

LADY ALICE — OUT FROM THE SHADOWS

Ruth Norrington and her publishers, the Kylin Press, reacted swiftly and vigorously to R.J. Schoeck's review of *In the Shadow of a Saint : Lady Alice More* (*Moreana*, No. 82). Prof. Schoeck had praised the « original research », pursued with dedication, which has given us a « fresh and illuminating study » of More's second wife. But he questioned the use of original sources, pointing to misquotations and errors in spelling.

Lady Norrington first took issue with Prof Schoeck's interpretation of the title. The final sentence of his review speaks of Lady Alice as « that remarkable... woman who lived a quarter of a century 'in the shadow of a saint'. » To Ruth Norrington, this is a misunderstanding, for the book shows that Lady Alice More came from a well-established family, and, on marrying Thomas More, she took her place beside him, not in his shadow. « The title of the book refers to the 450 years that have passed since More's death, not to the 24 years of their marriage, » she said (letter of July 5, eve of More's anniversary).

The Kylin Press, springing to the fray with all the vigour of the mythical beast on its blazon, challenged *Moreana* to substantiate the claim that original sources had been misquoted. Some of the discrepancies noted by Prof Schoeck are set out in an appendix to this survey of reviews. They may result in a second issue which will satisfy the « picky scholars » who wish to use the book.

The reviews sent to *Moreana* demonstrate the warm welcome that was accorded this biography. Reviewers have praised the ability of the new authoress to weave the clues she unearthed, during four years of patient study, into an attractive portrait, not only of Lady Alice, but of the whole More family.

Howard Docherty, OFM, in *The Universe* (25 Nov. 1983), notes that previous biographers of More had been content to repeat the unflattering remarks made about Alice by some of More's friends : « a glance at the index of most books on More will provide some half a dozen references to her, and from them one obtains no picture of the personality of the woman whom More chose to be stepmother to his very young family. » Comments made about Lady Alice were usually adverse, leaning heavily on the report of her given by Erasmus, whom an anonymous reviewer calls « a male chauvinist if ever there was one » ! Yet « the household she was called upon to supervise was quite extraordinary, with the young King likely to drop in through the garden gate, or a Cardinal or sundry Dukes, Earls, ambassadors and literary giants » (*Essex Recusant*, Vol 24, 1982, published in 1983).

The More family portrait, showing Lady Alice mistress of this household, is found on the inside cover of the biography : « A production of exceptional elegance, *In the Shadow of a Saint* contains a fine reproduction of Holbein's magnificent More family portrait group, now at Nostell Priory, the authenticity of which was recently vindicated. Lady Norrington discusses the picture and its

characters in detail ; she does the same for the architecture of the Great House at Chelsea, as revealed in surviving manuscript drawings » (Patrick Morrah, *The Tablet* 29 Oct 1983).

A major discovery of the study is that Lady Alice could claim some extraordinary family connections in her own right : « born Alice Harpur, the daughter of Sir Richard Harpur of Epping and his wife Elizabeth Ardern, daughter and co-heiress of Sir Peter Ardern of Mark Hall, Essex... there is a distinct possibility of a blood relationship between William [Shakespeare] and Dame Alice... ; added to that, the earlier marriage of her mother's cousin, Mary Bohun, meant that the new Alice More was related to both Henry VII and Henry VIII » (*The Universe*).

In the past, many saw Lady Alice as the butt of More's jokes, but Lady Norrington has described the bond and understanding between their personalities, to the satisfaction of her readers : « Lady Alice had an abounding sense of humour which acted as a foil for More's : at least she understood his jokes, which is more than many who have written about him have achieved » (*The Universe*).

Reviewers have also responded favourably to the author's estimate of the influence of Lady Alice on the life of the More household, « preventing it from becoming what otherwise might have been something of a monastic cell » (Ian Smith in the *Oxford Times*, 28 Oct 1983). Fr Philip Caraman S.J., writing for *The Month* (Sept 1984), notes that the book « draws much on the writings of Erasmus, at first a reluctant, but later an enthusiastic admirer. »

Much interest has centred on the discoveries about the descendants of Lady Alice through her one surviving daughter from her first marriage to the mercer, John Middleton. Also named Alice, also twice-married, More's step-daughter bore 12 children : « her host of distinguished descendants ... include both Queen Elizabeth II and the present Princess of Wales » (*The Tablet*). The *Thames Gazette* of 16 Sept 1983 records that « the Queen Mother, who is reported to be delighted by Lady Norrington's findings [of her direct descent from Lady Alice More] has been presented with the first published copy. » On the eve of the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, Lady Norrington wrote a resumé of their line of descent from Lady Alice, and concluded by saying : « Sir Thomas More would have been particularly amused and delighted to know that his much-loved wife was the progenitress of queens » (*The Tablet*, 13 June 1981, see an echo in *Moreana* no. 70, p. 3).

