until the Historical Tripos was created in 1873.¹⁴⁰ Although the universities had a profound influence in all fields of historical inquiry, Reformation studies were not affected to the same degree, for the simple reason that the sixteenth century

¹³⁸ Jann, *Art and Science*, p. 85

¹³⁹ Burrow, *Liberal Descent*, p. 126.

¹⁴⁰ Reba N. Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) p. 54.

was not thought to be suitable for the average student. The political upheavals and vicious "religious discussions" were deemed too controversial and complicated to effectively teach moral judgement.¹⁴¹

Far more instrumental in the development of Reformation history was the German historian Leopold von Ranke. He placed emphasis on total reliance on sources contemporary to the period under study and a complete absence of judgement or bias on the part of the historian. Ranke maintained that a complete examination of all the extant sources would, by itself, present a complete portrait of the past;¹⁴² in essence, the whole was the sum of its parts. From Ranke sprang a groups of historians who were proud to call themselves "scientific." These scholars placed paramount importance on a thorough examination of sources and facts, proclaiming that this research bound their conclusions in the iron bands of truth ascribed to the scientist of the physical world. Historians took pride in claims of impartiality, granted through unbiased reporting on the information found in their sources. The reality was that, while there was more acknowledgement of sources, the didactic, judgmental nature of the discipline did not falter in its importance.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Burrow, *Descent*, p. 99.

¹⁴² G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959) p. 74.

¹⁴³ Jann, *Art and Science*, pp. xxiv-xxv.

While Protestant whiggish history was entering the universities, Catholicism and Catholic history also underwent revivals in the later nineteenth century. In the early decades of the century, English Catholics were second-class citizens. Their religion was only marginally legal and popular opinion was hard against them. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 was the first in a series of reforming legislation, which gradually granted Catholics greater freedom over the course of the century. A second major step towards religious freedom was the 1850-51 papal bull which re-established the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England. The subsequent surge of converts and the Catholic-tinged Oxford Movement aroused yet another swell of intolerance on the part of Protestants. Despite this new surge of dislike, the Protestant government continued to pass laws benefiting Roman Catholics, and as the century wore on, anti-Catholic sentiment slowly dulled into toleration. This may have been partially due to the fact that the number of Catholics in England had actually dropped from the 1850s to the 1870s. After the initial rush, Catholicism lost ground in the late nineteenth century, to the point where Protestants did not see it posing as much of a threat as it had in the past.¹⁴⁴

In this slightly more liberal, but still charged atmosphere, there developed a branch of higher education decidedly Catholic in tone. All through the century, Catholics were prohibited from attending Oxford and Cambridge

¹⁴⁴ Walter L. Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982) pp. 4-5, 7, 212-217.

without special permission from the universities. In fact, the Church itself discouraged such applications, due to the fact that the universities were "pervaded by Protestant opinion." To fill the gap, a Catholic University College was established in 1875. Unfortunately for its supporters, it was horribly mismanaged almost from the day it opened its doors and it was shut down in disgrace in 1882. By 1895, however, the university powers of Oxford and Cambridge decided to offer admission to Catholics, while the Catholic hierarchy in turn had determined that the Anglican stranglehold on both institutions had been ended, leaving them at last morally acceptable.¹⁴⁵ At last given a voice in the universities, Catholics demanded histories which would teach Catholic students according to their traditional religious morality. Just as Protestant students had been instructed through history, so now were more Catholics. History's didactic nature remained constant.

Throughout this period, Thomas More and John Fisher were treated in a variety of ways by a large number of historians. Although each individual author emphasized different aspects of More's and Fisher's characters and actions, they all saw the two as excellent case studies for the teaching of personal conduct and the consequences of difficult moral decisions. Like their professional ancestors, nineteenth-century historians used More and Fisher to drive home their lessons for living. The authors under discussion below were

¹⁴⁵ Edward Norman, *The English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) pp. 296-297, 299-300.

selected from the entire nineteenth century, from its early, pre-Victorian days to the first years of the twentieth century. Included are many of the major historians of the day, representing the whig interpretation, constitutional historians, as well as early- and late-century Roman Catholic writers on the Reformation.

In many ways, John Lingard, D.D. (1771-1851) was an unusual specimen of Roman Catholic priest. Educated at the English College at Douay, he was ordained in 1795 and taught in various Catholic colleges. In 1811, desiring a more peaceful mode of life, he became the vicar of the tiny village of Hornby, Lancashire, where he built his own chapel and remained contentedly for the rest of his days. It was from Hornby that Lingard began in 1819 to produce his multivolume *A History of England from the First Invasion by the Romans*. The fourth volume, concerning Henry VIII and Edward VI, appeared in 1820. Lingard continued to revise and expand his work until his death, with a last edition issued posthumously.¹⁴⁶

As befits a Catholic, Lingard regarded More and Fisher in a sympathetic light, writing that not only England, but all of Europe saw them as the leaders of those opposing the divorce. Having established their credentials, Lingard moved on to detail their imprisonment, trials and executions. In essence, this section was a comparison between the character of the king and of More and Fisher,

¹⁴⁶ Thompson Cooper, "John Lingard, D.D." *DNB*, Vol. XI, pp. 1999-1201.

Henry being revealed as a bullying thug reacting violently against men of intelligence and principle. Formerly, Henry had trusted both men implicitly; More was Wolsey's successor as Lord Chancellor, while Fisher had been both a father-figure and a source of great pride to the young king. When circumstances compelled the bishop to stand against his king, however, Lingard posited that Henry adopted with pleasure the task of punishing his former friend.¹⁴⁷

Lingard further illustrated the king's petty nature in his accounts of the trials and executions. So afraid was Henry of More's oratorical skills and popularity that he had the charges couched in complex terminology designed to make refutation difficult, if not impossible. More, Lingard asserted, disproved the charge in "a long and eloquent address," but was convicted anyway. As for Fisher, Lingard presented the bishop's appointment to the cardinalate as an example of his worthiness, while the same honour drove Henry into a fury, causing him to order the defilement of Fisher's body; it was stripped naked and left on display on the scaffold.¹⁴⁸

One aspect of his writing which Lingard took great pains over was the moderate tone he adopted when dealing with religiously sensitive subjects. He took care to "defend the catholics, but not so as to hurt the feelings of the

¹⁴⁷ John Lingard, *A History of England From the First Invasion By the Romans*, Vol. VI (London: J. Mawman, 1825) pp. 278, 274.

¹⁴⁸ Lingard, *History*, pp. 289, 288.

protestants" and tried to create a book "as should be read by protestants."¹⁴⁹

With this conciliatory attitude, it becomes apparent why Lingard treated More and Fisher as he did. Lingard conveyed his opinion on the supremacy by structuring it in the form of a comparison of character, Henry's on the one side with More's and Fisher's on the other. The king, embodying the supremacy, was shown to be little more than a bully, fearful and small-minded, even though he wielded the highest authority in the land. The two condemned men, Lingard's champions of the church, remained honest, dignified, and honourable throughout, standing unmoved in the terrible storm of the king's wrath.

