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

Cover Design by Anna Galloway.

DAVID YEANDLE

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

The Rev. Dr John Hunt (1827-1907) was not a typical clergyman in the Victorian Church of England. He was Scottish, of lowly birth, and lacking both social connections and private means. He was also a widely and fluently intellectual, whose publications stood alongside the most eminent of his peers during a period when theology was being redefined in the light of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and other radical scientific advances.

Hunt attracted notoriety and conflict as well as admiration and respect: he was the subject of articles in *Punch* and in the wider press concerning his clandestine dissection of a foetus in the crypt of a City church, while his *Essay on Pantheism* was proscribed by the Roman Catholic Church. He had many skirmishes with incumbents, both evangelical and catholic, and was dismissed from several of his curacies.

This book analyses his career in London and St Ives (Cambs.) through the lens of his autobiographical narrative, *Clergymen Made Scarce* (1867). David Yeandle has examined a little-known copy of the text that includes manuscript annotations by Eliza Hunt, the wife of the author, which offer unique insight into the many anonymous and pseudonymous references in the text.

*A Victorian Curate: A Study of the Life and Career of the Rev. Dr John Hunt* is an absorbing personal account of the corruption and turmoil in the Church of England at this time. It will appeal to anyone interested in this history, the relationship between science and religion in the nineteenth century, or the role of the curate in Victorian England.
2. Clergymen Made Scarce

Hunt’s career as a curate was wearisome; indeed, it was not until 1878, some twenty-three years after his first curacy, at the age of fifty-one,¹ that he secured, through the good offices of Dean Stanley, a permanent living as Vicar of St Bartholomew’s Church, Otford, near Sevenoaks, Kent, a village of approximately 1,200 inhabitants. Biographical details for this undervalued and largely forgotten clergyman would be almost non-existent if Hunt had not published a booklet in 1864/5, entitled *Clergymen Made Scarce*, a somewhat disgruntled and dejected account of his career to date, written at Swallow, near Caistor, in the Wolds of Lincolnshire.² The booklet, the second edition of which (1867) enjoyed some degree of circulation, purports to be an open letter to the Bishop of London, penned after an incident that led to Hunt’s dismissal as curate from St Botolph’s, Aldgate. The second edition includes a Postscript in smaller type (pp. 26–48), dealing with Hunt’s experiences in St Ives, Huntingdonshire. The Postscript is nearly 4,000 words longer than the first (main) part of *Clergymen Made Scarce*.

The autobiographical account makes interesting reading. It contains allusions to personages and places that are referred to by pseudonyms or anonymously. Although some of these might be identifiable by a modern reader, others are obscure. Fortunately, there exists in the Norris Museum Library, St Ives, a rare copy of the booklet, with manuscript annotations by Mrs Eliza Hunt.³ Although not all of the spellings are accurate, they provide a most useful key to the persons and places

¹ On long probationary curacies, see Nicholls, ‘Social Expectations’, passim, esp. p. 147.
² There are a few references to the work in the wider press, e.g., *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, 16 April 1865, p. 27; *Cambridge Independent Press*, 30 March 1867, p. 6.
³ On the annotations, see fn. 1, p. 110, below.
mentioned, sometimes disparagingly, in the text. The booklet caused a degree of controversy in St Ives.⁴

Hunt’s booklet is not without humour, often of a down-to-earth nature. Even on the title page, he displays his scathing wit and keen intellect, with erudite epigraphs, which he modifies with mockingly ironic variations. His better-educated readers would have understood his ulterior motive, that of illuminating and criticizing privilege, preferment, prejudice, and folly in the Victorian Church.

The first epigraph, a modified popular saying, is a quotation from the satirical magazine *Punch*, which had published an article with the same title as Hunt’s booklet viz. ‘Clergymen Made Scarce’.⁵ Which came first is unclear. The epigraph alludes satirically, and largely in Hunt’s favour, to his predicament at losing the curacy at St Botolph’s, Aldgate: ‘Make the greatest fool in the family a parson, that is, if he will let you.’ The circumstances of this loss will be examined in Chapter 7. The main thrust is that none but a fool would enter upon the career of a parson, if his family had ‘not got a good fat living for him to step into as soon as he is ordained’.⁶ As we have seen, this was very far from being the case with Hunt.

