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John Wyclif: The Biography of a Legend

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The writings of the controversial John Wyclif (d. 1384) were largely lost to view until the end of the nineteenth century, but meanwhile a considerable biographical tradition had been created and sustained. He became hero of the Reformation on the basis of rumour and some centuries of polemic. This paper will consider some of the methodological problems and problems of revision that faced his biographers at the time when his works became available for them to read at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and which continue now that it is also apparent that the writings in English with which he was long credited are unlikely to be his work at all.

Introduction

John Wyclif, who died in 1384, was born probably in Yorkshire, and set off like other ambitious young contemporaries to be a student at Oxford. After he graduated, his intention seems to have been to begin a career as a parish priest, but within a year or two he was back in Oxford, studying for a higher degree, that of Doctor of Theology. This was a lengthy course, which took the student into early middle age. As a new graduate in 1372, Wyclif seems to have had higher ambitions. He was sent on a diplomatic mission on behalf of the English Government to argue with the papal emissaries about whether England should pay its overdue taxation to the Pope. He was apparently not very successful as a diplomat, but the research he did in preparation awoke in him a lifelong interest in the question of the nature of power or 'dominion', and he began to lecture and preach and publish treatises, which made him controversial. He fell foul of the powerful vested interests of the religious orders in Oxford and was 'reported' to the Vatican as a dangerous dissident. There followed a series

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of attempts to 'try' him and have him 'officially' condemned, which attracted lively interest among ordinary people. Eventually, two years before he died, he was driven from Oxford. He spent the last months of his life, before he died of a stroke, revising his works, expecially his sermons. All this was left unfinished and it remains hard to say what his intellectual achievement amounted to, for fame became notoriety, and his name became linked with trends and movements, the Lollardy in which others than he were the protagonists.

The biography of an author must in some sense be an 'intellectual biography'. That may make room for a touch of autobiography, for the author who is its subject may speak for himself. The writings of the controversial John Wyclif were not autobiographical in the sense that they were directly concerned with the author himself and his life. There are remarkably few personal moments. But they remain the speech of the living mind and in that deep sense the subject's own record of his life and ideas. In Wyclif's case, there is a further factor. Although his writings were largely lost to view until the end of the nineteenth century, meanwhile a considerable biographical tradition had been created and sustained. He became hero of the Reformation on the basis of rumour and some centuries of polemic. This paper will consider some of the problems that faced his biographers at the time when his works became available for them to read at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and which continue now that it is also apparent that the writings in English with which he was long credited are unlikely to be his work at all.

John Stacey provides a convenient modern survey of the judgements made by Wyclif's biographers and the commentators over the centuries, but omits the cluster near the centenary of his death in 1884 which helped to prompt the editing of his Latin works (Stacey, 1993: 12–25). In the first of the 'modern' biographies, written with the benefit of access to the corpus of the Latin writings in their new editions, Workman identified our problem. 'While Wyclif's works slumbered undisturbed in Continental libraries, the works of Hus were printed at an early date', he notes. 'It was Hus not Wyclif whom Luther recognized as a predecessor when he remarked that he had hitherto taught and held all the opinions of Hus without knowing it. Luther seems to have owned a copy of the *Trialogue* printed at Basle in 1525, but not to have understood the link between Wyclif's ideas and those of Hus' (Workman 1926: 9). Workman could see clearly that Wyclif's place in the legend as the 'Morning Star of the Reformation' rested upon reports of what he had written and not upon the actual texts. A biographer examines unpublished original sources, letters and diaries, and perhaps has the drafts and annotated manuscripts of the published books of a more modern subject. Wyclif's works unedited could not be used in quite that way. His books were burned publicly

in Oxford in 1410. Copies of some of them had been taken to Prague where there was interest in his ideas in the University. But they were scattered and the manuscript tradition was far from coherent. Wyclif had died of a stroke in the middle of revising his work, and it is impossible to say what, if any, of the random collection of surviving material constitutes his final intentions. The remainders stand at an uncertain distance from the author. It would have been more than a lifetime's work for any would-be individual biographer to get them into a state in which they could have been relied on as sources. Even after the Latin texts had appeared, the remaining sorting and dating has taken a further lifetime (W.R. Thomson, 1983).

It was the Wyclif Society that partly filled the gap with its series of editions, insofar as was possible with the limited skills of the period in the editing of medieval texts. In 1905, when the editorial project was nearing completion, Buddensieg acknowledged, in the Preface of his edition of the *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* in the Wyclif Society series, that

> the historical Wyclif is still a dim and undefined character to our mind's eye. We clearly discern but the chief features, the energetic bent for free thought, and his deep feeling, centring in and drawing strength from the Gospel. We know what he was, but don't know how he grew to be what he was.
>
> (Buddensieg, 1905)

