



God's Secretaries

By Adam Nicolson
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Introduction

A net of complex currents flowed across Jacobean England. This was the England of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Bacon; of the Gunpowder Plot; the worst outbreak of the plague England had ever seen; Arcadian landscapes; murderous, toxic slums; and, above all, of sometimes overwhelming religious passion. Jacobean England was both more godly and less godly than it had ever been, and the entire culture was drawn taut between the polarities.

This was the world that created the King James Bible. It is the greatest work of English prose ever written, and it is no coincidence that the translation was made at the moment "Englishness" and the English language had come into its first passionate maturity. Boisterous, elegant, subtle, majestic, finely nuanced, sonorous, and musical, the English of Jacobean England has a more encompassing idea of its own reach and scope than any before or since. It is a form of the language that drops with

potency and sensitivity. The age, with all its conflicts, explains the book.

The sponsor and guide of the whole Bible project was the King himself, the brilliant, ugly, and profoundly peace-loving James the Sixth of Scotland and First of England. Trained almost from birth to manage the rivalries of political factions at home, James saw in England the chance for a sort of irenic Eden over which the new translation of the Bible was to preside. It was to be a Bible for everyone, and as God's lieutenant on earth, he would use it to unify his kingdom. The dream of Jacobean peace, guaranteed by an elision of royal power and divine glory, lies behind a Bible of extraordinary and everlasting literary power. About fifty scholars from Cambridge, Oxford, and London did the work, drawing on many previous versions, and created a text which, for all its failings, has never been equaled. That is the central question of this book: How did this group of near-anonymous divines, muddled, drunk, self-serving, ambitious, ruthless, obsequious, pedantic, and flawed as they were, manage to bring off this astonishing translation? How did such ordinary men make such extraordinary prose? In *God's Secretaries*, Adam Nicolson gives a fascinating and dramatic account of the accession and ambitions of the first Stuart king; of the scholars who labored for seven years to create his Bible; of the influences that shaped their work and of the beliefs that colored their world, immersing us in an age whose greatest monument is not a painting or a building, but a book.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did James dream of national unity in England? How did the political fractiousness of Scotland influence his decision-making as sovereign of England? How would you describe James's interaction with Puritan believers? In what ways did his engagement with religious dissidents differ from that of Elizabeth I?
2. What were some of the Puritan objections to the Bishops' Bible of 1568? Why did Puritans prefer the Geneva Bible of 1560? What compromise did James propose in his suggestion of one "uniform translation?"
3. How did James's failure to achieve national unity fuel his efforts to bring peace and coherence to the church in the form of a new translation of the Bible? What role did Richard Bancroft play in helping the project to get off the ground?
4. Adam Nicolson writes: "Committees thrive on compromise and compromise produces fudge and muddle ... How can a joint enterprise of this sort produce anything valuable?" Do you agree with this statement? To what extent was the King James Bible an example of a "committee producing a work of genius?"
5. What did you think of James's rules for the translation of the King James Bible? Were you surprised by his indictment of marginal notes? What about James's concern that the Bible be seen as one, unified text, in which the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament were a foretelling of the New Testament?
6. In what way did the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 affect the practical activities of the translators?
7. How would you describe the character of King James I? Why did he exclude Separatists and Presbyterians from the committee of translators? In what way does this decision reveal his aims?
8. Adam Nicolson argues that the sense of closeness and immediacy and "passionality" available to the translators during the seventeenth century influenced the richness and linguistic excitement of their work. Do you agree? How does this idea play out in the King James translation of the Song of Songs?
9. James wrote of chained-up books in the Bodleian Library at Oxford: "Were I not a King, I would be a University-man." To what extent do the intellectual preoccupations of a leader extend to the policies of his/her realm? Do you think that political leaders and rulers today exert the same influence?

About the Author

Adam Nicolson has been both a publisher and a travel writer, and is the author of many award-winning books, including the recent *Sea Room*, about life on the Shiant Isles. He lives on a farm with his family near Burwash, England.