

THE COVERDALE PSALTER
AND THE QUATROCENTENARY OF
THE PRINTED ENGLISH BIBLE

ON Friday, the fourth day of October in this year, occurs the four hundredth anniversary of the first printing of the whole Bible in the English language. The earliest title page of that important *editio princeps* reads: "Biblia / The Bible that / is, the holy Scripture of the / Olde and New Testament, faith / fully and truly translated out / of Douche and Latyn / in to Englishe, / M.D.XXXV." The colophon printed at the end of the text, on the verso of folio cxiii of the New Testament sequence, is still more explicit on the matter of date: "Prynted in the yeare of oure Lorde M.D.XXXV. / and fynished the fourth day of October."

Neither the first nor the second editions of this important Bible carries the name of its translator on the title-page; but at the end of an excessively complimentary "Epistle unto the Kynges hyghnesse," addressed as a dedication "Unto the most victorious Prynce, and oure most gracyous soueraigne Lorde, Kyng Henry the eyght," the author designates himself subserviently: "youre graces humble subiecte and daylye oratour, Myles Coverdale."

Accordingly, just as the history of the printed English New Testament begins with the translation from the Greek by William Tyndale, printed in octavo at Worms by Peter Schoeffer in 1525; so the history of the printed English Bible begins with the translation from "Douche and Latyn" by Myles Coverdale, printed in a well-proportioned folio ten years later, and "fynished the fourth daye of October."

When one stops to consider the perfectly immense influence of

the printed English Bible on typography and book-making, on language and letters, on religion and culture, for English-speaking peoples both American and British; one realizes that here is an event in history that demands signal celebration.

Immediately the Coverdale Bible was followed by that amazing series of six other distinctive vernacular versions into English, that connect the Coverdale production of 1535 with the classic King James translation of 1611; making a grand total of eight different versions completed and printed in the short period of seventy-five years plus one. That was a period of English Bible translation and prompt publication par excellence. The six great intervening versions were:

The "Thomas Matthew" Bible, by John Rogers, 1537

The scholarly translation by Richard Taverner, 1539

The Great Bible, at first supported by Cromwell and later prefaced by Cranmer, also 1539

The Calvinistic Geneva Bible of the Protestant exiles, 1560

The official Bishops' Bible, edited by Archbishop Parker, 1568

The Douay Version, made by the Roman Catholic exiles at Rheims, published 1609.

In this series the Matthew Bible edited by John Rogers was substantially Tyndale plus Coverdale. Richard Taverner's translation interest was chiefly concentrated on the Greek New Testament. His Old Testament was a close repetition of the Matthew Bible. The Great Bible was Coverdale's own revision of the Matthew Bible. Even the Old Testament section of the popular Genevan version was but a further revision of Coverdale's Great Bible. The episcopal revisers who edited the Bishops' Bible were specifically instructed not to depart from Coverdale's Great Bible except when "yt varieth manifestly from the Hebreue or Greke original"; and they followed their instructions closely. At the end of the process,

the "Authorized Version" of 1611 emerged as substantially an emendation of Coverdale and Tyndale, not extensively recast or changed.

It is evident that through this crucial, formative period of Bible translation and publication the dominating influences were William Tyndale for the New Testament and the first half of the Old Testament, and Myles Coverdale for the remainder of the Old Testament *and the Apocrypha*. With honors thus shared, their combined influence for three quarters of a century may be compared to the near monopoly exercised by the King James translation itself for nearly three centuries after its appearance in 1611. Not only were Tyndale and Coverdale the instigators of a notable series of Bible translations and revisions, but also they dominated and controlled that series to an extent that is astonishing.

Of these eight versions of the Bible in English, half of them; the Coverdale, Matthew, Taverner, and Great Bibles, appeared in less than a half decade toward the end of the reign of Henry VIII. Coverdale's translation was published shortly before the execution of Anne Boleyn, and the Great Bible made its appearance shortly before the king's marriage with the more stupid, yet more clever Anne of Cleves.

The other four versions were more widely distributed. William Whittingham's New Testament was published at Geneva while tragic Mary Tudor was still reigning in England; but the whole Geneva Bible followed the joyous coronation of Queen Elizabeth by a year. The Bishops' Bible was the printed scriptural record of that astute queen's religious policy. Her successor James I instituted the production of the translation that is appropriately associated with his name, and that came to be called the "Authorized Version" from his royal patronage.

All this is to say that the great period of English Bible translation and printing began in the fermentation of the revival of learn-

ing and the reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries in England; it extended across the outburst of nationalism in the Elizabethan period, when Englishmen reasserted their independence in politics and religion, and their right to a full share in the newly appreciated cultural heritage of Europe; and it came to a culmination at the beginning of a reign that was hailed as the opening of an even better era.

The lifetime of Myles Coverdale, the reformer and man of letters, was sufficiently prolonged so that he shared abundantly in the exaggerated and challenging experiences to which Englishmen of the period were exposed. He was eighty-one years of age when he died; and he was born in the year 1488. During the decade after his birth Columbus discovered America; the Cabots discovered Newfoundland; and the first substantially accurate maps of the world were drawn. While he was in his early teens Desiderius Erasmus paid his first visit to Oxford where John Colet was lecturing on the letters of Paul. When Coverdale was twenty-nine, Martin Luther posted his famous theses that set off the reformation. He was at work on his translation of the Bible while autocratic Henry VIII was accomplishing his divorce from the faithful and religious Catherine of Aragon; and was further implementing his despotism with the parliamentary Act of Supremacy, that transferred to the king the legal powers of the papacy in England. His Bible was published exactly one year and two days before Tyndale was martyred at Vilvorde. Coverdale himself experienced a decade of the Elizabethan national revival; and he died in the year after the Bishops' Bible was published. The intellectual quickening of the revival of learning; the harrowing uncertainties and retroversions of the reformation in England; the fresh exuberance of the Elizabethan assertion of English aspirations—all these significant social trends were epitomized in the life-experience of Myles Coverdale.

Like John Wycliffe, the earlier reformer and translator, Myles