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SIR THOMAS MORE
AND THE OPPOSITION TO HENRY VIII

In considering Thomas More, few historians seem able to forget the end of the story. That More died a victim of Henry VIII, a martyr to his conscience, and a defender of the papal supremacy is, of course, perfectly true, but it is exceedingly rash to suppose that his whole life, or even the last few years of it, was simply a preparation for the tragic outcome. From about the middle of 1532 More certainly lived in a retirement in which he meant to prepare himself for his death, though not necessarily for one by violence; and from April 1534 he was in the Tower and knew what the end must be. But before that he had spent two and a half years of his life as lord chancellor, the King's highest officer and a leading member of the royal Council, at a time when Henry was manifestly striving for purposes that More detested. How could he justify holding office at all? What line did he take over the politics of those years? This part of his life occupies amazingly little space in the standard accounts.

More's acceptance of the chancellorship has been a stumbling block to his biographers. On Wolsey's fall it was clear to all men in high places that the King's infatuation for Anne Boleyn was about to unleash drastic events, full of danger for the Church and likely to produce bitter clashes between the *regnum* and the *sacerdotium* (1). More had already made it plain that he thought the Aragon marriage valid and would not be able to support Henry's endeavours to have it annulled. Yet he took office. Bridgett supposed that he did not do so until he had made sure of respect for his scruples of conscience (2), and even Chambers suggested that he obtained some sort of promise before the appointment (3). However, according to More himself, the King did not explicitly grant him liberty to dissent on the issue of the Divorce until after he had made him chancellor (4), and this is also what Roper understood to be the truth (5). There is no evidence at all that More had such a promise in his pocket when he became chancellor; as far as we know,

he entered office aware that he would still be called upon to involve himself in the burning question of the day.

That the decision to accept was not an easy one seems likely. Harpsfield, from whom the tradition of More's reluctance to take the great seal derives, offers no evidence, and Roper gives no hint of it (6). Since Roper was living in More's household at the time, his silence should perhaps carry more weight than William Rastell's later recollection that More refused, made the King angry, and then was much laboured to; still, the story may be true, being not improbable in itself, though one should be a little more careful of Rastell's fragmentary notes than scholars have been (7). From More himself we have only the short letter in which he told Erasmus what had happened; this does contain a possible hint that he was submitting to pressure (8). But, as we shall see, other phrases in the letter are more interesting. Hall knew that the succession to Wolsey caused a good deal of difficulty; long discussions in Council turned on the choice of a layman, and in the end More was appointed (9). But if there were difficulties it is too simple and hardly necessary to suppose that they were caused by More's inclination to refuse. If the great seal was on no account to go to a spiritual man, as Hall heard, More was the obvious man to choose: a trained lawyer, a man of European reputation and wide experience of affairs, chancellor of the Duchy and for several years one of the King's most intimate councillors. Erasmus understood that even Wolsey, who feared and hated More, regarded him as the only man in the kingdom fit for the office (10). Yet to appoint at this juncture a man who had already declared his opposition to the Divorce must surely have given Henry pause and troubled the Council. The obviously qualified man was also politically one of the least suitable, whether he wanted the appointment or not.

In the end, the King decided to take the risk, and More decided to submit to the royal pressure. What had either of them in mind? Very likely, as has often enough been suggested, Henry hoped to convert an opponent into a very useful ally; the King had a high opinion of his powers of persuasion and a low one of people's consciences, a subject on which he was something of an expert. As for More, historians have produced various conjectures: he thought he could be useful to the causes he valued (11); he came in on a wave of Erasmian rejoicing at the prospect of serious reform in the Church (12); he meant to confine himself to the professional judicial duties of a lord chancellor (13); he had no choice because, once he had entered the royal service, he was bound to accept whatever was offered (14). This last is not true; from Erasmus and More himself downward, contemporaries clearly supposed that though actual refusal might be difficult it was not impossible. The third

explanation reveals some misunderstanding of what the professional duties of the King's leading officer and councillor were; no Tudor lord chancellor, presiding in Chancery, Star Chamber and House of Lords, and prominent at the Council Table, could have thought of confining himself to the hearing of pleas. Incidentally, it is worth notice that except for a few anecdotes of Roper's nothing is so far known about More's much-praised work in the Chancery.

That leaves the first two explanations. Mr McConica rather overstates his case for an "Erasmian" domination of Henry VIII's policy in the years after Wolsey's fall; writings are not the same thing as actions, and the things done rather than dreamed of reflect a popular anticlericalism diplomatically exploited by the King's policy much more than they embody a humanist reform programme. But that Erasmus himself was pleased to see his friend in the place of power is true enough, and it would indeed have been odd if More had not expected the office to enable him to exercise some influence on the course of events. It is worth remembering that Chapuys' first reaction to the news of the appointment was to rejoice because this "upright and learned man" was also reckoned "a good servant of the Queen" (Catherine) (15). And what did More tell Erasmus? That he would energetically endeavour to fulfil the excessive hopes entertained by the King of his unworthy self, with all the faith and readiness at his disposal (16). Common form perhaps, or else a hint essentially ironic, in the More manner, in its implications: the King was not the only man to entertain hopes of More.

