

Biographies of the Book

by [Susan Felch](#) in the [November 7, 2001](#) issue

Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired. By Benson Bobrick. Simon & Shuster, 379 pp., \$26.00.

In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture. By Alister E. McGrath. Doubleday, 340 pp., \$24.95.

A History of the English Bible as Literature. By David Norton. Cambridge University Press, 484 pp., \$74.95; paperback, \$29.95.

The elderly churchgoer who declares that "if the King James Bible was good enough for St. Paul, then it's good enough for me" has long since passed into legend, but the tale of our English Bibles remains a fascinating narrative, replete with heroes, villains, plot twists and a surprising denouement. Benson Bobrick captures the romance by focusing on the heroic early Bible translators. He appreciates the Bible's history prior to the 1611 Authorized Version, a history that stretches from John Wycliffe through William Tyndale to the Genevan translators and the Elizabethan bishops.

In Bobrick's *Wide as the Waters*, we meet Tyndale, muffled in a cloak, making his way to a clandestine meeting with Stephen Vaughan, the king's emissary. Though Tyndale declares himself a loyal English subject, six years later he is tied to a stake, strangled and burned as a heretic.

Later John Rogers obtained a license from the king for what is essentially a completed Tyndalian Bible, and still later Matthew Parker parceled out biblical texts to his bishops to create a new authorized version for Queen Elizabeth I. By the time we reach the 17th century, we are ready for the spectacle of James I, newly arrived from Scotland, lecturing his bishops on the state of the English church and deciding to sponsor his own revised translation.

Bobrick, trained in English and comparative literature and the author of histories ranging from the American Revolution to the reign of Ivan the Terrible, knows how to engage readers with a rollicking narrative. He makes us care about the two

Wycliffite versions of the Bible (one by Nicholas Hereford, who later renounced his association with the reformer, and the other by John Purvey), and he draws us into the deliberations and the personalities of the six translation companies entrusted with the production of the King James Version.

Along the way we master the plot twists of this grand narrative: the 14th-century manuscript Wycliffite Bibles, based on the Latin Vulgate, give way to Tyndale's freshly translated New Testament of 1526. By 1535, a year before Tyndale is executed for his vernacular audacity, Miles Coverdale oversees the release of the entire Bible, which is dedicated to the king. Coverdale's "pastiche," based on Tyndale's own translations of the Old and New Testaments as well as the Vulgate and contemporary Latin and German translations, generates a slew of competing versions: the so-called "Matthew's Bible" of 1537, the first to be licensed by King Henry VIII; the officially sanctioned Great Bible of 1539, reprinted in 1540 with Thomas Cranmer's sonorous preface; and the short-lived Taverner revision.

Edward VI's reign sees the enshrinement of passages from the Great Bible in the Book of Common Prayer, while Queen Mary's return to the Roman Catholic Church encourages the English exiles in Geneva to produce their own translation in 1560. Elizabeth's authorized Bishop's Bible (1568) is largely a frustrated attempt to supplant this popular Geneva Bible, whose famous marginal notes are not entirely supportive of monarchical power. Although the KJV, another royal version pitted against the Geneva Bible, ultimately wins the day, it does so largely by dint of economic power rather than religious or literary persuasion.

Bobrick is a consummate teacher who summarizes complex historical and linguistic movements without reducing them to caricature. His biography of the Book becomes a guided tour through church and English history, as well as an argument for his subtitle: *The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*. That revolution is specifically the British civil war of the 1640s, but more generally the inexorable social movement toward democracy.

Bobrick asserts, rather than demonstrates, that the English Reformation and vernacular Bible "established the ground and right" for free discussion. As fascinating as his anecdotal history is, it suffers from the "great men" approach, with its drift toward hagiography and the inevitable omission not only of important people but also of institutional forces that lie beyond individual control.

