

The Rheims-Douay Version of the Bible

That crowning achievement of English literature which is the King James Version of the Bible was the result of religious controversy. Nevertheless, quite apart from its influence on English literature, I think one can safely say that it has brought the Word of God to more people than any other version since the Septuagint translation into Greek and the Vulgate translation into Latin.

It was born of a suggestion made by John Rainolds, the Puritan President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, at the conference called by James I at Hampton Court. On his journey south to his new kingdom James had been met by a delegation of Puritans with the Millenary Petition, signed by 1000 Puritans, asking for the abolition of some 'Popish' customs retained by the Church of England, such as confirmation, the use of a wedding-ring in marriages, the wearing of vestments. The following year James called the Hampton Court Conference to settle the disputed matters.

This is not the place to go into any detail about the production of the King James Version. Suffice to say that James jumped at the idea of replacing the highly popular Geneva Bible with another, less slanted, version. He had already agreed in 1601 to the suggestion at the Scottish Conference of Bruntesland to a revision of the Geneva Bible. Taking up the suggestion was also a sop to the Puritans, who seem to have been rebuffed in every other respect at the conference, but James certainly milked the idea to strengthen his own position. In the dedication to the king he is described as the 'principal mover and author' of the translation. Such flattery put him just one step below God, the first mover and author of all things.

In fact James also regarded the Geneva Bible as the worst of all versions, and held that the notes to the Geneva Bible were 'partiell' and 'trayterous', being in his opinion anti-monarchical. It was therefore specified that there should be no explanatory notes, though this does not extend to cross-headings, so that clear Christological interpretations are given in the cross-headings of the Song of Songs, and, for example, Isaiah 7. The Geneva Bible had been produced by the English Calvinist exiles in Geneva, and had won its leading position by several factors.

- It was printed in ordinary Roman type, not the black-letter type hitherto used for Bibles. It was therefore much easier to read.
- It was equipped with plentiful apparatus, not only explanatory notes to difficult passages, but also maps, tables, and verse-numbering (useful in controversy).
- It was produced in every size, from folio to 16^{mo}.
- It was the first Bible printed in Scotland.

Consequently, in the 20 years before 1603 it had passed through 51 editions. It is in fact the version quoted more than a dozen times in the Preface to the King James Version itself. James was taking no risks in the production of the new Bible. He arranged that the chairmen of the Oxford and Cambridge Companies should be the Regius Professors, therefore owing their job to him. The Westminster Company was of course not in London, but in Westminster, a royal peculiar though only just outside London.

The royal version was not, however, the only Bible produced in the early seventeenth century. Another was the subject of this paper, the Rheims-Douay version, produced by the exiled Catholics. Before considering the version itself (III), and finally its effect on and connection with the King James Version (IV), it is

important to consider the remarkable group from which it issued (I) and their emphases and spirituality (II).

I. Oxford in Exile

In matters of doctrine the Reformation caught on in England not under Henry VIII but first under his young son, Edward VI, formed and guided by Archbishop Cranmer. At Oxford there was widespread destruction of College chapels, books and stained glass, whole libraries being sold as scrap paper. On the doctrinal side the chief influence was an Italian erstwhile friar, Peter Martyr Vermigli, whom Cranmer summoned to England in 1548, and who became Regius Professor Theology at Oxford in the following year. He had, however, little lasting success in his attempts at reform, so that on 1st June 1560 he wrote to Bullinger, 'I have a continual struggle with my adversaries [at Oxford] who are indeed most obstinate'. Andrew Hegarty considers that 'the Edwardian regime utterly failed to effect significant change in Oxford'.