Continuing in similar vein, Hunt’s second epigraph ironizes the motto of the City of Edinburgh *inter alia*. The motto, a shortened version of Psalm 127, v. 1 (*nisi Dominus frustra*) is deliberately misinterpreted by means of a ‘Scotch translation’, i.e. an ironically blunt and distorted rendering, to mean that a man without resources and social connections need not apply for a post in the Church of England: ‘Unless ye be a lord’s son, ye need’na come here.’⁷

The third and final epigraph is a modified quotation from Juvenal’s First Satire (ll. 79f.), substituting *Ecclesia* for *natura*: ‘si Ecclesia negat, facit indignatio versum Qualemcunque potest.’ The likely sense is ‘if the Church denies (or fails), indignation creates a verse as best it can.’⁸

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⁵ ‘Clergymen Made Scarce’, *Punch*, 17 December 1864, p. 251. A previous article about the inquest on the ‘anatomy scandal’ had already been published in *Punch* on 26 November 1865, p. 215.
⁶ *Punch*, 17 December 1864, p. 251 [cited in the Appendix, pp. 186f., below.].
Whether the addressee of this open letter, Archibald Campbell Tait, Bishop of London (1856–1868, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1868–1882)⁹ ever read its contents we do not know, but he certainly encountered Hunt, including by negative report, in his large diocese. Some occasions are documented below. Indeed, Hunt may have had special reasons for choosing Tait as the addressee. Apart from his being Hunt’s ordinary, with liberal sympathies and a penchant for evangelism and innovation, Tait was, like Hunt, a Scotsman, who, like Hunt, had grown up in the Presbyterian tradition. Like Hunt, he rejected Calvinism. Like Hunt, he was interested in education beyond the confines of the ancient English universities, with their arcane practices, which he had experienced first-hand while a tutor at Balliol. What more suitable recipient of this letter could there possibly have been? What better figure of authority was there to ensure that the wrongs done to an able, intellectual clergyman would not be repeated? Who better to bring reform to the corrupt nineteenth-century Church?

Hunt’s booklet, then, provides a penetrating insight at parish level into the social foibles, corruption, and turmoil in the Church of England during Victorian times. It highlights curates’ often poor employment prospects, their insecurity of tenure, their lowly status and poor remuneration, their subservience to incumbents, their struggles in gaining preferment on merit in the context of the sale of ecclesiastical livings. Clashes with incumbents on account of differences of theology and churchmanship abound. These details are seen in the context of social class, ethnic origins, and education.

Hunt begins by addressing his ‘Letter’ to the Bishop of London, setting out his learning initially by means of an allusion to the Metamorphoses or Golden Ass of Apuleius (born c. 125 AD).¹⁰ He flatters the Bishop by referring to the Golden Ass and mentioning the name of its author, deferentially adding ‘as your lordship knows’.¹¹ At first, there is no obvious connection with the Church when he states in the context of the Golden Ass: ‘He [Apuleius] wished to show that wisdom might

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¹¹ Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 3.
sometimes exist even under an asinine exterior, and that there might be observing eyes where people did not expect to find them.’ The ‘asinine exterior’ soon reveals itself as belonging to the Church of England. The obscured wisdom would seem to be the preserve of figures like Hunt and Bishop Tait. The somewhat cryptic reference to himself as the ‘Golden Curate’, which, he suggests, ‘would seem self-laudatory if not egotistical’, were he not to ‘keep in check the spirit which has suggested the comparison’, turns out to be far from self-laudatory at the end of the main part of the ‘Letter’:

In the beginning I likened myself to the priest of Isis, but I checked the comparison. I again check it in the end. Apuleius wrote a fable, I have written the truth. Apuleius was at last delivered from his asshood; my curate-hood remains.

Having displayed his classical erudition, Hunt next refers to theology and philosophy, with references to St Augustine and Rousseau. A quotation from Goethe’s Faust, albeit in English translation, extolling the value of experience over theory, provides the final literary allusion and display of learning before Hunt launches upon his real topic. And although he notes ‘Curates are men who rarely speak for themselves’, he feels under a ‘divine impulse’ to speak out.

In this mood of emboldened militancy and divine justification for his cause, Hunt begins to recount to his bishop his life’s story and philosophy.

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 ‘Grey, dear Friend, is all theory, | But green is the golden tree of life’; ‘Grau, theurer Freund, ist alle Theorie | und grün des Lebens goldner Baum’, Mephistopheles, Faust I, 2038f.
16 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 3. For a general overview of a curate’s position in society in the nineteenth century, see Hart, The Curate’s Lot, pp. 127–173.