The Two Thomases: Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell

Professor Richard Rex, Queen’s College, Cambridge

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It is possible to talk about Thomas More without talking about Thomas Cromwell. Yet it has proven impossible to talk about Thomas Cromwell without talking about Thomas More. They are two of the emblematic figures of English history: More, the defender of the Catholic Church in England against the tyrannical pretensions of Henry VIII to be the Supreme Head on Earth of the Church of England; and Cromwell, the pliant instrument of tyranny. Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons* cast More as a liberal hero of freedom of conscience and Cromwell as the ruthless agent of State pragmatism. Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* has reversed those polarities for a new age, with Cromwell now the apostle of humanist tolerance and More the hate-filled prophet of religious fanaticism. My aims this evening are to investigate and document this reversal, to show how it was achieved, and to speculate on why it has enjoyed so much success. The key to this final aim is the idea that Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell have, in one little cultural niche, served to embody or represent the changing position of the Catholic Church in modern – or postmodern – western culture. But before we come to that we must unpack and unpick the role reversal and comment on its rationality and plausibility.

The reversal is essentially the achievement of a single work of fiction: Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* [London: Fourth Estate, 2009]. *Wolf Hall* retold, in the form of a novel, the true story of the rise to supreme power under Henry VIII of the low-born Thomas Cromwell, a gifted fixer talent-spotted by Cardinal Wolsey and catapulted into the highest levels of politics by the complex circumstances of his patron’s fall. Cromwell’s rise was inextricably tied up with Henry’s well-known decision in the later 1520s to rid himself of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry his new beloved, Anne Boleyn. Cardinal Wolsey’s failure to deliver this result after two years of desperate politicking led to his spectacular political eclipse in 1529. But Cromwell, despite displaying remarkable loyalty to his master – or perhaps because of that – managed to escape the wreckage and attach himself directly to the king, whose chief of staff he would be for the next ten years. ‘Poor boy makes good against all odds’ is a classic plot, and many people found *Wolf Hall* a compelling read. Awarded the Booker Prize in 2009, it was unusually successful even for a Booker winner. It was not merely reviewed in the classier newspapers and weeklies, but was actually sold and read in huge numbers. The reason for the enormous attention that it generated even before the award of the prize is obvious from reading the reports and reviews and interviews published at the time and over the following few years. And here we need to take a small detour in the argument.

According to the author, *Wolf Hall* was originally conceived as a single novel, retelling the rise and fall of its hero. However, as she got to grips with the events of 1534-35, in which Thomas More was targeted and ultimately destroyed by the regime for his refusal to go along with Henry’s assumption of the title of Supreme Head, under Christ, of the Church of England, she found the duel between More and Cromwell irresistibly dramatic. One sees her point. This duel became the dominant theme of the narrative, with a natural end in More’s execution. Thus the original novel was therefore recast as a trilogy, each closed by a beheading: Thomas More in 1535, Anne Boleyn in 1536, and, presumably, in the final volume, which has now been promised for next year, Cromwell himself in 1540. What you should note is that **Thomas More changed the course of the narrative**. In a sense, I would argue, he took over the story, despite his allotted role as a merely secondary presence within it. More’s impact on the story itself serves to undermine the author’s intentions and assumptions and assertions. Crucially, it was the portrayal of More, not that of Cromwell, which accounts for *Wolf Hall*’s early vogue.

For in *Wolf Hall*, it is More who is the villain, and Cromwell who is the hero. This is an abrupt reversal not only of an enduring tradition but also of the powerful dramatic portrayal of the two men in Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*, the Broadway hit that became an Oscar-winning film under the direction of Fred Zinneman, with Paul Scofield in the title role. Bolt’s More was a hero of the liberal individual conscience, refusing to bend before tyranny, scorning to kneel before false gods. He was a hero for the Cold War. The resonance of his stand against Henry VIII echoed in the prisons and gulags of the Soviet Empire and amid the terrors of China’s Cultural Revolution. And while Bolt’s individualist interpretation of the man is not fully authentic to More’s own commitment to the collective and divinely guaranteed wisdom of the Catholic Church, his portrayal of the man as a whole is reasonably faithful to his core values: truth, justice, peace, the rule of law … Bolt’s More was never unquestioned, but he held sway over the general imagination from the 1960s to the start of this millennium.