This technique permitted Lingard to make clear his stance on the supremacy without grossly offending either his Roman Catholic or Protestant audiences. He could vilify Henry VIII while simultaneously praising More and Fisher, by extension decrying the Supremacy and exalting the Church of Rome. Above all, he accomplished this by employing moderate language and without casting a partisan shadow over the whole. Given both his retiring nature and his religion's precarious standing in England at the time, this was obviously an important consideration to Lingard.

While Lingard was quietly Catholic, Henry Hallam (1777-1859) was one of the century's earliest exponents of Protestant whig history. He practised law for some years before accepting a government position which paid a generous

¹⁴⁹ John Lingard, quoted in Donald F. Shea, *The English Ranke: John Lingard* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969) p. 28.

stipend for modest duties. The resulting free time he devoted to scholarship, in 1827 completing *The Constitutional History of England From the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II*, which bears the unmistakable stamp of his legal background.¹⁵⁰

To clearly render Hallam's attitudes to More and Fisher, a brief summary of his thoughts on the Reformation and Henry VIII is in order. Like any good whig historian, Hallam firmly believed in the righteousness of the Reformation, as revealed by his reference to Protestant reformers as "enemies of ancient superstition." That he also hated Henry VIII is borne out by his conjecture that the sole reason that such a tyrannical monarch was not savagely despised by his contemporaries was that he did tremendously beneficent work in cutting England out of the Catholic communion.¹⁵¹

In a work of such vast proportions, Thomas More and John Fisher occupied very small spaces indeed. Hallam covered their executions in a single paragraph, with a few brief mentions elsewhere in the same chapter. In assessing their characters, he upheld Bishop Fisher as "almost the only inflexibly honest churchman...in that age," while More's "name can ask no epithet." He also included a short passage on More's astute defence against the Act of Succession, lauding his willingness to acknowledge Anne's children as heirs

¹⁵⁰ Leslie Stephen, "Henry Hallam," *DNB*, Vol. VIII, p. 980.

¹⁵¹ Henry Hallam, *The Constitutional History of England From the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II* (London: Murray, 1870) pp. 71, 40-41.

while refusing the Oath of Supremacy. In an analysis of More's opinion on the divorce, Hallam concluded that More condoned the procedure, though without enthusiasm. As long as Henry acknowledged the authority of the Pope to decide his case, More supported the king; only when the latter began investing himself with papal power did the Lord Chancellor turn away from the king.¹⁵²

Of greater importance to Hallam, however, was the nature of the statutes under which the two had been condemned. As an historian primarily interested in the development of English law and government, Hallam was of the opinion that More and Fisher had been convicted illegally. The king, desirous of the blood of those who stood against him, forced the Act of Succession through the Commons, leading Hallam to label it an "arbitrary invasion of the law" instead of a mere modification. Not only had More and Fisher not deserved their deaths; they had been executed without the proper application of law.¹⁵³

In the first analysis, it appears that Hallam took an exceedingly odd attitude to More and Fisher, in that he believed the Reformation to have been a good thing, while simultaneously damning the execution of two of its most outspoken opponents. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that Hallam granted less significance to religious changes than the workings of government and the passing of laws. Not concerning himself as much with

¹⁵² Hallam, *Constitutional History*, pp. 35, 60.

¹⁵³ Hallam, *Constitutional History*, p. 35.

religion, --and therefore neglecting Fisher-- he instead concentrated on More's legal dexterity, praising both his trial defence and the precision with which he defined his position on the Great Matter. More and Fisher's most important role, however, was their status as enemies of the king, for Hallam used them to illustrate the arrogant way in which Henry treated both the law and Parliament. For this author, the greatest crime in this series of events was the fact that the king had compelled the House of Commons to approve his quest for personal vengeance.

A contemporary of Hallam was Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), better known as Lord Macaulay, who is justly famous as one of the most influential historians of the nineteenth century. With his four-volume *History of England to the Death of William III*, published between 1848 and 1855, and the enormous number of essays he wrote for the *Edinburgh Review*, he made an immense contribution to the ascendancy of the whig interpretation of history.¹⁵⁴ As the majority of Macaulay's work concerned the seventeenth and subsequent centuries, he made relatively little reference to More and none at all to Fisher. Nevertheless, from a perusal of scattered passages, one may discern Macaulay's opinion of the ex-Chancellor. His evaluation was echoed in many later works by other writers, possibly due to Macaulay's giant reputation in the field.

¹⁵⁴ Owen Dudley Edwards, *Macaulay* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988) pp. ix-x; Christopher Parker *The English Historical Tradition Since 1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1990) p. 4.

In his 1828 review of Hallam's *Constitutional History*, Macaulay expounded upon Henry VIII and the English Reformation. Although the long-term effects of the Reformation were beneficial, the event originated with a king, "despotism itself personified," and a host of other unsavoury elements who wrestled the country from the "yoke of Rome." The Reformation in England, according to Macaulay, had "sprung from brutal passion" and was "nurtured by selfish policy." Henry cared only to rid himself of Catharine of Aragon by whatever means possible. Once the separation had been achieved, Henry suppressed both religious factions with equal severity, for he preferred a church Catholic in all respects save the Pope. It was only when faced with the threat of open rebellion that he grudgingly elected to make England a Protestant country.¹⁵⁵

More made an appearance in a passage in which Macaulay compared the upheavals of the Reformation with those of the French Revolution. The historian wrote that while the Reformation had "overthrown deeply seated errors," it had also shaken the very foundations of the entire society. Thomas More, who had in the *Utopia* tacitly denounced religious persecution, was himself forced into

¹⁵⁵ Lord Macaulay, "Hallam's *Constitutional History*," in *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, Vol. I, F.C. Montague ed. (London: Methuen, 1903) pp. 127-132; Lord Macaulay, *History of England to the Death of William III*, Vol. I (London: Heron Books, 1967) p. 39.

carrying out that role in reaction to the violent measures taken by Protestant reformers.¹⁵⁶

In another essay, a review of von Ranke's *History of the Popes*, Macaulay used Thomas More as an example in a discussion on faith and science. He argued that More, a "choice specimen of human wisdom and virtue," was willing to die for his belief in transubstantiation, a doctrine whose "literal interpretation" was as ridiculous in the 1500s as in the 1800s. More, well aware of this, nonetheless deemed it mortally important. Macaulay concluded that "we are, therefore, unable to understand why what Sir Thomas More believed respecting transubstantiation may not be believed to the end of time by men equal in abilities and honesty to Sir Thomas More." In essence, Macaulay contended that science cannot disprove doctrines which are wholly a matter of faith.¹⁵⁷

This assertion is in curious contrast to the opinions on Catholic doctrine espoused in reference to William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury in the reign of Charles I. Laud's "understanding was narrow," he was "rash, irritable...and prone to the error, common in superstitious men, of mistaking his own peevish and malignant moods for emotions of pious zeal." Of this man, Macaulay also noted that he had drifted theologically very near to Catholicism, "with his

¹⁵⁶ Macaulay, *Historical Essays*, "Burleigh and His Times," p. 463.

¹⁵⁷ Lord Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, "Von Ranke" (London: Longmans, Green, 1883) p. 544

passion for ceremonies [and] his reverence for holidays, vigils and sacred places."¹⁵⁸

From these disparate excerpts a reasonably clear picture of Macaulay's attitude to Thomas More may be drawn. The historian held More in high esteem for his great intellectual faculties, and lamented the terrible acts committed by Protestants which had compelled the ex-Chancellor to strike out against them. This assessment carries the connotation that More was a man capable of sound rational decisions even in a time of extreme turmoil; More himself was not an unthinking religious fanatic.

