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Review Essay

The Changing Portrayal of Sir Thomas More's Life

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Introduction

Sir Thomas More is an important figure in European intellectual history. During his lifetime, he was known throughout Europe as an accomplished thinker, writer, and lawyer. His devotion to the Church, pious lifestyle, and dramatic execution at the hands of Henry VIII made him a Catholic martyr, leading to his canonization in 1935. The facts of his remarkable life, his status among early modern Humanist intellectuals, friendship with Erasmus, his written works, like his famous *Utopia*, make it unsurprising that numerous scholars have written about More and analyzed his works. However, many of these scholars do not fully address a darker side of More's life: his pursuit and execution of Protestants during his tenure as Lord Chancellor of England.

Born in London in 1478, Thomas More followed in his father's footsteps to become a lawyer. More spent two years at Oxford University, where he studied under the Humanist scholars Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn, and later, while in law school in London (1494-1502), he came into contact with John Colet, William Latimer, and other Humanist scholars from the Oxford Humanist circle. He lived near London's Carthusian monastery, where he often worshipped. Though he never took monastic vows, he continued to wear a hair shirt for the rest of his life. Like Colet and Erasmus, More took Classical scholarship and applied it to the Bible and writings of early Church Fathers, joining the ranks of what later are called Christian Humanists—who called for reform of the Church but rejected Martin Luther's break with Rome.¹ After finishing law school, More went on to be appointed Under-Sheriff of

1 Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 3-33.

London (in 1513), a member of Henry VIII's Privy Council (1517), Royal Secretary (1520), was knighted and became Under-Secretary of the Treasury (1521), Speaker of the House of Commons (1523), High Steward of Oxford and Cambridge Universities (1524 and 1525), Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1525), and Lord Chancellor of England (1529), before being imprisoned and executed for treason in 1535.²

Serving as Lord Chancellor from October 1529 to May 1532, Thomas More was only the third layman in English history to hold the office. As Chancellor, More's primary job was to oversee the court of equity, place the Great Seal on legislation, write charters, draw up treaties, and partake in activities of the Star Chamber while serving as its President.³

More's campaign against Protestantism through printed works predates his tenure as Chancellor. One of his earlier tracts, *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523), was so vulgar that Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (More's close friend and fellow Christian Humanist) told his friends the work was full of bitterness; both Henry VIII and Thomas Wolsey, out of embarrassment, urged him to publish the tract under the pseudonym William Ross.⁴ In 1528 he was commissioned officially by the Bishop of London to read heretical books and write responses. This led to the writing of several religious tracts, among them: *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), *The Supplication of Souls* (1529), *The Confutation*

2 To offer a brief job description of some of the positions undertaken by More: the Under-Sheriff of London's job was to judge minor civil and criminal cases within the city. Speaker of the House of Parliament represented the House of Commons. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was in charge of lands, finances, and the court of equity within the duchy. Finally the Royal Secretary managed the King's correspondence, held his signet seal that authorized expenditures, and also checked grants of land, pardons, protections, and other documents. For more information see J.A. Guy, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

3 The Star Chamber was a separate court behind closed doors usually made up of certain members of the King's Royal Council. It dealt with various crimes such as conspiracy, libel, and sedition.

4 Jasper Ridley, *The Statesman and the Fanatic: Thomas Wolsey and Thomas More* (London: Constable, 1982), 132-135.

of Tyndale's *Answer* (1532). These tracts attacked Lutheranism, some stating that heretics deserved to be burned.⁵

More also used the power of his office to combat emerging Protestantism in England. In May 1530, More sat on a commission which advised Henry to prohibit the printing of an English version of the Bible. Fearing an English translation would only increase the danger of heresy within the country, heresy already fueled by imported books, More convinced Henry to issue a proclamation banning the printing, distribution, reading, and importation of heretical books. He himself continued to attack Protestantism by publishing works refuting Protestant ideas, and, as Lord Chancellor, setting up a spy network, interrogating suspects, and finally burning relapsed heretics.

