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William Tyndale: Martyr for the Common Tongue

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William Tyndale: Martyr for the Common Tongue

By PHILIP HOWARD

The following piece commemorates the quincentenary of William Tyndale's birth in west Gloucestershire, and is reproduced with the author's permission from The Times Saturday Review of April 25, 1992.

Writing is a bid for immortality, or it is nothing. Not many writers achieve it. Most of what we scribble is a waste of trees, and would serve more purpose as lining for budgerigar cages. But we do it because we hope that somebody out there in the black hole into which we hurl our words is going to read them, be moved, amused, made to think, or annoyed by them. Horace boasted in his *Odes* that he had made himself a memorial that would last longer than a brass statue, and for once hack's vanity got it right.

Immortality is not part of the human contract. It can be managed to a small extent by brass in Westminster Abbey, or a niche in the history books, or the transmission of the family genes and features to one's grandchildren, or by being a good teacher whose influence reverberates down the memory of generations. But in England, of all places, the marker to immortality is to write words that will become part of the national stock. Shakespeare is the prime example, the man who wrote entirely in quotations that have become part of the language, even for those who have never heard of him. We know almost nothing about Shakespeare the man, but his words live for ever.

The Englishman whose words have affected the national word stock almost as much as Shakespeare is an even odder case of immortality. We know quite a lot about his life, more than Shakespeare's, and his words occupy nearly as much space in the quotation dictionaries. But since his name is not attached to them, it is not widely recognised. However, his writing is the bedrock of English language and literature. He wrote to remake the world. To an extent, he succeeded in his megalomaniac aim.

He was the translator of the first published version of the Bible into English, and his translation was so good that it set the standards and bequeathed many of the words to all subsequent versions. *The Authorised Version* and *The Book of Common Prayer* are giant foundation stones of the English language and literature. Simple Anglo-Saxon spells such as 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth', and 'The Lord is my shepherd: therefore can I lack nothing', and 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' are built into the national subconscious through centuries when they were the only books generally read to the ordinary people. They use English with a simple power and poetry that has not been achieved since.

New versions of the Bible are needed, to correct the errors of the past, and to tell the old truths and stories in the idiom of the times. But it was an act of literary and linguistic self-mutilation when the Church of England so completely abandoned *The Authorised Version* and *The Book of Common Prayer*. For many people they were the only poetry they were going to hear in their lives; and the new translations and orders of service are no substitute. Yet even they preserve some of the phrases and rhythms of that first translator, who wrote a plain but poetic English for all generations.

We do not even know the date of William Tyndale's birth. The best modern calculation is that it was October 1494. A group of eminent literati, including Britain's Nobel laureate for

literature and the poet laureate, are establishing a committee through *The Times* to celebrate Tyndale's quincentenary in 1994. The celebration will be done with official pomp and thanksgiving. But Tyndale's best memorial is that whenever anyone writes or speaks well in English, she or he echoes the simple but majestic rhythms that Tyndale introduced. He showed that plain English was a mighty tongue. His voice is the forgotten ghost in the language.

Before the Reformation, for more than a thousand years, the Bible existed primarily in Latin, descended from Jerome's 4th-century versions, and known as the Vulgate. As Latin ceased to be generally known, the Bible became increasingly elitist, and the property of the clerkly classes. There were paraphrases and translations of parts, sometimes brilliant ones, into Anglo-Saxon, for example by Aelfric. In the late-14th century followers of John Wycliffe translated the entire Vulgate into English for the first time. This Lollard Bible was in two versions, handwritten and extremely expensive, above the reach of the ordinary man. But its pastoral aim was that of the dawning Protestant Reformation, to make the Bible available to the ordinary man in his common speech. It was a revolutionary idea, and a dangerous one.

Tyndale came from a Gloucestershire family living near the Welsh border, and was born, we have decided, in October 1494. He went up to Magdalen College Oxford, where Foxe, the Protestant martyrologist and propagandist relates that, 'besides improving himself in knowledge of tongues and other liberal arts', he devoted especial attention to theology, and 'read privily to certain students and fellows of Magdalen college some parcel of divinity, instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the scriptures'. He did it privily because he was playing with holy fire.

After that Tyndale went on to Cambridge, where Erasmus had been Lady Margaret professor of divinity from 1511 to 1513, and had introduced Greek and the new wave of the Renaissance to the old backwater in the Fens.

