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An article I wrote on the 'Date of Birth of Thomas More' was published in the December 2010 issue of *Moreana*.¹ I am grateful to the Editor who, in introducing that issue, wrote that the Article 'may well have settled once and for all the much debated question of the actual date of Thomas More's birth'. I am, however, still more grateful to Martin Wood, author of *The Family and Descendants of St Thomas More*,² for pointing out an error in the text. This – though not altering the conclusion – requires acknowledgement and rectification lest readers be led astray by the original error.

On the advice of the Editor, I take the opportunity not simply to make the correction, but further to write a short piece containing the gist of the argument such that it may stand on its own without repetition of all the original references. My retraction, in fact, gives me the opportunity to emphasise the issues involved and to expand on the essential argument.

* * *

As is well known, Sir John More, father of Thomas More, wrote up a Latin record of the date of his marriage to Agnes Granger and of the dates of birth of their six children. This record is now to be found in MS O.2.21 of Trinity College, Cambridge. The text of the *memoranda* was discovered in 1868 by William Aldis Wright, then Librarian of Trinity College. He published a transcription of the *memoranda* which is reproduced and analysed in the aforesaid Article in *Moreana*, December 2010, and in prior publications such as Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore*, edited by Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock, and published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press in 1932, reprinted in 1963.

¹ *Moreana*, Vol. 47, Nos. 181-182, p.109-128.

² Gracewing, Leominster, 2008.

The entry for Thomas More reads:

Memorandum quod die veneris proximo post Festum purificationis beate Marie virginis videlicet septimo die Februarij inter horam secundam et horam terciam in Mane natus fuit Thomas More filius Johannis More Gent. Anno Regni Regis Edwardi quarti post conquestum Anglie decimo septimo.

The seventeenth regnal year of Edward IV ran from 4 March 1477 to 3 March 1478, and therefore the date to which reference is made in the memorandum is 7 February 1478. Wright was aware that 7 February 1478 was not a Friday but rather a Saturday. The memorandum stated, however, that Thomas More was born between two and three in the morning. Therefore, Wright suggested that 'the confusion is obvious and natural'. The same conclusion was accepted by T.E. Bridgett in 1891 and by W.H. Hutton in 1895.³ Bridgett, the first modern biographer of More, relates Wright's discovery and explains that 'in the year 1478, 7th February was Saturday; but by a natural confusion it has been set down as Friday, since the birth took place soon after midnight'.⁴ This has been the common acceptance of the data contained in the memorandum: namely, that More was born overnight from Friday 6 February to Saturday 7 February 1478.

Some, however, have not accepted that simple explanation. In my original article the opinions of most recent scholars are rehearsed and there is no need to review them all here. The most prominent objections, however, are those advanced by Francis Morgan Nichols and Germain Marc'hadour who favoured Friday 7 February 1477, and that of R.W. Chambers who – after first siding with 7 February 1477 – finally proposed Friday 6 February 1478.

Chambers favoured Friday 6 February realising that the words referring to 7 February in the memorandum – italicised above – were in fact inserted between the lines, and suggesting that they were a later addition.⁵ Marc'hadour, however, held that, although written between the lines, they

³ William Holden Hutton, *Sir Thomas More*, 2nd edn, London, 1900, p.4.

⁴ T.E. Bridgett, *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More*, London, 1891, p.2; and its fourth edition, *Life and Writings of Blessed Thomas More*, 1913, p.2.

⁵ Chambers published also a transliteration of Entries in MS O. 2, 21, Trinity College, Cambridge as an Appendix to his book, *The Place of Saint Thomas More in English Literature and History*, London, 1937, p.123-124. He, however, omitted Sir John's interlinear words *videlicet septimo die Februarij* explaining his omission in a note favouring 6 February 1478.

do seem to have been added immediately after the rest of the paragraph, and need not be considered a mistake by Sir John.

