

## Introduction

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THE NAMES OF John Fisher and Thomas More, celebrated with a joint feast in the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church, will be forever linked as those of the two most illustrious opponents and victims of Henry VIII's repudiation of papal authority. Yet while the equality of honour they enjoy in the liturgy reflects their historical importance in the English Reformation, it does not reflect an equality in the treatment they have received at the hands of historians. The massive scholarly attention today lavished on More dwarfs the efforts of the few who study the career of his fellow martyr. Even the theology of Thomas More has received more extensive treatment than Fisher's, an imbalance especially hard to justify in view of the fact that the works of Fisher, a professional theologian, were more solid, enduring, original and influential than those of More. The reputation, and in consequence the study, of Fisher have suffered from his ready assimilation to the image of the hidebound conservative die-hard that is so frequently and casually applied to the early opponents of the Reformation in both England and Europe. This misleading account of Fisher originated with the Protestant opponents he faced during his life and was taken up by the royalist detractors hired to blacken his name after his death. Like so much of the work of these men, it has passed more or less uncriticised into the historiography of the English Reformation. The objectives of this study are to rescue Fisher's scholarly reputation from the oblivion into which it was cast by his English enemies and to examine the nature of his intellectual achievement, an achievement which was long held in the highest esteem in continental Catholic Europe. Its thesis is that Fisher's theology is marked by an individual and far from unsuccessful attempt to reinvigorate the old blood of the scholastics with the new blood of the humanists – not as an intermediate stage in some progress out of darkness into light, but as an interesting combination of two great, though fundamentally dissimilar, traditions. These characteristics combined with a clear perception of the fundamental issues at stake in the Reformation controversies, and with an incisive rebuttal of the theological challenges posed by the Reformers, to produce a body of work that met the contemporary need for a reliable and intellectually credible Catholic response

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to the new doctrines, a response which avoided obscurantism on the one hand and compromise on the other.

The disproportion of the historical interest accorded to More and Fisher is nothing new. Even in 1535, when they were executed, the romantic figure of the wary and witty lawyer, cracking jokes on his way to the scaffold, attracted wider popular attention and sympathy than that of the grave and forthright bishop. The first biography of More, the memoir by his son-in-law William Roper, was in print by the end of Mary Tudor's reign. The first biography of Fisher, in contrast, was completed only under Elizabeth, and was circulated only in manuscript form until the middle of the next century. Its compilation was the work of a few members of St John's College, Cambridge (which has always been closely associated with the study of Fisher) – ecclesiastics who had been prominent in the Marian reaction before finding their freedom curtailed by house arrest or close imprisonment under Elizabeth. John Young, former vice-chancellor of Cambridge and master of Pembroke Hall, was probably the author, and he received information and advice from Thomas Watson, deprived bishop of Lincoln, Alban Langdaile and Robert Truslowe, once Fisher's chaplain.<sup>1</sup> The work has been described as hagiography, but it is far more like a modern life than a medieval compendium of miraculous and moralising episodes. As befitted the work of a talented humanist, it was frequently based on critical research into original documents. It makes few claims that cannot be corroborated from other evidence. Unfortunately, its first appearance in print was the work of an unscrupulous and imaginative editor, Thomas Bailey, who interpolated quantities of spurious material and palmed it off as his own.<sup>2</sup> The late Stuart antiquary and clergyman John Lewis stripped Bailey's fictions away, but his unsympathetic account was not published until the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> It was at this time that the serious study of John Fisher may be said to have commenced, with the publication of his English writings. His funeral sermons on Henry VII and Lady Margaret Beaufort were edited in 1840, and in 1876 there appeared what was intended as a complete edition of Fisher's English works. Both these books were the work of members of St John's College.<sup>4</sup> The first modern and scientific study of Fisher, which appeared in 1885, was a labour of love by another Johnian, Thomas Bridgett, a man who traced the origins of his conversion to Catholicism to a perusal of Fisher's polemical writings against the Protestants.<sup>5</sup> It is hardly surprising that the resurgence of interest in Fisher came when it did. The mid-nineteenth century was the heyday of Tractarianism and Ritualism in the Church of England, of pre-Raphaelitism in the arts, and of the 'second spring' of English Catholicism. Bridgett's book was occasioned in particular by Fisher's beatification, together with that of More and other English martyrs, in 1885. Even more important than Bridgett's study, though traceable to the same impulse, was the critical edition of Young's life of Fisher published by François

