THOMAS MORE AS STATESMAN:
A BRIEF SKETCH

Born in 1477 in the heart of London, More learned service to his country as part of a long-established family tradition. On both his mother's and father's side, civic service was a way of life. His grandfather Thomas Granger, for example, was a lawyer actively involved in London, serving as an alderman and eventually as sheriff. More's father was a well-known and respected lawyer, then a judge. There in London, More learned the importance of citizens' vigilant involvement in government, a lesson he would appreciate even more deeply after studying the Greek and Roman philosophers and statesmen.

Preparing for Public Service

Thomas More was 41 when he finally accepted the invitations to join King Henry's service. He could have done so earlier, but he knew that his young and growing family would need him most in those early years of his career; he knew that his own character and thought were not yet sufficiently developed to face the wiles of the court; and he knew that Henry had tyrannical leanings.

Thomas's father, however, had begun preparing his talented son for a life of statesmanship far earlier than young Thomas ever imagined. After sending him to the best grammar school in London, St. Anthony's on Threadneedle Street, John More apprenticed Thomas to no one less than Lord Chancellor and Archbishop John Morton at Lambeth Palace. There, while waiting on tables and learning what a courtier must know, Thomas witnessed the ways and dealings of the greatest leaders of England. In the process, he impressed Morton, who predicted that "this child here waiting at the table, whosoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvelous man." Morton admired, for example, how during theatre performances, More would "suddenly sometimes step in among the players and, never studying for the matter, make a part of his own there presently among them which made the lookers-on more sport than all the players beside." Such "wit and towardness" led Morton to send Thomas to Oxford to study at his own Canterbury Hall (now Christ Church College).

Young Thomas had studied at Oxford for two years when John More decided that his son should return to London to complete his education at the inns of court, where Thomas would study a wider range of subjects needed for his success later in life. Studies at New Inn prepared him for entry to Lincoln's Inn, where he actively participated as a student, then lecturer, and then officer until the end of his life. Even while he was Lord Chancellor, for example, More was called upon to assist the Master of Revels in the Inn's celebrations, and he continued to participate in its professional and social events.

Studies after Law School

Called to the bar around 1501, More angered his father by not immersing himself in his legal career. Instead, More proceeded to master Greek while pursuing studies in philosophy, theology, history, and literature, and while also considering a priestly vocation. More's friend Erasmus tells us that John More became so angry with his son that young More was almost disinherited. Even in these early years, however, More seemed to realize that, whatever profession he would choose, he needed the philosopher's understanding of human nature, the historian's appreciation of his country, the theologian's perspective on eternity, and the poet's skill to move the heart.

More mastered Greek in three years, to such a degree that he joined Erasmus in translating the dialogues of Lucian. More explained his special love for these comic dialogues in this way: Lucian "everywhere reprimands and censures our human frailties with very honest and at the same time very entertaining wit. And this he does so cleverly and effectively that although no one pricks more deeply, nobody resents his stinging words." This same approach can be seen later in More's own diplomatic style.

In these years, More carefully studied Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the Greek and Roman historians. He translated a wide selection of Greek epigrams and composed in Latin many of his own. When these are considered with his English poems, More's collection is one of the most comprehensive ever compiled. These range from humorous poems about the many forms of human folly, to daring political commentaries on monarchy in general (and on both King Henry VII and King Henry VIII in particular), to devout poems about the love of God.

Along with the classical authors, More gave special attention to the Bible and the Church Fathers, while also working to master writing and speaking skills, skills which soon became as important as his legal expertise. His particular interests were shown in the series of public lectures which he gave in 1501 on Augustine's *City of God.* These lectures were given "not from the theological point of view, but from the standpoint of history and philosophy" – indicating More's conscious efforts to think through the philosophic and historical issues facing the city of his own day.

Freedom and More's Political Philosophy

More's study of the classical and Judeo-Christian authors led him to formulate a rarely-held position in those days, a position that rested upon the conviction that each person is essentially free. For example, in his *History of Richard III* he states clearly that Parliament (not the king) is "the supreme and highest authority in England." In a Latin poem written before he joined the King's service, he expresses more fully his view of political freedom and authority:

The Consent of the People Both Bestows
and Withdraws Sovereignty

Any person who has command of many persons
owes his authority to those whom he commands;
he ought to have command not one instant longer
than his people wish. Why are impotent kings so proud?
Because they rule merely on sufferance?