In 1897, and once again in 1918, Nichols favoured the year 1477, taking into account mainly references in the correspondence of Erasmus. P.S. Allen, in editing the first extant letter from Erasmus to More agreed with Nichols and wrote: 'Mr Nichols (*Proc. Soc. Antiquaries*, 1897, p. 321) has altered the date of More's birth to 1477, holding that the correction required in the manuscript discovered by Mr Aldis Wright (*Notes and Queries*, 17 Oct 1868, p.365-366, and Seebohm, *Oxford Reformers*, App. C) may be more easily made in the year-date than, as Mr Wright makes it, in the day of the week. [...] By a precisely similar change the month-date may be corrected into *sexto*, which would yield 6 Feb. 1478; but the further considerations adduced by Mr Nichols in favour of 1477 seem to make that year more probable.'⁶ Nonetheless, R.W. Chambers in his 'Historical Notes' to Hitchcock's edition of Thomas More's *Life* by Harpsfield found Nichols' arguments inconclusive: words of Erasmus can in fact be found to support either an earlier or a later date.⁷

The controversy was considered carefully by the editors of the three biographies of Sir Thomas More prepared for the *Early English Text Society*: that by Harpsfield published in 1932, edited by Hitchcock with 'Historical Notes' by Chambers; that by Roper published in 1935, edited and with 'Historical Notes' by Hitchcock; and finally that by Ro:Ba: published in 1950, edited by Hitchcock (who died in 1942) and P.E. Hallett, with 'Historical Notes' prepared by Hallett, and 'Additional Notes and Appendices' by A.W. Reed. The 'Historical Notes' provided for the latter two *Lives* reference those published earlier so that Hallett in the last was fully aware of Chambers' earlier objections in siding with Bridgett in favour of 7 February 1478. Hallett, however, wrote that Chambers suggested 7 February 1477, while in fact Chambers' opinion of 1931 changed by 1935 when he supported 6 February 1478. Probably Hallett, who died in 1948, wrote his notes at a much earlier date and they were not updated before posthumous publication in 1950. Chambers himself had died on 23 April 1942 and had had no chance to revise Hallett's notes. Anyhow, it is worth emphasising that, by the middle of the twentieth century, the end result of

⁶ *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Rotterdami*, ed. P. S. Allen, Oxford, vol. I, 1906, Introduction to Ep. 114.

⁷ Nicholas Harpsfield, *Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock, 'Historical Notes' p.300.

the combined research of a set of formidable contributors to the modern study of Thomas More – T.E. Bridgett (1829-1899), W.H. Hutton (1857-1952), E.W. Hitchcock (1886-1942), R.W. Chambers (1874-1942), and P.E. Hallett (1884-1948) – was that Thomas More was born on 7 February 1478.

In 1963⁸ and again in 1977⁹ Germain Marc'hadour came out in favour of Friday 7 February 1477 mainly because of the memorandum's reference to the Feast of the Purification: 7 February 1478 was the Saturday after Ash Wednesday. Marc'hadour thought it was strange to make use of the Feast of the Purification as a landmark and considered Ash Wednesday a far more logical point of reference. Logic, however, does not enter into it, and the prominence of the Feast of the Purification in English historical context – in particular with reference to Lincoln's Inn – is explained below.

The evidence from the Family Portrait

Most of those who have accepted Wright's account of the date of birth of Thomas More have looked at the ages written in on Holbein's preparatory sketch for the portrait of *Thomas More and Members of his Family*. The first to do so was Frederic Seebohm on 31 October 1868 in reply to Wright's account of his discovery of the *memoranda*. Before considering Seebohm's argumentation it is necessary to focus on that sketch. The drawing must be dated between Holbein's arrival in England in 1526 and his departure for Basel in the summer of 1528. Certainly he was in England by 18 December 1526, when More wrote to Erasmus acknowledging the arrival of the painter. The reference in the letter – 'Your painter friend, my dear Erasmus, is a wonderful artist. I fear he will not find English soil as rich and fertile as he hoped. But I shall do my best to make sure it is not completely barren.'¹⁰ – seems to imply that More had not yet commissioned the portrait from Holbein but that he intended to do so soon afterwards. Holbein would then have had to draw the small sketch and the individual portraits in preparation for painting the full-sized Family portrait. It is not unreasonable to place all this work in 1527, not least because the painted portrait of Thomas More now in the Frick collection has the inscription '1527'. The ages of the sitters are written on the sketch: Thomas More was in his 50th year; Anne Cresacre in her 15th year, and so on. Having

⁸ *L'Univers de Thomas More*, 1963, p.34-41.

