

## UNVEILING OF THE MORE FAMILY PORTRAIT AT NOSTELL PRIORY.

On the afternoon of Friday, 25th March 1983 (Lady Day), the Right Honourable the Lord Hailsham of St. Marylebone, Lord Chancellor of England, unveiled the newly restored 8 x 12 foot (2.5 x 3.5 meters) *Group Portrait of Sir Thomas More and His Family* at Nostell Priory, Wakefield, West Yorkshire before a distinguished audience. It was a glittering occasion with flashbulbs and television lights, contrasting in their brilliance with the sombre stone hall. Lord Hailsham chose his words with care and precision worthy of the senior law officer. He spoke of his admiration of the painting and his belief that it was by Holbein. He suggested a parallel between the situation of More and Boethius, whose *De Consolatione Philosophiae* features in the painting.

The family portrait <sup>1</sup> is one of several versions which appear to be based upon a Holbein sketch in Basel (No. 402). A modified copy by Rowland Locky hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London. This painting measures approximately 7 x 11 feet and is curious in its including four descendants of More, who were alive in 1593, with seven of the Thomas More family, as portrayed from life in the 1520s (No. 404). A much smaller Locky version in the Victoria and Albert Museum contains further minor variations (No. 405).

Sir Roy Strong states, in his *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits in the National Portrait Gallery*, that the Nostell Priory painting is a copy by the same Elizabethan miniature painter, Locky. <sup>2</sup> The evidence he adduces for the attribution is the signature in the lower right-hand corner of the canvas. The name -- either Richardus, Rogerus, or Rolandus / Rowlandus Locky -- bears with it the date 1530 or 1532. Sir Roy has rejected the apparent date (Locky was probably born in the 1540s) and has assumed it to be variously 1592 or 1593. <sup>3</sup> The Holbein original painting, from which it is presumed to have been copied, is believed to have been destroyed by fire in 1752 at Kremsier, Germany (No. 401).

The Winn family have been in possession of the Nostell portrait since the marriage of Sir Rowland Winn to a Roper heiress in the eighteenth century. At that time it was taken from Well Hall, Eltham to Yorkshire. The family tradition has held the painting to be a Holbein painted for Margaret Roper and her husband William. Both John Lewis and George Vertue described it as a Holbein in their time. In 1717 Lewis remarked on items in the painting only three inches from where the Locky signature appears today, without mentioning the Locky attribution. Is it possible that the signature was added after 1717?

The present owner, Lord St. Oswald, had received some highly interesting information before the unveiling. On 7th January 1982, Dr. Paul Damon of the Laboratory of Isotope Geochemistry at the University of Arizona received for radio carbon dating a strip of the original canvas, cut from the lower sight edge of the painting during restoration. After he had washed the linen free of paint and animal glue, the original eight grams shrank to four grams of pure linen cord. These four grams were insufficient to create the required volume of carbon dioxide gas for the 2.5 liter counters operated at three atmospheres. Dr. Damon had to dilute the specimen gas with pure inert CO<sub>2</sub>, containing no carbon 14. Additional delays were caused by contamination of the sample with radon gas ; a month was required for storing the gas to allow the radon to decay to insignificance. Finally, on February 14, 1983, he produced his report with its startling conclusion that « the calendar age of the harvesting of the flax lies between A.D. 1400 and A.D. 1520 ». Thus it was « compatible with the painting being an authentic Holbein the Younger ». It was, in other words, unlikely that Rowland Locky had chosen a seventy-year-old canvas to execute a difficult major work in or about 1593.

Armed with this new piece of knowledge, Lord St. Oswald informed the press. The first announcement in the national press was a short article by Donald Wintersgill in *The Guardian* of March 2, 1983, headed « Painting of More could be a Holbein ». Sir Roy Strong, Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, was quoted as doubting the conclusion of Dr. Damon : « How developed as a science is the carbon dating of canvas ? » he asked. « In my opinion, in no way is this a Holbein. It is a very complicated subject. The original was confiscated when More fell from power. »

One edition of *The Guardian* for the same day contained a further quotation from Sir Roy : « If canvas can be carbon dated, it would be of great significance. I would like to see it done on authentic paintings of which the dates are known. » When I queried this quotation, he wrote me that it was not quite true that he stated that it was doubtful that canvas of the sixteenth century could be carbon dated. The important point, he emphasised, was that the canvas was signed and dated Rowland Lockey, 1592. <sup>4</sup>

Not only was this prominent art historian opposed to the Arizona findings ; E.T. Hall, of the Oxford Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, reported to Geraldine Norman of *The Times* (25 March 1983) that the odd « hump » in the radio carbon calibration chart for the sixteenth century made it impossible to distinguish the early years from the late ones. Dr. Damon's dilution of carbon dioxide in order to « stretch » it, moreover, made the results liable to an error of 150 years. Professor Hall wrote to me that he believed the dates 1580 and 1620 were as likely as the date 1520 cited by Paul Damon. <sup>5</sup>