The actual depth of Macaulay's respect for More's intelligence and faith was further illumined by the historian's use of him as a authority on the significance of a particular doctrine. As evinced by his assessment of Laud, Macaulay had little patience with most aspects of Catholicism and even less for those who subscribed to them. He was also satisfied that belief in such things as transubstantiation could not be affected by advances in science. The only method, therefore, of determining the strength of conviction about transubstantiation was to accept the opinion of men known for learning in these matters, in this case, Sir Thomas More.

A possible reason for Macaulay's evaluation of More lies in the whig approach to history with its central creed of a steady human progress from

¹⁵⁸ Lord Macaulay, *History of England*, pp. 70, 69.

century to century. This continuity provided occasional opportunities for the whig historian to construct possibilities of the future.¹⁵⁹ Macaulay may have been seeking a an explanation for the endurance of certain articles of faith. He was convinced that Thomas More was a man whose judgement he could trust and concluded that since More continued to believe in the ancient doctrine of transubstantiation, so too could learned men of the future. Macaulay obviously held More in very high esteem as the ex-Chancellor's intellectual abilities not only overshadowed his religion, they actually helped to validate portions of it in the historian's eyes. Over time, more historians repeated Macaulay's opinion, determining More's Catholicism less important to his character than his learning.

Hardly less influential than Macaulay was James Anthony Froude (1818-1894), who from 1856 to 1870 wrote the *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*. In this work, Froude expressed a strongly Protestant view of the Reformation, contending that not only was it a good thing, a step forward along the road of progress, but that "it had been accomplished with peculiar skill and success." This was in direct contrast with both the Catholic camp, which held that the entire Reformation was a woeful happening, and the constitutional attitude, which believed it to have been a good thing accomplished by underhanded means. As pertaining to More and Fisher,

¹⁵⁹ Hamburger, *Whig Tradition*, p. 105.

Froude proceeded from the assumption that since the Reformation was a beneficial event, any measures the government took to safeguard it were justifiable and necessary; the two dissidents therefore were indeed guilty of treason.¹⁶⁰

There was a strong tone of lamentation running through Froude's treatment of More. The historian claimed More's reputation to be the "highest...of any living man," that he was the "most illustrious prisoner" ever to be tried in Westminster Hall, and that death held no fear for him, such was his "high-tempered nature." Simultaneously, however, Froude remarked that while More in his early days was a liberal man, as he grew more religious, the "genial philosopher" became the "merciless bigot." Having established More's character, Froude wrote of his execution as a tragedy, at once saddening and uplifting, dwelling at length upon the many people who wept as he proceeded out of court after sentencing and later to the execution ground. After recounting the actual death, Froude ruminated upon Thomas More's strength of faith, emphasising with reverence his Christian "victory over death."¹⁶¹

This was an extremely complex view of More, admiration of his strength of character underscored with acknowledgement of More's intolerance towards Protestants. Odder still was his description of the execution. It appears that

¹⁶⁰ J.A. Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (London: Longmans, Green, 1898) Vol. I, p. ii; Vol. II, pp. 217, 286-287.

¹⁶¹ Froude, *History*, Vol. I, pp. 360-361; Vol. II, pp. 261, 267-268, 272-276.

Froude accepted the government's justice and fully believed that More was guilty as charged and deserved to die. Tempering this conclusion, however, was Froude's regret that More had chosen the wrong path, for through his many sterling qualities he could have contributed much to the Reformation. In a strange way then, Froude regarded More's death as an atonement for his mistakes, for he faced his exit from the sinful world as any Christian should, nobly and calmly, in the hope of forgiveness and everlasting life.

Such generous treatment Froude did not extend to Bishop John Fisher. The historian bluntly called Fisher "weak, superstitious, pedantical; [to] Protestants...even cruel." He partially blamed the bishop for his own and More's incarceration, claiming that the government would have accepted the dissidents' offer to swear to the succession, while keeping secret the fact that they had not taken the Oath of Supremacy. Fisher, however, could never have been persuaded to remain silent, leaving the Tower the government's only option. Froude also described Fisher as a pathetic old man, who refused to accept his cardinalship in a last attempt to save his life when he realized how it had enraged the king. This plea was rendered all the more wretched by Froude's constant references to the bishop as "sinking into the grave with age and sickness" and having "the earth at the edge of the grave...crumbling under his feet."¹⁶²

¹⁶² Froude, *History*, Vol. I, p. 301; Vol. II, pp. 115, 265, 261, 266.

In Fisher's character, it seems that Froude was unable to locate in the bishop any of those redeeming qualities present in Sir Thomas More. The constant references to the grave, along with the other unkindly assessments, contributed to the notion that in Fisher's death Froude perceived absolutely no loss to the world, no sense of the high tragedy which he found in More's execution. There was only the image of a tired old man going "meekly" to his last rest.¹⁶³ This attitude exemplifies Froude's position on the entire Reformation; that it was a happy occurrence, well-planned and well accomplished by the government. Anyone, therefore, who opposed it deserved to be thrust out of the way without a qualm, killed if they refused to submit to its doctrines.

If Froude was typical of the period's writers, with his multivolume works, then Lord Acton (1834-1902) was an unusual member of the historical fraternity in that he succeeded in becoming one of the giants in the field without publishing a single book. Instead, the entire body of Acton's work is composed of essays published in a variety of journals. After a long career in politics, Acton in 1895 was appointed to the chair of the Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, a position which he held until his death.¹⁶⁴ A devout Catholic all his life, Acton also professed a fierce love of personal liberty. He in fact held the "freedom for the individual to decide his own conscience" as a universal truth, a

¹⁶³ Froude, *History*, Vol. II, p. 267.

¹⁶⁴ John Neville Figgis, "Sir John Acton," *DNB*, Supplement, 1901-1911, pp. 8-11.

belief which greatly affected his historical studies. Firmly convinced that there existed an all-encompassing moral code which held true down through the centuries, Acton proceeded to pass judgement on historical figures according to his conceptions of liberty.¹⁶⁵

Thomas More appeared in several of Acton's essays, including a passage which succinctly identified him as the "most illustrious victim" of the Reformation.¹⁶⁶ He received his most detailed examination in the 1877 treatise "Wolsey and the Divorce of Henry VIII." In this work, Acton explored More's relationship with Henry and his position on the question of the king's Great Matter. Acton argued that, in his early life, More had been one of the most liberal of men, indeed, the "apostle of Toleration," "the most daring innovator of his age." In *Utopia*, More had upheld the concept of divorce. Acton, however, professed that the "sinister influence" of the prevailing court religious attitudes had corrupted More's liberalism to the point where he not only persecuted heretics, he was now firmly convinced that the royal marriage must remain whole. Not wishing to have his views become known while he was Lord Chancellor, More managed to avoid openly declaring his opinion. This tactic, however, forced More to acquiesce when the king required him to act against the queen in his official capacity. "Whilst he remained in power," wrote Acton,

¹⁶⁵ Lord Acton, *Selected Writings of Lord Acton: Volume III, Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, J. Rufus Fears, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985) pp. xi-xii.

