

Utopia by Thomas More (1478-1535)

Post by Olive Morrin, Special Collections and Archives



Thomas More's seminal work *Utopia* was first published five hundred years ago in 1516 in Leuven, Belgium. *Utopia* depicts a fictional island where all the inhabitants share a common culture and live a simple shared lifestyle.

Canon Thomas Finan, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth donated his collection of books to the library in 2010 which included many books relating to Thomas More. Included in his collection is Thomas More's *Utopia* which is held in Special Collections. It was reprinted in 1899 from the 2nd and revised edition of 1556.

Although written in Latin the word "utopia" comes from a Greek expression meaning "no place". In present day parlance it has come to mean according to the Oxford Dictionary as "an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect".

In this book More sets out what he considers to be an ideal society. Firstly there would be no private property and goods would be stored in warehouses where the inhabitants would request what they needed. The Utopian state would be a welfare state with free hospitals, euthanasia is permitted, priests are allowed to marry, divorce is permitted, premarital sex is forbidden as is adultery. Slavery is allowed – each household is allowed two slaves. Slaves either come from other countries or citizens may become slaves as a means of punishment. There would be no locks on doors. Agriculture would be the most important job with men and women doing the same work but also a person must learn a trade and all able-bodied people must work. People should wear the same type of simple clothes. Other elements of the Utopian state were communal dining halls with the job of feeding the inhabitants rotated among the households. Most religions are tolerated, only atheism is despised but allowed, as atheists do not believe in an afterlife and they may be tempted to break the law. Gambling, hunting, makeup and astrology are all discouraged in Utopia and Utopians do not like to engage in war. Privacy is not a freedom in Utopia and private gatherings are not allowed as men should be in full view of each other so they do not behave badly.

Utopia poses for some, contradictions between the ideals expounded in *Utopia* and Thomas More's own public life. In *Utopia* issues such as divorce, euthanasia, married and female priests are accepted. These issues would have been alien to More as he was a devout Catholic and opposed Henry VIII plans to divorce Catherine of Aragon and the Reformation which in the end lead to his execution. In 1935 he was canonized as a martyr for his defence of the Catholic Church. In *Utopia* he advocated religious toleration but as Lord Chancellor of England it is alleged from many sources that he engaged in the persecution of protestants.

More's vision of equality and communalism in *Utopia* could be considered a precursor to socialism and communism which emerged centuries later most notably through Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*. It does appear from More's *Utopia* that individualism should succumb to the overall interests of the community.

It probably should be remembered that *Utopia* was a fantasy and a work of fiction and probably did not reflect More's own viewpoints as he dealt with the realpolitik of his day. The title of Fred Zimmerman's film about Thomas More "A man for all seasons" maybe encapsulates the ambiguities of *Utopia* and the mindset of Thomas More in his private and public life.

References:

Wikipedia

Thomas More: a short biography by James McConica

Sir Thomas More: biography, facts and information: <https://englishhistory.net/tudor/citizens/sir-thomas-more/>