What most struck early reviewers about *Wolf Hall* was that it stood this image of More on its head, and that it appeared to do so with the full authority of the historical record properly interpreted. The granular detail of the narrative, and the author’s earnest asseverations about the level of historical research that had gone into making the book, endowed it with almost professional scholarly status. The author herself revelled in this, and loved to quote the question once asked of her, “Why do you make a fetish of historical accuracy?” When her novel was being adapted for the stage, ‘it was her deep understanding of character and history’ that proved invaluable to Mike Poulton, the writer who did the job. This understanding, she assures us, enabled her to offer him advice such as this: ‘Well, actually, Thomas More cannot plausibly say this line, but Stephen Gardiner can’. As she said on another occasion, ‘The basic question is not, “Did they say this?” but “Could they have thought this?”, and I think that’s what you use as a guide.’ As one star-struck commentator remarked, ‘She checked every fact, every source, every date, every letter, every name. Her Cromwell books are a combination of wild imagining and unimpeachable accuracy’. The *Spectator* had it that *Wolf Hall* offered not just a good read but ‘a significant shift in the way any of her readers interested in English history will henceforth think about Thomas Cromwell … There is historical truth, and there is imaginative truth. Hilary Mantel … respects both’. One might sum up this discussion of the early emphasis on historicity advanced by the author and her admirers with these words of hers: ‘The novelist has a responsibility to adhere to the facts as closely as possible, and if they are inconvenient, that’s where the art comes in. You must work with intractable facts and find the dramatic shape inside them,’ Forgive me for labouring the point about the purportedly historical status of this novel in the early accounts of it by both the author and her reviewers. Latterly, Mantel has rowed back from the position she adopted early on, emphasising instead that her books are intended as fiction, not history. But that assumption of historical authority was important to the early success of *Wolf Hall* and to the rapidly growing reputation of its author.

The author certainly knew what she was about. In 2015 she observed that ‘some people have seen the novel as an outrageous attack on the reputation of Thomas More and as a travesty of the facts. But the truth is I have not discovered anything new about More’. Now it is indeed the case that she has ‘not discovered anything new about More’ – though perhaps not quite in the sense she intended. Her claim is to have depicted him ‘from the point of view of the London evangelical community’. The point of view is perhaps more nearly twenty-first century Islington coffee-bar than sixteenth-century London alehouse.

The Thomas More of *Wolf Hall* is first introduced to us by Thomas Cromwell as ‘some sort of failed priest, a frustrated preacher’, a fair harbinger of the catena of slipshod second-hand scholarship, long-range psychoanalysis, and mere character assassination which is to follow. For Mantel has not made this up herself. The notion, first put about by a modern biographer, Richard Marius, that More had in his youth seriously considered a vocation to the priesthood, has no basis in the original evidence. He did spend some years living a life of devotion – without any vow – in the London Charterhouse. Perhaps he was meditating the religious life, though the very fact that he went some years without taking a vow rather suggests not. Marius made this episode the linchpin of his view of More, linking it with More’s alleged obsession with excrement and sex to paint a picture of a warped psyche tormented by sexual temptation and frustration. That is itself all nonsense. More’s sole recourse to coprology in his voluminous polemical writings is to take up a single passage of Luther and metaphorically throw it back at him. And his alleged obsession with sex comes down to his frequent harping on Luther’s breach of his vow of celibacy through his marriage to Catherina von Bora – a tactic which More deploys with completely self-conscious intent. But even the basic idea that More toyed with the religious life is worlds away from the Graham Greene concept of the ‘failed priest’ which Mantel here infuses into Cromwell’s mind.

