

THOMAS MORE : WAS A SICK MAN BEHEADED?

In 1534, while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London, Thomas More wrote to a fellow prisoner :

“I have lived, methinks, a long life and now neither I look nor I long to live much longer. I have since I came in the Tower looked once or twice to have given up my ghost ere this and in good faith mine heart waxed the lighter with hope thereof.”<sup>1</sup>

Curiously, the revival of interest in Thomas More and his circle has not produced a consideration of the illness from which he suffered in his final years. Yet his chest ailment had an important effect on the course of his life. His complaint was real and provided him with a reason for his resignation as Chancellor in May 1532. In this device he had the help of his friend, the Duke of Norfolk.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, we shall see that it was a real source of concern for More and that it plagued him for the remainder of his life. The added pains of complaints which evolved while he was in prison, may have contributed to More's fear of the prospect of a death by physical violence. The persistence of his illness raises the interesting, though theoretical, possibility that death by disease would have averted More's martyrdom and solved Henry's dilemma. The situation was that King Henry VIII had imprisoned in the Tower a distinguished Ex-Lord Chancellor who refused to associate himself with the King's claim that he was not only head of the country but head of the Church in England.

With the available information, a retrospective diagnosis of More's illness is impossible. Yet from his letters and writings, from the various "Lives" and from the comments of friends, a picture emerges which suggests that More was suffering from angina pectoris. This study examines the evidence for this condition and includes a consideration of factors which entail a risk of heart disease. For this purpose, I shall focus on his appearance, his diet and health in general, his temperament and life-style, his symptoms, as he voiced them, and his attitude to sickness and pain.

What sort of man was Thomas More in flesh and blood? Erasmus described him when he was a little over the age of 40 :

"... in build and stature he is not what would be described as tall, but he is not noticeably short ; and there is such proportion in all his limbs that it never occurs to one to wish him in any way different. His skin is bright and clear, and so, too, his face, which is neither pale nor ruddy, except for a faint glow which shines over it all. His hair is auburn, tinged with black, or, if you like, black tinged with auburn; his beard thin, his eyes blue-grey, but with spots of different colour... No eyes, they say, are more free from blemish."<sup>3</sup>

Erasmus goes on to mention More's habit of carrying his right shoulder a little higher than the left, his rather coarse hands and his carelessness about his personal appearance.

Holbein's famous drawings and paintings were done in 1526 when More was 49. More agreed that they were an accurate likeness of the flesh and blood.<sup>4</sup> On examining them, I have found little evidence of disease. The oil painting most likely to be a true, colour likeness, by Holbein, is now in the Frick Collection in New York.<sup>5</sup> In it is portrayed a middle-aged man, looking about 49, sitting erect with hands folded in a relaxed but formal posture. A large nose dominates thin, determined lips. His green-brown eyes appear free of disease. Detail from the portrait,<sup>6</sup> photographed before cleaning and repair, reveals clear sclerae and corneae. The corneal margins do not show the senile changes associated with coronary artery disease. His grey beard is thick with about five days growth and it has a normal, masculine outline. His skin is clear and free from the blood vessel abnormalities sometimes seen in heart disease. Looking again at the general impression of the complete portrait, a full head of black hair is seen sticking out from under a black hat. Skin wrinkling, which is normal for a man of his age, is evident over the bridge of the nose and in the corners of the eyes. Interestingly, there are four grooves marking temporal vessels on the right. These are branched and linear, and appear to be collapsed, suggesting healthy, compliant veins. General hardening of the arteries is occasionally

evident at the temples in the form of winding, bulging cords which do not collapse. These vessels are not seen here. On examining the drawings at Windsor,<sup>7</sup> the only representations said to be indisputably and demonstrably from the hand of Holbein,<sup>8</sup> I see little that would change these impressions. The chin and throat are visible and give no evidence of excess fat nor blood vessel or thyroid abnormality.