¹⁶⁶ Acton, *Essays in Religion*, p. 563.

"he left the Queen to her fate and did his best to put off the hour of trial that was to prove the heroic temper of his soul."¹⁶⁷

Acton's view of Fisher was much less laudatory, with his one positive comment being that Wolsey considered Fisher's support of the divorce invaluable, for he could have brought to the king's side the weight of the new learning. As a counterpoint, Acton asserted that the bishop was the one Englishman in all history who declared the only cure for unorthodoxy was "fire and steel" and that he had openly approved of "a century of persecution and of suffering more cruel than his own."¹⁶⁸

In the light of Acton's views on liberty and his compulsion for moral judgement, the basis of his assessments of More and Fisher becomes clear. Acton held an overall favourable opinion of More for his early work and thoughts, but grieved that he fell away from such sentiments during his time at Henry's court, and censured him for his neglect of the queen in her hour of need. He was utterly redeemed, however, by the strength he displayed in refusing to yield to the Crown in the matter of the Supremacy. Acton forgave More his lapses because the ex-Chancellor stood his ground on a matter of far greater importance. Indeed, the historian appears to have exulted in More's steadfast grip on his beliefs, even unto death.

¹⁶⁷ Lord Acton, *Selected Writings of Lord Acton: Volume II, Essays in the Study and Writing of History*, J. Rufus Fears, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985) p. 282.

¹⁶⁸ Acton, "Wolsey," pp. 273, 283.

As for Fisher, Acton was willing to admit the bishop's importance to his peers, but did not agree with the prevalent view of an heroic cleric dying for his faith. Far more meaningful to Acton was Fisher's energetic and unique condemnation of any religious views outside Roman Catholicism. That same love of liberty which ultimately delivered Thomas More from the pits of iniquity led Acton to denigrate and censure Fisher for his intolerance.

As distinctive as Acton was John Richard Green (1837-1883) who, in his own epitaph, declared himself to be "the historian of the English people." This was an accurate self-assessment, for Green was indeed the pioneer of English social history. A whig historian to the core, he was the first to eschew politics and diplomacy in favour of a concentration on the English common people, from their mundane affairs and triumphs, to their "passionate devotion to self-government."¹⁶⁹ Educated at Oxford, Green was admitted into the Anglican priesthood in 1860 and took up residence in a poor London parish. Labouring mightily to relieve some of the burden of existence from his flock, Green shattered his health and was forced to resign his cure in 1869. He devoted the rest of his life to scholarship, turning out the *Short History of the English People* in 1874 and completing in 1880 an expanded edition in four volumes, *The History of the English People*. Green's frail constitution finally failed him in

¹⁶⁹ Anthony Brundage, *The People's Historian: John Richard Green and the Writing of History in Victorian England* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) pp. 147, 1.

1883, but he died knowing that sales of his *Short History* were second only to Macaulay's great *History*.¹⁷⁰

Even though Green is best remembered for the *Short History*, his longer 1880 *History* affords more detail on Sir Thomas More, though little on Bishop Fisher. Green rated More as one of the shining lights of his day, a devoted family man of giant intellectual and social achievements. Of the many spheres of thought in which More was ahead of his time, none was as vital as his abhorrence of the growth of royal power to the point of absolutism. More detested a system of government which could eventually leave a citizen with no more rights than the monarch cared to permit him. This belief, wrote Green, formed the moral nucleus around which the choices which led to his death were centred.¹⁷¹

Green also addressed the dichotomy between More as a farseeing liberal and as a persecutor of Protestants. More, with his exceptional insight into the future, saw the result of Luther's efforts as the terrible spectre of a Christendom split into two hate-ridden factions with no hope of compromise. Simply put, Thomas More finally lost his temper and replied to Luther's vituperative attacks on Catholicism in the same language, hitherto unheard from his lips. Even John

¹⁷⁰ Mandell Creighton, "John Richard Green," *DNB*, Vol. VIII, pp. 489-492; Brundage, *People's Historian*, p. 1.

¹⁷¹ John Richard Green, *History of the English People*, Vol. II (New York: A.L. Burt, n.d.) pp. 102, 109-110.

Fisher, that fierce defender of the Church, was "calmer and more argumentative" than the savage denunciation pouring from More's pen.¹⁷²

Thomas Cromwell emerged as the main villain of Green's saga. With unfeeling efficiency, he cut his way through the ranks of those opposed to the succession and the supremacy. Foremost among these was Thomas More, whose scrupulous silence on the subject, unusual in one so vocal, had marked him as a most dangerous enemy. Through the strength of his convictions on the boundaries of monarchical power, More began the "great battle of spiritual freedom," the heroic struggle which, Green attested, rose above denomination to be fought throughout English history whenever one Christian sect oppressed another.¹⁷³

More's most important attribute for Green's purpose was the ex-Chancellor's philosophy on liberty and tolerance, two tenets which touched the English people as a whole. Excused of attacks on Protestants on the grounds of extreme provocation, More's Catholicism was essentially irrelevant to the historian, for he was convinced that More died not so much for his religion as for his liberal principles. Viewing the execution in this light expanded the value of More's sacrifice to encompass not only Catholics, but all Englishmen, regardless of religious persuasion. Green, concerned with the entirety of the

¹⁷² Green, *History*, p. 130.

¹⁷³ Green, *History*, pp. 171-172.

people, created from what many other authors saw as extreme partisanship a tragic hero for all Britain.

William Stubbs (1825-1901), like Green, was an Anglican clergyman, but of a very different cloth. Bishop of Oxford and Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford from 1866 to 1884, he was primarily a constitutional and medieval historian. He also strove for Rankean impartiality in his writing.¹⁷⁴ Part of the statutory requirements of Stubbs' position was the delivery of two public lectures per year and in one such discourse he highlighted the important points of the reign of Henry VIII.¹⁷⁵ In a survey of that near-forty year span, Thomas More and John Fisher occupied but a small place, yet something of Stubbs' opinion of their characters was conveyed in the course of the narration.

Stubbs regarded Henry as the motivating power behind all the major events of his reign; no matter the policies or preferences of his first minister, the king was firmly in control of the helm at all times. Stubbs opened his assessment of Thomas More with the declaration that "the wisdom and virtue of More" should be assumed as he proceeded through the lecture. That Henry appreciated More's counsel Stubbs demonstrated by the fact that when the "good and wise chancellor" resigned, the king "became very sulky." Stubbs depicted the turning of More's fortunes as occurring very quickly: "events were proceeding more

¹⁷⁴ Gooch, *Historians*, p. 318.