If More's part in the years 1529-1532 is to be understood, two particular problems need to be investigated: his attitude to heresy and his relations with the Reformation Parliament. Between them, they illumine More's own view of the political circumstances of the day - the action these demanded and the way in which they could be exploited.

It is necessary to be very clear about More's reaction to the changes in religion which he saw all around him. No doubt, the more scurrilous stories of his personal ill-treatment of accused heretics have been properly buried (17), but that is not to make him into a tolerant liberal. Tolerance he would have abominated as treason to God; it was one of his objections to Wolsey that the cardinal had ignored the dangers to the faith (18). All the evidence goes to show that More hated heresy with a real, even an exceptional, passion. "Odit ille," wrote Erasmus in 1532, explaining More to one who did not know him, "seditiosa dogmata"; of that he had never made any secret (19). To Hall's parenthetical disgust, he "leaned much to the spiritual men's part in all causes" (20). Even the letter in which More told Erasmus of his resignation goes out of its way to

lament the spread of the new sects (21). Rastell recalled, perhaps correctly, that the more energetic pursuit of heretical teaching after 1531 resulted from representations made by More and the bishops (22). While Mr McConica's Erasmian humanists were busy bringing out works calling for reform in the Church, More got ever more deeply into his controversy with Tyndale in which he increasingly defended a total orthodoxy. The More of the early 1530's can hardly any longer be called an Erasmian, and Mr McConica cannot in fact link him with the activities of the "party" he has tried to document. The More of the *Confutation* may still be able to see, as the author of *Utopia* so clearly did, that not all is well with the old Church, but he is desperately certain that, as things are, reform can lead only to destruction and must be resisted. The only humanist in high places disappointed not only the King's hopes but also those of the Christian humanists.

It would surely have been strange if a man so aware of the pressing dangers of heresy had not used his high office to prevent disaster. Of course, he could not himself try heretics, a matter for the courts Christian; Chambers's argument that no heretics were burned in the diocese of London while More had influence appears to me irrelevant to an assessment of More's actions, and Erasmus was even more off the beam when he praised More for not condemning anyone to death for religion (23). No lord chancellor has ever had the opportunity of pronouncing the death sentence on anyone (24). However, he could arrest men, investigate their opinions, and hold them for trial by the spiritual arm; and this he seems to have done, even by his own admission, to a degree quite unknown among the King's lay councillors before or after. Perhaps a little more credence should be given than has of late been fashionable to the reports which reached Erasmus that More's successor was releasing numbers of "Lutherans" imprisoned by his predecessor (25). The numbers varied - forty perhaps, or only twenty - and rumours are not evidence. Yet there is evidence of More's determined persecution of heretics which has been too lightly written off. Thus a London merchant, Thomas Palmer, was in 1531 imprisoned by the bishop of London, and when his servant, John Stanton, tried to raise the matter in Parliament, More (he claimed) intervened to attack him with false accusations as a favourer of heresy (26). Palmer, no doubt, was no victim of More's; Stanton did not assert anything like that, and if Audley released imprisoned heretics in 1532 Palmer would not appear to have been among them (27). What matters is that More automatically sprang to the defence of the bishop's action and assumed the petitioner to be a tainted heretic.

There is also the case of John Field whose petition to Audley and the Council was first unearthed and used by Froude (28). Field claimed to have been detained by More at

Chelsea for eighteen days from 7 January 1530, securing his release only after he had bound himself to appear in the Star Chamber on Candlemas next. The outcome of that appearance was more than two years in the Fleet, in conditions of special hardship, without trial or knowledge of why he was held. On Palm Sunday (24 March) 1532 he was "under our said sovereign's commandment and Sir Thomas More's" transferred to the Marshalsea, the officers of the Fleet having first robbed him of his money - as they said, to obtain their fees. In the Marshalsea he "fell sick of the house sickness" and on Whit Monday (20 May) was "carried out on (29) four men's backs" with more loss of money to the keeper there. However, he recovered, which fact came to More's ears. Although More "went out of his said office of the chancellorship about the time your bedeman was carried out of prison", he made it his business through the services of the bishops of Winchester and London ("as your bedeman heard say") to persuade the duke of Norfolk to have Field put back in gaol. He was again released in October, on sureties, and for a year had been giving attendance every day of every term, as his bond demanded. Now he asked for his discharge and the restoration of his lost property. As happens so often in the records of this time, nothing else is known of this case (30). But the ease with which it has been brushed aside will hardly do. The circumstantial detail, the absence of any explicit animus against More (a fallen minister and easy target), the accurate dating of More's resignation, and the care taken to qualify one detail which the petitioner could know only by hearsay, all carry a good deal of conviction.

