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29 June 2016 | by Henry Wansbrough | Comments: 0



The Murderous History of Bible Translations

Harry Freedman

There is hardly enough murder to justify the title, but murder there was – that of William Tyndale, the noble first translator of the Bible into modern English, kidnapped and later garrotted and burnt at the stake for his heretical, Lutheran tendencies. But there is plenty of skulduggery, and less bloodthirsty but scarcely less interesting drama and excitement.

Harry Freedman covers a huge field, ranging from the first translations of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, and leaves the

reader with a striking impression of the fury which a new translation often excites and the tenacity with which readers will cling to a familiar version.

What emerges is the significant impact of Bible translation on the development of civilisation, not only the development of literature, but the creation of scripts and the growth of literacy. This is a series of gripping vignettes, rather than a comprehensive history: the Cathars and Beguins in medieval France, the Anabaptists in Münster, Moses Mendelssohn's Jewish translation, and the first Russian translation in 1876.

Freedman often relies on second-hand information and has sometimes failed to appreciate the finer points of scholarship and the significance of what he says (he has no grasp of the purpose of Latinisms in the Rheims-Douai Version, nor of its contribution to the King James Version, for example). But this is not intended as a work of scholarship but as an eye-opener; in this it fully succeeds.

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