⁹ *Moreana*, No. 53, p.7.

¹⁰ *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 12, Ep. 1770, lines 77-79.

accepted that Thomas More was born on 7 February 1478, Seebohm points out that the sketch would have been drawn after 7 February 1527. For Anne Cresacre, Seebohm considers first the age given on the plaque that was on her tombstone and is now fixed to the north wall of the Church of St Peter at Barnborough, near Doncaster in the County of York, which reads

*decessit secundo die Decembris anno aetatis suae LXVII anno Domini
MCCCCCLXXVII*¹¹

That is, her 66th birthday took place before 2 December 1577, and she was born between 2 December 1510 and 2 December 1511. Chambers goes further; he considers the inscription on the painting of *Thomas More His Family and His Hescendants*, which was at some stage at Burford Priory, and now is at the National Portrait Gallery, London. The inscription as reproduced by Joseph Hunter in his 1828 edition of *The Life of Sir Thomas More* by Cresacre More reads:

*Quae Anna nata fuit apud Baronburgh Hall anno 3 H. 8 [22 April 1511 to 21
April 1512].*¹²

This is where I was mistaken in my article of December 2010. On the sketch it is written that Anne Cresacre was in her 15th year, and I stated wrongly that her 15th birthday was on 22 April 1527. I should have written – paraphrasing R.W. Chambers – that she ‘had passed out of her fifteenth year by 22 April 1527’.¹³ The inscriptions on the drawing, therefore, should be dated prior to 22 April 1527; or, more precisely, the ages given there correspond to a scene – real or artistically composed – set between 18 December 1526 (the date of Thomas More’s letter to Erasmus mentioning the arrival of Holbein) and 22 April 1527.

In the *Yorkshire Star Chamber Proceedings* the case of Rokeby *versus* Constable¹⁴ deals with the forcible abduction of Anne Cresacre from the Manor House at Bishop Burton. There it is said that on 14 April of the 15th year of Henry VIII [22 April 1523 – 21 April 1524], Anne was ‘within the age

¹¹ The inscription is reproduced in Joseph Hunter, *Deanery of Doncaster*, vol. 1, 1828, p.374; and in Thomas Allen, *A New and Complete History of the County of York*, London, 1831, vol. 3, p.168.

¹² Appendix IV, p.362.

¹³ Chambers, *Thomas More* (printing of 1976), p.200.

¹⁴ *Yorkshire Star Chamber Proceedings*, vol. IV, being part of the *Record Series*, vol. LXX, published by the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1926, Case 16, p.28-36.

of 12 years'. That agrees with being in her 15th year three years later as stated in the sketch of 1527.

After considering the age of Anne Cresacre, Seebohm turns to that of Margaret, More's eldest daughter. In the sketch it is written that she was in her 22nd year. In the Preface to Margaret's translation of Erasmus' *Precatio Dominica* dated 1 October 1524, it is said that Margaret was then 19. Therefore it has been assumed that Margaret was born before 1 October 1505. This has provided the crucial argument for dating the marriage of Thomas More and Jane Colt no later than January 1505.¹⁵ This dating coincides with that given on the Burford picture which states that More's marriage took place in 20 Henry VII [22 August 1504 – 21 August 1505].¹⁶ That Margaret was in her 22nd year when the sketch was made is coherent with dating the sketch between 7 February and 22 April 1527.

