A VICTORIAN CURATE

A Study of the Life and Career of the Rev. Dr John Hunt

DAVID YEANDLE

A Victorian Curate

As with all Open Book publications, this e-book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: St Ives Vicarage, c. 1880. Courtesy of the Norris Museum, St Ives, Cambridgeshire, UK.

Cover Design by Anna Ga...
1. John Hunt

John Hunt was not a typical Anglican clergyman, and yet his life exemplifies starkly many aspects—both good and bad—of the career of an aspiring parson in the Church of England during the nineteenth century. He was an able, intellectual, liberal clergyman with moderate Evangelical views, but he tolerated other Christian traditions, both Anglican and beyond. He had rationalist sympathies—indeed reason was his guiding principle—and by his own admission he was ‘a devout believer in Arminius and Wesley’.¹ He shares many similarities of character with one of his more famous near contemporaries, Archbishop Sumner (1780–1862), described by Chadwick in the following sympathetic terms: ‘He was a temperate evangelical, and had none of that rigidity or aggression which cause unpopularity. He was moderate and gentle and amiable.’²

Hunt’s intellectualism and rationalism caused him increasingly to lean towards the Broad-Church party, the theology of F. D. Maurice and like-minded clergymen of high intellect.

His upbringing in Scotland was altogether different from that of a clergyman in England. Although Hunt is largely forgotten today, he was known—though not celebrated—in the Victorian Church and contemporary society for a variety of reasons, not all of them positive. He was a prolific author, with a fluent literary style, a skilled theologian, a controversialist, a competent linguist, with proficiency in both classical and modern languages, a man of letters, and an amateur natural scientist, with a particular interest in anatomy.

His epitaph, a memorial tablet in Otford Church, where he became vicar at the age of fifty-one, charitably sums up his life, drawing attention to his ‘strong intellectual force’ as ‘one of the deepest philosophical

---

¹ See Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 4.
thinkers of the church’, his ‘faith based on the divinity of Jesus Christ’, and his ‘rare simplicity of nature’.3 We are further told that ‘he was humble, straight and honourable in all his dealings, and transparently truthful’.4 These are attributes that can be observed repeatedly in his life, attributes that were rarely to be found in the clergy of his day but which, sadly, caused suffering and rejection for the gifted man who espoused them.

Such an aggregation of talents would perhaps, in a more enlightened society, have led to a senior post at a university or to high preferment in the Church, possibly even a bishopric; however, Hunt’s background did not constitute a normal path to such advancement, and he struggled to find employment in the Church of England. He never rose to particular prominence nationally and, despite his many talents, was denied a position of seniority in the Church of England. He was not from the social classes that sent their sons into the Anglican Church,5 nor was he rich, nor well connected, nor even an Englishman. He was, however, naturally intelligent and a perceptive thinker. As a liberal and a rationalist, he engaged with the theological controversies of the day, and in doing so, he often made more enemies than friends. His acerbic wit and keen intellect led to difficult encounters with men of lesser ability and inferior learning, who were, however, predominantly his ecclesiastical and social superiors. His bearing could at times appear supercilious and condescending, as, for example, when he called a churchwarden ‘a fool, and a big fool’6 His demeanour on occasions betrayed some rough edges. All this diminished his chances, as a Scotsman of humble origins, without private means or the right social connections, of obtaining preferment in the nineteenth-century Church of England.

3 See John Hunt’s epitaph in Otford Church, p. 101, below.
1. John Hunt

1.1 Family and Upbringing

Not much is known of Hunt’s family; he was born to parents Thomas and Agnes Hunt as the second of eight surviving siblings, all of whom were male. The family, which was of English extraction, lived in Bridgend, Kinnoull, a district of Perth, Scotland, on the east of the River Tay. His father, Thomas, was a shoemaker, as Thomas’s father, James, had been. He was apprenticed in shoemaking by his uncle, his father having died when Thomas was only six years old. Despite this relatively lowly manual occupation, he was an astute man, of whom it is reported: ‘He was a man of considerable mental power, a philosophic workman, whose lifelong hobby was algebra, and who spent his leisure, and possibly many of the hours which should have been devoted to his business, in the solution of abstruse algebraic problems.’ We are not informed how successful the business was, but it must at least have been capable of supporting a wife and eight sons.