The *Wolf Hall* More is allowed no redeeming features, and history is not so much interpreted as ruthlessly rewritten to this end. His life of personal mortification is transmuted into hypocritical vanity. Cromwell, of course, knows all: ‘Under his clothes,’ he tells us, ‘**it is well known**, More wears a **jerkin** of horsehair.’ The false note, by the way, rings loud here: hair-shirts were never ‘jerkins’ – the jerkin was an outer garment, usually of leather. The phrase at the time was a ‘shirt of hair’ (even ‘hair-shirt’ is later). But the chief use of the word ‘jerkin’, since 1800, has been as a word used by historical novelists to tell the reader that the action is set in the remote past. The evidence we have is that More’s hair-shirt was a closely guarded secret, known only to his confessor, his wife, and his daughters. But why spoil a good story?

The core of the *Wolf Hall* More, though, is his portrayal as a psychotic persecutor and torturer. Thus, when Cardinal Wolsey went to France on a protracted diplomatic mission in summer 1527, we overhear a conversation in his absence between Cromwell and the early English Protestant, Thomas Bilney. Bilney is in exalted mood, ‘drunk,’ as he puts it, ‘on the word of God’ (100). But Cromwell has a worrying warning for him. He should not feel safe simply ‘because the cardinal is away’. ‘Now,’ he says, ‘the Bishop of London has his hands free, not to mention our friend in Chelsea’ (101) – that’s Thomas More, in case you don’t know. High marks are due to the author here, by the way, for knowing about Wolsey’s mission to France in 1527. Not such good marks for the old-fashioned notion that Wolsey was easy-going towards heresy, which had been seriously undermined by the researches of Craig d’Alton in the twenty years before *Wolf Hall* appeared. But the checking of ‘every fact … every date … every name’ was apparently not enough to turn up the information that, when Wolsey crossed the Channel in 1527, accompanied by a princely retinue of about 1000 souls, those souls included not only Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, but also the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, that is, Thomas More. So much for free hands.

The mauling of More is relentless. ‘More says it does not matter if you lie to heretics, or trick them into a confession.’ (361) He says nothing of the sort in his surviving writings. And this comes strangely from a Cromwell who, in the sequel to *Wolf Hall*, *Bring out the Bodies*, tricks Mark Smeaton into furnishing the false witness he needs to destroy Anne Boleyn. Again, this man, known as the wittiest and funniest man in London, who once had to make himself boring for weeks so that king would tire of him, allowing him to get away from Court to see his family – this man, who, even his enemies conceded, was ever ready with a ‘mock’ – this man, Mantel’s Cromwell tells us, cannot take a joke against himself (459).

The most peculiar feature of the legislation of England during the 1530s, the Cromwellian decade, was something called an Act of Attainder. This was a parliamentary statute which had formerly been used to define the punishment of convicted traitors or notorious rebels. Under Cromwell, attainder was used to bypass judicial process and simply declare specified individuals guilty of treason. Attainder of this kind was unprecedented before 1534 and unrepeated after 1540, except for single revival in 1641 to cut off the Earl of Strafford. Yet even this unique instrument of Cromwellian ingenuity is fathered onto More by Mantel’s Cromwell, who justifies his own recourse to the expedient with the rebuke, ‘Come on, you would have seen them off that way yourself, when you were Chancellor’ (515). Never mind that he did not. All More can answer here is the weak admission, ‘You may be right’.

The most ludicrous fruits of the five years of ‘research’ that produced *Wolf Hall*, however, are saved for the final act. When Thomas More is immured in the Tower of London, cut off from the world, closely watched and closely guarded, his agents, we are told – listen to that for a moment, and laugh – his ‘**agents**’ are busy in Antwerp, hunting down the refugee Bible translator William Tyndale. ‘More has a sticky web in Europe still, a web made of money…’ (590). In early 1535, when all his assets have been confiscated – by an act of attainder, incidentally – and when his wife is writing to the king begging for assistance and relief, More is somehow financing and masterminding, from his captivity, an international plot to capture a renegade Englishman on the other side of the Channel. Shortly before his trial, this More lets Cromwell know that he has heard rumours of Tyndale’s arrest, and asks for further details. But Cromwell give him nothing, telling the reader in an unspoken aside that Tyndale had indeed been betrayed by someone, adding, significantly, ‘and More knows who’ (627).

