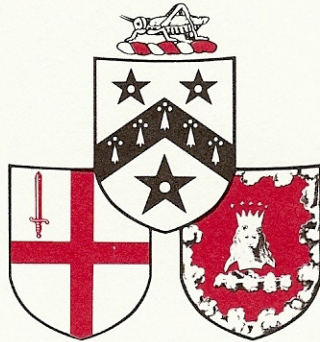


*G R E S H A M*  
*COLLEGE*



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Gresham Special Lecture

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*THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF  
WILLIAM TYNDALE*

delivered by

*The Rt. Revd. and Rt. Hon. The Lord Coggan DD*

at the Church of St. Lawrence Jewry-next-Guildhall

Thursday 19 May 1994

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Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH

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## Gresham Special Lecture

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### *THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF WILLIAM TYNDALE*

I have often wondered, if I were being interviewed by Sue Lawley on the *Desert Island Discs* programme, what would be my reply to the question so simply put, so variously answered: "And your luxury?" I should already have a Bible and a copy of Shakespeare's works. But what in addition? I think I might well ask for a crate, a large crate, full of biographies and autobiographies. If Sue Lawley demurred because of the multitude of the items in my choice, I should reply: "No difficulty at all. I'm asking for one thing, a crate. The contents are merely incidentals." I would hope to get away with my request!

For consider: I am a glutton for biography and autobiography. Give me the life story of almost any kind of man or woman, and I will thank you for a happy hour in his or her company. The book may provide me with the story of someone who has contributed richly to the pattern of world history – a Philip of Macedon, a Napoleon, a Churchill – or it may be an obscure figure who, according to ordinary standards, has contributed only a stitch or two to the tapestry of mankind's chequered advance. But that man, insignificant as he may seem, was somebody's baby, somebody's sweetheart, somebody's husband. What made him the man he was? What *made* him tick? I care little whether the tick was a strong, regular and healthy one; or whether it was weak and fitful. He was a *man*. She was a *woman*. And I for that reason am interested.

Picture me, then, under the shade of a spreading tree on my desert island. What will my first dip into the crate bring forth? What could be more suitable for one who, just before the journey which was to cast him ashore, had been lecturing in the Church of St Lawrence Jewry-next-Guildhall, than a *Life of John Colet* (b. 1466, d. 1519)? His father, Sir Henry, had twice been Lord Mayor of London, and he himself was Dean of St Paul's for fifteen years. Before that, formative years of study in Oxford, Paris and Italy prefaced years spent lecturing in Oxford, and especially on the Epistles of St Paul. Those lectures were like a gale of fresh wind invading a foetid atmosphere. The Middle Ages were waning. The classics were coming to light. The darkness of the mediaeval world of thought was beginning to be dissipated. Let me mention the names of just four of Tyndale's contemporaries, to illustrate the kind of men who, whether he agreed with them or disagreed, influenced the very air that he breathed.

**Erasmus of Rotterdam**, who died in the year of Tyndale's martyrdom, has been called the most renowned scholar of his age. A great humanist, himself deeply influenced by Colet's lectures, he was a brilliant writer of works such as his *Praise of Folly* and *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* ("pocket dagger of the Christian soldier"); he produced his own edition

of the Greek New Testament in 1516. That book was to exercise a deep influence on theological thought in succeeding years.

**Sir Thomas More**, who was to die one year before Tyndale's martyrdom, was Lord Chancellor. You can see his statue outside Chelsea Old Church on the Embankment and can read the inscription "scholar, statesman, saint". Close friend of Erasmus, stimulated by Colet, enriched by the beauty that was Greece and the glory that was Rome, he was happiest in his family circle. He was a man of affection and wit, a man of deep religious conviction. When Erasmus heard of More's death, he said: "I feel as if I had died with More, so closely were our souls united."

**William Grocyn** (d. 1519), "the foremost English scholar of his time", had brought back to Oxford the best of his studies of the classics in Italy.

**Hugh Latimer** (d. 1555), Cambridge scholar, Bishop of Worcester, reformer of doctrinal abuses, doughty disputant with his adversaries, was eventually to become a martyr for his beliefs.

Such were some of Tyndale's contemporaries. One could lengthen the list. What a galaxy! I only mention them to illustrate the nature of the intellectual world in which our hero, William Tyndale, grew up.

