

RICHARD'S ENGLISH BIBLE:

A Rejoinder

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The following article was judged to be necessary as a corrective to that appearing under a similar title in the last Ricardian. The main premisses, that Richard was either a heretic to own a Lollard New Testament, or that the Bible he owned was not of Lollard origin, are not valid, and the evidence brought forward in the course of the article is not entirely valid either. Since the topic is, in a sense, peripheral to our main interests, this article will not deal with the apparent misconceptions of the views of the Lollards, and of the attitude of the Church towards vernacular Bibles in the 15th and 16th centuries, but will instead concentrate on the central issues. It will attempt to show that the followers of Wycliffe undoubtedly made a translation of the Bible, that this Bible still exists and is that known as the Wycliffe Bible, also that Richard was not necessarily heterodox, much less heretical, to own an English New Testament, but merely (at worst) of an independent mind.

John Wycliffe was undoubtedly believed by his contemporaries to have translated the Bible into English, the references of Miss O'Regan are sufficient to prove that. They are rather stronger as evidence than she indicates though. John Hus' belief that he had translated the Bible has great weight since there were close connections between Prague and Oxford in the 15th century. Two Bohemian Wycliffites were in Oxford in 1407 as the controversy over vernacular Bibles raged, and they took back with them to Prague a treatise of Wycliffe's advocating knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. There were other contacts too.¹ More conclusive is the reference in the Constitutions of Oxford of 1408. The relevant passage forbids the translation into English of "any text of Holy Scripture" by way of book, booklet or treatise, or the reading of any such translation made in the time of John Wycliffe or since. It does not forbid only the translation of "any passage of Holy Scripture" as maintained by Dr. Gasquet, followed by Miss O'Regan.² It has been shown that in the minds of those who executed this law the prohibition extended to the entire Bible, or any part of it, "*lately composed in the time of the said John Wycliffe*."³ Perhaps sufficient has been said to show that no contemporary had any doubts that John Wycliffe had either translated the Bible, or instigated such a translation; certainly none of those who argued at the time for and against translations had heard of any other.⁴ It is not usually maintained nowadays that Wycliffe personally worked on the translation, the dates of the earliest manuscripts would seem to forbid this, but that his disciples were responsible.

1. M. Deanesley "The Lollard Bible", 1920, p. 240. This book, unaccountably not used by Miss O'Regan, is the standard work on the subject. It will be referred to subsequently as Deanesley.

2. F. A. Gasquet, "The Old English Bible and Other Essays," 1908, pp. 148-9. Deanesley p. 3 n. 2 shows quite conclusively that Gasquet was wrong in translating the words "*aliquem textum*" as "any passage". *Textus* was used to mean a whole book.

3. Church Quarterly Review, 51 (1901), pp. 281-2; Deanesley, pp. 238-9. The reviewer shows that Lyndewood, the great 15th-century authority on Canon Law, and Gasquet's sole authority for his unfortunate interpretation of the Constitutions, does not in fact support him (cf. also Deanesley, p. 296 n.1).

4. Deanesley, p. 250, cf. the whole of Chapter IX, pp. 223-51.

As Miss O'Regan states,⁵ two versions of the Bible known as Wycliffe's have survived. They are connected by the fact that one is an earlier version of the other, being a more literal rendering of the text (see below). The second version is associated with the name of John Purvey, the leading disciple of Wycliffe, and it may in fact be shown with virtual certainty that he was the translator. The proof depends on the "General Prologue" found with many manuscripts, and whose style when compared with the translation of the Bible leaves no doubt that it is by the same hand.⁶ In the course of the Prologue is a comment that certain evil conditions resulting from the celibacy of the clergy were made known at "the last Parliament";⁷ this is an explicit reference to the "Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards" presented to Parliament in 1395. The Prologue was thus written between February, 1395 and February, 1397, when the next Parliament opened, and the Bible was probably finished before then, the earliest manuscript is dated about 1395.⁸ An examination of the Prologue shows it to be the work of a Lollard, it contains passages referring to "simonient and covetous prelates" as antichrist, and denunciations of indulgences and image-worship, all typical Lollard charges. The author was being persecuted at the time of writing and was a person of great learning. The only Lollard who would fit this description in 1395-7 is John Purvey who did not recant until 1401. There are also a number of subsidiary factors, all of which go to prove that John Purvey wrote the General Prologue.⁹

