

THE COVERDALE BIBLE

ANOTHER TREASURE FOR THE LIBRARY

Sylvia Marchant describes the Coverdale Bible and other rare books from the Library's collection

In July 2007, a copy of the 1550 edition of the Coverdale Bible was purchased by the National Library of Australia and became a significant addition to the Library's collection of rare Bibles.

The new acquisition is an early edition of the first complete Bible printed in English. Myles Coverdale (1488–1569) produced the first edition in 1535, followed by a revised edition in 1550. Some 65 copies of the original 1535 edition are known to survive but none is perfect and the 1550 edition is very rare. The only other Australian library to hold a copy of the 1550 edition is the State Library of Victoria. *The Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of The English Bible 1525–1961* claims that the National Library's edition was printed in Zurich by Christopher Froshover. In the Bible itself it says 'printed for Andrew Hester, dwellynge in Paules churchyard at the sign of the white horse', and a dedication under the title declares: 'Set forth with the Kynges mooste gracious licence.' The complete history of the Library's copy is unknown but for many years it was privately owned by Alfred E. Bright, who was Chairman of the Trustees of the Felton Bequest to the National Gallery of Victoria in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

The Library's copy, at some twenty-three centimetres high, is a heavy and beautiful calfskin-bound tome with gold-tooled titles and gilt edging. To hold it is to experience its pleasing weight and chunky shape, together with the soft, smooth patina of its binding. As equally satisfying as the feel of the book is the knowledge that this is one of the world's great treasures and that it is now safe in the collection of the National Library of Australia. It is in remarkable condition for its age and has clearly been well cared for by previous owners. The handsome binding is not original, as such binding did not exist at the time of its publication,

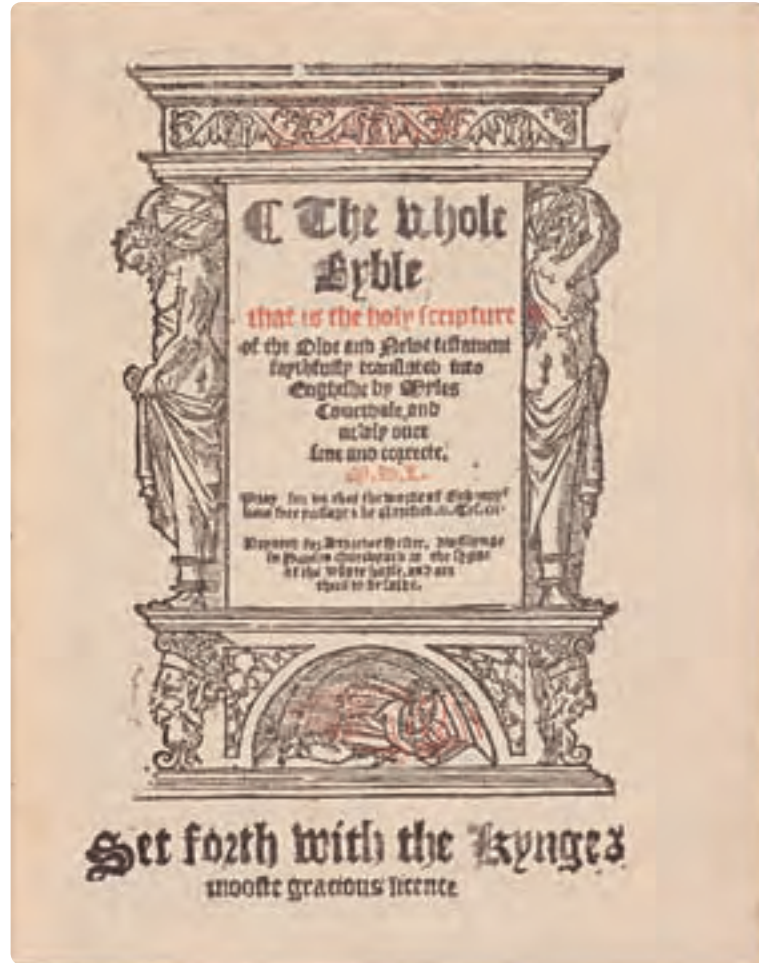


and the cleanliness of the end papers also suggests it has been rebound at one point. Damage to the early pages indicates that the original cover was lost for some time. The text is in double columns with 50 lines to the full column and is printed in what was known as 'black letter English' or 'German Gothic', a highly decorative script popular in Western Europe in the twelfth century. There are decorated initial capitals throughout and it has one woodcut, which has ornamental sideblocks and depicts the creation of Eve. A scriptural note in similarly elaborate handwriting on one of the pages tells us that it was once someone's precious personal possession and more than just

The Whole Byble: That is the Holy Scripture of the Olde and Newe Testament Faythfully Translated into Englyshe by Myles Couerdale, and Newly Ouersene and Correcte (Zurich: Christoph Froshauer and S. Mierdman?, 1550)
Rare Books Collection
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above left:
Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Library exhibitions curator
Margaret Dent examines
the recently acquired 1550
Coverdale Bible



above right:
Title page of *The Whole Byble: That is the Holy Scripture of the Olde and Newe Testament Faythfully Translated into Englyshe by Myles Couerdale, and Newly Ouersene and Correcte* (Zurich: Christoph Froschauer and S. Mierdman?, 1550)
Rare Books Collection
RBRS 25

a museum piece. A bookseller's catalogue note has been placed in the book but is difficult to date. It advises that this edition is 'extremely rare' and is offered for sale for fifteen pounds sterling.