In conclusion, accepting 7 February 1478 as the date of birth of Thomas More fits with the evidence we have of dates of birth for Anne Cresacre and Margaret. This, however, is not conclusive evidence for his date of birth because the dates we have for Anne Cresacre and Margaret leave open the possibility of the sketch having been drawn either before or after 7 February 1527. The opinions of Stanley Morison and J.B. Trapp, based on their consideration of the order of Holbein's production, suggest however that it is unlikely that the family sketch was drawn before February 1527 and favour therefore the memorandum indicating that More was born in 1478. At this stage two points need to be made. *First*, the references to the age of Anne Cresacre from the plaque at St Peter's Church at Barmborough and from the Yorkshire Star Chamber proceedings, and to the age of Margaret from the Preface to the translation of *Precatio Dominica*, together with the letter from Thomas More to Erasmus dated 18 December 1526, imply that the sketch was made between that December 1526 and 22 April 1527, but they do not prove the date of birth of More. *Second*, although – following Seebohm and Chambers – reference has been made to the text on the Burford picture, that text must be treated with caution. It is no longer fully legible on the painting and the transcription by Hunter in 1828 is unreliable. It states that Thomas More was born in 1480, which is the

¹⁵ Roper, *Life of Sir Thomas Moore*, ed. Hitchcock for the Early English Text Society, 1935, –Historical Notes, p.109; E.E. Reynolds, *Margaret Roper*, London, 1960, p.1.

¹⁶ John Guy, *A Daughter's Love*, 2008, p.89-90, expands the discussion on the date of marriage of Thomas More placing it just before Advent Sunday, 1 December 1504, or in mid-January after 13 January 1505, the octave of Epiphany.

date given by Cresacre More in his biography of More¹⁷ and that was indeed the accepted date before the discovery of Sir John's memoranda in 1868. Hunter hinted at this incongruity when he headed that transcript with the words: 'Copy of the inscriptions on the painting of the More family, now at Burford-Priory, the seat of --- Lenthall, Esq. as far as they can be recovered'.¹⁸ In any case, the painting is dated 1593; it is by no means a contemporary schedule of dates of birth for Thomas More and his family. It is necessary to return to the essential source, namely the detailed account of Sir John More.

The Friday after the Feast of the Purification

The reference to the Feast of the Purification in the memorandum seems to be Marc'hadour's fundamental objection to acceptance of a date in 1478. In my earlier article detailed consideration was given to this matter, including a chart with relevant portions of the calendar for 1477 and 1478. It may be worth, however, expanding a little on that study here.

The Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary was a great feast, marking the end of the extended Christmas season. Some liturgical hymns were intended to be sung precisely from Christmas to the Purification. The *Alma Redemptoris Mater* has an antiphon 'for Advent' (*Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae*) and another to be said 'from Christmas to the Feast of the Purification' (*Post partum Virgo inviolata permansisti*). The *Ave Regina caelorum* was said from after the Purification until Wednesday in Holy Week. Equally, of the Votive Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the *Sarum use* in force in much of England up to 1549, the first scheduled was 'From Advent to Christmas', the second 'On Christmas Day until the Purification', the third 'From the Purification to Advent'.

Such liturgical indications had an impact on the legal and civil calendars. For instance, in a memorandum attributed to Richard III's reign but which may belong to the first year of Henry VII it is stated that certain officers were to be appointed to collect money for the Crown and that 'all auditors, each year, between Candlemas and Palm Sunday should make declaration of all the livelihood in their charge'.¹⁹ For the relevance of the Feast of the Purification as a landmark in legal chronology see Cheney (ed.),

¹⁷ Cresacre More, *The Life of Thomas More*, ed. Hunter, 1828, p.14.

¹⁸ Cresacre More, *The Life of Thomas More*, ed. Hunter, 1828, p.361.

¹⁹ M.H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, London, 1997, p.456.

Handbook of Dates for Students of English History, Royal Historical Society, London, 1945, 'The Law Terms', p. 65-67.

