

Humphrey Monmouth and the Monmouth Society

David Parish and Richard Higginson reveal how business people have risked their fortunes and even their lives to support ventures in bringing the truth of Christianity to ordinary people. They trace the life and adventures of Henry Monmouth, who supported William Tyndale through finance and business organisation. The Monmouth Society in the USA finances equivalent enterprises today.

Monmouth: Merchant Draper, Bible Smuggler and Reformer

Although the name Humphrey Monmouth may not be familiar to you, he played a very important role in 16th century history, an influence with lasting effects. Without him the New Testament translated by William Tyndale would not have been distributed as effectively in England as it was.

Monmouth was born in Worcester and the family name has connections with the Welsh town of Monmouth. The first record we have of him is when in his late teens he came to London to be apprenticed to Edmund Bruge, a member of the Drapers Livery Guild. He became a Freeman of the Company¹ in 1503. His business must have thrived because 20 years later he had a home in Buntingford in Hertfordshire and a London home in Barking. He may also

have had business premises in Cheapside which was as wide as it is today, but instead of being lined with coffee shops and corporate offices it was home to London merchant traders. 'Cheap' is a corruption of the Saxon 'cheop-' a shop. There would have been living space above the shop and the ground floor would have been open during the day and closed with shutters at night.



Although all the Tudor wooden buildings on Cheapside were lost in the Great Fire, there are examples of such buildings that still exist in other parts of the country, notably Kingston-upon-Thames, Winchester, Tenby, Gloucester, York, Shrewsbury and Norwich. The street plan of that part of London today would have been familiar to Monmouth. Austin Friars, now a street not far from Cheapside, was then a thriving Augustinian monastery and next to it was Thomas Cromwell's splendid London Mansion. The hall of the house survived the fire, since it was stone-built, and is now the Drapers Hall, home of the Drapers Livery Guild, of which Monmouth was a Freeman.

Monmouth also conducted several court actions, as was typical at a time when contract law did not really exist, and he would have been familiar with the Inns of Court. These were not inns in the later sense but hostels where apprenticed lawyers learnt their trade. Staples Inn and Lincoln's Inn are still there.

We do not know how Monmouth became a follower of the New Learning (as Luther's Protestant teaching was called), but he had connections with Cambridge University which was home to many of the English reformers, while his Hertfordshire home would have

been a convenient stopping point *en route* from Cambridge to London. He also provided a scholarship at Cambridge for a friend of Erasmus, Dr John Watson, who studied at Queen's during 1513. The White Horse pub in Cambridge, marked today with a plaque on King's Parade, was known as 'Little Germany' due to its German reformer clientele². Monmouth also knew Thomas Poyntz, who later provided sanctuary for William Tyndale in Antwerp, and Tyndale himself had tutored the children of Poyntz's relatives.

By the time Monmouth met Tyndale in 1522 he was a member of the Christian Brethren, an underground cell of fellow members of various Livery Companies who followed Luther's teaching. Monmouth had also become a member of the Court of Assistants that governed the working of the Drapers Livery Guild. The Court covered everything from settling trade disputes to charitable giving, to ordering the copious amounts of wine for the Livery dinners.³

The 1522 meeting with Tyndale may have happened when Tyndale was preaching at St Dunstan's in the City of London, and it soon led to him being invited to stay with Monmouth and his family.⁴ In 1524 Tyndale was expelled

from the Church for his 'heretical' teaching and for beginning to translate the New Testament into English. He had told the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, of his intention, and that brought it to the attention of Henry VIII who had no desire to see ordinary people have access to scripture.

Tyndale wisely sought refuge in Germany, moving from town to town to escape detection, and later moving to Antwerp. The funds for his translation work came from Monmouth and his Brethren friends.⁵ In 1526 the first copies of the Tyndale New Testament in an easily transportable octavo size came off the presses in Worms and within a few months thousands of copies were being smuggled into London.. Before Elizabeth I later ordered controls to be applied through the newly formed Her Majesty's Revenue and Excise, goods could be landed anywhere along the Thames from Greenwich to Blackfriars. Even today there are several cuts and wharves maintained and operated along the Southwark bank of the Thames. Duties in Monmouth's time were paid according to the honesty of the importer. This made smuggling of the bibles hidden in bales of cloth relatively risk-free at first.





However, as the flow increased, Bishop Tunstall was furious and ordered his private security force to seize copies and burn them publicly. But Monmouth continued to use his network of merchants to smuggle the bibles in bales of cloth. Even Hans Collenbeeke, a German merchant based at the Steelyard, a Hanseatic League wharf on the Thames near Cannon Street, was involved in channelling money to Tyndale.⁶ It is believed that around 10,000 copies (possibly more) of the New Testament were smuggled into England. Of these, a few thousand were seized and burned. At one point, Tunstall was buying them to burn - and thus fuelling the demand.⁷ Literacy was high among the merchant and artisan class and there was a ready demand; they would have sold for around nine shillings. At today's prices that is around £230, nearly three weeks wages for a working man but a few days' work for the merchant class.

The Lord High Chancellor Thomas More became incensed with the flow of the testaments and set out via his agents to track down the source. Once Monmouth realised that he was under suspicion he burnt his Lutheran books and bibles.⁸ He rebound the Tyndale Bibles in covers with different titles on the spine. Nevertheless, he frequently took risks and because of this was eventually tracked down. Monmouth was arraigned and placed in the relative comfort of the Tower of London. John Tyndale, a relative of William's, was arrested with him, but released due to

lack of evidence. Others involved were less fortunate and ended up in the dreadful conditions of the Fleet and Marshalsea prisons.

