

Ruth Norrington. *IN THE SHADOW OF A SAINT : LADY ALICE MORE*. The Kylin Press, Waddesdon, Buckinghamshire : 1983. vi & 169 pp. 29 illustr. £ 12.50.

This study of Lady Alice More, the second wife to Sir Thomas More reveals to us (in the words of the Epilogue) the

Lady Alice More, who has stood beside her husband, in his shadow, for so long, [and the study] not only throws a light on her, but seems to put him in a new light as well. Seen through her eyes, he comes down a little from the pedestal where he has been placed by his admirers, and is cut down to the size of a man ; a man with many faults, seen by none more clearly than his wife, who had lived with him for twenty-four years. ... Lady Alice, by her constant watch and care of him, by her pruning of his more excessive [sic] spiritual tendencies, by her balanced outlook on life, played a great part in the final flowering of his remarkable character. (p. 138)

Such a claim is a very large one, and it is very largely earned. We do indeed come to understand how Lady Alice « ran one of the most remarkable households in Europe with consummate skill » ; and for the first time in history, in reading and reflecting upon More and his family, we can understand more clearly why he picked Lady Alice Middleton to be his second wife so soon after the death of his first, Jane Colt.

There is here much original research which shows convincingly that Lady Alice was well-born -- able, in fact, to claim connections, through the marriage of her cousin, to Henry VII and Henry VIII. It may well be, as claimed, that the family of Lady Alice were « great friends of the Tudors long before More attracted their notice by his wit and learning » ; but it must be regarded still as a claim, not buttressed by contemporary evidence. But that argument would be a major revision of that part of More's biography, and in fact of much of his family -- if not of some of his public -- life after 1510.

The author makes a valuable contribution in showing that Lady Alice More had important family connections, then ; but one may disagree with some of her conclusions, which strain at times to find a point of view through what is projected from those relations. Thus, as one example (p. 30) :

She waged a lifelong battle with him to improve his worldly [printed *wordly*] position. In this she had some powerful relations behind her. Her cousin's kinship with Henry VIII through the Owen Tudors, and the Southwells' close friendship with Henry VII, gave an added reason for her wishing to get him into Court circles. It is interesting to speculate on the possibility that if More had not married Alice, he would never, in fact, have embarked on the public career which ultimately lead [sic] to his downfall.

The quieter life of a lawyer and scholar were far more suited to his temperament and inclinations.

But, surely, we may interpret the pattern of events somewhat differently if we look from More's point of view -- demurring also with the point that we do not know that Lady Alice wanted to get herself or her husband into Court circles. For a significant decision had already been made half a dozen years before his marriage to Alice in 1511, when he left the Charterhouse and married Joanna Colt. He had already embarked on a public career when he married Alice in 1511, having been an Undersheriff of London about a year. There is enough that is solid in the evidence and findings of this book on More's second wife without forcing the evidence towards conclusions that will not stand.

It must, alas, be added that much of the writing does not support a careful and thoughtful reading, for not only are there numerous errors in spelling (of which some to be sure are typographical errors), but there are occasional misquotations (e.g., pp. 64, 72, 75, 102, 112) where the original is rather freely rewritten or edited without indication. This does not inspire confidence in the handling of original sources, especially when combined with the habit of citing texts from More and Erasmus which originally were in Latin but are given in a modern English without indication of the translator. There are some errors of fact. I do not think that it can be said quite so simply that More laid « the foundation of the great law of Equity, which was finally established in the Judicature Act of 1873 » (p. 69) ; and More was not the first layman to hold the office of Lord Chancellor « for several hundred years » (p. 68) ; etc.

There is so much charm in other parts of the narrative, and so much obvious dedication in the loving pursuit of research, that one feels churlish in lamenting that there had not been a more meticulous care in the writing and in the handling of sources and facts. It must finally be added that there is a fair amount of recent scholarship that has not been made use of : thus Clare M. Murphy's comment on the speech given to Dame Alice in the play *Sir Thomas More*, « which accords to More's wife a dignity worthy of the Lord Chancellor's lady, but missing in popular tradition » (*Moreana* XIX, 73 [March 1982], 77). Scholarship which would have taken her study considerably forward : some of the legal connections of the family and friends of Lady Alice need to be studied, and there will almost certainly be further support of the author's main argument about the importance of her connections. Few sectors of Tudor society intermarried quite so regularly as did the legal families, as Samuel E. Thorne and others have shown.

One may well differ at times from the author in the conclusions drawn, and one may even in charity both offer corrections and demur from some of the statements. But any reader of Thomas More must be grateful for this fresh and illuminating study of that remarkable -- and until now, remarkably unknown and misunderstood -- woman who lived a quarter of a century 'in the shadow of a saint.'