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THOMAS MORE'S BIRTH :

1477 or 1478 ?

Mr. Francis Murray, in *The Tablet* of 15 January 1977, wrote that "the Amici Thomae Mori", to celebrate More's quincennial, "has chosen 1977 as the correct date." Reacting to this announcement in the correspondence column of the 29 January issue, Canon A. de Zulueta and Stephen Ryle consider 1978 a better year, because 1478 is the accepted date of St Thomas More's birth, the one retained by Chambers, the one inscribed in gold on the Chelsea statue. Mr Ryle invites us to "produce evidence for placing his birth in 1477," and the personal intervention of the editor emboldens us to use as much space as is needed : *The Tablet* will thus be true to itself, since no weekly journal has given the martyred chancellor more generous coverage over the years.

The excellent columns on "Fisher and More today" in the 26 June issue bear repeated reading. There E.E. Reynolds praises everybody involved in making the two saints better known. He, of course, has done more than anyone else for that. He was unanimously elected President of the Amici Thomae Mori by the founding members on the feast of St Thomas Becket (29 Dec. 1962) ; he it was who chose the title *Moreana* for the Association's bulletin ; and after resigning the presidency (1976) he has remained an active contributor, signing for instance twenty pages in *Moreana* no. 53 (March 1977). His 1968 *The Field Is Won* is the most accurate biography of More ever published. Unfortunately it is out of print ; can any action be taken to make it available for the quincennial ? I lodged a bulk order toward our Angers More Congress of next April, and I am bitterly disappointed to frustrate the expectations of not a few participants.

"For the date of his birth we have to choose between 6 or 7 February 1477 or 1478", writes E.E. Reynolds (p. 18), adding in a footnote : "In these pages the year 1478 will be assumed (without prejudice) as that of birth." In Appendix I, he calls it "a working hypothesis" and points out that "it doesn't really matter which is preferred." (p.383). Every scholar of More would sign these

wise lines. Even with a Centennial at hand, the year hardly matters. The uncertainty about Erasmus' birth-year enabled the world of learning to celebrate his half-millennial over four consecutive years (1966-69). Why not rejoice that the quincennial of his London friend should spread over two full years? It began on 7 February 1977 with the publication of two books -- one in Connecticut, one in Los Angeles, and continued on 10-11 February with an extremely successful More Conference at the University of Fordham : one of the lectures was given by John Scarisbrick of England. The National Portrait Gallery has managed to span the two rival years by holding its More exhibition from 25 November 1977 to 12 March 1978. The scale of that exhibition is sure not to be matched anywhere in the world. The Angers Congress (12 - 17 April), jointly sponsored by the Amici and by the Thomas - Morus - Akademie, promises to be the academic climax of the quincennial, with speakers from as far afield as Egypt, Arizona, and Australia, all lecturing in More's own English. More's native country will send distinguished representatives, both lay and clerical, but in numbers which to date are inferior to those of Germany, France and America. (Those interested may approach Francis Murray, 12 Hammet St, Taunton, TAI IRL, or else More - 500, B.P. 858, 49005 Angers, France). Thomas More was not born a saint ; right to his life's end he prayed for "grace busily to labour to love God". The spirit which prompts Canon de Zulueta to suggest More's *dies natalis* (6 July) as the most appropriate season for honouring his blessed memory will lead the Angers festival to commemorate the firm step he took towards martyrdom by refusing the oath on 13 April 1534, and again on Friday 17, when he and John Fisher were "gentilmanly sent straight vnto the Towre" (to quote More's words about Dr. Wilson's imprisonment).

Major document on More's birth.

Misled by More's youthful appearance and by the ages indicated on a 1530 copy of Holbein's portrait of the More family, biographers of More, starting with his great grandson Cresacre, placed his birth in 1480. This assumption was shattered in 1868, when W.A. Wright published the autograph page of Sir John More registering

seven events : his own marriage, and the births of his children. (My photocopy of the precious page comes from E.E. Reynolds.) The full text is transcribed in Harpsfield's *Life of More* (Early English Text Society, 1932), and the four-page commentary thereon (pp. 199-303) was R.W. Chambers' last wrestling with the chronological conundrum. The third and longest entry, concerning the future St Thomas, deserves quoting in the original (we normalize its spelling and add punctuation) :

Die Veneris proximo post Festum Purificationis Beatae Mariae Virginis, *videlicet septimo die Februarii*, inter horam secundam et horam tertiam in mane, natus fuit Thomas More, filius Ioannis More Gent., anno regni Regis Edwardi quarti post conquestum Angliae decimo septimo.

