

Pitching to ploughboys

This year is the 500th anniversary of a pioneering English-language New Testament which has influenced every translation since – Catholic as well as Protestant / **By DAVID CRYSTAL**

The groundbreaking English translation of the New Testament by William Tyndale – an enterprise that influenced every other Bible translation in the sixteenth century, and especially the King James Bible of 1611 – will be 500 years old this year. It was a daring initiative, partly based on the Greek sources, and thus at odds with the Catholic establishment, where the only acceptable version was the Latin Vulgate. Tyndale wanted the Bible to be understood by everyone in their own tongue, and more-over so clearly that it would be accessible even to “a boy that driveth the plough”.

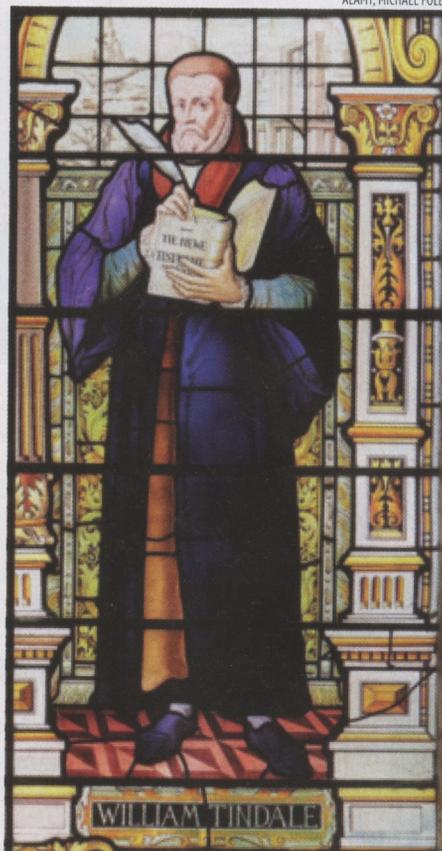
He managed to complete the whole of the New Testament (and, in the 1530s, a few books of the Old) before his execution for heresy in 1536. His translation was published abroad, but banned and burned in England. As a result, only two complete copies of the original 6,000 or so survive. When I was making a

recording of his gospel of Matthew in original pronunciation for the British Library in 2012, I was shown the original and allowed to hold it. No happy emoticon could live up to the smile on my face.

A decade later, after Henry VIII's break with Rome, English translations became permitted in England, and the gates opened to a flurry of Protestant versions: Coverdale's in 1535, the Matthew Bible in 1537, the Great Bible in 1539, the Geneva Bible in 1560 and the Bishops' Bible in 1568 – the official Church of England text before the King James “Authorised Version”. Then there was the Catholic Douai-Rheims Bible, so called because the New Testament was published in Rheims in 1582, the Old Testament following in 1609-10 in Douai. Tyndale's influence is evident in all of them, the earliest ones leaning heavily on his work, though cautiously, given his heretical reputation. Here are three familiar instances from his translation of Matthew, where every sixteenth-century version follows him (I've modernised the spelling and punctuation): “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (5:38); “Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth/doeth” (6:3); “If the blind lead the blind” (15:14).

IT'S OFTEN SAID that 80 per cent of the King James New Testament is actually Tyndale. I investigated the accuracy of this claim using a newly devised metric that recognises over 20 different degrees of similarity between sentences in the two texts, ranging from total identity to having nothing in common, and ended up with an overall figure of around 70 per cent. But there are several striking cases where the King James *doesn't* follow Tyndale. In Matthew 23:27, in Tyndale's translation, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites and compares them to “painted tombs”. That never caught on. King James' “whited sepulchres” did. And in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Tyndale has the nicely colloquial “The day present hath ever enough of his own trouble”; rhetorical tradition rejected this in favour of King James' “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matthew 6:34). That's an expression we see frequently adapted, most famously by Mark Twain in a speech in 1879 where he inveighed against the “permanent riot” involved in managing twins and triplets: “sufficient unto the day is one baby”.

But what of Douai-Rheims? Would the



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William Tyndale in the chapel at Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge

Catholic translators have allowed Tyndale's Protestant text to influence their work? There's clear evidence that they did. The best examples are when Douai-Rheims and King James are identical, while other translations do something different – and in fact both the King James examples I just quoted are only found in Douai-Rheims. There are several other instances. The King James translators clearly liked the rhythmical punch of “what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6), rather than Tyndale, Geneva and Bishops' “Let not man put asunder that which God hath coupled together”. And they must have appreciated the rhythm of “many are called but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14), “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's” (Matthew 22:21), and – my favourite – “of making many books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12:12).

Clearly the Douai-Rheims translators were doing their own thing; and sometimes their choices ended up being the ones that are most familiar to modern eyes and ears. For instance, we know Matthew 5:16 as their “let your light shine”, and not (as the others have it) “let your light so shine”. In the First Book of Kings

A master of what today we'd call 'hate speech', his vituperation is not always comfortable reading

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(2:2), “the way of all flesh” has been preferred to the others, who have “the way of all the earth”. And then there’s the interesting replacement of Tyndalian “love” by Douai-Rheims’ “charity” in the First Epistle of Peter (4:8): “charity covers a multitude of sins”.

But there are many cases where the Catholic version departs from Tyndale, sometimes quite noticeably, and its usage failed to stay in the popular mind. It goes for “emissary goat” in Leviticus (16:8), where Tyndale has the well-known “scapegoat”. “Go, and do thou in like manner” in Luke (10:37) loses out to Tyndale’s “Go and do thou likewise”. We remember “vengeance is mine” in Romans (12:19), not Douai-Rheims’ “revenge is mine”. And in Acts (1:7) we have forgotten “times or moments” in favour of Tyndale’s more colourful “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons”.

USING THE FILES of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I found a remarkable 822 instances of the first recorded use of a word in written English was in Tyndale. Words beginning with A include religious words such as absolve, annunciate, atonement and anointed; technical terms such as analogy and apparitor (an official of an ecclesiastical court); and everyday items such as anew, at once, and the now archaic anywhence.

There are new phrases too, such as “act of faith” and “as ever was”. And we mustn’t forget the vocabulary of insult and confrontation, where Tyndale was specially adept, such as after-witted (being wise after the event) and the evocative “nose of wax”, applied to weak-minded people who are easily influenced in their scriptural thinking (for him, especially Catholics). His vituperation doesn’t always make for comfortable reading today for anyone who doesn’t share his Protestant Reformation zeal. He was a linguistic master of what today we’d call “hate speech”.

Tyndale is also the first to use alphabetical listing to gloss lists of difficult words, thus anticipating the first English dictionaries a century later. And he developed a new style of prose that follows the rhythms of everyday speech – long sequences of clauses and phrases that make sentences look unwieldy on the page, but when spoken aloud are surprisingly effective. So, when you hear, in two weeks’ time, “Behold the man” (John 19:5) in the English Standard Version, you’re listening to Tyndale. And the same applies whenever you hear such famous phrases as “flesh and blood” (1 Corinthians 15:50), “treasure in Heaven” (Luke 18:22) and “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13) – three among many that, incidentally, also appear in the Jerusalem Bible. All modern translations, Catholic or Protestant, display a kaleidoscope of linguistic influences – but Tyndale is never far away.

David Crystal is a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster on language. *William Tyndale and the English Language* is published by Bodleian Library Publishing (£25; Tablet price £22.50).