

fixture; and second, he sought to deflate each grandee somehow, to cut him down to size, make him a forked beast when not enthroned.

Shakespeare questioned the credibility of the myth of leadership. He thus broke out of the pattern of tragedy to that time, and gave biography a possible new direction as well.

Whittemore has a cheer, or possibly a cheer and a half for Boswell, but certainly not three of them. He was the first, he agrees, to place character at the center of biography and thus constitutes in his practice a historic dividing point in the genre's history. For Aristotle, for Plutarch, for the hagiographers, for Johnson himself, character was subordinated; for Boswell it was central. Anything that bore on the character was thus worth retaining, and here Boswell introduced that "squirreling of incidental material like old bills and hatbands" with a completeness "not to be equaled until the days of the tape recorder." Johnson had the mental discipline and sense of order that Boswell lacked, but his major biographical work, the *Lives of the Poets*, was handicapped, Whittemore feels, not only by the mediocre ability of many of the poets he wrote about, but also by the stylized format he adopted in which to write about them: subject's life, subject's character, a critical commentary on the subject's works. His instinct for order betrayed him. Whittemore will draw fire from both the Johnsonians and the Boswellians for his characteristically lucid judgments, an eventuality that I doubt he is worrying much about.

Laurence Sterne appears as the subject of the last chapter because *Tristram Shandy* "was especially directed at the sources of character, just as the probings of psychobiographers are now directed." He was "probing an emergent order, an order denying surface order and subsisting beneath the surface, an order whose study now is given over mostly to psychiatrists, or to those who think they are." After Sterne came the Romantic Revolution, with its emphasis on the self's independence. That is what Sterne had been

writing about and exemplifying.

This is a little book (handsomely produced by the Johns Hopkins Press) but there is nothing little about Reed Whittemore's perspective or learning. *Mulum in parvo*. We look forward to his next venture in the genre of biographical theory. It will be worth waiting for.

— Reviewed by Calhoun Winton

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## Sir Thomas More (1478-1535)

**Thomas More: A Biography**, by Richard Marius, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985. 562 pp. \$22.95.

MEMORABLE IN LIFE, Thomas More declined the oblivion of shame for which Henry VIII destined him, and by 1886 the great chancellor who had stuck on principles archbishops found negotiable had been beatified. For those unmoved by his witness to religion, there remained More the man of letters, the author of *Utopia*. From the era of Roper, Stapleton, and Harpsfield, all of whom wrote within the century, More's was a life that courted recollection and required explanation. To a love of the new learning that made him seem revolutionary to the Oxford Aristotelians was joined a prophetic insight that the new greed, unchecked by the old pieties, would wreck the world; and More's sharp criticism of late medieval theologians was inseparable from his rock-ribbed defense of traditional theology. Most who read his letters find a character too complex for easy explanation, but the attempt challenges, and Richard Marius's new biography is a recent presentation of the courtier whose cautious courage made him a martyr.

Every age is to some degree a mirror in which the image of the past is twisted to the interests of the present, and while the strength of this new biography is probably the author's extensive use of More's own

writings, its weakness is perhaps Marius's desire to make More modern, to depict him as a man torn by the inner conflicts that now tend to preoccupy biographers, by his desire for both marriage and monasticism, for Christian perfection and political success. Beneath the credible scholarly superstructure is the fundamental thesis that More was "no glorified mummy . . . embalmed with adulation," but a man who bought his public character at a price. Earlier biographers made More's saintliness too peaceable. Marius suggests that the *persona* More made through acts of will and intellect was, if not superficial, perhaps at least partly the work of a well-intentioned though unself-conscious dissembler, someone who might better have confessed in good romantic style that he was a creature divided, but who chose instead to form a self by deliberately suppressing the dark imaginings with which modernity is relentlessly involved.

