

## BLACKFRIARS

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A LETTER of Erasmus has immortalized "My Lord of Rochester's" many-windowed library with its wealth of books which no other episcopal library could outdo. To remember this library and to think for a moment who has raised this episcopal book-lover to the altars is to see in a glimpse the old Roman proverb: *Est modus in rebus*. For assuredly there is more than a coincidence—indeed there may be the traffic of angels' counsel—in the fact that the martyred Collector of Rochester's famous library has been raised to the altars by a Pope who was himself a notable librarian.

But if the martyred Cardinal and the canonizing Pope meet fitly on the peaceful field of books, they meet us undeniably and still more dramatically on the great field of world-action; where assuredly they are not to be counted amongst that worthy throng of whom it is said . . . they also serve who only stand and wait.

Perhaps it is our Holy Father's unique part in the world-upheaval of to-day that has prompted him to be, as he has been facetiously called, the Promotor Causae of the two great world figures—John Fisher and Thomas More. At any rate what they understood and withstood in its cradle-days he is called upon to understand and withstand in its full manhood's strength.

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That the writer of *Utopia* was a great world figure did not need the imprimatur of the Henry Tudor axe. But what was undeniably the position of More was hardly observable in Fisher; whose brilliant junior drew and kept men's gaze. For the past four centuries the quiet Yorkshireman who happened to be a Bishop has been in a self-wrought and almost invisible background. But with the canonization of this first Cardinal Martyr he comes apologetically to a foreground where "it has seemed good to the Church and to the Holy Ghost to put him."

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In spite of apprehension in certain quarters there never

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was a danger that More would dim the glory of Fisher. The two men, though contrasted in a thousand ways, were so fundamentally alike that their thousand contrasts and differences seemed but to make each man the complement of the other. Only when seen side by side on the crowded tumultuous stage of sixteenth century Europe do they show their stature to its full; and Europe of their day had no two men of equal stature.



Let us risk our reputation by saying quite frankly that of the two men Fisher seems the more admittedly an Englishman. But let us try to recover our reputation by at once adding that if Fisher is the typical Englishman, More is the typical Londoner. We must remember that London is not England; nor is England London. Even for the England of to-day, London is a county apart and almost a country apart. Now if London, *parens secunda liberorum*, ever bred an authentic son, that son was More. With the exception of one or two diplomatic trips abroad and a stay at Oxford, More was born, lived and died within sound of Bow bells.

But if More was that fascinating thing, a sixteenth century Londoner, the tall, somewhat awkward, stolid, dogged, upright Fisher was almost the typical Englishman still so dear to foreign cartoonists. He came from the Yorkshire moors. His first romantic adventures would be from his nursery into the wool-mercantile's shop with its sweet-smelling rolls of Beverley Blue and Beverley Scarlet.<sup>1</sup>

When he went to Cambridge, "distant from his native soil about eight days' journey southward," he went as an average English lad with little or nothing in his purse and with nothing to further his academic career except what the Fisher family had marvelled to "perceive in him a great dexterity and aptness towards learning."

When his qualities of mind and soul gave him the re-

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<sup>1</sup> What these two far-famed Beverley products suggest to the present writer he dare not place in the text nor withhold from the notes. But I can see John Fisher only as a Blue—and thanks to the Tower axe, as Beverley Scarlet

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sponsible position of confessor and spiritual guide to the Lady Margaret, he was being led into the other England which was the complement of his native North. The daughter of the Duke of Somerset was too decisively of the great South-west culture not to give her confessor, whom she mothered as well as obeyed, an English quality he could not receive from the North.

We might add that what he had received had been the gift of England. London gave him nothing. But he gave London his witness, his warnings and his blood.



For most men who have read or read about *Utopia* it is easy to feel that, though England was a small part of Europe and of the world, yet More is a great world-powerful figure. Fisher's cosmic position is less easily accepted by those who see England against the greater background of Europe or against the still greater background of the Old World and the New. Yet the remembrance of the Humanist revival which caught but did not engulf Fisher might surely lead men's minds to recognize that the culture the Humanists were rightly prizing came mainly from the little thing called Greece.

But the head of St. John the Baptist upon the altar of Fisher's private chapel would remind them of another little thing called Israel from whence had come such great world-figures as Isaiah, Jeremiah, fitly closed by a figure of one clothed in camel's hair, who was yet of such moral stature that men took him to be the Messiah.

It is with these weights and measures in our mind, and not with any geographical measures, that we take the Church's first canonized Cardinal Martyr to be for all time a world-figure of indefinable magnitude. Paul III "being High Priest that year" had pontifical if not prophetic insight into Fisher's place in history. The letter he wrote to Ferdinand of Hungary contains these significant judgments:

This Henry has far exceeded the impiety of the former one. He slew one only, this man, many. He slew the defender of the rights of one particular Church; this man, the rights of the Church universal. He, an archbishop; this man, a Cardinal of the Roman Church.