*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven!*

(W. Wordsworth)

Yes, "*dawn*"! Questions were being asked. Minds were being stretched. An intellectual revolution was taking place in theological and philosophical thought comparable to the contemporary Copernican revolution in the world of stellar exploration.

One cannot understand the *life* of a man, nor estimate rightly his *legacy* to history, without some knowledge of the milieu in which he grew up and without some acquaintance with his contemporaries. So I was lucky to have been able to put in my crate the biographies of those whose names I have just mentioned. Now we are more ready to look at the man himself – William Tyndale (or Hutchins, to give the name used by the family) and to note how short was his life (1494 – 1536, a mere forty-two years). Don't forget that, when you look at the splendid window recently installed in Hertford College Chapel, Oxford, where Tyndale appears to be aged about seventy!

Which biographies of Tyndale have I put in the crate? Not many, for space is limited. But J.F. Mozley's (1937) and C.H. Williams's (1969) had to have a place; and if, when the sun was hot, I needed something more popular and written from a particular theological angle, Brian H. Edward's *God's Outlaw* would do for after-lunch reading. Even if I had to jettison other books, it would be imperative to include in the crate David Daniell's *Tyndale's New Testament* (Yale 1989), not only because it provides us with a modern-spelling edition of Tyndale's 1534 translation, together with his *W.T. unto the Reader* and *William Tyndale*,

yet once more to the *Christian Reader*, but also with an *Introduction* of 25 pages by David Daniell himself. If I am rescued in time, I shall read with the greatest interest a new *Life of William Tyndale* which is due to appear from the pen of Dr Daniell this year (Yale). Dr Daniell is probably the greatest living authority on Tyndale and one who is taking a leading part in this quincentenary programme of events. (One would want to include *Tyndale's Old Testament*, edited by David Daniell, with another valuable *Introduction*, this time of 20 pages (Yale 1992). But I am no good at carpentry, and my bookshelves might not stand the weight of these *two* fine volumes. If a choice had to be made, it must be the New Testament volume.)

An immense amount of writing has been done – and is being done – about Tyndale, but from the books I have mentioned I should be able to glean a fair picture of the man and to make a fair judgement of his legacy to history.

The art of a biographer is a delicate one. I have written only one such book (and that, not on Tyndale), but I recall giving to myself, as I tackled the task, some such warning as this: "It is all too easy to look up the events of the biographee's life, to get the dates right, and to comment on them. But the result of such work could be deadly dull, prosaic in the extreme. I want to know *what made him tick*, what motive power drove him, what inspired him so that he stood out from his contemporaries, and left something to history." And what was that "something"?

The title of this lecture, then, faces me with a challenge. It should not be too difficult to outline the *life* – and anyway, many of you already know that outline. It will not be so easy to assess the *legacy*, and that is my main aim. What made William Tyndale what he was? What did he leave to posterity?

The facts of his life and work can be outlined with no great expense of time and energy – we have already learned something of that heady air of Renaissance which he breathed from his youth onwards.

He was born in Gloucestershire in 1494 (as near as we can guess, for we have no actual record), of good yeoman stock. We know little of his schooling; he entered Magdalen Hall, Oxford (now incorporated into Hertford College) in 1506 or thereabouts, at the tender age of about twelve – but things were different in the Oxbridge of those days! As Mozley puts it: "The course was an education in names rather than in things, a mental gymnastic rather than a cultural training" (p.14) – no Bible, no theology in the sense that we give to that word today. He obtained his B.A. in 1512, his M.A. in 1515. His graduation was followed by a considerable period of years (twelve?) lecturing, coaching, feeling his way in a world where the forces of conservatism were engaging with the forces of new learning; it was a time of un-ease, of fearfulness on the part of some and of hopeful anticipation on the part of others. From Oxford he went to Cambridge, and found it to be a centre of the new learning – Erasmus had been there not many years before Tyndale arrived, bringing with him a rejection of scholastic Biblical interpretation, a careful study of the Greek text of the New Testament, a humanism whose light threw into dark shade the elaborate allegorical exegesis of Scripture to which people had grown accustomed. Tyndale had not

himself sat at the feet of the great scholar from Rotterdam, but he inhaled his spirit and pondered his writings.