Now, the bizarre notion that a man shut up in the Tower was able, like some Tudor Moriarty, or perhaps some Tudor Macavity, to mastermind a conspiracy against a religious refugee on the other side of the North Sea, is **not**, as you might think, the fanciful fruit of a novelist’s perfervid imagination. And it is only fair to say at this point that I have found nothing in *Wolf Hall* to suggest that its author has that sort of imaginative power. What this notion tells us is what ‘research’ actually means in relation to the production of *Wolf Hall*. The source of this ludicrous idea is a 2002 biography of Tyndale by the late journalist Brian Moynahan. He promenades this idea as his personal discovery, and I know no reason to deny him that credit. But – and this is where you have to follow me closely – Moynahan offered not one single, solitary shred of evidence for his claim. The best he could do was to pick up a rumour circulating at the time that unspecified English *bishops* were behind Tyndale’s arrest. There is no evidence to substantiate these rumours either, and the intellectual processes that enabled a journalist to leap from rumours about bishops to claims about a layman inside Tudor England’s most secure prison are far beyond the abilities of a mere historian.

In *Wolf Hall*, anything that has ever been said to the discredit of More, at any day from his to ours, is to be repeated, while anything that has ever been said in his favour is to be passed over in silence or positively denied him. The social conscience of the author of *Utopia*? Nowhere to be seen, although we are told that Thomas Cromwell felt that ‘people ought to be given better jobs’ (87). More’s notorious sense of humour? His jokes are all, it transpires, his father’s; his own humour, such as it is, merely cruel and hurtful (231). His devotion to his family, celebrated in Holbein’s group portrait, and in Erasmus’s biographical sketch of one of his closest friends? Gone: Mantel’s More had no love for his wives and was, frankly, a misogynist (123) who routinely insults and humiliates women (123, 233, 235) and is, of course, disliked by his wife (233). The fact that More gave his daughters the kind of academic education almost exclusively reserved for boys in Tudor England is mentioned … but only indirectly, so that Cromwell’s daughter, eager for learning, can ask why More’s daughter should be the only girl to have such a privilege (138). Allegations that More tortured suspected heretics are dinned into the reader incessantly (40, 125, 298, 335, 348, 459, 628-29, 639-40). His own printed refutation of such allegations is not so much as hinted at.

Thus far More: what about Cromwell? The characterisation of our hero is entirely opposite. For the Cromwell of *Wolf Hall* is a most curious creation. Above all, he is **nice**. Niceness is the nearest that our banal era can get to virtue, and Cromwell is **very** nice. Although he is tough, and hard, and may even have killed a man, he is at heart non-violent: ‘I gave up fighting,’ he tells us loftily, ‘because, when I lived in Florence, I looked at frescoes every day’ (41). Yes, Cromwell too was an expat in Chiantishire, like so many of *Wolf Hall*’s admirers. Let’s just recall the author’s own observation that ‘The basic question is not, “Did they say this?” but “Could they have thought this?”. Well, nobody, but nobody, in the sixteenth century could have responded in that kind of way to frescoes! But the niceness is relentless. Cromwell recalls from his boyhood seeing a heretic burned alive. The crowd cheered, but not Cromwell, who alone felt pity for her fate (352-56). And of course he has no time for astrologers or alchemists (481-82). And he is so kind to prisoners. He calls by to make sure that a gaoled Protestant is being properly looked after in the Tower of London (433). He even pops in to see the Holy Maid of Kent, Elizabeth Barton, perhaps the most dangerous figurehead of popular opposition to Henry’s regime in the early 1530s: ‘You are fed properly, are you?’ he asks solicitously (545). He considers threatening Thomas More with a lingering death – because, of course, More is a weakling and a coward (628, 636-37) who cannot even take Cromwell’s manly handshake without flinching (634). But Cromwell will not sink so low: ‘he **knows** he will not do it: the notion is contaminating’ (628). He is so much **nicer**, you see, than that **nasty** Master More. And in case we balk at taking Cromwell’s unsupported word for his own niceness, it is endorsed by More’s son-in-law, William Roper, who ruefully assures Cromwell, ‘We know you are not vengeful, sir. Though, God knows, he has never been a friend to your friends’ (577).