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This defence of the Universal Church was made by Fisher under such conditions as almost immeasurably to honour the defender. It must be remembered that Fisher was defending, not primarily the Church, but the Pope. But Fisher was too sound a theologian and Catholic not to distinguish between a divine institution and its human occupants. A life that had been lived under Alexander VI, and had been ended under Paul III, was not likely to confuse the office with the person or to identify infallibility with impeccability. Moreover, if we may take the judgement of Fr. Bridgett and other competent historians, Fisher was one of those who thought that the Pope's delays to decide the theological issues lost England to the Faith. Under such circumstances, and three centuries and a half before the Vatican decision, Fisher's death-witness to papal authority is perhaps the most momentous happening of the sixteenth century.



Yet this dogmatic aspect of Fisher's heroic martyrdom, though so striking, may have to yield to the social aspect, which as time goes on may grow in greatness.

Just as in Florence Savonarola instinctively understood and accepted the challenge of "money-power," now so explicitly exposed and condemned by the *Quadragesimo Anno*, so did Fisher instinctively understand and accept the challenge of Totalitarianism when it first opened its attack.

A comparison of sixteenth century with contemporary Germany or Italy or France or Spain will yield detailed proof that for a Totalitarian foray into the liberty slowly won and wrought by Christ's spirit no country was so ripe as was England. Almost everything in Church and State, in Churchmen and Statesmen, in the debts of the Crown to the Papacy and of the Papacy to the Crown made many of the first decisive lines of cleavage indistinguishable. That practically an entire Hierarchy failed to detect a heresy cannot wholly be attributed to their wickedness of life, or even to the weakness of their will. There are certain occasions of sin so strong that only the heroic will can overcome.

Master of these circumstances and with a large, detailed

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plan unstayed by conscientiousness was the colossal figure of Cromwell. This student of Machiavelli was more fortunate than his master in belonging to a happy island, now Tudor-governed, where all and more than all the principles of *Il Principe* could be put into operation. If money was needed this quondam house-and-land-agent could confiscate the wealth of the richest Church in Christendom. If force was needed, Henry Tudor had no hesitations on the grounds of kindred, friendship or loyal service. If ecclesiastical sanction was needed, the Divine Right of Kings, eked out by hanging and quartering, had given Cromwell a non-resisting or consenting Hierarchy.

There is a phrase in an ambassadorial despatch from England in those years. He writes to his royal master that "everything here is now Sedition." Already in the sixteenth century we have the totalitarian dogma that can make even trivial acts—or even silence—an act of counter-revolution or sedition.

If against this subtle yet brutal Machiavellianism of Henry and Cromwell the gaunt, immovable Yorkshireman stood up in the name of Jesus, he stood up no less in the name of human freedom. Perhaps one of the greatest pages in the history of England records the names of her children who suffered for freedom's sake. But none of those names has a greater title to remembrance than that of John Fisher.

Two special titles will one day win him a unique place amongst the champions of human liberty.

First when the totalitarian attack was first delivered under circumstances that made it irresistible because almost undistinguishable, it was the genius of Fisher to detect and oppose it. We of Fisher's faith know the secret source of wisdom which gave him "sight beyond the smoke."

Secondly, he fought it; he died fighting it. Yet unlike the man he was fighting, he always fought fair. John Fisher never "fouled" his adversaries. But though, for a moment, they won on a foul, he like a true sportsman never gave in "till the bell rang."

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Some days ago my anguish at reading that Soviet Russia

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had now authorized the death-sentence for children over twelve even for stealing, made me write to several prominent and influential men and women politicians. Before me as I write is the despairing letter of one of the most prominent whose sincerity is everywhere accepted and whose advocacy of Russia was public. He writes:

It is difficult to know what anybody can do about the atrocities which are being committed in nearly all the dictatorships to-day, except pray. They are now quite impervious to foreign opinion.

When one travels abroad one becomes more and more grateful that one lives in England.

I am not sure that our main task will not be *to prevent liberty* and the very large measure of social reform already accomplished in this country *from being swept away*.

An example of the liberty of the subject still existing in this country may well form a contrast with the totalitarian ideals which Fisher quietly but doggedly fought till the Tower axe put an end to his game. A man who was convicted of murder though he had pleaded "accidental death," successfully appealed to the House of Lords. He was fortunate in having his appeal presented by a Catholic advocate. And the Law Lords decided that even when a prisoner confessed to having caused death, it was not his duty to prove that the death was accidental. On the contrary it was the duty of the Crown to prove that the death was deliberate.

If this liberty of the subject is now a prized feature in our national life, we must not forget that it is a prize stubbornly won from an abortive Tudor totalitarianism by a group of dogged inhabitants of these islands. Amongst that group of our fellow countrymen the honours must be given to our fellow Catholics. And amongst the group of fellow Catholics the foremost place must be given to the fearless leader whose Beverley Blue by the stroke of the Tudor axe became for all time Beverley Scarlet.

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