WYCLIF THE LEGEND

Let us begin with the legendary Wyclif, for when the subject has an established reputation so colourful and so durable, that reputation arguably becomes a biographical fact in its own right. Modern biography presents the life of an individual in its particularity, attempting to render as exactly as possible the man or woman in the circumstances. By contrast, the typical medieval biography is a saint's *Life*. For a collection, see *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* (Brussels, 1899–1901) and *Supplementum* (Fros, 1896), which gives a survey of more than 9000 texts. Hagiography had its own strong conventions, which have more to do with norms than with the peculiar features of individual lives. Nor did the genre confine itself to the kinds of event that find a place in modern biography. The conventions include 'evidences' that God is acting miraculously in such lives and foresees their exceptional holiness. For example, it is common for the subject's mother to have had a vision when pregnant of the future greatness of her child. Hagiography thus took its subject to be holy to a degree that manifested itself in miracles, and supernatural events are taken to be testimony to the sanctity of the subject. Lessons are drawn so that the reader may not fail to be led in the right direction by his or her reading, which

is envisaged as a form of devotional exercise. The purpose of hagiography was edification and to that end it sought to depict its subject as an example to others. No one tried formally to canonize Wyclif but from the earliest biographical notices there were energetic attempts to make him a hero or a villain, and to attach an air of sanctity to him in his person of hero. This polarizing and simplification of opinion about him showed a surprising continuing power to infect the judgement even of the most sober and scholarly, as research aspired to something closer to modern levels of rigour and sophistication and his Latin writings steadily appeared from the hands of the editors of the Wyclif Society editions. For example, writing in the late 1890s, R. Corbett Cowell made use of Lewis Sergeant's work in 'The heroes of the nations' series, as he acknowledges in his prefatory note, and also of Burrows' *Wyclif's place in history*, as well as Lechler, Vaughan, Lewis and Wylie, without any apparent consciousness of the widely differing purposes and scholarly pretensions of these works (Corlett Cowell, 1897).

A tour of these *Lives* is instructive. The legend of which Wyclif was hero was largely manufactured in the sixteenth century, The edgy John Bale (1495–1563), a convert to Reformation ideas and full of the zeal of the convert, compiled a mordant account of the 'Wycliffite Martyrs', *A brief chronicle concerning the examination and death of Sir John Oldcastle* (London, 1544), and a list of English writers. It is he who famously calls Wyclif *stella matutina*, 'Morning Star' of the Reformation. The Protestant apologist John Foxe (1516–87) put Wyclif first in his own list of 'martyrs' in his first Latin version of 1554 (despite the fact that Wyclif was never actually martyred), claiming for him the distinction of being the author in whose time the persecution of the witnesses to the truth first began. (Only in later editions did Foxe add an account of the history of the primitive Church and of dissidents before Wyclif.) In the English version of the Acts and Monuments of 1563, Foxe draws on John Bale in his 'Morning Star' passage (Aston, 1984: 244–47).

Foxe himself had an enormous influence. The *Book of Martyrs* was approved by the English bishops and went through four editions before Foxe's death. It led later generations to polarize the events and the context of Wyclif's story into a tale of good and bad, white and black. 'There were not a few by whom it pleased the Lord to work against the bishop of Rome, and to weaken the pernicious superstition of the friars; but our countryman was specially raised up to detect more fully and amply the poison of the Pope's doctrine, and the false religion set up by the friars' (Clarke and Townsend, 1843–49: II, 47–48).

Foxe points the modern biographer to a further dimension of the difficulty of genre, for as a theologian, Wyclif was dealing with perennial questions in the terms and with the emphases of contemporary controversy. He

imputes to Wyclif a sixteenth-century view of the then state of things. 'After he had a long time professed divinity in the University of Oxford, and perceiving the true doctrine of Christ's gospel to be defiled with the inventions of bishops, orders of monks, and dark errors, and after long deliberating with himself, with many secret signs, and bewailing the general ignorance of the world, could no longer bear it, he at last determined to remedy such things as he saw to be out of the way' (Clarke and Townsend, 1843–49: II, 49). Foxe here credits Wyclif personally with much that was going on among his contemporaries independently of his efforts, and at the same time translates the discussion to make it fit the sixteenth century's emphases. The problems Wyclif sought to check, Foxe suggests, stemmed from a neglect of those fundamental topics of Christian theology in which the theologians of his own day were particularly interested: 'As to faith, – consolation, – the end and use of law, – the office of Christ – our impotency and weakness, – the Holy Ghost, – the greatness and strength of sin, – true works, – grace, and free justification by faith, – the liberty of a Christian man; of all these things wherein consists the sum of our professions, there was no mention, and scarcely a word spoken' (Clarke and Townsend, 1843–49: 48). Yet several of these are the priorities of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and they were not really Wyclif's own preoccupations at all. This problem of the mismatch between the perennial and the historical and contextual was noted by Wyclif's first modern biographer. 'Abstraction from environment is the defect of much theological writing, and presupposes that there is a sort of constant, invariable truth, independent of the age, the measure of which in any man it is the biographer's task to discover' (Workman, 1926: viii).

The first substantial early modern *Life* was the work of John Lewis, *The history of the life and sufferings of the Reverend and Learned John Wiclif, DD* (1719). This made fair, though by modern standards uncritical, use of historical evidence; it had its own axes to grind and its own polemic. Lewis remarks, for example, that 'the Papists were very angry at the publication of [Foxe's] history, in which their lies and cruelty were so fully exposed and accordingly ... represented it as a huge fardle of most notorious lies and falsehoods' (Lewis, 1719). Lewis provided authors of the first half of the nineteenth century with a starting point for accounts that tend to the adulatory and the polemical. Robert Vaughan wrote *The life and opinions of John Wycliffe* as a young man, but when it came to the question of a second edition nearly a quarter of a century later, he decided, on maturer reflection, to write an entirely new book, *John de Wycliffe, DD* (London, 1853). The special pleading is unashamed. This is a book with a message, but it is the message of a new century. 'There is but too much reason for directing the attention of the men of our time to a topic of this

nature. The corruptions unmasked and denounced so boldly by Wycliffe, are still rooted in the social state of Europe, and still find lodgement among ourselves' (Vaughan, 1953: iv).