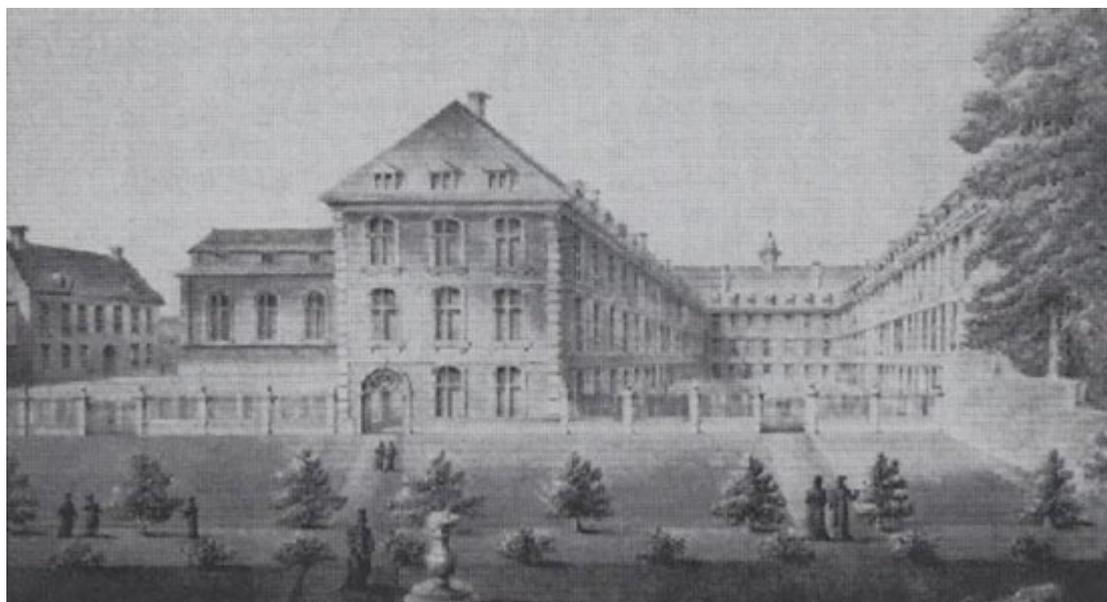
At Mary's accession in 1553 Bishop Gardiner, released from the Tower, found New College and Corpus mostly Catholic in sentiment, but needed to expel some members of Magdalen. However, only three heads of house were deprived. Presumably others were content to accept Catholicism again, a significant contrast to the situation at Elizabeth's accession. It is significant that Cardinal Pole, when he became Chancellor of the University in November 1556 (Cranmer was burnt at the stake 9 months earlier), was more concerned with reconciliation than with punishment, and issued faculties for the reconciliation of heretics rather than excommunications.

Catholicism at Oxford was much strengthened by the presence there of two energetic Spanish friars, Fray Pedro de Soto (who lectured on the good scholastic subject of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*) and Juan de Villagarcia. The strength of the resistance to Protestant ideas is shown not only by the mass-exodus from Oxford at Mary's death, but by the dispirited reactions of the would-be reformers. One Protestant reformer, Parkhurst, wrote gloomily in May 1559 that Oxford was 'as yet a den of thieves, and of those who hate the light. There are few Gospellers and many Papists.' Such a situation was not to be allowed to continue for long.

The Elizabethan settlement fell on this re-established Catholicism at Oxford with a heavy hand. Nicholas Sander reported on May 1561 to Cardinal Morone on the Catholic reaction. His report on the way the Catholic Bishops were bullied, outgunned and outmanoeuvred in debate makes painful reading. It is followed by long lists of those deprived, executed and imprisoned, which makes proud reading. Heads of House deprived included Balliol, Lincoln, Merton, Christ Church, Trinity, University, Magdalen, Queen's, St John's. Dr Whyte, managed to remain at New College, though he was a known Papist, but 29 Fellows from New College were purged in ten years. Duffy comments, 'the list of émigrés from New College alone reads like a roll-call of Elizabethan recusancy'; altogether over one hundred academics chose to go abroad rather than conform.