Dr. V. R. Switsur, of the Sub-Department of Quarternary Research at the University of Cambridge, was more favourable to Dr. Damon's report. He estimated the dates 1407 and 1495 as the limits for the 95 per cent level of confi-



The Group Portrait of Sir Thomas More and his Family, reproduced here by kind permission of the Lord St. Oswald, through the good offices of Jack Leslau. Infra-red photograph by National Gallery, London, 1951.

dence, using the data from Arizona. Should the level of confidence be increased to 99 per cent, there was a slight possibility of a confusion between 1525 and the 1600-1620 period. <sup>6</sup>

Writing in May to Mr. Jack Leslau, Dr. Damon referred to the successful completion of a « blind interlaboratory test » which gave confirmation to his findings on the dating of the canvas of the Nostell portrait. Dr. Switsur was Dr. Damon's choice as an expert on radio carbon calibration in the United Kingdom.

Although the scientific controversy has still to be resolved, Lord St. Oswald was sufficiently satisfied by the reports from Dr. Damon and Dr. Switsur to invite the present Lord Chancellor to officiate at the elegant ceremony at Nostell. After its restoration in a Chelsea stable, formerly part of More's estate, the newly-framed painting was resplendent.

But what of the signature on the painting and the disputed date, 1530/1532 ? An infra-red photograph, taken in 1951 at the National Portrait Gallery, revealed interference and a partially disfigured date, possibly 1752. An examination by microscope in January 1978 by the Courtauld Institute indicated that an original eighteenth century date had apparently been changed by additions of brown/grey and blue/black semi-transparent overpaint to create the 1530 or 1532 now visible. <sup>7</sup> Further examination by the Hamilton Kerr Institute in Cambridge indicated that the Locky signature was a later addition and spurious. A pig's snout had been clearly superimposed on the nose of the little dog, directly in front of St. Thomas More, probably at the same time as the other alterations.

On the day of the unveiling, *The Times* published a long article by Geraldine Norman, entitled « How Holbein hid a royal secret ». It described the discovery by Jack Leslau in 1976 of a concealed rebus in the Nostell painting, similar to others in the work of Hans Holbein the Younger. Seen from a special point of view, the single glove held by Elizabeth Dauncey, for example, is read « le pair lui manque » for « le père (or Père) lui manque », and covertly refers to the illegitimacy of her visible pregnancy. The purple peony on the left of the canvas is an unconventional symbol ; it secretly « marks » one of the persons with the symbol of « royalty » and « medicine ». (« Peony » was a nickname for a doctor, as Paion was physician to the gods in Greek mythology). Another flower is a Richard-Lion-Heart and « marks » an alleged Plantagenet in the painting. The Turkish carpet of the side-board signifies a cover-up -- « faire la tapisserie à la crédence » or « cacher la crédence sous le tapis. » The cover-up referred to is the concealed existence of the younger son of Edward IV, Richard Duke of York, as Dr. John Clement. His alleged murder by Richard III, described by More thirty years after his disappearance, was a blind to protect him. « Est-ce (esses) gauche ou, réflexion faite, est-ce (esses) à droite ? » ask the reversed S's on the chain (of the Duchy of Lancaster) that hangs from More's neck. Clement stands, depicted at half his age, in the doorway ; he is dressed in the Italian style, having studied medicine at Siena and probably Padua.

*The Times* later published four letters referring to Geraldine Norman's article. Mark Bostridge (April 4, 1983) argued that the Nostell painting was a Locky copy of the lost Holbein original, given to William Roper, son of William and Margaret Roper. Holbein would not have dared paint a huge canvas for the Ropers while serving as court painter to Henry VIII after the martyr's execution. Furthermore, the date 1530 was incompatible with Holbein's sojourn in London. The cramped perspective was inconsistent with Holbein's practice. If John Clement was in fact Richard Plantagenet, he would have died at the unlikely age of ninety-nine in 1571. One point should be made in passing : the painting was not given to a son of William Roper of the same name. No such person existed, and the error is traceable to a publication of the National Portrait Gallery : Angela Lewi's *The Thomas More Family* (1974), p. 7. <sup>8</sup>

A second letter, from Lady Jacynth Fitzalan-Howard (April 6, 1983), accused Mr. Leslau of an exuberant imagination. The single glove was merely a mark of rank in Tudor portraits. The customary place for carpets in the period was on tables and the tops of cupboards. The purple peony was a mistake by the artist, like the five-petalled Madonna lilies in the Locky version at the National Portrait Gallery.

A third letter found fault with Mr. Leslau's French. P.J. Barlow (April 9, 1983) claimed that *joncachet* was not French for a rush-strewn floor. *Faire tapisserie* meant « to be a wall-flower ». *Crédence* did not mean « belief », and a Turkish carpet was a *tapis*, not a *tapisserie*.

Finally, a fourth letter by Eric Lyall (April 15, 1983) took issue with Mr. Barlow's criticisms. Mr. Lyall claimed that *jonchée* was near enough to *Jean caché* to serve as a sixteenth century rebus pun for a hidden John Clement. *Tapisserie* could also mean a carpet and *crédence* was « belief ». He concluded with an opinion based on a different interpretation of one of Mr. Leslau's rebuses. *Porter à faux* means « to be inconclusive ».