Such writings indicate that More's many years of study resulted in a coherent political philosophy that would guide him throughout his career in the King's service. The depth of this study can be seen in More's famous *Utopia*, which gives a playful but profound analysis of the nature and limits of political life, drawing heavily upon the Greek, Roman, and Christian classics.

In one of his most original poems, deviating from the Greek epigrams he studied and translated, More gives striking expression to the importance of friendship and the danger of proud kings. What follows is a prose translation of the Latin verse:

On Two Beggars, One Lame, One Blind

There can be nothing more helpful than a loyal friend,
who by his own effort assuages your hurts.
Two beggars formed an alliance of firm friendship
– a blind man and a lame one. The blind man said to the lame one,

"You must ride upon my shoulders." The latter answered,
"You blind friend, must find your way by means of my eyes."
The love which unites shuns the castles of proud kings
and rules in the humble hut.

More was convinced that every human being, no matter how gifted, was marked by original sin and thus was incomplete and in need of others' help. As this poem implies, the statesman's role is to order the "lame" and "blind," himself included, in such a way that all contribute to a just and peaceful society.

"Born for Friendship"

Erasmus, who knew leaders from around the world, marvelled at More's affable and self-effacing manner. More was, Erasmus wrote, "born for friendship," a person who delighted in conversation with others and who could deal with every type of person at any level.

More's best friend was Antonio Bonvisi, an Italian merchant-banker who risked his own reputation and safety, standing by More even in his time of disgrace. During More's imprisonment, for example, he supplied More with food, wine, and warm clothing. Among the last of his letters, More writes a moving tribute to this best of friends who was a source of comfort and encouragement for over forty years. Such a friend More considered to be the gift of a good and merciful God. Such a friend More tried to be to others. Even after his trial, speaking to the judges whom he had known for most of his life and who had just condemned him as a traitor, More expressed the hope that they might all be merry together in heaven.

Testing Character

Though born for friendship, More was not naive. He learned early on that everyone, but especially persons in positions of authority, must test the characters of those with whom they work. More observed the way that Lord Chancellor and Archbishop Morton did this, but More chose a different approach. He chose to use irony instead of Morton's "rough address" – a lighter and more artful approach that he learned from the classical authors and from the Bible. So effective was More's use of irony that his own family often did not know when he was joking or serious. And so courageous was he in using irony that he did not hesitate to use it to appeal to the conscience of either cardinal or king.

"The Christian English Cicero": Civic Humanism & the Ideal of Peace

More lived in one of the most revolutionary periods of all times, called by some the Early Modern Period and by others the English Renaissance, the "rebirth" of the exhilarating classical ideal which later became known as civic humanism. This ideal focused upon a person's duties and possibilities in building up the earthly city as the natural sphere of human greatness. The city of Rome was great not simply because of its architecture and culture, but especially because it developed the arts of peace as well as traditions of freedom and of democratic rule. The "Pax Romanorum" was an ideal that Erasmus and More and all in their European circle embraced, in opposition to the supposed glories of war. Significantly, More became known as the "Christian English Cicero," and he used a signet ring with the image of Titus, the Roman ruler who was thought to embody many of the ideals of civic humanism.

These ideals eventually conflicted with Henry VIII's love for chivalric glory and imperial ambitions. Not only did Henry begin his reign by making imperial claims, but he soon acted upon these by waging war on France. In opposition to Henry's war policies, More expressed his view that Christian princes should assist one another, and he discretely indicated that Henry suffered from a lust for power in his quest for glory. In addition, More satirized the exalted view that kings often have of themselves.

More shared the common view of his fellow civic humanists that peace is the ideal, although he recognized circumstances that would allow just war. On his epitaph, More presented his diplomatic endeavors for peace to be among those projects of his life he considered of greatest importance.