Among these was a special group of ardent young men who moved, almost en bloc, to the new University of Louvain in the Low Countries. It has been suggested that the formation of such a group of young men had been a deliberate policy of the leaders of the Marian revival. One senior figure was Thomas Harding, who had become Regius Professor of Hebrew as early as 1542. Then he was presumably Protestant; however, under Mary he accepted Catholicism, became treasurer of Salisbury in 1555, and was deprived in 1559. By 1561 he was in Flanders. He became one of the most powerful controversialists on the Catholic side, writing a series of pamphlets against Bishop Jewel's *Apologia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (1563-1567).

There was certainly a group of young Wykehamist friends, Nicholas Sander (Winchester, entered New College 1546), John Rastell (Winchester, entered New College 1547) and Owen Lewis. Sander and two other Wykehamist friends, John Marshall (ex-New College, later Second Master at Winchester) and Thomas Stapleton, took a three-year lease of a large house in Louvain, seemingly to continue a form of Oxford College life.



Douay College in the eighteenth century

Another pair of friends, marginally later arrivals but especially important for us, was Edmund Campion and Gregory Martin. They were both among the original Fellows of St John's College chosen by Sir Thomas White in 1557 and continued there for some years, Campion teaching rhetoric and Martin teaching Greek. Campion was chosen to deliver the speech of welcome to Queen Elizabeth when she visited the university and to lead a debate before her, attracting considerable favourable notice. Both continued well into the new reign, Martin till 1568 and Campion till 1570. However both eventually defected to Douay, where they studied theology together (1570-73).

The leader of this talented group was William Allen. Not only does he seem to have had a natural authority, his credentials were good in every way. He was a decade older than most of the young Oxford men who moved to Louvain; he went up to Oriel in 1547 and became a Fellow of Oriel in 1550. He had already held senior office in the university, becoming Principal of St Mary's Hall in 1556 and Proctor of the University in 1557. His persecution-credentials were also good: he managed to stay in Oxford for two years after the purge at Elizabeth's accession in 1559, but then moved to Louvain. There he wrote the first draft of *A Defense and Declaration of the Catholike Churchies Doctrine touching Purgatory* (1561, but not published till 1585).

Having developed tuberculosis while tending a pupil at Louvain afflicted with the same disease he was advised to return to his native Lancashire for his health. There he conducted a sturdy campaign to strengthen the resistance of Catholics. It was a widespread practice to evade fines for non-attendance at parish church service by attending both Catholic Mass and the Anglican service. Allen campaigned against this dual churchmanship on the grounds that attendance at Anglican church services and

sermons would inevitably weaken Catholic resistance and the purity of Catholic belief. He was forced to move from house to house to escape the pursuivants, and when Lancashire got too hot for him he moved back to the Oxford area for a couple of years before returning to Louvain and being ordained priest at Malines in 1565.

II. The English College at Douay

The crucial factor which welded together this Oxford in Exile was the foundation of the English College at Douay. It has also been assessed as the single factor which prevented the Catholic religion from being completely destroyed in England, as it was in the Scandinavian countries. The idea was first mooted by Allen on his return from an abortive winter (1567/8) in Rome with Dr Vendeville, who had taken him there in the hope of an audience with the Pope to promote his own schemes. The establishment of a seminary for the education of the clergy was no mere passing whim. The idea may well have been in Allen's mind since his days as University Proctor to implement the decrees of Pole's visitation of Oxford. It was Pole's insistence at the Council of Trent which had made seminaries for the training of clergy such an important item in the whole movement of the counter-Reformation. Strongly influenced as Allen was by Pole, the establishment of a seminary may well have been a long-standing ambition of Allen.

The College opened on Michaelmas Day 1568. Its purpose was to sustain the Catholic faith in England until such time as it could be restored by the overturning of the Elizabethan regime. Not only would it train priests to be sent on the English mission to sustain the faith of Catholics, but also the sons of Catholic gentlemen could receive a Catholic education there. Unlike the seminarians, these young gentlemen paid fees. However, any student was welcomed for a month's instruction free of charge.