Against this, it has been urged that More himself answered all such charges when he spoke, in the *Apology*, of accusers who had been investigated by the King's Council and found to be liars (31). But should More's word be taken without question on points like these? However truthful a man he may have been, he could surely have been mistaken. Unfortunately there is no evidence except his word that charges of this kind were after his fall dismissed in the manner related by him, and what he himself has to say is less straightforward than his apologists have supposed. He mentions one accuser by name, Thomas Phillips, and what he offers in his own defence is surely a trifle peculiar. Phillips, he says, had strongly reminded him of Richard Hunne (some sixteen years earlier), and because he feared another suicide in the bishop's prison with all the consequences that he remembered from 1514 he had transferred him to the Tower, not the proper place for suspected heretics (32). At its best, such action was irregular and unwise. But, More claims, the King had investigated the charge and absolved his late chancellor, telling Phillips

he had been lucky to get away with so little. If this is true, it is a case of hard words breaking no bones: Phillips did well for himself thereafter and is found in 1538 as a gaoler in the Tower who converted Sir Nicholas Carew on the eve of his execution by introducing him to the Bible in English (33). Clearly he was a heretic; clearly he was troubled by More's personal intervention; clearly he was liberated after More's departure from the scene. As for Field, the supposition that More had dealt with his accusation, too, will not do. More does not mention him by name, and what he has to say about unnamed accusers does not fit the case. The investigations of this clamour which, he says, resulted in sharp rebukes for the accusers dealt (according to More's explicit assertion) with complaints against the bishops and not against himself. But Field said nothing of bishops and confined his attack to the late lord chancellor. John Foxe may have collected too many exaggerated stories of More's doings, but he was right enough in his assessment of the chancellor's share in the seeking out of heresy.

Indeed, it would be quite wrong to "acquit" More of action against heresy: he thought it his duty to use his place in the defence of the true religion. If Field may be trusted - and the weight of probability is in his favour - More went a very long way in his pursuit of suspects. All this agrees well with his known beliefs and his frequent bitter words. There is every reason to think that among the purposes he hoped to fulfil when he accepted office he put high the protection of the Church against its heretical enemies.

In this, however, he was not at all out of step with the official policy of those years. At the time, in fact, both King and Commons repeatedly demonstrated their orthodoxy in order to rebut the charge that their actions against clergy and pope were equal to heresy (34). More was more zealous and almost certainly more sincere than most, but as an enemy of heresy he had, during his years as chancellor, nothing to apprehend from King or Council. Matters stood differently when it came to the defence of the Church against political attack, to the cause of the Divorce and the powers of the papacy. On all these, we know, Thomas More entirely disliked the progress of Henry's policy; but did he confine his disagreement to the privacy of his own mind or even to mere expressions of views?

More's recorded official actions in the Parliament, where events took place, are both few and unexceptionable: not so few as to hide his standing in the government, but sufficiently unexceptionable to have troubled the hagiographers. Thus he opened the proceedings of the 1529 session with his notorious attack on Wolsey, and whether one thinks (improbably) that he was here "preaching to Henry VIII" (35), or

(as is much more likely) "that he spoke for all who were sympathetic with the need for reform" (36), it is clear that he was crossing official lines, not official lines. Attacking Wolsey in November 1529 would come well to his successor who had long regarded the cardinal as a major disaster; it would be agreeable to the King who wanted to justify to himself his rejection of a faithful old friend and servant; and it would delight most of the lords assembled to hear the speech. More's next known appearance in Parliament presents greater difficulties. In 1531 it was decided to silence rumour and press the King's views by presenting to both Houses of Parliament the opinions in favour of Henry's case that had been gathered from various Universities. The day chosen was 30 March, and the man made responsible was the lord chancellor (37). He started in the Lords, explaining how untrue it was that the King was seeking his divorce for the love of some woman and not out of a scruple of conscience; then he asked the clerk to read the opinions. Catherine's partisans protested, and Norfolk intervened to the effect that the King had sent the papers for information, not debate. Nevertheless, someone managed to ask More what he himself thought, to which the chancellor allegedly replied only that he had often enough told the King his views. He then led a deputation of peers to the Commons where he repeated the performance. After the reading of the opinions he added:

Now you of this Common House may report what you have seen and heard, and then all men shall openly perceive that the King hath not attempted this matter of will or pleasure, as some strangers report, but only for the discharge of his conscience and surety of the succession of his realm. This is the cause of our repair hither to you, and now we will depart.

Chapuis heard that the bishops of London and Lincoln (both well known as conservatives) also spoke in the King's defence, and that the Commons received everything in silence.

Roper must be right in saying that More did all this "at the King's request", but how true is it that he "was not showing of what mind himself was therein"? (38) As reported, his words were chosen with care. He did not commit himself on the justice of the King's cause; the only thing he himself supported was the King's claim to be acting for serious reasons of conscience and policy. He may have believed this, as indeed Henry himself believed it. No one could have used his remarks against him. But his omissions must surely have been noted: not a word from him to suggest that the opinions to be read out were in fact the truth. Yet as far as the less subtle were concerned, he had unquestionably associated himself with the King's policy, and while his careful abstention from any expression of

personal views may have reassured his friends (and alerted his enemies) it cannot have satisfied More himself. He was in an impossible position, and it is no wonder that rumours about his intention to resign had circulated at the beginning of the session (39). While he held the highest office in the state he was bound to come into contact with great affairs, in Council and publicly in Parliament, and no gracious concession, sincere or not (40), to his conscience could insulate him against the contagion. By 1531 he could not really both serve Henry as lord chancellor and also maintain his conscience clear; and this carefully staged business of 30 March proved it. Thomas More, Catherine's and Chapuys' hope and a determined opponent of the Divorce, had had to take the lead in presenting to the nation the alleged evidence that the Divorce was just. How did he feel: determined to resign? No doubt, but he stayed another year.

