

William Tyndale and His Promoters

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Historians tend to find the origin of nationalism or imperialism of England in the sixteenth century, which would become efflorescent in the nineteenth century. One of the crucial issues during and before that era was the dawn of the English Bible and the Reformation. The English Bible owes mostly to William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536) who translated the Bible into an early form of Modern English and holds the distinction of being the first man to ever print the New Testament in the English language. A historian David Daniell examines Tyndale as the person leading to sixteenth-century reformers and even to nineteenth-century Anglican champions of the “native religion” against the “foreign” referring to Elijah who protested against the importation of foreign religion and stood for the rights of ordinary people against tyranny (Daniell 233-4). Daniell has promoted the idea that Tyndale is the forgotten champion of English liberties. In fact on the recent stage at the Globe in England, *Anne Boleyn* has received a popular review and Tyndale, protected by his lay supporters in the woods, appears on the stage as a person who put influence on Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII and the mother of Elizabeth I. On the stage, Anne was represented as a reformer admirer of Tyndale and his writings. It is likely to be taken that the expectation towards the Reformation was considered high under Henry VIII reign (1506-1547).

However, there are also historians called “revisionists” who oppose to the long-supported protestant view saying that the English Reformation was a “top down imposition of an unpopular religious agenda on a populace largely happy with late-medieval catholic piety” (Daniell, 317). As I have examined the influence of Catholicism and its practice on Shakespeare's late plays around 1600, I would agree with the opinion that there was a certain number of population who preferred remaining or remained unconsciously in the old religious practice.

On the other hand, it is hard to deny the power of vernacular scriptures on laypeople. Although reading the Bible was an unlawful act till it became official in 1539, people were eager to read it. By the end of the summer in 1527, the number of people who possessed Tyndale's vernacular New Testament had gone from hundreds to thousands through the south to the east part of England (Daniell, 298). Simpson also suggests that around fifty thousand copies had been produced in spite of the situation which put the owner of each copy in danger before the Bible became official (Simpson, 58).

Meanwhile, revisionists say that protestants' views had been promoted, extended, and supported by propagators, such as John Foxe, the author and editor of the well known book, *Book of Martyrs* and John Day, the publisher. It is true in a way that in forming Tyndale's reputation and spreading his idea, we cannot ignore the power of printing. Benedict Anderson finds the growth and availability of print culture and print capitalism to be a crucial benchmark discussing the development of national identity and the rise of nationalism.¹ He has argued that print capitalism was largely responsible for the Reformation's unmatched

explosion of both print and the vernacular (37-46). Moreover, the story and/or vocabulary in the books have to catch the mind of the readers. Therefore, the roles of Foxe and Day should not be ignored in the process of spreading the fame of William Tyndale and the ideology. This paper examines William Tyndale and his English Bible focusing on the followers who spread the reputation of Tyndale through the country using printing as a tool to awaken the national consciousness of the people in the sixteenth-century England.

William Tyndale

Tyndale was born most probably at North Nibley, fifteen miles south-west of Gloucester, England, in 1494, and died at Vilvoorden, six miles north-east of Brussels, Belgium, Oct. 6, 1536. The fact that Tyndale was a Gloucestershire man seems to be important, according to Hill.² First, Gloucestershire was a county in which Lollardy survived and it was a clothing county. The connection between clothing and heresy has been noted by contemporaries. Hill examines the connection caused by the mobile nature of the occupation: collecting wool and selling the finished product in other area. Gloucestershire clothiers, in fact, are considered to have close contacts with London where people from all parts of the kingdom exchange goods and ideas. Besides, London was the center of the English reformation. Many Gloucestershire men established themselves in London and some of them helped Tyndale financially later on. Gloucestershire was also the place where gentry and yeomanry who already involved in the clothing industry had more power because of the situation in which traditional feudal power of the hitherto dominant family had collapsed. Some suggest that the individual-centeredness of Protestantism met the needs of rural masterless men, and such a climate must have influenced Tyndale.

Tyndale enrolled at Oxford University and received his Master's Degree in 1515. He seemed to be gifted in languages and was skilled in eight languages- Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, German and English. He became a tutor in the family of Sir John Walsh in Gloucestershire around 1520, and became attached to the doctrines of the Reformation and devoted himself to the study of the Scriptures. He openly stated his opinion and disputed with Roman Catholic dignitaries, which may have caused trouble and led him to London, or as Daniell and Simpson suggest, he went to London hoping that he would be able to find a place to translate the New Testament (Daniell 139-80, Simpson 37).