In fact, as the final feast associated with the Christmas season, 2 February was a day of important revels at Lincoln's Inn known as the Post Revels. The performance of dramas and music played an important part in the entertainments for it and the attendance of members seems to have been compulsory. It is curious to note that next to the entry of Thomas More's admission to Lincoln's Inn, a reference to the Feast of the Purification is made. The record of More's admission, as is well known, appears in the Black Book, A1a2, at the bottom of folio 34v, and it reads:

*Thomas More admissus est in Societatem xij die Februarii anno supradicto
[11 H. VII = 1496] et pardonatur ei quatuor vacationes ad instanciam Johannis
More patris sui.*

Immediately following this entry, also at the bottom of fo. 34v, there is the admission on the same day, also at John More's instance, of Richard Stafferton. The next entry, at the top fo. 35r, reads:

John Cryspe was admitted on the Friday before the Purification, 11 H. VII, and pardoned all vacations at the instance of John Roper, for which he paid 26s. 8d.

This new reference to the Purification stands out, and it may be readily observed by the reader of the whole volume that it recurs on many other occasions: John Stafford made a payment on the Sunday after the Purification, 11 Henry VI [1433], Book I, fo. 18; officers were elected on the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 9 Henry VIII [1518], Book III, fo. 74; payments were received on the Tuesday after the Purification (same folio); and so on.

The key is given in Book I, part I, fo. 20:

Be hit in myde that in the Feast off Saynt Arkenewold, the IXthe yere off Kyng Harry the vjte [1431], it is accorded by all the felwschip that ther shall be iiij revels in the yeere and no mo, that is to sayyng, in the fest off All Halowen ...; and in the fest off Seint Arkenewold another ... the iijde in the fest off Purification off oure Lady to wych all remenaunt schall be contributorie sayyng Seint Peter and Seint Thomas men. The Ferthe [fourth] on Midsomer Day, to wych sall be contributorie Seynt Peter and Seint Thomas men.

From that point onwards references to the Purification are to be found everywhere: Contributions are to be made on Candlemas, fo. 31; and on the

octave of the Purification of the Blessed Mary, 18 Henry VI [1440], fo. 39; Robert Willendale, one of the Governors, paid 40s for the minstrels at Christmas and the Purification, fo. 91; Breto is admitted on the Sunday after the Purification, 32 Henry VI [1454]; Edmund Blake was admitted on condition that he paid yearly in summer, to wit, within the octave of St John the Baptist, a buck, and within the octave of the Purification a doe, fo. 93; John Layton admitted in Michaelmas Term and pardoned all vacations and admitted to repasts at his own pleasure, for which concession he shall pay at the feast of Purification next, a hogshead of red Gascon wine; in the First week after the Purification, 1 Edw IV [1462], William Elyot was admitted into the Society.

The next entry, fo. 157 [1468-69] is especially interesting because it implies that the Feast of the Purification gives a name to the whole week. It reads:

It was agreed and established by all the Fellows ... that every Fellow living within the City of London or the suburbs of the same, or in the town in Westminster ... may for the future be in commons in those weeks in which fall the feasts of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Ascension of our Lord, the Nativity of S. John the Baptist, and All Saints, and at repasts in the same weeks, ...

That is, reference to the Feast of the Purification was made all through the week in which the feast fell, whether the date was before or after the feast and even if it was a Sunday. This was the practice at Lincoln's Inn, and it was understandably followed by Sir John who was at the time a member of the Inn.²⁰

Though the case for Lincoln's Inn is especially well documented, the reference to the Feast of the Purification was common elsewhere. Robert Pearce, for instance, points out that Revels were kept generally in the houses of the nobility and in other great houses and that Christmas celebrations ran from Allhallows-eve to Candlemas-day; and curiously the last of the Revels known to have been observed in the Inns of Court took place in Inner Temple Hall on the 2 February 1733.²¹

* * *

²⁰ Cf. Hastings, 'The Ancestry of Sir Thomas More' in *The Guildhall Miscellany*, July 1961, p.47-62.

²¹ Robert Pearce, *A History of the Inns of Court and Chancery*, London, 1848, p.114 and 229.

My aforesaid article considers lastly the internal evidence of the whole schedule of memoranda written by Sir John, and concludes that 'it is most unlikely that Sir John would have made a mistake in stating the year; among other reasons, because year after year he would have seen such a mistake and would have corrected it if need be. We are not dealing here with an isolated piece of information about someone whose date of birth was unrecorded. We are dealing with a carefully drawn family record of seven entries written by a lawyer.'

