RCEWA Case 10 (2014-15): English translation of Erasmus's *Enchiridion militis Christiani*

Expert adviser’s statement

Reviewing Committee Secretary’s note: Please note that any illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the Arts Council England website

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item(s)
This manuscript is the earliest copy of any work by the humanist scholar and reformer, Desiderius Erasmus (b. 1467, d. 1536) translated into English. It is also the only known manuscript of a contemporary English translation of Erasmus’s most popular work, the *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, or ‘handbook of the Christian soldier’. Between 1501 when Erasmus wrote the *Enchiridion* and 1536 when he died the original Latin text appeared in more than fifty printed editions; between 1533 and 1545 there were thirteen editions in English, the first being published by Wynkyn de Worde for John Byddell. The present manuscript on paper comprises 145 leaves (each 285 x 190mm). Its text was written in 1523 by a professional scribe, probably for presentation rather than commercial purposes. The volume has been in the Duke of Northumberland’s collection at Alnwick Castle since at least 1872, but remained unused by scholars.

2. Context
Erasmus was the most important intellectual of the English ‘pre-reform’ movement: his influential creed of humanism and laicism became central to the Reformation controversy. He attracted episcopal and aristocratic patrons, such as John Fisher and Lady Margaret Beaufort, and inspired an extensive following of enthusiasts for classical learning, such as Thomas More and John Colet.

Two contemporary accounts testify that the religious reformer William Tyndale (d. 1536) translated Erasmus’s *Enchiridion* into English in 1522 or 1523. To date, however, there has been no secure evidence that it survived and scholars have long debated whether the 1533 printed edition was of Tyndale’s translation. A preliminary comparison of the text of the Northumberland manuscript and those of ten different sixteenth-century printed editions reveals significant differences in word selection and language (Appendices 1 and 3). The manuscript includes marginal glosses not present in the editions and lacks the opening epistle included in the editions. It is unlikely that changes of this magnitude would have been made by a printer. The manuscript, therefore, preserves a hitherto unknown English translation of the *Enchiridion*.

3. Waverley criteria

I consider the manuscript to meet the third Waverley criterion.

As the earliest copy of any English translation of a work by Erasmus, and the only known contemporary manuscript of an English translation of his most popular work, this volume is of outstanding significance. Scholarly access to it would permit a reassessment of the importance of the *Enchiridion* in Erasmus’s oeuvre, and of its
impact in pre-reformation England. The large number of English translations of Erasmus’s texts in the 1520s and 1530s suggests that his views were central to contemporary English affairs and to the subsequent ‘middle way’ of Henrician and Elizabethan religious settlements. Given the particular popularity of the *Enchiridion* in England, its translation in England needs to be considered not merely as a literary and linguistic exercise, but as a formative text for Henry VIII’s court.

**DETAILED CASE**

1. **Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.**

Erasmus’s *Enchiridion*, a compendium of humanistic piety, evoked widespread interest in sixteenth-century Europe. By the end of the century there were 70 editions of the Latin text (50 by Erasmus’s death in 1536), as well as first-edition versions printed in Czech, German, Dutch, French, Castilian, Spanish, Italian, English, Portuguese, and Polish (mostly in the 1520s). The Northumberland manuscript represents a second, different English translation of a much earlier date (1523) than the one currently accessible and known to scholars. The appeal of this text to English laymen, as well as its significance for the peculiar circumstances of the English Reformation, make it of outstanding scholarly interest.

The extent of the *Enchiridion*’s dissemination in the vernacular far exceeded that of Erasmus’s other published works. The first English edition was printed by Wynkyn de Worde for John Byddell on 15 November 1533 (STC 10479) with the second edition following three months later; it was subsequently reprinted a further eleven times. The first edition of 1533 survives in eleven copies, five of which are in UK collections (see Appendix 2). Before the emergence of this manuscript, the earliest extant English translations of Erasmus’s works were those of Margaret Roper (STC 10477) and Gentian Hervet (STC 10474), both printed by Thomas Berthelet in 1526.

