Henry More

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HENRY MORE

AND THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

A. RUPERT HALL

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General Editor's Preface

OUR SOCIETY depends upon science, and yet to many of us what scientists do is a mystery. The sciences are not just collections of facts, but are ordered by theory, which is why Einstein could say that science was a free creation of the human mind. Though it is sometimes presented dispassionately and impersonally, science is a fully human activity, and the personalities of those who practise it are important in its progress, and often interesting to us. Looking at the lives of scientists is a way of bringing science to life.

Those scientists who appear in this series will be chosen for their eminence, but the aim of their biographers is to place them in their context. The books will be long enough for authors to write about the times as well as the life of their subjects. Science has not long been a profession, and for many eminent practitioners of the past it was very much a part-time activity; their *Lives* will therefore show them practising medicine or law, fighting wars, looking after estates or parishes, and not simply focus upon their hours in the laboratory. How somebody earned a living, made a career, got on with family and friends is an essential part of a biography: though in this series it is the subjects' commitment to science that has got them in, and must be always at the back of the biographer's mind.

Henry More's name will not be familiar to most of those who practise science today. There is no law, chemical reaction or disease named after

him; no laboratory or scientific society bears his name; and indeed it would be curious to call him a scientist at all. The word was coined in the 1830s by analogy with 'artist'; by then there were sufficient numbers of people active in the natural sciences to need a term to describe themselves. They were no longer philosophers or savants with special interests in nature, but a self-conscious group engaged in a common enterprise. Even in the nineteenth century, the term took some years to catch on, and 'natural philosopher' or 'man of science' remained, with 'naturalist', popular especially with those reluctant to see their common culture divided into humanistic and scientific halves.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, there was the 'New Philosophy' of Bacon, Galileo and Descartes, challenging the beliefs inherited from ancient Greece; this involved an emphasis upon answerable and empirical questions, and led to the beginning of modern science. But More did not devote himself to fact collecting, experiment or mathematics; he became one of the most celebrated philosophers of his day, corresponding with Descartes, and playing a very important part in transforming Cambridge from a stronghold of Puritan orthodoxy in the early part of the century into a more liberal place where mathematics could flourish in the Restoration period.

More was one of the group called the Cambridge Platonists, who saw Plato as a kind of prophet of Christianity, and he was also a believer in atomism. The atomic theory in the ancient world and in the Renaissance had been associated with irreligion; the gods of Epicurus and Lucretius watched the collisions of the atoms, but had not created them and could not intervene in the world. More, in his poem *Democritus Platonissans*, tried to combine the insights of Plato and those of the atomists, arguing for created particles and for the possibility of divine interventions. He believed that the atoms, possessing only the primary qualities of the new philosophy (motion, weight and shape), gave rise by their various arrangements to the secondary qualities, such as taste, colour and smell.

For More and his associates, as for Plato, God had worked through Nature, a kind of demiurge, in the creation, rather than doing everything himself, and the result might therefore be less than perfect. Robert Boyle, among others, disagreed with this, refusing to see an intermediary between God and the world as he refused to see one between God and humanity – he was a good Protestant. But More has an important place in making

atomism respectable in Britain, and in thus laying foundations for the work of Boyle and of Newton.

More was a prominent figure in Cambridge when Newton came up as an undergraduate, and recent work on Newton has pointed to the importance of the philosophical background to Newton's thinking. Rupert Hall, in this fascinating life, has come to More after editing Newton's later correspondence and various published works, and nobody could be better qualified to guide us through the new philosophy and the origins of modern science, intellectual and social. More was a very important figure in his own day, not a great original thinker like Descartes or Newton, but a synthesizer bringing together new and old thoughts into a new pattern. Against the background of thinkers like him we can assess the originality of Newton properly, and without understanding men like More we find that the greatest thinkers become inexplicable. This life will provide a splendid route into the middle of the seventeenth century, and its Scientific Revolution.

David Knight
University of Durham

Preface

HENRY MORE (1614–87), Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, was the greatest of English metaphysical theologians and the most perplexing, perhaps also the most distinguished, member of the group of seventeenth-century divines known as the Cambridge Platonists. He is in several respects a paradoxical figure. An admirer of Galileo, Descartes and Boyle, he rejected their detailed applications of the 'mechanical philosophy' to the explanation of natural phenomena. He was an experimenter, yet also a cabalist. He applauded the rising scientific movement of his day and became a Fellow of the Royal Society, yet maintained that the forces of Nature were spiritual. Isaac Newton approved More's atomist philosophy but rejected his 'Spirit of Nature'.