The judge's simple factual Latin hardly needs translating. The italicized words were added in the same hand above the line. They need not be construed as a later intervention, they may have been inserted as an immediate attempt at greater precision. To paraphrase the essential information, Thomas More was born on the Friday after Our Lady's Purification (or Candlemas, 2 Febr.), namely the 7th of February, between 2 and 3 o'clock a.m., in the 17th year of Edward IV's reign. There is no mention of A.D. 1477 or 1478 ; the historians' hesitation does not arise from any doubt concerning the date (25 March versus 1 Jan.) at which the new year began, but from an internal contradiction : "Friday 7 Febr." fits 1477, but Edward IV was still in the 16th year of his reign, having come to the throne on 4 March 1461. Endless conjecturing, by Wright, by F.M. Nichols, by P.S. Allen, failed to elicit a conclusion from the document. Instead, then, of trying to locate the error in Sir John's entry by a weighing of verisimilitudes -- "could a lawyer be wrong on the regnal year ?" etc --, one should seek probabilities from other sources. My own preference for 1477 rests on Erasmus' letter to Hutten of 23 July 1519 : "*noui hominem non maiorem annis viginti tribus, nam nunc vix excessit quadragesimum* : when I first knew the man he was not more than 23, and now he is hardly past the age of 40." (P.S. Allen, *Erasmii Epistolae, IV*, p. 14), Like More's father, his Dutch friend contradicts himself. "Not more

than 23" suggests at least the 23rd year of his age when More and Erasmus met in the second half of 1499. If 22 then, More was 42 in July 1519 when the letter was signed, and *vix* -- "barely, scarcely"-- is too restrictive an adverb. In 1521 Erasmus, no doubt at the prompting of More himself or of other Englishmen, corrected several statements in his letter. Thus he now reckoned at three, instead of six, the fee owed to the undersheriff for a lawsuit (Allen, p.20). In the sentence on More's age, he altered no figure; he achieved consistency by substituting *non multum* for the initial *vix* (presumably written when he put that elaborate epistle on the loom in 1518, if not late 1517). All of Europe henceforth, including More's own father and household, in edition after edition of that famous letter, read that More, "not older than 23" in 1449, was "not much beyond 40" -- "in his early forties" as we would say -- in 1519. Doesn't this precision, in a careful and scrupulously emended *vita Mori* by his closest friend, gently tip the scales in favour of 1477? A number of advantages presented by that earlier year may be considered for good measure.

1. Recounting the weeks between Edward IV's death and Richard III's usurpation (Spring of 1483), More writes: "I remember hearing these words reported to my father at that time..., when no suspicion of Richard's treason was entertained" (*The History of Richard III*, edited by R.S. Sylvester, Yale 1963, Latin p.9, translation p.170). The older our child witness, the less amazing his recollection of the words and his awareness of their ominous significance.

2. Holbein's pen-and-ink drawing of the More household, though neat, is an early draft, a non-final sketch toward the painting: under the kneeling figure of More's wife, the artist has written in German that she "shall sit". That More was able to express admiration for Holbein's talent by 18 December 1526 (in a letter to Erasmus) inclines one to believe that the drawing dates back to before 7 February 1527. Now, it carries the age of each sitter in the hand of Nicholas Kratzer, the German astronomer. In our chronology, to which Holbein's latter activities lend support, the age of *anno 50* ascribed to More fits 1477 better than 1478.

