II

THE ENGLISH BIBLE OF THE REFORMATION AGE

WHILE the detestable incubus of Papal Supremacy rested on the fair bosom of the English Church, the national tone of our religious life was pressed down and stifled by a large and overbearing body of foreign clergy, and of clergy with alien interests, against whom the anti-Roman clergy strove long in vain; and, among other evil consequences that resulted, was the busy discouragement of what Englishmen had always loved, the use of vernacular Bibles. To those whose thoughts and interests all centred in Rome, the use of any other tongue for devotional purposes than that of the Roman Court had a discordant clang of heresy, sounding like a cracked church bell.

According to Archbishop Cranmer (who lived so near the times that he was likely to know the his-

torical truth), this discouragement of English Bibles dated from the beginning of the fifteenth century. In his preface to the Bible of 1540, Cranmer writes, by way of argument in support of vernacular Bibles:—"If the matter should be tried by custom, we might also allege custom for the reading of the Scripture in the vulgar tongue, and prescribe the more ancient custom. For it is not much above one hundred years ago since Scripture hath not been accustomed to be read in the vulgar tongue within this realm. And many hundred years before that, it was translated and read in the Saxons' tongue, which at that time was our mother's tongue: whereof there remaineth yet divers copies, found lately in old abbeys, of such antique manner of writing and speaking, that few men now been able to read and understand them. And when this language waxed old and out of common usage because folk should not lack the fruit of reading, it was again translated into the newer language, whereof yet also many copies remain, and be daily found."

Similar testimony is borne likewise by John Foxe, the martyrologist, who writes:—"If histories be well examined, we shall find both before the Conquest and after, as well before John Wickliffe was born as since, the whole body of the Scriptures by sundry men translated into this our country tongue."

The same thing had also been stated some years earlier by Sir Thomas More:—"The whole Bible was,

long before Wickliffe's days, by virtuous and well learned men translated into the English tongue, and by good and godly people with devotion and soberness well and reverently read:" and "this order neither forbad the translations to be read that were done of old before Wickliffe's days, nor condemned his because it was new, but because it was naught."

On another occasion the same learned and well-informed writer says, "I have shewed you that the clergy keep no Bibles from the laity that can no more but their mother tongue, but such translations as be either not yet approved for good, or such as be already reproved for naught as Wickliffe's was. For as for old ones that were before Wickliffe's days they remain lawful, and be in some folk's hands." "Myself have seen and can shew you Bibles fair and old which have been known and seen by the bishop of the diocese, and left in laymen's hands and women's, to such as he knew for good and Catholick folk that used it with soberness and devotion."[1]

[1] More, Cranmer, and Foxe were acute men, not likely to be deceived into mistaking Bibles of a recent for those of an ancient date. More, particularly, who doubtless thought "Wickliffe's" Bible "naught," was a critic of much literary experience, while Cranmer speaks of early English Bibles, in 1540, *being* in old abbeys in just the same way as a writer of the fourteenth century, quoted at page 2, had said in 1398 that *they were there.* That they have not come down to us is, doubtless, owing to the fact that in Edward VI.'s days all old libraries were ruthlessly destroyed. The University Library of Oxford, the library of Merton College, that of the Guildhall, London, and those of the dissolved monasteries, were packed off as waste paper

When Cranmer specified "not much above one hundred years" as the limit of the anti-vernacular epoch, he was probably thinking of a canon which was passed at a convocation held in Oxford, under Archbishop Arundel, in the year 1408. This canon, after stating, on the authority of St. Jerome, the risk which was incurred in translating the Bible, lest the sense of the inspired writers should not be really given, goes on to enact as follows:—"We therefore decree and ordain, that from henceforward no unauthorised person shall translate any portion of Holy Scripture into English, or any other language, under any form of book or treatise: neither shall any such book or treatise, or version made either in Wickliffe's time or since, be read either in whole or in part, publicly or privately, under the penalty of the greater excommunication, till the said translation shall be approved either by the bishop of the diocese, or if necessary by a provincial council."[1]

to any one who would buy them, and the very shelves and benches of the first-named library were sold for firewood. The earlier the English in which old books were written, the less intelligible and the more pernicious they would seem to the silly Vandals who wrought such destruction.—[See Macray's *Annals of the Bodleian Library*, p. 12.]

[1] Wilkins' Concil., iii. 317. This constitution has been much misrepresented. It was interpreted by Lyndewood in the following words:—"Ex hoc quod dicitur 'noviter compositus,' apparet quod libros, libellos, vel tractatus in Anglicis vel alio idiomate prius translatos de textu Scripturæ legere non est prohibitum." This was written about A.D. 1430, and the words of so cautious a lawyer and so learned a divine as Bishop Lyndewood are clear evidence as to the existence of vernacular Bibles, whole, or in part, earlier than that of Wickliffe.

But even this canon seems to shew that an "authorised version" was contemplated, as "a provincial council" would not be called upon to look through, and to sanction or condemn, particular copies of the Bible, while the supervision of a new translation was exactly within its range of duties.

But from the end of the fourteenth century until the publication of Tyndale's New Testament in 1525, no one seems to have attempted any new translation. The art of printing had leaped into sudden perfection abroad in the production of the famous Latin folio Bible of Mentz (commonly known as the Mazarin Bible), which was most beautifully printed as early as A.D. 1450. Italy, France, and Spain, each had printed Bibles in their own languages before the reign of Henry VIII. began in England in A.D. 1509. Thirty years before that time, as early as A.D. 1477, there had been five distinct translations printed in Germany, twelve more being printed before Luther was heard of, that is before A.D. 1518. It would have been a noble work to have matched these great continental Bibles with a printed edition of the existing English translation, or of a revised version of it, but the idea of doing so seems never to have occured to Caxton, Wynkyn de Worde, or any of our early printers, although they produced works of considerable size, such as the Lives of the Saints, Breviaries, and Missals.