On only one more occasion did More address the Commons, in April 1532 when he urged them to make a grant for the defence of the northern border (41). It is possible that the occasion was not so politically innocent as it appears. We know that about this time Thomas Temse, burgess for Westbury (Wilts.), moved for a petition to the King to take back his wife; and James Gairdner linked this motion with the lord chancellor's request for money (42). Certainly, Temse's move was answered by Henry with yet another explanation of the justice of his case, this time to a Commons' deputation summoned to meet him. However, Hall, who supplies the only evidence (43), and who ascribed both events to the prorogued session that began on 10 April 1532, put More's visit into the end of 23 Henry VIII and Temse's speech in the beginning of 24 Henry VIII, the dividing date being 21 April. There is no evidence for Gairdner's allegation that Temse touched on Scotland; the troubles he wished to prevent were, according to Hall, the bastardisation of Princess Mary "and diverse other inconveniences". Nevertheless Gairdner may have been right in linking the two events; as we shall see, the possibility of pre-arrangement even cannot be excluded. It is just possible that More provided the setting for Temse's motion. However, it is more certain that at this time the manoeuvres were going forward which resulted in the Submission of the Clergy and that in these More played no public part. Whether the King had ever again tried to involve him publicly in the defence of his proceedings we do not know; at any rate, More had not allowed himself to be so trapped again. At the end of this session he did resign, but the circumstances of that resignation and the evidence for his less public activities in his years of office need to be entirely reassessed.

After More's execution, Thomas Cromwell wrote a long

letter to Gregory da Casale, the man used until 1535 to maintain a tenuous contact with Rome (44). In it he explained the treasons for which, he alleged, Fisher and More had died. This, of course, was a piece of propaganda, and diplomatic propaganda intended for the pope at that; nevertheless, the letter does not deserve the neglect which More scholars have bestowed upon it (45). One passage in it, which refers to a nameless opposition group, must be quoted at length:

And when the public council of the realm, which we call Parliament, was called to meet at stated times to see to the good order of the realm, they began everywhere to enquire secretly with busy diligence what matter should be in hand and what should in that Parliament fall to be done for the benefit of the commonwealth. And whatever they managed to gather, by the report of others, from their experience of past usage, and by conjecture, that they at once considered in their policy meetings, arriving at conclusions very different from what the peace and interest of the realm required.

Having devised such contrary policies, they then buttressed them with much skill of argument, producing a point of view which could easily have deceived the rude people. And when after a bit they realised that the King was getting annoyed at this organising of opposition, they stepped up their campaign by arranging for select speakers and preachers to spread the arguments that had been worked out. Investigations initiated by the King showed that More and Fisher stood at the heart of this conspiracy.

If Cromwell was telling the truth, he was describing methods of unexpected political maturity. According to his story, the summoning of the Reformation Parliament caused the opponents of the Divorce and defenders of the clergy to form a kind of defence committee which set out to counter everything said and done in Parliament by reasoned arguments designed to meet the exact steps taken, steps of which, since proceedings were secret, they should have been ignorant. What Cromwell called a conspiracy we may more properly call an organised opposition outside Parliament but able to obtain information from within it, sufficiently coherent to prepare counter-efforts to the King's propaganda, and able to arrange for its members to speak publicly against the King's proceedings. The sermons of Peto, for instance, or of Forest might well have resulted from such a concerted programme (47).

Even if Cromwell was telling the truth, it is still possible that he was unfairly involving More. More's discretion was and is notorious. In the spring of 1531 he even refused to receive a friendly letter from the Emperor because such contacts might arouse suspicion, even though he

felt that the proofs he had given of his loyalty should have assured his freedom from any such hostility (48). But what matters is whether this discretion hid inaction or some deeper activity, and even More could not keep the record entirely clear of hints of the true position. In the same breath as he refused Charles V's letter he also told Chapuys that if he were suspected of any contact with the imperial cause he would lose his freedom to speak as frankly in Council as he had hitherto done on all that touched the Emperor and his aunt. Chapuys, who had earlier identified both More and the earl of Shrewsbury as friends to Catherine, also thought that the chancellor had gone out of his way to show favour to the Emperor and his servants (49). More stood at any rate close enough to the Aragon faction to open his mouth on occasion, as when he reassured one of the ambassador's men that the Emperor's preoccupation with the Turkish danger would not enable the English to take any action: "there is no order nor power." (50)

Thus it seems that More not only made no secret of his views but maintained some contact with the centre of intrigue, the Emperor's ambassador, and contributed frank opinions in policy debates with King and Council. This is not quite the aloof More of tradition, but such action falls well short of what Cromwell later alleged against him. However, there is further evidence which seems to bear Cromwell out in essentials, and in particulars too.