Many historians have minimized, or neglected, this darker aspect of More's life. One reason lies in the fact that sources for More's career as Lord Chancellor are somewhat sparse. His official papers were not placed in the government archive due to his execution as a traitor.⁶ In addition many of the facts we have about More come from his contemporaries' recollections, which usually paint him in a positive light and exclude his official campaign against Protestantism. If this were not enough, the only well-known, primary source that writes about More's persecution of Protestants is John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*⁷—a work written to advance

5 It should be noted that all aforementioned publications were written in Latin, which was the main mode of communication in intellectual circles. More also felt Latin was a better way to communicate because he feared that if commoners read his or others writings they would misunderstand them and further heresy could take place.

6 Guy, *Public Career*, ix

7 John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*. London: Printed for the Company of Stationers, 1641. The 1641 edition is a reprint of the 1583 edition, the final of five revisions that Foxe and publisher John Day released his lifetime. It is also important to note that the titles "Acts and Monuments" or "Book of Martyrs," as it is also sometimes known, are shortened versions of the actual title which is *Acts and Monuments of these latter and perilous dayes touching matters of the Church, wherein are comprehended and described the great persecutions & horrible troubles, that haue bene wrought and practiced by the Romishe Prelates, special-lye in this Realme of England, and Scotlane, from the yeare of our Lorde a thousande, unto the tyme nowe present.*

the Protestant agenda, and therefore sometimes questionable as to the reliability of some incidents Foxe relates.⁸

John Foxe directly links Thomas More to the burnings at the stake of seven Protestants. The first was Thomas Hitton, who was interrogated by More and sent to his death in 1530. After Hitton came Thomas Bilney, who was interrogated by More and executed as a relapsed heretic in Norwich in 1531. John Tewkesbury, who was interrogated by More and executed the same year, followed Blinney. Foxe also named Richard Bayfield as being interrogated by More in 1531, recanting his Protestant beliefs, only to relapse and be executed. The last martyr Foxe linked to Thomas More was John Bainham, interrogated by More and sent to stake in 1532. Bainham's story presents More as an obsessive destroyer of Protestants. Foxe writes: "Sir Thomas More, after he had brought this good man to his end, ceased not to rave after his death in his ashes, to pry and spy out what sparks he could find of reproach and contumely, whereby to rase out all good memory of his name and fame."⁹

All of these men were burned between 1529 and 1532, when Thomas More, as Lord Chancellor, was involved directly in prosecuting Protestants. However, from Foxe we learn that More also was involved in the martyrdoms of two other individuals after his tenure as Lord Chancellor. John Frith was investigated and arrested by More for distributing copies of illegal books in 1532, but not burned until 1533, the year after More resigned as Lord Chancellor. According to Foxe, More's most famous victim was William Tyndale, who published the first English *New Testament*. Tyndale and More exchanged literary blows with throughout their lifetimes, and More had agents hunting down Tyndale, who was hiding out in the Netherlands. More already had been executed (1535), but it was one of those agents who, in 1536, informed

8 See, for example, Ronald E. Shields and James H. Forse, "Creating the Image of a Martyr: John Porter Bible Reader," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 33 (2002), 725-34.

9 John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. George Townsend, vol 4 (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 688.

Imperial authorities in the Netherlands that Tyndale was incognito in Antwerp. Tyndale was arrested, and subsequently executed at Vilvorde Castle near Brussels.¹⁰ Only in the last quarter of the twentieth century has this darker picture of Thomas More's role in the early stages of the Henrician religious reforms emerged. Why is it that this negative information about Thomas More found in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* received little attention in biographies of Thomas More until the last quarter of the twentieth century?

John Foxe and his *Acts and Monuments*

John Foxe received a Master of Arts from Oxford in 1543, and sometime about then become a Protestant. By 1555 Foxe was in exile on the Continent, escaping "Bloody Mary" and her reinstatement of Catholicism in England. It is there Foxe began to compose what would become known as *Acts and Monuments*, or *Book of Martyrs*—a work printed, revised, expanded, and reprinted, five times during his lifetime. By the 1583 edition, the last printed in Foxe's lifetime, *Acts and Monuments* had grown to two large volumes, about 2000 pages printed in double columns.¹¹

Foxe sought to present a history of Christian persecutions from the earliest times in Rome to his present time in England. Foxe believed he could give hope to Protestants in England who were being persecuted by Queen Mary and her Catholic regime. For his account of English persecutions, Foxe used many documents (some of which have since been lost)—trial reports, eyewitness testimony, episcopal registers, printed books from the time of the Henrician martyrs. Foxe continually collected and compiled accounts of martyrs' deaths, and the length of his work grew with each new

10 Brian Moynahan. *If God Spare My Life: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible—a Story of Martyrdom* (London: Little, Brown, 2003), 246, 340; Townsend, *Foxe*, 619-698.