Concerning Thomas More's habits of life, his friends have given us considerable information. Erasmus tells us he drank the thinnest beer and only put wine to his lips out of custom. "I have never seen anyone less dainty about what he eats. He used to choose beef and salt fish and bread made of coarse and fermented flour, rather than the delicacies which most people enjoy... His favourite dishes are made of milk-foods and fruit, and particularly of eggs."<sup>9</sup>

Of More's health in general, Erasmus says, "His health is good rather than strong, fit enough for any work that befits his position, and with little tendency to disease."<sup>3</sup> More himself, his wife Dame Alice, and his children managed to avoid the contagious Sweating Sickness of 1517, despite contact with many afflicted friends and members of his household.<sup>10</sup> The tertian fever, during which More suffered three crises, does not shed further light on his general resistance.<sup>11, 12</sup>

More had his citizens of Utopia place great emphasis on the maintenance of good health. "Almost all the Utopians regard it as great and as practically the foundation and basis of all pleasures."<sup>13</sup> Yet he believed that one should suffer bodily pain for the spiritual joy that comes of it.<sup>11, 14</sup> Further, his Utopians were willing in some cases to sacrifice their health for a greater good. It is extreme madness

"... to impair the strength of the body, to turn nimbleness into sluggishness, to exhaust the body by fasts, to injure one's health, and to reject all the other favors of nature, unless a man neglects these advantages to himself in providing more zealously for the pleasure of other persons or of the public, in return for which sacrifice he expects a greater pleasure from God..."<sup>15</sup>

Given sufficient reason, More was willing to do the same himself.

It seems that More's disposition was particularly engaging :

"What has Nature ever created more gentle, more sweet, more happy than the genius of Thomas More?"<sup>16</sup>

"His nature may be read in his face, always pleasant and friendly and cheerful, with a readiness to smile : indeed its inclination is towards merriment rather than to grave dignity,..."<sup>3</sup>

Erasmus assures us that he carried this nature into his home. He said that much had been made of the difficulties of living with Dame Alice, More's second wife :

"Yet his life with her is as blithe and sweet as if she had all the attractiveness of youth, and with his buoyant gaiety he wins her to more compliance than severity could command.

With the same charm he rules his whole household, so that strife and quarrels are unknown. Should any arise, he composes them at once ; never feeling anger with anyone, nor leaving him sore. Indeed, fate seems to have made this home for special happiness ;"<sup>17</sup>

Roper agrees : "Whom in sixteen yeares *and* more, being in house conversant with him, I could never perceive as much as once in a fume."<sup>18</sup> We cannot know whether constant congeniality ran right through More's person or whether it cost him considerable inner effort. On at least one occasion, he admitted to the human frailty of worrying about the future :

"... yet in all the agonies that I have had, whereof before my coming hither (as I have showed you ere this) I have had neither small nor few, with heavy fearful heart, forecasting all such perils and painful deaths, as by any manner of possibility might after fall unto me, and in such thought lain long restless and waking, while my wife had weened I had slept,..."<sup>19</sup>

The question of More's temperament is important since physicians have long noticed the frequent occurrence of coronary artery

disease in hard-working men who are burdened by heavy responsibility.

He was ascetic and hard-working. To Stapleton we owe the assurance that he slept on the ground or on bare boards with perhaps a log of wood as his pillow. At the most he slept four or five hours.<sup>20</sup> We are told that he secretly wore a hair-shirt and "He used also sometymes to punishe his body with whippes, the cordes notted,..."<sup>21</sup> More held various public offices over more than twenty years : Under Sheriff of London (1510) and Member of Parliament prior to 1509, Master of Requests (1518), Under-Treasurer of the Exchequer (1521), Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1525), Speaker of the House of Commons (1523), and Lord Chancellor of England (1529). His exacting life of prayer, his deep commitment to the public life and his busy friendships made for a life-style that must have driven him close to his physical limits. From a reading of More's biographers, a similar picture emerges of "a person who could not be accused of any incapacity for life, who indeed seized life in great variety and almost greedy quantities,..."<sup>22</sup> And if he seems to us a man endowed with abundant personal resources, he was also intent on expending them fully.