Sir George Throckmorton, a man who in 1536-37 repeatedly ran into political trouble, used one of his confessional statements to tell a fascinating story which again has been quite unjustly neglected (51). In 1529 Throckmorton had been elected knight for the shire of Warwick and, according to his own account, acted in the House as a frequent and persistent opponent of the King's policy. Now, in 1537, he wished to explain to Henry his "proud, lewd and indiscreet handling of myself to you ward... since the beginning of your Parliament anno vicesimo primo or thereabouts". A little before the Parliament opened, Throckmorton was sent for to Lambeth by Friar Peto, the best known of Catherine's unswerving supporters. Peto told him what he had allegedly already told the King, both in sermons and in private audience, that since Prince Arthur's marriage was never consummated (concerning which point he insisted on believing Catherine's sworn statement) the Queen's marriage with Henry could be dissolved only by death. There could in any case be no marriage with Anne Boleyn since Henry had "meddled" with both mother and daughter. Having thus defined the line of argument, Peto went on to advise Sir George "if I were in the Parliament House, to stick to that matre as I would have my soul saved". Throckmorton took this advice and spoke against all the important acts - Annates, Appeals,

Supremacy. He had many conversations with Fisher about the proposed legislation and the question of the pope's authority, and Fisher referred him to Nicholas Wilson, another very active supporter of Catherine, with whom also he had several talks. He went to be confessed by yet another well known opponent, Father Reynolds, who influenced him in the same direction: if he did not stick to his opinions he would surely be damned, "and also if I did speak or do anything in the Parliament House contrary to my conscience for fear of any earthly power or punishment, I should stand in a very hard case at the day of judgment". Reynolds was even more uncompromising than the others, telling him to speak out even if he was certain that he could not win; Fisher and Wilson had conceded that if he were sure that his speaking "could do no good, that then I might hold my peace and not offend". Reynolds argued that no one could know "what comfort I should be to many men in the House to see me stick in the right way, which should cause many more to do the same". Blinded by their pressure and by long habit, he had ignored many warnings from Cromwell against their influence, till now of late he had come to see the error of his ways.

Here, then, is proof of an organised opposition group which not only attempted to counteract the doings of the Reformation Parliament but succeeded in attracting at least one member of the House to itself, instructed him in parliamentary tactics and the arguments to be used, and used his freedom of speech in the Commons to gain a hearing for the opposition point of view. This is what Cromwell told Casale had existed since November 1529, and his letter was written some two years before Throckmorton's confession. His management of the House included endeavours to talk the opposition round and break their dependence on this non-parliamentary policy committee, as Throckmorton's reference to the warnings received clearly proves. Though we know for certain of no other members who took their orders from the Peto group, it is, of course, possible that Throckmorton was not the only one. Speeches in favour of Queen Catherine were reported on several occasions: they must now all be suspect as somewhat less than spontaneous (52).

Yet what of More? Throckmorton tied him, too, into the story. Shortly after the opening of the Parliament (and apparently soon after Peto's first approach) (53) More, still chancellor, sent for Sir George to meet him in the Parliament Chamber. The scene is described in detail: More awaited his caller in a little room off the Chamber which had an altar or something like it in it on which the chancellor leant throughout the interview. Throckmorton thought he remembered that the bishop of Bath was talking to More when he arrived, but More disengaged himself to speak to Sir George words of great comfort:

I am very glad to have the good report that goeth of you and that you be so good a catholic man as ye be; if ye do continue in the same way that you began and be not afraid to say your conscience, ye shall deserve great reward of God and thanks of the King's grace at length, and much worship to yourself - or words much like to these.

More's kindness and encouragement sent Throckmorton into ecstasies and greatly encouraged him to seek out the other counsellors already mentioned. There is really no reason to doubt that More spoke to the effect remembered by Throckmorton, but if he did so he must be considered one of the organised group. Peto had picked the right man in a political innocent like Throckmorton who could be threatened with hellfire first and flattered by a kind word from the lord chancellor after, to such good purpose that he maintained opposition in the House for at least five of the Parliament's seven sessions.

Admittedly, More once again practised that care and discretion which distinguish his handling of himself in the tricky situation that his acceptance of the chancellorship had forced upon him. It might be argued that he had just happened to hear about Throckmorton's useful attitude and quite independently wished to offer his commendations; unlike Peto, Fisher, Wilson and Reynolds he held no long indoctrination sessions with Sir George. But the first is a good deal harder to credit than that More knew of Peto's schemes and helped them along; and as for the second, there was neither reason nor occasion why the lord chancellor should converse at length or frequently with a knight for Warwickshire. What really matters is the remark that support of the catholic cause would in the end earn favour from the King. This shows More well aware that for the present the King's attitude to Throckmorton was likely to be very different, that the present policy was hostile to the catholic cause, and that he himself was involved in trying to change that policy. Throckmorton's testimony supports Cromwell's allegations, and between them they place More firmly with one of the political groups of the time, that organised to oppose the King's Great Matter and to support the cause of Catherine and Rome. There is no doubt that the King and others were well enough aware of More's opinions and heard them expressed; it is another question whether at this early date they knew of his share in the "conspiracy". As More told Chapuys in 1531, he wished to retain his usefulness as a proponent of the organisation's policy by avoiding all suspicion of contact with the group. Until 1532 he succeeded sufficiently in retaining the King's trust to make his continued stay in office, however distasteful, worth while.