¹⁷⁵ Elizabeth Lee, "William Stubbs," *DNB*, Supplement 1901-1911, pp. 444-445, 447; Gooch, *Historians*, p. 318.

rapidly than ideas." The historian then followed up with a barrage of happenings linked by semi-colons, ending with the execution of More and Fisher, the "two worthiest men in England." Stubbs concluded this passage with the poignant observation that the ex-Chancellor "represented all that was good in [Henry's] own early experience," yet still had been executed.¹⁷⁶

The primary reason for Stubbs' treatment of More needs little inference, for the author himself asserted that his death was but one of many during the establishment of a royal power to destroy anyone whom the king's majesty desired dead, without need for judge or jury, merely an executioner. This "dark side" of Henry's administration¹⁷⁷ was granted a much grimmer face when Stubbs, who had taken great pains to portray More as a tower of virtue, recounted how swiftly and casually the king had him killed. This legal conclusion, to be expected from a constitutional specialist, also provides the reason why an Anglican bishop was so unconcerned with More's fervent Catholicism. Stubbs also succeeded in this instance in his quest for unjudgemental history, for he let slip not a hint of disapproval of More's final choice of death over the Church of England.

Much more interested in Thomas More's and John Fisher's religious preferences was Cardinal F.A. Gasquet (1846-1929). Originally a Benedictine

¹⁷⁶ William Stubbs, "The Reign of Henry VIII," *Seventeen Lectures on the Study of Mediaeval and Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900) pp. 285, 287, 294, 325, 296.

¹⁷⁷ Stubbs, "Henry VIII," pp. 303-304.

monk, he was ordained a priest in 1874 and was appointed a cardinal in 1914. For many years, he was the prior of the Downside monastery near Bath, and from this sanctuary he composed erudite, strongly Catholic history.¹⁷⁸ All of Gasquet's work contains an extremely defensive tone, as if he were anticipating that the majority of his readers would disagree with his arguments. He had cause, for a goodly portion of the population of England did oppose his conclusions, none more so than G.G. Coulton, who in his 1906 *Ten Medieval Studies*, claimed to defend the "moderate Protestant"¹⁷⁹ point of view. Coulton devoted an entire appendix to an attack on Gasquet's work as a whole, revealing such mistakes as the cardinal's deliberate mistranslation of a Latin source in order to make it fit his argument.¹⁸⁰

In 1887, Gasquet published the first volume of *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, the purpose of which was to relate those facts "which tell in favour of the monasteries," for he asserted that since the story of monastic corruption had been bruited about ever since the 1530s, it was past time for someone to come to their defence.¹⁸¹ Naturally enough, Gasquet did not address the concerns of state beyond those which directly affected the monks. In that

¹⁷⁸ E.C. Butler, "Francis Neil Gasquet," *DNB*, 1922-1930, pp. 330-332.

¹⁷⁹ H.S. Bennett, "George Gordon Coulton," *DNB*, 1941-1950, pp. 180-181.

¹⁸⁰ G.G. Coulton, *Ten Medieval Studies* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1967) pp. 238.

¹⁸¹ F.A. Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, Vol. I (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1972) p. xi.

sphere, however, fell the case of the Nun of Kent, and, within that context, Gasquet dealt with More and Fisher. As befitted his ecclesiastical subject, he devoted more space to the bishop than the ex-Chancellor.

Elizabeth Barton, the Nun of Kent, Gasquet judged to be a true prophet, with genuine visions of the future. He arrived at this conclusion primarily due to John Fisher's endorsement of her holiness. Gasquet held that Fisher was "an ecclesiastic of extraordinary ability and learning.....of advanced age and possessed of practical prudence, his judgement balanced by vast and varied experience."¹⁸² So authoritative was the bishop's estimation of the Nun that Gasquet believed his readers would accept her legitimacy solely on that basis.

When he decided to move against Barton, Cromwell seized the opportunity of attacking Fisher, the most capable defender of Queen Catherine in the divorce controversy. He made Fisher the offer of mercy and a complete pardon for all past offences if he would but abjure the Nun and beg mercy. This, Gasquet asserted, was nothing less than a blatant attempt to secure Fisher's tacit approval of the divorce. The bishop indignantly refused and was subsequently attainted and convicted of treason, without the opportunity of defending himself.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Gasquet, *Monasteries*, p. 115.

¹⁸³ Gasquet, *Monasteries*, pp. 121, 119, 147.

Gasquet addressed Thomas More in the same context of the attainting of the Nun's supporters, and brought to light More's political acumen and incisive legal mind. More maintained reservations about Barton, communicating to Cromwell that he considered some of the tales ascribed to her to be "mere fabrications," although he did include the caveat that "some lies are...written of...saints in heaven, yet many miracles [are] done by them for all that." This qualified statement prevented Cromwell from building a strong case against More, whom he also regarded as a threat to the Great Matter.¹⁸⁴

Through these passages, Gasquet accomplished a number of aims, the first of which was to firmly establish Elizabeth Barton's credentials, a matter of simply pointing out Fisher's near-infallible judgement. Fisher's honesty and rigid morality also served as a convenient contrast with the underhanded manipulations of the king and Cromwell, Gasquet's villains. Less was revealed of Thomas More's character, but, nonetheless, Gasquet managed to convey the impression that in the ex-Chancellor's intelligence and political shrewdness, the royal conspirators had met their match. More's constant vigilance hindered his ensnarement in the net Cromwell threw to contain all opponents of the divorce.

On December 29th, 1886, Thomas More and John Fisher were beatified, declared by papal decree to be blessed martyrs of the Roman Catholic Church. Struck by this momentous event, Rev. T.E. Bridgett (1829-1899), a Catholic

¹⁸⁴ Gasquet, *Monasteries*, pp. 138-139, 142-143.

priest of London, in 1892 penned a full-length biography of the ex-Chancellor, entitled *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More*. Bridgett himself was born of Protestant parents and began his higher education at Cambridge. Near to graduating, he found in 1850 that he was unwilling to take the Oath of Supremacy, which was required of him in order to receive his degree. Leaving Cambridge, he was converted to Catholicism that same year by John Henry Newman of the Oxford Movement. Completing his schooling on the continent, Bridgett was ordained in 1856. A prolific author of various theological texts, the biography of More was one of his last works.¹⁸⁵

The *Life and Writings* was, as may be expected, a celebration of More's life and martyrdom. More was portrayed in a wholly positive light, with Bridgett taking great care to remove any hint of a stain from his subject's character. The largest such shadow was, as always, More's persecution of heretics. Bridgett opened his argument with the contention that although More despised the Lutherans and their ilk because they repudiated "everything the Christian people had hitherto held in veneration and uproot[ed] the foundation of all morals," he was prompted to action against them by their "outrages and violence." Bridgett quoted More's reply to a friend who wished "that everyone

¹⁸⁵ Herbermann, Charles G. ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. II (New York: Robert Appleton, 1909) pp. 204-205.

might be left free to go to the devil if he chose," as "Yes, but he shall not drag society with him."¹⁸⁶

Having established More's hatred of heretics, Bridgett turned this potential criticism on its head by asserting that the Church only suppressed heretics in self-defence, and that More's role in this procedure was restrained and humane. Bridgett dismissed the numerous stories of More's torturing heretics as malicious slanders invented by John Foxe, while taking at face value More's declaration that only occasionally had he had heretics physically punished. Indeed, Bridgett remarked, in his upholding of the heresy laws, More was "as tender and merciful as is compatible with the character and office of a judge," and commented that few other magistrates, when confronted with such an enormous threat to their entire world-view and having the authority to kill, would restrict themselves to "severity of language."¹⁸⁷

Overt references to More's newly-bestowed holiness Bridgett tended to avoid until the very moment of the ex-Chancellor's execution. Then, More received "the fatal but blessed blow that will surround his brow for ever with the martyr's aureole." He then detailed the disposition of More's relics, from his head to his hat, noting with conviction the various small miracles recorded by Stapleton. At the book's very end, with More comfortably ensconced in his

¹⁸⁶ T.E. Bridgett, *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More* (London: Burns and Oates, 1892) pp. 262-263.

