

The Bible in English : A Survey

BY DONALD COGGAN

THIRTEEN hundred years is a long time in the growth of a nation. But it is impossible to speak about the influence of the English Bible on the life and character, the literature and thought of the English people without going back at least that far. True, the outlines of history are dim and the facts not easily verifiable when one is dealing with the seventh century A.D. ; but it seems probable that there is truth in the story that just about 1,300 years ago a labourer at the monastery of Whitby, who later became a monk there, turned much of the Scriptures into verse as a result of a vision vouchsafed to him. So Caedmon became the first Anglo-Saxon writer of popular religious poetry, though it is likely that even before his time there were paraphrases from the Latin scriptures into the vernacular. A country like Britain, which could as early as 314 send three of its own bishops to the Council of Arles, presumably had considerable parts of the Scriptures in its own common language.

Perhaps the best way of surveying what is a very long stretch of history and a vast subject will be to focus the light of our inquiry on certain people and on incidents of particular interest. To put it another way, we shall flash on the screen of our mind a short series of pictures that will illustrate our theme.

The first we have already glanced at—Caedmon who, so the old story goes, felt keenly his inability to sing and, when he saw the harp coming his way at the monastery at Whitby, would leave the table. But one night when he had done so, and had lain down in the stable and there fallen asleep, there stood One by him in a dream, and said, “Caedmon sing Me something.” And he answered, “I cannot sing, and for that reason I have left the feast.” But He said, “Sing the beginning of created things.” So he sang; and the poem of Caedmon is the first native growth of English literature.

Our second picture comes again from the north of England. This time it is Jarrow and the date is 735. The Venerable Bede tells us that he spent all his years in the Jarrow monastery, “ever intent upon the study of the Scriptures. In the intervals between the duties enjoined by the disciplinary rule and the daily care of chanting in the church, I took sweet pleasure in always learning, teaching, or writing”. Now it is Ascension Day, 735, and Bede is on his death bed. Let his faithful disciple Cuthbert tell us the story of the finishing of the translation of St. John’s Gospel. “In the evening his boy-scribe said to him : ‘One sentence, dear master, is left unfinished’. He bade him write quickly. Soon the boy announced that it was finished. ‘True’, the dying man said, ‘it is finished. Take mine head between thy hands and raise me. Full fain would I sit with my face to my holy oratory, where I was ever wont to pray, that sitting so I may call on my Father’. And so he sat on the floor of his cell, and chanted ‘Glory be to the Father and to the

Son and to the Holy Ghost'. And as he breathed the words 'the Ghost', he died." So the good work of the translation of Scripture into a language that the common people could understand went on.

Centuries pass, and we go for our third picture to Lutterworth in Leicestershire, the scene of the work and ministry of John Wyclif. Some forty-four years after his death in 1384, the Pope ordered the Bishop of Lincoln "to proceed in person to the place where John Wyclif was buried, cause his body and bones to be exhumed, cast far from ecclesiastical burial and publicly burnt, and his ashes to be so disposed of that no trace of him shall be seen again."

The offence, for which this dire penalty was prescribed, was that Wyclif had unlocked the Bible to the common English reader. "Thus," wrote the old historian Thomas Fuller, "this brook"—he is referring to the river Swift—"hath conveyed his ashes into Avon; Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow seas; they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wyclif are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over." The claim is scarcely exaggerated. It is indeed a fact that only part of the Wyclif Bible is actually the work of John Wyclif himself—Nicholas Hereford at Oxford translated much of the Old Testament. But the impetus was Wyclif's, and the whole work appeared two years before his death. It was, as G. M. Trevelyan has said, "an admirable and scholarly piece of work, a great event in the history of the English language as well as religion". Wyclif was a man before his time, one of those:

deathless minds which leave when they have past
A path of light.

Indeed, the light was needed, for it was a day when many of the clergy could not construe or expound the Lord's Prayer, nor the creed or the ten commandments. The plight of the laity must have been dire; and it is deeply significant that the copies of the Wyclif Bible still extant are small, unadorned, and closely written, indicating that they were meant not for the mighty and the wealthy but the man in the street.