Comparison of pages from the beginning, middle, and end of the 1533 printed edition with corresponding text in the manuscript reveals substantial differences in word choice, phrasing, and the number and content of the marginal glosses, together with sustained differences in spelling. Furthermore, the opening epistle present in the 1533 English edition is lacking in the manuscript (see Appendix 1). Unlike the spelling variations, these major textual divergences cannot be explained as changes introduced by the printer. Instead they suggest that the Northumberland manuscript preserves an earlier, previously unstudied, English translation of Erasmus’s most popular work.

2. **Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).**

Erasmus’s desire for a simplification of doctrine and reform of practice through humanist values was one that he envisaged taking place within the broad tradition of medieval Christendom, something which was to become untenable by the time of Luther’s revolt. Because of Erasmus’s extended stays in England many of his works were written there, with dedicatees including Henry VIII, Thomas More, Thomas Wolsey, William Warham, and John Colet. In 1547 Henry VIII’s library contained four copies of the *Enchiridion*, including one in Spanish, and one of Erasmus’s
Paraphrases (1522-24) of the New Testament containing marginal annotations by the King. In 1524 Catherine of Aragon asked Erasmus to write a treatise on Christian marriage for Princess Mary (Christiani matrimonii institutio, 1526), and as a young girl Elizabeth I produced a French translation of Erasmus’s Dialogus fidel as a gift for Catherine Parr.

Despite its immense contemporary popularity, the impact of the Enchiridion is today overshadowed by Erasmus’s satire, The Praise of Folly, and by his translation of the New Testament from Greek. Yet, the Enchiridion was Erasmus’s first summing up of the guiding principles of his religious life, setting out his vision of a purified, Christ-centred faith based on essential points of doctrine. As a manual of lay piety, it endorsed the lay vocation to holiness in the Christian life as lived in the world. Erasmus’s revolutionary concept, given its first and definitive expression in the Enchiridion, was his elevation of the educated laity as the potential source of new life in a Church and society fallen into decay. The large number of English printed editions of his Enchiridion demonstrates the importance of its influence in Tudor England.

The question of the identity of the translator of this seminal work is an important area for research. All of the printed editions in Appendix 2 comprise revised copies of the first 1533 edition (Appendix 3), with the exception of an abridged translation by Miles Coverdale (1545) and another anonymous abridgement prefaced by John Gough (1561). The Enchiridion was evidently of enduring interest to a number of different translators and its influence pervasive. Access to the unique English version preserved in the Northumberland manuscript will allow further consideration of translations of Erasmus’s works in England. Although Tyndale and his circle of Miles Coverdale, Nicholas Udall and Thomas Arthur may have been responsible for the translation in the manuscript, further candidates must include the translators of Erasmus’s other works into English in the same decade: Margaret Roper (Precatio dominica, 1526), Gentian Hervet (De misericordia Domini concio, 1526), and William Roy (Paraclesis, 1529). Erasmus’s universal appeal to those on both sides of the sectarian partisanship is evident in the printing history of the English Enchiridion, which was acceptable to every Tudor monarch.

This manuscript is certainly of outstanding significance for the study of the reception of Erasmus in pre-Reformation England, and for the study of the patronage that supported this activity of translation and transmission. The close proximity of the date of this manuscript to that of Tyndale’s putative Enchiridion is suggestive of a potential identification with his ‘lost translation’. Detailed stylistic and linguistic analysis of the manuscript text with Tyndale’s surviving work, and with the work of other candidates as noted above, is necessary to reveal the connections between the manuscript translation and other works of the reformers. Dialect analysis, for example, may reveal a Cotswold profile which would increase the likelihood of Tyndale’s authorship. If the manuscript’s text could be ascribed to Tyndale, it would represent an outstanding opportunity to study Tyndale’s apprenticeship in the art of translation, in the years leading up to the 1526 New Testament for which he is acknowledged as ‘the greatest of Tudor translators’. 