WYCLIFFE, John, who was born about the year 1324, derived his name from the place of his nativity, a village six miles from Richmond in Yorkshire. From the era of the Norman conquest, the family to which he is supposed to have belonged had been lords of the manor, and patrons of the rectory of Wycliffe ; and it is to be inferred that his parents were able and willing to give him the best educa­tion which the kingdom then afforded. In due time he be­came a commoner of Queen’s College, Oxford, a seminary of very recent institution ; but he speedily removed to Merton College, which then enjoyed a higher reputation than any other house of learning: the scholastic celebrity of Duns, Ockham, and Bradwardine, was alone sufficient to consecrate its walls. Having been duly initiated in lo­gic and rhetoric, he directed his attention to other branches of knowledge. His proficiency in the civil, the canon, and the municipal law, has been noticed by Lewis, and other biographers ; but his greatest efforts were devoted to the study of theology, not merely that barren art which was then taught in the schools, but that divine science which is derived from the spirit as well as the letter of the Scriptures. In the prosecution of his inquiries, he had to contend with numerous and formidable difficulties: the genius of the age was hostile to any plan of study or mode of investigation which the church had not sanctioned ; the text of the sacred writings was in a great measure neglect­ed, while its place was supplied by systems of scholastic divinity ; the original language of the New, as well as the Old Testament, was almost totally unknown in the king­dom ; the inhabitants of the western world had almost uni­versally surrendered their understanding to the control of a body of priests, who reduced spiritual tyranny and delu­sion to a complete system ; and the student eagerly bent on the search of divine truth, was left without encourage­ment and without a guide. But in spite of all these disad­vantages, Wycliffe pursued his course with alacrity and perseverance. He arrived at a degree of scriptural know­ledge which had not been equalled for many centuries ; and his veneration for the sacred writings procured him the honourable appellation of the Evangelic Doctor.

His earliest publication, entitled “ The last Age of the Church,”@@1 appeared in 1356, when he is conjectured to have attained the age of thirty-two. In 1347, England had been visited by a pestilence, which first made its appear­ance in Tartary, and after ravaging various countries of Asia, proceeded by the shores of the Nile to the islands of Greece, and carried devastation to almost every nation of Europe. So prodigious was the waste of human life, that this quarter of the globe is supposed to have lost a fourth part of its inhabitants.@@8 The direful distemper was even com­municated to the brute creation, and the land was covered with putrid carcasses. These portentous signs of the times filled the pious mind of Wycliffe with gloomy appre­hensions, and led him to indulge in speculations respecting the last age of the church. He arrived at the conclusion that the day of judgment was not to be deferred beyond the close of the century in which he himself lived. Many individuals of a visionary turn of mind, and some possessed of the most vigorous understanding, have in various ages hazarded similar predictions. It is stated by Dr Vaughan, that “ the opinions and the feeling disclosed in this pro­duction, though but imperfectly developed, are such as to prepare the reader to anticipate in Wycliffe a devout op­ponent of the corruptions which it describes with such so­lemnity and pathos. It is important to know, that even at this period of his history, the nefarious practices connected with the appointment of the clergy to the sphere of their duties, had so far shocked his piety, as to dispose him to expect a speedy and signal manifestation of the displeasure of heaven.” After an interval of a few years, he distin­guished himself by his strenuous opposition to the mendi­cant orders, who then infested the best parts of Europe, and, under the pretext of betaking themselves to a life of poverty and devotion, consumed the fruits of the earth, and too often set an example which did not tend to edification. In 1360 he published his Objections to the Friars, which were long afterwards committed to the press by Dr James. The errors and vices of the mendicants, it has been re­marked, had never been so generally or so forcibly assailed ; and while those who preceded aimed only at the removal of particular abuses, he perceived that the institution itself was unnecessary and pernicious. The friars were a class of men whom it was dangerous to provoke ; nor is it to be doubted that he thus made a large addition to the catalogue of his enemies. His friends however were likewise nume­rous. In 1361 the society of Balliol College presented him to the rectory of Fillingham, in the diocese of Lincoln ; and he became master of that college in the course of the same year. In 1368, he exchanged this living for Lutger- shall, in the archdeaconry of Bucks; a benefice of inferior value, but situated at. a more convenient distance from Ox­ford. After retaining his mastership for the space of four years, he was appointed warden of Canterbury Hall, re­cently founded in the same university by Simon Islep, archbishop of Canterbury, with a provision for twelve scho­lars, eight of whom were to be secular clerks, and the re­maining four, including the warden, were to be chosen from the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury. The war­den first nominated by the founder, was one Wodehall, a fierce and turbulent monk, whom he soon found it neces­sary to remove from his office. Wycliffe was invited to supply his place, and the archbishop did not long survive. His successor in the primacy was Langham, bishop of Ely, who had previously been abbot of Weslminster, and still retained the spirit of a monk. Wodehall appealed to this new visitor, and found the support which he expected. The appointment of Wycliffe having, with little regard to law or fact, been pronounced null and void, a person named Radyngate was first substituted in his place, and in the course of a few weeks Wodehall resumed the office of war­den. From this arbitrary sentence, Wycliffe appealed to the sovereign pontiff ; and, after an interval of several years, found it was vain to expect that justice should flow from so polluted a fountain. The decision of the pope was con­firmed by the authority of the king, who did not however pronounce an unbribed judgment.

About the time when Wycliffe was appointed warden of Canterbury Hall, a controversy had arisen between Urban the Fifth and Edward the Third, in consequence of the re­newed demand of an annual tribute of a thousand marks, as an acknowledgment of the feudal superiority of the pon­tiff over the kingdoms of England and Ireland. The pay­ment of this degrading tribute had never been regular, and it had been entirely discontinued for thirty-three years; but on the renewal of the papal claim, the king thought it necessary to consult both houses of parliament. “ The prelates solicited a day for private deliberation ; but as­sembling on the morrow, the lords spiritual and temporal, and the members of the commons, w ere unanimous in stat­ing, that neither King John, nor any other sovereign, had power thus to subject the realm of England, without con­sent of parliament ; that this consent was not obtained ; and that, passing over other difficulties, the whole transac­tion, on the part of the king, was in violation of the oath

@@@l the last Age of the Church, by John Wycliffe : now first printed from a manuscript in the University Library, Dublin. Edited, with notes, by James Henthorn Todd, D. D., &c. Dublin, 1840, sm. 4to.

@@@≡ The Black Death in the fourteenth Century, from the German of I. F. C. Hecker, Μ. D., translated by B. G. Babington, M. D., p. 77. Lond. 1833, 12mo. "It may therefore be assumed, without exaggeration, that Europe lost during the Black Death 25,000,000 of inhabitants.”