Because Henry More was an important figure in the history of my own College, his name has been familiar to me for fifty years; later I sat often under the sad portraits of his friends, Finch and Baines. Before the war Sir John Plumb assured me that Henry More had seen the devil flying round the tower of Great St Mary's, clad in leather breeches. I have not found such a tale in his writings, but there are others there nearly as strange. Copies of More's books and an important collection of his manuscripts are preserved in the College Library.

More was a prolific and varied author in both English and Latin. As several of his books were reprinted in his lifetime and since, he has been

widely read. But if More is often seen on the stage of history, he has rarely come under the spotlight; if he often figures in articles and monographs upon intellectual history, few books have been devoted wholly to a consideration of his writings. Yet his work touches on many points of perennial interest, not least his relation to the scientific movement of the seventeenth century, which he both aided and opposed. The young More popularized in English verse the work of Galileo and Descartes; the mature More ignored the former and rebelled against the latter. In final judgement More may be found an opponent of the rising scientific spirit, even if his ideas did contribute positively to Newton's concepts of space and time.

My book is concerned only with the scientific aspects of More's thought, and his relationship to Newton in particular. I have excluded any evaluation of More as poet and theologian. In his biography I have emphasized his scientific relationships, and in writing of his philosophy, his philosophy of Nature. I have dealt lightly with More as a figure in the history of witchcraft and spiritualism in England, and upon his involvements with cabalists, Rosicrucians and alchemists. His detestation of ranting religious enthusiasms seems to me to belong to a treatment of More as a religious writer. It is perhaps a more serious (though deliberate) omission that, though I have tried to put together an accessible account of More in the contexts of Renaissance and Cambridge Platonism – for some grasp of these contexts is essential to an understanding of his scientific writings – I have attempted no full assessment of More as a Platonist; that would require a different book.

The aspects of More's writings least examined by me have been fully treated by Dr R. W. B. Crocker in his Oxford D. Phil. thesis 'An Intellectual Biography of Henry More (1614–87)', presented in 1986. He has studied More as a mystic and a man obsessed with the spiritual element in the world. Dr Crocker's is undoubtedly the most thorough analysis of More to date, but More's relation to or possible influence upon the scientific movement of his time, central to my interest, is tangential to his. I read his thesis after my own book was written and was happy to discern no obvious conflict between us. I must have some recollection also of a Cambridge MA thesis by Miss P. M. L. Moir on 'The Natural Philosophy of Henry More', but it is twenty-two years since I examined it with Dr Gerd Buchdahl. Dr Crocker has compiled elaborate bibliographical materials which will be of great use to future scholars.

PREFACE

Part I of this book is introductory to the more detailed study of More and the Scientific Revolution in Part II. I have not examined every one of More's numerous writings with great care because many are irrelevant to my purpose. I am much indebted to the work of other writers, above all to the *Conway Letters* of Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1930), an invaluable source. Appendix I lists More's chief philosophical writings. The Bibliography lists many published studies relevant to my topic.

For assistance in preparing this book I am indebted to the Librarian of Christ's College, Cambridge, and Mrs Courtney; to Drs Alan Gabbey and John Henry, who have explored More before me; and to Dr Sarah Hutton who kindly invited my participation in a symposium on the tercentenary of More's death. Particularly I am indebted to Sir Hans Kornberg FRS, Master of Christ's College, whose invitation to deliver a commemorative lecture in the College induced me to prepare this introductory study.

A. Rupert Hall
Tackley, Oxford

Foreword to the Cambridge Edition

Since this book was first published in 1990 a mild interest in Henry More has thriven. Dr Sarah Hutton has given us a re-edition, with new material, of the *Conway Letters* and promises a complete, annotated publication of Richard Ward's near-contemporary biography of More. Articles on him or on matters with which he was concerned continue to appear in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* and elsewhere. One of these, by Dr John Henry, took the form of a review of the present volume. Dr Henry gently rebuked me for making too little of More's 'voluntarist' theology and its relation to his philosophy. But, as I mention in my Preface, I did not mean to concern myself with Henry More as a poet or as a theologian, for it was my original plan to write only about him in the context of the seventeenth century's new scientific movement. This proved too narrow a view but 'Henry More, Scientist' has remained (if the anachronism may be permitted) my chief interest.

A. Rupert Hall, Tackley, August 1995

Cambridge! *Cambridge*! What a monstrous mother art thou! I never thought the *same womb* could labour with *Moores* and *Christians*.

Thomas Vaughan, *The Man-Mouse*, 1650