To doubt that the tensions Marius finds in More were present, or to deny that these influenced his actions, is to ignore evidence ably produced. What may need rethinking is the origin and the accuracy of that vision of human wholeness to which the glorified mummy is implicitly juxtaposed in this biography. Moderns are typically, at least in literature, autonomous individuals who combine an ability to preside over the passions in such a way as to enjoy the flesh fully and yet guilelessly with a cool, Fabian appreciation of the social good. But the image that combines easy, distant political virtue with guiltless satisfaction of the passions was not accessible to the 1530s, and its use tells us more about modernity than about the author of the *Dialogue of Comfort*. To be frightened of ambition and lust, as More manifestly was, shakes the foundations of modernity, but to men who understood the hyperbole of the offending eye, the hairshirt was no great thing. That God chastises the sons he calls was not news even in the court of Henry VIII. Mortification and simplicity were characteristic of the pursuit of the holy life, inside the monastery and out.

More's anxieties about his busyness, imaginings, and ambitions are hardly so unusual as to be a key to the meaning of his life.

Marius's tendency not to bring into focus the very ordinary ideal of sanctity that influenced More is the most obvious of several examples of the author's inability to escape the clichés of modern historiography. To repeat the hoary commonplace that Henry's radical resolution of the lingering, endemic tension between pope and king, or his confiscation of the monasteries, was caused or justified by the corruption of the Church does not illuminate. Corruption evokes the image of decay and removes the entity corrupted from the world of actions and intentions, while at the same time telling us very little about Wolsey, Henry, or Clement VII.

Minor skewing also infects the treatment of More's Oxford years, in which astrology is made the probable theme of his studies, or at least of the Oxford curriculum, in the early sixteenth century. Astrology did enjoy a revival as the Middle Ages waned, and Thomas More was interested in the planets, but since St. Augustine, and indeed since St. Ignatius of Antioch, belief in astrology had been considered dangerous or heretical. The late medieval university in which astrology was the academic centerpiece subserves a doubtful Enlightenment historiography and obscures the desiccated scholasticism of the Oxford that More knew.

Marius's tendency to import presuppositions too uncritically formed by contemporary imagination—his account of the Hunne affair may be another example—makes More inaccessible save as a failed modern. But what can modernity make of a man who believed that attacks on revealed truth were no private matter, but threats to Church and state so serious as not only to justify but also to require punishment, even death? More's conviction that the conclusion of the intellect in truth and adherence to that truth by the will were matters upon which eternal salvation or loss depended is unintelligible to an age which, while willing to destroy millions for convenience, or political expedi-

ency, or in the name of historicist abstractions, considers thought epiphenomenal and decision another name for appetite.

To write biography successfully, one must enter the personality of the subject, think his thoughts, share his sentiments. It is not enough to be charmed or challenged by the subject's life; the biographer must at some point discover a significant psychological unity with the man or woman whose life he will represent. The difficulty Marius finds in making this attempt is perhaps best illustrated by his presentation of the strangely weak character of More's arguments on behalf of papal authority. Indeed, one searches More's writings in vain for a straightforward assertion of the doctrine of papal authority and inerrancy for which nineteenth-century imagination believed More had died.

It was only at the very end, if son-in-law Roper was right, that More said plainly that no layman, not even a prince, could usurp the place given to Peter by divine law. Bishop John Fisher had boldly advanced the theory of papal primacy that would later become normative in Catholicism. Was More's reticence rooted in a stubborn conciliarism that made him at best a lukewarm advocate of papal authority? But it is one of the strengths of Marius's biography that he presents More as the circumspect man, one who wanted very much to live if that might be. It was utterly in character that More should argue the weakest case on which conscience could stand, insisting that the papacy was at least an office instituted by all Christendom, against which part of the Church could not lawfully speak. More took a conscientious line less likely to enrage his opponents than John Fisher's papalism until the time for argument was past. He then said plainly what Catholic Englishmen were perhaps seeing clearly for the first time.

It was in the 1530s that the significance of the intractable, sometimes bitter tension between king and pope became clear, and men saw for the first time, or at least some prophetic men saw, that the tyranny

of clerks was as nothing to the tyranny of the state, that if Peter's power was destroyed, the absolutist monarchies, unchecked by Church or custom, might indeed become leviathan. More's reluctance to make much of the primacy of Peter need not be seen as incipient conciliarism or even timorousness. Prudence (in the old sense) combined with a healthy desire to live and the relative novelty of the situation made it reasonable that he should conduct his defense around the doctrine Catholics were "at the leastwise" (More's own phrase) traditionally required to hold. Marius seems intent upon discovering uncertainty or perhaps even a faint scent of modernism in More's climactic witness, and in doing so he betrays a partial inability to do more than see the issue extrinsically and in contemporary light.