Education

More's study of history and of human nature led him to see that working for peace and justice required capacities and skills which needed the hard work of education to perfect. More saw education as essential to effective leadership because the leader always and everywhere would need what More called a "good mother wit." Why? Because only a person of practiced good judgment can avoid the deceptions of appearances and of flatterers. To achieve such a judgment, More indicated that a deep study of philosophy, literature, history, and theology would be necessary – the very education he sought for himself and that he gave his daughters and son.

Giving his daughters the same education as his son made More a educational reformer of his times. He stated explicitly that both men and women "are equally suited for the knowledge of learning." According to Erasmus, More succeeded in this educational reform because More himself combined "so much real wisdom with such charm of character" that his contemporaries came to see the advantages of such an education, an education that was soon accepted among the leading families not only in England, but throughout Europe and eventually the United States.

Hard Work and Family Life

More worked hard to acquire a broad range of experience as a young lawyer and local politician. As a young lawyer he was known to be the first in court each day, a habit that continued after he joined the king's service. His first cases were humble and eminently practical ones. He worked, for example, on legal contracts for the construction of London sewers, a project much needed to prevent the frequent flooding of the Thames River. He also worked closely with London's businessmen and merchants, who came to so value his judgment and skills that they chose him as their spokesmen in Parliament and their negotiator for contracts.

Not surprisingly, then, More was soon a prominent citizen of London, immersed in the life of his city, his profession, and his country. He was selected for Parliament in 1504, married in 1505, and lectured in law at Furnivall's Inn from 1503 to 1506. In 1507, he was elected Financial Secretary of Lincoln's Inn and became a member of the influential Mercers' Guild in 1509; in 1510, he was elected to Parliament again and became undersheriff of London. In was in this later capacity that More received the widest range of practical experience and eventually became beloved by his fellow Londoners for his "marriage of wit and wisdom" and for being "the best friend the poor ever had."

By 1510, More was blessed with four children and a wife, Jane, whom he dearly loved, even if the first years of marriage had brought unforeseen misunderstandings. Like any young lawyer, he worked hard to develop his law practice, and in 1511, he was asked to give the prestigious Autumn lectures at Lincoln's Inn. In that same year, just when life seemed happiest, Jane died. Deeply grieved, More had the additional difficulties of taking care of four children under the age of six. His solution went against the expectations of many, but within one month, More married Alice

Middleton. Although she was older than he by seven years and shared few of his interests, More knew her to be a good and loving woman, as she proved to be.

Even with the experienced and efficient help of Alice, More found balancing the demands of family and profession to be quite difficult. As he explains in a famous letter:

> *I am constantly engaged in legal business, either pleading or hearing, either giving an award as arbiter or deciding a case as judge. I pay a visit of courtesy to one man and go on business to another. I devote almost the whole day in public to other men's affairs and the remainder to my own. I leave to myself, that is to learning, nothing at all.*
>
> *When I have returned home, I must talk with my wife, chat with my children, and confer with my servants. All this activity I count as business when it must be done – and it must be unless you want to be a stranger in your own home. Besides, one must take care to be as agreeable as possible to those whom nature has supplied, or chance has made, or you yourself have chosen, to be the companions of your life, provided you do not spoil them by kindness, or through indulgence make masters of your servants.*
>
> *Amid these occupations that I have named, the day, the month, the year slip away. When, then, can I find time to write? Nor have I spoken a word about sleep – nor even of food, which for many people takes up as much time as sleep – and sleep takes up almost half a man's life! So I get for myself only the time I filch from sleep and food.*

More's sense of duty towards his family was so great that he was willing to give up his political positions rather than see his children neglected. He found many ways to show that he was indeed a "tender, loving father." And in devising the curriculum for his children, he was explicit about what was most important, "Put virtue in the first place..., learning in the second; and in their studies esteem most whatever may teach them piety towards God, charity to all, and modesty and Christian humility in themselves," because "the whole fruit [of education] should consist in the testimony of God and a good conscience." He also pointed out that an important end of education, as we have seen, is that one come to "love good advice."

More's Political Career: From Citizen to Subject

From 1511 to 1518, More was a very active citizen of London. He developed one of the largest and most lucrative law practices in the city. He took on greater responsibilities in governing Lincoln's Inn, and he was elected to the prestigious Doctors' Commons. He also represented the city's business interests in foreign embassies, and still found time to write and to correspond with Europe's leading intellectuals.