TOWARDS A MODERN BIOGRAPHY

Social and patriotic themes were to prove significant ingredients in the nineteenth-century Wyclif biography. The Wyclif legend allowed of application to the concerns of a new era, just as it had in the sixteenth century. But now the fashion was for social comment. 'Wyclif's work lived in England during the fifteenth century, and was, probably, the principal factor in the gradual emancipation of the people during that epoch. ... the Lollards ... were by thousands silently preparing the way for the great Reformation which the nation was to undergo in the days of Henry VIII' (Corlett Cowell, 1897: 122–23). 'The purity and sanctity of domestic life would have perished from the household had he succeeded in forcing his socialistic principles upon the men and women of England' (Stevenson, 1885: ix). For Buddensieg, John Wyclif is 'the great reformer, in whom the characteristics of the Christian and the Englishman meet and combine in almost equal fullness, as do in Luther Christianity and Germanity' (Buddensieg, 1883: viii). All this reflects a nineteenth-century pattern of scholarly enthusiasms, which had their value; without them we should not have the long series of editions of texts and publications of learned societies on which much modern scholarly work on the theology of the Middle Ages still depends. The notions of national 'identity' that inspired Wyclif's nineteenth-century German editor belong to another age. Within a few years of writing this Preface, Buddensieg published his *John Wyclif, patriot and Reformer*, enlarging upon his social and political theme. 'England owes him her Bible, her present language, the reformation of the Church, her religious, and to a very large degree, her political liberty (Buddensieg, 1884: 13).

Gotthard Lechler's biography of Wyclif, *John Wycliffe and his English precursors*, was first published in Leipzig in 1878, with an English translation and abbreviation by Peter Lorimer, and was reprinted in 1884. This was the landmark biography of the modern list, and with it begins in earnest the conscious process of getting ahead of the evidence of Wyclif's own writings, but now in full awareness that when they were available they might radically change the picture. In his 1878 Preface, Lechler pleads, 'should the Clarendon Press determine to include in the series of the Select Works an additional number of Wyclif's Latin writings', that it will follow his advice 'that works of an earlier date than 1381 should be selected', and that 'most of all, the publication of the *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* is to be recommended; and next to this a collection of 40 Latin

sermons, preserved in the Vienna MS. 3928, and which reflect an earlier stage of Wyclif's opinions'. He thought an edition of the *De Ecclesia* was urgently needed too (Lechler, 1884: vi–vii). He was himself to become one of the editors of the Wyclif Society editions. Paradoxically, Lechler wanted to use the *Life* he was writing to stir sufficient interest in Wyclif to make it a practical proposition to get his writings edited, in order that the more satisfactory *Life* could be attempted. His English translator, Peter Lorimer, was enthusiastic about the result of the dipping and extracting Lechler had already done. 'Never before has the whole teaching of the Reformer – philosophical, theological, ethical, and ecclesiastical, been so copiously and accurately set forth; and never before has so large a mass of classified quotations from all his chief scientific writings been placed under the eyes of scholars' (Lechler, 1884: ix).

The hagiographical language is still there in the excited prose. Lechler calls Wyclif, 'a character of the genuine Protestant type, whose portraiture it may not be without use to freshen up again in true and vivid colours in the eyes of the present generation' (Lechler, 1884: vii). Lorimer, in his Translator's Preface, shares his assumption and his enthusiasm, to the point of including a poem addressed to Wycliff, describing his sentiments as he translated 'Lechler's learned page' (Lechler, 1884: ix). 'It is a singular fact', he adds, 'that five hundred years should have passed away before it became possible to do this service of justice to the memory of so great a man – the very 'Morning Star of the Reformation' (Lechler, 1884: 6). Lechler was not unaware that the passage of time does not necessarily make it possible to gain a more accurate perspective and he also recognized that much depends on whether the researcher is sympathetic to the Reformation or not, when approaching 'the same class of facts' (Lechler, 1884: vii). He was less conscious, perhaps, of the degree to which he himself was importing the assumptions of his time, and imputing attitudes to Wyclif, particularly an English patriotism.

A cluster of adulatory English biographies followed in the tradition Lechler had begun to establish, but retaining a lively stream of 'hagiographical' language, within the tradition that had kept Wyclif's name visible and made him an object of interest. In a popular little book, William Chapman outlines a medieval world in which a series of episodes and individuals held 'sacred the cause of truth' but merely as 'the forerunners of a still greater spirit', Wyclif, destined 'to confer the never-dying blessings of liberty upon his country' (Chapman, 1883: 20). 'Wiclif was eminently a patriot. ... his patriotism was of the highest and noblest type, for he sought, by diffusing light from his own great stores of knowledge, to teach the people to govern themselves' (Chapman, 1883: 34–35). In a pamphlet in an overheated style, and having more of the air of a sermon than of a biography, Henry Varley asserts that 'Scarcely is there any

