

## In Search of Utopia

On the Trail of the Most Influential Book Ever Published in the Low Countries

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[ D E R E K B L Y T H ]

It was raining as I turned into Eiermarkt. I was looking for a house called De Biecorf, the Beehive, where Pieter Gillis lived in the early sixteenth century. But the street didn't look too promising, with a big car park on one side and the back of a shopping centre on the other. Then I noticed a narrow passage leading into a quiet courtyard surrounded by older houses. High on a wall, hidden from the street, a beehive was carved on a stone.

Here was the evidence I needed. In old books on Antwerp, Pieter Gillis is said to have lived in a tall house on the Grote Markt called De Spiegel. But that is apparently a case of mistaken identity, according to an academic paper published in 1988. Someone else with a similar name lived in De Spiegel, but the Gillis I wanted lived in De Biecorf, on a square then called Oude Veemarkt.

I had hoped there might be a plaque. Or something at least. But there was no mention of Gillis. Nothing to remind people that, some five centuries ago, Thomas More's Utopia was conceived on this spot.

Pieter Gillis was employed as state secretary of Antwerp when he met the English lawyer Thomas More in 1515. More had been sent to Bruges on a diplomatic mission on behalf of King Henry VIII. He spent four months engaged in difficult negotiations on wool imports, like British officials who now take the Eurostar to Brussels to argue over the fine points of EU regulations. During a break in the proceedings, More managed to escape to Antwerp for a few days.

He was put in touch with Pieter Gillis through their mutual friend Desiderius Erasmus. More possibly stayed with Gillis in the house on Eiermarkt. He began Utopia with a warm description of the Antwerp official. 'I do not know if there be anywhere to be found a more learned and a better bred young man,' he wrote. 'There is not perhaps above one or two anywhere to be found that are in all respects so perfect a friend.'

This friendship led to the publication in 1516 of a small book that was to have a huge impact on the history of Western thought. It really deserved a plaque to mark the location.



Thomas Morus, *Libellus de ... insula Utopia*, Leuven, Dirk Martens, 1516, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels

## A work of genius

In December 1516, thanks to help from Erasmus, the first edition of Thomas More's *Utopia* came off Dirk Martens's presses in the university town of Leuven. Originally published in Latin, the fable begins in Antwerp, where More bumps into Gillis on his way from the Cathedral. Gillis introduces More to an old Portuguese seaman called Raphael Hythlodæus who has recently returned from a four-year stay on the island of Utopia.

Raphael reveals the existence of an ideal society on an island on the other side of the world where private property is abolished, men and women are treated equally and different religions are allowed to exist.

More's *Utopia* was an enormously disruptive book that raised the possibility of an orderly human society where life could be very different from the brutal reality of early sixteenth-century Europe.

The idea of Utopia would change the structure of European thinking for more than 500 years. It was the word that Robert Schuman used in a 1949 speech in Strasbourg when he was launching the idea of a united Europe.

The initial aim of the European Community (as it was then called) was to bring steel and coal production in France and Germany under the control of a single authority, so that the raw materials of war were taken out of the hands of the nation states. But Schuman was already thinking of something much more visionary. 'We are carrying out a great experiment, the fulfillment of the same recurrent dream that for ten centuries has revisited the peoples of Europe: creating between them an end to war and guaranteeing an eternal peace.'

Schuman mentioned some of the past experiments in unification that had failed to work for one reason or another. 'The Roman Church of the Middle Ages failed finally in its attempts that were inspired by humane and human preoccupations.' Then he included a gentle dig at the nation that had recently caused the deaths of millions. 'Another idea, that of a world empire constituted under the auspices of German emperors was less disinterested; it already relied on the unacceptable pretensions of a "Führertum" whose "charms" we have all experienced.'

He then referred to some of the great European thinkers such as Dante and Erasmus who had provided the framework for 'systems that were both ingenious and generous.' Lastly, he singled out the one system that particularly appealed to him. 'The title of one of these systems became the synonym of all that is impractical: *Utopia*, itself a work of genius, written by Thomas More, the Chancellor of Henry VIII, King of England.'

When the French foreign minister went on to deliver the Schuman Declaration in 1950, the word Utopia had vanished from the text. It was perhaps too impractical for the founding fathers of Europe.