Alister McGrath, while alert to the well-honed anecdote, is more carefully attuned to social history. In *In the Beginning* he surveys the economic impact of print technology on the production of English translations and sets the English Bible within its European context. Unfortunately, he is less attentive to the British context. He dismisses the Wycliffite Bibles as inaccurate and crams the 16th-century Bible translators into two chapters. However, he does acknowledge Tyndale as "the most formative influence" on the KJV and recognizes that the 17th-century translators "saw themselves as standing on the shoulders of giants."

It is useful to read Bobrick and McGrath in tandem, the former supplying the personal touch, the latter weaving his story on a larger loom. The two books also demonstrate the role of historical interpretation. Both discuss the life of John Bois, who remained the rector of Boxworth while serving as a KJV translator for four years. But Bobrick sees him as "singularly conscientious" for holding down two jobs, while McGrath points out that "he needed little encouragement to neglect his parish duties . . . for the academic delights of Cambridge."

Bobrick relies almost entirely on secondary sources, even for the words he puts into the mouths of his heroes. Since he prefers the older, colorful histories, such as those by H. C. Conant, J. R. Green and G. M. Trevelyan, his quotations are lively but sometimes of dubious authenticity. McGrath, who is professor of historical theology at Oxford and the principal of Wycliffe Hall, is the stronger historian. It is therefore somewhat disconcerting to find him making such elementary errors as relegating the 14th-century poet Geoffrey Chaucer to the 15th century or mistaking John Foxe's 1559 Latin martyrology for the famous *Acts and Monuments*, popularly known as the *Book of Martyrs*, published in 1563. It is also annoying to discover that he does not cite his quotations, making it difficult to locate or evaluate his sources.

Both Bobrick and McGrath pursue an aggressively Protestant thesis, suggesting that there was little of spiritual value in the Middle Ages. To some extent, this results from choosing a dramatic shape for their narratives: with heroes, there must also be villains. As a consequence, neither author pays sufficient attention to the vernacular sermons, prayers and prayerbooks and mystical writings that nourished biblical knowledge and piety prior to the 16th century.

Bobrick and McGrath also recite the commonplace notion that the KJV stands as a literary masterpiece that, as Bobrick states, "surpassed all others in the majesty and music of its words." Or, as McGrath's first sentence declares, "The two greatest

influences on the shaping of the English language are the works of William Shakespeare and the English translation of the Bible that appeared in 1611." Though McGrath acknowledges Tyndale's formative contribution and recognizes the KJV as a revision of earlier translations, he still insists that the King James Bible established "norms in written and spoken English." This despite the fact that five of the six familiar English phrases he uses to illustrate his point were actually created by Tyndale and were common expressions before the KJV translators began their task. It is unfortunate that McGrath seems unable to abandon the claims of his subtitle for the more nuanced historical reading of which he is capable.

In *A History of the English Bible as Literature*, an abbreviated revision of his two-volume *A History of the Bible as Literature* (1993), David Norton provides the surprising denouement to the story by arguing that the KJV's literary excellence is a myth. Whereas Bobrick and McGrath's books have the virtue of sweeping narration, Norton's presents primary sources, lengthy (but attributed) citations, nuanced commentary and a finely tuned argument. The resulting density might be intimidating were it not for the clarity of Norton's prose. Like their predecessors, the KJV translation companies valued accuracy over elegance, Norton asserts. Yet, paradoxically, through the processes of familiarity and sentimental attachment, biblical English gradually moved from being perceived as a low style to, by the 18th century, the critical (or uncritical) adulation we see repeated in Bobrick and McGrath.

Norton presents a careful study of translations and their reception from Richard Rolle's 14th-century Psalter to the 20th-century New English Bible. Along the way, he inveighs against "Avolatry" (the uncritical praise of the Authorized Version), examines the evidence for the influence of biblical English on literary English, and traces the transformation of the Bible from a religious text to one read merely "as literature." Although Norton concludes by reflecting "on the decline of Christianity to effective non-existence for the majority of English-speaking people," these three books may indicate that we are witnessing a renewed interest not only in the English Bible but in the religion for which it remains the sacred text.