The conclusion is thus inescapably reached that the Bible now known as the Wycliffe Bible is identical with that instigated by John Wycliffe and translated by his followers, notably John Purvey. It is therefore of heretical origin. However it contains no heretical matter at all, apart from the General Prologue, which is only attached to some manuscripts. This is not surprising since the early Lollards at least were scholars and wished to popularise the life of Christ and his disciples, not to prove particular heretical points. This fact mislead Sir Thomas More and Cardinal Gasquet who could not believe that an orthodox Bible could come from the pen of a heretic.¹⁰ More stated quite clearly that the heresy in the only heretical Bible he had seen (that of Richard Hun) was in the Prologue, and because of the above misconception believed that Bibles he had seen in the hands of orthodox people were descended from pre-Wycliffe orthodox translations.¹¹ A natural inference perhaps, but one with no evidence to support it. There is no proof whatever that any complete English translations of the Bible, other than those now known as Wycliffite, were made and widely used before the 1380s.¹² More did not know that the English Bibles he had seen in the houses of his friends consisted of the Wycliffite text without the heretical Prologue. It is now known that Bibles with this text were even

5. Ricardian No. 44, p. 24.

6. Gasquet, *op. cit.*, p. 100; Deanesley, pp. 260-3.

7. Forshall, J., and Madden, F., "The Holy Bible . . . made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers," 1850, Vol. I. p. 51.

8. Deanesley, pp. 297-8, and Appendix I, 1.

9. Deanesley, p. 266, and Appendix I, 2 "The Identity of John Purvey with the author of the General Prologue to the Old Testament and the second Wycliffite version." See also the references to Forshall and Madden in this Appendix. In my opinion the evidence is quite conclusive.

10. H. B. Workman, "John Wyclif," 1926, p. 185; Deanesley, pp. 230-2.

11. Deanesley, p. 14.

12. Deanesley, pp. 131-2; p. 334.

in the Libraries of some monasteries. For example in 1517 a copy of the early version of the Wycliffite New Testament was given to the brothers of the Abbey of Sion, this was without any evidence of heresy, and Henry VI presented one that he owned to the Carthusians of Sheen. The latter volume contains the non-heretical first chapter to the General Prologue.¹³ There is very little evidence for the general ownership of English Bibles between 1394 and 1526, as might have been expected had there been in existence a translation recognised by the Church, and which lay folk were encouraged to read. Much work by Miss Deanesley only brought to light 21 examples in the above period, and she examined, amongst other sources, 7578 wills.¹⁴ There were undoubtedly other copies, but in view of this evidence, not a great many.

Richard was thus not alone in reading the Bible in English in the 15th century, and he was certainly not necessarily a heretic to wish to do so. He was however certainly not conforming to the general actions but was acting independently, as he did at other times in his life.

It is hoped that in the September Ricardian an article describing the copy of the English New Testament owned by Richard will appear. This manuscript is interesting both because of its association with Richard and in its own right as an example of the earlier form of the translation.

13. Forshall and Madden, op. cit. I, p. lxii, No. 156; p. xlvij, No. 60. The existence of this last copy disproves the suggestion in the National Portrait Gallery Exhibition Catalogue (p. 29) that Richard was the first English king to have read the Bible in his own tongue.

14. Deanesley, chapter XII, pp. 319-50, particularly pp. 332-7; Appendix 6. Apparently even Richard's mother, Cecily Duchess of York, did not own a copy (Deanesley, p. 343).

SIR EDMOND SHAA, Kt., P.C. 1427?-1488 LORD MAYOR OF LONDON

JOHN BLUNDEN-ELLIS

On 20th April 1488, Sir Edmond Shaa, Lord Mayor of London from October, 1482 to October, 1483, died. During his year of office, he was present and took part in one of the most dramatic and momentous periods in English history. His family, although obscure, seemed to have been fairly prosperous. Of Cheshire origin, the distinctive family name apparently originated in Williemus Schaw or del Shagh, Lord of Schaw, circa 1200. One ancestor of Edmond's, one Hugo de Shaw married a daughter of the Norman Earl of Chester Ranulph III, and gained "divers manors" into the bargain, probably in the neighbourhood of Middlewich in Cheshire.

Of the early life of Edmond Shaa nothing is known save that he was apparently early attracted to London to be apprenticed to a Robert Botteler, a goldsmith who flourished in the 1430s.