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van Ortroj in the early 1890s.<sup>6</sup> Bridgett and van Ortroj laid the foundation for all subsequent studies of Fisher. The canonisation of Fisher and More in 1935 provoked a second wave of interest. Philip Hallett translated one of Fisher's polemical writings in anticipation of the event, and Philip Hughes edited a popular version of Young's life.<sup>7</sup> There were, besides, several biographies of greatly varying standard. These were all superannuated by E.E. Reynolds, whose biography of Fisher broke new ground by exploiting the evidence of his episcopal register. It remains the best English life.<sup>8</sup> The French account by Jean Rouschause gave fuller weight to Fisher's polemical writings, and added a number of fresh biographical details.<sup>9</sup> Students of Fisher are also indebted to Rouschause for his editions of Fisher's correspondence with Erasmus, and of his devotional writings.<sup>10</sup> Most recently, in the wake of the 450th anniversary of Fisher's execution, a collection of essays edited by Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy has cast new light upon several aspects of Fisher's career – his educational interests, his relationship with Erasmus, his theology, his episcopate, and his role in the opposition to Henry VIII in the early 1530s.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, the study of Fisher has also been advanced by researches not primarily concerned with his career. His work as a preacher was set in its sixteenth-century context by the investigations of J.W. Blench.<sup>12</sup> His ecclesiology has been analysed in an appendix to Brian Gogan's comprehensive survey of Thomas More's view of the Church.<sup>13</sup> And his contributions to the controversy over Henry VIII's divorce have been examined in several studies of that episode.<sup>14</sup>

Of all the recent studies of Fisher, one must be singled out for special praise – the pioneering study by the late Edward Surtz, *The Works and Days of John Fisher* (Harvard, 1967). Surtz was the first scholar to attempt a full-scale survey of Fisher's voluminous Latin theological writings. His *Works and Days* is an indispensable handbook for any student of Fisher, presenting Fisher's views on almost every issue on which it is possible to ascertain them. If one had to criticise this important work, it would be for its length, which owes something to repetitiveness, and for its over-ready assimilation of its subject to the traditions of both Erasmian humanism and Thomist scholasticism – a pair by no means easily reconciled, from both of which Fisher in fact departed in some important respects. Surtz tends to assume an almost monolithic uniformity about the Catholic theological tradition, and this in turn gives the reader little idea of where Fisher stood in relation to the intellectual traditions he inherited, and the contemporary intellectual developments with which he was faced.<sup>15</sup> These problems of length, organisation and interpretation help to explain why Surtz's work has not made the impact it should have upon other scholars working in related fields, and why misconceptions about Fisher's theology still prevail among them. Nevertheless, the magnitude of Surtz's achievement should not be underestimated. To read, digest and present the essence of Fisher's works

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would have been valuable in itself. But Surtz added to this the fruits of monumental erudition in sixteenth-century sources, awakening the reader to Fisher's importance as a theologian on the European scene – an insight which my own study attempts to take further forward.

