

WILLIAM TYNDALE AND THE ENGLISH NEW TESTAMENT OF 1525.

BY W. GUY JOHNSON.

FOUR hundred years ago this last Spring, the New Testament printed in English found its way into England for the first time. Wyclif had translated the Bible a hundred and fifty years earlier, but his version was from the Latin and it did not appear in printed form until nearly five centuries after his death. William Tyndale translated direct from the original Greek and himself saw the work through the press. It was completed in the latter half of 1525 and reached this country early in the following year, making one of the most memorable and important landmarks in the history of the Bible. The anniversary, either last year of the completion of the book, or this year of its arrival in England, has attracted comparatively little attention. There have been a few articles in newspapers and magazines, and the Oxford Press has issued a beautifully produced facsimile of that fragment of the work which exists in the King's Library in the British Museum, but that is about all. It is a pity, for Tyndale was a man of rare genius and heroic character; and his self-sacrificing achievement and tragic end deserve fuller remembrance. Macaulay has warned us that "A people which takes no pride in the noble achievements of remote ancestors will never achieve anything worthy to be remembered with pride by remote descendants."

Tyndale's career was in one sense uneventful and affords comparatively little in the way of incident, as anyone who reads Demaus' full and able biography will discover. He stood apart from the stirring events and movements of his time and lived the life of a scholar and specialist. But there were few of his more active contemporaries who did as much as he to stimulate and to give permanence to the movements for reform which were going on around him. His history is that of a life wholly concentrated on a single purpose from which nothing was allowed to deflect him. When at Little Sodbury in the household of Sir John Walsh, he replied to a priest who had asserted that it was "better to be without God's law than the Pope's," "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest." And to this purpose, in spite of dangers, discouragements and difficulties which would have daunted anyone of less heroic temper, he successfully devoted himself for the next sixteen years, at the end of which his only earthly reward was martyrdom at the stake. Bishop Westcott writes "From the first he had exactly measured the cost of his work; and when he had once made his resolve to translate the Scriptures, he never afterwards lost sight of it, and never failed in doing what he proposed to do."¹

¹ *History of the English Bible*. Third Edition, p. 27, n.

The literature relating to Tyndale is not very extensive, though it is sufficient to give us a very good picture of his life and work. First of all there are his own writings, which are readily accessible in the three volumes published with a biographical introduction by the Parker Society; and there is the account of him compiled by Foxe in the "Acts and Monuments." Among quite modern books there is the *Dictionary of National Biography* which gives a good summary of his career; and the able and scholarly article on English Versions by the Rev. J. H. Lupton in the supplementary volume of Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*. Bishop Westcott in the first part of his *History of the English Bible* gives a brief sketch of Tyndale's life and character, and in the second part a critical estimate of his work as a translator. But the fullest and most complete account of the man and his work is to be found in the Biography by the Rev. R. Demaus, a second edition of which, edited and revised by the Rev. Richard Lovett, was published by the Religious Tract Society in 1886. This has since been re-issued and is still in print. It deserves to be read, for it is as popular and interesting in style as it is full and scholarly in its matter; and it is not only a good biography, but is also an important contribution to the history of the English Bible.

The date and place of Tyndale's birth are not known. The probability is that the year was somewhere about 1490, though if it were so late as that he showed a maturity of opinion, scholarship and literary expression at an age which was very early in view of the limited material in the way of texts, grammars and lexicons at his command. The place may have been Slymbridge near Stonehouse, in Gloucestershire, as Demaus tentatively suggests, but, whether it was there, or at Stinchcombe or at North Nibley in the same county, it is impossible to decide. A like obscurity envelops his early years, of which we know only what Foxe tells us, that "Tyndale was brought up from a child at the University of Oxford." This probably means that being a precocious boy he was sent to Oxford at an early age. As our knowledge of his earlier life is confined to what we learn from a brief summary in Foxe, the passage may be given here.

"William Tyndale, the faithful minister and constant martyr of Christ, was born about the borders of Wales, and brought up from a child in the university of Oxford, where he, by long continuance, grew up, and increased as well in the knowledge of tongues, and other liberal arts, as especially in the knowledge of the Scriptures, whereunto his mind was singularly addicted; insomuch that he, lying then in Magdalen Hall, read privily to certain students and fellows of Magdalen College, some parcel of divinity; instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the Scriptures. His manners also and conversation being correspondent to the same, were such, that all they that knew him, reputed and esteemed him to be a man of most virtuous disposition, and of life unspotted.