In the year 1477, Caxton set up his press under the shadow of Westminster Abbey. What a weapon this was to be for the dissemination of literature and in particular of the English Bible! No longer would it be necessary laboriously to copy out each gospel or epistle by hand. Wyclif's Bible of the previous century, or Tyndale's of the ensuing one, would be rolled off in their hundreds and thousands of copies by this stupendous invention.

Before we come to Tyndale we ought to glance at Oxford around the year 1500. There we see a young man just back from Italy, full of the heady knowledge of the Renaissance. The ancient classics had come alive for him. But it is not on these that he is lecturing. It is on the Epistles of St. Paul. His lecture room is crowded to the doors. John Colet, close friend of Erasmus and of Sir Thomas More, is bringing these old letters to life in a way that Oxford had never known before. The great doctrines are seen to be not the relics of an age gone by nor the property of the schoolmen only, but the word of God for every man who has ears to hear them. The expository skill of Colet at Oxford, of Erasmus at Cambridge and of many who lit their lamps from the fire

of their learning—this, married to the technical skill of Caxton and his successors, put the Bible unfettered into the hands of the English people.

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For our next picture we turn to William Tyndale, whose life and work (and, it should be added, his martyr-death) are of inestimable importance in the story of the English Bible. It has been reckoned that ninety per cent of Tyndale's translation stands unaltered in the Authorized Version of 1611. No wonder that Professor Greenslade can call him "the man who more than Shakespeare even or Bunyan has moulded and enriched our language". This man, driven by a great passion to "cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture" than did many of the clergy of the day, had an uncanny gift of lifting the common language, in a true nobility of homeliness, up to the sublime level of the Bible. When, as we read the pages of the Authorized Version, we find ourselves moved by such a phrase as "until the day dawn and the day-star arise in our hearts"; or "in Him we live and move and have our being"; or "for here we have no continuing city but we seek one to come", we are, whether we realize it or not, indebted to William Tyndale. Driven out by persecution from London, Tyndale did his greatest work on the Continent, whence copies of his translation were smuggled out, some in bales of cotton and some by other surreptitious means into this country. In 1536 he was martyred by strangulation and burning. His last prayer was "Lord, open the King of England's eyes". Little did he dream that that prayer was to be answered in the very next year by the royal recognition of the Coverdale Bible, which itself was enormously indebted to Tyndale's.

We pass by Coverdale's work, with only a glance of thankfulness for that lovely version of the Psalms that is enshrined as a monument to him in our Prayer Book, and with, perhaps, a touch of regret that such a rendering as "There is no more triacle at Galaad" (Jeremiah viii. 22) never found its way into the Authorized Version. And so we come, for our last picture, to 1611. Or, rather, to 1604, for it was in that year, the year after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, that at the Hampton Court Conference, with the full approval and encouragement of King James I, a new translation was decided on. The King James Version (or, as it is known to us, though less accurately, the Authorized Version) is the final answer to those who maintain that no good thing can come out of the deliberations of a committee.

This version was the result of the work of a committee, itself divided into six sub-committees, two sitting at Westminster, two at Oxford, and two at Cambridge. The members were the cream of the scholarship of the day. It was said, for example, of Bishop Launcelot Andrewes, who headed the Westminster group, that "he might have been interpreter general at Babel . . . the world wanted learning to know how learned he was". But the committee was marked not only by culture and learning—it was marked also by humility and piety. In the "Preface of the Translators", the members wrote, rather delightfully: "We never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new

Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against: that hath been our endeavour, that our mark."

