

Melvyn Bragg, **The Book of Books: the Radical Impact of the King James Bible 1611-2011** (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011. 370 pp)

Melvyn Bragg, through such series as the *South Bank Show* and *In Our Time*, has discussed more topics with more specialists more energetically than most of us could ever hope to do. The 400th anniversary of the King James Bible provides him with the perfect opportunity to pen a perspective reflecting that breadth of encounter. And that is what *The Book of Books* is. We are looking through a Melvynian glass, brightly.

The book has three parts. Part One takes us 'From Hampton Court to New England'. It's a broadly chronological account, putting the KJB in its historical context, and paying proper attention to earlier translations, with Tyndale rightfully recognized as preeminent. It explains how the KJB was commissioned, planned, and executed. Then the camera angle widens, and we are taken on the first of the KJB's many journeys - across the Atlantic via the *Mayflower*... to the English Civil Wars, where it provided ammunition for both sides... to the Restoration era in Britain... to the Great Awakening in America.

Part Two is headed 'The Impact on Culture'. Here the journeys take us into science, language, literature, and political thought. We find the KJB hugely influential among those who formed the Royal Society. Its language forms an important strand in present-day idiom. It can be seen as great literature in its own right. And it has hugely influenced British and American writers. We are given a whistle-stop tour from Shakespeare to Toni Morrison, with way-stations including Milton, Bunyan, Defoe, Blake, Melville ('Call me Ishmael'), Faulkner, Eliot, and Golding. The aim is not to probe in depth; it is to demonstrate the way the KJB has permeated English literature and 'after all the pounding it has taken... is still a source for such great imaginative writers today'.

Bragg goes on to show how the KJB fared during the Enlightenment, surviving the attacks of such writers as Hume and Hobbes. 'Perhaps the truly remarkable thing about the Enlightenment', he concludes, 'is not that it swept away for ever the King James Bible and all it stood for but that it failed to do so'. And this leads him to make a strong case for how it will survive the so-called New Enlightenment of Richard Dawkins and others. There is a grand demolition job of Dawkins' limited



read that there are 'literally thousands' of present-day idiomatic expressions in the KJB (my estimate is around 250). But I'm happy to turn a blind eye to the occasional linguistic infelicity in the interests of obtaining a grasp of the wider picture.

Which is what we get. Bragg's overview is a tour de force. His strength as a novelist produces an account that is personal and imaginative, full of excitement and enthusiasm, maintaining energy and pace. He is inclusive, addressing different kinds of reader, believers and nonbelievers alike. There are SENTENCE ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS. The paragraphs are short, as are the chapters, which usually end with a cliffhanger. I've never read a biblical account quite so compelling.

The key word is in the sub-title: 'the *radical* impact of the King James Bible.' He says, at the end of his Prologue, that whoever we are in the English-speaking world, and regardless of whether we have religious convictions or not, he hopes to persuade us that this version 'has driven the making of that world over the last 400 years, often in most unexpected ways.' I am persuaded.