"Thus he, in the University of Oxford, increasing more and more

in learning, and proceeding in degrees of the schools, spying his time, removed from thence to the University of Cambridge, where, after he had likewise made his abode a certain space, being now further ripened in the knowledge of God's word, leaving that University also, he resorted to one Master Walsh, a knight of Gloucestershire, and was there schoolmaster to his children, and in good favour with his master. This gentleman, as he kept a good ordinary commonly at his table, there resorted to him many times sundry abbots, deans, archdeacons, with divers other doctors, and great benefited men; who there, together with Master Tyndale sitting at the same table, did use many times to enter communication, and talk of learned men, as of Luther and Erasmus; also of divers other controversies and questions upon the Scripture.

"Then Master Tyndale, as he was learned and well practised in God's matters, so he spared not to show unto them simply and plainly his judgment in matters, as he thought; and when they at any time did vary from Tyndale in opinions and judgment, he would show them in the book, and lay plainly before them the open and manifest places of the Scriptures, to confute their errors, and confirm his sayings."¹

No reason is given for this removal from Oxford to Cambridge. It may be that the "divinity" he taught was of the new reforming type and that the authorities were becoming suspicious. The expression "spying his time" would fit in with this. Or, it may be that the fame of Erasmus, who was lecturing on Greek at Cambridge, drew him. The late Principal Lindsay wrote of Tyndale as the favourite pupil of Colet,² a very interesting suggestion; but a request for the authority for the statement brought the reply that, though he must have had some ground for making it, a search among his notes revealed no trace of it. It is not impossible, but the evidence, if there is any, seems to be lost. Colet exercised a profound influence upon Erasmus; and Tyndale's was the nature to profit largely by the same influence had he come within its range.

During the time when, as Foxe tells us, he was attached to Sir John Walsh's household at Little Sodbury, near Bristol, doubtless in the capacity of chaplain as well as tutor, he would meet the local magnates, clerical and lay, who visited there, and as he appears to have spoken his mind pretty freely, he naturally fell under suspicion of heresy, for which he was cited before the Chancellor of the diocese, though nothing came of it but significant threats. It was in Sir John Walsh's house that he declared his intention to translate the Scriptures, and in the preface to his edition of the Pentateuch, he gives us the reason:—

"Which thing only [the objection of those in power 'that the Scripture should come to light'] moved me to translate the New

¹ *Acts and Monuments*, Fourth Edition, Revised by the Rev. Josiah Pratt. Vol. v, pp. 114, 115.

² *History of the Reformation*, vol. ii, p. 319.

Testament. Because I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text.”¹

Finding no place to accomplish his purpose in Gloucestershire, he turned his steps to London, where he hoped to find encouragement from the Bishop, Tunstal, whose disposition towards the New Learning had been praised by Erasmus. With a translation of one of the orations of Isocrates in his pocket, and an introduction to the Controller of the Royal Household, he reached London in the middle of the year 1523. Alas, he soon discovered that there was no place in my lord of London's palace to translate the Scriptures, and he was soon to find that there was no place for the purpose in all England. He remained in London for about ten months, during which he preached at St. Dunstan's, Fleet Street, though the existing registers have no record of the fact. The Church itself was destroyed in the Great Fire, the present building standing on the site. By a fortunate circumstance, Tyndale here made the acquaintance of a wealthy London merchant, Humphrey Monmouth, who took him into his house and befriended him both then and afterwards at much risk to himself, for he was later on brought before the authorities on the charge of aiding and abetting him.

It was by now plain that there was no place in all England where the New Testament could with safety be translated and, we may add, published; for it is manifest from the date at which the work reached this country that the translation must have been far advanced before Tyndale left England. Accordingly, in the month of May, 1524, he set sail for the Continent, never to see his native land again. He landed at Hamburg and, according to all contemporary evidence, proceeded to Wittemberg, to confer with Luther. There was then no printing press in Hamburg, so that he would have no object in remaining in that town, though within a year he was again there to receive a remittance from his merchant friend in London.

It is hardly necessary at this time of day to defend Tyndale against the charge of want of originality either in the design of his work or in its execution. He doubtless discussed scores of points of grammar and rendering with Luther and others, but they could give him no assistance with his English version, for the Continental reformers as a whole were generally unacquainted with the English language. The close and vigorous examination to which his work has been subjected has long since vindicated his claim to independence as a translator. The late Bishop Westcott has dealt with the matter adequately in the work already referred to, and it is indeed no longer in dispute. Tyndale was undoubtedly indebted to Luther, as every scholar is indebted to other scholars in the same field;

¹ *Works* (Parker Society), vol. iii, p. 394. *The Five Books of Moses, a verbatim reprint of the edition of 1530*, p. 3. Edited by the Rev. J. I. Mombert, D.D. London, 1884.

but when the question of independence is raised differences have to be considered as well as resemblances, and the differences here are many and not always unimportant.