¹⁸⁷ Bridgett, *Life and Writings*, pp. 263-268, 271-272.

heavenly office, Bridgett stated that he had explicitly refrained from attacking More's enemies in the course of the book, for such assaults had no place in the life of a man who had prayed for his foes before he died.¹⁸⁸

In essence, Bridgett's book was a paean to its subject, the perfect candidate for sainthood in the nineteenth century. In order to illustrate the reasons behind More's elevation to the heavenly hierarchy, Bridgett portrayed him as a man almost faultless, with the exceptions of those shortcomings which More himself noted. More was learned, religiously tolerant, and successful in the world while remaining true to his faith. These qualities made More an ideal example to English Catholics, for with the lifting of religious restrictions in all areas of public life, opportunities for Catholics were greater than ever. Studying More's pattern of life could help nineteenth-century Catholics gain those skills necessary to a successful life, among which were education, tolerance of other faiths, and a knowledge of the proper manner of conducting oneself in order to advance. This emphasis placed by Bridgett upon More's actions in the world were furthered by his ploy of addressing More's theological importance only at the very end of the book, by which point it was apparent to the reader that More had earned that place through his exemplary life in the world. The author included one last lesson with his discussion of the lack of animosity borne by

¹⁸⁸ Bridgett, *Life and Writings*, pp. 438-440.

More for his enemies, a fitting ending for a celebration of the recognition of More's sanctity.

Adopting a view of More and Fisher entirely alien to Bridgett's, A.F. Pollard (1869-1948), one of the most influential historians of the early twentieth century; put forward an interpretation of Henry VIII's reign, for many years the standard against which other writers reacted. By this time, historians were taking to heart Ranke's injunction to analyze the past dispassionately, allowing no hint of partisanship to enter the work. Pollard recognized this as an impossible task, and decided that the best compromise was for the writer to set down what he saw as the truth, the result of exhaustive research.¹⁸⁹ With that ideal in mind, Pollard produced in 1905 a biography of *Henry VIII*.

Thomas More and John Fisher made their way into this narrative in their usual places as defenders of the Catholic Church and opponents of the divorce, with a slightly different role. Pollard unconditionally contended that More "gloried in the persecution of heretics" and he was also one of the first historians to make use of the correspondence of the Imperial ambassador to convict Fisher of urging the Holy Roman Emperor to launch an invasion of England to prevent Henry from carrying out his plans. Pollard himself considered the bishop a traitor.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ O'Day, *Debate*, pp. 102-105.

¹⁹⁰ A.F. Pollard, *Henry VIII* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) pp. 156, 244.

The bulk of the references to More and Fisher, however, were set around their imprisonment and executions. Pollard was of the opinion that More and Fisher were really of little consequence in the overall implementation of the supremacy. In recording their initial refusal of the Oath, he commented that they "alleged" that it contained a rejection of the Pope to which they would not agree, and that the populace offered a "general consent" to the entire statute. Pollard noted that the two dissidents, once in the Tower, had not actually denied the Supremacy, and in confinement, would not have had much chance to do so. It was only when the Pope made Fisher a cardinal that Henry's wrath brought them to the block, even though it was unclear whether or not the two were guilty of the crimes of which they were convicted. Pollard concluded with the observation that More and Fisher had stood for "individual conscience," a good and noble thing, but ultimately helpless when faced with the "inevitable movement of politics" that was personified by Henry VIII.¹⁹¹

The theme of Pollard's treatment of More and Fisher was that they were essentially unimportant to the proceedings of the divorce and separation from Rome. The stage was set with the choice of language in the oath-refusal anecdote: More and Fisher seemed to be a tiny minority in a vast sea of Englishmen content to grant Henry his supremacy with no fuss. Immured in the Tower, the dissidents had even less influence. As long as they were significant to

¹⁹¹ Pollard, *Henry VIII*, pp. 244, 259, 265-266, 351.

nobody else, Henry left them alone. As soon as the Pope announced an interest in Fisher, however, the king perceived both prisoners as a possible focus for resistance and swiftly eliminated them. That the values More and Fisher represented were worthy and honourable, Pollard did not contest; he did not criticize them in the slightest fashion. His concluding note was of a coldly practical nature. He maintained that the bishop and the ex-Chancellor did not in any way hinder the king in bringing his plans to complete fruition. Morally, they won a great victory; politically, they were dismal failures.

Equal in erudition to Pollard, James Gairdner (1828-1912) had far humbler academic credentials; from 1846 until his retirement in 1893, he was a clerk in the Public Record Office of Edinburgh. He earned a reputation for careful research, meticulously documented and cited, although his explanations of character and motives did not always attain the same high standard. Among his scholarly works was *The English Church in the Sixteenth Century From the Accession of Henry VIII to the Death of Mary*, published in 1902.¹⁹²

Gairdner held a dim view of the entire Reformation, commenting that the "break-up of that old framework...was extremely demoralising...to the whole Christian life of Europe." The populace of England, while they resented the Reformation, had no means of resistance, for "the nobles had lost their independence, and the Church...was not only bound and shackled, but

¹⁹² *DNB*, 1912-1921, p. 206.

terrorized and unable to speak out." As the historian asserted that England had "never [been] so degraded by tyranny,"¹⁹³ it was natural enough that he should see in Thomas More and John Fisher champions of both the common people as well as the Church.

Both men were depicted in extremely positive lights, with Gairdner taking care to gloss over More's persecution of heretics with the declaration that, although More disliked heretics, he pursued them only with legitimate methods, never "tainted with inhumanity." The historian added as further proof More's own statement that of all the prisoners he took, none "had never any of them any stripe or stroke given them." That these accusations of cruelty be disproved was vital to Gairdner, for he considered that if true, "they destroy More's character, not for humanity alone, but for honesty and truthfulness as well." More's integrity was of paramount importance to Gairdner, for he relied upon it to prove the injustice of the ex-Chancellor's conviction. The historian took Richard Riche's damning testimony to be entirely false, revealed as such solely on the strength of More's telling the true story of that conversation and his accusing Riche of perjury. That More would utter a lie Gairdner never deemed possible.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ James Gairdner, *The English Church in the Sixteenth Century from the Accession of Henry VIII to the Death of Mary* (London: Macmillan, 1902) pp. 131, 163.

¹⁹⁴ Gairdner, *English Church*, pp. 131-132, 160.