darkness in him who we call "the Morning-star of the Reformation"; his beams unsullied lengthen out their lines of light over the centuries' (Varley, 1884: 2). 'There are many aspects in which we may contemplate this heroic soul; he is a jewel cut in many facets' (Varley, 1884: 2). Lewis Sergeant published a biography of John Wyclif in 1893, the seventh in the series, *Heroes of the nations*, a book he intended 'to popularise the picture of John Wyclif' (Sergeant, 1893: 3). The other heroes in the series at the time of publication were Nelson, Gustavus Adolphus, Pericles, Theodoric the Goth, Sir Philip Sidney and Julius Caesar. Lewis's idea was that 'the pioneers of moral development in every age, even across the interval of five hundred years' may be 'near akin' (Sergeant, 1893: 4). His particular hero, John Wyclif, is identified by the way he 'stands forth so prominently in an age which forms a joint and hinge of religious history' (Sergeant, 1893: 5). Sergeant expressed a consciousness of a need to stand back from too hasty an attempt to analyse the evidence of Wyclif's writings in detail, even if he had thought it appropriate, until the Wyclif Society had completed its work. In any case, it was his view that 'truth to tell, the works of Wyclif are not and cannot be made very attractive to men and women of the present day. ... For the general reader they are, in their complete form, not only superfluous but even a little misleading' (Sergeant, 1893: 7, iii).

The irony of the adoption by extreme protestants of apparent veneration for a saint was not lost on Roman Catholic critics. Joseph Stevenson, a Jesuit for whom Wyclif was anything but a hero pointed to the impact of 'the last day of December, 1884 ... the five hundredth anniversary of the death of this messenger of evil' (Stevenson, 1885: vii). Stevenson thought well of F.D. Matthew's 'carefully written sketch' in the prefaces to some of Early English Text Society editions. There is an example in *The English works of Wyclif, hitherto unprinted* (Matthew, 1880: i–li). Stevenson also approves of N. Pocock's 'masterly communication' addressed to 'The Guardian' and a pamphlet by Wordsworth, bishop of Lincoln. But he thought very differently of other works, he notes (Stevenson, 1885: xiii–xiv). Other biographies coming out in connection with this event were close to being hagiographical, he accused. 'Watch the crowd as it hurries by to worship at the shrine of the Saint of Lutterworth' (Stevenson, 1885: vi–vii).

> The "agents" of this new cult, as they march past, scatter their pamphlets, tracts and fly-sheets, far and wide, and the credulous ones of the people good-humouredly pick them up, are converted to the doctrines, believe the statements, and subscribe to the funds of the Wyclif Society. ... The nation is chidden for having so long permitted the glories of this "Morning Star of the Reformation" to remain in obscurity. ... We should feel no surprise were we

> to read that a pilgrimage was about to be organized in order that his disciples might visit the church which Wyclif desecrated by saying the Mass which he believed in his heart to be a blasphemous fable and a dangerous deceit.
> (Stevenson, 1885: vi–vii)

'We find them professing a veneration, at once exaggerated and unauthorized' (Stevenson, 1885: vii).

Stevenson's ire had been awakened by several testimonies to the cultic status of Wyclif.

> This admiration for Wyclif, now so conspicuous, is no new thing. It has been steadily on the increase for some years past. It has shown itself by the dedication of a church to his memory at Birmingham, and by giving his name to a small place of education at Oxford, called Wyclif Hall [founded 1877]. One would like to know why it should have been so called.
> (Stephenson, 1885: x)

Stevenson suggests that the name may have been chosen for the new foundation simply because it

> ... sounded well, and implied a sort of general recognition and acceptance of 'the principles of the Reformation.' But if it had a deeper meaning it could only be that the training which it professes to give its pupils is intended to be in conformity with that which the scholars and divines of the Oxford of five hundred years ago had cast out from among them as an unclean thing, and with one voice had declared to be abominable and heretical.
> (Stephenson, 1885: x–xi)

The question can be answered. Robert Baker Girdlestone, in a pamphlet, *Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, its nature and object* (Oxford, 1878), puts forward the view that a degree in theology is not adequate training for the ministry. He was a Biblical scholar and thought himself well able to judge. 'It is not enough that they should be able to talk learnedly about the authenticity of Daniel, the date of Job, the deutero-Isaiah, the Elohist controversy, or the Synoptic Gospels. They must read God's Word from another point of view, if it is to be the means whereby they may convince men of sin, show them the path of pardon, and lead them in the way of righteousness.' Some can get what they need to equip them for this work by consulting the professors; some will become lay helpers in a parish with an enlightened incumbent who can direct their studies; some will go to theological colleges. But there are those who are reluctant to leave Oxford, and these can stay on in their own rooms and 15 minutes' walk will bring them to Wycliffe Hall; some will wish to reside at Wycliffe Hall and, conversely, they can enjoy the advantage of attending the lectures in the University. 'The teaching at Wycliffe Hall is designed to be practical and devotional,

not controversial, and to be supplementary to – not a substitute for – the work of the Divinity Professors.'