Lady Norrington described her own sense of kinship with Lady Alice in an interview with Paula Davies of the *Daily Telegraph* (14 Sept 1983). Herself widowed three times, the mother of one daughter, and stepmother to five children, the author drew on her own experience : « the fact that in her own three marriages her second husband knew the first, and the third knew the second led her to check the relationships between the Colt, More and Middleton families. These explain why Thomas married Alice within three weeks of the death of his first wife. He obviously knew her well, almost certainly before she married for the first time. »

Ruth Norrington lays the blame for much of the misrepresentation of Lady Alice at the door of Will Roper, who « wrote a short life of More in which he never even mentioned the fact that More had two wives » (*Daily Telegraph*). Keen to redress past wrongs by sharing her new-found knowledge, Lady Norrington has given radio broadcasts and written articles for newspapers in Essex and Hertfordshire where towns hold memories of the More, Colt and Middleton families. She has also recorded her book on tape for a cassette library which distributes audio books all over the world. The Calibre Library is based at the Tindal Hospital in Aylesbury.

Lady Norrington has not stopped her research with the publication of her first book ; she has started to delve for evidence on More's son, John. Maybe we can look forward to another biography of one of the lesser-known members of the More family.

Moreanum, Angers

Mary O'NEILL



APPENDIX

The liberties Lady Norrington occasionally takes with the wording of her sources resemble our oral paraphrases of each other's statements ; though it involves no betrayal of the message, this freedom can surprise and alarm readers when she uses italics and quotation marks. Good samples are available in the very Prologue ; thus, on page 6, we find :

Father Bernard Basset, in his book says : 'A great many unkind things have been said about her, few of them justified. More was devoted to her, and much in her debt. Only a woman of her uninhibited tastes could have faced such a situation, and played such a notable part in building up one of the most distinguished households in Europe'.

Note 3 refers to *Born for Friendship*, without indicating the page. The passage is easily found in a section entitled « Dame Alice arrives at the Barge », and this is what Father Basset actually wrote :

'A great many unkind remarks have been passed about Dame Alice, few of them justified. There can be no doubt that More himself was devoted to her and knew well how much he stood in her debt. Only a woman of her uninhibited tastes could have faced such a situation and played a notable part in the building of a household, one of the most distinguished in history.' (p.91)

This kind of paraphrasing is not unlike More's own way of echoing his opponents, or indeed Holy Scripture. But within quotation marks our age expects a verbatim report.

Kylin Press sought evidence of inadequate proofreading. They will find three eye-catching anomalies in the first half of page 4. Line 7, « Bishop of St Stephen's » must be a printer's substitute (from the line above) for « Bishop of Rochester ». Line 11, « godley », read « godly » ; Line 15, Archbishop. And there are dozens more. Take the chapter « Mistress Alice More », p. 29. It begins with this line in italics : « it is even better to rule than be ruled, » which is quoted differently on p. 30 as « it is ever better to rule then [sic] be ruled, » whereas the source quoted, *Harfsfield* (p. 95), reads : « it is ever better to rule than to be ruled ». On p. 37, for More's attempts to give Alice a science lesson, we are referred to Erasmus' correspondence, though the ensuing quotation is from the *Confutation* (CW8, p. 605 / 16 - 37), with upward of two dozen departures from More's text : « much work » becomes « much hard work », « thy » becomes « you », « world » in one instance becomes « whorls », etc.

Compare the story of Dame Alice and her little dog, as told by Lady Norington on p. 64 :

Dame Alice loved litle dogs to play with. It happened that she was presented with one that had been stolen from a beggar woman. At length Sir Thomas got to hear of it, so caused both his wife and the beggar to come before him in the hall, and said -- « Wife come you here, at the upper end of the hall, because you are a gentlewoman, and you good wife stand beneath, because you shall have no wrong. »

against the source to which we are referred, the E.E.T.S. edition of the *Lyfe of Syr Thomas More* by Ro. Ba., where we read on page 113 :

Sir Thomas his last wife loued litle doggs to play withall. It happened that she was presented with one which had bene stolne from a poore beggar woman. The poore beggarChallenged her dogg, hauuinge spied it in the armes of one of the seruinge men that gave attendance vpon my ladie. The dogg was denied her, so there was great hold and keepe about it. At length Sir Thomas had notice of it, so caused both his wife and the beggar to come before him in his hall, and said, « Wife, stand you here, at the vpper end of the hall, because you are a gentlewoman ; and, goodwife, stand [you] there beneath, for you shall haue no wronge. »