Picturing Politics: Thomas More’s Utopia
By Dr Lucy Sargisson

The image on the left formed the frontispiece for the first published edition of Thomas More’s book *Utopia*. This book is nearly 500 years old, yet it stills reads as wildly radical and scholars still argue over its true meaning.

It tells the story of a fictional conversation between Thomas More, some of More’s friends, and a wise seagoing man who has seen the world. This man’s name is Hythloday. In the second part of the book, Hythloday describes a wondrous island called ‘Utopia’, where there is no such thing as private property and people live happily from their commonwealth.

This image is a map of that place, or perhaps, of that idea. In one sense then it’s a map of Utopia. It suggests that it is a real place, it shows us the topography of the island with rivers and towns. And yet it’s also not a map of Utopia – it doesn’t tell us where it is or how to find it.

In 1518 the book was republished with a new frontispiece, shown here on the right. Several changes have been made to this image but the most interesting, I think, is the inclusion of the figures in the foreground. These are Hythloday, Thomas More and his friend, Peter Giles and this image, for me, captures the essence of More’s *Utopia*.

*Utopia* is about what can happen when people from different worlds come together and when the gaze of the stranger falls on our lives. It encourages us to question things that we take for granted. It’s about being willing to challenge the way that things have always been done and thinking hard about what makes a good society. In the first part of the book, for example, Hythloday expresses disgust at the inequities of the social and legal systems of sixteenth century England:

“People are impoverished as a consequence of the enclosure of land, and yet you punish them by death for the crime of theft. English law is neither effective nor just. Listen to me and I’ll tell you about a place where things are done differently and better.”

*Utopia* is a great book - it inspired a tradition of utopian thinking that continues today. And these images are a fascinating way into thinking about that book.