In 1518 More joined Henry VIII's service, with reluctance and well aware of the serious risks involved. Besides the dangers and the substantial loss of income, this career change meant he would have less time for his family and for his own study and writing; it also meant he would be a subject of the king rather than a free citizen of London. Yet, "in the interests of Christendom," More took on what he saw as his civic duty.

The year 1518 held new and important opportunities. In that year, both Henry and Wolsey decided to pursue a path of peace instead of war, and both seemed open to much needed reforms in church and state. Nevertheless, before joining Henry's service, More spoke with Henry about matters of conscience. As More reported this conversation, King Henry "graciously declared unto me that he would in no way have me do anything except what I should perceive would serve my own conscience, and that I should first look unto God and after God unto him." This, More recalled, was the "first lesson...that ever his Grace gave me at my first coming into his service," and More considered it "the most virtuous lesson that ever prince taught his servant."

Once engaged in the King's court, More rose rapidly in responsibilities and duties. He soon became Henry's private secretary and close advisor. Henry knighted him already in 1521 in recognition of his wide range of services. The confidence of both King and Commons was shown when More became Speaker of the House of Commons in 1523, an important session in the history of British liberties. In 1525 Henry gave Sir Thomas full responsibility for his extensive and lucrative Duchy of Lancaster. As Chancellor of this duchy, More assumed the full scope of administrative and judicial duties of a political ruler. Nonetheless, in 1526, More was given even greater responsibilities when Henry appointed him to his Royal Council's subcommittee of four, the four who oversaw all the major concerns of the realm, excluding matters of war. And yet so strongly was More concerned with peace that he also served as a peace ambassador to France during those years. These peace efforts came to fruition in the Peace of Cambrai in the summer of 1529. Years later, when writing the epitaph for his grave, More would briefly mention his service as king's counselor, knight, and chancellor, but, as noted earlier, he wrote at surprising length about his work for peace:

> *[More] served as the King's ambassador at various times and in various places, last of all at Cambrai.... In that place he witnessed, in the capacity of ambassador, to his great joy, the renewal of a peace treaty between the supreme monarchs of Christendom, and the restoration of a long-desired peace to the world. May heaven confirm this peace and make it a lasting one.*

A few months after that peace was confirmed, Sir Thomas was chosen by Henry VIII to be the Lord Chancellor of England, the highest office of the land.

Early Political Views

At the beginning of his career, More was well aware of “kings’ games...played upon scaffolds” and the ever-present dangers of a courtier’s life. Even at the height of his favor with King Henry, More made the telling comment that “if my head could win [King Henry] a castle in France...it should not fail to go.” In the poems of his youth, More wrote about the dangers of unchecked kingly power: “A king in his first year is always very mild indeed.... Over a long time a greedy king will gnaw away at this people.... It is a mistake to believe that a greedy king can be satisfied; such a leech never leaves flesh until it is drained." The barb of the ending is typical of More’s vivid and incisive approach as a youth. As this example shows, the younger More wrote with less tact than the older and practiced statesman who lived in dangerous political conditions.

In his early political writings, More regularly used the word “citizen” instead of “subject,” and he pointed out the dangers associated with monarchy. Chief among these was flattery. As he later warned Cromwell: Tell the king "what he ought to do, but never what he is able to do. So shall you show yourself a true faithful servant and a right worthy Councillor. For if a lion knew his own strength, it would be hard for any man to rule him.” As this statement implies, More was also aware of the dangers of one person possessing unlimited power. Indeed, More’s coronation ode to King Henry warned that “unlimited power has a tendency to weaken good minds, and even in the case of the very gifted.”

In contrast, Henry's example of the model king was the chivalric warrior Henry V, the historic figure that seemed to dominate Henry VIII’s imagination of himself as a ruler. This led the new King Henry to plan war with France almost immediately and, against the counsel of his advisors, to lead the troops himself – thus needlessly endangering his life and thus the stability of the English nation. This pursuit of glory through military conquest was in opposition to More’s pursuit of a worldwide peace.

Free Speech and Equal Justice

Events of particular historic importance in showing the statesmanship of Thomas More are his "Petition for Free Speech," his defense of the liberty of the House of Commons, and his work in expanding access to the courts of justice.

