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THE LOLLARDS

Richard Rex

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To my mother, Christina Rex, another Yorkshire dissident

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 The Church of England in the Later Middle Ages	1
2 John Wyclif and His Theology	25
Wyclif's Philosophy	32
The Bible	34
Lordship in Grace	35
Predestination and Necessity	38
The Church	39
The Papacy	41
Faith and Salvation	41
The Eucharist	42
Sacraments and Signs	45
Christian Life	48
Royalty and Reform	50
The Peasants' Revolt and the Condemnation of Wyclif	52
3 The Early Diffusion of Lollardy	54
Lollard Preachers	55
The Lollard Message	59
Lollardy and Patronage	61
Geography of Early Lollardy	64
Social Distribution of Early Lollardy	71
Lollard Texts	74
Lollardy and Lay Piety	78
Lollardy as a Movement	81
Lollardy and Politics	82
The Oldcastle Rising	84

4	Survival and Revival	88
	Geography of Later Lollardy	89
	Social Distribution of Later Lollardy	101
	Gender Distribution of Lollardy	104
	The Dynamics of Lollard Communities	108
	A Tudor Revival of Lollardy?	112
5	From Lollardy to Protestantism	115
	Comparative Geography of Lollardy and Protestantism	119
	The Moral Contrast between Lollardy and Protestantism	131
	The Social Contrast between Lollards and the English Reformers	133
	Lollardy and Calvinism	139
	The Fate of Lollardy	140
6	Conclusion	143
	<i>Notes</i>	151
	<i>Bibliography</i>	174
	<i>Index</i>	186

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One tribute I can pay in a book about dissidents is to disagree with people, which I have done freely throughout. Perhaps here I could take the opportunity of assuring those with whom I have taken issue that no disrespect is intended thereby. The other tribute is in the dedication. Finally, my apologies to all those at whom, over the last few years, I have scowled or rolled my eyes despairingly upwards upon hearing the polite enquiry 'How are the Lollards?'

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INTRODUCTION

K. B. McFarlane had such a far-reaching influence upon the study of late medieval history in late twentieth-century England that it is surprising to recall that the only book he himself published was *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, originally written for A. L. Rowse's series Teach Yourself History, and later reissued by Penguin Books.¹ To write a work which aspires to replace McFarlane's only published book is necessarily an act of hubris. For a Tudor historian trespassing outside his own field to attempt that task is to invite nemesis at the hands of those scholars who work 'after McFarlane'. Not that this effort seeks to justify itself by carping at its predecessor. The best tribute that can be paid to McFarlane's survey is precisely that for fifty years nobody tried to replace it. If a new survey is needed, it is simply because, thanks often to his pupils and even to theirs, a great deal more has been discovered in the last half-century about both Wyclif and his followers, the Lollards, as well as about the political and social context within which they lived.

Since McFarlane's time, by far the greatest contributions to extending our knowledge of Lollardy have been made by Margaret Aston, J. A. F. Thomson, and Anne Hudson.² It was Margaret Aston who, in a series of seminal articles, finally detached the study of Lollardy from the dead hand of confessional polemics and set research into the subject on a wholly new basis. Thomson's account of the Lollards after 1414 took up the story where McFarlane had left off, telling it on the basis of exhaustive enquiries into ecclesiastical archives. Most recently, Hudson's magisterial study, *The Premature Reformation*, has brought an unparalleled knowledge of Lollard texts to bear upon the social history of the movement to produce what will remain the standard monograph for the foreseeable future. If at times in this study I venture to dispute some of the conclusions of these three scholars (and they do not always

agree among themselves), then I must emphasise all the more that I endorse others, and that without their fundamental achievements, efforts such as this would be impossible.

'Lollardy' is a strange, archaic word. The debate about its etymology is not one in which I claim special expertise. Catholic scholars in late medieval England fancifully traced it to the Latin 'lolium', meaning 'tare' – in Christ's parable the weed sown among the wheat, interpreted by medieval exegetes as false teaching disseminated among the true. The *Oxford English Dictionary* more soberly traces its origins to Dutch words for mumbling. In terms of its original connotations, its links to 'lolling' the tongue, with its associations of stupidity and incapacity, and the onomatopoeic overtones of what is still obviously, if somewhat obscurely, a pejorative tell us all we need to know at this level.

More important, especially given that the word has been taken for the title of this book, is the fact that in late medieval England, 'lollard' was not a proper noun but a general one. It meant 'heretic', and 'lollardy' meant 'heresy'. In itself, it carried no sense of a particular sect or school of the kind conveyed by such terms as 'Arian' or (later) 'Lutheran' (derived from specific individuals), or 'anabaptist' or 'unitarian' (denoting specific theological positions). Authors writing in Latin would sometimes use the term 'Wyclifista' to describe a follower of Wyclif, but there was no such noun in the vernacular.

Thus anyone in late medieval England whose religious beliefs or practices deviated noticeably from the norm was liable to be described as a 'lollard' or 'loller'. Like many pejoratives before and since, 'lollard' was further extended to become a general term of abuse. None the less, because the noun was current only in that particular period of English history (after the Reformation of the sixteenth century it soon became an archaism), it now serves us conveniently as a proper noun for the distinct, if still somewhat broad, band of dissident beliefs and practices which flourished in England at that time, and which owed its inspiration to Wyclif, at times invoking his memory in establishing or expressing its own identity (as in one of its more widely circulated pamphlets, *Wycklyffes Wycket*).