Monmouth was known to Cardinal Wolsey and appealed to him about his situation, but Wolsey did not intervene.⁹ Perhaps Monmouth knew Wolsey through Thomas Cromwell, who was then rising in influence and became the king's right-hand man after Wolsey's death in 1530. Cromwell was a Merchant Taylor; he was known to own Tyndale New Testaments and to be favourable to the Reformation.

In 1529 Thomas More began to fall from favour at court because he opposed Henry VIII's desire to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon which culminated in his separation from the Catholic Church. Monmouth was released and went on in 1535 to become one of the two Sheriffs of London, as well as Master of the Drapers. He was present in his role as Sheriff at the execution of Thomas More; we can only guess what his feelings were, but he might have thought 'This could have been me!' The date of Monmouth's death is not known but his will of 1537 shows that he had acquired wealth from his business¹⁰ and in it he left a bequest to Cromwell. The preamble to his will shows clearly his devotion to Christ and to the reformed faith.

Tyndale was less fortunate. In 1535 he was arrested in Antwerp and charged with heresy. The following year he was

strangled to death while at the stake and his body was then burned. Tyndale died unrepentant and his final prayer was that the Lord would 'open the King of England's eyes'. His translation work lived on. His distinctive English idiom passed irrevocably into our language, providing the inspiration and much of the content for the King James translators 70 years later.

The Monmouth Society

It is amazing to think that for centuries the political and religious establishment deliberately deprived people of the capacity to read the Bible in their own tongue, believing that direct access to the Scriptures should be restricted to priests who knew Latin. Humphrey Monmouth saw things differently. He clearly shared William Tyndale's passion for making the Bible available to ordinary people. Monmouth used finances accrued from his business to serve the kingdom of God in his generation. His example has inspired a group of Christians in the USA who are motivated to use their money for Kingdom purposes. They see Humphrey Monmouth as a 'Gospel Patron to the Underserved Visionary'.¹¹

Chris Conant is an American businessman from Southlake, Texas. He is a property investor who is the founder-owner of a marketing, public relations and branding agency, intriguingly named More Cabbage. A committed Christian, his faith was memorably renewed and developed through the experience of his wife


Nancy, who was dramatically healed from an apparently terminal illness.¹² In 2016 he founded the Monmouth Society, which is a \$300m private equity and venture capital fund. It is a funding instrument for Kingdom-minded accredited investors who want to invest money into 'Kingdom-class' companies. The Monmouth Society invites applications from and seeks to identify Christian CEOs who are making an outstanding social contribution in terms of the products or services they provide, and the way that they run their companies.¹³ Chris and his colleagues are looking for chief executives who honour Christ, practise servant leadership and are developing innovative technologies.

Underlying this strategy is Chris Conant's conviction that Christian CEOs have a strategic role to play in God's mission. He claims that they are 'the most underserved and least supported Christian missionaries in the USA'. Their sphere of influence – relating to so many different

stakeholders – constitutes a massive mission field, with CEOs coming into contact with far more unchurched people than the typical pastor or church leader. Yet as Christian CEOs report, they are often lacking in peer support, intercessory support and financial resources. The Monmouth Society seeks to help them on all three fronts. In partnership with other Christian organisations, and sometimes making use of workplace chaplaincies, it puts business leaders with whom it invests in contact with other business leaders, creating groups or chapters all round the USA. Its aim is to empower Christian CEOs so that they can more effectively experience God, lead excellent companies and reach the lost among their circle of influence: employees, clients, suppliers and communities.

Conant follows a way of thinking, popularised by Youth With a Mission and the writings of Landa Cope¹⁴, which thinks in terms of culture being divided into seven key areas or 'mountains':

arts and entertainment, business, education, family, government, media and religion. These all belong to God and come under the lordship of Christ, but they show abundant marks of sin and rebellion and need reclaiming for Christ. So the Monmouth Society is interested in supporting companies that are having a significant positive impact in these different areas. Its sphere of influence extends well beyond the USA to include companies investing in the Global South. Areas that it's particularly concerned to develop include global wireless power and the use of the most advanced data to transform agriculture.

The Monmouth Society is still in its early days, and time will tell how much lasting impact it has. Its goals for advancing the kingdom in God's world are certainly ambitious. How interesting that it takes its inspiration from a businessman who is not a well known figure in Reformation history, but played a crucial role as a mover and shaker behind the scenes. 

1 Drapers Hall livery member records.

2 Andrew Hope, *Tyndale Society journal*, No.31, Aug 2006, p.28.

3 Drapers Court of the Assistants records 1515-1529, p.153. Thanks to the Archivist for her assistance.

4 Hope, *op.cit.*, p.31.

5 *Ibid.*

6 John Strype, *Ecclesiastical memorials 1-2*, p.364.

7 Hope, *op.cit.*, p.36

8 Strype, *op.cit.* pp.364-367.

9 Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, Clarendon, 1989, p.108.

10 National Archive PRO.

11 monmouthsociety.com. Monmouth has become well known in the USA through his featuring prominently in John Rinehart's popular book and video, *Gospel Patrons*.

12 Nancy and Chris Conant, *Resurrection Monday: The True Story of a Death to Life Experience*, Heyoo House, 2013.

13 Both potential investors and would-be purchasers can register on the Monmouth Society website, monmouthsociety.com.

14 See www.ywamers.community/7spheres and Landa Cope, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Template: Rediscovering God's Principles for Discipling All Nations*, The Template Institute Press, 2006.



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Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He is now Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FiBQ and the author of several books, including Faith, Hope & the Global Economy and (with Kina Robertshaw) A Voice to be Heard. He is an international speaker on business ethics and the theology of work.