Cromwell’s attitudes are impeccably modern, which helped endear him to the Booker judges in 2009. More’s, of course, are anything but. His inevitable antisemitism is introduced casually: ‘Still serving your Hebrew God, I see,’ he remarks in passing to Cromwell, adding, presumably for our benefit, ‘I mean your idol, Usury’ (91). There is no reason to think More’s attitude to Jews was any more or any less favourable than those of his English contemporaries, but the implied contrast with Cromwell is eventually delivered. Once he is Master of the Rolls, Cromwell meditates on the history of the Rolls House in Chancery Lane, which had at one time served as a hostel for Jewish converts to Christianity. His kindly heart brims with fellow feeling for those who lived ‘within these walls, flinching from the Londoners outside’ (602).

And so it goes on. Cromwell has a genial, good-natured scorn for superstition (20-21, 486) and especially for the priesthood (250, 638), though for reasons that are never quite clear his essentially sceptical temperament stands alongside some undefined brand of scriptural Protestantism (39, 91, 104). He avails himself of twentieth-century psychological insights to explain the visions of the Holy Maid of Kent (400). And finally – this is my personal favourite – he has reservations about hunting. Not, we are told, because, like Thomas More, he thinks it ‘barbaric’ (none of More’s judgemental moralising, you note), but as far as one can make out, because it has driven some species of larger mammals to extinction.

How can he put it? ‘In some countries they hunt the bear, and the wolf and the wild boar. We once had those animals in England, when we had our great forests.’ (181)

It’s not just the furry animals he wants to hug, it’s the trees as well. This guy wouldn’t be out of place on Islington High St. with a skinny latte and an iPhone, chatting to Jeremy Corbyn.

But surely it’s only a novel. What harm can it do? Can’t you tell the difference between fiction and history? Well yes, I can, but that’s because I do this for a living. Lots of people can’t, and that’s where the harm lies, especially in a literary project which makes ‘a fetish of historical accuracy’ and blurs the boundary to such an extent that not even the professional historian will be able to tell the two apart unless, like me, they happen to be a specialist in the period. As my friend Colin Armstrong once told me, literate people today derive a surprisingly large proportion of their knowledge of and notions about the world from fiction. (That may, of course, explain why ignorance abounds on all sides.) So when a book presents an essentially historical narrative bolstered with a remarkably well researched body of circumstantial trivia but characterised by wild misrepresentations and grotesque anachronism, it will misinform and it will mislead. At that point, the historian has the right, indeed the duty, to intervene.