'As for the date, it is very understandable that Sir John should have in mind the Friday after the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is when the birth pangs would have started and then added the precise date, 7 February, when he realised that the birth took place after it was already morning. As suggested by Marc'hadour, the words between the lines "need not be constructed as a later intervention, they may have been inserted as an immediate attempt at greater precision".'

There is no need to mistrust the accuracy of Sir John's statement: Thomas More was born on the night between the Friday after the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Saturday, that is, early in the morning of 7 February 1478.²²

²² Perhaps a last-but-one footnote is called for. If the conclusion is so obvious why then has there been such a variety of opinions about the matter? The question has been answered in this article, but in synthesis:

- 1868: Wright found the MS and discussed it with other scholars aware of the difficulty that the memorandum involved. They concluded that the statement of Sir John should be taken as trustworthy and everyone accepted 7 February 1478.
- 1897-1950: That date, however, was challenged by Nichols, and a number of scholars considered the matter again in detail. These included Bridgett, Hutton, Hitchcock, Allen, Reed, Chambers, Hallett, and others, all specialists in their field. By 1950 the conclusion of that study agreed with the previous accepted date, 7 February 1478; but before that final assessment was published in Hallett's *Historical Notes* to the EETS edition of Ro:Ba: Chambers had favoured 6 February 1478 in his 1935 biography, *Thomas More*. Had he not died before 1950 he would probably have sided with his peers. Chambers's *Thomas More* stood as the standard biography from 1935 until the early 1970s; his suggestion of 6 February 1478 had therefore a great number of followers, and even today it is accepted by some, cf. Caroline M. Barron, 'The making of a London citizen', *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, 2011, p.7, and extensive note 35.
- In 1963, however, Marc'hadour published his 586-page chronology of Thomas More, and although a lot has been written since then, his *L'Univers de Thomas More* remains a required point of reference. The thesis he put forward there in favour of 7 February 1477 was taken up by many, particularly by subscribers to *Moreana*; indeed, as he reported in the journal in March 1977, it was considered that 'the *Amici Thomae Mori* had chosen 1977 as the correct date to celebrate More's quinquennial.

Once again, I am grateful for the correction received from Martin Wood who – pointing out my error with regard to the date of birth of Anne Cresacre – has given me an opportunity to expand on the practice of dating, common at Lincoln’s Inn at the time, with reference to the Feast of the Purification.²³

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- The first sentence of Richard Marius’s *Thomas More* published in 1984 is that ‘Thomas More was born early in the morning of February 7, 1478’ and later in the same first chapter he made reference to Sir John’s *memoranda* and gave the argument explaining the apparent discrepancy in John More’s account: probably like most people he considered a new day as beginning at dawn and thought of his son as being born on Friday night, in the realisation that he had been born after midnight he added the date February 7. In his ‘Introduction’ Marius, however, criticised Chambers’s approach and wrote that his own book sought ‘to find the More of history buried under the pyramid of praise heaped over his name in recent times’.

- It is understandable, therefore, that from then on most authors followed either Chambers’s 6 February 1478; or Marc’hadour/*Moreana/Amici Thomae Mori* 6 7 February 1477; or again the original date given by Wright-Seebohm from the *memoranda* 6 7 February 1478; or settled for reporting on the three positions, as is the case with Seymour Baker House’s entry ‘Thomas More’ in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

²³ I must, of course, acknowledge those who contributed to my original article, Dr Esther Mitjans (University of Barcelona), Adam C. Green, Assistant Archivist at Trinity College, Cambridge, and Josephine Hutchings, Archivist of Lincoln’s Inn, London. The last-mentioned was of invaluable help in my research into the *Black Books of Lincoln’s Inn* for this article. I have to add my gratitude to the Archivist of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society (Leeds), and the Parish Administrator of St Peter’s Church, Bamborough. And I reiterate my thanks to Dr Andrew Hegarty, Director of the Thomas More Institute (London), and Professor Gerard Wegemer, Director of the Centre for Thomas More Studies (University of Dallas).

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