We do not know the date or place of Tyndale's ordination, but he would seem to have been a godly priest. Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor, who was to become a bitter opponent of Tyndale, nevertheless testifies that he was "well known . . . for a man of right good living, studious and well learned in Scripture, and in divers places in England was very well liked, and did great good work with preaching."

Tyndale found ample opportunity to exercise his preaching ministry when he joined the household of Sir John Walsh at Little Sodbury in Gloucestershire. His duties there do not seem to have been heavy, and would have allowed him to visit neighbouring parishes. One can imagine the members of the country churches settling down to sleep as they anticipated yet one more sermon from an ignorant priest, only to find this young man opening up the Scriptures with all the excitement of new discovery and applying them to everyday life. There was a directness to his preaching which is echoed in the notes, often sharp, which Tyndale put in the margins of his New Testament text.

From this time at Little Sodbury he learnt much. Sir John Walsh was a young man of substance in the county, and the teaching of his young family cannot have fully occupied Tyndale's time. Sir John entertained, and his guests were many, varied, and some of them distinguished. Tyndale had an open mind and an open ear, and learnt much of what was going on in the world from his table-talk. He doubtless made his own contribution and surprised the visitors with his knowledge of the Bible. Tyndale translated Erasmus's *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* from Latin into English, and gave a copy to his master and mistress. The influence of his book and – not less – the influence of Tyndale's life and conduct, led to Sir John's conversion. The debates over the dinner table became increasingly theological, and it soon became clear that there, in the peaceful English countryside, in the person of William Tyndale, was a young scholar of advanced and "unorthodox" views. Trouble was brewing for him. Soon he was to be accused of espousing heretical ideas, and that accusation would follow him to the end of his brief life.

Tyndale had hoped that when his time at Little Sodbury Manor came to an end, he might find an episcopal patron under whose sheltering authority, if not under whose roof, he might find security to pursue the work to which he knew God was calling him, a work dearer to his own heart than anything else on earth. He arrived in London in 1523, having already begun his work of translating into the English of his day the Greek text of the New Testament. Martin Luther, working on the text of the New Testament which Erasmus had prepared, gave to the German people his version in their own tongue. Why should the English people be deprived of a similar gift?

Cuthbert Tonstall, recently installed as Bishop of London when Tyndale arrived in the city, was himself a considerable scholar, reputed to be liberal to new thought, commended by Erasmus, on good terms with the Court. But who was this comparative stripling seeking his support? The news from Germany of the spread of Lutheranism did not smell sweet in the nostrils of Tonstall. Why should he meddle with or support Tyndale's project? The Bishop's answer was "No", and Tyndale found it hard to forgive him. In fact he described

him, in language more vivid than Christian, as "a ducking hypocrite made to dissemble" (*Practice of Prelates*). Tonstall's rebuff, together with what Tyndale saw of the ignorance and worldliness of the Church, and with what he sensed of the rising opposition to the things that he held most dear, led him to see that his project had better prospects of success if he left England and pursued his ends on the Continent. This he did after a year in London. Thus in 1524 began twelve years away from his home-country, often harried from pillar to post – in Germany (Hamburg, Wittenberg, Cologne, Worms) and in the Netherlands and in Belgium – until his death in exile in 1536. The temperature of persecution in England rose rapidly – Tonstall issued an injunction against the importing of Lutheran books into England, and powerful men like William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, and Sir Thomas More himself ganged up to destroy the copies of Tyndale's New Testament, filtering as they were into this country, hidden in bales of cloth and by other secret means. Their enterprise was not without its humorous aspect. The chronicler Hall tells of an incident connected with Bishop Tonstall. The Bishop came home from the Continent by way of Antwerp where he arranged with a merchant named Packington to seize a great number of New Testaments. Hall says:

*The Bishop, thinking he had God by the toe, when, indeed, as he after thought, he had the Devil by the fist, said, "Gentle Mr Packington, do your diligence and get them, and with all my heart I will pay whatsoever they cost you, for the books are erroneous and nought, and I intend surely to burn them at Paul's Cross." So Packington came to William Tyndale and said, "William, I know thou art a poor man, and I have gotten thee a merchant." "Who?" said Tyndale. "The Bishop of London." "He will burn them," said Tyndale. "Yea, marry," quoth Packington. And so forward went the bargain; the Bishop had the books, Packington the thanks, and Tyndale the money.*

The money, we cannot doubt, was used for reprints!

