

subject. While Edwards has followed Tange's *curriculum vitae* with meticulous attention I am not sure that a fully rounded picture of the man emerges. Edwards touches only very lightly on Tange's personal life. One recurring theme in the book is of Tange as an "aloof loner", two words that recur often but without deep analysis. Against this assessment it emerges that Tange was early assiduous in maintaining strong relationships with a number of figures that were important in his quick rise to the top. Later his relationships with some of his ministers were particularly close.

Most surprisingly, Tange's wife of sixty years, Marjorie, daughter of Edward Shann, only infrequently comes into the story and then often as a shadow in the background. We hear a little more of the two children, who appear to have been happy to collaborate with Edwards. There is nothing about Tange's intellectual and cultural interests (did he have any?) and only a little about his hobbies and other interests outside work.

More importantly, some will feel that Edwards became too close to and too influenced by Tange and his views and that in the end he has given us a more sympathetic portrait than the man deserved.

Edwards writing is clear, accurate and unadorned and he leads the reader along at a good pace. We might note a superfluous detail here and there and the occasional excess (Tange's "Mona Lisa smile" in one of his portraits?) but on the whole the book is admirably crafted and intelligently organised. Moreover, it has been carefully proofread, with only one exception I noted on page 80.

It is probably more the fault of costs and convention than of Edwards, but the endnotes are the usual nuisance in making it necessary to check the back of the book several times on an open page in case one misses some further amplification of the text. O for the days when footnotes appeared at the foot of the reader's page.

A BUREAUCRATIC HOLINESS

by Michael Giffin

God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible,
by Adam Nicolson;
Harper Perennial, 2004, US\$13.95.

I FOUND THIS BOOK, published simultaneously as *God's Secretaries* in the United States and as *Power and Glory* in Great Britain, hard to put down. It brilliantly captures the spirit of an age that's often thought of as a hiatus between the Elizabethan era and the Civil War. It reminds us of Jacobean England's unique history, and how the story of the King James Bible is inseparable from that history.

The book's power owes much to the author's romantic belief that literary genius is a product of incongruity, whether psychological or social. In stressing the stark contradictions of the age and its people, Nicolson suggests that, had the incongruity been rendered more congruent, the English-speaking people would have been denied their most influential and enduring text. One irony, among many, is that while the Authorised Version has come to be the preferred Bible of some of America's most conservative Protestants, it was the creation of a civil and ecclesiastical establishment that persecuted the Pilgrim Fathers. They used the Geneva Bible, which they took to the New World.

The making of the King James Bible between 1604 and 1611 is a mystery. The men who accomplished it left few clues. But Nicolson believes their anonymity is

the power of their book, a key to its grandeur, since:

It is not the poetry of a single mind, nor the effusions of a singular vision, nor even the product of a single moment, but the child of an entire culture stretching back to the great Jewish poets and storytellers of the Near Eastern Bronze Age.

Nicolson's own inspiration, which drives his narrative, is their "sense of an entirely embraced and reimagined past". They sought to write as if the passage of 3000 or 1600 years made no difference, since their text was universal:

As a result, it does not suffer from one of the defining faults of the age: a form of anxious and egotistical self-promotion. It exudes, rather, a shared confidence and authority and in that is one of the greatest of all monuments to the suppression of ego.

In spite of such commonality of purpose, there were arguments and struggles, exclusions and competitiveness:

It is the product of its time and bears the marks of its making. It is a deeply political book. The period was held in the grip of an immense struggle: between the demands for freedom of the individual conscience and the need for order and an imposed inheritance; between monarchy and democracy; between extremism and toleration. Early Jacobean England is suffused with this drama of authority and legitimacy and of the place of the state in that

relationship. “The reformers”, it has often been said, “dethroned the Pope and enthroned the Bible.” That might have been the case in parts of Protestant Europe, but in England the process was longer, slower, less one-directional, and more complex. The authority of the English, Protestant monarch, as head of the Church of England, had taken on wholesale many of the powers which had previously belonged to the pope. The condition of England was defined by those ambiguities. In the years that the translation was being prepared, *Othello*, *Volpone*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*—all centred on the ambivalences of power, the rights of the individual will, the claims of authority, and the question of liberty of conscience—were written and staged for the first time. The questions that would erupt in the Civil War three decades later were circling around each other here.

