

Excerpts from Utopia
Thomas More, 1516

From Wikipedia: *Utopia* is “A little, true book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia”) is a work of fiction and socio-political satire by Thomas More (1478–1535), written in Latin and published in 1516. The book is a frame narrative primarily depicting a fictional island society and its religious, social, and political customs. Many aspects of description of Utopia are reminiscent of life in monasteries.

Description of the Island of Utopia

The island of Utopia is 200 miles broad in the middle, and over a great part of it, but grows narrower at either end. The figure of it is not unlike a crescent. Eleven miles breadth of sea washeth its horns and formeth a considerable bay, encompassed by a shore about 500 miles in extent, and well sheltered from storms. In the bay is no great current. The whole coast is as it were a continued harbour, affording the whole island every advantage of mutual intercourse. Yet the entrance into the bay, owing to rocks and shoals, is very dangerous.

In the middle is a rock which appeareth above water, on whose top is a tower inhabited by a garrison. The other rocks lie under water, and are very dangerous. The channel is known only by the natives, and a stranger entering the bay without one of their pilots would be in imminent danger of shipwreck. Themselves could not pass it in safety, without certain marks on the coast to direct their way. And if these were a little altered, any fleet coming against them, however large, would certainly be lost. On the other side of the island are likewise many harbours; and the coast is so fortified by nature as well as art, that a small force could hinder the descent of a large army. Report saith (and marks of its credibility remain) that this island was originally a part of the continent. Utopus, the conqueror of it, and whose name it now bears (having previously been called Abraxa), brought the government and civility of the rude inhabitants to their present highly improved state. Having easily subdued them, he formed the design of separating them from the continent and encompassing them with the sea. To this end, he ordered a deep channel to be dug 15 miles long; and that the natives might not think he treated them like slaves, he not only obliged them, but also his own soldiers to labour at the work. From the number of hands employed, it was finished with dispatch exceeding every man's expectation; and his neighbours, who at first laughed at the folly of the undertaking, when they saw it accomplished, were struck with admiration and terror.

There are 54 cities in the island, all of them large and well built. Their laws, manners, and customs, are the same, and they resemble each other as nearly as the ground they stand on will allow. The nearest to each other are at least 24 miles asunder; and the most remote, not above a day's journey on foot. Every city sendeth three of her wisest senators once a-year to Amaurot (the capital of the island, and situate in the center), to consult on their common interests. The jurisdiction of every city extendeth at least 20 miles, and farther where they lie wider asunder. No one desireth to enlarge her boundary, for the people consider themselves in the light of good husbands, rather than owners, of their lands.

Laws of Utopia

If a man aspire ambitiously to any office, he loseth it for certain. They live in loving intercourse with each other, the magistrates never behaving either insolently or cruelly to the people. They affect rather to be called fathers, and by really being such, well merit the appellation. The people pay them all marks of honour, the more freely because none are exacted from them. The prince himself hath no distinction either of garments or a crown; a sheaf of corn only is carried before him, and a wax-light before the high-priest. They have few laws and such is their constitution, they require not many. They much condemn other countries, whose laws, with the commentaries on them, swell so many volumes; esteeming it unreasonable to oblige men to obey a body of laws so large and intricate, as not to be read and understood by every subject.

They have no lawyers among them. For they esteem them a class, whose profession it is to disguise matters, and to writhe the laws. Therefore they think it much better that every man should plead his own cause, and trust it to the judge, as elsewhere the client trusteth it to his counsellor. By this plan they avoid many delays, and find out the truth with more certainty. For after the parties have opened the merits of the cause without the artifices of lawyers, the judge examines the matter and supports the simplicity of those well-meaning persons whom otherwise the crafty would run down. And thus they avoid those evils which appear so remarkable in those countries which labour under a vast load of laws.

Every one of them is skilled in their law. It is a very short study, and the plainest meaning of which words are capable, is ever the sense of it. They argue thus. All laws are promulgated that every man may know his duty. Therefore the plainest construction of words is, what ought to be put upon them. A more refined exposition could not easily be comprehended, and would only make the laws useless to the greater part of mankind, especially to those who most need the guidance of them. It is the same thing, whether you make no law at all, or couch it in terms of which, without a quick apprehension and much study, men cannot find out the true meaning; for the generality of mankind are so dull and so busied in their avocations, that they have neither the leisure nor capacity requisite for such an inquiry.

Some of their neighbours, who long ago, by the assistance of the Utopians, shook off the yoke of tyranny, being struck with the virtue they observed among them, have come to desire magistrates of them, some changing them yearly, others every five years. When they change them, it is with strong expressions of honour and esteem; and in this they seem to have hit upon a very good expedient for their own happiness and safety. Since the good or ill condition of a country dependeth so much on its magistrates, they could not have made a better choice than men whom no advantages can bias. Wealth is of no use to them, who must so soon return to their own country; and being strangers among them, no party interests can agitate them. When public judicatories are swayed by avarice or partiality, justice, the grand sinew of society, is lost.

Their Farms

There are fifty-four cities in the island, all large and well built, the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow. The nearest lie at least twenty-four miles' distance from one another, and the most remote are not so far distant but that a man can go on foot in one day from it to that which lies next it.