11 William Haller has charted the number of editions to be fourteen, five being released during Foxe's life and nine after his death. William Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation* (London: Ebenezer Baylis and Son, 1967), 9; John N. King, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: Select Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xli.

edition.¹² If he found new information, or learned that some sources were false, he corrected the problem for the next edition. However, J. R. Mozley points out that Foxe's dates often do not match up across multiple editions, nor did he seem to care if they clashed. Foxe relied on transcribers search out and copy to the various registers, so some problems in his work may have more to do with bad transcriptions than Foxe's own research. Foxe also was very unsystematic in how he used the information he found, adding and removing verbatim documents at random from edition to edition,¹³ and sometimes his stories evolved in other directions from edition to edition to suit specific Protestant purposes.¹⁴

In his own lifetime critics of Foxe seized on these errors to discredit his claims. Nicholas Harpsfield, who produced a sixteenth-century biography of Thomas More, wrote in his 1566 publication *Dialogi Sex* that Foxe could not be trusted. However while Harpsfield had much to say about all the ways in which Foxe was smudging the truth, he is strangely silent about Protestant martyrs around the time More was Lord Chancellor. The same thing can be said about the 1604 publication, *A Treatise of Three Conversions of England* by Robert Parsons. While he has much to say about Foxe personally—he accuses Foxe of hiding the Episcopal registers that could reveal the truth about what happened—and denigrates Foxe's martyrs as “rogues, thieves, and traitors,” he too is silent concerning stories about Protestant martyrs at the time of Thomas More.¹⁵

Criticism of *Acts and Monuments* appeared again in the nineteenth century, when Reverend S. R. Maitland (an Anglican minister), and on a smaller scale J. S. Brewer and James Gairdner, discredited Foxe. Maitland writes: “any attempt to set up Foxe...

12 J. R. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 124, 153, 155, 157.

13 Mozely, 154, 165.

14 Shields and Forse, 727-34.

15 Mozley 177-178.

as an authority of any kind is perfectly absurd.”¹⁶ J. R. Mozley writes that Maitland’s main criticism was that Foxe was not precise enough in his methods, as he did not provide enough documentation to back-up his claims.

In the last half of the twentieth century interest in *Acts and Monuments* as an historical source resurfaced. New, annotated editions of *Acts and Monuments* were published, and scholars checked many of Foxe’s stories against other, contemporary documents and found them consistent with that evidence. And, as Mozley points out, Maitland and other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians criticize Foxe for failing to use historical methodology not developed until the nineteenth century.¹⁷ George Townsend attributes Maitland’s dislike for Foxe to Maitland’s desire to defend the history of and the Anglican Church.¹⁸ Because of the new scholarship on Foxe, Townsend and other scholars strongly defend *Acts and Monuments*, if used carefully, pointing out that is one of the few sources for the successive Tudor reformations we possess.¹⁹ Townsend writes: “If Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* had not been written...no book in the English language can be mentioned which would supply its place.”²⁰ This new acceptance of the historical value of Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* caused the shift in portrayals of Thomas More in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Early Biographies of Thomas More and Their Influence

Before examining some of the twentieth century biographies of Thomas More, it is important to give a quick review their antecedents. As mentioned, modern biographies of Thomas More

16 S. R. Maitland, *Review of Foxe the Martyrologist’s History of the Waldenses* (London: J. G. and F. Rivington, 1837).

17 Mozley, 181.

18 George Townsend. “The Objectors and Objections to the General Authority and Veracity of Foxe’s ‘Acts and Monuments of the Church’ Considered.” In John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. George Townsend, 163-236. 8 vols (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1965), 167.

19 See, for example, David M. Loades, *Mary Tudor: A Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 273-88.

20 Townsend, “The Objectors and Objections,” 231.

often are skewed by an over reliance on encomiums written by his fellow Humanists like Erasmus, and biographies of More written in the sixteenth century by William Roper, Nicholas Harpsfield, and Thomas Stapleton.