But it is easy to let that historical perspective distort the picture. To see the early seventeenth century through the gauze of the Civil War is to regard it only as a set of origins for the conflict. That is not the quality of the time, nor is the King James Bible any kind of propaganda for an absolutist king. Its subject is majesty, not tyranny, and its political purpose was unifying and enfolding, to elide the kingliness of God with the godliness of kings, to make royal power and divine glory into one indivisible garment which could be wrapped around the nation as a whole.

NICOLSON BEGINS with an engaging summary of the transition from Elizabeth to James. Few moments in English history, he says, were hungrier for the future, and its possibilities, than the spring of 1603. Elizabeth had become a relic of a previous age, hadn’t moved with the times, and the great social and economic and religious issues facing the country weren’t being addressed. If some historians portrayed Elizabeth’s death as the moment when England swapped “a heroic, gallant, Renaissance freshness” for “something more degenerate, less clean-cut, less noble, more self-serving, less dignified” he suggests that’s “the opposite of what England felt at the time”.

James brought with him energy, a wife, and heirs. He was a poet, and an intellectual of European standing, with a fresh perspective: “More than we can perhaps realise now, a change of monarch in an age of personal rule meant not only a change of government and policy, but a change of culture, attitude and belief. A new king meant a new world.” James adopted as his motto words from the Sermon on the Mount, *Beati Pacifici*, Blessed are the Peacemakers, and the making of the King James Bible became central to his claim on that ideal.

Within months of his accession, during a major and extended outbreak of the plague, James received a petition to bring the English Reformation to a conclusion. He agreed to a conference, to be held in January 1604, at which outstanding ecclesiological and theological issues would be discussed with both the Puritans and the Episcopate (the latter including both Calvinist and anti-Calvinist bishops). Amid intense lobbying from all sides—and there were more than two—James agreed to terms of reference that would simultaneously preserve and reform the established church. True extremists were excluded.

The conference was dressed up as a meeting of opposites but it was in fact the bringing together of a near-consensus. James held tight reins over the agenda and dominated the proceedings. Among the staged wrangling over monarchical ecclesiology, and the merits and demerits of the official Bishop’s Bible and unofficial Geneva Bible, the idea for a new translation was born. It would be uniform and represent the teaching authority of Oxford and Cambridge. It would be revised by the bishops and vetted by the Privy Council. James himself would approve it.

The translation was to be the work of a committee; an idea that our modern mind, trained on centuries of individualism, rebels against. But if we now balk at the idea that a joint enterprise can understand genius and produce a valuable work of literature, things were different in 1604:

If you think of the King James Bible as the greatest creation of seventeenth-century England, a culture drenched in the word rather than the image, it is easy to see it as England’s equivalent of the great baroque cathedral it never built, an enormous and magnificent verbal artifice ... its orderliness and richness a kind of national shrine built only of words. Considered like that, it is inconceivable that the project should have been put in the hands of any individual. It can be no surprise that the king, in whose speeches the word “love” comes up in paragraph after paragraph, and for whom unity was an almost sacred watch-word, should summon a huge committee to do the work; it is unthinkable that he could have done it in any other way.

The committee was divided into six sub-committees. Each sub-committee was called a “company”, a name given to a group of actors who performed in public and at court, and to a commercial enterprise penetrating the newly discovered world, bringing to mind ideas of potency and enlargement, drama and success. A “director”, a title that hints at efficient commercial organisation, led each company. The six companies had nine members each, a total of fifty-four, nearly four times the

size of any previous Bible enterprise.