Myles Coverdale was the bishop of Exeter from 1551–1553. The background to the production of his Bible is obscure but it is known he met William Tyndale abroad in 1529 and is said to have assisted him in his translation of the Pentateuch which comprises the first five books of the Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Coverdale's own translation was carried out under the patronage of Thomas Cromwell (c.1485–1540), King Henry VIII's chief minister from 1532 to 1540, who was anxious for the publication of an English Bible. The work was probably encouraged by the action of Convocation which, under the instigation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer (1489–1566), petitioned for such a work in 1534.

In its arrangement of the books of the Old Testament, Coverdale's Bible was epoch-making. In the standard version

of the Bible before Coverdale, the Latin Vulgate, the books which are now classed as the Apocrypha are intermingled with the other books of the Old Testament. In Coverdale's Bible the books are divided into six parts—(1) Pentateuch; (2) Joshua–Esther; (3) Job—'Solomon's Balettes' (i.e. Canticles); (4) Prophets; (5) Apocrypha (the books and treatises which were not considered of the same authority as the other books of the Bible, and are not found in the Hebrew canon); and (6) the New Testament. The Reformers, both in Germany and in England, generally agreed with Coverdale's division and, as far as the English Bible was concerned, his example was decisive. There are copious scholarly accounts of Coverdale's life and work and especially of the development of his Bible translation. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* include excellent accounts, and other scholarly discussions can be found in works on Bible history.

Before Coverdale, all Bibles were printed in Latin and the standard version, the Latin Vulgate, was a translation from the Hebrew

and Greek texts by Saint Jerome. It was this version that was the first book ever printed in the Western world using movable type. Known as the Gutenberg Bible and also as the 42-line Bible because each column had 42 lines, it was printed in 1455. Between 180 and 200 copies of the Gutenberg Bible were printed; only 48 still exist and, of those, only 20 are complete. A rare and perfect copy of this Bible was loaned to the National Library by the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, UK, as part of the *Treasures from the World's Great Libraries Exhibition* (7 December 2001 – 24 February 2002). A digital copy of the Gutenberg Bible is available in the Library's electronic resource collection. Copies of the Gutenberg Bible are extremely valuable and even single leaves can bring high prices at auction. The National Library holds a single leaf (from Leviticus, chapters VI and VII), which is featured in the National Library of Australia's publication, *A Banquet of Books* (2007).