---


8 John Hunt’s father, Thomas (1789–1867), was the son of James ( 1762–1795). His father, Thomas (1734–1802), was one of ten children of John Hunt (1685–1756). He was born at Braiseworth, Suffolk, and became a soldier in the 31st Regiment of Foot (Royal Surrey Regiment). His regiment was transferred to Edinburgh Castle, where his son James was born. After leaving the Army, Thomas moved to Perth in 1768 and became a hatter (personal communication from Mr John Hunt); cf. also Smith, Historians of Perth, pp. 199f.

9 Although shoemakers were not prosperous in the nineteenth century, with many living at or below subsistence levels in meagre lodgings, it would appear that Thomas Hunt had advanced in this trade. Especially telling in the context of John Hunt’s later career as a clergyman is a comment in George Eliot’s ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton’ about the eponymous curate: “Rather a low-bred fellow, I think, Barton,” said Mr Pilgrim […] “They say his father was a Dissenting shoemaker; and he’s half a Dissenter himself”, George Eliot, Scenes of Clerical Life (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1858) , p. 16, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6zJAAAQAAJ Cf. also Hart, The Curate’s Lot, p. 132.

10 Smith, Historians of Perth, p. 195.

11 It is difficult to estimate his income, but a point of comparison is a shoemaker’s earnings in Forfar (some thirty miles away from Perth), c. 1840, which are reckoned
He appears to have remained active in the same business until his death in 1867. His address changes from 3 Gowrie Street in Bridgend (outside the burgh) to the west of the River Tay, first to Melville Street (1850), afterwards to North Port (1854), and finally to the most prestigious of the addresses, 14 Watergate (1856), where he appears to have resided for the rest of his life.\footnote{The dates and addresses are based on the details in the various Post Office directories, e.g., Post Office Perth Directory for 1845–6 (Perth: Fisher, 1845), https://digital.nls.uk/directories/browse/archive/85660224. On the Watergate, see Short History of the Watergate, Made in Perth — Official Website, 2014, http://madeinperth.org/a-short-history-of-the-watergate/}

Smith writes, concerning Thomas and Agnes: ‘to the upbringing and education of their large family, in a time of general poverty and distress, all their energies were devoted.’ Thomas did not become a freeman of Perth, which was a prerequisite for carrying on his trade within the burgh, ‘probably for want of funds’,\footnote{Smith, Historians of Perth, p. 198.} and this is deemed the reason why he settled at Bridgend, as it was ‘outwith the burgh’.\footnote{Cf. Smith, Historians of Perth, pp. 198, 200. Bridgend was originally an insalubrious and undesirable place to live, but by this time it was an up-and-coming area.} That he might, given better circumstances, have been in contention to become a freeman, the fee for which was an initial £25 plus the usual small dues,\footnote{Smith, Historians of Perth, p. 198.} suggests that he might have aspired to the wealthier mercantile class, but that his financial situation precluded this.\footnote{£25 would be worth approx. £2,600 in 2020. This and all subsequent currency conversions are calculated using ‘Inflation Calculator’, http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator. All values are approximate.} In short, he might be described, in today’s idiom, as ‘upwardly mobile’. Moving out of the manual, or working, class into the lower middle class of small shopkeepers and tradesfolk was a realistic possibility.
Thomas and some of his sons, especially Colin, were autodidacts, by which they were able to better themselves, and which afforded them the opportunity to aspire to a higher social status. Indeed, Colin, who is described as ‘a well-known, useful, and much-respected citizen of Perth’, and other sons became successful businessmen and thus joined the middle classes. As far as it is possible to tell, John was the only one of the eight sons to study at university; at least, there are no other Hunt sons recorded at St Andrews University, which is located thirty-five miles away from Bridgend.

1.2 Education

John Hunt relates how he was ‘educated in a Presbyterian sect’, although he does not elaborate further. In fact, his theological nurturing was in the Church of Scotland, at St Leonard’s, Perth, where the celebrated pastor and evangelist John Milne was minister (1839–1853). It was a very distinctive kind of evangelicalism, described affectionately by Hunt:

18 Cf. Smith, Historians of Perth, pp. 195f.
19 See ‘University of St Andrews Biographical Register 1747–1897’, https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/biographical-register/data/documents/1387291364
20 Cf. Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 3.
23 Cf. ‘It will be observed that [John] Watson was brought up under the ministry of the Rev. John Milne, of St. Leonard’s, Perth. Mr. Milne belonged to what was known in Scotland as the M’Cheyne school. This was made up of men who were noted for their sanctity and their evangelistic zeal. Milne left his ministry in Perth to become a missionary in Calcutta, and after an interval returned to his old church. His life was written by Dr. Horatius Bonar, and he has been most felicitously described by the Rev. Dr. John Hunt, Vicar of Otford, Kent, and author of many important books on the history of theology. Dr. Hunt [....] in his early years attended Mr. Milne’s church’, Nicoll, p. 18.
We have said that Mr. Milne’s ministry was successful. He had no great gifts of intellect; he had no eloquence; his learning was not extensive; in fact, his reading seems to have been unusually limited. What, then, was the secret of his power? We might say at once it was that he preached religion rather than theology; and he lived what he preached. If he did not know the difficulties that beset men who think, he yet knew the wants of men in general. He knew the power of sympathy, and he knew that the story of the life and the death of Jesus will reach men’s hearts to the end of time. And then he had mastered the evil that was in himself.\footnote{Hunt, ‘Review of Bonar’, The Life of the Rev. John Milne, p. 459.}

Clearly, Hunt owed much of his way of thinking and acting to this upbringing in Presbyterianism and the influence of the ‘saintly John Milne’,\footnote{The term is Smith’s, Historians of Perth, p. 35.} as will become apparent.

His secondary education was at Perth Grammar School.\footnote{Cf. Herbert E. Norris, History of Saint Ives. From ‘The Hunts County Guardian’ (St. Ives: Hunts County Guardian, 1889), p. 77.} He mentions having ‘matriculated at a Scotch University’, without naming it.\footnote{Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 3.} St Andrews, where he studied from 1847–1848, whilst being the oldest university in Scotland (founded in 1413), was very different from the ancient English universities, with their distinctive collegiate system, arcane traditions, exclusion of Dissenters, and privileges for aristocrats and wealthy undergraduates, who were often more interested in gentlemen’s pursuits than scholarship.\footnote{Cf. Michael Sanderson, Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780–1870, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), passim.} It is not known how it was possible for John, coming from originally humble circumstances and having little in the way of personal financial means, to attend St Andrews University, but it is to be noted that he did not matriculate at the university until 1847, aged nearly 21, whereas the usual matriculation age was around 17, and some matriculated as young as 15.\footnote{Cf. Neil T. R. Dickson, ‘A Scottish Fundamentalist? Thomas Whitelaw of Kilmarnock (1840–1917)’, in Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century, ed. David W. Bebbington and David Ceri Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 35–52, p. 38.} He may have had some form of employment before matriculation, possibly with his father. The Biographical Register of St Andrews lists Hunt as being a
student at United College and having studied only Latin 1 and Greek 1. Thus, he appears to have taken only first-year courses and may have left, possibly for lack of funds, without a degree, which required four years for the M.A., hence his use of ‘matriculated’, rather than ‘graduated’. His St Andrews D.D. was awarded much later, in 1878, apparently on the strength of his publications. In some of his later publications, e.g., Religious Thought in England from the Reformation to the End of the last Century, he is styled ‘The Rev. John Hunt, M.A.’. After leaving St Andrews, he is to be found in 1851 in Preston in Lancashire, working as a private tutor. He spent two or three years here and during this time published Select Poems: from the German (1852) and a translation of The Spiritual Songs of Martin Luther (1853). He also served as the first editor of the Preston Herald.

1.3 Hunt’s Scholarship

This subject can be accorded only a brief mention in the context of the present work. Hunt was a prolific author. Throughout his long life, he published many hundreds of pages in books, pamphlets, journals, magazines, and ephemeral publications of varying types and quality on varying subjects, principally theology and religion. He was also engaged in editorial activity, particularly while a member of staff (1867–1877) of The Contemporary Review, for which he also wrote.

---

32 The somewhat equivocal reference to Hunt’s university career in Smith, Historians of Perth, pp. 195f., is possibly further evidence in support of this supposition: ‘The second son, now the Rev. John Hunt, D.D., vicar of Otford, Kent, after passing through the University of St Andrews, joined the Church of England, and for nearly thirty years has held his present preferment.’ See below, p. 44.
33 Norris, History of Saint Ives, p. 77.
34 His more important publications are listed in the Bibliography, p. 233, below.
This liberal periodical, which attracted progressive theologians, such as F. D. Maurice, and other figures of note, such as W. E. Gladstone, was published by Alexander Stuart Strahan, a moderate Scottish evangelical, with whom Hunt seems to have enjoyed a degree of friendship, since he was a witness at Hunt’s first wedding. Several of Hunt’s major works were also published by Strahan and the related firm of W. Isbister. His scholarship is rarely cited or consulted nowadays, and it called forth mixed reactions at the time of publication. It was noted for its almost excessive thoroughness and stylistic competence, but it was also criticized for assembling a collection of extracts from other writers and of being ponderous and dull. Hunt’s lack of lasting success as a theological writer was possibly in part due to his inability to express himself succinctly.

