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F. J. Furnivall's Last Fling: The Wyclif Society and Anglo-German Scholarly Relations, 1882-1922

[H. L. Spencer](#)

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Abstract

The Wyclif Society (1882) was the last of F. J. Furnivall's text societies, prompted by the approaching quincentenary of Wyclif's death (1384), and by celebrations commemorating Luther's birth (1483); moreover, the Bohemian reformer, Jan Hus, was thought to have been heavily influenced by Wyclif's writings. Luther's works were published in authoritative editions to coincide with the anniversary. Protestant religious sentiment was indissolubly mixed with patriotism, and, in central Europe, with nationalist aspirations in the German states before and after unification in 1871, and among Czech patriots seeking independence.

The Society concentrated on Wyclif's Latin works, of which many of the best manuscripts were in libraries in the historic Bohemian lands, and also Vienna. Though English-run, the Society necessarily relied heavily on German-speaking editors who could gain access to the manuscripts. They brought to the task the familiarity with critical text editing and philological methods for which German scholarship was famed. Its publications were ground-breaking in applying methods of text editing devised for classical texts to medieval Latin, while also offering practical demonstrations of how to prepare critical editions for the benefit of English scholars more familiar with parallel texts and diplomatic transcription.

The Society testifies to remarkable cultural exchanges and friendship between English- and German-speaking scholars at a time of rising Anglo-German political tension, as well as pressures within the German-speaking and Slav communities in central Europe, Catholic and Protestant. The Society was even briefly revived in 1918 to complete work in progress before war broke out.

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