Thus ended the correspondence to *The Times*. Jack Leslau's rebuttals to the three critical letters were not printed. <sup>9</sup> Although many letters were received by *The Times* in connection with the Geraldine Norman article, popular interest had by this time, no doubt, shifted to the feigned Hitler Diaries.

Had it not been for Jack Leslau's absorbing interest and energy in the face of numerous rebuffs, however, the Nostell portrait would never have been closely examined by the Courtauld and the Hamilton Kerr Institutes. The carbon dating would not have taken place. Without the carbon dating, is it likely that Lord Hailsham would have lent his dignity to the unveiling of a work commonly held to be a copy ? Jack Leslau's hours of work deserve more than an unconsidered dismissal by art historians and scholars, and, above all, lovers of St. Thomas More.

## NOTES

1. See *The Likeness of Thomas More* by Stanley Morison and Nicolas Barker, London, 1963, chapters 6 and 7, for a discussion. The Nostell portrait is catalogued by Morison as No. 403. Figures in parenthesis will refer to this book.

2. Roy Strong, *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits in the National Portrait Gallery*, London, 1969, Vol. 1, p. 349.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 349. «... Lockey executed three versions in all: (i) an exact copy of the Holbein as it then was. This is now at Nostell Priory and, although it bears the impossible date 1530 it would seem reasonable to conclude that it was painted at the same time as no. ii in 1593... » The reference No. i is to Morison's No. 403; No. ii is to Morison's No. 404. In a letter to the author, Sir Roy Strong stated that the Nostell portrait was dated 1592. See our next note.

4. The undated letter was received from Sir Roy Strong in May 1983 in answer to the author's request for a clarification of his newspaper statement published in *The Guardian*. The author stated that he was preparing an article for a journal. Sir Roy said in the letter, «... The important point is that regardless of the date of the canvas, the picture is signed and dated by an Elizabethan artist, Rowland Lockey, 1592. In respect of canvas dating, I feel that this is an area of research that may prove to be highly interesting but at the moment could hardly be regarded as in any way being beyond an exploratory stage.» (End of letter.) The author further queried Sir Roy Strong's date in the light of evidence that the signature and date are spurious. Sir Roy has yet to reply.

5. Letter from Professor E.T. Hall, dated May 20, 1983, with specific permission to quote from it. Calibration charts included.

6. This information is contained in a detailed letter to Lord St. Oswald, dated March 21 1983, calibration charts included.

7. «... An infrared photograph of the inscription on the Group Portrait at Nostell, taken at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in 1951, reveals a hidden and partially disfigured date, possibly '1752', which has been inexplicably overlooked in the past. A preliminary and inconclusive microscopical examination of the portrait in January 1978 by Robert Bruce-Gardner, Acting Director of the Technology Department, The Courtauld Institute, revealed (in part) three separate applications of paint and the relevant missing outline of the date (identified by me) which I deduce was probably due to the interference reported in writing by the National Gallery in 1951. The recommendation was made that the date (and inscription) should be examined further, the possibility of my date-identification not being excluded; and though Bruce-Gardner was willing to do this the portrait was too large to permit entry to the workrooms of the Courtauld Institute... » Jack Leslau wrote this in *The Ricardian*, Vol. V, No. 64 (March 1978), p. 24.

8. Kai Kin Yung, Registrar of the National Portrait Gallery, confirmed in a letter to the author, April 26 1983, that this was an error.

9. They are dated April 7, 9, and 14, 1983.

In the Summer 1983 issue of *Exeter*, the bulletin of Phillips Exeter Academy, New Hampshire, Summer 1983, the leading article, by Thomas V.N. Merriam (class of 1950), is entitled « The Hidden Rebus in Hans Holbein's Portrait of the Sir Thomas More Family. » The illustrations, essential for the thesis, include the portrait of Richard III (p. 12), since Jack Leslau finds a resemblance between him and the young man standing in the doorway of the Nostell painting, and uses this « air de famille » as further evidence for identifying the young man as Richard of York. The Basel sketch of the More family group (p. 13) and the Nostell canvas (pp. 58-59) are reproduced, so we are challenged to detect some of the eighty-odd differences in lay-out and detail which J. Leslau interprets as symbols giving cumulative support to his « revisionist history of the Tudor period ». A few photographs show Jack Leslau with the author, and with Lord Hailsham and Lord St. Oswald. Much is made of negative evidence: thus the total absence of any portrait or any holograph record (were it only a signature) of Dr. John Clement while he was President of the College of Physicians is exploited to confirm that he was a « notional person », merely destined to cover the identity of Prince Richard, « rightful » heir to England's throne from 1528, after the death of Edward V (covered by another notional person, Sir Edward Guildford). Other elements -- carbon dating against Lockey's claims, etc. -- are touched in much the same way as in Mr. Merriam's article (*supra*, pp. 111-16). We reproduce the Basel drawing to invite comparison with the Nostell painting.

G.M.