Fisher's wisdom, forthrightness and internal fortitude Gairdner established with the simple expedient of noting that he was the only member of Convocation to speak out against the king's divorce. He also recorded the bishop's defence of Queen Catherine in the legatine court, emphasizing Fisher's avowal that he "was ready to lay down his life for his opinion," a stance which earned him Henry's unrelenting hatred. Gairdner further postulated that Henry commuted Fisher's sentence to simple beheading rather than the more rigorous quartering and disembowelling not out of any sense of mercy, but because "the sympathy of the people with the sufferer was unmistakable."¹⁹⁵

Gairdner's book was one of absolutes, with the entire Reformation having an unwholesome effect on the country, imposed by a tyrannical king on an unwilling populace. Having cast his villains, he found heroes in More and Fisher. While other historians emphasized the two dissidents' advocacy of the Catholic Church, Gairdner believed them instead to represent the English people. To that end, it was essential that they be pure, with no stains upon their characters. Hence More's hunting of heretics was not a personal crusade, but a protection of society, and both men were in an instant ready to sacrifice their lives for their fellow Englishmen. Honourable, morally upright, totally incorruptible, they went to their deaths almost gladly, knowing that their legends would continue to inspire their countrymen.

¹⁹⁵ Gairdner, *English Church*, pp. 141, 95, 159.

This absolutism on Gairdner's part likely originated from a number of factors, the first of which was simply the historian's tendency to demote studies of character in favour of chronicling events and sources. The second, broader, influence was the overwhelming number of histories written in the late nineteenth century which adopted a more Protestant, whiggish view of the Reformation. Gairdner may have taken his stance, as *The Catholic Encyclopedia* of the day remarked, to clarify a period long obscured by Anglican partisans¹⁹⁶ and taken his analysis to extremes as a reaction to the strength of the opposition.

Upon inspection of these varied authors, several patterns emerge in the way in which they approached More and Fisher, more authors mentioning the ex-Chancellor than the bishop. In all cases, both More and Fisher occupied some sort of educational niche, true to the pedantic, moralizing, didactic purpose of nineteenth-century history. In most authors' works, Thomas More enjoyed positive treatment, with the few exceptions not so much personally objecting to him as deeming more important the governmental processes of the Reformation.

One of the significant roles More played in these books was that of the tragic hero, a noble man who fell from grace, but later redeemed himself even in the face of death. Froude, Acton, and Green all adopted this attitude towards More, though for somewhat different reasons. Froude considered that though

¹⁹⁶ Herbermann, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. V, p. 444.

More's death was deserved, it was regrettable in terms of the great gifts wasted by the ex-Chancellor on Catholicism. At the last, however, completing the tragedy, More offered to the people an example of a Christian death transcending denominational squabbles. Acton too lamented More's fall into religious hatred and intolerance, but named him heroic in his resistance to the supremacy. Green's Thomas More was slightly less tragic and individualized, for the social historian justified More's persecution of heretics on the grounds of social necessity and bad temper. In his death, Green saw a universal hero, who died for all Englishmen and every religion's freedom, sufficient vindication for his Catholicism. To students of history, this concept of the tragic hero taught the lesson that even a man with a major defect of character or who made an extremely bad decision could still transcend his flaws.

Green's analysis of More was carried to a more extreme, though less tragic, form in the writings of Lingard, Gasquet, Bridgett, and Gairdner. All these writers took the position that More was an unadulterated hero, a champion of the English people and a martyr for the Catholic Church. The three priests, Lingard, Gasquet, and Bridgett utilized extremely disparate philosophies of presentation in writing of Thomas More. Lingard sought a temperate, conciliatory tone, striving to win Protestant sympathy for the Roman Catholic point of view by concentrating on More's nobility of character instead of his fervent religious convictions. Gasquet, in contrast, was clearly writing in

defence of his faith; his More was above all a devout Catholic, wily and astute in the political arena, defeating on its own ground all the assaults of the state.

Bridgett wrote simply of a near-perfect man, justly raised to an exalted state.

Gairdner took More to his logical extreme as a thoroughly virtuous and genuine hero of the English. Catholic students reading these works would have digested the uplifting stories of a Catholic hero, noble, cunning, and representing the people at large.

Macaulay also treated More in a positive light, but also in a unique fashion. While concurring with Green that More was forced by circumstances into the role of persecutor, Macaulay took the ex-Chancellor in quite a different direction. With his use of More as a standard in the argument concerning the influence of science on faith, Macaulay projected him into a consideration of the future, in the ultimate extension of the whig historian's philosophy. In this way, Macaulay instructed his readers on the nature of both science and faith, and the wisdom in listening to the voices of learned men of the past.

Less bold than Macaulay, but still acting under the umbrella of the whig interpretation of history, were the constitutional historians Hallam and Stubbs and the state-oriented Pollard. These men considered the development of the English system of government to be the appropriate centre of any historical work. As such, More and Fisher occupied a peripheral position in their books. Hallam mentioned both More and Fisher only during his condemnation of Henry

VIII for his dubious use of the law in forcing through the Supremacy. Hallam exhibited no personal opinion on either man; the crime had, in his eyes, been committed by the king against the rights and traditions of the government. Stubbs was a little more concerned about the personal element, alluding to More's good qualities, but still having as his main interest the analysis of the growth of Henry's arbitrary judicial power during his reign. Pollard extended this attitude even further by evaluating More and Fisher as failures in the political arena, to him by far the most important of their spheres of influence. In their examinations of the power of the state and king, these historians simply did not view More's and Fisher's fates as tragic, overly lamentable, or even worthy of much notice. With Hallam and Stubbs keeping their eyes trained on the steady progression of the constitution through history, and Pollard's conviction that Henry was fully in command of the whole process, the thoughts and feelings of two dissidents were hardly vital to an understanding of the period. In their didactic value, More and Fisher in these books only offered lessons in the futility of striving against just or unjust power of the state.

John Fisher was a much less complicated figure to address than his lay contemporary. He appeared in detail in only five of this collection of authors, namely Lingard, Gasquet, Gairdner, Froude and Acton. The first three held very high opinions of the bishop, while the latter two despised him. Lingard portrayed Fisher as a benevolent paternal advisor to the young king who later

turned on him viciously when the bishop took up the queen's cause. Gasquet's Fisher was far more potent, an intelligent man whose vast learning and virtue rendered his judgement nearly flawless. In many ways, Gasquet painted Fisher in identical hues to those which other authors used for Thomas More.

Gairdner's efforts revealed a man far more vehement in the expression of his opinions, and therefore the target of a much greater rage on Henry's part.

Froude and Acton took quite the opposite view of the bishop of Rochester. To Froude, Fisher was a useless old man, worthy of nothing but pity and contempt. He deserved to be swept out of the way of a progress he stubbornly resisted out of superstitious fear. Acton's opinion was even lower, holding that Fisher was possibly the worst, most ruthless persecutor ever to plague England. None of the other authors wrote anything significant about him.

To these authors, Fisher represented the medieval Catholic Church, an institution praiseworthy to the first three and hateful to the last two. Lingard, Gasquet and Gairdner all regarded the old establishment as perfectly serviceable, in no need of replacement, while Froude and Acton saw a corrupt, rotten edifice waiting for demolition. As such, these authors' approaches to Fisher lacked the complexity and shading which characterized their attitudes towards More. Wholly good or totally evil, there existed no middle path for the bishop to tread as there did for the ex-Chancellor.

That reactions to More were a little more complicated than those to Fisher was probably simply due to the fact that the ex-Chancellor appeared to have a greater depth of character than the bishop. Some facets of More's life and personality, such as his stance on toleration and heresy, required a more detailed analysis in order to reconcile seemingly disparate elements. Fisher, in contrast, was simply an outspoken Roman Catholic bishop with a reputation for wisdom, a status which could either be upheld or ridiculed as the historian chose.