However, he soon found out that he was unable to do so in England and he left England for the continent about May, 1524 (he never returned till his death in 1536). He appears to have visited Hamburg and Wittenberg where he translated the New Testament under the aid of Martin Luther. It has been said that the printing of this New Testament in quarto was begun at Cologne in the summer of 1525, and completed at Worms (octavo edition was likewise printed before the end of the same year). After that, he finished translating Pentateuch in 1530 and Jonah in 1531. In addition to translation, he produced his own pieces including *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (1527), which was originally a prologue to the quarto edition of his New Testament and *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1527-8).

Those works were considered written in places of concealment, so secure and well

¹ In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson writes "print-language laid the bases for national consciousness in three distinct ways. First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars. ...Second, print capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation. ... Third, print-capitalism created language of power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars. (44-45)

² Hill, Christopher. "Tyndale and His Successors", from www.tyndale.org/Reformation/i/hill.html

chosen that neither the ecclesiastical nor diplomatic emissaries of Cardinal Wolsey and Henry VIII were able to reach them. This phase has been on the stage, *Anne Boleyn* played in 2010 and 2011. Anne is presented as a religious, a Protestant reformer who admires William Tyndale and tries to see him in person. Catholics and moderate Protestants fear and loath Tyndale, but she, who has read and holds *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (the book was considered to be a key text of the Reformation attacking the Pope and the Church when it was published in 1528), goes into woods where Tyndale was in hiding protected by lay people. Going through the attack by Cardinal Wolsey who had confiscated the book from one of Anne's ladies-in-waiting and tried to track Anne down, she successfully reads aloud a part of the book to the King who eventually comments that this book is for him and for all Kings to read (Brenton, 4).

However, Tyndale was betrayed in the end by a person called Henry Phillips, the agent either of English ecclesiastics, Henry VIII, or possibly both. After being arrested and imprisoned in the castle of Vilvoorden for over 500 days, Tyndale was tried for heresy and treason, and then convicted. He was finally strangled and burnt in the prison yard, Oct. 6, 1536. It has been said that his last words were "Lord, open the king of England's eyes"³, which was recompensed three years later when King Henry VIII published the English "Great Bible," the first officially authorized English translation of the Bible (Daniell, 648).

Tyndale's English Bible and its controversy

Although Tyndale ended his life stigmatized as a heretic, he has been considered as the single most gifted translator and recognized as the father of the English Bible. (Filed, 53) A year before Tyndale's death a full English Bible had been produced in 1535 by Miles Coverdale (1488-1569) who was in exile, using Tyndale's work for the Pentateuch and the New Testament, with resting supplied by Coverdale's own translation from Latin and German texts. (Simpson, 38) Coverdale's version including Tyndale's material was then used by John Roger, the editor, in Antwerp for the Matthew's Bible published in 1537⁴, and he also used Tyndale's translation from the Hebrew of Joshua to two Chronicles. All this occurred before the significant event: the Great Bible of 1539, to which Coverdale also worked under Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540).

Scholars tend to find national identity spurred by the English Bible. Furrell claims that translating the Scriptures into the vernacular, whether Martin Luther's German Bible or the early English renderings of William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale, was both a political and religious act tied to rising nationalism. Rosendale focuses on the power of language itself as the crucial role played in the emergent national identity as well as the Reformation. He explores the English Reformation as an important religious and political component of the legitimacy, focusing on the state-sponsored shift from Latin to English in the language of divine access through the vernacular Prayer book (1143-4). Besides, Daniell claims that Tyndale represents both a revolution and a recovery of "native" continuities. Tyndale's recovery of "Saxon" English, with its frequently monosyllabic vocabulary and straightforward syntax, weakened foreign language power, which was French and Latin. When the English language was considered less powerful, Tyndale revived it during the mid-sixteenth century (27). To the argument that English is not fit for bearing the weight of a learned language, Tyndale retorts that English has deeper affinities with Hebrew than with Latin (Simpson, 61).