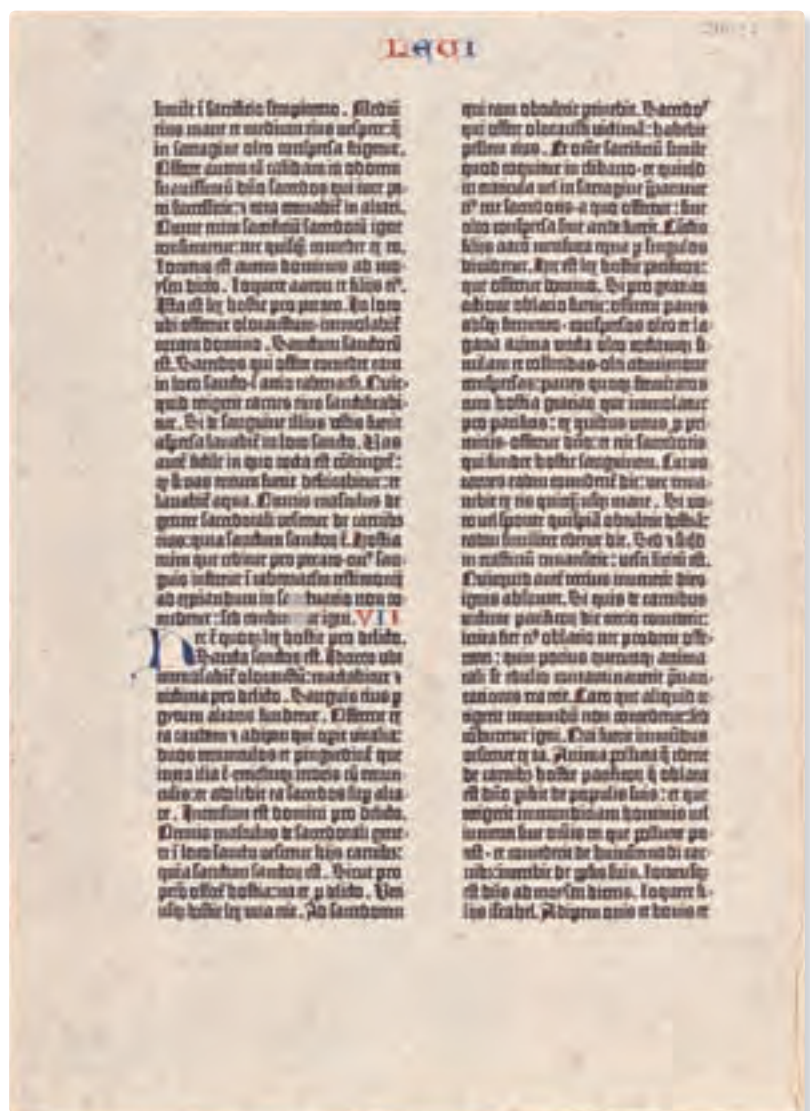
The 1550 Coverdale Bible joins the Library's collection of rare Bibles in print, microfilm and electronic format. While the 1550 edition is now the earliest most complete English Bible held by the Library, a digital version of the 1535 edition, together with many other early translations of the Bible, can be viewed through the electronic resource, *Early English Books Online*, available onsite at the Library. Other rare Bibles that predate Coverdale and are therefore in Latin include a Bible printed in 1477 by Anton Koberger (or Coberger), printer of the Nuremberg Chronicle which, after the Gutenberg Bible, is one of the best known and most valuable of all *incunabula* (early printed books especially those printed before 1501). Ann Nugent has carefully traced the history of the printed English Bible, using the Library's Bible collection, and her comprehensive account appeared in the *National Library of Australia News* (March 2002).

Apart from the Coverdale Bible, the Rare Books Collection holds other irreplaceable items, including five *incunabula* and a first folio edition of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1623). Many of the Library's rare books are explored in *A Banquet of Books*. This publication surveys a selection of 37 of the Library's rare, unusual and beautiful holdings to bring to readers a glimpse of the treasure trove of literary delights

available to them. Each entry is illustrated and carries an informative textual resumé of the work, which explains its provenance and significance. Arranged in three sections: 'Homegrown Historical Treasures'; 'Masterpieces from Abroad'; and 'Works of Art' (books that in themselves are works of art), *A Banquet of Books* offers many hours of pleasure in trawling through its contents and perhaps will tempt readers to go further and examine one or more of the books it describes.

Among the publications featured in *A Banquet of Books* is the smallest book in the world (Joshua Reichert, *Das Kleinste Buch der Welt*, 2002) which has 26 pages, all illustrated, and measures a minute 2.9 x 2.4 millimetres. Not surprisingly it comes with its own magnifying lens. Also included is Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, printed by William Caxton in 1478. This is the oldest complete book in the National Library and is a biographical

Single leaf from Leviticus, chapters VI and VII of the *Biblia latina*, known as the 42-line Bible (Mainz: Gutenberg, 1455?) Rare Books Collection BRBS 9





above:
Hartmann Schedel (1440–1514)
World Map—Secunda etas mundi
reproduced from Nuremberg
Chronicle, folio XIII (Nuremberg:
Hartmann Schedel, 1493)
map; 31.0 x 43.0 cm
Maps Collection, nla.map-nk6074

below:
C.B. Currie, after Nicholas
Chevalier (1828–1902)
*The Old and New Home-
stations, Victoria*
fore-edge painting reproduced
on a copy of *The Three Colonies
of Australia: New South Wales,
Victoria, South Australia: Their
Pastures, Copper Mines, & Gold
Fields* by Samuel Sidney (Auburn,
N.Y.: Derby and Miller, 1854)

hagiography of the lives of saints and includes useful instructions on how to slay a dragon. Hartmann Schedel's *Liber Cronicarum* (The Nuremberg Chronicle), which was designed to tell the history of the world from creation to the publication date of 1493, is another treasure featured. Books which are works of art where the production is more significant than the text include *The Three Colonies of Australia* (1854) by Samuel Sidney, the true value of which is the fore-edge painting by Miss Currie. In this kind of painting, an illustration is painted on the fore-edge leaves of the book, opposite the spine. When the book is closed the painting is concealed but when the pages are fanned

slightly to one side, it is revealed—an obscure but delightful form of book decoration.

Readers can access these treasures and many more at the Library, though some are only available in electronic form to protect the originals. The Coverdale Bible adds lustre to the Rare Books Collection and provides scholars and researchers with a new and rich source of historical and biblical knowledge.

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