

The First Psalter Printed in English

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IF YOU ASKED a well informed Christian who gave the world the first English printed Bible, he would probably reply Tyndale. He would be right, for Tyndale translated the whole of the New Testament; he also translated and published the Pentateuch plus a few other oddments like Jonah, and left a substantial part of the rest of the Old Testament in manuscript translation. If you asked that Christian who first translated the rest, he might mention Miles Coverdale: again he would be right. Coverdale worked over Tyndale's Old Testament labours, adding those of his own, and he is best remembered for the majestic cadences of his Psalter which was made famous the world over through the Book of Common Prayer. But very few people would mention either Joye or Bucer in connection with early printed English language Bibles.

George Joye is almost unknown today. His argument with Tyndale about life after death and pirating Bibles is just about known, but his personal contribution figures in few Reformation histories. Bucer is much better known—generally for his eirenical spirit. He is often thought to have occupied himself with continental Reformation problems until near the end of his life when he was invited to England by Cranmer. Though he spoke no English, he advised Cranmer on theology and Prayer Book revision, before dying at Cambridge in 1551. In fact Bucer gave us the first English printed Psalter through the translation of George Joye.

In 1529 Martin Bucer, who was then at work consolidating the Reformation in Strasbourg, produced a massive and learned commentary on the Psalms. It was written in Latin, the international scholarly language of the day. Details of George Joye's life are mostly obscure, but we know that this Cambridge graduate who was a native of Bedfordshire had to flee for his faith and his life to the continent. We know that he was married, and that he spent much time in Antwerp, then at the height of its power commercially, and it may be

surmised that he supported his family through writing (mainly translating) and proof reading for the industrious Antwerp printers, especially Endhoven and de Keyser. Antwerp was an international trading and financial centre at the time, and it is surprising how often extant letters mention chance contacts in the Low Countries through which Protestant ideas spread as far afield as Poland, Italy, Spain and Britain. The English merchants in Antwerp befriended the Protestant fugitives and in a measure protected them both from Henry's and papal agents.

Joye, one of these refugees, and despite his later dispute largely a friend of Tyndale, soon determined to translate part of Bucer into English. He translated Bucer's Latin text, and after the manner of the times allowed himself a certain liberty in changing what he translated. Joye added to the actual Psalter text Bucer's *Arguments*, these being a kind of interpretive summary which he prefixed to each individual Psalm. By 1530 Joye's Psalter was rolling off the Antwerp presses, though because of the danger involved in printing anything of which the authorities disapproved, the imprint was fictitious 'Francis Foxe, Argentine', this last word being the contemporary name for Strasbourg.

Bucer's influence in England was felt long before Cranmer invited him to British shores. The Bucer-Joye Psalter is little known because it has not been reprinted since the sixteenth century, and because due to the rigours of censorship and persecution, only two copies are known to have survived, one in the British Museum, London and the other in California. The Oxford copy listed by Darlow and Moule (normally careful scholars) is a fiction, for it has never been known in the Bodleian Library, Oxford as I have verified.

This 1530 Bucer-Joye Psalter was used in the early Reformation Primers, the forerunners of the Prayer Book, and also for the notes in Matthew's Bible. A number of strange and yet well-known phrases, usually held to be Coverdale's in origin, are found in Joye's translation, *bugges* for instance in Psalm 91 or *shephoke* in Psalm 23. The work itself purports to be by Aretius Felinus, the pseudonym under which Martin Bucer wrote. Joye is not mentioned, but, for reasons I have set out in the *Courtenay Facsimile* edition introduction, he is the translator almost certainly. Three editions were published before the liturgical reforms of the 1540s and the later versions of the Bible replaced the Bucer-Joye version. But it has its rightful place in Bible history as the first Psalter ever printed in English. It contributed to our English literary heritage with the occasional memorable phrase, and it showed once again the strong continental influence on the English Reformation. How anyone with any first hand knowledge of sixteenth century history can go on believing the myth that somehow the English Reformation proceeded on theologically different lines is a mystery to me. There is overwhelming and ever growing evidence against this

notion. The historical setting was different, but early on the theology on both sides of the Channel was almost identical. Bucer's influence was felt right through the sixteenth century from the late 1520s onwards. Through Joye's translation he was read by ordinary people, and even before that Bucer was read in Latin by the learned. The copy of Bucer's Psalms Commentary which Archbishop Warham, no friend of the Reformation, left to All Souls Library, Oxford is evidence of that, quite apart from Cranmer's extensive library later on.

Until the *Courtenay Facsimile* was made available in a limited edition of 250 copies, there were only two known copies extant. Now the first Psalter ever to be printed in English is available once again for libraries, collectors, scholars and bibliophiles.

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