That a great biography can be written by an author who is fascinated by his subject but who considers the subject innocently mistaken regarding the cardinal conclusions that motivate the life is doubtful. Richard Marius is a scholarly, urbane modern who, perhaps because he cannot easily imagine More's world of thought and actions, tries repeatedly to drag More into ours. For the author "the ethereal vision of the sacred," which forms the background of Thomas More's life, "has quite faded away in the electric glow of our modernity." If modernity is the arbiter, More's life may be interesting, but it is ultimately misguided. The moment on the scaffold then becomes what Marius makes it, a time for psychological resolution. That it certainly was, but it was also a time for one final and superb act of faith and charity. More's life, despite his fears, had as its central theme love for God.

Since God will not appear as a character among characters, the writers of the biographies of saints have a hard task at hand. If hagiography is the kind of writing that subsumes ordinary life into a supernatural relation, there must surely be another kind that Marius's book represents, in which the soul's great formative desire is subordinated to psychology and politics. Still to be written is a biography of More

which rejects the tendency of baroque piety to mummify and glorify prematurely—against which Richard Marius rightly protests—but which nevertheless sees in the tensions and cautions of an ordinary life that one illuminating thread that leads from irresolution to unshadowed holiness.

— *Reviewed by James Patrick*

## Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

**Thomas Jefferson: A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity**, by Alf J. Mapp, Jr.,  
Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books,  
1987. xv + 487 pp. \$22.95.

REVIEWING *SELECTED LETTERS* of Edmund Burke in the *American Spectator* in 1985, Professor Charles R. Kesler claimed that American conservatives attempting to propagate Burke's principles "have always faced an embarrassing obstacle: namely the almost complete lack of a Burkean tradition in America." Kesler, with a side-long glance at Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, proceeded to tell how certain conservative scholars have thus been forced to engage in "ingenious efforts to evade this dead end by finding or inventing a native Burkean tradition, dragooning John Randolph of Roanoke, Orestes Brownson, and others into the act": efforts which fail to convince "because you cannot enroll the *obvious* Americans in it—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, to name a few."

Stepping lightly over the question of why, after citing *The Conservative Mind*—which contains a key chapter on the roots of the American conservative tradition entitled "John Adams and Liberty under Law"—Kesler chose to include Adams among the "obvious" Americans, we are

confronted by the other stellar names on his list. And here Kesler is on firm ground. For here, not only are any perceived links with Burke tenuous at best, but also we encounter the name of a man long claimed by American liberals as a native son: that of Jefferson. "He is not only the patron saint of a political party," writes historian and biographer Alf J. Mapp, Jr., in the fat book at hand,

He is also the patron saint of a host of ideologists, most of them of the liberal persuasion. Many of them approach the task of telling Jefferson's life story as if it were that of a revered father. Each conservative thought attributable to this Founding Father is an isolated slip from grace. To reveal it to the public, they seem to feel, would be as disloyal and pointless as exposing to general gossip the few instances in which a beloved parent, deservedly respected for sobriety, indulged too heavily in drink.

But as Mapp convincingly reveals in *Thomas Jefferson: A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*, Jefferson's slips from grace were far from isolated. Indeed, it is the main premise of Mapp's book "that the story of Thomas Jefferson in American history is a strange case of mistaken identity resulting in part from willful misrepresentation but even more from the wishful thinking of both admirers and detractors."

In attempting to demonstrate this, Mapp has avoided the temptation to identify his prejudices with Jefferson's, to exclude uncongenial data, and, in short, to cook his thesis. Seeking instead to "chip away at the encrustation of legend to reveal some portions of the true Jefferson," he has followed the advice given by Jefferson to those selected to hold teaching positions at the University of Virginia, endeavoring to "follow truth wherever it may lead." The result of Mapp's labors will surprise readers of all political persuasions. For what are we to make of this revolutionist who, while serving on Virginia's Committee to Revise the Laws of the Commonwealth in 1777, opposed with Burkean stolidity Edmund Pendleton's proposal for