After the kaleidoscopic changes of the previous decades - to Protestantism under Edward, the 'godly imp' (Foxe), in 1549, to Catholicism under Mary in 1553, back to Protestantism in 1559 - it is not surprising that the Catholics should look forward to yet a further reversal. It is significant that the enterprise was always financially supported by Philip II of Spain, in whose territory Douay lay; it was certainly to his political interest to encourage English Catholicism. When Protestant feeling in the Netherlands forced the College into exile at Rheims in 1577, Philip continued to support it. The College developed and prospered rapidly. The first ordinations were in 1573, numbers being roughly 20 ordinations a year. In 1575 there were 80 students; in 1577 as many as 120. The unrest consequent on the strong Orange feeling against Spain and Catholicism decreased numbers to 42 students in January 1578, and led to a move to the more peaceful and Catholic Rheims, but at Rheims numbers rapidly rose again to 100 in 1580.

Among the Professors at the College was soon to be Gregory Martin. He had remained in Oxford, lecturing in Greek at St John's, until 1568, but then resigned, presumably because of pressure to conform to the established Church. After a couple of years in the Catholic household of the Duke of Norfolk he had joined the College at Douay in 1570, studying theology until 1573, when he was ordained priest in Brussels. In 1576 he began teaching Hebrew at the College. After only one term he moved with the first batch of students to found the Venerable English College in Rome, where he taught for some 18 months.

In *Roma Sancta* Martin gives a detailed account of the intense biblical study of the English College, then located at Rheims. There is plenty of reading of the text itself, but also ample space for instruction and controlled discussion, not surprisingly

with special emphasis on points of controversy. Each meal takes a half-hour. At dinner Church history is read (Eusebius, Rufinus, Evagrius, Bede, Josephus and others) ending with the martyrology for the following day. At supper the Bible is read, the whole in a year, so that each year the students read it once in the breviary, once at meal-time 'and before they come to the hall every man peruseth in his chamber the chapters that are to be readde at supper'.

After supper, without moving from their places, the students have in Latin a half-hour examination or explication of the passage read, led by 'one of the elder divines (a master in the faculty)', the New Testament after dinner, the Old after supper. All the students have their Bibles open and some take notes; they ensure that they remain within the tradition of the Church by using the exposition of the fathers. Nor is this all. Commonly there is a Hebrew and Greek lesson at another hour of the day, and 'for better understanding of the text and refelling of the Adversary also an other solemne and exact lesson for an hour, covering the whole Bible in a year', accompanied by note-taking. Further, there is a weekly disputation 'on places of scripture which pertain to Controversie'. The educational formation is not exclusively biblical, for there are also two lessons a day on the *Summa* of Aquinas, sometimes a lesson on the *Sentences*, two weekly sessions on cases of conscience, and on certain days a lesson on the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. The fact that this last is noted as being in English might suggest that the others are in Latin, and indeed correspondence of the time shows that the students had complete facility in writing Latin.

Why, then, the need for a translation of the Bible? As early as 11th June 1567 Thomas Harding and Nicholas Sander wrote to Cardinal Morone suggesting a Catholic English translation of the Bible: 'some people think it would be advantageous if at least the historical and moral books of the Old Testament and the Gospels and Epistles could be published by Catholics in the vernacular. In this way the populace could at last be persuaded to put aside the old books corruptly interpreted, if they had available new ones accurately translated and faithful to the Vulgate'. A dozen years later, in September 1578, William Allen wrote to Dr Vendeville about the difficulties of preaching and arguing in English for those whose training had been in Latin:

We preach [our practice sermons] in English, in order to acquire greater power and grace in the use of the vulgar tongue, a thing on which the heretics plume themselves exceedingly, and by which they do great injury to the simple folk. In this respect the heretics, however ignorant they may be on other points, have the advantage over many of the more learned Catholics, who having been educated in the universities and the schools do not commonly have at command the text of Scripture or quote it except in Latin.....this evil might be remedied if we too had some Catholic version of the Bible, for all the English versions are utterly corrupt.