It is easy to look back from the vantage point of the passage of 350 years and to detect errors in scholarship that the researches of later years have brought to light. We know much more today about the Hebrew language and about Greek manuscripts than did Launcelot Andrewes and his colleagues. But I think that Macaulay was right when he described the 1611 version as "a book which, if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power"

It was a matter of extreme good fortune that the King James Version came into being just when it did, for this was the period when our language reached what G. M. Trevelyan has called "its brief perfection". It was the age of Shakespeare and Marlowe, of Spenser, Hooker, and Bacon. There is a kind of monosyllabic simplicity and yet majesty about much of the language. Consider this: "Thus will I bless Thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in Thy name". Or: "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost". Or again: "The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land". For sheer beauty, it would be hard to improve on sentences such as these. It was this kind of English that fixed the standard for centuries to come.

It was hard to improve—impossible perhaps—on the language of the Bible and the Prayer Book and of Shakespeare. There had been a steady progress and enrichment from Chaucer to Elizabeth, and the peak point was reached in the early years of the seventeenth century. Even today, three and a half centuries later, our common speech is vastly enriched by the cadences and proverbs of this version. Very often those who use such phrases as "the skin of my teeth", "heap coals of fire on his head", "the fat of the land", "the salt of the earth", "the powers that be", "the pearl of great price", "hip and thigh", do not realize to what an extent they are indebted to this most formative of all translations.

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I have spoken of the influence of the Bible on our English speech. But as a matter of fact, it had an influence far deeper on our character, on our religion, and on our social history. In a famous sentence, J. R. Green wrote of the time of Queen Elizabeth I: "England became the people of a book and that book was the Bible". G. M. Trevelyan, who perhaps better than any other living Englishman has described our social history, says that "when Elizabeth came to the throne, the Bible and Prayer Book formed the intellectual and spiritual foundation of a new social order". For every Englishman who had read Sidney or Spenser, or had seen Shakespeare acted at the Globe, there were hundreds who had read or heard the Bible with close attention as the Word of God. The effect of the continual domestic study of the book upon the national character, imagination, and intelligence far outweighs

three centuries to come, was greater than that of any literary movement in our annals, or any religious movement since the coming of St. Augustine. That is a stupendous claim, but it is one that can be amply justified. Let us look at two illustrations.

Some sixty to seventy years after the 1611 version appeared, a tinker in Bedford was writing prose of extraordinary power. His education had been very slight, his reading limited mainly to the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and Fox's Book of Martyrs. John Bunyan's most famous book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, opens like this: "I dreamed and behold I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a Book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked, and saw him open the book and read therein: and as he read, he wept and trembled: and not being able longer to contain, he broke out with a lamentable cry, saying 'What shall I do?'" "A Book in his hand"—that was true not only of John Bunyan but of tens of thousands of his fellow-countrymen. The days were long past when they had to be dependent on the mystery plays for a knowledge of drama of Biblical events, or on strolling preachers such as the lollards, or on a visit to the local church to read from a Bible chained to the lectern. The Bible was available to practically every man and available in lucid English. "A man, with a book in his hand," from which he learnt the secret of forgiveness and of life—this was an apt description of multitudes from the early decades of the seventeenth century on.

My second illustration is drawn from an engraving. The scene of Edward Prentis's "Evening Prayer" is set in a middle-class home of about 1850. The table has been cleared except for a vase of flowers. His glasses are on, and he is reading to the family, including a small child and an old lady with her work-basket beside her. Near the door sit the maid and a working man. There is no question what the book is. It is the Bible which in this way, by daily reading and pondering, became a powerful influence in tens of thousands of homes. A nation's character was largely moulded not only by what was heard in church, but by what was read and reverently listened to at home.

I have tried to indicate something of the power the English Bible has exercised on the life and character, the language and literature of our people. It is small wonder, against that background, that when at the Coronation Service the Archbishop of Canterbury presents a Bible to the sovereign he says: "Most gracious King, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom, this is the royal law; these are the lively oracles of God."