More's "Petition for Free Speech" in 1523 is the first recorded argument that has come down to us defending the political necessity of free speech. Although it was sometimes the custom to ask the king not to punish members of parliament for expressing their mind, More's speech went far beyond the pragmatic question of punishment. He gave a reasoned argument why it is in the best interest of the king and of the country to encourage free speech. More argued that good counsel required the free exchange of ideas. As a philosopher, More understood the need for public deliberation, and he explained that, since in discussing issues "of great importance, the mind is often so occupied in the matter" rather than the manner of expression, a proper examination of issues would not be possible unless the members of the House of Commons "were utterly discharged of all doubt and fear" about how they might express their judgments. In these and other words, More sketched the reasons for the free deliberation of political issues.

More's defense of the liberty of the House of Commons, which also took place in 1523, is commemorated by a life-size mural in England's Parliament. This painting is one of eight in the "Building of Britain" series in St. Stephen's Hall, and it depicts a famous incident that occurred in 1523 when, as Speaker of the House of Commons, More ingeniously and courageously resisted Lord Chancellor and Cardinal Wolsey's attempt to violate the Commons' tradition of free deliberation.

Throughout his career as a judge, More worked hard to expand access to justice and to ease the rigor of the common law by considering, through equity, the actual circumstances of individual persons. This did not make him popular with the common law judges since he issued many subpoenas requiring a review of their decisions. When complaints against More increased, he invited all the judges involved to dinner. Over wine afterwards, he went through each subpoena he had issued and explained his reasons for having done so, thus winning back the judges' good will.

As a judge, More became well respected among the people for fair and quick judgments. Although no evidence yet exists about its origin, there is a common rhyme testifying to this reputation. The poem probably refers to More's work as a judge while he was the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster:

When More sometime had Chancellor been,
No more suits did remain.
The like will never more be seen
Till More be there again.

More's impartiality as a judge was also well-known. When, for example, his son-in-law complained that More did not favor his own family, More replied: "Son, I assure you on my faith that, if the parties will at my hands call for justice, then, even if my father stood on one side and the devil on the other, his cause being good, the devil should have right."

Free Speech and Martin Luther

The issue most confusing for our times is More's treatment of such a figure as Luther. Why did More write and act so strongly against this theologian and churchman whom many revered? The brief answer is this: More, like many political leaders of that time, was convinced that Luther, with his incendiary rhetoric, held special responsible for the alarming bloodshed and violence that plagued Germany. Furthermore, along with King Henry and the other leaders of England, More was convinced that the same bloodshed could occur in England if Luther's call for violent reform was not checked.

Thomas More and his friend Erasmus had called for church and civil reform long before Luther. But they advocated peaceful means: the gradual reform of education, laws, and customs – brought about by such time-tested means as public deliberation and councils. In contrast, Luther used inflammatory rhetoric calling for the violent overthrow of legitimate but flawed institutions. In the words of Erasmus, who was at first sympathetic to Luther's project of reform, Luther "shattered almost the whole world." More put it this way about Luther: "You hurled a burning torch on all of Germany. You lit the wildfire that is now consuming the world." In the Peasants' Revolt in Germany in 1525, More pointed out, 70,000 German peasants were slaughtered – and More, along with Erasmus and many others, considered Luther to be largely responsible for that wildfire.

Along with Luther's angry rhetoric, More and Erasmus considered his view of human nature as a danger to peace and justice. As More and Erasmus understood him, Luther stressed human depravity and the failure of reason; he outright denied freedom of the will and the necessity of working diligently to acquire virtues; he also downplayed (especially in his early writings) the force and importance of man-made laws. These revolutionary teachings were viewed by More and Erasmus as so contrary to the needs of human and political life that they could only lead to war and bloodshed. Strongly opposing these views, More used irony, satire, and even the most powerful sarcasm to show the devastating implications of Luther's views for society and for the unity that had marked the church throughout Europe for 1500 years.

Proper Spheres of Church and State

More's final conflict with Henry VIII is the most dramatic and best-known aspect of Sir Thomas's life. Therefore, in this brief account, let it suffice to summarize More's understanding of the proper spheres of legitimate authority governing church and state, as shown in three different incidents.