The principal aim of the translation was, then, its use in controversy, and the principal quality desired was accuracy. Martin worked with impressive speed. He aimed to translate two chapters a day, submitting them for revision to William Allen and Richard Bristow. In fact he translated the whole of the Vulgate in less than two years, at the same time writing a lengthy preface to the translation and a controversial pamphlet on the distortion of text and translation by Protestants to support their theology, *A Discoverie of the Manifold Corruptions of the Holy Scriptures by the Heretikes of our Daies*. The explanatory notes to the Bible were written by Richard Bristow, another formidable Oxford scholar. The New Testament was published at Rheims in 1582, the Old Testament however, owing to lack of funds, not until 1609,

by which time the College had returned to Douay. Hence the name, the Rheims-Douay Version.

III. A Portrait of the Rheims-Douay Version

The majority of the features of the Rheims-Douay Version are discussed and justified in the lengthy Preface by Gregory Martin. Not all the items are of equal interest to the modern reader. We may list four of them.

1. *Literalism*. The preface claims, ‘We presume not in hard places to modify the speeches or phrases, but religiously keep them, word for word, point for point, for fear of missing or restraining the sense of the Holy Ghost to our phantasie’. In another place the Preface argues, ‘acknowledging with S. Hierom, that in other writings it is enough to give in translation, sense for sense, but that in Scriptures, lest we miss the sense, we must keep the very words.’ In not a few places this policy results in almost laughable unintelligibility.

2. *The text translated is the Vulgate rather than the Greek of Erasmus which was commonly the basis of Protestant translations*. The reasons for this are fully set out, in a way which is especially impressive at a time when textual criticism was still in its infancy.

- a. The Vulgate is more ancient than Erasmus’ Greek. This would not be considered a good argument today. Age is no guarantee of wisdom! The reliability of a MS depends not on its age but on its general profile of correctness.
- b. It was approved by the Council of Trent. This argument from authority is persuasive for Catholics, but of course holds no water for Protestants.
- c. Jerome had available and used MSS which no longer exist. This is an impressive insight, suggesting that the Vulgate may retain readings superior to those of Erasmus’ Greek text. However, each reading needs to be argued individually.
- d. In many places the Vulgate is confirmed by earlier patristic readings. Again, each reading needs to be argued individually. However, the testimony of the patristic readings is an argument which is still valid and important in textual criticism today.
- e. The text of the Vulgate is superior to ‘the Greek’ (by which is meant Erasmus’ Greek). These must again be argued individually. To follow Martin’s own example, the addition to the Lord’s Prayer, ‘for thine is the kingdom, etc’ is normally now judged an addition to the original text of Matthew.

The ability to see beyond the Greek text of Erasmus is therefore a refreshing insight. Since 1516 Erasmus’ *editio princeps* of the Greek New Testament had swept all before it, but it relied on 7 casually-chosen twelfth-century MSS of the Byzantine tradition. The extreme case is the Book of Revelation. Erasmus had no MS of the Book of Revelation, and was forced to borrow from a friend a MS which lacked the final page. These final verses he himself retroverted from Latin into Greek. Reliance on the slender and limited MS tradition of Erasmus is now widely recognised as one of the chief limitations of sixteenth-century translations, and even of the KJV. The ability to see these limitations is impressive, and does establish a case that in a number of instances the Vulgate text may be superior to the Greek text which had become the standard basis of all Protestant translations.

3. *The retention of many Hebrew words, such as Amen, Alleluia, Corbana, Parasceue*. These are argued as fitting because they give a fuller and more authentic sense. If

‘Sabbath’ is used why may not these also? If ‘phylacteries’ and ‘Pentecost’ are acceptable, why not also ‘Paraclete’ and ‘evangelize’? The preface argues that any unfamiliarity will soon be overcome: ‘We translate often thus, *Amen, amen, I say unto you*, which as yet seemeth strange but after a while it will be as familiar, as *Amen* in the end of all prayers and Psalms’.

