

# SKETCHES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

S.M.Houghton

An Illustrated Account of 20 Centuries of Christ's Power



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In the 14th Century a young man was enrolled at the University of Oxford, of whom his teachers had great expectations. John Wycliffe, for such was his name, had a brilliant mind, undaunted courage, and a silver tongue. He also developed great skill with the pen. The date of his birth and the precise spot where it took place are not known, but in all probability it was during the period 1320–24, and in or near the village of

Old Richmond in Yorkshire. He would doubtless be about 16 years old when he went to Oxford but to which of its colleges is uncertain. He remained in association with the University for the rest of his life, becoming first a Fellow, and then in 1361 the Master of Balliol College. He became a Doctor of Theology there also.

Wycliffe never forgot the terrible results of the plague that came to England in the year 1349.

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## John Wycliffe



His writings mention it frequently. It was called the Black Death and probably killed off one third or even a half of the population. Among the clergy mortality was very high. In the West Riding of Wycliffe's native county, more than two thirds of them died. A village in North Oxfordshire had six rectors between 1349 and 1354.

In 1366 Wycliffe came to the notice of King Edward III in connection with the refusal of the King to pay tribute to the Pope; he wrote a pamphlet containing the arguments which seven lords used in Parliament when the matter was debated. Wycliffe argued that the Pope had no right to require the King to collect money from the church in England to be sent to Rome. The Pope was probably angry because England had long ceased to pay the annual tribute of 1,000 marks which Pope Innocent III had exacted from King John in 1213. During the 1360's, when Pope Urban V had tried to recover the arrears, Edward III had consulted Parliament, with the result that the tribute was emphatically and finally repudiated.

In the year 1374 Wycliffe represented his country and king at a meeting with papal officers at Bruges, and further earned the king's gratitude. In the same year he was appointed to the Crown 'living' of Lutterworth in the county of Leicester. But if the king became an admirer of Wycliffe, it was not so with many of the clergy and the mendicant monks, who hated him bitterly and tried to bring about his downfall. He sharply criticized the monks for their indolence, for their habit of begging, and for their perversion of religion. The worship of images and relics he called foolishness, and in no uncertain terms he denounced the sale of indul-

<sup>1</sup> See page 59.

gences, masses for the dead, and processions and pilgrimages. The pope he denounced as Antichrist, 'the proud, worldly priest of Rome, the most accursed of clippers and purse-curvers' (robbers).

The bishops of the Church of England were greatly alarmed, and summoned Wycliffe to appear before the Convocation of the Church at St. Paul's, London, in the year 1377. He did so, and was savagely attacked by his opponents, but protected by the king's son, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. In that same year the Pope issued five Bulls (decrees) against him, and condemned him on nineteen different charges taken from his writings.

The great crisis of Wycliffe's life, however, came four years later when he attacked the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation, that is, the teaching that in the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>1</sup> As all priests claimed the power to perform this so-called miracle, it raised them, in the eyes of the Church, high above princes. Wycliffe's attitude in this matter aroused the greatest opposition, the king began to withdraw his support, and as for the University of Oxford, the heads and fellows of its various colleges were also in opposition to him. But he was so popular with the common people that his enemies feared to molest him. Possibly he might have brought about a better state of things in the church had he used more moderation and had he possessed more patience. But he wished to overthrow with one blow the false teachings of Rome and to re-establish the pure, undiluted gospel. Yet he discovered, as time passed, that reformation could not be brought about in one year or in ten; it required

long effort and much patience.

Wycliffe's position was made more difficult because of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, for he and his followers were blamed for it, although they were in no way responsible. John of Gaunt's Palace of the Savoy (London) was attacked, and finally the young king Richard II appeared in person to face the rebels, who were quelled and dispersed. John of Gaunt advised Wycliffe to abandon his work of reform; instead he published a further confession of faith.

At this point Parliament asked the Archbishop of Canterbury to call a church council to deal with matters in dispute. This he did, the council becoming known as the Earthquake Council because of the quake that occurred while it was in session. Wycliffe's followers looked upon this as a sign of divine intervention in their favour. Nevertheless Wycliffe's doctrine was condemned. Very soon he was summoned to appear before the Pope, but he refused to go to Rome. Actually, at this time there were two Popes, each calling the other Anti-christ. Although Wycliffe's followers and friends suffered persecution, Wycliffe himself remained untouched. He retired to Lutterworth, and lived a quiet but active life there until his death on the last day of the year 1384.

Towards the end of his life Wycliffe organized an Order of Poor Priests or preachers, who diffused his teachings among the people. Pitying their ignorance and spiritual blindness, he endeavoured to bring the truth of the gospel to them by means of these preachers, who travelled around clad in long reddish-brown gowns. The clergy derided them, but they became a formidable force, to be reckoned with by their opponents. As a result of their work many became believers. Wycliffe's enemies

called them Lollards, a word whose origin is uncertain. Some consider it a term of scorn meaning 'idle folk', others that it refers to their habit of singing in praise of God.

However, the greatest of all the works accomplished by Wycliffe has still to be mentioned. He translated the Bible into English, so that all who were able to read, or listen to the Word when read, could learn the truth of God.

*Of the Book that had been the sealed-up Book  
He tore the clasps, that the nation  
With eyes unbandaged might look thereon  
And therein find salvation.*

The Roman Church used the Latin Bible only, in the version called the Vulgate, and refused to have it translated into the language of the people. Wycliffe did not know either the Hebrew or Greek of the original Scriptures; he had to make his translation from the Latin, and so it was not as accurate as could be wished: but still it proved to be a great blessing to the people. Also all Scripture had to be written by hand for as yet there was no printing press. The poor preachers took portions of it with them in their travels and read them to men and women in cities and hamlets, wherever they could get an audience. Wycliffe's was the first English translation of the whole Bible. Probably he had helpers in his work, but to what extent is not fully known.

Early the following century two dreadful steps were taken by Parliament and Church. A law for the burning of heretics—and Lollards (Wycliffites) were called heretics—was passed in 1401, and it did not remain a dead letter, the most notable sufferer being Sir John Oldcastle (Lord Cobham) in 1417; also the Convocation of the Church condemned Wycliffe's translation of the Bible.



From the picture, 'The Dawn of the Reformation', by W F Yeames, R A. John Wycliffe is here shown sending out his 'poor preachers' from Lutterworth in Leicestershire. They carry copies of his translation of the Scriptures into English.

The hatred of the Roman Church for John Wycliffe is perhaps best shown by an event which took place about forty years after his death. By order of the Council of Constance (1415) the reformer's bones were to be dug up from their grave and refused reburial. This was carried out in 1428 when the Bishop of Lincoln burned the remains, and scattered the ashes upon the waters of the River Swift which runs through Lutterworth. It has been well said that, as the ashes were carried by the Swift to the Avon, by

the Avon to the Severn, by the Severn to the 'narrow seas', and by the 'narrow seas' to the ocean, so the reformer's teachings and message reached out into all England, and from England into far-distant lands. Indeed, Wycliffe was 'The Morning Star of the Reformation' which commenced in the 16th century.

*And though his bones from the grave were torn  
Long after his life was ended,  
The sound of his words, to times unborn,  
Like a trumpet-call descended.*