

XVII.—SOME EVIDENCE OF LOLLARD ACTIVITY
IN THE DIOCESE OF DURHAM IN THE
EARLY FIFTEENTH CENTURY.

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A Northern episode in the history of the followers of Wycliffe, the trial of Richard Wyche by bishop Walter Skirlawe of Durham, has long been represented in print. In 1858 appeared his recantation and submission to the bishop, taken from a manuscript in the British Museum,¹ and in 1890 Wyche's own remarkable account of his trial and condemnation was printed by F. D. Matthew from a transcript made from a Prague manuscript by Professor Loserth.² What has not hitherto been appreciated is that Wyche was only one of several Lollard priests summoned to appear, and perhaps condemned, by bishop Skirlawe towards the end of the year 1402 and in the first few months of 1403.

Richard Wyche, a priest of the diocese of Hereford,³ was engaged in preaching in Northumberland when he was summoned before bishop Skirlawe. His account of the trial is given in a letter to a friend, a layman apparently living in Newcastle. He was brought before the bishop on 7 December, accused of preaching heretical doctrines; this was in the year 1402, as will be shown presently. As his answers to his examination were unsatisfactory, he was excommunicated and committed to the bishop's prison. From time to time during the next three months he was brought out of prison

¹ *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif* (Rolls Series), Appendix VI, pp. 501-505. Wyche's examination, printed *Ibid.*, pp. 370-382, may belong to a later trial (see below).

² *English Historical Review*, V, pp. 530-544.

³ For a summary of what is known of his career, see Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500*, III, p. 2101.

and examined before the bishop or his chancellor. Masters in theology were brought to argue with him, and every effort was made to induce him to recant, but he remained steadfast and stubborn in refusing to accept the authority of the church when it conflicted with his reading of the scriptures, particularly with regard to the nature of the eucharist. At length, in March 1403, he was pronounced a heretic, laid under major excommunication, and returned to prison to await degradation from his orders. It was at this point that his account of the trial was written, and his letter ends with messages for a number of his associates and disciples, whom he mentions by name.

Meanwhile, at least three other priests had been denounced to bishop Skirlawe for heretical opinions and had been cited to appear before him. Two mandates of bishop Skirlawe to publish the citations survive among the muniments of the Dean and Chapter of Durham, and two more in the cartulary of Kelso Abbey, printed under the name *Liber S. Marie de Calchou*.⁴ They all concern priests charged with heresy and with preaching heretical doctrines.

The first of these mandates in order of date, issued on 8 February 1403, directed the archdeacon of Northumberland to cite two priests called James Nottingham and John de Roxburgh to appear before the bishop or his commissary in the chapel at Bishop Auckland on 23 February.⁵ Next, on 17 February a mandate in respect of one John Whitby, priest, already once summoned and now excommunicated for non-appearance and cited to appear on 14 March, was directed to the prior of Durham, who communicated it to the vicars of the convent's appropriated churches on 19 February.⁶ James Nottingham likewise did not appear on the day given him, and on that day, 23 February, a similar mandate was issued to the prior recording his excommunica-

⁴ I am indebted to Dr. J. A. F. Thomson of the University of Glasgow for drawing my attention to the latter source.

⁵ *Liber S. Marie de Calchou* (Bannatyne Club, 1846), II, p. 435.

⁶ Durham Dean and Chapter Muniments, Loc. XVII No. 26.

tion and further citation, also for 14 March.⁷ The prior certified to the bishop on 12 March that this and the order concerning Whitby had been duly executed.⁸ There was no further mention of John de Roxburgh, who may be presumed to have answered his first summons. Neither Nottingham nor Whitby, on the other hand, answered their second summonses, and accordingly a mandate to the archdeacon of Northumberland dated 14 March ordered them both to be cited to appear on 6 April in order to purge themselves of the accusations against them.⁹

Richard Wyche's account of his trial, while covering a period from early December to mid-March, does not identify the year in which it took place, which has hitherto been variously estimated.¹⁰ It is reasonable to suppose, however, that James Nottingham, John de Roxburgh and John Whitby were Wyche's associates, and that his trial took place in the same winter as the proceedings against them, that is in 1402-3. These suppositions are supported by further evidence. Wyche's letter mentions two persons who can with a fair degree of probability be identified as Nottingham and Whitby. He quotes bishop Skirlawe as asserting "that James and I [i.e. Wyche] have subverted the people in Northumberland,"¹¹ a likely reference to James Nottingham. He later asks that his letter be entrusted to one "Bhytebi" so as to be read in secret to others of his friends;¹² in view of the remarkable renderings of other English proper names perpetrated by the Bohemian scribe of the manuscript, this name may reasonably be identified with that of John Whitby.

⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Reg. III, f. 6r.

⁹ *Liber S. Marie de Calchou*, II, p. 436.

¹⁰ F. D. Matthew, *Eng. Hist. Review*, V, p. 531, suggests 1401; Wylie, *History of England under Henry the Fourth*, III, p. 463, and McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, p. 162, give 1400 as the year of Wyche's apprehension; Gairdner, *Lollardy and the Reformation in England*, I, p. 183, suggests that the trial took place in 1404-5; Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford*, III, p. 2101, dates his arrest 1401, his examination 1402.

¹¹ *Eng. Hist. Review*, V, p. 535: "Et illud Episcopus dixit, quod Jacobus et ego subvertimus populum in Northumbria."

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 541.

Investigation of bishop Skirlawe's movements, moreover, shows that Wyche's trial can have taken place only in 1402-3 or 1403-4. Wyche, writing from the bishop's prison, told his friend that books would reach him if conveyed to a priest called Henry de Topcliff who lived by the church of Auckland St. Andrew, a statement which confirms that Wyche was tried at Bishop Auckland, in itself the most likely place at that time for an appearance before the bishop. Skirlawe was in Bishop Auckland in January and February of both 1403¹³ and 1404,¹⁴ whereas in the same part of the year 1401 he was in London attending meetings of the king's Council,¹⁵ in February 1402¹⁶ and again in the early part of 1405¹⁷ he was at his manor of Wheel Hall in Yorkshire, and in the first months of 1406 he was on his deathbed at Howden in the East Riding.¹⁸ The fact that the recantation of Purvey, which took place at Paul's Cross on 6 March 1401,¹⁹ was read to Wyche in the course of his trial²⁰ precludes a date before the winter of 1400-1401.

No register of bishop Skirlawe is extant, and the mandates for the citation of James Nottingham, John de Roxburgh and John Whitby have survived only by chance. There is therefore no reason to suppose that proceedings may not have been taken simultaneously against others of their company, especially as Wyche was told while in prison that the bishop's chancellor had on a visit to Newcastle in pursuit of Lollards found a Lollard master called Robert, whom Wyche identified as a friend and "brother" called Robert Herl.²¹ It is difficult, too, in spite of the incongruity of the charges

¹³ Durham D. & C. Muniments, Loc. XX No. 8 (5), Loc. XVII Nos. 26, 27; *Liber S. Marie de Calchou*, II, pp. 435-7.

¹⁴ Durham D. & C. Muniments, Reg. III f. 9v, Loc. XVII Nos. 28, 31.

¹⁵ Public Record Office, Council and Privy Seal E28/8, Significations of Excommunication C85/199/9-10.

¹⁶ Durham D. & C. Muniments, Loc. XVII No. 34.

¹⁷ See the codicils to his will, *Testamenta Eboracensia* (Surtees Society), I, pp. 314-317.

¹⁸ York Diocesan Archives, Court Papers R.VII.F.24; Public Record Office, Parliamentary Proxies, S.C.10/42/2099.

¹⁹ Wilkins, *Concilia*, III, p. 260.

²⁰ Eng. Hist. Review, V, p. 537.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 542.

against him, to resist identifying the man to whom Wyche directed that his letter be secretly read by Whitby, "magistro meo de Balknolle,"²² with Robert York, master of the Trinitarian hospital of Wallknoll in Newcastle, who, as we learn from one more mandate of bishop Skirlawe's dated 19 May 1403,²³ had in March of that very year gone into hiding after refusing to purge himself. He had been accused, not of heresy, but of having given unauthorized absolutions, published "indiscreet" indulgences, and received money from penitents and confessed persons, hardly likely offences for a Lollard sympathizer. The identification must therefore be made with caution, but it is at least possible that these charges were preferred for want of any more valid ones which could be laid against him with any hope of success.