Every city sends three of their wisest senators once a year to Amaurot, to consult about their common concerns; for that is the chief town of the island, being situated near the center of it, so that it is the most convenient place for their assemblies. The jurisdiction of every city extends at least twenty miles, and, where the towns lie wider, they have much more ground. No town desires to enlarge its bounds, for the people consider themselves rather as tenants than landlords. They have built, over all the country, farmhouses for husbandmen, which are well contrived, and furnished with all things necessary for country labor. Inhabitants are sent, by turns, from the cities to dwell in them; no country family has fewer than forty men and women in it, besides two slaves. There is a master and a mistress set over every family, and over thirty families there is a magistrate. Every year twenty of this family come back to the town after they have stayed two years in the country, and in their stead there are another twenty sent from the town, that they may learn country work from those that have been already one year in the country, as they must teach those that come to them the next from the town. By this means such as dwell in those country farms are never ignorant of agriculture, and so commit no errors which might otherwise be fatal and bring them under a scarcity of corn. But though there is every year such a shifting of the husbandmen to prevent any man being forced against his will to follow that hard course of life too long, yet many among them take such pleasure in it that they desire leave to continue in it many years.

These husbandmen till the ground, breed cattle, hew wood, and convey it to the towns either by land or water, as is most convenient. They breed an infinite multitude of chickens in a very curious manner; for the hens do not sit and hatch them, but a vast number of eggs are laid in a gentle and equal heat in order to be hatched, and they are no sooner out of the shell, and able to stir about, but they seem to consider those that feed them as their mothers, and follow them as other chickens do the hen that hatched them.

They breed very few horses, but those they have are full of mettle, and are kept only for exercising their youth in the art of sitting and riding them; for they do not put them to any work, either of plowing or carriage, in which they employ oxen. For though their horses are stronger, yet they find oxen can hold out longer; and as they are not subject to so many diseases, so they are kept upon a less charge and with less trouble. And even when they are so worn out that they are no more fit for labor, they are good meat at last. They sow no corn but that which is to be their bread; for they drink either wine, cider or perry, and often water, sometimes boiled with honey or liquorice, with which they abound; and though they know exactly how much corn will serve every town and all that tract of country which belongs to it, yet they sow much more and breed more cattle than are necessary for their consumption, and they give that surplus of which they make no use to their neighbors. When they want anything in the country which it does not produce, they fetch that from the town, without carrying anything in exchange for it. And the magistrates of the town take care to see it given them; for they meet generally in the town once a month, upon a festival day. When the time of harvest comes, the magistrates in the country send to those in the towns and let them know how many hands they will need for reaping the harvest; and the number they call for being sent to them, they commonly despatch it all in one day.

Their Cities

He that knows one of their towns knows them all – they are so like one another, except where the situation makes some difference. I shall therefore describe one of them, and none is so proper as Amaurot; for as none is more eminent (all the rest yielding in precedence to this, because it is the seat of their supreme council), so there was none of them better known to me, I having lived five years all together in it.

It lies upon the side of a hill, or, rather, a rising ground. Its figure is almost square, for from the one side of it, which shoots up almost to the top of the hill, it runs down, in a descent for two miles, to the river Anyder; but it is a little broader the other way that runs along by the bank of that river. The Anyder rises about eighty miles above Amaurot, in a small spring at first.

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The inhabitants have fortified the fountainhead of this river, which springs a little without the towns; that so, if they should happen to be besieged, the enemy might not be able to stop or divert the course of the water, nor poison it; from thence it is carried, in earthen pipes, to the lower streets. And for those places of the town to which the water of that small river cannot be conveyed, they have great cisterns for receiving the rain-water, which supplies the want of the other. The town is compassed with a high and thick wall, in which there are many towers and forts; there is also a broad and deep dry ditch, set thick with thorns, cast round three sides of the town, and the river is instead of a ditch on the fourth side. The streets are very convenient for all carriage, and are well sheltered from the winds.

Their buildings are good, and are so uniform that a whole side of a street looks like one house. The streets are twenty feet broad; there lie gardens behind all their houses. These are large, but enclosed with buildings, that on all hands face the streets, so that every house has both a door to the street and a back door to the garden. Their doors have all two leaves, which, as they are easily opened, so they shut of their own accord; and, there being no property among them, every man may freely enter into any house whatsoever. At every ten years' end they shift their houses by lots.

Their Officials

Thirty families choose every year a magistrate, who was anciently called the Syplogrant, but is now called the Philarch; and over every ten Syplogrants, with the families subject to them, there is another magistrate, who was anciently called the Tranibore, but of late the Archphilarch. All the Syplogrants, who are in number two hundred, choose the Prince out of a list of four who are named by the people of the four divisions of the city; but they take an oath, before they proceed to an election, that they will choose him whom they think most fit for the office: they give him their voices secretly, so that it is not known for whom every one gives his suffrage. The Prince is for life, unless he is removed upon suspicion of some design to enslave the people.

The Tranibors are new chosen every year, but yet they are, for the most part, continued; all their other magistrates are only annual. The Tranibors meet every third day, and oftener if necessary, and consult with the Prince either concerning the affairs of the State in general, or such private differences as may arise sometimes among the people, though that falls out but seldom. There are always two Syplogrants called into the council chamber, and these are changed every day. It is a fundamental rule of their government, that no conclusion can be made in anything that relates to the public till it has been first debated three several days in their council. It is death for any to meet and consult concerning the State, unless it be either in their ordinary council, or in the assembly of the whole body of the people.

These things have been so provided among them that the Prince and the Tranibors may not conspire together to change the government and enslave the people; and therefore when anything of great importance is set on foot, it is sent to the Syplogrants, who, after they have communicated it to the families that belong to their divisions, and have considered it among themselves, make report to the senate; and, upon great occasions, the matter is referred to the council of the whole island. One rule observed in their council is, never to debate a thing on the same day in which it is first proposed; for that is always referred to the next meeting, that so men may not rashly and in the heat of discourse engage themselves too soon, which might bias them so much that, instead of consulting the good of the public, they might rather study to support their first opinions, and by a perverse and preposterous sort of shame hazard their country rather than endanger their own reputation, or venture the being suspected to have wanted foresight in the expedients that they at first proposed; and therefore, to prevent this, they take care that they may rather be deliberate than sudden in their motions.