

## JOHN ROGERS OF DERITEND, ASTON, BIRMINGHAM

John Rogers was the compiler of the first Authorised English Bible, the pioneer of the English Reformation, and its first martyr. He was the son of Margery Wyatt and John Rogers, loriner (maker of horses bits and bridles) of Deritend, Aston, Birmingham, and was born about 1500. A bust of John Rogers was unveiled by the Mayor of Birmingham in 1883.

He was educated at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge.

For a time he was chaplain to the English Merchant Adventurers at Antwerp.

Through William Tyndale he is said to have '*embraced evangelical truth in its fullness.*' Later he ministered for several years to a Protestant congregation at Wittenberg. On the death of Henry VIII, he returned to England, and in August 1551, was appointed a prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral. Subsequently the Dean and Chapter nominated him as Divinity Lecturer.

After the death of Edward VI, Roger's fortunes changed very much for the worse. In January 1554, at the instigation of Bishop Bonner, he was committed to Newgate Prison. A year later, he was sentenced to death by Bishop Gardiner for heresy. On February 4th, he was taken to Smithfield to be burned but before the fire was kindled, he was offered a pardon on condition of recantation. This he refused. He had not been allowed to have a final interview with his wife, but on the way to the stake she and the eleven children (the oldest a lad of 17 and the youngest a babe in arms), watched from the crowd. '*This sorrowful sight of his own flesh and blood could nothing move him,*' writes John Foxe, '*he cheerfully took his death, with wonderful patience in the defence and quarrel of Christ's Gospel.*'

The first English Bible to be printed, completed by Miles Coverdale in October 1536, was never really sanctioned for public reading either by King or Parliament. Henry VIII apparently gave his sanction to its issue at the intercession of Anne Boleyn. But in May 1536, Anne was beheaded and the injunctions which had actually been drawn up, authorising the issue were never sent out and acted upon.

Five months after Anne's death, William Tyndale was martyred at Vilvorde in Belgium. At the stake he is said to have prayed, '*Lord open the King of England's eyes!*' It is an extraordinary thing to recall that ten months from the date of his martyrdom, a Bible in English was actually authorised by Henry VIII.

A copy of this Bible came into the hands of Archbishop Cranmer early in August 1537. He wrote at once to Thomas Cromwell pressing the latter to obtain from the King '*a licence that the same may be sold and read of any person.*' Nine days later, the

Archbishop wrote once more, acknowledging Cromwell's intimation that Henry had granted the licence.

This Bible which is believed to have been printed under Roger's supervision at the Antwerp press of Jacob van Meteren, comprised 556 folios (that is 1,112 pages). Of the 1,500 copies printed comparatively few escaped destruction.

The title page of the volume bore these words:

*'The Bible, which is all the Holy Scripture: in which are contained the Olde and Newe Testament truly and purely translated into Englysh by Thomas Matthew. Set forth with the Kynges most gracious lycece.'*

Then who was Thomas Matthew, and what was his precise association with John Rogers? On this point, Sir Sidney Lee writes, in the Dictionary of National Biography: *'There seems no doubt that Tyndale handed over to Rogers his incomplete translation of the Old Testament and that Rogers mainly occupied himself during 1536 in preparing for the press the English version of the whole Bible, including Tyndale's rendering of the Old Testament to the close of the Second Book of Chronicles. To complete the translation of the Old Testament, and the Apocrypha, he borrowed Coverdale's rendering, published in 1535. By adopting the pseudonym 'Thomas Matthew,' Rogers doubtless hoped to preserve himself from Tyndale's fate. He was henceforth known as 'Rogers alias Matthew,' and his Bible commonly quoted as 'Matthew's Bible.'*

A revised edition of the Matthew's Bible was published in London in 1539, and there were two further issues in 1549 and yet another in 1551. In his *Records of The English Bible*, Prof. A.W. Pollard says that *'while the Matthew Bible was quickly superseded, its importance was very great, since it formed the starting point of the successive revisions which resulted in the version of 1611.'*

Dr W. F. Moulton, in the fifth edition of *The History of the English Bible*, agrees with Mr J. L. Chester in regarding Matthew's Bible as, *'the first Authorised Version of the English Bible'*.

John Rogers was the first of the nearly 300 persons who suffered death by burning in the reign of Mary Tudor. The burnings, however were only part of the story. As Miles Coverdale says, *'Some were thrown into dungeons, ugly (horrible) holes, dark, loathsome, stinking corners. Others lay in fetters and chains, loaded with so many irons that they could scarcely stir. Some were tied in the stocks. Some were whipped, scourged, beaten with rods, and buffeted with fists. Some had their hands burned with a candle. And some were miserably starved. On the head of one at least, melted pitch was poured.'*

One of the foremost figures in this terrible story was Bonner, Bishop of London, in whom says the quaint Thomas Fuller, *'The lion, tiger, wolf, bear, yea, a whole forest of*

*wild beasts, met. '*

This article reminds us of the very high price that was paid by so many brave, godly individuals, to give us the Bible in our mother-tongue and to win for us the right to read it freely.

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