That this is an accurate reconstruction is borne out by the story of his resignation - that moment when the old tie with Henry VIII finally broke and the old love turned to the new hatred that was in the end to bring More to the scaffold. There is no doubt that More resigned; Harpsfield was certainly right to reject the rumours spread by "adversaries and evil willers" that More had been "against his will thrust out of the chancellorship" (54). He had at intervals been pressing for his release, using the friendship of the duke of Norfolk to persuade the King; one wonders just how good a friend he found that devious second-rater (55). Thus, at least, Roper; but since More in the end resigned quite easily and with assurances of future kindness from Henry, one might ask just how hard he had tried before. In 1532 More pleaded ill health to get free of office (56), but though no doubt he was at fifty-four no fitter than might be expected in the sixteenth century, he cannot have been really ill, for he was to survive an increasingly rigorous imprisonment with his health unaffected. Erasmus conjectured that "perhaps he feared the unpopularity of that Divorce against which he had always advised" (57), and there may be something in this; however, no one even at the time supposed More guilty of promoting that particular piece of policy. It would possibly be more accurate to say that he did not wish any longer to stand by the side of those that advocated the Divorce, whether it was unpopular or not.

This is the usual view, but it will not quite do. Once again it would be wrong to suppose that More had been watching in an inactive despair. The main issue in the spring of 1532 was the attack on the clergy's independence which emerged from the Supplication against the Ordinaries promoted in and by the Commons. There has been some debate about these events. Years ago I suggested that the whole operation was from the first planned by Cromwell: that he took over genuine grievances well ventilated in the Commons in order to compel the clergy's submission to the King's authority. Mr J.P. Cooper in reply stressed more heavily the Commons' independent concern in these issues, and Dr M. Kelly has more lately made a good case for supposing that the sequence of events reflects not prearrangement but the playing out of conflicting policies and day-to-day developments (58). The present reassessment of More's activities in part supports and in part casts doubt on Dr Kelly's views. For More played his part in this crisis, obscure though that part may once again be. It has long been noted that he resigned on the very day after the Convocation had finally surrendered, & Chapuys knew that in Council More had joined the bishops in opposing the King. Henry was said to be particularly angry with More and Gardiner (59). Gardiner, of course, who had drafted the tough early replies of Convoca-

tion, had throughout stood forth as the champion of clerical liberties. But why More, unless he too had resisted more strenuously than the rest? The Submission was extorted after much public and private struggling in Convocation and Council; if Dr Kelly is right in thinking that it was "an unexpected and precipitate development" of May 1532 (60), there is no need to doubt that More, with the bishops, would right to the end have supposed the issue insufficiently settled and could justly have continued argument and opposition for as long as a shadow of hope remained. On the other hand, in the light of the evidence assembled in all the articles cited, it looks as though the anticlericals on the Council, guided by Cromwell, had all along intended to obtain drastic concessions by means of the Supplication. The Submission may have come as a sudden and unwelcome development to More, but that is not to say that his opponents were not looking for something like it from the first.

Thus More resigned, after a last battle in which he had finally jeopardised what remained of the King's favour. The first chapter of Magna Carta was wiped off the book; the liberties of the English Church were destroyed. Surely the whole of More's career as chancellor now hangs together. He had taken office when Wolsey's removal opened some prospect of rational reform, but also at a time when the King's determination to get rid of Catherine showed to all thinking men that Church and clergy were likely to be in much danger. He dreaded heresy with a hatred that in so reasonable and balanced a man strikes one as a trifle abnormal (61). Thus he hoped to use his office, as best he might, to stand guard over the things in which he believed: the orthodox faith and the liberties of the Church. In so far as he opposed the Divorce, he did so because he thought the King's legal case bad and because he dreaded the larger consequences; it is not easy to see simply a defender of Queen Catherine in the man who "would not deny to swear to the succession" of Anne Boleyn's issue but could not take the oath tendered in April 1534 because it implied denial of the pope's supremacy (62). So he employed himself in the detection of heresy, and he lent his aid and authority to that group of dissentients who hoped to organise opposition and seem to have had some success in the House of Commons. At the same time, of course, he tried to apply the brake in the Council and may have been partly responsible for the absence of any clear-cut policy in those years (63). But he was never either a reckless man or a really subtle politician, and the role he had chosen did not suit him too well. From early in 1531 at the latest, by which time Thomas Cromwell was increasing his influence at court, More realised that he was losing the battle. Nevertheless he stayed at his post; the cause of the Church demanded one last effort

from him. The victory of the anticlerical policy in May 1532 and the destruction of the Church's independence in England closed a chapter. His usefulness at an end, his preferred policy irremediably destroyed, More could and must go. Is it any wonder that he now resolved to spend the remainder of his life away from the great affairs and in contemplation of "the immortality of the life to come"? (64)