3. In 1478, Easter Sunday fell on 22 March, which is most unusually

early. Friday the 6th of Feb. was in Shrove-Week; it was the third day in Lent. Between quinquagesima Sunday (1 Feb.) and Shrove-Tuesday (3 Feb.) Candlemas appears to be far less of a landmark than in a more current calendar. One would expect John More, for 1478, to write "Friday next after Ash-Wednesday", or "the first Friday in Lent", much as his son was to date "on Shrove-Tuesday" the battle of St Albans (*Richard III*, Yale edition, p. 60); whereas in 1477 Candlemas, occurring two weeks before Lent, provided the normal point of reference.

4. The pattern of births in John More's house reads (11 March) 1475, (6 Feb.) 1478, and (31 Jan.) 1479; or else 1475, 1477 and 1479: *caeteris paribus*, the second set of intervals is likelier.

5. On 1 May 1519 More wrote to his fellow-parishioner Edward Lee: "I knew and loved you as a little child, being ten years older than you: *annis ipse decem prouectior*." (E.F. Rogers, *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, p. 141). Now Lee, who received his B.A. in 1500, can hardly have been born later than 1486. *Decem* will do for 9 years, as "huit jours" is standard French for a week, but wouldn't More be straining the elastic if he said 10 for 8?

An assortment of convergent impressions would seem to increase More's age beyond what had been assumed, for instance his friendship with older men -- Linacre, Grocin, Colet. He is presented as these men's peer, not in genius (which does not come with years) but in erudition. In the experience of Richard Whitford, who knew them well, More and Erasmus were so alike in every way that "he would say no twins could be found who were more similar: *vsque adeo similes esse dicere solebas, vt negares vllos gemellos magis inter se similes reperiri posse*." (Erasmus' 1506 letter to Whitford, *Allen I*, p. 423). Mention of those comradeships elicits no comment on difference in years, no exclamation on More's precociousness, of the kind used for the encyclopaedic adolescent Pico della Mirandola.

I am glad that both Father Bridgett and E.E. Reynolds make a point, even with 1478, to retain Friday -- "soon after midnight on Friday" doing correct duty for first hours of Saturday. As is well-known, the day of the week was more notable than the date, nor was any so easily remembered as Friday in a society where abstinence

was enforced by law. In 1477 "Sent Volentynes Day" also fell on a Friday (a week after More's birth), a coincidence duly noted in Elizabeth Brews' letter to John Paston (*The Paston Letters*, Gairdner's edition, III, no. 782). Hastings' arrest by Richard III, More tells us, took place "on the Friday the day of ." Research would be needed to fill in the blanks for the dates, but the day of the week had printed itself upon the popular memory.

A few objections to 1477 were answered in my *L'Univers de Thomas More*, especially pp. 39 and 40. Nevertheless, in 1963, I considered the case so unproved that my entry for More's birth reads " ? 6 ? 7 février, 1477, ? 1478." And so it should still read. The point of this disquisition is to show that a preference for 1477 is no wanton partiality ; that it is not caused merely by an itch for change or an automatic swing of the pendulum. The cumulative force of several details gravitating around a rather unyielding statement of Erasmus', produce a pattern which tallies beautifully with the earlier date, and in which all the objections so far raised have made no dent.

If More was born in 1477, he entered Lincoln's Inn at the age of 19, first met Erasmus at 22, was 29 when his translations of Lucian were published in Paris, and 34 when he lost his first wife, within weeks of his 40th birthday when the *Utopia* appeared (Christmas 1516), 52 when he became Lord Chancellor, 55 when he resigned, and 58 when he died.

The Year of the Lord 1477 saw the birth in Nantes of Anne de Bretagne, twice queen of France ; in Modena, of Cardinal Sadoletto, humanist and reformer ; at Westminster, of the first book ever printed in England. It began with the death, near Nancy, of Charles Le Téméraire -- "the Reckless" or "the Rash" rather than "the Bold" -- who was Edward IV's brother-in-law ; France's triumph over the Duke of Burgundy was felt as a blow by the English : "It semytlye that the worlde is alle qwaveryng", Sir John Paston wrote his son John on 14 Febr. 1477 (*op. cit.*, p. 174), which brings us back to Friday and to St Valentine, and to the London in which the second child and eldest son of John More and Agnes Granger was one week old.

G. M.