The Welsh-Language Bible and Prayer Book of 1809: Savior of a Native Tongue

By

Rev. Lawrence B. Porter, Ph.D.
Library Director

This leather-bound volume comprises a Welsh-language translation of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, along with a Welsh translation of the religious services in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. It was printed in 1809 at London by W. Dawson, Bensley, and Cooke of Pater Noster Row (the publishing center of London since medieval times, named for its proximity to Saint Paul’s Cathedral whose clergy in the Middle Ages could be seen daily exiting the cathedral and walking down this path chanting the Lord’s Prayer).

Welsh or Cymraeg is a branch of Celtic spoken natively in Wales, a principality of Great Britain situated on the Atlantic coast, west of England. Partial translations of the Bible into Welsh are known to have been in existence as early as 1470. But the first complete translation was published in 1527 as the result of an act of Parliament. However, that first complete Welsh translation of the Bible was quickly deemed unsatisfactory not only because of its numerous printing errors but also because of its use of all-too colloquial expressions. And so another was made by the Anglican bishop Richard Parry of the cathedral town of St. Asaph in north Wales, and Welsh grammarian and renaissance scholar, Dr. John Davies. Their translation appeared in 1620. Parry and Davies aimed at producing a translation which would be not only in conformity with the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible which had appeared in 1611 but also similar to it in literary style that is written in a more polished or refined Welsh comparable to the cultivated, sonorous English of the King James version.

This 1809 edition is basically a reprint of Parry and Davies’ translation but with the addition of a Welsh translation of the Book of Common Prayer. This combination of Bible and Prayer Book in Welsh contributed importantly to the survival of that language because it had the effect of conferring estimable status on Welsh as a theological and liturgical language, a language for private study and public worship, at a time when ever-increasing English-usage appeared about to eliminate the existence of Welsh as a means of everyday communication.