Thomas More's son-in-law, William Roper, wrote his biography of More around 1577, and though not published until 1626, it serves as the foundation for later accounts of More's life.²¹ Less than one hundred pages in length, Roper used his personal recollections to create a biography intended to be a family manuscript, meant only for those who loved and wished to remember More. Roper's biography, of course, portrays More in a positive light, and there is no mention of More's zeal in pursuing Protestant heresy.²² Roper gave his manuscript to Nicholas Harpsfield, Archdeacon of Canterbury, who used it to create a more detailed description of More's life, augmenting his account with the writings of both Erasmus and More, as well as oral reminiscences of people who knew him.²³ As might be expected, neither Roper's nor Harpsfield's works were printed during the reign of Elizabeth I. Portrayals of More as a saint who lost his life serving the Catholic Church would find little favor with his executioner's Protestant daughter.²⁴

Harpsfield's efforts were followed by a Catholic cleric in exile, Thomas Stapleton, who like More, wrote anti-Protestant texts. In his Latin biography of More in 1588, Stapleton relied on a very few documents and various stories that he had heard from other exiles.²⁵ Once again, and it cannot be stressed enough, Stapleton's

21 William Roper, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore*, ed. E.V. Hitchcock (London: Oxford University Press, 1935).

22 Marius, xv.

23 R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co Inc., 1935), 32; and Marius, xvii; Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.V. Hitchcock (London: E.E.T.S., 1932).

24 Marius, xvii.

25 Chambers, 39; Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.E. Reynolds (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966).

Thomas More essentially is a copy of the Thomas More we find in the biographies of Roper and Harpsfield. Stapleton viewed More's story as one of triumph that could be used to comfort Catholics in difficult times. Stapleton emphasized that even though he was a layman, More was a saint in his own right who was a devoted father and faithful servant of the Church. Three other early modern biographies of More exist: a "life" by Cresacre More (Thomas's grandson) printed in 1631, another by John Hoddeson in printed in 1662, and one by an anonymous author writing under the name of "Ro.Ba, found only in manuscript, and first printed in 1950."²⁶ All three continue in the same vein as the previous three—Thomas More is a saint, there is no mention of persecuting heretics. Modern authors do not cite these last three frequently.

After Ro.Ba. there was not another major biography of More published until 1891—Father T. E. Bridgett's biography *The Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More*.²⁷ Richard Marius writes that Bridgett's work is the best modern biography of More (presumably up to the publication of his),²⁸ Like the early modern authors, Bridgett presents More as a pious man of God, but in addition to using Roper's, Harpsfield's and Stapleton's biographies as primary sources, Bridgett also uses Erasmus's account of More's life. This new source set a trend for Thomas More historiography. Erasmus's account serves as one of the primary sources which subsequent biographers use to support claims about More, his non-involvement with heresy, and the motives behind his publication of *Utopia*.

Problems are evident in the primary sources about Thomas More available to modern biographers. Most of the early modern

26 Chambers, 40-41; Cresacre More, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, ed. James L. Kennedy (Athens, PA: Riverside Press, 1941), first printing in 1631 (Douai: B. Bellière); John Hoddesdon, *The History of the Life and Death of Sr. Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor England, in King Henry the Eighth's Time* (London: printed for George Eversdan and Henry Eversden, 1662); Ro.Ba., *The lyfe of Syr Thomas More, sometimes Lord Chancellor of England*, ed. E.V. Hitchcock and Philip E. Hallett (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

27 T.E. Bridgett, *The Life and Writings of Thomas More* (London: Burns & Oats 1891).

28 Marius, xix,

sources were written by men who were overtly, or covertly Catholic. Two of them, William Roper and Cresacre More, were members of More's family, and Stapleton and Erasmus were Catholic clerics—Erasmus also was More's close, personal friend. Most of these sources stress More's Catholic piety and martyrdom in support of the Catholicism. We can safely assume their perspectives prevented them from acknowledging the negative aspects of More's life. The willingness of later authors, beginning with Bridgett, to accept at face value the accounts of Roper, Harpsfield, and Stapleton leaves gaps in More's story—gaps not addressed until the 1980s in the publications of J. A. Guy and Richard Marius. Finally, and most importantly for this study, none of the early modern sources discussed above address the idea that More could have possibly persecuted Protestants. In relying heavily on these texts, some modern authors use them as the basis to refute of any evidence suggesting negative aspects of More's life and career. This insistence on ignoring certain lines of evidence is rampant throughout works about Thomas More until the last quarter of the twentieth century, when authors began using John Foxe as a reliable source.