Nothing is known of the eventual outcome of Skirlawe's proceedings against any of the above priests other than Wyche. We do not know whether Nottingham and Whitby obeyed their final summons to appear before the bishop or remained contumacious; nor is there any trace of their subsequent fate or that of John de Roxburgh. Much more is known of the fate of Wyche, who was eventually persuaded to make a full recantation and submit himself to correction by Skirlawe or his commissary.²⁴ This recantation, as James Gairdner pointed out, can be dated between October 1404 and March 1406; Innocent VII, elected on 17 October 1404, is mentioned as being pope and head of the church, while bishop Skirlawe died on 24 March 1406.²⁵ Years later, in 1419, Wyche was again examined on suspicion of heresy, this time before the convocation of Canterbury; he admitted having been condemned before Skirlawe and master Richard

²² *Ibid.*, p. 541; he is perhaps identical with "bonus magister Dees Oknolle," mentioned earlier in Wyche's letter, *Ibid.*, p. 531.

²³ Durham D. & C. Muniments, Loc. XVII No. 33.

²⁴ *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, Appendix VI, pp. 501-505. The text as there printed gives the bishop's name as William, a fact which gave F. D. Matthew "serious difficulty" (*Eng. Hist. Review*, V, p. 530). An examination of the original manuscript (British Museum, MS Royal 8. F. XII, f. 16r) shows that the name is there correctly given as Walter.

²⁵ Gairdner, *Lollardy and the Reformation*, I, p. 183.

Holme (a member of Skirlawe's *familia* and possibly his chancellor at this time), and added that after a long subsequent imprisonment in the North he had been brought by writ of *corpus cum causa* into the Chancery at Westminster, where he had been released,²⁶ presumably on finding security for his good behaviour. In view of his previous recantation, Wyche was in danger, at this second trial in 1419, of being condemned to be burnt as a relapsed heretic; but in fact it was not until 1440, after conviction by the bishop of London, that Richard Wyche's career was brought to an end on Tower Hill.²⁷

It remains to assess the evidence now available of Lollard activity in the diocese of Durham in the first decade of the fifteenth century. The bishop of Durham in the winter of 1402-3 was clearly dealing with more than one isolated preacher; at least four, and probably one or two more, itinerant priests were spreading heresy in his diocese. The impetus clearly came from outside; Wyche was from the diocese of Hereford and James Nottingham's name suggests that he originated from at any rate the edge of that area of the north Midlands where the Lollards were most numerous. John Whitby and John de Roxburgh, on the other hand, were almost local men, to judge by their names. The centre of their activity was evidently Newcastle. It was there that Skirlawe's chancellor went "ad explorandum Lollardos", and it was almost certainly the place from which Wyche set out on his journey by way of Chester-le-Street to Bishop Auckland to answer the bishop's summons, and to which he sent his letter describing his trial. We gain a brief glimpse of the Lollard community there from the messages which he sent in his letter to his friends and followers, although their names as recorded by the scribe are often obscure. The priests among them have already been mentioned; it remains to notice the laymen. To John "Maya" and his wife, Wyche sent a message of encouragement in their faith, and to their daughter

²⁶ The Register of Henry Chichele (Canterbury and York Society), III, p. 57.

²⁷ Emden, Biographical Register, III, p. 2101.

moral and spiritual advice about chastity and marriage.²⁸ "Laudens" is a name only, coupled in greetings with one Green and his wife, of whom Green was to be warned against pride.²⁹ Finally, Wyche sent his respects to the wife and mother-in-law of the unnamed friend to whom he was writing, whom he also asked to send him some books, some of which, as Wyche believed, were written in that friend's own hand. If he were unable to bring them himself to Bishop Auckland, he was to send Green's servant.³⁰ There was clearly an established Lollard community among the more prosperous and literate inhabitants of Newcastle, one of those groups which, in the words of a distinguished historian of Wycliffism, are "only known to us when brought to light by the activities of some heresy-hunting bishop".³¹ Wyche's account suggests that we have in Skirlawe a bishop anxious to persuade rather than condemn, but his hunting of the priests who were spreading heresy in his diocese has nevertheless illuminated a small part of a religious movement whose history is still largely obscure.

²⁸ Eng. Hist. Review, V, pp. 541-2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 543-4.

³¹ McFarlane, John Wycliffe, p. 125.