In 1521, after reviewing Henry's *On the Seven Sacraments*, More cautioned Henry about exaggerating the temporal jurisdiction of the pope. In strong opposition, Henry insisted upon setting "forth that authority to the utmost," especially since "we received from that See our crown imperial." This statement by Henry reveals his misunderstanding about the origins of political authority and indicates why he would be easily tempted to adopt the notorious conception of the divine right of kings which the English people would violently reject a hundred years later. Since More conceived human beings as free by nature, he saw political authority as arising from people who are self-governing. Hence, as we have already seen, he stated boldly that "the consent of the people both bestows and withdraws [temporal] authority."

More clarified this crucial issue again in 1529 when the Church was accused of usurping state power. Both William Tyndale and Simon Fish charged that the Church forced King John in 1213 "to yield up his realm to the Pope" and thus to demand the payment of Peter's Pence. More called this a double calumny because Peter's Pence was always an alms freely given, and it was a custom that had begun before King John's time. More also explained the principle of proper jurisdiction: "For never could any king of England give away the realm to the Pope or make the land tributary even though he wished." More clearly understood there to be two orders, temporal and spiritual, whose governments were necessarily separate and distinct but, ideally, complementary and mutually supportive.

More repeated this principle of Church-State relations at his trial on July 1, 1535, when he invoked both the Magna Carta and the King's ancient Coronation Oath to show the longstanding recognition of this important distinction. At that trial, More respectfully but forcefully expressed his fundamental disagreement with Henry's personal despotism, reminding the English people of their own deeply-held convictions about the sovereignty of law and about the limited authority of government.

Man's Law and God's Law

More acknowledged that much learning and effort are required in solving the legal and ethical complexities that often arise in life. He told his daughter that he spent seven years and many sleepless nights thinking through the theoretical and practical issues involved in Henry VIII's "great matter."

Although More highly respected law, he recognized that some laws "could never be lawful." In general, however, More considered law to be the work of "tradition," arising from generations of leaders concerned with the common good. More saw these laws as a "sure and substantial shield" that is absolutely necessary for a society's peace and prosperity. Although More recognized that no law is perfect, he knew that "people without law would rush forth into every kind of crime." And because laws are easily manipulated, More insisted that even unjust laws deserve respect, and he advised prudent leaders to wait for the proper time and circumstances to advocate change. This More showed in own death. His was a respectful and serene acceptance of death when confronted with a law he could not obey, although, as will be seen, he energetically and effectively sought to change that law and to prevent the radical changes that Henry and Cromwell were planning.

As he said so clearly to Roper, More would give the devil himself benefit of law for the sake of justice and peace. Although More knew law to be one of society's clearest expressions of reason and therefore one of its strongest safeguards against injustice, he also recognized that law alone would never be enough to secure justice. In addition, More showed in his earliest writings that statesmen, imperfect as they would always be, would nonetheless be always needed – i.e., those individuals who would embody, stand for, and be willing to die for the justice which law imperfectly expresses.

Statesmanship to the End

Contrary to the impression given by Robert Bolt's artful *A Man for All Seasons*, scholars have now clearly shown that Thomas More did not remain silent or passive at the end of his life. Instead, More waged one of the most active and (until suppressed) effective writing campaigns of all times. This campaign was so effective in countering what More saw as the unjust manipulation of England's most fundamental laws and institutions that Henry VIII and Cromwell used the full force of their leading positions to execute London's most popular citizen and one of Europe's most respected scholars.

Up to the last moment of his life, More used discrete but effective means of appealing to the conscience of his king and his country. He did this not only at the cost of his own health and safety but at the cost of his family's material welfare. This he did, convinced that the very principle of just and legitimate government of both church and state was at stake.

Although More seemed to end his life as a political failure, history now praises his revolutionary success – a success that helped end a politics of unchecked power and that helped advance a politics of democratic self-rule. As British historian John Guy recently wrote, "For a former Lord Chancellor to defy the King and claim freedom of conscience against the state was a revolutionary step by the standards of the sixteenth century. More stood at the crossroads of history."

Gerard Wegemer
October 31, 2001