4. *Passages are deliberately left ambiguous where they are so.* Hence at Jn 2.4 ‘What is to me and thee, woman?’ is left, with the note, ‘Because this speech is subject to diverse senses, we keep the words of our text, lest by turning it into any English phrase, we might straighten the Holy Ghost’s intention to some certain sense either not intended or not only intended’.

These four arguments and their ramifications do establish a case that the Rheims-Douay version should be considered a responsible attempt to provide a reliable Bible for the purpose of theological argument and controversy – the purpose for which it was originally proposed. It is not flowing, literary or easily readable even in private, still less in public, but then it was never intended to be. For this purpose it had to wait for the revisions sponsored by Bishop Challoner in the years 1730-1752, which made it the Bible used by English-speaking Catholics well into the twentieth century.

IV. Influence of the Rheims-Douay Version on the King James Version

As might be expected, the appearance of the Rheims New Testament was greeted with howls of denunciation. William Fulke considered that the objective of the Rheims New Testament was deliberately ‘to darken the sense’ so that the Bible might ‘be kept from being understood’, and George Wither complained that the translators have ‘left their sentences unperfect, halt, maimed and without sense, and all to strike simple persons in a maze.’

When the panels for translating the KJV were assembled, the Rheims New Testament was not included amongst versions which they should consider. The Douay Old Testament, of which the first volume was published in 1609 and the second in 1610, was of course too late to require even this. In a book so frequently translated as the Bible it is difficult to be sure whether a word or phrase is culled from another translation unless it is strikingly fresh.

Opinion has varied about the influence of the Rheims version on the KJV, James G. Carleton in his book *The Part of the Rheims in the making of the English Bible* maintaining that it was important, and Charles C. Butterworth the contrary. Carleton goes so far as to say that the KJV’s ‘debt to the Roman Catholic Rheims is hardly inferior to her debt to Puritan Geneva’ (p. 31).

The recent publication of the Notes made by John Bois at the final committee of revision of the KJV, sitting at the Stationers Hall, 1610-11, adds a further dimension. Bois was Rector of Bosworth, a Fellow of St John’s College, Cambridge, and took meticulous notes during the ‘three-quarters of a year’ of the final revision. The Notes concern only the discussion of the latter part of the New Testament, which had been assigned to Second Westminster Company, presided by William Barlow, Dean of Chester. It is uncertain whether the revision committee consisted of six or twelve members. The process is described by John Selden. One member read the translation, while others followed, holding in their hands some Bible of the learned tongues or French, Spanish, Italian, etc; if they found any fault they spoke, if not he read on.

There are numerous passages in the texts covered by Bois’ Notes where it is clear that the Rheims version was consulted and was influential, despite the fact that it

was not one of the versions prescribed to be consulted in the original brief. Rule 1 gives preference to the Bishops' Bible, which is 'to be followed and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit'. Rule 14 prescribes for consultation the Bishops' Bible, Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, Whitchurch and Geneva Bibles. In fact it is obvious that at the final revision the Rheims version was one of those held in the hand.

I think it will be clear that, at any rate in the final revision of the later section of the New Testament, the Rheims Version played an honourable part. Without John Blois' invaluable Notes it would be difficult to establish whether the same painstaking attention was paid to it in the revision of the rest of the New Testament. Only where the KJV differs from Tyndale, Geneva and the Bishops' Bibles, but agrees with Rheims could one suggest that it depends on Rheims, and even then the change could be the result of a spontaneous preference by the revisers, without dependence on Rheims. However, enough has been said to establish that this careful translation by the Catholic exiles did play its part in the formation of the King James Version.

*This article is based on a paper given in June 2011 by Dom Henry Wansbrough in Hatfield at a conference **The Bible in Our Culture** sponsored by a group of Christian organisations including the Newman Association.*