

Sir Thomas More
1478–1535

Thomas More was born in London, the son of Sir John More, a distinguished judge. His early education came at St. Anthony's School, the same school which had trained John Colet and William Latimer, two of the group of prominent "Oxford reformers" who later became close friends of More. An important chapter in More's early life was his period of residence in the home of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury. More studied at Canterbury College, Oxford, then entered New Inn, London, and later Lincoln's Inn for legal training. In his early years he deliberated between a career in law or in the church; although he decided in favor of the law, he retained strong religious feelings all his life, as manifested by his wearing a penitential hair shirt, but even more by his high principles and the nobility of his actions.

Early in his career More was invited by William Grocyn, a prominent teacher of Greek and the new humanism, to deliver a series of lectures on St. Augustine's *City of God*. His interest in the *City of God* has a bearing on his *Utopia*, as will be seen later.

More early became a highly successful lawyer. He was elected to Parliament in 1504 and became Under-Sheriff of London in 1510. In 1515, he was appointed to a commission sent to Bruges to negotiate with representatives of the Holy Roman Empire for trade agreements. It was at this point in his career that he began work on *Utopia*.

Soon after his return from the Netherlands, he was persuaded to enter government service permanently, and his rise to prominence was rapid. In 1518 he was appointed to the Privy Council (the king's cabinet), and he was knighted in 1521. During the decade of the 20s, at Henry VIII's request, he became involved in the writing of polemics defending Catholicism against Luther's attacks.

In 1529, following the downfall of Cardinal Wolsey, More became Lord Chancellor, equivalent of Prime Minister; but his tenure in that office was brief and stormy. In the early 1530s Henry started negotiations to divorce Catherine of Aragon—or have his marriage annulled—and he expected to find a loyal supporter in his Lord Chancellor. More's refusal to second the king's arguments eventually brought about a breach, and More resigned. Then when Henry broke off allegiance to the pope, declaring himself head of the Church of England, he tried to force all

Englishmen to acknowledge the “Act of Succession and Supremacy” under penalty of law. More was one of a distinguished group of faithful Roman Catholics who refused to recognize Henry’s proclaimed supremacy over the Church of England. He was accused of treason, imprisoned in the Tower, and beheaded, July, 1535.

The full story of More’s life and character casts valuable light on *Utopia*, even those events that came after the writing of the work; but the principal key to its interpretation is the story of More the humanist scholar. He came to Oxford as a student, when Greek studies were being encouraged through the instruction of William Grocyn, an Englishman who had been trained in Italy. More was to become a friend and collaborator with the leaders in the new movement and eventually a leader himself. When Erasmus visited England, he and More became warm friends. The great Dutch scholar was often a guest in More’s home; in fact, it was in More’s house that he wrote part of his famous *Praise of Folly* (*Encomium Moriae*), which he dedicated to More. It was Erasmus who was responsible for introducing More to Peter Giles, the man who figured prominently in the composition of *Utopia*. And it was Erasmus who arranged for the anonymous publication of *Utopia* in Louvain in 1516.

During More’s stay in the Low Countries, there was a long recess in the official negotiations, during which he spent a good deal of time in conversations with that friend of Erasmus, Peter Giles. The tenor of their speculations on world-wide problems apparently led More into writing down his account of an imaginary kingdom on an imaginary island. That account was to become the basis for, or chief portion of, Book II of *Utopia*. During the year following his return to England, More wrote Book I, the section on contemporary English and European society, which offers sharp contrasts to Utopian life.