Map of Antwerp, detail,  
*Virgilius Boloniensis*, 1565,  
Plantin Moretus Museum,  
Antwerp







Hans Holbein the Younger (after),  
*Portrait of Thomas More*, 1527  
(*The Bedford Version*), Oil on oak panel,  
74.9 x 58.4 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London

## The idea of friendship

A few months later, the search for Utopia took me to London. I was looking for the street where Thomas More was living when he completed *Utopia*. A research assistant at the London Museum had responded to my query with a detailed description of More's house.

'More lived in The Barge, in Bucklersbury, in the parish of St Stephen Walbrook', she wrote. 'It is possible that the Bucklersbury garden with pergola, depicted on the Agas map and described by Stow, was part of the More estate. Stow says it was so called because of the sign of the "Olde Barge" hung out there, and that it was a common report that when the Walbrook was open, barges were rowed out of the Thames and towed up here, so that the place has ever since been called the "Olde barge".'

Later that day, I found Bucklersbury buried away among the shiny glass skyscrapers of London's financial district. But nothing has survived of the manor house that once stood on the banks of the River Walbrook.

Thomas More was living here when he met Erasmus for the first time in the summer of 1499. He invited the Dutch scholar to walk out to Eltham, south of London, where the children of King Henry VII (including the future Henry VIII) were being educated.



Quinten Massys, *Portrait of Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 1517, Oil on panel, transferred to canvas, 59 x 47 cm, Palazzo Barberini, Rome

This marked the beginning of a deep friendship that lasted more than thirty years. In a letter to a friend, Erasmus wrote: 'What has nature ever created more gentle, more sweet, more happy than Thomas More?'

It was while staying in the house on Bucklersbury that Erasmus wrote *Encomium Moriae, In Praise of Folly*, which was also, as the Latin title hinted at, In Praise of More. Written in the space of a week, the essay gently mocked the Catholic Church while raising the possibility of a less corrupt alternative.

More was still living in this house when he returned from Antwerp in 1515 to complete his own little book. Edited by Erasmus and dedicated to Pieter Gillis, *Utopia* was first published in the winter of 1516.

I learned later that the financial company Bloomberg was building its European headquarters on the site of More's Bucklersbury estate. Large panels attached to the barrier illustrated Roman remains found during the construction work. But there was no mention of Thomas More. Not a word about Erasmus. Nothing to recall that two of the most important works of northern European literature were written on this spot.

### **In praise of friendship**

*Utopia* was a truly European project, the product of deep ties of friendship between three humanists – Dutch, Flemish and English. One year after the book was published, Erasmus and Gillis decided to send portraits of themselves to



## The Lost Utopia

In 1623, Thomas More moved from the Old Barge to a new country house near the river in Chelsea. Curious to see what if anything remained of the house, I took the underground to Sloane Square and walked down to the river.

The house has vanished, but a statue of Thomas More stands outside Chelsea Old Church, placed there in 1969. Written on the stone base were the words Statesman, Scholar and Saint. But no one had thought to add that he was the author of *Utopia*.

The church was hit by a bomb in 1941, killing four firemen, but the chapel built by More miraculously survived. Inside is the tomb that More built for his first wife Jane in 1528. He took the opportunity to compose his own epitaph, which he sent to his old friend Erasmus for proofreading before commissioning a London stonemason to carve it on the tomb.

'Thomas More, born a Londoner, of a respectable but not noble family; he engaged to some extent in literary matters,' he began, before listing all the important official posts he had held. He had no idea then that his distinguished career would end up with execution on Tower Hill. His body was buried within the walls of the Tower of London while his head was stuck on a pike.

Then I walked along the King's Road to visit Chelsea public library, where a small bronze statue of Thomas More sits near the entrance. Made by the German sculptor Ludwig Cauert during his stay in London, it shows More slumped in a chair, looking tired and more than a little grumpy.



Quinten Massys,  
*Portrait of Pieter Gillis*, 1517,  
Oil on panel, 59 x 46 cm,  
Royal Museums of Fine Arts,  
Antwerp



'Can I help you?' the librarian asked.

'I'm looking for *Utopia*,' I said.

'Is that by James Joyce?' she asked brightly.

'I think that was *Ulysses*,' I said. '*Utopia* was written by Thomas More, who lived in Chelsea.'