Then what of Thomas More's chest ailment? On May 16, 1532 England's Chancellor of two and a half years resigned, tendering reasons of ill health.<sup>2,23,24</sup> From letters to friends the following month we learn that he has been sick for some time, that his sickness is not evident to others and that it is aggravated by his work :

"For the past several months the condition of my health has aroused strong feelings of fear within me, although outwardly I have not appeared very ill. Not even since my release from all public duties have I succeeded in shaking off this ailment. It was a fact that I was incapable of carrying out my duties as Chancellor effectively without aggravating the malady, and the doctor held out no hope for my recovery unless I retired to private life. Not even then could he give me any definite assurance. My decision, then, was

influenced by a desire to regain my health, but much more so by my regard for the common good, which I would hinder in many ways if, while handicapped by bad health, I would myself be a handicap to affairs of state."<sup>25</sup>

To Erasmus he confides that the *meaning* of the sickness rather than the pain, causes him and his doctors to be fearful :

"For some sort of chest ailment has laid hold of me ; and the discomfort and pain it causes do not bother me as much as the worry and fear over the possible consequences. After being troubled with this ailment continually for several months, I consulted the doctors, who said that such a lingering disease could be dangerous ; in their view there was no speedy cure possible ; healing would be a long, slow process, requiring proper diet, medicines, and rest. They did not predict the length of convalescence, nor did they even give me assurance of a complete cure."<sup>26</sup>

On April 17, 1534 More was committed to the Tower for refusing to take the oath required by the Act of Succession. Not long after, he wrote to his daughter Meg, opening his letter : "Our Lord be thanked, I am in good health of body, and in good quiet of mind ;..."<sup>27</sup> Yet when Meg visited him after August, she found that his disease had continued and that new problems had developed :

"..., when I had a while talked with him, fyrst of his diseases bothe in his brest of olde, and his reynes nowe, by reason of gravel and stone, and of the crampe also that divers nightes grypeth hym in his legges, and that I found by his wordes that they wer not much encreased, but continued after theyr maner that they did before, sometime very sore and sometime little grief, and that at that time I found him out of pain..."<sup>28</sup>

More's biographer, Ro: Ba:, tells us that a little before giving over his high office, "...he begane to be troubled with a little sickenes, and after he was shut up in the tower, it much increased."<sup>29</sup>

Bad health seems to have been a consistent feature of life

in the Tower. The ailing Bishop John Fisher suffered greatly there. At his execution it was apparent to all that, "...very shortelie he must have dyed by nature."<sup>30</sup> But it is difficult to estimate the effect of the same Tower on More's health. Of his fifteen months imprisonment he was shut up in his cell for the last three. Because of his former high office, his conditions of living would have been less severe than usual although it is not even certain where in the Tower he was imprisoned.<sup>31</sup> More alludes to his chamber as "meetyly fair."<sup>32</sup> Lady More seems to have been comforted that it was warm enough,<sup>32</sup> but she also thought he was a fool, "...to lye heare in this close, filthy prison, and be content thus to be shut upp amongst mise and rattes, when you might be abroade at your libertye,..."<sup>33</sup> Master Lieutenant, on visiting More, apologised for "suche poor cheare as he had," but More assured him that, "I doe not myslike my cheare."<sup>34</sup>

However his confinement must have been arduous for by the time of his trial on July 1, 1535 More's weakness impressed the court and a chair was hastily brought for him :

"Et quant aux accusations dont l'on me charge, je doute que ne l'entendement ne la memoire ne la parolle pourront satisfaire a y repondre, eu esgard a la prolixite et grandeur des articles, obstant aussi la longue detention de prison, la grieve maladie et debilitation que maintenant je seuffre."<sup>35</sup>

Finally we have Stapleton's description of More on his way to execution on July 6. Margaret Giggs had been present and described to Stapleton, by means of a "life-like image", his final appearance :

"His beard was long and disordered, his face was pale and thin from the rigour of his confinement."<sup>36</sup>