Throughout the nineteenth century, historians found in More and Fisher excellent opportunities for the dispensation of their lessons of the past. From the two, students learned a variety of things, depending on the author's convictions; some taught of the redemption available even to the worst of sinners, while others wrote of noble heroes fighting the good fight against the tyrannical state, or being swept aside by the juggernaut of Henry VIII. Yet other writers told tales of foolish, misguided, or evil men, who provided examples of the terrible consequences awaiting those who fell into immoral ways. Whatever the lesson, More and Fisher provided ideal vehicles for historians to drive their points home.

Conclusion

From the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, the legends of More and Fisher changed little relative to the passage of time. Their use in history was not altered to any great extent; instead, the use and purpose of history changed around them, and they adapted well to their new circumstances. In the sixteenth century, one of history's primary purposes was to instruct the populace on how best to live a good Christian life outside the holy confines of a monastery. The stories of More and Fisher were admirably suited to such a task, either for the Catholic or the Protestant codes of behaviour. The nineteenth century use of history was slightly different in that historians concerned themselves less with teaching readers the niceties of leading a devout life, and more with honing the skills of the governing classes in the areas of moral judgement and honourable, upright conduct. In this new arena, More and Fisher also performed well, for both men were towers of virtue and had strong senses of civic duty.

It is of crucial importance to note at this juncture that despite the increased secularization in the nature of history, the didactic qualities of the discipline remained constant. No matter whether the subject was the living of a Renaissance Christian life or a Victorian civil one, writers of history never faltered in their belief that theirs was the best medium for the teaching of moral

values. Through their multifaceted personalities and dramatic lives, the stories of More and Fisher proved ideally suited to the task of illuminating the right ethical path for a man to take, for they could either be its thesis or its antithesis with equal facility.

The similar uses to which writers of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries put More and Fisher necessarily created some common views of the two dissidents. One pattern was the way in which More greatly overshadowed Fisher all through the literature of both centuries. In the 1500s, the Catholic biographies of More outnumbered those of Fisher, so much so that the bishop was almost reduced to nothing more than an ecclesiastical mirror to Thomas More. The Protestant chroniclers as well paid more attention to the ex-Chancellor than the bishop. Similarly, More proved to be the more popular character to many of the nineteenth-century historians, for many did not even mention the bishop, while those who did tended to include him in their discussions of More, effectively painting the two with the same brush.

Thomas More was covered in greater detail in the sixteenth century due to the varied accomplishments of his life which recommended him to the sixteenth-century reader. Catholic and Protestant alike could draw meaning and instruction from an account of More's life. Fisher's life, on the other hand, attracted a much smaller audience, for there was little in the story of a devout, academic, ascetic bishop that would offer enlightenment to the majority of the

Catholic laity. Protestant readers merely dismissed Fisher as yet another useless Catholic priest.

The nineteenth-century writers followed much the same pattern laid down by their forebears, although for different reasons. Thomas More became not an ideal secular Christian, but a paragon of Englishmen. The fact that he was almost fanatically devoted to the Pope mattered not to writers who pictured for the edification of their readers a man learned both in the arts and in the law, who rose to fill one of the most powerful offices in England. As such, his story had much to offer students who one day might be running the country. Fisher, in contrast, was shunted aside by most of these writers as merely a priest of an outdated, anachronistic faith that was thrust away in favour of the far more advanced Church of England. His life served no function in the education of a nineteenth-century student, save perhaps a cautionary word.

A second example of the close proximity of the two generations' use of More and Fisher is the depiction of More as a tragic hero, a man who is overcome by a tragic flaw, but still manages to redeem himself in some fashion. Although this theme was not as strongly present in the sixteenth century, Foxe and Holinshed could not quite condemn the ex-Chancellor, even though they considered him a declared enemy of everything they held sacred. The nineteenth-century historians Acton, Froude and Green developed this idea far

more thoroughly, building it into the central concept of their assessments of More.

Although these sixteenth-century Protestant writers cheerfully castigated More for his Catholicism, they were awed by his intellectual achievements and the depth of his faith, even if it was misplaced. This germ of respect was enough to save More from a wholesale beating such as Fisher received from these writers, and if they did not quite regard the ex-Chancellor as a tragic hero, he at least deserved the status of an honourable enemy. These qualities of More's, the Protestant chroniclers determined to have some instructional value, even if they were accompanied by stern warnings on the dangers of Catholicism.

More's tragic heroism was much more apparent to certain of the nineteenth-century writers, who saw him as one of the worthiest men of his day for his adherence to the principles of liberalism. They lamented the fact that in his persecution of heretics, More chose to deviate from those tenets which he had formerly held so dear. The ex-Chancellor, however, was saved through the heroic manner in which he faced his death, a clear lesson to nineteenth-century readers that it is the rare error indeed for which atonement is impossible.

Perhaps the comparison between centuries which most clearly outlines the difference in objectives is More's reputation among Catholics of the 1500s as opposed to the whig evaluation of the 1800s, taken to its most extreme and erudite form by Lord Macaulay. The biographies of the late sixteenth century

illustrated an as yet uncanonized saint, a man successful and revered in both this world and the next. Macaulay portrayed a man so wise and learned that his belief in a doctrine peculiar to Catholicism could be taken as proof that it would be believed in the future.

These two characterizations perfectly sum up those aspects of More's personality which attracted the writers of the two different centuries. To the hagiographers, More's passionate dedication to his religion was the essential quality which made him worthy of sainthood, his other achievements being secondary reasons. The Protestant whigs of the nineteenth century, in contrast, praised More's wisdom and intelligence above all else, dismissing as relatively unimportant his inimical religion. Both groups perceived More's life as having extraordinary teaching value, but they lighted on vastly divergent features of his experiences. The sixteenth-century writers of both denominations were mainly interested in instructing their readers in the means of living a good Christian life, so they naturally were preoccupied with More's religious choices. As the nineteenth-century historians' primary focus was the elucidation of techniques of good administration, as well as accounts of unimpeachable conduct, they detailed More's political principles and his struggles with the government.

In summation, the reputations of More and Fisher developed through the sixteenth century and retained their essential natures in the nineteenth. On one level, their use by historians remained constant, while on another, it changed. Unaltered was the basic didactic purpose of history, for writers of both periods

saw their craft as an important educational medium, teaching people the morals needed to thrive virtuously in their societies. The values being imparted, however, were distinct to each century. The sixteenth-century historians prided themselves on the communication of the behavioural code of Christianity so integral to their society. Their coverage of More and Fisher therefore detailed the depth and strength of faith of the two men, all the while noting the way in which they followed, for good or ill, the laws of the Catholic God throughout their lives. While religion still played a large part in nineteenth-century society, far more important to the historians in the period was the continual evolution of the British state to new heights. Their concentration was thus on the political considerations surrounding More and Fisher's decisions to defy Henry VIII even at the cost of their lives. Through all this variance, the appeal of More and Fisher as instructive moral examples stayed consistently high. Whether they were thought of as noble or foolish, heroes or villains, Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher engendered powerful reactions from all writers who addressed their dramatic stories.

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