All this is worth mentioning because Girdlestone anticipates Stevenson's criticism. People are bound to ask 'how far it is intended to subserve the purposes of one particular party in the Church'? Girdlestone does not think it essential to adhere to any particular position in the conspectus of 'doctrines which have many sides'. But he does think it indispensable 'to be absolutely certain that there is one 'Remedy ... *namely, the Gospel*'. Wycliffe Hall had as its mission 'to help men in their studies' so that they might achieve 'an accurate, comprehensive and sympathetic study of the Scriptures, viewed in relation to the human heart and to the age in which we live'. So this was a Wycliffite enterprise only in the sense that Wycliffe was still being credited with having called for a reliance upon Scripture, direct teaching of ordinary people about the Bible, and its translation into English, so that they might read or hear it for themselves. Girdlestone's pamphlet includes a list of lectures for October Term 1878, among them 'Personal dealings with the careless and the anxious' and 'Reformatory work amongst London lads'.

The Wyclif Society

Stevenson's acerbic irony was unleashed on the Wyclif Society:

> But Oxford has done something more effectual than this. ... Oxford contributed largely towards the publication of his English version of the Bible, it has given us three volumes of his miscellaneous writings ... and it has employed a learned German professor to edit a new edition of the *Trialogus*. ... And now it joins the movement which invites us to contribute to the formation of a more comprehensive undertaking, the prospectus of which lies before us. ... the magnitude of the systemical efforts which are being made at the present moment for the publication of the whole of Wyclif's writings ... apparently the project will succeed, and we hope it will. It is important that we should know what really were Wyclif's opinions, and the originators of the undertaking assure us that we cannot do this until all his works are printed.
>
> (Stevenson, 1885: xii–xiii)

Much energetic activity was generated in connection with the Wyclif Society's scheme of publishing Wyclif's Latin writings.

> Until within the last few years, England has been singularly ungrateful to the memory of one of her greatest men. She seems to have forgotten that not only is John Wiclif the father of her prose but that he was also the first to do

> battle for the maintenance of evangelical faith and English freedom with a foreign power that openly denied to Englishmen the privilege of both.
>
> (Buddensieg, 1883: v)

Thus warmly wrote Rudolf Buddensieg, the late nineteenth-century Dresden schoolmaster who gave up all his leisure for more than a quarter of a century to his great project of bringing the writings of his hero into print. Buddensieg found it ‘painful’ that Wyclif’s ‘most important works should have been until now allowed to lie buried in manuscript’ without its apparently occurring to him that the lack of early printed editions might be an indication of the uncertainty in the minds of the early publishers of their actual importance (Buddensieg, 1884: 13).

It was Buddensieg who explored the repositories in such regions as Bohemia, Moravia and Lower-Austria, and discovered the whereabouts of many of the manuscripts now known of Wyclif’s writings, including a set carried off to Sweden by the Moravians during the seventeenth century (Buddensieg, 1884: vi–viii). Buddensieg describes the foundation of the Wyclif Society ‘by the energetic F.J. Furnivall and his helpers’ in March 1882. Their adoption of a scheme of publishing Wyclif’s writings brought to fruition an idea adumbrated earlier in the century, which had been the occasion of W.W. Shirley’s earlier attempt to list the extant writings of Wyclif. He had done so in preparation for the project of getting the Oxford University Press to publish a selection from his works (Shirley, 1865). The Wyclif Society’s willingness was a great relief to Buddensieg, for he says that he could not persuade the delegates of the Oxford University Press to undertake publication. He had captured the interest of the English enthusiasts who formed the Wyclif Society, by writing a letter to the *Academy* in September 1881 (Buddensieg, 1883: vi).

The editors enlisted were D.D. Matthew, A.W. Pollard, Edward Harris, Charles Sayle, M.H. Dziewicki, Johann Loserth, Rudolf Beer, Rudolf Buddensieg, Herzberg-Fränkel, R.L. Poole (Whitney, 1927: 98–114). M.H. Dziewicki was a Roman Catholic. He explains in the Introduction to his edition of the *De Ente* (London, 1909), p. vi, that when he was ‘offered the position of editor of Wyclif’s Latin works’, he consulted a clergyman in London. ‘He told me that a translation into the vernacular would be forbidden, but that a mere edition of the Latin text was another thing.’ Dziewicki came to believe that this advice was technically in error but he continued to consider that ‘as a layman asking counsel’, he was ‘right in accepting it.’ The editors had a strong sense that they were repairing an important gap. ‘The Wyclif Society was founded in 1882 to remove from England the disgrace of having till then left buried in manuscript the most important works of her great early reformer, John Wyclif. ... Till the

Wyclif Society started, only one treatise of importance, the *Trialogus*, had ever been printed, out of the great mass of the Reformer's Latin writings.' This was re-edited by Lechler in 1869, with more than a hint of a patriotic pride in what the Society was doing.

> In Germany Dr. Lechler had printed a few short pieces; and two volumes of Polemical Tracts, edited by Dr. Rudolph Buddensieg of Dresden, and in part paid for by the King of Saxony, were adopted and issued as the Wyclif Society's volumes for 1882 and 1883. We cannot desire that German scholars and princes should complete the work which falls by right to Englishmen.
>
> (Dziewicki, 1893: 1–3)

There was some sensitivity over the extent of the German contribution. A congratulatory survey identifies R.L. Poole as 'one of the chief supporters' of the Wyclif Society but emphasizes that 'the lion's share of the editing was taken by Dr. Loserth with thirteen volumes' (Whitney, 1927: 98).