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In that excellent book *The Bible in its Ancient and English Versions* (edited by H. Wheeler Robinson, Oxford University Press, 1940) there are two chapters by J. Isaacs. The second of these is entitled "The Authorized Version and After". It includes some samples from

translations which appeared in the eighteenth century—and there was something of a glut of them. As we read these samples, we can only express admiration and gratitude for the restraint, the dignity, and the musical poetry which characterize the King James Version. Consider this as a rendering of James ii. 3 : “ If you should respectfully say to the suit of fine cloths, sit you there, that’s for quality ” ; or this for a rendering of James ii. 5, 6 : “ The tongue is but a small part of the body, yet how grand are its pretensions ! a spark of fire ! what quantities of timber will it blow into a flame ? the tongue is a brand that sets the world in a combustion : it is but one of the numerous organs of the body, yet it can blast whole assemblies : tipp’d with infernal sulphur it sets the whole train of life in a blaze.” (Both of these are from a rendering by Mace in 1729.)

Or consider this from America—had Benjamin Franklin got his tongue in his cheek when he gave this rendering of Job i. 6-11 ? “ And it being *levee* day in heaven, all God’s nobility came to court to present themselves before him ; and Satan also appeared in the circle, as one of the ministry. And God said to Satan : You have been a long time absent ; where were you ? And Satan answered : I have been at my country seat, and in different places visiting my friends. And God said : Well, what think you of Lord Job ? You see he is my best friend, a perfectly honest man, full of respect for me, and avoiding every thing that might offend me. And Satan answered ; does your Majesty imagine that his (Job’s) good conduct is the effect of mere personal attachment and affection ? Have you not protected him, and heaped your benefits upon him, till he is grown enormously rich. Try him ; only withdraw your favor, turn him out of his places, and withhold his pensions, and you will find him in the opposition.”

Or contrast the simplicity of The Song of Solomon ii. 12 in the Authorized Version (“ The flowers appear on the earth ; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land ”) with this effort by the Quaker Anthony Purver in 1764 : “ Earth’s Lap displays her infant Flowers, the warbling Spring is welcomed in, and hark how the Turtle-dove cooes in our Clime.” No comment is needed.

We can be thankful that it was the King James Version which gripped the imagination of the English people from 1611 onwards, and not the highly coloured efforts of later generations.

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But the Editor has asked me to write on *modern* versions of the Bible. If we restrict ourselves to the twentieth century alone we have a rich field in which to work. James Moffatt, of course, was something of a pioneer. We may get tired of his rendering of the divine name by “ The Eternal ” ; we may be provoked by his rearrangements of the text with an arbitrariness which most later translators have eschewed ; we may get a hearty laugh from his rendering of Job. iii. 3 : “ Perish the day I was born, the night that said, ‘ It is a boy ’ ! ” ; we may shrink from calling the ark a barge ; we may squirm at the indignity of “ We only know bit by bit, and we only prophesy bit by bit ” (1 Corinthians xiii. 9). But we cannot be other than grateful for a brave piece of pioneering work—a certain blazing of the trail for others to follow.

Many of us, too, are grateful for that reverent and quietly scholarly rendering by Dr. Weymouth which lit up parts of the New Testament for us when first we were tasting its joys. Since those days, we have had such a feast of renderings that it is easy to forget the joy with which we welcomed the earlier attempts at "Englishing the Bible", as Knox called it.

And what an achievement was *his*! Those who have read that sad book *Ronald Knox* by Evelyn Waugh, will have felt that his translation of the Bible did much to redeem the failure to use his brilliant gifts for which the Roman Catholic Church must be held responsible. A one-man translation of the Bible, including the Apocrypha, with an extra version of the Psalms thrown in for good measure—this is a stupendous achievement. There is a resounding power and dignity to much of this translation which befits a man who, from his earliest years, knew how to handle language.

J. B. Phillips' *Letters to Young Churches* made a tremendous impact on the English-speaking world, and whetted our appetite for further courses to follow: *The Young Church in Action*, *The Gospels*, and *The Book of Revelation*. If the element of paraphrase mingles somewhat freely with translation in these books, we can only be thankful for a rendering which has opened up the New Testament to millions of readers and made it contemporary in a way never known to them before. It is said that Phillips' rendering is even more popular in America than it is here—and that is saying a good deal, for the sales since the day that C. S. Lewis first commended *Letters to Young Churches* in 1947 must have been enormous.