What is the evidence that More suffered from angina pectoris? A modern cardiologist would say that his diet, rich in animal fat, salt and eggs may have predisposed him to coronary artery disease. The excessive physical and emotional demands made on him and the responsibility and tribulation of his public life may have affected him similarly. Typically, sufferers from

angina pectoris complain of a discomfort, rather than pain, in the center of the chest. It is usually a pressure or aching sensation causing more concern about the significance of the ailment rather than the discomfort. Occasionally, those afflicted develop an acute fear of death during an attack. More called his disease an ailment and a discomfort, rather than pain.<sup>37</sup> He emphasized his fear<sup>25, 26</sup> and said that on several occasions he thought he might die.<sup>1</sup> It was a recurring complaint and his doctors felt it was unlikely to go away.<sup>25, 26</sup> There was little outward sign that he was ill.<sup>25</sup> These features are all typical of angina pectoris.

However, distinctive features of angina are its onset after physical effort or emotion and relief with rest and relaxation.<sup>38</sup> More did not mention these. For this reason we cannot diagnose the presence of this condition with certainty.<sup>39</sup>

In his writings, More gave us two tantalising clues that he knew what angina pains in the center of the chest could be like. In *The Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, Anthony is discussing violent death :

“And yet lieth many a man more days than one in well near as great pain continually as is the pain that with the violent death riddeth the man in less than half an hour. Except a man would ween that whereas the pain is great to have a knife to cut his flesh on the outside from the skin inward, the pain would be much less if the knife might begin on the inside and cut from the midst outward. For some we hear in their deathbed complain that they think they feel sharp knives cut a-two their heart strings.”<sup>40</sup>

More continued, making it clear that he was not describing pain arising from the pleura for, “they that lie in pleurisy think that every time they cough they feel a sharp sword swap<sup>41</sup> them to the heart.”<sup>40</sup> The second hint occurs in his Remembrance of Death in *The Four Last Things* :

“If thou couldst now call to thy remembrance some of those sicknesses that have most grieved thee in thy days, as every man hath felt some, and then findest thou that some one

disease in some one part of the body, as percuse the stone or the strangury, have put thee to thine own mind to no less torment than thou shouldst have felt if one had put a knife into the same place,... - think what it will be then when thou shalt feel so many such pains in every part of the body, breaking thy veins and breaking thy life strings, with like pain and grief as though as many knives as thy body might receive should everywhere enter and *meet in the midst.*” [italics mine]<sup>42</sup>

Finally, one more bit of evidence emerges from More’s apology to Cromwell for not writing in his own hand :

“I pray you pardon me, that I write not unto you of mine own hand, for verily I am compelled to forbear writing for a while by reason of this disease of mine, whereof the chief occasion is grown, as it is thought, by the stooping and leaning on my breast, that I have used in writing.”<sup>43</sup>

It is possible that More’s physicians attributed his disease to continued, external pressure on his chest, because More *complained to them* of a pressure sensation in his chest, a cardinal symptom of angina pectoris.

Ultimately we are confronted by the fact that Thomas More valued spiritual health infinitely more than physical health, and would be one of the last to let his physical pain be noticed by others. The nature of his illness was such that we can only know about it if he complained of it and how likely is it that More would complain of a chest discomfort when he faced daily the possibility of destruction by political forces? How did he bear pain and how did he view the possible outcome of any illness : death? The wise physician acquires this insight at the bedside. We are left to conjecture from the extant fragments that remain.

More counselled his family to carry their suffering cheerfully for, “We may not look at our pleasure to go to heaven in featherbeds.”<sup>44</sup> His severity extended to his own comfort which he frequently compromised.<sup>20, 21</sup> Yet in his last days we find the man in the flesh “shrinking from pain and from death”<sup>45</sup> and “of nature

so shrinking from pain that I am almost afeard of a fillip."<sup>19</sup> For More the suffering of body or of soul might engender the distemperance of the other and sometimes both. It is unlikely that, in his last days, More would complain of anginal pains in isolation from all his other tribulations.

