Richard Rex

THE RADICAL
WHO BROUGHT THE PEOPLE TO THE BIBLE

David Daniell, *William Tyndale: a biography*,
Yale University Press

It is almost incredible that, as the blurb claims, this is the «first major biography of Tyndale for 60 years», for Tyndale's importance in the history of English culture can hardly be exaggerated. Almost singlehanded, he translated the whole of the New Testament and half of the Old Testament into English. His monumental work was taken over by the compilers of the Authorised Version with few alterations, and as a result he has, arguably, done more than any other single author to shape the language we speak today. «Let there be light» (just one of the countless phrases he coined) might have been his motto. Translaing the Bible for the benefit of his countrymen was not only his life's work but the cause of his death. From almost his first appearance in recorded history until his execution by burning for heresy, he was at work upon this task.

Tyndale began in 1523 by seeking support for his endeavours from Cuthbert Tunstall, the learned Bishop of London. The approach was rebuffed, which presumably surprised Tyndale, given Tunstall's friendship with the great scholar Erasmus, who had made a celebrated call for the Scriptures to be made available in the vernacular for all to read. But unfortunately, Tunstall and his fellow English bishops were locked in the past, despite their Erasmian connections (and there is evidence that at least John Fisher admitted in principle the value of vernacular Scripture). For the legacy of the native English heresy, Lollardy, which had engendered the first scriptural translations in the 1390s, had been repressive legislation making it an offence to translate the Bible or to own a translation without episcopal permission.

With the sudden emergence of Lutheranism on the Continent, it would have taken an act of heroic vision by the bishops to sanction an English Bible in the 1520s. But they lacked that vision, and by rebuffing Tyndale the English bishops probably pushed an Erasmian humanist into Luther's camp. They did not stop him translating the Bible. But they may have ensured that his translation, if only by virtue of being published without their authority,

would harm their Church.

In any case, Tyndale travelled to Germany to set about his life's work. The rest of the story is well known, and Professor Daniell tells it with verve. The bishops sought to suppress the successive editions of the New Testament on the grounds that they contained myriad inaccuracies. In fact the text was largely faithful, if sometimes tendentious, and the most dangerous features were the Lutheran prefaces and marginal notes. Posterity was thus presented with the unedifying spectacle of Catholic bishops burning bibles.

Tyndale's translations, together with his opposition to Henry VIII's plan to divorce Catherine of Aragon, made him a target for the English regime. Various unsuccessful attempts were made to lure or drag him back to England for trial before, in 1536, the Dutch authorities arrested, tried and executed him for heresy. Ironically, in the very year of his death, Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell first ordered every parish priest in England to buy a copy of the English Bible, and the first edition approved for this purpose, which appeared over the pseudonym of «Thomas Matthew», was in fact largely Tyndale's work. Henceforth, Tyndale's biblical translations were to be among the most precious assets of the Church of England amidst the political and theological vicissitudes of the English Reformation.

If this was all that there was to be said, one could have nothing but praise for this book. Unfortunately, there are certain flaws. Some readers may be surprised at the tone of the biographer's remarks about the Roman Catholic Church, particularly when he is considering the prolonged and rancorous controversy between Tyndale and Sir Thomas More, and to a lesser extent when he inveighs against Earnon Duffy (dismissed on p.99, for example, as being «very far» from the New Testament) and his magisterial study of late medieval English Catholicism and the Reformation, *The Stripping of the Altars.* It is sad that, in order to magnify his hero, Professor Daniell thinks it necessary to belittle Thomas More, sadder still that in doing so he should make gratuitous gibes at the Roman Catholic Church.

Was it really necessary to say that the admittedly distasteful tone of the latter stages of More's campaign against Tyndale «perhaps make a reader think a little about the qualities normally expected in a saint of the Catholic Church»? Daniell makes much of More's lamentable descent into incoherence in his treatment of Tyndale, yet himself lapses at least

into inconsistency in his own treatment of More.

In his preface he tells us that "More is not vital to the study of Tyndale". He then goes on to devote an entire chapter to him, maintaining now that "a biographer of Tyndale has to write about More".

In comparing these two very different men, Daniell loses his usual sense of proportion: witness his contrast, drawn without a trace of irony, between «Tyndale's skill» and «More's slippery tricks», as manifested in their controversy. And his justifiably low opinion of More's performance in that controversy has betrayed him into an unjustifiably low opinion of More as a whole: «People who have read Tyndale's Bible still speak of him as of an ordinary neighbour; nobody speaks like that of More». Yet, apart from his writings, we know next to nothing about Tyndale. Tyndale, one might almost say, is more book than man. More, on the other hand, is much more than the sum of his books. He inspired those who knew him to write their various memoirs. Tyndale seems to have had none of More's, or for that matter Luther's, ability to inspire loyalty and affection. We therefore know far more about the author of *Utopia* as a person — not only the virtues but also the weaknesses, failings, tensions, and contradictions — than we do about Tyndale, the single-minded translator. Even the portraits of More are more eloquent. And that is why More will always be the more fascinating personality.

Sympathetic biographies usually read better, however, and Daniell's work is none the worse for his unconcealed and sincere veneration for his subject. It is flawed by occasional lapses in manners and by its distorted image of More, but these must not be allowed to detract from the author's impressive achievement. Many claims and counter-claims have been made about the accuracy, originality, and craftsmanship of Tyndale's biblical translations. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Daniell's study is his meticulous and convincing vindication of Tyndale's reputation on all three counts. If Tyndale has indeed been marginalised in recent accounts of the English Reformation, then this biography will certainly put him back where he belongs, at the centre of the stage.

Source : *The Tablet,* 29 October, 1994, p. 1378.