Twentieth-century Publications on Thomas More and the Inclusion of John Foxe

When we track publications on More into the twentieth century, we see a shift in portrayals of More's life from a man who was unjustly executed for his steadfast faith to a man who strove to stamp out heresy with fire. The deciding factor in this shift was the renewed scholarship on John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* that led to its acceptance as a reliable primary source.

In the first half of the twentieth century scholars tended to repudiate John Foxe's claims that Thomas More persecuted Protestants. H.G. Ganns' "Sir Thomas More and the Persecution of Heretics: An Historical Inquiry" (1900),²⁹ presents Thomas More

²⁹ H.G. Ganns, "Sir Thomas More and the Persecution of Heretics: An Historical Inquiry," *Catholic Quarterly Review* 25 (1900): 531-548.

as a kind-hearted man who “was an avowed advocate and fearless champion of freedom of conscience perilously in advance of his time.”³⁰ Ganns’ maintains that ever since his death, More’s good name has been tarnished by lies. Though he gives no specific citations from *Acts and Monuments* anywhere within his article, Ganns accuses Foxe of lying about More’s persecution of Protestants.³¹ Interestingly, the biographies of Thomas More, which flood the market between 1930 and 1965, do not cite Ganns when refuting the idea that More may have a part in the persecution of heretics.³² This may have something to do with Ganns’ writing style, which seems “over the top” in its defense of Thomas More’s reputation.³³

Henri Brémond’s 1920 brief biography, entitled *Sir Thomas More: The Blessed Thomas More*, also declares Foxe a liar.³⁴ Brémond, like Bridgett, relies on the accounts of Roper, Erasmus and company. He stresses that the real Thomas More cannot be found by studying his actions in the courts, and that “his life, indeed, is spotless, and his biographer can relate it without paraphrase or reticence.”³⁵ Brémond continues the tradition that sought to make More a saintly figure in Catholic history. Christopher Hollis follows Brémond’s lead in his biography, *Sir Thomas More* (1934), taking care to remind the reader that Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* could not be trusted as a reliable source for accusations against More.³⁶

30 Ganns, 535.

31 Ganns, 533.

32 The interest in Thomas More probably stems from the efforts that led to his canonization by the Roman Catholic Church in 1935. He was later made Patron Saint of Statesman in 1980, and not surprisingly there was an increase in publications on More then as well.

33 An example of Ganns’ style: “Not a remote insinuation of scandal ever affected the stainless integrity of More, not a more of suspicion ever flitted over his untarnished ermine, while obsequious servility, unpardonable ingratitude, criminal malversation in office, left blotches on ‘the greatest, wisest and meanest of mankind’ that three centuries of persistent and aggressive apologetics have not explained away, much less effaced.” (Ganns, 535).

34 Henri Brémond, *Sir Thomas More: The Blessed Thomas More* (Manchester: R&T Washbourne Ltd., 1920).

35 Brémond, 2, 13.

36 Christopher Hollis, *Sir Thomas More* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1934).

These defenses of More's life and reputation coincide with the campaign to proclaim him a saint of the Catholic Church. Pope Pious XI canonized Thomas More in 1935, and several biographies of Thomas More were published over the next few decades. R. W. Chambers' *Thomas More* (1935) is considered the best of these. Chambers does go into some detail about Foxe's accounts of More's persecution of Protestants. His is the first detailed defense against Foxe's charge that More tortured and executed heretics. Though Chambers insists that Foxe's stories about More are false, he does address other authors, in works not specifically dealing with Thomas More, who had accepted Foxe's stories as true. Unlike earlier biographers, and Chambers also relies heavily on More's correspondence, and provides a detailed analysis of *Utopia*, claiming a study of More's writings is the only way a scholar could truly understand him.³⁷ This, perhaps, is Chamber's most valuable contribution to the historiography of Thomas More, for it influenced the methodology of subsequent biographers.