Meanwhile, High supports and praises Tyndale's translation mentioning a possibility that Shakespeare might have read Tyndale's or the pieces which had taken Tyndale's view

³ As examined in the following section, the story might have been made by Foxe and Day.

⁴ This version, also known as Matthew's Version, published under the pseudonym "Thomas Matthew" was known to Henry VIII.

and remarks that Tyndale is the one who first popularized the historical event in print. Daniell goes even further saying that without Tyndale, there would have been no Shakespeare (406). Shakespeare might have or might not have read Tyndale's work: however, one could say ambiguity, circuitousness, and contradiction are the key features of Shakespeare while simplicity, plainness, and directness for Tyndale. Tyndale and his supporters claimed that Scriptures should be simple, plain, and designed for simple people. Tyndale states in his prose that Scriptures "hath but one simple, literal sense, whose light the owls cannot abide." Throughout his prefaces, Tyndale warns his reader to "beware of subtle allegories" since allegory is the surest tool the clergy can wield to preserve their own power over and possession of Scripture" (Simpson, 111). With Tyndale, scripture became simple and straightforward and with a single interpretation. Tyndale cultivated a plain style with exceptional skill, and as Simpson suggests, it is also doubtless that part of the reason for that style was to allow a much wider access to Scripture (118). To Tyndale, Scripture should be simple, unambiguous, which was wholly beyond the need of interpretation. Such attitude towards Scriptures might have been matched to the movement of the era since it has been said that in a society undergoing profound social mobility, written authority will replace the intuitive praxis of smaller ruling elites, the new social forces which habitually demand that the rules be clear (or "transparent") and explicit. They demand that the rules be written in the clearest possible prose (Simpson, 119).

However, there was a person who opposed such simplicity or directness in Scripture. Thomas More (1478-1535) had been against Tyndale's Bible. More, entered royal service in 1518 as a member of the King's Council, was active and seemed to be clearly driven to be active, at the forefront of the fight against English Lutheranism and Tyndale's vernacular scriptures (Simpson, 45-47). From 1526, the target of official repression seemed to be not only Lutheranism, but also, much more challengingly, vernacular scripture. Starting in 1521 itemized Lutheran opinions had been banned in England, and by 1527 specific books had been officially confiscated. The New Testament of Tyndale along with other polemical evangelical books by him and others were on the list of books to be handed in under pain of excommunication in 1527. While More was chancellor (1529-1532), he imprisoned men for owning the books, and he engineered the arrest of several book dealers, burning six Lutherans (Simpson, 50).

People tend to find a single well scripted story for the More, Tyndale confrontation; on one side is the manic, persecuting, suppressive More, who has rejected the civilized humanism for which he had earlier stood, and now leads the troop of all who are hostile to the vernacular Bible. On the other side, the solitary persecuted Tyndale leads the heroic fight for liberation of conscience nourished by liberty to read the Scriptural word in the vernacular. Actually, More was not opposed to vernacular Scriptures and even defends it in his writing, *The Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, which reveals total agreement of Tyndale's argument in many points (Simpson, 51). What More could not stand for seemed to be Tyndale's translation concerning the choice of words. More must have felt that his interpretation of the Bible, which must have been different from Tyndale's, had been violated, and that Tyndale's translation was full of prejudice. More had consistently focused on Tyndale's prejudicial translation of certain key words, such as the choice of "repentance" over "penance" (75).

In fact, recent scholars tend to support the idea that Protestantism liberated readers and society. As for Tyndale's translation, for example, High, highly praise it, particularly certain words choice over More's, commending Tyndale as the father of Presbyterianism. He says that Tyndale's translation of certain words, to which More so fiercely objected, had social roots as well as being linguistically accurate.⁵ Daniell, also characterized Tyndale's