As one review of *Wolf Hall* put it, ‘you cannot back Cromwell without spitting on More’. If you can’t back Cromwell without spitting on More, can you back More without spitting on Cromwell? You certainly can’t back both horses. But you can esteem and praise More, even making room for appropriate criticism, without really having to take Cromwell into account at all. Bolt and Mantel once again offer a useful contrast. In *A Man for All Seasons*, Cromwell is definitely down among the ‘minor characters’ in the credits. But in *Wolf Hall*, Thomas More is central to the action. This imbalance reflects reality, despite the author. Thomas More has never been forgotten. People fell over themselves to write his biography, even in the Tudor era. The biographies by William Roper, Nicholas Harpsfield, and Thomas Stapleton all survive. The one written by William Rastell is preserved only in a few stray fragments. There have been more editions just of Roper’s Life of More than there have been biographies of Cromwell. Not a century has gone by without its share of biographies of More. No one rushed to write the life of Cromwell. The only early account was that offered by John Foxe in his Book of Martyrs in 1563. That, to be fair, was a book itself endlessly reprinted. But it would be stretching a point to suggest that this rich publishing history had much to do with the presence of Cromwell’s life in its voluminous pages. For all Foxe’s efforts, no one could take Cromwell seriously as a martyr. And perhaps it is the relative fate of the two men in London that is most revealing. Both were Londoners, More of a higher social level than Cromwell. But as Peter Ackroyd noted in his 1998 life of More, despite the best efforts of Henry VIII to traduce or suppress his memory, his fellow Londoners never forgot him. Despite his Catholicism, even Protestant London cultivated his memory. Cromwell, in contrast, was soon forgotten. There is no collection of Cromwell memorabilia to match the Moreana now preserved at Stonyhurst. Even John Strype, the indefatigable Stuart historian of the early Church of England, saw no reason to include a life of Cromwell alongside his biographies of Reformation luminaries, not only clergy such as Cranmer and Parker, but also laymen such as John Cheke and Thomas Smith. For centuries there was nothing more than Foxe except for an attempt at a historical play, published in 1602 with a deliberately misleading claim to be the work of one ‘Mr W. S.’ Yes, early Stuart readers were meant to think it the work of Shakespeare. It wasn’t. It was not included in the early folios; and in the later scholarly editions, if it was included (and it usually wasn’t), it was as an explicitly spurious work. But for that little-known play, there was barely a whisper of Cromwell until 1887, when one Arthur Galton published *The Character and Times of Thomas Cromwell* (Birmingham: Cornish, 1887). For Thomas Cromwell was not rediscovered until the publication of the great series of summaries of the *Letters and Papers … of the Reign of Henry VIII* (London: HMSO, 1862-). Before Elton’s pioneering work in the 1950s, a grand total of three biographies were written. Between Elton and Mantel, another four appeared. Since *Wolf Hall*, there have been five – an unparalleled rush – culminating in Diarmaid MacCulloch’s definitive *Thomas Cromwell: a Life* [London: Allen Lane, 2018].

It was G. R. Elton, more than anyone else, who put Thomas Cromwell back on the historical map after four centuries of near obscurity. No Elton, no Mantel. In the 1950s, Elton offered Cromwell as the pioneer of cabinet government and architect of modern Britain, via a “Tudor Revolution in Government” which, in less than a decade, transformed a ramshackle medieval monarchy into a modern Nation-State. In the 1970s he sought to reinvent him again as a statesman dedicated to the ‘common weal’, a forerunner of the welfare policies of the post-war consensus. But Elton realised the difficulty of presenting Cromwell as hero when he was so closely involved in the destruction of Thomas More in 1534-35. In addition, he resented Bolt’s portrayal of More as an advocate of the rights of the individual conscience. In this, of course, he was quite correct. But the need to correct that misrepresentation lured him into an excessive hostility which led him to take up Marius’s bizarre interpretation of More. It was Elton’s Cromwell and Elton’s More that fed through into Mantel’s fiction.