After Chambers, several biographies of Thomas More appeared: Algernon Cecil's *A Portrait of Thomas More: Scholar, Statesman, Saint* (1937), Theodore Maynard's *Humanist As Hero: The Life of Sir Thomas More* (1947), W. E. Campbell's *Erasmus, Tyndale, and More* (1950), Leslie Paul's *Sir Thomas More* (1959), and Bernard Basset's *Born For Friendship: The Spirit of Sir Thomas More* (1965).³⁸ Though they should be commended for their efforts at producing modern, historical biographies, each continues the themes of those who came before them. These biographies still rely heavily on the early modern biographies of Roper, Harpsfield, and Stapleton. They gloss over his career as Lord Chancellor and involvement in the

³⁷ Chambers, 19.

³⁸ Algernon Cecil, *A Portrait of Thomas More: Scholar, Statesman, Saint* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937); Theodore Maynard, *Humanist As Hero: The Life of Sir Thomas More* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1947); Leslie Paul, *Sir Thomas More* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1959); W. E. Campbell, *Erasmus, Tyndale, and More* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1950); Bernard Basset, *Born For Friendship: The Spirit of Sir Thomas More* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965).

persecution of Protestants, denigrating Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* and authors who used it as a reliable, historical source. Maynard and Campbell, however, do attempt to present Thomas More within a broader picture of his intellectual world. Maynard expands upon More's place in the history and ideas of Humanism, and Campbell interweaves More's biography with biographies of his close friend, Erasmus and his great nemesis, William Tynsdale.

In the 1980s scholars begin to recognize, with reservations, the worth of utilizing Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* as a primary source. As concerns the life of Thomas More, this new acceptance of Foxe also led to an increase in consulting a variety of other sources, as well as an acceptance that More did have something to do with the arrest and persecution of Protestants. This new path was first taken by J.A. Guy in his article "Sir Thomas More & the Heretics" (1980). Guy's article was a sample of what later appears in his book, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*.³⁹ *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* is a splendid book that offers the reader a more intimate look into More's career. Using public records for the first time in a Thomas More-focused piece, Guy successfully charts the rise and fall of Thomas More in the political arena, with special attention paid to his long battle against heresy.

Guy notes that, as Lord Chancellor, More believed it was his duty to suppress heresy and protect the people from the sedition he believed followed in its wake.⁴⁰ More first began his assault on heresy by convincing Henry to issue two proclamations against possessing heretical books. The first made it illegal to own certain "banned books;" the second warned the people to be vigilant against heretics and forbade unlicensed preaching. More even went as far as to announce in Parliament that the destruction of heresy was an official government policy.⁴¹ Using additional public records, Guy

39 J. A. Guy, "Sir Thomas More & the Heretics" *History Today*, 30 (Feb. 1980): 11-15.

40 Guy, *Public Career*, 104.

41 Guy, *Public Career*. 172.

shows that on October 25, 1530 Chancellor More sent one John Porseck and his friends to the Tower of London for possession of banned books. Upon their repudiation of Lutheranism, More required them to ride on horseback, backwards, through London to a spot where they were to burn all their contraband. Around the same time More caught John Tyndale (the brother of More's nemesis William Tyndale) and his friends distributing his Tyndale's *New Testament*. After their imprisonment and confessions, they too were sentenced to ride backwards on horseback through London while offal and rotten fruit was thrown at them.⁴²

Guy turns to the various charges leveled against More by Foxe, and sketches the story of each martyr that More helped send to the stake, one of whom More called "the devil's stinking martyr!"⁴³ With Guy's publications leading the way, other historians began to acknowledge the probable validity of Foxe's accusations. Historian Jasper Ridley published the most memorable of these new counter-attacks on Thomas More's saintly reputation in 1984. The title of his book, *The Statesman and the Fanatic: Thomas Wolsey and Thomas More*, reveals the depth of Ridley's war on More's saintly reputation. Like Guy, Ridley turned to John Foxe for some added ammo.

In brief, Ridley's book is a two-figure biography, bouncing between chapters on Thomas Wolsey (the statesman) and chapters on Thomas More (the fanatic). Ridley presents a darker side to More's life and career. He paints Thomas More as a religious fanatic who betrayed his earlier ideas of moderation and freedom of conscience, and took actual pleasure in tracking and capturing heretical Christians. Citing Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, Ridley identifies five men Thomas More arrested, interrogated, and sent

42 Guy, *Public Career*, 173.

43 The Protestant martyr to whom the author refers is Thomas Hitton, who was burned at Maidstone in 1530. Hitton was a priest who was caught with letters from English heretics. After being excommunicated by Archbishop Warham and refusing to give More the location and name of his parents, Hitton was burned and in More's *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* Hinton is referred to as "the devil's stinking martyr!" For more information on this and Guy's writings on the other men More helped persecute, see Guy, *Public Career*, 164-174.