More alluded to death many times : death the great equaliser,<sup>46</sup> death the banisher of disease and sorrow,<sup>47</sup> death as an end to life the incurable sickness,<sup>48,49</sup> death by accident as a means of avoiding death by disease.<sup>50</sup> In the end one thread of concern dominates. More was fearful at the prospect of a painful violent death.<sup>51,52,53</sup> Against this fear, More set all his mettle, in meditation, in prayer and in writing.<sup>54</sup> His moral victory over Henry was possible because he first conquered his own body and spirit.<sup>55</sup> His final resolution to accept death happily would have precluded any complaint of disease. For this reason our measure falls short of the man and the final diagnosis remains unmade. For Thomas More, the man, spiritual pleasure triumphed over bodily pain :

"... the spiritual pleasure is of truth so sweet that the sweetness thereof many times darkeneth and diminisheth the feeling of bodily pain,... and credible is it that the inward spiritual pleasure and comfort which many of the old holy martyrs had in the hope of heaven darkened and in manner overwhelmed the bodily pains of their torments..."<sup>56</sup>

Montreal and Nigeria

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#### NOTES

1. E.F. Rogers, *St. Thomas More : Selected Letters*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1961, p. 233.

2. W. Roper, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, knyghte*, ed. E.V. Hitchcock, London (EETS) : Oxford University Press, 1935, p. 51.

3. D. Erasmus, Letter to Ulrich von Hutten, in *Sir Thomas More, Selections from his English Works*, ed. P.S. and H.M. Allen, Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1924, p. 2.

4. *Opus Epistolarum Des Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. Allen, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1913, Vol 3, no. 683.

5. S. Morison, *The Likeness of Thomas More, An Iconographical Survey of Three Centuries*, London : Burns and Oates, 1963, chap. 3.

6. *Ibid.*, Fig. 3.

7. K.T. Parker, *The Drawings of Hans Holbein in the Collection of His Majesty the King at Windsor Castle*, London : The Phaidon Press, 1945, plate 2 (12225) and plate 3 (12228).

8. Morison, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

9. Erasmus, Letter to Ulrich von Hutten, p. 3.

10. *Opus Epistolarum Des Erasmi Roterodami*, Vol. 3, no. 623.

11. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, 1534, ed. L. Miles, Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1965, p. 73.

12. Ro: Ba., *The Lyfe of Syr Thomas More*, 1599, ed. E.V. Hitchcock and P.E. Hallet, London (EETS), 1950, p. 150.

13. Thomas More, Utopia, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. E. Surtz and J.H. Hexter, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1965, p. 173/37.

14. Thomas More, The Four Last Things, in *The English Works of Thomas More*, ed. W.E. Campbell, London : Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931, p. 464.

15. Thomas More, Utopia, in *The Complete Works*, p. 177/38.

16. D. Erasmus, Letter to Robert Fisher, in *The Epistles of Erasmus*, trans. F.M. Nichols, New York : Russell and Russell, 1962, p. 226.

17. Erasmus, Letter to Ulrich von Hutten, p. 6.

18. Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

19. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

20. T. Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.E. Reynolds, trans. P.E. Hallet, London : Burns and Oats, 1966, p. 8.

21. Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

22. R. Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, Scarborough : Bellhaven House, 1968, p. xii.

23. Ro: Ba., *op. cit.*, p. 81.

24. N. Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sr. Thomas Moore, knight*, ed. E. V. Hitchcock, London (EETS) : Oxford University Press, 1932, p. 58.

25. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 177. It is difficult to say how long More had been suffering from his chest ailment. On his epitaph More wrote that his troubles began soon after his father's death. The date of his father's death is not exactly known. Chambers says John More's will was proved on December 5, 1530. See R.W. Chambers *Thomas More*, Middlesex : Penguin Books, 1963, p. 51.

