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Book Reviews

Edited Trevor Curnow

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Classic review

Thomas More (George M. Logan and Robert M Adams eds)

***Utopia* (revised edition)**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 pp. xxxvii + 134

ISBN: 052152403 (pb) \$10/£7.95, 0521819253 (hb) \$30/£22.50

Having taught a course on utopian thought for several years, I have probably read Thomas More's *Utopia* more often than most people. Since the book has the unusual distinction of having given its name to a whole genre of philosophical literature, there seems little point in disputing its classic status. And yet I have to confess that, unlike what one is perhaps supposed to find with classics, this book does not improve with re-reading. To its original sixteenth century audience it may indeed have appeared novel, bold and revolutionary, but it is difficult to experience it that way today. It is both less philosophical than, say, Plato's *Republic* and less satisfying as a work of fiction than, say, H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia*.

For those unfamiliar with its contents, it is a curious mixture of serious blueprint and tongue-in-cheek narrative. Indisputably sincere social ideals are found mixed with schoolboyish humour (for example, the main character's surname, Hythloday, means 'purveyor of nonsense'). The book's very title could mean either 'good place' or 'nowhere' (or both). This much-discussed ambivalence gives the book a certain fascination but, as with many utopian works, its descriptive dimension frequently borders on the tedious. Political platforms, however well disguised, rarely make for compelling reading.

More than that, each group of students to whom I have introduced the work generally finds the ideal society depicted within it unattractive if not outright repellent. While there may be a grudging acknowledgement of its egalitarian motives, most react strongly against what is perceived to be its extreme communitarianism. More's ideal society is one in which privacy and individualism count for little. Its one technological innovation, automatic doors fitted to houses, is designed not so much to facilitate entry as to make it impossible to prevent it. Curiously, perhaps, in a society where denims and baseball caps are ubiquitous, there tends to be a distinct dislike of its insistence on uniformity. But a chosen uniformity is perceived very differently from an enforced one. And students are rarely impressed by a society in which one is obliged to work for six hours each day.

However, these faults, if such they are, are scarcely to be attributed to More. The passage of half a millennium is bound to make a difference. Perhaps more than most philosophical literature, utopian works have to be understood in the context of their own times. This is where the value of good introductions and helpful annotations comes in, and this edition is well-provided with both. For example, when More mentions that the Utopians practised cremation, you are reminded that this was certainly not the custom in Tudor England. What might otherwise be passed over as a trivial detail is instead revealed to be a radical innovation.

Some books tend to be more read about than read, and *Utopia* is perhaps one of them. But its modest scale and narrative style make a first-hand acquaintance with it undemanding. It won't change your life, but not many books do.

Trevor Curnow