to the stake.⁴⁴ As shown above, seven deaths should actually be attributed to More's activities. Ridley observes that both William Tyndale and John Foxe labeled him as unnecessarily cruel, even seeking to destroy a man's reputation after he had been burned at the stake.⁴⁵ And he points out that none of More's supporters, nor More himself, ever refuted Tyndale's and Foxe's accusations of excessive cruelty.⁴⁶ Ridley uses a wide selection of sources, including More's own writings, to paint More as an authoritarian conservative, a cold and distant father, a man who believed women were instruments of Satan, and a man who was so alarmed at his own sexuality that he sought to repress it in any way possible, including wearing a hair shirt and self-flagellation—Ridley's explanation of a practice apologists use to demonstrate More's deep religiosity.⁴⁷

Ridley's book is a full-blown attack on More's reputation as a kindly, saintly man who died for his beliefs. Ridley's Thomas More is obsessive and bitter, hell-bent on destroying heresy and choosing to leave his post as Lord Chancellor only after his defeat by Anne Boleyn's faction became inevitable. Though later publications do not give such a condemnatory picture of Thomas More, Ridley's and Guy's works pointed the ways to use *Acts and Monuments* as a reliable source. Foxe's work is a prominent source in the biographies of Thomas More by Richard Marius and Peter Akroyd.

Richard Marius' *Sir Thomas More: A Biography* (1984, reprinted Harvard University Press, 1999), and Peter Akroyd's *The Life of Sir Thomas More* (1998) are the last major publications about Thomas More in the twentieth century.⁴⁸ Both books try to combine and synthesize the previous scholarship on More, as well as the

44 Guy, *Public Career* 252-57. Using Foxe, Ridley attributes the deaths of Thomas Hitton, Thomas Blinney, Richard Bayfield, John Tewkesbury, and James Bainham to More.

45 Ridley, 239. See John Foxe's account of John Bainham's death (*Acts and Monuments*, ed Townsend, v 4 688).

46 Ridley, 239.

47 Ridley., 30, 62, and 125.

48 Peter Akroyd, *The Life of Sir Thomas More* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

surrounding literature from the period in which he lived, to create a complete picture of the man. Marius and Akroyd present More as a man capable of feeling every emotion and committing any action. They take special care to explain his upbringing, the culture of London, what English society was like at the time, Humanism, the impact of the Reformation, and what More did while serving Henry VIII. They primarily rely on Foxe as their major source for showing that More did, in fact, actively persecute Protestants, and reinforce Foxe's charges with other sixteenth-century source material. They attempt to understand what it was about More's psyche that made him despise heresy so much that he would send another man to his death. Previous treatments of More note his aggressive literary battle against heresy, but they downplay those writings, explaining them as only the works of a devoted Christian protecting his faith.

Marius and Akroyd reject this simple explanation, taking cues from Guy and Ridley, to search for deeper understanding of the complexity of the world around Thomas More in addition to the man himself. They fall short, as one might expect of single volume biographies, but they do represent an evolution that suggests perhaps the best direction is to focus on studying specific aspects of Thomas More's life and career instead of his life in its entirety. A modern example of that approach is Craig D'Alton's "William Warham and English Heresy Policy After the Fall of Wolsey" (*Historical Research*, 2004).

D'Alton examines the actions taken by the government to combat heresy after Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was stripped of his duties. He asserts that Archbishop of Canterbury William Warham took the lead in attempting to silence heretics, through pamphlets and ecclesiastical pressure, but Warham did not attempt to bring the full weight of the state down upon them. D'Alton maintains that it was when Warham's approach seemed ineffectual; it was Lord Chancellor Thomas More who began a radically different policy of hunting down, capturing, and burning Protestants.⁴⁹ It is only with

49 Craig D'Alton, "William Warham and English Heresy Policy After the Fall of Wolsey," *Historical Research*, 77 (2004), 337-57.

the acceptance of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* as a legitimate primary source, and the work of late twentieth-century biographers that such reinterpretations of the life of Thomas More and the complexities of the Henrician religious reforms could occur.

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Study for Portrait of the More Family by Hans Holbein the Younger