One may be sure that More sincerely meant this. Once he had broken with public life he would never in any form engage in it again. And yet, in the circumstances this was an unreal stance. For nearly three years he had been right at the centre of affairs and had not kept silent; as he had told the Lords in 1531, the King knew his views well enough. He had backed a losing policy, and when that policy was lost he had taken himself off out of sight: at least, this is the way in which things must have appeared to Cromwell and the King. Some suspicion of his relations with known opponents must have existed already, as the later charges concerning the Nun of Kent and Bishop Fisher indicate. What reason had the government to suppose that a man who had actively engaged in such controversial politics would now abandon them altogether? Being the men they were, neither Henry nor Cromwell would have really believed such a turning away to be possible; and even if, knowing their More, they supposed him capable of it (65), they could well decide that the risk was too great for them to take. Here was a man of stature and ability and European renown who had already done much to discredit their policy both at home and abroad. Left at large, he must have seemed like a time-bomb to them. And so the tragedy was staged: more pressure upon the now inflexible man to accept the new order, the King's increasing hatred, the rigged trial and the condemnation on a charge which rested on perjured evidence. But though the charge was false in fact, it was (as More's speech to his judges showed) true in spirit, and by his part in the events of 1529-32 More had made certain that his conscience could not in the end be left private to himself.

G. R. Elton

NOTES

- 1) - R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (London, 1935), 236, is right to say: "More knew quite well what was coming."
- 2) - T.E. Bridgett, *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More* (London, 1891), 225.
- 3) - Chambers, *More*, 236.
- 4) - *St Thomas More: Selected Letters*, ed. E.F. Rogers

(New Haven, 1961), 209. (Cited as *More : Selected Letters*).

5) - William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, in *Two Early Tudor Lives*, ed. R.S. Sylvester and D.P. Harding (New Haven, 1962), 224. (Cited as Roper).

6) - Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.V. Hitchcock and R.W. Chambers (London, EETS, 1932), 51. Roper (p.219) mentions only More's formal disabling speech, after the appointment was in effect settled.

7) - "The Rastell Fragments" (Printed in Harpsfield, *Life and Death*), 222. The material in the fragments was collected for a life of Fisher and deals only incidentally with More.

8) - *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. Allen et al., viii. 294 : "Ego merebus accommodo..." (Cited as Allen).

9) - Edward Hall, *The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Famelies of York and Lancastre*, ed. H.Ellis (London, 1809), 761. (Cited as Hall).

10) - Allen, x. 136, 180.

11) - E.g., Algernon Cecil, *A Portrait of Thomas More, Scholar, Statesman, Saint* (London 1937), 301.

12) - J.K. McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics* (Oxford, 1965), ch. 5.

13) - Christopher Hollis, *Sir Thomas More* (London, 1934), 157.

14) - Chambers, *More*, 236.

15) - *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J.S. Brewer, J. Gairdner, R. H. Brodie (London, 1869-1932), iv. 6026. (Cited as LP).

16) - Allen, viii. 294.

17) - E.g. Chambers, *More*, 274ff.

18) - More's attack on Wolsey (Hall, 764) included references to "new enormities" among the people for which no law had been made, a conventional term of the time for divergences in religion.

19) - Allen, x. 138.

20) - Hall, 771.

21) - Allen, x. 33-4.

22) - Harpsfield, *Life and Death*, 223.

23) - Chambers, *More*, 279ff.; Allen, x. 138.

24) - "Quum habeat ius occidendi," said Erasmus ; but More had no such right.

25) - Allen, x. 116, 135, 180.

26) - LP v. 982.

27) - LP vi. 573.

28) - Public Record Office, London : SP 1/78/246-7 ; cf. J.A. Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (standard edition, n.d.), i. 556-9. Froude's transcript contains his usual quota of unimportant errors.

29) - MS : of.

30) - Both LP and A.I. Taft, in his edition of *the Apology of Syr Thomas More Knyght* (E.E.T.S. 1930), 328 ff., identify this John Field with one who petitioned Cromwell in November 1536 (or a later year) for his release (LP xi. 1164). But even if the two Fields are the same man, the later imprisonment cannot be linked with the former. Field then spoke of having spent nearly three years in the Counter : i.e. at some point he must have been newly jailed, and in a different prison, since on the earlier occasion he was certainly free for a year from October 1532. The second petition deals manifestly with some non-religious offence ; the first, despite Taft's unconvincing doubts, concerned a point of the faith since Field's books were investigated. The tone of the second petition, acknowledging that "such grievous complaint is made against me that they to whom God has given authority to punish offences may no less do of justice than keep me in prison until the time of judgment", is very different from that of the first. If only one John Field (a common enough name) is involved in these two cases he may be thought accident-prone, but his later troubles are quite clearly distinct from his earlier and cannot be used, as Taft tries to do, to explain them away.

31) - Bridgett, *More*, 270 ; Chambers, *More*, 277.

32) - *The Workes of Sir Thomas More, Knyght...written by him in the Englysh tonge* (London, 1557), 905-6. The danger of suicide was the greater because a cousin of Phillips's called Holy John had drowned himself in a well when accused of heresy !

33) - Hall, 827. Taft, who discussed Phillips's case in his edition of *the Apology* (320ff.), missed this revealing point.

