Middle-Brow History Of A Working Committee

A net of complex currents flowed across Jacobean England. This was the England of Shakespeare, Jonson and Bacon; of the Gunpowder Plot; the worst outbreak of the plague England had ever seen; Arcadian landscapes; murderous, toxic slums; and, above all, of sometimes overwhelming religious passion. Jacobean England was both more godly and less godly than it had ever been, and the entire culture was drawn taut between the polarities.

This was the world that created the King James Bible. It is the greatest work of English prose ever written, and it is no coincidence that the translation was made at the moment “Englishness” and the English language had come into its first passionate maturity. Boisterous, elegant, subtle, majestic, finely nuanced, sonorous and musical, the English of Jacobean England has a more encompassing idea of its own reach and scope than any before or since. It is a form of the language that drips with potency and sensitivity. The age, with all its conflicts, explains the book.

The sponsor and guide of the whole Bible project was the King himself, the brilliant, ugly and profoundly peace-loving James the Sixth of Scotland and First of England. Trained almost from birth to manage the rivalries of political factions at home, James saw in England the chance for a sort of irenic Eden over which the new translation of the Bible was to preside. It was to be a Bible for everyone, and as Gods lieutenant on earth, he would use it to unify his kingdom. The dream of Jacobean peace, guaranteed by an elision of royal power and divine glory, lies behind a Bible of extraordinary grace and everlasting literary power.

About fifty scholars from Cambridge, Oxford and London did the work, drawing on many previous versions, and created a text which, for all its failings, has never been equaled. That is the central question of this book: How did this group of near-anonymous divines, muddled, drunk, self-serving, ambitious, ruthless, obsequious, pedantic and flawed as they
were, manage to bring off this astonishing translation? How did such ordinary men make such extraordinary prose? In Gods Secretaries, Adam Nicolson gives a fascinating and dramatic account of the accession and ambition of the first Stuart king; of the scholars who labored for seven years to create his Bible; of the influences that shaped their work and of the beliefs that colored their world, immersing us in an age whose greatest monument is not a painting or a building, but a book.

As always, visiting and reading the words of the previous 63 reviews has proved to be enlightening and useful. Because of certain comments and objections offered in the past, it seems to me that I should begin with statements of what this book is NOT:

--This book is not an advocate of any particular religious issue, sect or cause.

--This book is not a Bible study or, indeed, any sort of religious study guide. Those seeking an exposition of religious truth should turn away right now. This is not for you.

--This book is not an academic text, being largely free of any formal thesis and paying no particular homage to whatever Theory happens to be on the academic boil these days. Academic drudges burrowing for material with which to footnote their footnotes will be wasting their time here in a manner even more dramatically pointless than usual.

--This book is not a self-consciously designed easy read written in words and phrases suitable for the comprehension of fourth graders. This author occasionally dares to quote people who lived four hundred years ago in their own words, styles and spellings. Consider this passage: I am persuaded his Royall mynde reioyceth more with good hope, wch he hathe for happy successe of that worke [the new Bible], then of his peace concluded with Spayne. [Page 65-66 of the hardcover edition] If that taxes your reading skills to the breaking point, seek enlightenment elsewhere.

This book does provide an overview--or perhaps more accurately, a sketch of religion and politics in 17th century England. In many ways, the two words were alternate terms for the same phenomenon, much as they are in Baghdad today. (A single generation after this translation of the Bible was made, the intertwining of religion and politics would become almost as deadly as it is in Baghdad today.)

The book offers thumbnail biographies--and in a few cases, somewhat more than that--of the fifty or so grave and learned scholars tasked with preparing the translation. In so far as the records survive, it outlines their organization and their contributions--for even in those long-ago days there were bosses and drudges.
Finally, the book deals with the majestic 17th century translation of the Bible as a literary entity. Here, at last, Adam Nicolson becomes an advocate. While acknowledging that scholarship and learning have made advances in the three centuries since the translation was made, he argues forcefully that no English translation made before or since has matched the King James Version in effectiveness, directness, power and sublimity.

Nicolson is such an advocate of the grand style of the KJV that it affects his own writing style. He does not emulate the actual style of the Bible—a thing, he makes clear, that was deliberately chosen and already noticeably archaic in the early 17th century, but he is much more orotund than is common in our piping times. He models his prose more on Gibbon or Macaulay than, say, Hemingway.

Consider the authors handling of a meeting at Hampton Court that involved the newly crowned King James, some gorgeously bedecked senior bishops of the Church of England and four black-clad Puritan ministers. All were assembled to bring sweet harmony to the land under a King who liked to think of himself as a peacemaker—and who sometimes was. That, of course, turned out to be a flat failure, but one of the Puritans, John Reynolds, almost casually remarked that the ministers he represented would like to have one only translation of ye Bible to be authenticall and read in ye churche. Richard Bancroft, the Bishop of London (who a few years earlier had taken up a pike among his own armed guards to repulse the Earl of Essexs ragtag rebellion and who would soon become Archbishop of Canterbury) sneered at that, saying If every mans humour might be followed, there would be no end of translating.

To everyones surprise, the King commanded that a translation be made. In Adam Nicolson's long-breathed, parentheses-strewn, semi-colon-laden words, it was a translation that was to be uniform (in other words with no contentious Geneva-style interpretations set alongside or within the text); with the learned authority of Oxford and Cambridge (which, at least in their upper echelons, were profoundly conservative institutions ...); to be revised by the bishops (the very influence that Reynolds did not want); then given, for goodness sake, to the Privy Council, in effect a central censorship committee with which the government would see that its stamp was on the text, no deviation or subversion allowed; and finally to James himself, whose hostility to any whiff of radicalism ... had been clear enough. And this ferociously episcopal and monarchist Bible was to be the only translation to be read in church: `no other. [Page 60.]

It must be pointed out, however, that Nicolson's prose does not always march to the solemn beat of the kettledrums (for goodness sake), but sometimes dances to a merrier piper: For these Puritans, and in a way we can scarcely understand now, the words of the scriptures were thought to provide a direct, almost intravenous access to the divine. [Page 135]
This is a good, middleweight book that, so far as I can tell, does not push unduly beyond the bounds of the scanty evidence. It can be justly criticized for being as much a series of raconteurial anecdotes as a logically-structured book. Its underlying preference for style over content is, at the very least, open for debate.

Four stars--but well worth reading in any case.

A MINOR OBSERVATION:

Adam Nicolson is obviously an Englishman, but my American edition from HarperCollins consistently uses the typically North American term, King James Version, rather than the English Authorised Version. I therefore suspect that other Americanisms may also have been edited into the English text.

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