This book is not intended as another biography of Fisher. Nor is it intended to replace Surtz's *Works and Days* as a handbook to Fisher's theology. Its aim, rather, is to build on the foundation provided by Surtz and the biographers in order to examine the sources and character of John Fisher's theological writings, and to locate his thought in its proper intellectual tradition and in relation to the intellectual currents of his day. Specifically, this means relating his work to the Christian traditions of the early fathers and the scholastics, and to the contemporary movements of humanism and the Reformation. The writings in which Fisher engaged most directly with these various movements and traditions were works of polemical theology, and these are the main object of this study. They fall into three groups: works concerned with questions raised by the humanist criticism of scripture and ecclesiastical authority; refutations of the main propositions of Reformation theology; and examinations of the issues raised by Henry VIII's pursuit of a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. These works are of course all in Latin, and have therefore received less attention than they deserve from previous students – Surtz excepted. Fisher's sermons fall into a separate category. Written in English, they are more accessible than his polemical works, and have been treated more thoroughly in the literature. Nevertheless, they are obviously of direct relevance to a study of Fisher's theology, and for that reason receive specific attention in a chapter of this book, as well as providing illustrative material elsewhere. Fisher's other writings – mostly devotional treatises – do not bear so directly on this book's concerns. They are therefore dealt with not in their own right, but only in so far as they cast light on his general intellectual position or on his particular views of controverted matters. However, in concentrating on the less accessible sources, this study hopes to present a more accessible account of Fisher by treating the central debates of the time rather than the peripheral ones. The question of justification will thus, for example, receive the attention of a complete chapter; that of indulgences will be mentioned only in passing. The intended results of this approach are a sharper picture and sounder judgments about Fisher's intellectual and theological positions.

This book begins conventionally enough for an intellectual study with an examination of its subject's education, in so far as it can be reconstructed. In Fisher's case this means looking at the curriculum and character of late fifteenth-century Cambridge, with particular reference to the arts and theology courses. Although the evidence from this period is sadly defective, some sense can be gained of the initial impact of humanism, at least in the arts, and of the scholastic dominance of theology. Chapter 2 examines Fisher's earliest

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surviving theological writings, namely his sermons, most of which were delivered in the first decade of the sixteenth century. These works evince both a real interest in vernacular religious culture and a strongly Augustinian theological approach, two themes that were to come into their own later in his career. The third chapter continues to sketch the background to Fisher's polemical writings, looking at his engagement with the new currents of humanism in the sixteenth century, and in particular at his relationship with Erasmus and his attitudes to the study of the original languages of scripture. But consideration is also given to his attitude to the various medieval theological schools and to the early fathers of the Church. In the fourth chapter we come to the first of Fisher's polemical writings, three books against the French humanist Lefèvre d'Étaples on the question of whether Mary Magdalene was rightly identified by the Church with the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Although this controversy is somewhat arcane by modern standards, and even at the time was soon eclipsed in the academic world by the crisis provoked by Luther, it raised important questions about the relationship between the critical scholarship of the humanists and the doctrinal authority of the Church – a tense relationship which Fisher was reluctant to see degenerate into conflict. The position of Fisher with regard to both reveals his attitudes not only to humanism but also to what we now call popular religion. The fifth chapter provides an overview of Fisher's place in the Catholic campaign against Luther and the Reformation, outlining his own part and considering his relations with other Catholic polemicists, and assessing the importance of his contribution in the development of a standard Catholic response to Protestant teachings. It stands by way of introduction to the three chapters that follow it which in turn analyse Fisher's views on the three crucial issues of the Reformation: authority, justification, and the eucharist. On each of these issues Fisher had a distinctive and influential contribution to make. The ninth chapter turns away from the Reformation back towards humanism, exploring for the first time a controversy which briefly flared up between Fisher and Richard Pace in 1527 over the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. Once more questions of authority and criticism were at stake, and once more Fisher endeavoured to resolve the problem without prejudice to either. The last chapter moves on to the matter that was to dominate Fisher's declining years, the controversy over the validity of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. His several treatises on this question reveal at once a far wider knowledge of the scholastics than we would deduce from his other writings, and a far greater facility with the original languages of scripture. They thus provide a fitting culmination to a study whose underlying thesis turns on the relationship between humanism and scholasticism in Fisher's writings.

Before we begin, though, it is worth reminding ourselves of the salient features of Fisher's career. John Fisher was born around 1469 to a moderately

