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God's Secretaries
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Long and hard! Primary texts are few, and those I went to read in the Archbishop's library in Lambeth, in the British Library and in libraries in Oxford and Cambridge. But early 17th century England has been a historiographical battleground for over half a century and the secondary literature is both enormous and daunting. I spent many months reading those books and papers. More enjoyably, I then found myself in a third layer, a raft of Victorian scholarship, which published many of the more personal memoirs, letters and journals of the period. It was here, beneath the more theoretical 20th-century histories, that I felt most in touch with the men of the time.

Were you surprised that so many different personalities could coordinate their efforts to produce such a masterful translation in a mere seven years?

The essential fact of a society like Jacobean England is the overriding influence of authority. It is a pre-liberal world. People do not, on the whole, believe in freedom. They believe in order. Order must be just and merciful. It cannot be arbitrary, but it cannot be absent. The arguments of the age are not between freedom and authority; they are between conflicting versions of authority. The governing nightmare is the situation envisaged by Shakespeare in *King Lear* in which order is casually dismantled, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, and the bonds of a civilised, sane, coherent life are undone.

It is this shared belief in order, and a highly efficient management system devised by Richard Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, which allows the unwieldy instrument of 50-odd diverse scholars to work so cleanly and neatly together. They were, of course, intensely familiar with these texts, and so it was not as if they were coming naked to the task. And Englishmen had been at work on translating the Scriptures for almost 80 years before the King James Translators began. You could see it as the culture itself writing this book; the individuals involved were in a sense merely the carriers of the cultural genes. They did what the historical moment allowed them to do.

Are you surprised that better records of the actual process of translation weren't kept and saved for perpetuity?

Not entirely. There was a fire in the royal archives in Whitehall, which destroyed all the documents of the Privy Council between 1600 and 1613. That removed the royal end of the paper chain. And besides, it is scarcely part of the Jacobean frame of mind to preserve the working documents of an enterprise like this. Unlike us, they were interested in product not process. No one at the time would have considered it right, or at least important, to see by what steps the conclusions were reached. In a way, such working documents might be seen to undermine the finality and authority of the final text.

What do you think explains the permanence of the King James Bible? What accounts for its being so influential today?

The King James Bible has one quality above all others: breadth. Its purpose and method is to encompass all. There is nothing mean or thin in it. Open any page and you feel yourself fed and sustained, simply by the reach, directness, grandeur, poignancy and power of the language. It is that rare thing: a book about universal realities which understands that only the beautiful gives access to the divine.