After taking holy orders, Tyndale returned to his native Gloucestershire as a domestic chaplain and tutor, and in his spare time did some radical preaching in the villages and to the crowds that assembled at College Green in Bristol. He fell out with the local clergy, and was summoned before the chancellor of Worcester as a suspected heretic. He was acquitted of heresy, although censured as a troublemaker. This persecution confirmed Tyndale in his opinion that the church was in a terrible state and that the way to reform it was to translate the Bible into English. He declared to one of his opponents, in terms that express his militant nature: 'If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou doest.'

Tyndale hoped he might find support for his populist plan in London, so he set off 'with the will of his master' in 1523. But Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, and his clergy (unsurprisingly) were not as keen as Tyndale on giving up their monopoly of Holy Writ. So he left England for the Continent in 1524, never to return. After visiting Luther, another revolutionary, in Worms, he went to Cologne with his amanuensis, and started translating the New Testament from the original Greek, of which a good text had just been established by that old Cambridge professor, Erasmus.

By now the establishment was seriously alarmed by Tyndale's activities. Local authorities prevented publication in Cologne, so the work was completed in Worms in 1525. Ports were watched, and such copies of the New Testament in English that found their way into Britain were burned. Readers of it in England were persecuted, and there was a public burning of Tyndale's Bibles at St. Paul's Cross. So ruthless were the authorities that only one copy of Tyndale's first complete New Testament is known to survive. And Tyndale set off on the short remainder of his life as translator and polemicist on the run and in hiding. His translations of the Old Testament books of the *Pentateuch* (1530 and 1534), and *Judges* to *II Chronicles* were from the Hebrew. The combined learning of Oxford and Cambridge had produced a formidable linguist.

