

The First Welsh Bible

Written by K B Napier

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William Morgan (1545-1604) was bishop of Llandaff and St Asaph, and he was the first to translate the entire Bible into the Welsh language, from the Greek and Hebrew. It is of note because the Welsh were previously banned by the English invaders from using their own language.

He was born near Betws-y-Coed in north Wales, now a very pretty tourist attraction, and because his father was tenant of the Gwydir estate, he was probably educated with the ruling Wynn family's children. He later went to St John's College, Cambridge, where he studied philosophy, Greek and mathematics. He graduated BA in 1568 and MA in 1571. He went on to biblical studies for seven years, including Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, as a prelude to his clerical career. Studies of Protestant theology and the Church fathers were part of his regime. He obtained his BD in 1578 and DD in 1583. This left him just 19 years to finish his remarkable work of translation!

He became a clergyman, his first parish being Llanbadarn Fawr, 1572. After three years he moved to a parish in Welshpool, and then, three years after that, Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant in mid-Wales.

William Salesbury published his New Testament in Welsh while William Morgan was a student at Cambridge. Though William Morgan liked this version, he believed the Old Testament should also be made available. So, with the encouragement of the Queen, he began the work, finishing it (and a revision of Salesbury's work) in 1588. As a full-time clergyman, this was a mammoth task, especially by candle-light!

He then revised the Prayer Book, published in 1599, and worked on revising the 1588 Bible, because it contained printing errors. Bishop Richard Parry and Dr John Davies continued the work after his death, publishing a revised version of the Bible in 1620. Though finished by two others, it was still called the William Morgan translation. It is this later revision that became the standard Welsh text, still used today (with modern revisions in 1988 and 2004). It is significant because the Welsh people could at last read scripture in their own language, after often brutal repression of the language by the English, though the majority spoke in Welsh!

Parts of the Bible were available in Welsh before William Morgan came along, based on the corrupt Latin Vulgate. William Salesbury, enabled by the new Reformation, translated the New

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Testament into Welsh from the Greek. Morgan's whole-Bible translation arrived just 19 years later. When it was revised, Morgan spent a large part of every day at the printing works, reading and amending the text... mainly because the printer was English and did not understand the letters he was using to print the Bible. The two who carried on his work did so to polish the finished book, especially as it contained too many colloquial terms. Their aim was to bring it more-or-less in line with the English KJAV. It is treated by the Welsh as equal in status to the KJAV.

Very few of these Welsh Bibles were printed, simply because only one per parish was completed. They were, then, large, heavy pulpit editions which were chained to the lecterns, because Bible-thieves were about in those days. The first smaller versions, for use in homes, was printed in 1630. Both editions ensured that the Welsh language did not die out. An original copy of the first Welsh Bible is on view in St Asaph cathedral, north Wales, and is the Bible used at the investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1969. There is much difference between the 1620 version and the later 1988 and 2004 versions.

Salesbury was alarmed at how base the language had become, and feared it would soon be extinct, saying ""And take this advice from me; unless you save and correct and perfect the language before the extinction of the present generation, it will be too late afterwards." ("Oll Synnwyr Pen Kembero Ygyd").

One of the first books to be published in Welsh was a tentative affair, given the previous hostility at court to Welsh. Written by John Prys of Brecon, it was "Yn y Lhyvyr hwnn" (translates as 'In This book'), containing the credo, Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, made available in the 15th century.

Much later, Salesbury published the Welsh Prayer Book in 1549, saying "If you do not wish to be worse than animals, obtain learning in your own language; if you do not wish to be more unnatural than any other nation under the sun, love your language and those who love it. If you do not wish utterly to depart from the faith of Christ... obtain the holy scripture in your own tongue, as your happy ancestors, the ancient British, had it" ('Oll Wynnwyr Pen Kembero Ygyd').

It was Queen Elizabeth 1st who made the William Morgan translation possible, through an Act of Parliament commanding Welsh bishops to make the Bible available in Welsh. Though some historians complain that this was only a political action so that Elizabeth could manipulate them

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into closer compliance, this is opinion rather than known fact. In fact, she and her courtiers were worried that the Welsh were very slow to adopt English, which kept them out of the English political scene. Thus, the new Welsh version was placed side-by-side with the English version, in the hope that both languages would be used!

The smaller Bible published in 1630 ('Y Beible Bach': literally 'the Bible small', or small Bible) spurred on a great tradition of learning how to read and write, being the only book in Welsh for most people.

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