Furnivall and Buddensieg, the chief drivers of the project, did not prevent some of their editors from expressing bewilderment as the works of Wyclif emerged at their hands. Reginald Lane Poole was one of the most sober and judicious of the Wyclif Society editors. When he edited the *De Civili Dominio*, his first interest lay in establishing the credentials of the double Vienna manuscript from which he worked (MSS 1341 and 1340). But he also reflects in his Preface upon the difficulty of the editing 'due to the peculiar nature of Wyclif's Latin'. His theory is that it 'belongs to a time when scholars were ceasing to *think* in Latin', a hypothesis which rests upon his confidence, now known to be misplaced, that Wyclif was 'one of the founders of English prose writing' (Poole, 1885: xviii).

The *De Compositione Hominis* was edited for the Wyclif Society in 1884 by Rudolf Beer. The work had taken him a long time to complete, although he claims that 'the principles which must guide our editors are well understood' and that 'the volumes which have already appeared have helped to develope [*sic*] them'. His problem has been that he cannot understand the work he is editing. He feels that to be impossible until 'the publication of the whole of his obscure Latin writings' is completed, 'which must surely explain and complement one another' (Beer, 1884: 5). The obscurity would have disappeared with better acquaintance with the work of Wyclif's contemporaries, but we surely hear a note of disappointment here, coupled with a lingering hope that when the set is complete all will be revealed and with it Wyclif's legendary greatness and the compelling power of his arguments to stir a generation to dissent. Alfred W. Pollard and Charles Sayle edited the *De Officio Regis* for the Wyclif Society in 1887. They claimed for it a position 'as the eighth book of Wyclif's great

Summa', hypothesizing a degree of planning on Wyclif's part for which there is in fact no evidence (Pollard and Sayle, 1887: vii). 'After the publication, by the Wyclif Society, of the *De Compositione Hominis*, of the *De Ente Praedicamentali*, and of the three volumes of *Logica*, lately issued, enough is now known of this philosopher's general system and trend of thought to render a synopsis of his philosophy quite possible' (Dziewicki, 1902: V).

The introduction upon the scene of the writings of Wyclif was disturbing to some of the editors. Matthew recognized that a close acquaintance with what he believed to be Wyclif's mind in the English writings did not inspire admiration. 'It cannot be denied that there is a certain sameness which makes these tracts rather tiresome to read continuously' (Matthew, 1880: xlviii). Nor could he speak very highly of him on the basis of his Latin writings. He mentions the story of Wyclif's charm.

> Judging from his works it is rather difficult to discern in what the charm consisted. They are marked by learning and earnestness, and are occasionally relieved by touches of witty or humorous sarcasm ... Nor do we find in him what may be called the religious genius; the deep insight into spiritual things, the vivid sense of the invisible presences, which at times carries Luther, as it does St. Bernard or St. Theresa, into mystical rapture.
>
> (Matthew, 1880: xlviii)

The truth was that Wyclif's works were not proving to support the claims for his greatness.

With appeals for subscribing members the Wyclif Society kept itself in being until its project was completed, for the journal *Wyclif Society* proved not to be a good earner. All the subscriptions to it lapsed at the end of 1887 (Dziewicki, 1893: 1–3). The Foreword to *Opera Minora* (ed. J. Loserth, 1912), says the Wyclif Society's work is now nearly done and 'thus the Wyclif Society has raised to that great thinker's memory a monument more beautiful and more lasting than bronze or marble could have been ... His Latin works, now being published by the Wyclif Society for upwards of fifteen years, are almost unread in his own native country' (Dziewicki, 1902: V).

'The task undertaken by the Wyclif Society, in connection with the five hundredth anniversary of Wyclif's death, is now coming to its end' (Foreword to the *Opera Minora*). The Wyclif Society's edition of Wyclif's works has still not been superseded. The state of the known manuscripts is one good reason. But the quality and importance of the works is likely to be another, for Wyclif has no modern Buddensieg and the Society, having completed its task, ceased to exist. Yet none of Buddensieg's claims for Wyclif stands up now, either historically or, in an era of ecumenism, theologically.

The English Wycliffite writings

Although the Wyclif Society's project was to edit the Latin works, there was also contemporary enthusiasm for what were believed to be Wyclif's English writings, and especially for what was erroneously believed to have been Wyclif's role in the making of the first English translation of the Bible. Matthew said in the preface to his early English Text Society editions, 'My object has been to complete the publication of Wyclif's English works' (Matthew, 1880: xlv–xlvi). 'Wycliffe ... resolved to translate the New Testament into English, so that his countrymen might read in their own language the glad tidings of the glorious Gospel. Up to this time, the Word of God had been locked up from the knowledge of the people ... Wycliffe was not acquainted with the Hebrew and Greek tongues, but he was a sound Latin scholar, and set himself to turn the Latin Testament into English.' When it was published, Wycliffe's New Testament was a best-seller and 'the new doctrine which Wycliffe and his itinerant preachers had proclaimed all over the country were found to be contained in this book, which the people were now for the first time put in possession of' (Robinson, 1879: 7–8). 'The other great work which gave impetus to the new movement was Wyclif's translation of the Bible into the native tongue of Englishmen as it was then spoken. ... What days and nights of toilsome study does this monument of consecrated industry and holy ambition represent' (Varley, 1884: 31, 33). 'He stands in the front rank of the world's mightiest and noblest men. ... Our Bible, our liberties, our conception of religious truth, and our Protestantism, are inalienably bound up with the name of John Wyclif, the greatest of English Reformers' (Corlett Cowell, 1897: 128). The work of Anne Hudson and others has now established beyond reasonable doubt that Wyclif did not make a translation of the Bible and that none of the surviving Wycliffite writings in English can safely be said to be his (Hudson and Gradon, 1983–96).