So the Lollards of this book are indeed a particular group of people, even though those who originally spoke and wrote of 'lollards' did not limit the term's connotations in such a specific

way. Another book might be written on the usage of 'lollard' and 'lollardy' in late medieval England. It would cover a wider range – not simply Wycliffite heretics, but sceptics, anticlericals, rioters, rebels, felons, eccentrics, lunatics, and outsiders of all kinds. But it would not be this book. Here, 'lollard' is restricted to that more coherent group of people who gave the term its central meaning and its general currency. These 'lollards' knew who they were and knew one another. Their preferred self-description was 'known men', and, as R. G. Davies has observed, their movement was not so much a matter of what they knew as of whom they knew.³

The Lollards is divided into five main chapters. The first, on the late medieval English Church, makes no pretence to originality. It is a synthesis based on what is in itself an enormous body of historical writing, and it is inevitably patchy and selective. As it simply is not possible to do justice in a brief chapter to a subject which has attracted sustained scholarly attention from Pantin's *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* to Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars* and beyond, the principle of organisation and selection has been to concentrate on setting out the relevant background against which the dissent of Wyclif and his followers emerged.

The second chapter, on Wyclif, sets out a new understanding of the public career and theological development of this difficult man. Evidence about his life is fragmentary and has been subjected to excessively heavy interpretation over a very long time, while his writings are typical of their age in the technical complexity of their content and the recondite Latin of their style. This chapter offers a significant revision to a widely accepted account of Wyclif's political role in the 1370s before going on to present a full yet succinct account of his mature theology. Although my debts to the many scholars who have worked in this field (most notably Anthony Kenny) are made clear, the analysis of his theological development is ultimately my own, and endeavours to show how the critical events of the later 1370s (notably Wyclif's excommunication by the pope and the subsequent outbreak of the Great Schism between rival popes at Rome and Avignon) stimulated Wyclif into taking his philosophical principles forward into radically new theological territory. I hope that he would have recognised his thought in the reflection I give of it here.

The third and fourth chapters consider the history of the Lollards themselves, broadly dividing their history into two phases – before

and after the riotous assembly just outside the walls of the City of London in January 1414 which came to be known as the Oldcastle Rising. The brief early phase saw the growth and diffusion of Lollardy; the long latter phase can best be characterised as one of stagnation and survival. Neither of these chapters claims to add anything to the corpus of factual knowledge of Lollardy. It is unlikely that there is any new data to be found in the ecclesiastical records of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which have been combed so often. The recent researches of, among others, Edward Powell and Maureen Jurkowski have shown that there is still something to be gleaned from the surviving records of the king's courts, as the association of heresy with sedition and the cooperation of the secular arm with the spiritual authorities in the policing of orthodoxy brought heresy, considered under certain aspects, within the purview of those courts.⁴ But the future yields are likely to be low, and are unlikely to necessitate major alterations to the picture we can already put together.

Where these central chapters of the book claim to make their distinctive contribution is in their interpretation of the material. With regard to early Lollardy, it is maintained that the movement was simply never as popular or as powerful as many nervous contemporaries feared and some recent historians have hoped. While even the limited success which the movement achieved would make it absurd to argue that the medieval English Church was neither vulnerable to doctrinal and social challenge nor concerned about it, it also shows that what really needs explaining is why the wounds inflicted were so superficial. The answer is found partly in the nature of Wyclif's doctrines, which (unlike the more moderate teachings of Jan Hus) were just too radical to appeal widely, and partly in the particular failure of his doctrines to gain ground among key sections of society, notably the gentry and the friars.

The main question to be addressed with regard to later Lollardy is whether it was showing signs of revival and growth in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. While it is undeniable that growing numbers of Lollards were being prosecuted in this period, the case argued here is that it is not possible to account with complete certainty for this rise. Although the evidence is compatible with a revival in the movement's fortunes, it is equally compatible with an increase in reportage and an intensification of

repression. The fact that later Lollardy displays none of the other hallmarks of a movement on the ascendant makes the latter explanation more probable. Among other things, however, the fourth chapter also contests a thesis which has gained in popularity in recent years, namely that Lollardy exercised a disproportionate appeal among women.

The last substantive chapter considers the relationship of Lollardy to the English Reformation in the sixteenth century, a question which has been the subject of intense historiographical debate for about a century. Again, little in the way of new information is offered about either late Lollardy or the early Reformation. But the chapter makes several new contributions to the debate, chiefly by bringing information from diverse sources and fields to bear upon it. The argument is simple: that Lollardy is of virtually no importance for the success of the English Reformation. This must ultimately be a question of interpretation, and I cannot therefore expect my judgement to be taken as final. But I hope that the chapter will at least make it much more difficult for the opposing case to be maintained in future.

The short epilogue to the book addresses the question why, if the Lollards were neither numerically significant in their own time nor of great importance for the course of English history, they have attracted so much scholarly attention. The answer offered is still less flattering, and still more problematic. For I suggest that this attention is disproportionate to their actual importance, and arises partly from an accidental and partly from an extraneous cause: the accidental, the disproportionate survival of Lollard texts; the extraneous, the romantic appeal of the Lollards as a criminalised minority. The problem this raises in its turn is why we should bother with the Lollards at all – a curious problem to raise at the end (and now at the beginning) of a book about them. But for the answer to that you can either wait or turn at once to the closing pages.