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wealthy merchant of Beverley, Robert Fisher. John was one of several children, among them a brother named Robert who subsequently became his steward. His father died in June 1477 and his mother, Agnes, married again and bore further children, including Fisher's sister Elizabeth who became a nun at the Dominican convent of Dartford. Having presumably received his early education at the grammar school attached to the collegiate church of Beverley, Fisher was sent to Cambridge around 1483, where he appears to have studied at the college of Michaelhouse.<sup>16</sup> By 1491 he had become a fellow of Michaelhouse, and was ordained priest that same year in York. He was elected senior proctor of the university for the academic year (roughly October to October) 1494–5, and in this capacity he made the acquaintance of Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII, while in London on university business. He proceeded to the degree of doctor of divinity on 5 June 1501, and was elected vice-chancellor of the university ten days later. In the meantime he had become confessor – in effect, spiritual director – to Lady Margaret and was the leading figure in her household. Fisher's merits were brought to the attention of the king by Richard Fox, bishop of Winchester, and he was unexpectedly appointed to the see of Rochester in 1504. At about the same time the university elected him chancellor, a post he was to hold for most of the rest of his life. In fact he resigned it in 1514 to make way for the rising Wolsey, but upon the latter's refusal of the honour he was re-elected for life, to be deprived by act of attainder only in January 1535.

Despite the extra responsibilities laid upon him by his promotion to the episcopate, Fisher remained Lady Margaret's closest adviser until her death in 1509. It was under his influence that she re-founded the Cambridge college Godshouse as Christ's College. In order to provide Fisher with a Cambridge residence from which to carry out his heavy load of business, Lady Margaret secured for him in 1505 the presidency of Queens' College (where since the death of the Queen Consort Elizabeth she had in effect wielded foundress's rights). It was around this time that Fisher obtained from Rome a dispensation releasing him from his full obligations of episcopal residence so that he could fulfil his personal obligations to his patroness.<sup>17</sup> He resigned the presidency of Queens' in 1508, after which he probably stayed at Christ's when he visited Cambridge. His association with Lady Margaret brought other benefits to the university, including the endowment of a lectureship in divinity and a preachership. Her greatest benefaction, though, was without doubt the foundation of St John's College, to which she was persuaded by Fisher shortly before her death. Unfortunately, her death prevented the proper completion of the arrangements and Fisher had to face two years of legal wrangles with his king (who was anxious for a share of Lady Margaret's lands), in order to vindicate the college's claim to about half of the endowment she had originally intended. The establishment and enrichment of St John's became in Fisher's

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own mind his chief hope for perpetuating his memory. He drafted the original statutes of the college, which were promulgated in 1516, and was engaged in almost constant revision of them until his imprisonment in 1534. Besides this he persuaded several other benefactors to add to the endowments of the college, and himself made over lands worth £500 to found a chantry chapel there with several fellowships attached for the benefit both of learning and of his immortal soul. But as chancellor, he was also interested in the wider concerns of the university. As well as those already mentioned, his services to it included the recruitment of its first two lecturers in Greek and its first lecturer in Hebrew. His fifty-year association with the university saw in addition the foundation of university lectureships in arts and mathematics and of the university preacherships, the reform of the proctorial elections, the introduction of the office of public orator, and the establishment of the first – though short-lived – Cambridge press. It has indeed rightly been said that it was under Fisher's chancellorship that Cambridge became for the first time the intellectual equal of Oxford.

Fisher was an able administrator, and he selected other talented administrators as his assistants. Much of his work for Cambridge and St John's was carried out by such men as Henry Hornby (master of Peterhouse, and also chancellor to Lady Margaret), Robert Shorton (first master of St John's and later master of Pembroke, who served in addition in the households of Wolsey and Catherine of Aragon), and Nicholas Metcalfe (third master of St John's, and Fisher's right-hand man as archdeacon of Rochester). Delegation left Fisher himself free for what he saw as his primary responsibility – the spiritual welfare of his diocese. The claim of his early biographer that he was unusually attentive to his episcopal duties has been amply borne out by recent research.<sup>18</sup> The evidence of his itinerary shows that he spent most of his episcopal career either in his diocese or in London on ecclesiastical business. His longest continuous absence was caused by his imprisonment in the Tower from April 1534 to his death in June 1535.<sup>19</sup> Anecdotal evidence remarks especially upon his zeal and skill as a preacher, and this is confirmed by his surviving sermons (mostly composed for special occasions and audiences) and by his commitment to the promotion of preaching. Fisher also took seriously his duties towards the Church on a national and international level. He played a leading part in the plans for reform in the Church of England at the convocation of 1510–11. Twice he was named as an English delegate to the Fifth Lateran Council, in 1512 and in 1515. On each occasion his preparations to depart were far advanced when political developments frustrated his plans. He remained a prominent ecclesiastical politician throughout the 1520s. His polemical writings, suffused with a high sense of his episcopal role, were his chief contribution (apart from his death) to the universal Church. His virtues recommended him as a model bishop, not only to contemporaries such as

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Erasmus and Johann Fabri (bishop of Constance) but also to successors like Cardinal Borromeo.