Life and legend

H.B. Workman's, *John Wyclif: a study of the English medieval church* (1926), was written with the benefit of access to the Wyclif Society editions which, for all their imperfections, at least provide a conspectus of the majority of the texts of Wyclif's surviving Latin writings. 'The weakness of much writing on Wyclif has lain in an insufficient knowledge of his Latin writings, studied chronologically, and an uncritical acceptance of the English works' [which Workman himself could not know are not attributable to Wyclif at all], he admitted (Workman, 1926: vii–viii). But even Workman, always workmanlike and sober in his judgements, overestimated the personal impact of Wyclif; the legend died hard.

'His influence is beyond dispute', he claims. He accords him the status of 'politician', when he was merely sent on a single diplomatic mission, which failed; and intellectual 'leader', when he was manifestly only one among many fellow academics discussing the same subjects; and 'a master of English' when we have no identifiable words in English from him at all (Workman, 1926).

It is not at all easy to say what Wyclif's real achievement was. No work in English that can be attributed with certainty to Wyclif survives; nor is there any evidence that he actively got the work of translating the Bible into English under way or was even directly involved in it, although he was a prolific author and the Wyclif Society editions fill a shelf. Not a single 'great book', or any book of lasting importance, bears his name. We can point to no quotation so memorable that it echoes down the years. He was not the only one among his contemporaries putting forward the particular arguments which came to be associated with his name and the only 'English freedom' he fought for was the refusal to pay taxation decades overdue to the papacy from the Kingdom of England; even there he was acting as one of a diplomatic mission and not as a solitary hero.

The biographical task in a case like this resembles that of a picture restorer. Layers of varnish and overpainting have to be cleared away, without accidental removal of any part of the 'real' picture, in circumstances where it is not at all clear where the 'real' picture begins. But the Latin writings must form part of the real picture.

The modern biographer has choices to make when confronted with a subject whose chief claim to interest lies in the fact that he became such a legend. It is important to try to fix any elements of fact in the legend; but it is the historical reality which forms the biographer's proper subject-matter. Any other choice would turn biography into fiction. There is the option of looking at the history of the life through the lens of the legend that later emerged about the life, but no modern biographer should allow such inventions as those that litter some of the late nineteenth-century lives. 'It was the appearance of a treatise on "The Kingdom of God", which Wyclif had been composing in his quiet country vicarage, that first showed how wide was the gulf between him and the Established Church of his day' (Varley, 1884: 19). 'The other great work which gave impetus to the new movement was Wyclif's translation of the Bible into the native tongue of Englishmen as it was then spoken. ... What days and nights of toilsome study does this monument of consecrated industry and holy ambition represent' (Varley, 1884: 31, 33).

In this case, the task is complicated by the fact that the historical evidence is thin in the areas conventionally important to a biographer, although it is comparatively rich in the wider reach of contextual events in which the subject's life must be placed. That stage of life which generally

gets the reader reading on from the beginning of a biography is the account of childhood and early youth. There is no cosy nursery world in Wyclif's story. Wyclif had no Boswell to record what he said; there is no equivalent of Luther's 'Table talk'. We have to make do with chance scraps. About 1372, one of those who challenged Wyclif to public intellectual duels in an Oxford 'disputation', gave it as his opinion that Wyclif was 'deep' (*profundus*), spoke well and with distinction (*pulchre dictum et egregie*) and was a solemn and learned figure both in speech and in knowledge (*Doctor tam solemnis in scientia et sermone*) (Shirley, 1858: pp. 12, 14, 19, 67, 456; Workman, 1926: 121). Wyclif says that he himself had not always lived an ascetic life. He admitted that 'in excess of eating and clothing' he has not set the priestly example he should have done. He has consumed goods that might have benefited the poor (Buddensieg, 1905–07: I.360, 363). He admits to losing his temper easily. 'I have often lapsed into indignation or irritation' (Buddensieg, 1905–07: I.366). He says he prays about this and tries to break himself of the habit. William Thorpe, a 'Lollard' who had been in Oxford from about 1377, described John Wyclif to the inquisitors who were examining him on his own beliefs in 1407. Wyclif, he said, was spare, thin, a man of moderate and harmless habits and able to win the affection of those who knew him. 'They loved him dearly' (*eum dulciter amabant*), he said (Shirley, 1858: xlv). This does not provide much to go on by way of even a thumbnail sketch of the person.

For the most part, we must try to 'hear' the tone of voice of utterances which now survive only in written form, mainly in long Latin monographs written with skills now unfashionable and unfamiliar. The Wyclif Society editors were right that Wyclif was no stylist. His writing is almost wholly without elegance, awkward and often unclear (Poole, 1885: xviii–xix). There is barely enough to allow us to put a face to him and sketch the distinctive roundnesses and roughnesses of individuality – almost no surviving letters and no memorials from devoted personal friends to preserve the touching vulnerabilities and moments of humour that define a man as surely as the major events of a life and its achievements.