It would bore you if I traced in any detail the story of banishment, persecution and betrayal which led up to his death. A thorough job, that death was – by strangulation and burning, but merciful in that that was the order of procedure (burning alive was apparently reserved for the lapsed and for anabaptists). Foxe tells the story briefly:

*He was brought forth to the place of execution, was there tied to the stake, and then strangled first by the hangman, and afterwards with fire consumed, in the morning at the town of Vilvorde, A.D. 1536; crying thus at the stake with a fervent zeal and a loud voice: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."*

Only a year later, that prayer was gloriously answered by the royal licence accorded to Matthew's and Coverdale's Bibles, themselves deeply indebted to Tyndale's work. Two years after that, the Great Bible (1539) was ordered to be provided and set up in all the parish churches of the land. Tyndale and his fellow-martyrs had won the day.

So much, or rather, so little, for the *life* of William Tyndale. Now to his *legacy*. Of course, the man himself was the most precious part of his legacy, and the gift he gave to the world

in his priceless translation could never have been made by anyone less well-equipped and less fully dedicated than he.

What manner of man was Tyndale? We have already noted the testimony of one of his most bitter opponents, Sir Thomas More – "a man of right good living, studious and well learned in Scripture . . .". One of his other persecutors spoke of him as "a good, pious, and honest man". We caught a glimpse of him preaching, as a young priest, in the villages of Gloucestershire. Nor, for all his scholarly pursuits, did he forget his pastoral work, for even in his time in exile in Antwerp, he would spend some two days a week visiting, especially among the sick and needy. And at the end, in this prison in Vilvorde, he won his gaoler and his family to the allegiance of Christ.

You will all have read how, in recent weeks, the British Library has acquired for £1 million, from the Baptist College at Bristol, the greatest treasure of all English printed Bibles, Tyndale's Worms New Testament (Lord Oxford gave ten guineas for it in the first half of the 18th century.) At the end of the book is a short epistle to the reader. It reflects something of the spirit of Tyndale as he addressed himself to the study of Scripture:

*Give diligence, reader, I exhort thee, that thou come with a pure mind, and as the scripture saith, with a single eye, unto the words of health and of eternal life; by the which, if we repent and believe them, we are born anew, created afresh, and enjoy the fruits of the blood of Christ . . . Mark the plain and manifest places of the scriptures, and in doubtful places see thou add no interpretation contrary to them; but, as Paul saith, let all be conformable and agreeable to the faith . . .*

If sometimes we are put off by the acerbity and even the bitterness of some of Tyndale's language when he was in controversy with his opponents, we need to remember such a passage as this, for in it we see Tyndale's humility as he addressed himself to the text and then found himself, as all devout students must do, to be addressed by the Spirit *through* the text. He was a man of the Spirit.

It was because of the depth of his spirituality, as well as because of his own scholarship, that Tyndale was revolted by much of what he heard from the clergy of his day. The morals of many of them left much to be desired, and their ignorance was abysmal. There is ample evidence of clerks who could not repeat the ten commandments or even say the Lord's prayer. Their knowledge of Scripture was minimal, and their indulgence in mumbo-jumbo irritated Tyndale to distraction.

The spirit of devotion and humility sustained him to the end. I know of few more moving letters than that which Tyndale wrote in the year before his death – the letter itself strongly reminiscent of Paul's letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 4). He wrote from prison to some person in authority:

*I believe, right worshipful, that you are not unaware of what may have been determined concerning me. Wherefore I beg your lordship, and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary*



*to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth too to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woollen shirt, if he will be good enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth to put on above; he has also warmer night caps. And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study. In return may you obtain what you most desire, so only that it be for the salvation of your soul. But if any other decision has been taken concerning me, to be carried out before winter, I will be patient, abiding the will of God, to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ; whose Spirit (I pray) may ever direct your heart. Amen.*

*W. Tindalus.*

That extract calls for no comment. It speaks for itself. Tyndale's greatest legacy to the world was – Tyndale. Early in life he had decided that, whatever the cost, he would be the means by which the message of the Bible might reach the people of England. Had he trimmed his sails, had he decided to go with the great in the land, he might well have risen to high fame (for he mixed with men of position from his early years) and might have died in his bed in a ripe old age. You will be familiar with the famous passage in which Tyndale was in the company of "a learned man" (no name is given), "and in communing and disputing with him drove him to that issue, that the learned man said: We were better be without God's law than the Pope's. Master Tyndall, hearing that, answered him: I defy the Pope and all his laws; and said: If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost."