It was something of an event when Dr. E. V. Rieu's translation of the Four Gospels, with its excellent introduction, was published as one of the *Penguin Classics* series of which Dr. Rieu is the editor. Now it has been followed by *The Acts* translated by his son. "A wise son maketh a glad father."

The Revised Standard Version is a fine piece of work, but it is a revision of a revision, not a fresh translation. As the opening words of the preface to that book have it, "the Revised Standard Version of the Bible is an authorized revision of the American Standard Version, published in 1901, which was a revision of the King James Version, published in 1611". It has been, and is, widely read in homes and churches in this country—a handsome contribution from America to British readers of the Bible. I believe it will have served to wean some of our people from too blind an adherence to the Authorized Version and to prepare them to listen sympathetically to that new version, the first part of which has come to us only a few months ago.

I have only touched on some of the renderings which have come to us in recent decades. Before I turn to the *New English Bible*, I should like to mention three books where the story of modern versions of the English Bible is told fully and well. The first of these is *The Translations of the Bible* by E. H. Robertson (S.C.M. Press, 1959), one of the series: "Studies in Ministry and Worship". The second is *The English Bible: A History of Translation from the Earliest English Versions to the New English Bible* by F. F. Bruce, Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester

(Lutterworth Press, 1961). The third is *The Bible in the Making* by Geddes MacGregor, Professor of Philosophical Theology in the University of Southern California (John Murray, 1961). This book covers much more ground than either of the former two, but has some interesting chapters on modern English versions.

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Now, at last, has come the long awaited *New English Bible : New Testament*, the first instalment of a work which is to include the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. As is now well known, this is a completely new translation, by a group of scholars under the directorship of the Reverend Professor C. H. Dodd, representing all the main strands of English Church life (apart from the Roman Catholic), and incorporating the most recent discoveries of New Testament scholarship and based on the best available texts. The time is ripe for such a new translation, in a way that it was not ripe when the Revised Version was put out. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the discovery of the ostraca and papyri, which were to throw so much light on the nature of New Testament Greek and on the meaning of many of its most important words, was yet future. Now all these discoveries can be incorporated in the new version.

The result of all this new information, together with the use of language and idiom such as is normally used in our own day, is to give us a version whose colours are almost startlingly bright. A Bradford business man compared the effect of the reading of this new version to the withdrawal of a piece of gauze from the face of a picture—the colours and lines seemed so much clearer. Much, he said to me, of what was obscure now stood out plain. I suspect that many of the ethical passages of the Pauline Epistles will make much more uncomfortable reading than they do in the Authorized Version!

The layout of this version helps in this process of clarification. The headings of large sections are useful. The titles given to some Epistles are illuminating—thus I John is “Recall to Fundamentals”, I Peter is “The Calling of a Christian”, I Timothy is “Church Order”, and James is “Practical Religion”. Moreover, the paragraphing helps in the clarifying of argument; and the fact that the verses are only indicated by small figures in the margins means that the reader can run on uninterrupted. (*The Pericope Adulterae* is removed from its usual place in the Fourth Gospel and printed on a separate page at the end of that book.)

So much has been written already on this new version that perhaps the most interesting course will be to take, almost at random, certain verses and to comment on the contribution which their new rendering makes to the understanding of them.

The Beatitudes become a series of exclamations, thus probably reflecting their Semitic original: “How blest are those who hunger . . . who show mercy . . . whose hearts are pure . . .”.

The price of sparrows (Luke xii. 6) has risen from “five for two farthings” (Authorized Version) to “five for two pence”—not, presumably, because of a rise in the cost of living but because of a

change in the use of the language of currency as between 1611 and 1961!