26. Rogers, op. cit., p. 173.
27. Rogers, op. cit. p. 223.
28. *The Works of Sir Thomas More Knyght*, ed. W. Rastell, London, 1557, p. 1434. See also note 39.
29. Ro: Ba., op. cit., p. 272.
30. The Rastell Fragments, p. 244, in N. Harpsfield, op. cit., App. I.
31. E.E. Reynolds, More's Cell in the Tower, *Moreana* 19 : 27-28, 1968.
32. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort*, op. cit., p. 207.
33. Roper, op. cit., p. 82.
34. Ibid., p. 77.
35. The Paris New Letter, p. 258-59, in N. Harpsfield, op. cit. (App. II).
36. Stapleton, op. cit., p. 187.
37. Rogers, op. cit., p. 182.
38. In a statement by More, already quoted in the text, he said that he was incapable of carrying out his duties as Chancellor effectively without aggravating his malady. See my note 25. This statement is compatible with the condition of angina pectoris, but in order to identify it definitively, a more explicit association with effort or emotion would have to be present.
39. Angina pectoris is a symptom, not a disease, of which the cause is most commonly atherosclerosis of the coronary arteries. While there are many other causes of this symptom, such narrowing of the coronary arteries is the best and simplest explanation of More's symptoms. His leg cramps and passing of gravel are two other symptoms that doctors encounter in generalised atherosclerosis, affecting the entire arterial system.
- In addition there are other diseases of the chest and upper abdomen which may make the angina pectoris worse, or similar pains can result from these diseases themselves. In my opinion, there is no reason to suspect the former. Angina pectoris is a much more plausible explanation than any of the latter. Finally two conditions without a pathological basis, occurring in anxious or emotionally disturbed people, can stimulate the pain of angina pectoris. These conditions are dilation of the stomach from swallowing air and reflux of acidic stomach contents into the oesophagus. There is no evidence that More had the type of personality disorder in which these conditions are seen.
40. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort*, op. cit., p. 224. Traditionally Anthony is presumed to be a veil for More in this dialogue written in the Tower. What is significant here is the idea that pain coming from the inside would be much less than that from the surface. Angina is suggested by a feeling of pressure beginning deep inside and pushing outward.
41. strike or hit.
42. Thomas More, *The Four Last Things*, op. cit., p. 468. Angina pectoris is notorious for radiation or movement of the pain. Occasionally the pain is felt first in the arm, throat, back or upper abdomen and then it localises to the central chest area. More seems to suggest a similar sensation here. Of interest, the same sequence of

- events can occur during a heart attack or myocardial infarction. However there is no additional evidence to suggest that More had one.
43. Rogers, op. cit., p. 201.
44. Roper, op. cit., p. 26.
45. Rogers, op. cit., p. 237.
46. Thomas More, *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. and trans. L. Bradner and C.A. Lynch, Chicago : Chicago University Press, 1953, epigrams 22, 27, 28.
47. Ibid., epigrams 52, 56.
48. Ibid., epigram 57.
49. Thomas More, *The Four Last Things*, op. cit., p. 74.
50. Thomas More, *The Latin Epigrams*, op. cit., epigram 243.
51. Rogers, op. cit., p. 238.
52. Thomas More, *The Four Last Things*, op. cit. p. 468.
53. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort*, op. cit., p. 148.
54. Ibid., see the excellent Introduction to this edition for an explanation of this point.
55. In Roper, op. cit., p. 73, occurs the well-known line, "Sonne Roper, I thancke our Lord the feild is wonne." Roper later conjectured that "the love he had to god wrought in him so effectually that it conquered all his carnall affections utterlye."
56. Thomas More, *The Four Last Things*, op. cit., p. 462.

More's handwriting, when he was 'already dying', is here sampled from the autograph Tower meditation by courtesy of the Colegio Patriarca, Valencia, Spain.

nimmii  
 et, uere locu ferit illi mi:bo  
 chrym q qui no est micu  
 contra me est. Erat em uer  
 contra chrym, qui cui tu maxie  
 molhebatur infidias, qui reliqu  
 cu discipuli sequerentur ad  
 comprandiu. Sequantur nos