Erasmus, in the preface to his translation of the New Testament, had written similar words in 1516 about "the gospel and the epistles of St Paul". "I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plow, that the weaver may warble them to his shuttle, that the traveller may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way." Fine words from Erasmus. Tyndale died that the vision here glimpsed might be translated into fact.

We must not underestimate the extent and the depth of Tyndale's *scholarship*. He dealt with words as *sacred* things, to be treated, like marriage, not "lightly . . . but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God". He would not trifle with words. He was a linguist of great competence. Among the seven or eight languages with which he was familiar, Hebrew was one. Unlike Wycliffe before him, who, so far as we know, knew no Hebrew and therefore had to work on the Latin of the Vulgate (itself a translation and often an inaccurate one), Tyndale was able to work with the original language of the Old Testament. He came to appreciate its rough directness so well suited to the Hebrew prophets, Psalmists and sages. Like Lancelot Andrewes after him, of whom it was said that he might have been interpreter-general at Babel, so great was his learning, Tyndale rejoiced in going back behind translations to originals.

If Tyndale appreciated the prophetic power of the *Hebrew* language, he loved even more dearly the suppleness, the cadences, the subtle nuances of the *Greek* language. He kept a careful eye on Erasmus's Greek text with its Latin translation, on the Latin Vulgate, and on Luther's German Bible – kept an eye on them, accepting some translations and rejecting others precisely because he was competent in handling the Greek text himself. He knew his way around the complex field of textual and linguistic problems, and he showed a healthy independence in his judgement of other men's work. He laboured to revise, and to revise again, his translation of 1526, for no translation can be perfect and improvements can be made as knowledge advances. Thus we have his second and third editions of 1534 and 1535. Though harried from pillar to post, with no assured place of safety, and though concerned with finding printers who would undertake his work and shippers who would see the precious volumes into England, his interest in the text and in its best translation never faltered.

But what about his *English*? Professor Peter Levi, Fellow of St Catherine's College, Oxford, praises Tyndale's liveliness and directness of language and expression. He points out that Tyndale was basically a Gloucestershire man, and his New Testament translations "embody the handsomeness of the plain English of his time, and of an inevitably country habit of speech in the mouth of a learned and passionate man." There is a crispness about Tyndale's translations which reminds one of the freshness of an early spring day. Philip Howard, in an article in *The Times* of 19 April this year, pointed out that when the authors of the King James Version altered Tyndale, they often weakened his translation. He quotes: "And the Lord was with Joseph and he was a prosperous man," and labels it Rotaryspeak. Tyndale wrote: "The Lord was with Joseph and he was a luckie felaw." Again, according to the King James Version, the serpent in the Garden of Eden says to Eve: "Ye shall not surely die." Tyndale has him say, "Tush, ye shall not die." That "Tush" is finally dismissive! His imaginative cadences brought out deep meanings from the original texts, and Tyndale illustrated for us again and again that religion and poetry, religion and beauty, belong together, and that the power of the English language is best seen when it is at its simplest.

It has been reckoned that some ninety per cent of Tyndale's second edition of the New Testament stands unaltered in our Authorised Version of 1611 and seventy-five per cent in the Revised Version. We owe him a colossal debt. Many of his renderings have passed into our everyday language, and we use them unthinkingly without realising to whom we owe them. There is simplicity and power in such phrases as "Until the day dawn and the day-star arise in your hearts"; "in him we live and move and have our being"; "for here we have no continuing city: but we seek one to come"; "the burden and heat of the day"; "eat, drink and be merry"; "the powers that be"; "a prophet hath no honour in his own country".

So great was Tyndale's gift that David Daniell in his *Introduction* to his first volume wrote: "No other Englishman, not even Shakespeare, has reached so many."