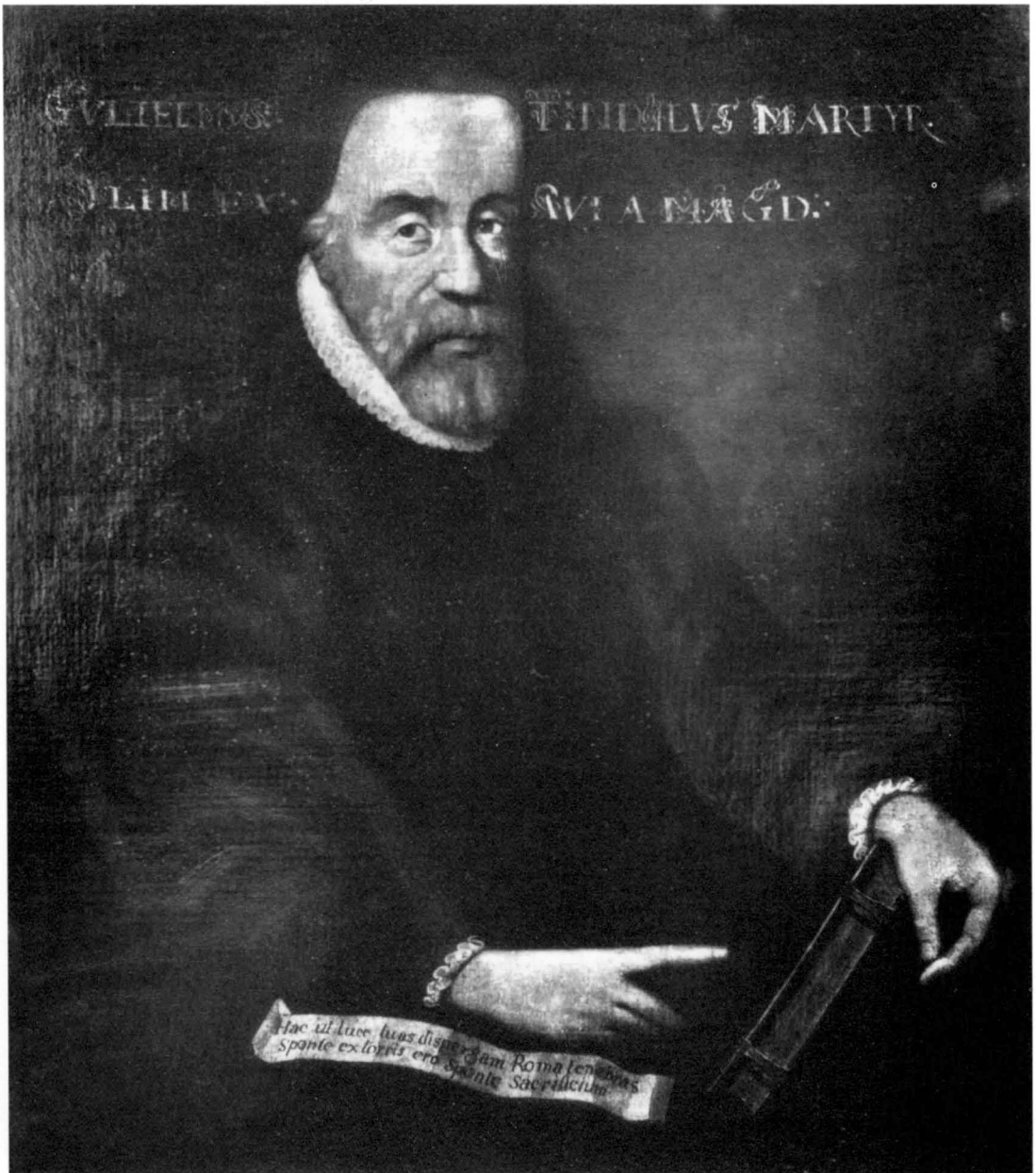


Fig. 1 William Tyndale, born in Gloucestershire 1494, martyred at Brussels 1536. (Copyright, British Museum)

*Hac ut luce tuas dispergam Roma tenebras
Sponte ex torris ero sponte sacrificium*

‘That I may disperse, Rome, they shadows by this light, from the brands will I willingly be a spontaneous sacrifice’

Doctrinally, Tyndale was close to Luther on justification by faith, but Zwinglian in his view of the Eucharist as symbolic celebration only. His radical theological works laid down the two great principles of the English Reformation: the authority of scripture in the church, and the supremacy of the king in the state. However, his vehement condemnation of Henry VIII's divorce did not do him much good back home, where his reputation with the establishment was already suspect. He also entered into a famous and eloquent controversy with Sir Thomas More.

In 1535 Tyndale was betrayed by an English Roman Catholic student at Louvain, who had pretended to be a keen reformer, and also pinched money from Tyndale. After this passage of time, the trail is cold, and it is impossible to establish whether the English church was implicated in the plot to trap Tyndale. The imperial officers imprisoned him at Vilvorde Castle, the state prison, on the outskirts of Brussels. He was tried for heresy and condemned. His passion for translation stayed with him to the end. There is a letter from Tyndale in the archives of the council of Brabant requesting the governor of Vilvorde to let him have his Hebrew Bible, grammar and dictionary.

He was executed in prison on October 6, 1536, being strangled at the stake, and his body afterwards burnt. 'At the stake', Foxe says, 'he cried with a fervent zeal and a loud voice, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes!"'

His death for his translation came as no surprise to him, in that terrible time of ecclesiastical blood and thunder. He had written: 'If they shall burn me, they shall do none other thing than I looked for. There is none other way into the kingdom of life than through persecution and suffering of pain, and of very death after the ensample of Christ.'

I hope he found his way into his kingdom of life, but in any case, Tyndale earned immortality. At the time, the English language was considered common and uneducated. Scholarship has since provided better texts of scripture. Tyndale was a good scholar of Greek and Hebrew, in an age when such knowledge was extremely rare. He had a natural instinct of how those languages might go into English, and the phrases he found were so clear and arresting that all subsequent translations have drawn on them or adapted them. He wrote like the Recording Angel, but with more compassion.

In particular, *The Authorised Version* of 1611 drew heavily on Tyndale, often repeating him word for word. And where it decided to make changes, Tyndale's versions still have extraordinary freshness that indicates what a superbly simple but imaginative writer he was. His serpent says to Eve not 'Ye shall not surely die', as in *The Authorised Version* (Genesis 3:4) but, colloquially, 'Tush ye shall not die'. With Joseph in Egypt, Tyndale does not say with *The Authorised Version* 'And the Lord was with Joseph and he was a prosperous man', (Genesis 39:2) but 'The Lord was with Joseph and he was a luckie felaw'. Over a gulf of five centuries, you can hear the voice of the man on College Green, Bristol.

Tyndale had the revolutionary idea that the English of ordinary folk could be the finest literary language in the world. He was a passionate populist and democrat, as well as a rich scholar. He died horribly, in exile, when he was just 40. But his words are blood and bone of the English language. That is why we shall thank God for him as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of his birth.