⁵ *ibid.*

translation as a work that spoke directly to the hearts of readers and laid the groundwork for evangelical transformation. However, Simpson casts a different view towards such praise for Tyndale. To Simpson, this sixteenth-century achievement “is better characterized as the origin of fundamentalism than of the liberal tradition” (3). Simpson states that Tyndale's translation which allows only single interpretation and entire evangelical community cultivated a culture of paranoia and intolerance in early Tudor England, whereas Thomas More and the other opponents of this nascent fundamentalism were the true purveyors of liberty and liberality⁶. According to Simpson, Tyndale, along with Luther insisted that Scripture should be simple, unambiguous, and wholly beyond the need of interpretation,” yet hemmed their translations of the Scriptures with rules and warnings for the unwary reader, and that demonstrate an essential anti-liberal attitude (118). He even says “evangelical reading did not produce either liberty or freedom from institutional restraint,” or the Biblical text actually unleashed different forms of violence (29). Simplicity or directness often limits the liberty of interpretations, which is likely closely related to fundamentalism. At the same time, it has power to appeal to the mass population, so the straightforwardness of the Bible should have allowed a much wider access. Simpson's view is impressive and we may be able to find a tendency for fundamentalism in Tyndale's insistence; however, it would be hard to deny the power his vernacular Bible had during the period.

John Foxe and John Day

John King has examined how Protestantism and early printing culture reinforced each other focusing on John Foxe, the martyrologist, and John Day, the Elizabethan master printer regarding them as the people who played central roles in the emergence of literate print culture following the death of William Tyndale⁷. As revisionists criticize, the reputation of Tyndale would not have been formed without Foxe and Day. In this section, I will focus on Foxe and Day, examining their work.

Foxe is well known as the author and editor of the *Book of Martyrs* that introduced Christian martyrs, emphasizing the sufferings of English Protestants, throughout Western history from the first to the early sixteenth century, and Tyndale is one of them. The book continued to four editions, which was nearly four times the length of the Bible, besides it was the best illustrated English book of its time with spectacular woodcut illustration. He seemed to begin working on the piece in 1552 during the reign of Edward VI, but he had to leave England during the Marian reign. He seemed to publish a piece focused on the English Lollards during the fifteenth century in Latin in Strasbourg, and published his first Latin edition of the book in Basel in 1559. After the death of Queen Mary, he came back to London and became a familiar figure at the Aldersgate printing house of John Day. Then they collaborated on the production of the increasingly massive English edition of the *Book of Martyrs*⁸ that was published in 1563. The full title was a paragraph long as well as the pieces of the period, and scholars call it in abbreviation, *Acts and Monuments*, although the book was known well then, as it is now, as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.

King points out that the book has played a significant role in the construction of Tyndale's reputation as the father of the English Reformation (56). Foxe and Day produced the piece up to the fourth edition together, and they actually add some revisions. Foxe added some stories or accounts to dramatize the life of Tyndale, so Mozely advises readers to refer to original form, 1563 version, not the later edition formed by Foxe (56). Scholars have

⁶ Simpson, James. *Burning to Read*. Harvard up. 2007

⁷ Foxe's *Book of Martyrs and Early Modern Printing Culture*. Cambridge UP. 2006

⁸ It was a folio form about 1800 pages, which is about three times the length of the 1599 Latin book.

pointed out the differences in the second edition especially, in which Foxe modified and extended some accounts in order to meet his own opinion. For example, he extended one story transcribed from John Bale's *Catalogus* to emphasize Tyndale's anti-Catholic inspiration, which should have met Foxe's intensified antipapal animus (Collison, 73). In retelling the story of Tyndale's emigration from England, Foxe emphasizes Tyndale's motivation for translating the Bible into vernacular, aiming to appeal to readers, "that the poor people might also read and see the simple plain word of God." Likewise, the 1570 version paraphrases from the epistle and prologue of *The Obedience of the Christian Man* in order to explain Tyndale's goal of enabling common folk to attain biblical understanding without mediation by non-scriptural traditions or the "idolatries" and "sophistry" of the "pharisaical clergy." In particular, Foxe expounds the translator's famous attack on the method of allegorical interpretation in order to explain his hostility to clerics who wrest "the Scripture unto their own purpose, contrary unto the process, order, and meaning of text; and so delude them in decanting upon it with allegories, and amaze them, expounding it in many senses laid before the unlearned lay people" (King, 63).