He went on: "In the clangour of the market-place of modern popular translations, Tyndale's ravishing solo should be heard across the world."

For many years two books were to be found in the homes of literate English people – the Bible of 1611 and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan (1628-88) presumably acquired

his detailed knowledge of the Bible from reading the Authorised Version which, as we have seen, was influenced through and through by Tyndale's translation. C.H. Williams does not exaggerate when he writes:

*Tyndale's translations, together with the finest passages of his original writings, went to the making of modern English prose. Milton, Bunyan, and a long list of later English writers were steeped in the language of the Authorised Version, and in consequence, whether they knew it or not, they were debtors to William Tyndale.*

(William Tyndale, p. 81).

And Christopher Hill in his recent book *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution* (Allen Lane, 1993, p.438) goes further than Williams when he writes:

*In the seventeenth century the Bible was central to emotional as well as intellectual life. The majestic prose of Tyndale, the Geneva and Authorised Versions, transformed English ways of thinking as well as the English language – not only ways of thinking about theology.*

Tyndale had long known that his life might be short and that his lot might be that of martyrdom. He wrote:

*If they shall burn me, they shall do none other thing than I looked for. There is none other way into the kingdom of life than through persecution and suffering of pain, and of very death after the ensample of Christ.*

One of Tyndale's dearest friends was John Frith. They were brothers in Christ, willing martyrs for an identical cause. Frith was burned at Smithfield in 1533. Tyndale was to meet a similar death at Vilvorde three years later. We who live in an age when truth is held cheap and all too few have a faith by which to live and for which they would willingly die, do well to listen to a letter which Tyndale wrote to Frith a few weeks before the latter's martyrdom:

*Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven. For we suffer with Him that we may also be glorified with Him: Who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body according to the working whereby He is able even to subject all things unto Him. Dearly beloved, be of good courage, and comfort your soul with the hope of this high reward, and bear the image of Christ in your mortal body, that it may at His coming be made like to His immortal, and follow the example of all your other dear brethren which chose to suffer in hope of a better resurrection. Keep your conscience pure and undefiled, and say against that nothing. Stick at necessary things; and remember the blasphemies of the enemies of Christ, saying, "They find none that will abjure rather than suffer the extremity" . . . Two have suffered in Antwerp, unto the great glory of the Gospel; four at Riselles in Flanders: and at Luke hath there one at the least suffered, and all the same day. At Roan in France they persecute: and at Paris are five doctors taken for the Gospel. See, you are not alone. Be cheerful and remember that among the hard-hearted in*

*England there is a number reserved by grace: for whose sakes, if need be, you must be ready to suffer.*

How other can I end this lecture than by quoting to you Tyndale's rendering of the opening two verses of the 12th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

*Wherefore let us also (seeing that we are compassed with so great a multitude of witnesses) lay away all that presseth down, and the sin that hangeth on, and let us run with patience unto the battle that is before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, which for the joy that was set before him, abode the cross, and despised the shame, and is set down on the right hand of the throne of God.*

# G R E S H A M

## COLLEGE

Gresham College was established in 1597 under the Will of the Elizabethan financier Sir Thomas Gresham, who nominated the Corporation of the City of London and the Worshipful Company of Mercers to be his Trustees. They manage the Estate through the Joint Grand Gresham Committee. The College has been maintained in various forms since the foundation. The one continuing activity (excepting the period 1939-1945) has been the annual appointment of seven distinguished academics 'sufficiently learned to reade the lectures of divyntyte, astronomy, musicke, and geometry' (appointed by the Corporation), 'meete to reade the lectures of lawe, phissicke, and rhetoricke', (appointed by the Mercers' Company). From the 16th century the Gresham Professors have given free public lectures in the City. A Mercers' School Memorial Chair of Commerce has been added to the seven 'ancient' Chairs.

The College was formally reconstituted as an independent foundation in 1984. The Governing Body, with nominations from the City Corporation, the Mercers' Company, the Gresham Professors and the City University, reports to the Joint Grand Gresham Committee. Its objectives are to sponsor innovative research and to supplement and complement existing facilities in higher education. It does not award degrees and diplomas, rather it is an active collaborator with institutions of higher education, learned societies and professional bodies.

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