A life in context

It is much easier to set the man in context. We know a good deal more now that was known at the end of the nineteenth century about the Oxford in which Wyclif spent most of his life, the academic rivalries and conflicts and the way his thinking was formed by his studies and the arguments he had with his colleagues. The evidence for that survives in copious quantities in his own writings as well as in those of his opponents and contemporary commentators. That enables him to be classified as an example of

a relatively familiar figure, the medieval academic who is perceived to be saying things which present a potential stumbling block to the souls of the faithful. The controversial reputation he actually acquired in his lifetime was in reality probably not much different from that of other Oxford figures who got into trouble with the authorities. Troublesome academics were quite a common feature of medieval Europe once the universities came into being in the course of the twelfth century. So in this respect he is a type, though an unlucky example of his type, for he was pursued with a remorseless others did not have to face.

There was no legacy of important and influential writings. There were copies of Easton's work in monastic libraries but not of Wyclif's. Netter's *Doctrinale* became an early printed book, for example in 1571, but almost nothing of Wyclif's was rushed into print in the sixteenth century. Wyclif's *Trialogus*, at best a late minor work in which he tried to present some of his ideas in a popular form, was published at Worms in 1525 (and in Latin, at Basle in 1525), 'now that the sun is shining again, driving back the darkness and thickest mists inimical to light', as its additional prologue says. But there was no attempt to publish the rest of his *oeuvre* in the sixteenth century, even though this was an age in which the important books of antiquity and the Middle Ages were coming off the new presses of Europe in a torrent. John Bale made a list of titles of Wyclif's works which he had found in manuscript but even with this as a starting-point, the trail of the early printed material in England is thin. Item after item in Thomson's modern review has only the Wyclif Society editions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Thomson, 1983). *Wycliffes wicket* (London, 1546), and again (London, 1548), expounded by W. Tyndall and I. Frythe, was a snippet of Wyclif's arguments on the Eucharist. J. Wycliffe, *The dore of Holy Scripture* appeared in London in 1540. *The true copye of a prolog written about two c yeres paste by Iohn Wycliffe* (London, 1550) prints the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, which was not Wyclif's work at all, 'the originall whereof is founde written in an olde English Bible betwixt the olde Testament and the Newe', which we are assured is the lean and hungry look attributed to him. 'He did florish in Oxford longe while', explains the publisher. He was protected under Edward III but not under Richard II. Verses follow, faithfully depicting the mythical reformer.

Yet dyd thys good man never alter his stile
But wrote mani volumes whils he was alive
To extinguish errour, and truth to revive.

Above all, a biographical judgement has to be arrived at about the scale of Wyclif's personal achievement within the trends and movements with which his name became associated. Here again the definitive work has

been done by Anne Hudson (Hudson, 1987). Some Wycliffite and Lollard ideas were Wyclif's own; some later flowed from his work; some were given currency by his friends and followers rather than Wyclif himself. But it is certain that he did not as a matter of historical fact do all the things the legend said he did. Those of Wyclif's ideas which had chimed with the thinking of ordinary people who were 'angry with the system' were not new. They simply joined a river of similar ideas which was already flowing strongly, and had been doing so in Europe for at least two centuries. There is no evidence that it was Wyclif in particular who stimulated Englishmen's enthusiasion for them, though he made his contribution; it seems that popular preachers were already disseminating them in the years when he was becoming infamous and the object of disapproving notice by the authorities. In other words, his name was linked with something which was already happening. If he did not really 'start anything', did he crystallize anything, give it definitive statement? Again, it is hard to show that he did, because of the lack of important books, and even any significant remarks to be quoted in a conclusion such as this. In the international world of exchange of academic ideas, it seems that he was merely a contributor to scholarly debate who got entangled in some heated ecclesiastical politics, and that is how we should rate him if he had not notoriously been condemned and if Asam Easton and other contemporaries had not made him a villain and Foxe and Bale had not set about making him a hero.

Conclusion

The lesson is perhaps that the Wyclif 'story' has proved surprisingly durable because it became detached so early from the hard and disappointing evidence about the true achievement of an individual and became an extremely flexible and useful legend. Stevenson, a Jesuit, observed of Wyclif that he had proved a highly adaptable figure: 'He is a Papist and a priest, but he finds himself quite at home among the members of the Tract Society in London and the Free Kirk in Edinburgh' (Stevenson, 1885: v). For Buddensieg, John Wyclif is 'the great reformer, in whom the characteristics of the Christian and the Englishman meet and combine in almost equal fulness, as do in Luther Christianity and Germanity' (Buddensieg, 1883: viii). All this reflects a nineteenth-century pattern of scholarly enthusiasms, which had their value; without them we should not have the long series of editions of texts and publications of learned societies on which much modern scholarly work on the theology of the Middle Ages still depends. The notions of national 'identity' that inspired Wyclif's nineteenth-century German editor belong to another age. Within a few years of writing this preface, Buddensieg published his *John Wiclif,*

patriot and Reformer (London, 1884), enlarging upon his theme. 'England owes to him her Bible, her present language, the reformation of the Church, her religious, and to a very large degree, her political liberty' (Buddensieg, 1884: 13). Wyclif is still being credited with some of the legendary features (J. Thomson, 1983: 355–62). The modern biographer who wishes to portray the real Wyclif is left to tell a much less engaging tale and one of which it must be asked repeatedly whether its subject has been worth the attention he has, historically, received.

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