In his private life Fisher was a man of prayer and scholarship, who might have adorned the monastery or the university with as much distinction as he did his diocese. His taste in devotion was for the fervent, personal and emotional, though he was far from undervaluing the routine of the daily office of the Church. Besides an interesting treatise on the practice of prayer, he composed a number of private prayers, some of which survive. These include some imitations of the psalms, compiled in large part by scissors-and-paste work on the Psalter, which were published perhaps as early as 1525 and remained popular for the rest of the century. By a curious irony they came to be included – without acknowledgment – in a standard work of Anglican devotion, *The King's Psalms*. These may well be the 'brief prayers' referred to in a papal dispensation of 1533 by which Fisher was absolved from the obligation to recite the daily office on condition that he said instead certain prayers of his own choosing.<sup>20</sup> His predilection for fervency in prayer also led him to favour the use of 'ejaculatory' prayers, short single-sentence prayers that could be repeated often and invested with considerable emotional intensity. He recommended these in his treatise on prayer and gave a few examples, all directed to 'Dulcissime Iesu'.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise his piety was conventional, though profoundly devout, concentrating especially on the mass. As a scholar, Fisher retained all his life the intellectual curiosity and openness of youth. Under the influence of Erasmus and Reuchlin he set himself in his forties to learn both Hebrew and Greek, embarking around the same time on an ambitious project to produce a harmony of the Gospels, and a few years later on an exposition and paraphrase of the Psalms.<sup>22</sup> In his fifties he branched out with striking success on a new career as polemical theologian. His opponents were, in succession, Lefèvre d'Étaples, Martin Luther, Ulrich Velenus, Johann Oecolampadius, Richard Pace, and finally Robert Wakefield together with other theological advisers of Henry VIII. The works of this period spread Fisher's scholarly reputation throughout Europe, and ensured him a place in its intellectual, as well as its political, history.

The most eventful years of Fisher's life, and those with which his biographers have traditionally been most preoccupied, were his final years, spent in opposition to Henry VIII's marital and ecclesiastical policies. This opposition began of course with the controversy over Henry's divorce. As Fisher was one of the first to see, Henry's case against the validity of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon soon bore the seeds of a revolt from the authority of the papacy. As this danger became manifest, and as Henry put increasing pressure on the English church, Fisher was in the forefront of the opposition. Indeed, without him it is hard to imagine what sort of opposition there would have been. He was by far the most able of the defenders of the

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marriage, and was not afraid to defend it to Henry's face. He spoke out against anti-clerical legislation in the Parliament of 1529, and appealed to Rome against its enactments in 1530 – a gesture that resulted in his first imprisonment. He led the resistance in Convocation to the submission of the clergy in 1531, and was probably the author of the saving clause 'quantum per legem Christi licet' by which the clergy qualified their acceptance of Henry as their supreme head on earth. The dozen representatives of the lower clergy who signed a protestation against the submission a few days later included several of Fisher's friends and clients. Absent through illness from the convocation of 1532, he nevertheless wrote outspokenly against the temporal invasion of the spirituality. He may even have stiffened the resolve of his old friend Archbishop Warham to make a final gesture of defiance shortly before his death that year. It is a tribute to his personal influence that so many of his friends or associates should have stood out against the divorce or the royal supremacy or both. The list includes Thomas More, Nicholas West, Cuthbert Tunstall, Nicholas Wilson, Henry Gold, Ralph Baynes, John Addison and many others. Driven to disloyalty by the attack on the church, Fisher entered into negotiations with Eustace Chapuys, the imperial ambassador, with a view to securing Henry's excommunication and deposition by the pope with the assistance of imperial arms. In 1533 he led the small dissenting minority against Convocation's declaration that marriage to a brother's widow was absolutely contrary to natural law and indispensable by the pope. The day after Convocation cleared the way for the divorce, Fisher spoke publicly in defence of the marriage, and was gaoled for his pains. Anxious to silence him, the government included him in the act of attainder against the Holy Maid of Kent, on the grounds of misprision of treason – that is, for not revealing to the king prophecies which the Holy Maid had already told the king in person. While she and her closest followers were condemned to death, he escaped with 'confiscation of body and goods'. Before he had even been brought to prison, he was presented in April 1534 with the oath to the act of succession, which he refused. He was immediately confined to the Tower.