She looked confused, although she must pass the little bronze statue at the entrance every day. She logged on to the library's website and typed 'Utopia' in the search box. The first book listed was Robert Ludlum's *The Utopia Experiment*, clearly more popular with the residents of Chelsea than *Utopia* by Thomas More.

'Unfortunately we don't have it,' she said.

'Thanks anyway,' I said. 'I'll try the bookshop up the road.'

I paused before leaving the library to take another look at the little statue of Thomas More. A small bronze plaque noted that it was bought for the library in 1896 by public subscription, which seems a rather utopian idea.

Then I walked back down King's Road to a bookshop I had passed earlier. It was called *World's End Books*. The owner was sorting some secondhand books as I went in.

'I'm looking for *Utopia* by Thomas More,' I said.

He shook his head. 'No,' he said firmly. 'I don't have anything like that. Sorry, mate. I can't help you.'

## Lessius is More

In Quinten Metsys's portrait of Pieter Gillis, the Antwerp official is shown holding a letter from More. I had hoped to look at the original painting, but it is difficult to visit Longford Castle. So I took the train to Antwerp, where there is a good copy, probably painted by Quentin Metsys. It had been moved temporarily from the Fine Arts Museum, which was closed for restoration, to the seventeenth-century Rockox Mansion.

I was the only visitor on a foggy winter morning. The old wooden floors creaked as I moved from room to room, occasionally setting off the alarm when I got too close to a painting. I finally found Pieter Gillis in a large room looking out on the renaissance garden.

I particularly wanted to look at the letter from Thomas More that was so well done. I peered at it as closely as the alarm permitted, but I couldn't see any handwriting at all.

Then I went to meet a friend for coffee. She used to teach at Lessius College in Antwerp, which changed its name in 2012 to Thomas More College. I wanted





Stephen Walter, *Nova Utopia*, 2013, detail

© Stephen Walter, courtesy of the artist and TAG Fine Arts, London

to know why they had dropped the name of a Flemish theologian in favour of an English lawyer.

It was partly because Thomas More was a famous thinker, I learned. But there was more to the story. It also appealed to the college because it allowed them to play on the English word 'more'.

On its website, the college explained the reason for merging two colleges – Lessius College and the Kempen Catholic College – into Thomas More College. It would, they said, provide 'more education, in more locations, with more cooperation.' And, in case you still didn't get the joke, they promoted the new name with the slogan 'Lessius is More'.

## A map of Utopia

I went back to Antwerp again a few weeks later to look at a temporary exhibition in the MAS museum titled 'The World in a Mirror'. The curators had brought together a fascinating range of maps from different historical periods, including a rare map of the island of Utopia made in 1596 by the Antwerp cartographer Abraham Ortelius.

Few people knew of the existence of the map until it surfaced at an auction in 1981. On the map, which is the only copy to have survived, Ortelius indicated many of the places mentioned in Thomas More's book. He also added a Latin inscription at the bottom encouraging the spectator to 'Behold the happy kingdom'.

'The world has no other, which is better or more beautiful!' it goes on. 'This is that Utopia, bulwark of peace, centre of love and justice, best harbour and good shore, praised by other lands, honoured by you who knows why, this, more than any other place, offers a happy life.'

Hanging next to it in the exhibition was a map of Nova Utopia made in 2013 by Stephen Walter. The London map-maker had carefully copied the topography of Ortelius's map, including the fifty-four towns mentioned by More, but added modern details that turned Utopia into an overcrowded tourist resort.

Later that day, I happened to walk past Thomas More College in Antwerp's Sint-Andries district. Only it wasn't called after Thomas More any longer. It had become part of Leuven University in the latest reorganisation of Flemish higher education. The slogan 'Lessius is More' had gone. All that remained was a delivery van with the words 'Expect More Drive' on the back.

I never found out who had come up with the idea of playing around with the name More. But they were repeating a joke that went back more than 500 years, to a friendship that gave the world a description of Utopia. ■

## EXHIBITION

### **In Search of Utopia**

20.10.2016 - 17.01.2017

M - Museum Leuven

*500 years Utopia* is a citywide project in Leuven in 2016.

[www.utopialeuven.be](http://www.utopialeuven.be)

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