The Archbishop of Canterbury issued a letter of sixteen separate instructions to the translators, which were the King's own rules, covering the nature and scope of translation and creating a system of peer review and mutual moderation among the sub-committees. Nicolson believes the instructions provide a remarkable insight into the workings of the royal mind, being "deeply encoded, concealing as much as they reveal, assuming as much as they make explicit". They exude "a habit of orderliness: numbered, coherent, managerial and modern" and give "a rather different picture of James and his advisers than history has chosen to remember".

WHILE THE FIRST instruction decreed that the official Bishops' Bible was to be followed, "and as little altered as the Truth of the Originall will permit", no more than 8 per cent of its phraseology made it into the new translation, and the fourteenth instruction allowed the translators a great latitude to absorb, copy and adapt from any source they wanted; from other translations of the Bible itself, including the recently translated Roman Catholic Douai version; and from any Hebrew, Greek or other manuscripts available. Their understanding of their commission, as described in their preface, was not so much to make a new translation as to make "out of many good ones, one principal good one". While they represented a great range of linguistic scholarship, they did rely heavily on Tyndale's version of the previous century, polishing its meanings to appeal to what Eliot calls "the auditory imagination".

Nicolson is a fan but admits the final version was not entirely good. Apparently, the Hebrew and Greek texts the translators worked from were not the most accurate, even by the standards of their time. For example, Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, had prepared an edition of the New Testament forty years earlier based on a more ancient and less corrupt text. Also, they were still a little adrift on tenses in Hebrew, and they did not completely understand *koine*, the common Greek of the New Testament, which is very different from the classical Greek of Plato and Aristotle.

In spite of these limitations, Nicolson ends his narrative with a curiously grandiose nostalgia for an age that, with the benefit of hindsight, few of us would live in (or could survive in). As a confessed outsider, he laments that those inside the church have abandoned the mind of their forebears:

The belief in the historical and authentic truth of the scriptures, particularly the Gospels, has been largely abandoned, even by the religious. The ferocious intolerances of the pre-liberal world have

been left behind ... and perhaps as a result of that change, perhaps as a symptom, religion, or at least the conventional religion of ordinary people, has been drained of its passion. There is no language that can encompass the realities which the Jacobean accepted as normal. Modern religion's rhetoric is diluted and ineffectual, and where it isn't, it seems mad and aberrational ... there is something that connects the God-shaped mentality of Jacobean England more intimately with the world of modern Muslim fundamentalists than with our own softened, liberal tolerance. These men, and their Bible, exist on the other side of a gulf, which can be labelled liberal, secular, democratic modernity. We do not live in the same world ... It is impossible now to experience in an English church the enveloping amalgam of tradition, intelligence, beauty, clarity of purpose, intensity of conviction and plangent, heart-gripping godliness which is the experience of page after page of the King James Bible. Nothing in our culture can match its breadth, depth and universality, unless, curiously enough, it is something that was written at exactly the same time and in almost exactly the same place, the great tragedies of Shakespeare.

At this point, though, one must wonder just what it is Nicolson is really longing for, since he admits to being neither this nor that—neither a churchgoer nor an atheist—as he lapses into the stock rhetoric of those outside the church who hold dogmatic beliefs about what the church ought to be, ignores the experience of those inside the church, and generally questions the authenticity of contemporary religious experience. Of course, he stops short of committing himself to Anglicanism if only the Authorised Version was still read and the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* was still used. A parallel rhetoric is heard from lapsed Roman Catholics who use the passing of the Latin Mass as an excuse for not engaging with the church on a personal level.

This is not to denigrate Nicolson's important book, which acknowledges the scarcity of primary material and yet magnificently reconstructs the social, economic, political and religious context that supports what evidence there is. I can't help feel that a central if unspoken premise of *God's Secretaries* is that a committee can only be successful in translating (or redacting or canonising) sacred texts if there are favourable political circumstances that allow the committee to function. Following this line of thinking, it would be marvellous if similarly accessible narratives were written about committees that translated (or redacted or canonised) other scriptures. Nicolson has led the way and is an excellent example to follow.