Tyndale did not return to Wittenberg after his business at Hamburg was completed and the money needed for printing was in hand, but went to Cologne to have the book put into type. That it was ready for this within a year of his reaching Hamburg is sufficient evidence that it was already well on the way before he left England. Cologne was a city thoroughly under orthodox influences, though there were printers who would print secretly the Bible or other heretical books if it paid them to do so. It was less likely to be suspected than Wittenberg, and it offered greater facilities for the exportation of books to London. At any rate here it was that Tyndale put the work in hand. The secret, unfortunately, leaked out: the story is well known, and Tyndale, taking with him the sheets already printed, fled further up the Rhine to Worms, where he found a printer to complete the New Testament begun at Cologne. That version had the glosses or marginal notes which are said to have been responsible for the hunting down and destruction of Tyndale's translation. The notes were in some cases controversial, though in the fragment of the Cologne version the great majority are merely explanatory or expository. There is nothing in them comparable to the very pointed note placed in the margin of the Pentateuch against Balaam's question "How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed?" where Tyndale says "The Pope can tell how." But arrangements were made to seize the books before it was known whether there were any notes or not. And the same efforts at destruction were levelled as fiercely at the edition without notes as at the one which had them. The annotated edition was in small quarto, and there are only two fragments of it known to exist. One is in the library of St. Paul's Cathedral, the other in the British Museum. It is the latter which the late Professor Arber published in facsimile with a very useful introduction. A fresh facsimile has been made by the Oxford Press and was published last year.

But on reaching Worms Tyndale had a smaller edition, octavo, without notes, set up. Both editions were completed, if not by the end of 1525, which scarcely seems possible, yet very early in 1526, and three thousand copies of each were printed. The utmost secrecy had to be observed in their distribution, for the Cologne episode had given warning to the authorities, and Wolsey and Henry VIII had taken prompt action to prevent their being circulated in this country. It was, however, to no purpose, for copies smuggled over in bales of merchandise were in circulation here by April or May of 1526, two years after Tyndale had left London. Froude says "the high dignitaries of the earth were fighting against God and they met with the success which ever attends such contests." Of the 3,000 copies of the octavo edition only one is known to be in existence. Its only defect is the lack of the original title page. Otherwise it is perfect. It is in the library of the Baptist College

at Bristol.¹ Tyndale spent the remaining ten years of his life in revising and perfecting this translation and in translating the Old Testament, which, however, he was not to complete, and in writing various treatises in defence of his work.

His New Testament was warmly welcomed and eagerly sought for, in spite of official prohibitions and of the grave perils to which the possession of a copy rendered its owner liable. Men and women seeking God found Him in His Word and found freedom from the burdens which a corrupt Church had laid upon their souls. The translation was wonderfully true to the original and has left an indelible mark upon every subsequent version. It was violently attacked for its "errors," its most respectable antagonist being Sir Thomas More. Tyndale has found opponents in our own day. An Anglo-Catholic writer, who has since gone over to Rome, had no better description of him than "Tyndale and Coverdale, two dissenting heretics," and this in a book dedicated "by kind permission" to the late Bishop Creighton. It is to be supposed that the Bishop had not taken the precaution to read the book before giving his "permission."

Dr. James Gairdner makes very unsympathetic reference to Tyndale's work in several passages in his *History of the English Church from Henry VIII to Mary*, but Professor Pollard, whose authority is at least equal to that of Dr. Gairdner, in commenting on one of these puts the matter in a truer light. He writes:

"Dr. Gairdner appears to agree with More in considering Tyndale's translation of the Scriptures as 'a mischievous perversion of those writings intended to advance heretical opinions.' Tyndale's object was to spread the knowledge of the Scriptures irrespective of the question whether that knowledge made men heretics or confirmed their Catholicism. If a knowledge of the Scriptures tended to make men heretics, that was the fault of the Church. And as for the 'mischievous perversion,' that surely consisted in enforcing a translation which implied a whole world of ideas not contained in the original. 'Priest,' 'do penance,' 'charity,' and 'church' all denoted to the men of the sixteenth century ideas which are not to be found in the New Testament; and no Greek scholar would dispute the fact that Tyndale's expressions were less of a perversion of the truth than those they displaced. If Tyndale's translation is a 'mischievous perversion,' what is the Revised Version, which for the most part adopts Tyndale's phrases?"²

The late Professor Froude wrote of his work as a translator as follows:

"Of the translation itself, though since that time it has been

¹ The late Mr. Francis Fry had an exact facsimile of this made by a careful process of tracing each page; it was then lithographed and a limited edition was published; copies of this are now very scarce.

