

THE CHRISTIAN SENTINEL.

I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved.—HAB. ii. 1.

Rev. A. H. BURWELL, Editor.]

THREE-RIVERS, FRIDAY, 21st JANUARY 1831.

[Vol. I.—No. 21.]

SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF JOHN WICKLIFF THE ENGLISH REFORMER.

(Compiled for the Christian Sentinel.)

The Reformation of the Christian Church in the sixteenth century has been justly styled a glorious Era, and the names of the illustrious agents in that work by which successive millions have been blessed, will ever live in the grateful memory of mankind. But while it would be more than injustice to detract from the noble and successful exertions of the great German Reformers in the sacred cause of religious truth, especially of him whose name is so closely identified with the rise of Protestantism—the immortal LUTHER—it would scarcely be more unjust to overlook the claims of our own country to a conspicuous share in this glorious restoration of pure Christianity, in her illustrious WICKLIFF.

It cannot but be admitted that, long before the actual Reformation was effected, there prevailed throughout Christendom, in many instances, a strong disposition to resist the encroachments and eradicate the errors of the Church of Rome. And while this spirit is to be very early discerned amongst the continental nations, it was perhaps even more early and more strongly developed in England than in any of the other countries which subsequently shook off the Papal tyranny. Looking back into the ecclesiastical history of Great Britain, we discover that it was not without a serious struggle that the novel doctrine there first broached by Augustine in the seventh century, that the bishop of Rome was, by divine right, the head of the Christian Church, was complied with by the English prelates;* and the accounts of succeeding times assure us that the usurpations of the Papal See were often violently and effectually resisted by the king and the parliament, the people and even the clergy of the country. It will be perceived that in the celebrated Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, to whom the English nation are primarily so much indebted for many of the civil liberties they now enjoy, even the head of the Anglican Church was often a strenuous advocate for its independence on the Pope. † The Statute of Provisors or of Præmunire, (a name by which it is better known) passed in the reign of Edward III. was a check to the Papal assumptions from which it never recovered; and although there were times when its enactments were overlooked, yet there were periods, when the spirit of the nation was roused, in which its provisions were acted upon in all their severity. ‡

But we are fully justified, from the testimonies of history, in ascribing to JOHN WICKLIFF the merit of introducing, not only into England but into many parts of Germany, the positive spirit of the Reformation. He was the “little leaven” whose powerful, though imperceptible influence, so infected the great body of the English nation as to prepare them for the general Reformation which subsequently took place; for it would be difficult to account for so sudden and universal a defection from the authority of the Church of Rome as was afterwards made in England, unless we were assured that an antecedent disposition for such a change had prevailed in the kingdom. The same remark will, in some degree, apply to the nations beyond sea; for to Wickliff Bohemia was evidently indebted for the origin of the Reformation amongst its people: the new and—as they were termed—heretical opinions of John Huss and Jerome of Prague, the well-known victims of

the Council of Constance, having been imbibed from the writings of that English Reformer. A peculiarity of circumstances produced about those times, a more than usual intercourse between Bohemia and England, and in consequence several distinguished persons of the former country became acquainted with the tenets of Wickliff and imbibed sentiments of hostility to the corrupt jurisdiction of the Romish Church.

The well known saying that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,” was fully verified upon the tragical fate of Huss and Jerome. Their countrymen took the alarm, and tumults and wars ensued; but the violent efforts of the Popish adherents to crush the abettors of the growing heresy only served to rivet, to spread and to perpetuate the spirit of opposition to the Romish corruptions and the Romish tyranny. The fire was kindled, and raged far and wide; nor was it extinguished when Luther rose to give the fatal blow to the monstrous pretensions of the Papal hierarchy. The spirit of religious freedom (a) had then been long abroad, and Luther found thousands to countenance him in its vindication and to protect him from the fate of the Bohemian martyrs.

But amongst these high claimants to the reverence and gratitude of Protestants, we must not omit the name of Wickliff. It was he which gave the first wound to the Papal despot—his writings it was that communicated the spirit which led on Huss to martyrdom and Luther to victory. His name merits a high—perhaps the highest—place amongst the assertors of religious liberty; and as a celebrated writer has justly observed, it is a reflection upon the country which gave him birth, that no statue has ever been erected to his memory. * A short sketch of his life, with the design of recommending his pretensions to the consideration they deserve, will not, therefore, be unacceptable to any Protestant reader.

John Wickliff was born at a village near Richmond in Yorkshire during the reign of the ill-fated Edward II. about the year 1324; † and having been at an early age, designed for the Church, was educated at the University of Oxford. Here he made a remarkable progress in the prevailing studies of the day—paying the usual devotion to the great literary deity of the times, the philosopher of Stagira, and pursuing, with the ordinary avidity, that metaphysical jargon which was denominated the philosophy of the schoolmen and which gained for its most distinguished professors the high-sounding but ludicrous epithets of the seraphic, the profound, the irrefragable, and the evangelical doctors. ‡ Yet the native good sense of Wickliff led him soon to dispise these unprofitable studies, to withdraw his adoration from Aristotle, and to give to the Bible the precedence over Thomas Aquinas. He entered seriously upon the study of the holy scriptures, and investigated their important truths without the usual bias from the vague, contradictory and unmeaning annotations of the schoolmen. These pursuits, followed up with zeal gained him much literary reputation; and this, conjoined with his pious and exemplary life procured him—in accordance with the manner of the times—the title of the *Evangelical Doctor*.

His great acquirements and distinguished eloquence naturally raised his character and increased his influence in Oxford; but his spirited opposition to the Mendicant Friars who had long been the pest of the University and who now assumed pretensions which made them an object of alarm as well as of hatred, gained him a degree of favour there which proved of essential importance to him during his subsequent life. These religious beggars

* See Collier's Eccles. History of Great Britain, vol. i. p. 76, folio 1708.
† Collier, vol. i. p. 422.
‡ See Burnett's Hist. of the Reformation, vol. i. pp. 128, 187, 8vo. Ed.

* Southey, Book of the Church. † Gilpin, life of Wickliff.
‡ See Enfield's History of Philosophy, book vii. ch. 3.