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Miles Coverdale (1488-1568)

Active: 1535-1569 in England, Britain, Europe

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One of the leading Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, Miles Coverdale produced the first English Bible in the 1530s, thereby preparing the way for the later translators of the Bible, and opening up the relationship between the Bible and English literature. His influence can be strongly felt in the centuries of interaction between the Bible and English poetry.

Coverdale was born in York in 1488. No details are known of his parentage or early education. The current consensus on his ordination is that John Underwood, in Norwich in 1514, ordained him priest at the age of 26. Coverdale became an Augustinian friar and went to the house of his order at Cambridge; he was there in 1520, when Robert Barnes returned from Louvain to become Prior. Barnes became increasingly associated with the movement for religious reform and, when he was summoned to appear before Cardinal Wolsey in February 1526, Coverdale pledged his support for his superior, and even accompanied him to London. Back in Cambridge, Coverdale took his degree, and met Thomas Cromwell, probably before 1527. His associations with Barnes and Cromwell pushed him further towards the emergent reformist movement. By Lent 1528 he had left the Augustinians, and had publicly preached against transubstantiation, the worship of images, and sacramental confession. Perhaps fearing for his safety, by the end of 1528 he had fled overseas.

Coverdale's whereabouts for the next seven years are uncertain; some scholars consider it likely that he spent most of this time in Antwerp. Certainly, it was at some point in this period that he began his translation of the whole Bible. It should be noted that the question of an English Bible was hugely controversial at the time. In May 1530 Archbishop Warham had declared that a translation of the Bible into English was unnecessary, and potentially harmful. Although Henry VIII disagreed with his Archbishop, hostility within the church ensured that no translation occurred, until Coverdale's. Coverdale's Bible was the first time that the entire Bible had been translated and printed in English. Printing was finished in Antwerp, by Martin de Keyser, on 4 October 1535, and it was soon reprinted in England by James Nicolson in Southwark. The New Testament was a slight modification of William Tyndale's earlier translation, but Coverdale's main achievement lay with the Old Testament, very little of which had previously been translated into English. It was, of course, a hugely significant book; not the least of its success was the way in which it shaped countless future editions of the Bible by presenting the Apocrypha as an appendix to the Old Testament: Coverdale and de Keyser were the first to do this.

Returning to England later in 1535, Coverdale also printed his *Goostly Psalmes and Spirituall Songs*, a collection of English versions of German hymns, and another hugely influential text, establishing Coverdale as an influence on the later tradition of scripturally-derived hymns. More texts followed, not just translations: Coverdale was an extremely active reformer, and his total number of publications approaches forty. In 1537, a hybrid of Coverdale's and Tyndale's Bible translations, known as the "Matthews Bible", arrived in England from Antwerp. The New Testament of this edition was Tyndale's, while the Old Testament was split roughly evenly between the two translators. Coverdale was commissioned to produce a revised version of this Bible, which would be placed in every parish church in England. Although printing began in Paris in May 1538, political and theological complications led to the burning of the books by the French. In April 1539 printing moved to London, and by March or April 1540, enough copies of the text had been produced to fulfil the original mandate. This is the famous 1539 "Great Bible", and Coverdale's input was significant; it was, however, a revision of the 1537 Matthews Bible, and not of the 1535 Coverdale Bible.

In June 1539, the Act of Six Articles ended the official approval of religious reform, and Coverdale was forced to again flee overseas. Before leaving, he married Elizabeth Macheson (d.1565), and the two went to Strasbourg, where they stayed for about three years, Coverdale continuing with translations from Latin and German. In September 1543 Coverdale became assistant minister of Bergzabern (a small town 40 miles north of Strasbourg) and headmaster of the town school: he held these posts for five years. Meanwhile, in England Coverdale's books were condemned by decree on 8 July 1546. On 26 September, some of his books (including his Bible) were burnt at Paul's Cross.

The death of Henry VIII (January 1547) left the way open for Coverdale to return to England, but he waited a year until he received a summons. In June 1549, Coverdale went, as preacher, with Lord Russell to quell a rebellion in Devon and Cornwall; although the rebellion was over by the end of August, Coverdale stayed for several months. In

August 1551 he was appointed Bishop of Exeter, although the position brought with it a number of large debts. Over the next few years, Coverdale's main work was in his diocese, although he continued making translations throughout this period.

Following the death of Edward and the accession of Mary in 1553, Coverdale was placed under house arrest, and removed from his bishopric. In 1555, he was given permission to leave England for Denmark where, however, he stayed for only a few weeks. He went to Wesel for a few months, before returning to Bergzabern, where he remained until 1557. That year he moved to Aarau, and in 1558 relocated to Geneva, where he may have contributed to the translation of the Geneva Bible (published 1560). He returned to England in 1559, a year after Mary's death.

Coverdale did not resume his bishopric on his return to England, although he did continue as an active preacher. In 1564 he accepted the living of St. Magnus the Martyr by London Bridge. His wife Elizabeth died in September 1565, though he remarried (to Katherine) in April 1566. In the summer of that year, he resigned his living, possibly as a response to what he viewed as a conservative edict on the wearing of vestments in the church. He continued to preach in London, where he died on 20 Jan 1569. He left no will, and appears to have no living descendants.

Although an active reformer in many ways, preaching and printing the new Protestant message, Coverdale is remembered primarily for his remarkable achievement as a Bible translator. His achievement was, indeed, extraordinary: not only did he undertake the first translation and printing of the entire Bible in English, he was also heavily involved in the plan to place an English Bible in every English parish church. His writings and prologues were collected and reprinted in the nineteenth century, but his literary reputation continues to rest on his skills and industry as a translator.

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