² *Thomas Cranmer*, p. 110, n.

many times revised and altered, we may say that it is substantially the Bible with which we are all familiar. The peculiar genius—which breathes through it—the mingled tenderness and majesty—the Saxon simplicity—the preternatural grandeur—unequaled, unapproached, in the attempted improvements of modern scholars—all are here, and bear the impress of the mind of one man—William Tyndale. Lying, while engaged in that great office, under the shadow of death, he worked, under circumstances alone perhaps truly worthy of the task which was laid upon him—his spirit, as it were divorced from the world, moved in a purer element than common air.”¹

The limits of a magazine article will not admit of an account of Tyndale's theological views, or of his wanderings on the Continent from place to place in search of a fresh refuge as one after another became known to those who were seeking to take him. The three volumes of his works, including “The Obedience of a Christian Man,” “The Parable of the Wicked Mammon,” “The Practice of Prelates,” his controversy with Sir Thomas More, Expositions and other writings, will well repay perusal, and will show the man and his teaching as they were.

Mrs. Oliphant in *The Makers of Florence* gives us a charming picture of the artist Giotto as he wandered about Italy “here leaving a mild-eyed Madonna, there a group of saints in glory or sinners in pain . . . and betraying his course wherever he went by something beautiful, some bit of common wall blossomed into an immortal thing.”

In some such manner may we think of William Tyndale. Wherever he went we have the same testimony to the beauty and devotion of his character, and to his singleness of purpose and unselfish devotion to the task set before him. Humphrey Monmouth, Sir Thomas More, even the agents sent out by Thomas Cromwell to take him, bear witness to his blamelessness of life. When abroad, his recreation from the strain of study was to visit and relieve the sick and poor and to minister to those of his own countrymen whom he could find. He may well be included in the catalogue of those of whom the world was not worthy, though the Bishops and Convocations of the present century did not find a place for him in their revised Calendar. After eluding his enemies for several years he was eventually taken by treachery, imprisoned at Vilvorde near Brussels, and having been first strangled, his body was burnt at the stake in 1536. His last words were “Lord, open the King of England's eyes.” His prayer was answered, for within a year the complete Bible, printed in English and including the very New Testament which had previously been proscribed, was edited by John Rogers and circulated in England without opposition from the king. Mr. Trevelyan, in his recently published *History of England*, writes (p. 310):

“Above all, at Cranmer's instigation, the Bible in English was not only permitted to circulate freely but was ordered to be set up

¹ *History of England*. Popular Edition, vol. ii, p. 497.

in every parish church. A version based on that of Tyndale, the noble scholar and martyr, and on another by his less learned successor, Miles Coverdale, became known, as Tyndale had desired, to craftsmen and to 'the boy that driveth the plough.' "

The only surviving specimen of Tyndale's handwriting is the letter which he wrote from his prison to the governor of the castle of Vilvorde, the Marquis of Bergen-op-Zoom, with whom Thomas Cromwell had already interceded on his behalf, though alas, as it proved, without result. The letter is so characteristic of the man that it may well be given here :—

" I believe, right worshipful, that you are not ignorant of what has been determined concerning me (by the Council of Brabant) ; therefore I entreat your lordship and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here (in Vilvorde) during the winter, you will request the Procureur to be kind enough to send me from my goods which he has in his possession, a warmer cap, for I suffer extremely from cold in the head, being afflicted with a perpetual catarrh, which is considerably increased in this cell. A warmer coat also, for that which I have is very thin : also a piece of cloth to patch my leggings : my overcoat is worn out ; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woollen shirt of mine, if he will be kind enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth for putting on above ; he also has warmer caps for wearing at night. I wish also his permission to have a lamp in the evening, for it is wearisome to sit alone in the dark. *But above all, I entreat and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the Procureur that he may kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study.* And in return, may you obtain your dearest wish, provided always it be consistent with the salvation of your soul. But if, before the end of the winter, a different decision be reached concerning me, I shall be patient, abiding the will of God to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose Spirit, I pray, may ever direct your heart. Amen.

W. TYNDALE."

In face of such a life eulogy seems an impertinence. There is a fine statue of Tyndale in the Embankment Gardens in London ; a better memorial is perhaps the House of the Bible Society standing side by side with the office of *The Times* newspaper in Queen Victoria Street. But the truest monument to his life and work is a nation which has been liberated in mind and conscience, ennobled and made great by the truths of that Divine Word which Tyndale strove so successfully to put into its hands. If ever England departs from that Word the period of her decline will have begun.