We can but marvel, however, at Hunt’s monumental undertaking in producing his three-volume magnum opus of almost 1,400 pages: Religious Thought in England, together with his 384-page Essay on Pantheism, which, he explains, was intended as the first chapter in this enterprise. He writes about the task in the following revealing terms, showing not only that he enjoyed the mentorship of no less a theologian than F. D. Maurice, but also that, during his many troubles as a curate, he was constantly engaged in writing this very substantial work of scholarship, as well as making many lesser contributions:

In the preface to my essay on Pantheism I have recorded the circumstances which determined me to devote some years to the special study of theology. When I came to London, in 1859, I began a course of reading with the object of inquiring into the nature of revelation and the evidences by which it is supported. At the end of four years I had formed a plan of something like a complete history of theology, which

---

39 E.g., ‘Mr. Hunt is painstaking and industrious indeed, but ponderous beyond belief or endurance’, Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art 83 (1897), 154. Cf. the reviews of Religious Thought in England, pp. 197–204, below.
would set forth the special character of Christianity and its relation to other religions. In the spring of 1863 I showed the outlines of my work to the late Professor Maurice, who had gone over large portions of the same field, and whose writings had been of great service to me. The Professor looked over the paper, and returning it, said with an incredulous smile 'you have twenty years' work before you'. He advised me to try one part first, and to go on with the rest if that succeeded.\footnote{Religious Thought in England, III, pp. vf.}

### 1.4 Hunt’s Marriages

Hunt was not a family man. Although he married twice, both marriages—each time to women considerably his junior—were without known issue. It seems that he met his first wife, Eliza Meadows Shepard Thorp,\footnote{Although variant spellings are found, this would appear to be the canonical form, as recorded in the England & Wales Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837–1915.} in St Ives, Huntingdonshire, while he was curate there from 1865–1866. Eliza’s father, Frederick William Thorp, was an attorney in St Ives, having been articled there to George Game Day, a prominent, wealthy local figure.\footnote{The Legal Guide, iv (1840), p. 56.} In 1851, the family lived at 26 The Pavement, St Ives. Eliza was the eldest of four siblings, and her mother was Eliza Meadows Shepard. By 1861, they had moved to 33 Cromwell Place, on or near the site of Oliver Cromwell’s probable former residence, old Slepe Hall.\footnote{’Oliver Cromwell, the Farmer of St Ives’, https://stives.cambs.info/citizens/cromwell.asp} There were seven children living at this address, but Eliza is no longer registered as living there. In the 1871 census, she is employed by Joseph Topham, a farmer and magistrate, as a governess, aged twenty-five, in the village of Great Staughton, Huntingdonshire.\footnote{1871 England Census, Folio: 78; Page: 11.} She married Hunt in 1873 at St Mary’s, Lambeth, where Hunt was curate, when she was twenty-eight and he was forty-six. Eliza was the author of several literary works, the most prominent being a three-volume novel, *The Wards of Plotinus*.\footnote{Hunt, Eliza [Mrs John Hunt], *The Wards of Plotinus*, 3 vols (London: Strahan, 1881), http://archive.org/details/wardsofplotinus01ward. The book contains a dedication ‘To the Very Reverend Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, D.D., Dean of Westminster, These volumes are inscribed with mingled feelings of admiration and gratitude.’ The Preface (pp. vii–xiii) is written from Otford Rectory by John Hunt, who had a hand}
at the early age of forty-four, leaving Hunt ten years a widower, until in 1899, aged seventy-two, he married Margaret Allen Foote, aged forty-one, from Cupar, Fife, at St Peter’s, Clerkenwell, Islington. Interestingly, he gave ‘Gentleman’ as his deceased father’s ‘Rank or Profession’ in both marriage registers. There was no hint of the latter’s lowly origins as a shoemaker. Margaret outlived him, and in 1908, a year after Hunt’s death, married the Rev. John Martin, from Carluke, Lanarkshire, Hunt’s former curate. A strong Scottish connection is apparent.

Cf. ‘Mrs. Hunt, wife of the Rev. Dr. Hunt, vicar Otford, died on Sunday last, after a few days illness, from diphtheria, and was buried this afternoon. The deceased lady, who was well-known as an author, was greatly respected’, Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser, 7 March 1890, p. 5.