In addition, Foxe includes a miraculous story that subtly enhances Tyndale's status as a latter-day apostle as an addendum to Tyndale's biography. The story about Tyndale's apotropaic power to neutralize the "devilish magic arts" of an Antwerp juggler incorporates an allusion to St. Paul's blinding of Elymas, a magician at Antioch. In the text, the juggling wizard was represented as a kinsman of Roman Catholic clerics (King, 59). Moreover, either Foxe or Day provided a new title in the second edition: "The Life and Story of the True Servant and Martyr of God, William Tyndale, Who, for His Noble Pains and Travail, May Well Be Called the Apostle of England in This Our Later Age." The new title was more dramatized in contrast to the simple summary in the 1563 title: "The conversation of Master William Tyndale and his first occasion of his departure out of this realm of England and how traitorously he was taken and brought into the hands of God's enemies." By stressing a thesis absent in the 1563 story, the new title must have called people's attention (King, 59). As King says, expressing that Tyndale is not an apostle, but "the Apostle" of England, the second edition transcends apostolic allusions in the 1563 text. Again, an added unsubstantiated story concerning Tyndale's shipwreck on the way to Hamburg, where he planned to publish his translation, should associate with Apostle Paul (King, 60). Thus, some stories may be a pious fiction designed to enhance Tyndale's status as a latter-day saint who recalls the earliest Christian apostles (Daniell, 26-7).

Meanwhile, John Day seemed to be a well off business man. He seemed to base his career upon sound business principles. He monopolized on the publication of the most often reprinted sixteenth-century English books, *The ABC with Little Catechism* and *The Whole Book of Psalms*, afforded the foundation for his prosperity as a very successful Elizabethan master printer (King, 67). At the same time, his religious zeal made him contribute in producing the book, and between Foxe's preface and abridgement of Tyndale's life, Day arranged for the insertion of a large double-column woodcut entitled "The Martyrdom and Burning of William Tyndale in Barbant, by Vilvorde Castle." The publisher commissioned it for the first edition of the Book of Martyrs. Because no genuine portrait of Tyndale exists, this illustration may be his earliest extant portrayal. This woodcut exemplifies Day's careful attention to the commissioning of more than one hundred woodcuts that made Foxe's collection the best illustrated of the Elizabethan age (King, 69-70). The execution scene portrays Tyndale chained to the stake as the executioner garrotes him before burning. The loin cloth that he wears is a naturalistic detail, but a remote possibility exists that it suggests an allusion to the iconography of the nakedness of truth. More importantly, we can read the words extending from Tyndale's mouth: "Lode op? the king of Englands eies." There was no episode of Tyndale uttering the words in execution in 1563 edition, but Day or Foxe seemed

to add the legend in the second, and the legend ends with the words of Tyndale: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes" (King, 70, 71). The words and the illustration were powerful enough to make Tyndale last in people's minds. Day used this woodcut in all four of his editions of the *Book of Martyrs*.

Another device Day worked on was rubrication using red lettering to emphasize important saints' days and church festivals and the small number of confessors and martyrs in the Calendar infused in the *Book of Martyrs*. The names of most martyrs are printed with black ink, but he printed Tyndale's name in red ink on the anniversary of Tyndale's execution. King examines it saying that this placed Tyndale in the company of new-style saints whose writings afforded a basis for the Elizabethan settlement in religion (65). In addition to his religious passion, Day as a businessman with acumen enhanced book sales by altering and expanding successive editions of the *Book of Martyrs*. This should have been an incentive to churches, officials and individuals to buy new editions.

This paper briefly introduced William Tyndale, as well as arguments regarding his English-language Bible, as well as John Foxe and John Day, who must have had a profound influence in establishing Tyndale's reputation and spreading Protestantism in England. Simpson's characterization of Tyndale's translation and his followers' attitude toward Bible interpretation as nascent fundamentalism is very appealing. We can imagine that a tolerant society would permit liberty in interpretation even as regards the Bible, while a society that only permits a single interpretation with rules and warnings may lead to narrow-mindedness and intolerance. While it is true on the one hand that the simplicity and directness of the words in the Bible tend to allow broad sections of humanity to access its messages, it may on the other be difficult to examine in a balanced manner the religious issues of a person of strong faith, such as a scholar who eagerly champions Tyndale as the hero of Protestantism. This was the case with the earnest Protestants Foxe and Day, who shaped Tyndale's popularity by revising the book. Regardless, the role of Tyndale and his Bible should not be underestimated, as they must have given rise to a sense of national consciousness and influenced the formation of national identity of sixteenth-century England.

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