Before long, the chain of events which would lead to Fisher's death was under way. The statutes of supremacy and treasons were enacted, despite forlorn opposition from a minority that included Fisher's brother Robert, then member of Parliament for Rochester. Under these acts, 'maliciously' denying that the king was supreme head under God of the Church of England was made high treason, punishable by death. The apparently crucial adjective 'maliciously', inserted by the opposition in a vain attempt to mitigate the severity of the legislation, ultimately proved Fisher's undoing. Thomas More's legal training warned him against putting faith in such a loophole, and in the event he could only be convicted by perjury. But Fisher was not quite so cautious. Having been informed about the inclusion of this clause by his brother, he

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relied upon it to protect him from the consequences of his honesty. His initial refusal of the oath around the beginning of May was safe enough, and he was given six weeks to reconsider.<sup>23</sup> But a little later, on 7 May 1535, before a group of councillors which included Thomas Cromwell, he uttered the words ‘The Kyng owre Sovereign Lord is not supreme hedd yn erthe of the Cherche of Englande.’<sup>24</sup> The truth of the story that Fisher was tricked by Richard Rich into denying the supremacy is difficult to assess. The chronology of the *Vie* is confused over his various interrogations, and puts Rich’s stratagem at a late date in their course – which clearly cannot be true. Moreover, in the earliest version of the story Rich is not mentioned at all.<sup>25</sup> The subsequent introduction of his name is probably guilt by analogy with his well-known role in the entrapment of More. Yet the general outline of the story should not be dismissed out of hand.<sup>26</sup> The *Vie* gets the wording of the indictment right, and is surely correct in claiming that Fisher’s defence rested on the ‘maliciously’ loophole. As it is unlikely that he would simply have blurted out a denial of the supremacy in full knowledge of the penalties, it is probable that he was manoeuvred into it. The trick described, to put him under something like confessional secrecy with regard to a conscientious scruple of the king’s on which he wanted Fisher’s confidential advice, has no parallel in More’s story and would have been ideally suited to get through Fisher’s guard. The introduction of Rich’s name is something of a *réd herring*. But the trick itself has the ring of truth.<sup>27</sup> How could the honest and loyal bishop have refused such an appeal? At any rate, a few days later he was shown by his servant a letter from More to Meg Roper describing and justifying his attitude to the interrogation, namely his refusal to give any opinion on the matter whatsoever. Fisher then wrote to More asking for clarification, which he obtained. In a letter of 12 May, More described the statute to him as a ‘two-edged sword’, since to deny the supremacy imperilled the body, to affirm it imperilled the soul. This presumably worried Fisher, for shortly afterwards he wrote again, reminding More of the inclusion of ‘maliciously’ in the statute, and saying that he had thought it safe therefore to answer the questions frankly. The reply from More, written on 26 May, advised him against any further such frankness, and also urged that he should find his own words to parry further questions. Fisher did not take this sufficiently to heart. In a subsequent interrogation on 3 June, he refused to answer further questions on the supremacy, asking that his earlier answer should be allowed ‘the benefite of the same statute’ as it had not been malicious. However, he took up More’s theme in referring to the supremacy as a ‘two-edged sword’, a coincidence which alerted the councillors to the possibility of collusion between the two men. They soon nosed out the story of the clandestine correspondence, and subsequent interrogations concentrated on this, presumably in the hope of finding something to incriminate More.<sup>28</sup> In Fisher’s case the damage had already been done. In the meantime, news