34) - E.g. the defence of orthodoxy by an attack on heretical books had to wait until the King's policy had begun to turn against Rome (*Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. P.L. Hughes and J.F. Larkin, 1.193ff). Or cf. the Commons' reaction in 1529 to Fisher's charges of heresy (Hall, 766).

35) - Chambers, *More*, 242.

36) - McConica, *English Humanists*, 107.

37) - Chapuys (LP v.171) and Hall (775ff.) report in very similar terms.

38) - Roper, 225.

39) - LP v. 112.

40) - It seems to have been sincere - at least at first. As is well-known, More did not sign the appeal from the nobility to the pope which Henry VIII arranged in 1530. But this was not a courageous refusal, as Chambers (*More*, 249) in probable reliance on Rastell's dubious notes (*Harpsfield, Life and Death*, 223) supposed. Chapuys knew that More, together with Catherine's supporters among the bishops, was not called to the meeting which prepared that document

(*Calendar of State Papers Spanish*, iv.I.599), and while he ascribed the selection to suspicion it looks more like a concession to the sort of promise that Henry had made to More.

41) - Hall, 785.

42) - J. Gairdner, *The English Church in the Sixteenth Century from the Accession of Henry VIII to the Death of Mary* (London, 1903), 116-7.

43) - Hall, 788. Harpsfield's note in his *Pretended Divorce between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon*, ed. N. Pocock (London, Camden Soc. 1878), 197 is clearly taken straight from Hall. The editor of *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish* iv. II. 994 confused Temse's intervention with the motion of a member for the city of London reported by Chapuys a year later, which in any case was quite different (cf. LP vi. 324).

44) - R.B. Merriman, *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (Oxford, 1902), i.427ff. Also printed in *State Papers of Henry VIII* (London, Record Commission, 1830-52), vii.633ff.

45) - The only historian to use it was, inevitably, Froude (ii. 283-6); he quoted it in a mock-Tudor translation of his own which is at times excessively free, though it does not pervert the essential sense.

46) - "Et ubi Regni concilium (quod parliamentum vocant) pro Regni quiete stabilienda, ut ad certa tempora habendum indictum foret, ceperunt undecunque sollicita cum sedulitate clanculum exquirere, qua de re tractari quidque in hoc parlamento ut expediens rei publicae agi oporteret. Quicquid uero aliorum delatu ex re praeterita rerum usu uel coniectura usque collegissent, id statim communibus consiliis trutinabant, omnia secus interpretantes quam Regni quiete et utilitas exposcebat."

47) - Cf. D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. III (Cambridge 1959), 201; H. Maynard Smith, *Henry VIII and the Reformation* (London, 1948) 442.

48) - LP v. 171. Charles's letter has now been printed by H. Schulte Herbrüggen, *Sir Thomas More: Neue Briefe* (Münster, 1966), 97.

49) - *Ibid.* 120. Earlier, Chapuys had heard that More's frequent defence of Catherine had put him in danger of dismissal (*Calendar of State Papers Spanish*, iv.I.727).

50) - *Ibid.* 187.

51) - Public Record Office, London: SP 1/125/247-51; cf. LP xii. II. 552. His account contains some dating problems: writing up to eight years after the event, he was liable to telescope several parliamentary sessions. In retelling the story I have adopted the most likely way out of several confusions.

52) - E.g. Temse could have been a client, as suggested

above, p. 292.

53) - Throckmorton says it happened shortly after the Parliament opened and when he had been arguing to the Act of Appeals (1533): both cannot be correct. Since he speaks of More as chancellor, I prefer the earlier date.

54) - Harpsfield, *Life and Death*, 59-62. Continental reformers, too, spoke of More as "iure depositum" (Allen, x. 116).

55) - E.g. Roper, 225; Harpsfield, *Life and Death*, 58-9 is curiously condensed on the whole of More's chancellorship on which, quite contrary to his usual practice, he does not quote Roper.

56) - As he explained to Erasmus (Allen, x.31-2).

57) - Allen, x.124: "fortasse metuebat invidiam repudii, quod semper dissuasit."

58) - G.R. Elton, "The Commons' Supplication of 1532: parliamentary manoeuvres in the reign of Henry VIII," *Eng. Hist. Rev.* 66 (1951) 507ff.; J.P. Cooper, "The Supplication against the Ordinaries Reconsidered," *ibid.* 72 (1957) 616ff.; M. Kelly, "The Submission of the Clergy," *Transactions Royal Hist. Soc.* 5th Ser. vol. 15 (1965), 97ff.

59) - LP v. 1013.

60) - *Trans. R. Hist. Soc.* 1965, 105.

61) - Had More in his younger days ever experienced doubt about catholic orthodoxy?

62) - *More: Selected Letters*, 217.

63) - Cf. G.R. Elton, "King or Minister? The Man behind the Henrician Reformation," *History*, New Series, xxxix.216ff.

64) - Quoted by Chambers, *More*, 287.

65) - In More's ultimate troubles, Cromwell's considerate treatment and his regret at More's "obstinacy" became very plain (e.g. *More: Selected Letters*, 222, 236). It looks almost as though Cromwell would have left More alone if it had not been for the King.