The Prodigal Son (Luke xv. 13) now does not "gather all together" (Authorized Version) prior to setting off for the far country. No; he turns "the whole of his share into cash", the translation reflecting a particular usage of *synago* which the papyri have disclosed.

No longer do the bystanders say to Peter at the Passion, "Surely thou art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee" (Matt. xxvi. 73). They say: "Surely you are another of them; your accent gives you away!"—which is just about what they would have said!

Philip is concerned (John vii. 7) not lest two hundred pennyworth of bread would be insufficient to feed the multitude, but "twenty pounds" (footnote—*literally* 200 *dénarii*). "This is an hard saying" (John vi. 60) becomes "This is more than we can stomach", and "Doth this offend you?" (in the next verse) becomes "Does this shock you?" (Incidentally, a study of the various ways in which *skandalizo* is rendered would be an interesting comment on the fact that the translators felt perfectly free to render the same Greek word in a variety of ways, in order to catch the particular *nuance* of a particular context.)

The typically Semitic parallelism of the sayings of Jesus is recaptured in the great utterance of John vii. 37, 38 (how pleased C. F. Burney would have been!): "If anyone is thirsty let him come to me; whoever believes in me, let him drink."

The difficult verse, John viii. 25 becomes, "Why should I speak to you at all?" with the footnote variant, "What I have told you all along".

There are what our American friends call "preaching values" in some of the footnotes—as, for example, in this footnote to John xv. 11, "I have spoken thus to you, so that I may have joy in you and your joy may be complete."

Turning for two or three examples from the Epistles, we note with pleasure the omission of the comma after "saints" in Eph. iv. 12, Authorized Version—"the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry . . .". This becomes, "to equip God's people for work in his service . . .".

The obscure "she shall be saved in childbearing" (I Timothy ii. 15) becomes, "she will be saved through motherhood", with two variants at the foot of the page: "saved through the Birth of the Child" and "brought safely through childbirth".

Parakletos in I John ii. 1 becomes "one to plead our cause" (footnote "advocate"), while in the Fourth Gospel it is rendered "Advocate".

Let me put two questions in no spirit of carping criticism: Is the word *truckle* sufficiently familiar in ordinary parlance to be used in such a passage as Mark xii. 14: "Master, you are an honest man, we know, and *truckle* to no man . . ."? In John ii. 4 and xix. 26, "Woman" becomes "Mother" in our Lord's words of address. This may be a concession to the impossibility of translating *gymē* satisfactorily, but may there not be some significance in the fact that

there is no reference in the Gospels to our Lord calling the Virgin Mary "Mother"? If there is, it is obscured by this translation.

When a major work of revision of some venerable document has been done, it is the easiest thing in the world to go through it with a tooth-comb and point out many passages which we could have rendered far better than the revisers have done! This is an age of revision—Bible, Catechism, Church Psalter, all are in process of taking on a new look. That is all to the good. It may well be an indication of the work of the Spirit in the Church—that Spirit whose task it is to "prod" into spiritual and intellectual activity the members of the Body of Christ. But when such a work as this revised New Testament appears, we should ask such questions as these: Is this a work in which the results of the scholarship of recent decades are well and truly incorporated? Is this a work which effectively strips away those things which dim the truth of God? Is this a version which makes it easy for the average Englishman in the mid-twentieth century to hear what the word of God is saying to him? Is this a rendering which, while indicating the difference in style between St. Mark's roughness and *Hebrews'* polish, gives the message with a dignity befitting its content? Is this version likely to wear well? The present writer would give to all these questions a resounding affirmative answer, and that is high praise.

Perhaps a final word may be allowed. The work of translating the Old Testament and the Apocrypha goes on—now more rapidly than formerly because the New Testament is out of the way and so the English panel can give its undivided attention to the work which comes through to them from these two panels. The work is beset by great difficulties. It is incumbent on the Church over the coming years to pray continually for the members of the panels concerned. "O send forth Thy light and Thy truth, let them lead them."