No Mantel, no MacCulloch. I very much doubt whether, had Hilary Mantel not dragged Cromwell back into the public eye, Diarmaid MacCulloch would have embarked on his monumental study. MacCulloch’s *Cromwell* is a professional triumph. One of the most technically accomplished Tudor historians of our age, he has no trouble in disentangling the details of Cromwell’s life and work. Gone is Mantel’s hopelessly anachronistic idealisation. Gone too is Elton’s proto-modern statesman. Following the lead of David Starkey, MacCulloch shows us Cromwell as a master of Court politics, a fixer who made himself and his relatives stupendously wealthy by ensuring that Henry VIII got whatever he wanted. Yet the human being who emerges from this is tragically empty. MacCulloch’s Cromwell is still, like Mantel’s, a poor boy who made good. But he didn’t **do** good. MacCulloch does his best, but the raw material just isn’t there. The most he can say is that Cromwell cared for his children! It’s good to know, but it’s not exactly an encomium. He rightly emphasises that Cromwell was a Protestant. But he misses the essential superficiality of Cromwell’s Protestantism, the pure instrumentality of a faith that Cromwell saw only as a buttress for Henry’s supremacy. Of course he cannot possibly have been the liberal sceptic of Mantel’s imagination. There were no atheists within the swing of Henry’s axe. But Cromwell put the other world entirely at the disposal of this. And he was a destroyer – of institutions, of traditions, of people. He set about destroying Catholicism, which he saw quite rightly – and far more clearly than poor confused Henry – as the opposite of Henry’s supremacy. And it is this about him that appeals to our age, which also sees Catholicism, quite rightly, as inimical to its tastes and values. That, in a sense, is why he appeals to MacCulloch as much as to Mantel, and to her many readers.

Cromwell, then, has only recently become interesting, while More has always been interesting. We should attend to this rather simple history lesson. But why has this reversal of historical truth gained so much traction? My answer is, in the Péguyan sense, mystical – rather than rigorously logical. It is all to do with Thomas More’s unquestionable place as a martyr for the Catholic Church and the swelling tide of resentment in the last thirty years against the Christian and in particular the Catholic past which created and sustained Europe over the last 1500 years. Next year sees the centenary of one of Hilaire Belloc’s most important books, *Europe and the Faith* (London: Constable, 1920), in which he delivered himself of one of his most trenchant observations: ‘The Faith is Europe; Europe is the Faith’. Because Belloc was a Catholic, his claim is often assumed to have been a claim about Catholicism, as some kind of colonialist claptrap, as if he thought that Catholicism must be European. But that is not what he was saying at all. He was talking about Europe, and his claim was about Europe and its essence. Without Christianity, he argues, ‘Europe’ can be nothing more than a geographical expression. It is difficult to define Belloc, but perhaps the easiest way to sum him up is to say that he was a prophet. He believed fervently in Europe, but he was no dunderheaded triumphalist. He saw our times coming, both the relentless rise of materialist paganism and the resurgence of Islam, a culture for which he had immense respect.

What has this to do with our Two Thomases? As our Europe, and our Britain or your Ireland, don’t so much loosen their grasp on their traditional Christian culture as thrust it from them with revulsion and disdain, Cromwell and More symbolise the spiritual struggle of our times, both in their historical reality and in the distorting mirror of Mantel’s fiction. Cromwell

Evidently Cromwell must destroy More. So too must his admirers. As Denzel Washington says in his title role in *The Equalizer* [2014], ‘Old man’s gotta be the old man, fish’s gotta be the fish. You gotta be who you are in this world, no matter what’. To destroy More, the symbol of Catholicism, More must be diminished to the scale of an ant, that Cromwell may trample upon him. Mantel’s fiction shows us a nasty man getting his Tudor come-uppance. History shows us something rather different. But truth is about proportion, and getting things in proportion is about the big picture.

And in the case of Cromwell and More, the pictures are there for us to see. They can be seen in the Frick Collection in New York, where More and Cromwell gaze at each other across a fireplace, captured by the hand of the sixteenth century’s greatest portraitist, Holbein. The author of *Wolf Hall* herself describes his Cromwell as an ‘incredibly dead picture’. The art critic Waldemar Januszczak more memorably labels Cromwell ‘the least attractive sitter in the whole of Holbein’s art’. The picture is the evidence. A great painter, they say, paints not just the face but the soul. And Holbein’s More is famously and sublimely living. This is the evidence: Cromwell – dead, dull; More – alive, alert. Holbein got it. Seeing is believing. But there’s none so blind as them that will not see.

**Correction**: My friend Professor William Tighe (Muhlenberg College, Pennsylvania) has reminded me that attainder was revived not only to condemn the Earl of Strafford in 1641, but also to condemn Archbishop William Laud in 1645. I am grateful for this correction.