A Victorian Curate

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

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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.
At the end of his stay in Walham Green and before the episode in Rutland, another misfortune befell the ill-fated curate: ‘On the last day, he [Garratt] called with a petition for me to sign. It was the Clerical protest against the “Essays and Reviews.” He asked me to sign it as a matter of course—all the Clergy were doing it.’ Whereas many clergymen signed the petition on the basis of hearsay and prejudice, like Garratt, not having read Essays and Reviews, which was first published in 1860, John Hunt, always the scholar and progressive thinker, explained, to Garratt’s surprise, how he had ‘read it six months since’. Whereas he was thus able to come to a sober appraisal of its contents and declined to sign the petition, Garratt’s narrow-minded partiality in the matter caused him to suspect ‘that [Hunt’s] gospel was not the soundest in England’.

After his lack of success in Rutland, Hunt moved to a new engagement, his fourth curacy, in 1860, a year that was very eventful for him and which saw storm clouds gathering in the debate between science and religion. The parish is identified as ‘Edmonton’ by Mrs Eliza Hunt, without further elucidation. At the time, Edmonton was a

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4 Ibid.
5 Darwin’s Origin of Species was published in 1859. See Chadwick, Victorian Church II, pp. 1–35.
6 Anglican churches that were in existence at the time in Edmonton are: All Saints’, Edmonton (founded in the twelfth century); Christ Church, until 1862 Weld Chapel, Southgate (founded 1615), St Michael’s, Wood Green (founded 1844); St
separate town, not part of London. Since Mrs Eliza Hunt notes the name simply thus, without the name of the incumbent, we may reasonably assume that this was the ancient parish church of All Saints rather than one of the newer churches in the parish, as these would likely have had a more specific designation. Hunt refers to the incumbent as the ‘Vicar’, whereas the other churches did not have a vicar, and the clergymen in charge are referred to as ‘incumbent’ in Crockford’s (1860). In the absence of further information, it is impossible to be certain. The Vicar of All Saints’ at the time was the Rev. Thomas Tate, MA, who died on 21 January 1863. Thomas Tate’s academic credentials were not the best; he was first of the ‘Junior Optimes’ (i.e. Third Class) in the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos in 1828. He had previously been curate at Edmonton, while his distinguished father, James Tate, was vicar. It is unclear whether Thomas Tate, who was aged fifty-six, was the incumbent with whom Hunt had to deal. Although Mrs Eliza Hunt does not identify this incumbent either, she names the other curate as ‘John Goodwin’, whom Hunt calls ‘an ignorant man from St. Bees’.

Initial encouragement from the congregation, who were very pleased with Hunt’s sermons and packed the church, drew the admiration of the incumbent, and Hunt remarked: ‘I seemed to be on my feet once more.’ Once again, however, his liberal, progressive opinions served to uphold his probity but not to further his temporal advancement. Once again, the argument was over Essays and Reviews, which he was able to appraise fairly and honestly, since he, unlike most, had actually read the volume, judging that ‘There was truth in it that we needed—truth, some of it unpalatable indeed, but it was necessary for truth’s own sake

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8 Crockford’s 1860, p. 594.
9 St Bees Theological College in Cumberland was founded in 1816 as an alternative to Oxford and Cambridge, providing a route to ordination for ‘literates’, i.e., non-graduates. It was mostly looked down upon by graduate clergy. See Alan Graham Leigh Haig, ‘The Church of England as a Profession in Victorian England’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Australian National University, 1980), https://doi.org/10.25911/5d77863e864a; idem, The Victorian Clergy (London; Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 205 and passim.
10 Clergymen Made Scarce p. 15.
that it should come out." Predictably, the prejudice of those who had not read the text came again to the fore, this time more forcefully than before. Hunt’s sober intellectual approach contrasts starkly with that of his congregation and fellow clergy. Once again, he receives notice to quit—this time immediately:

My remarks brought me anonymous letters, expressing amazement and disappointment, that one whose ministrations they so much esteemed, should see any good in such a book. The Vicar too wrote that I must leave at once. The other Curate, an ignorant man from St. Bees, next Sunday denounced the ‘Essays and Reviews’ as the most atrociously infidel book that had ever been published. The Vicar came home, and he preached ‘Essays and Reviews’ till every servant girl in the Parish was reading ‘Essays and Reviews.’ The Curate of course had never read the book, and the Vicar made a vow he never would read it; but if his congregation wanted to go to hell, that, he said, was the book for them to read. It gave me great pain that I had been in any sense the cause of all this raving.

Hunt’s honesty and intellectual self-respect had once again been to his own detriment. This occurred more out of innocence, even naivety, than academic arrogance:

I felt I had made a mistake, but it was done in innocence. I never could realize that religious people could be angry about a religious inquiry; least of all that Clergymen, the science of whose profession is theology, should be angry about theological Essays, displaying such ability and learning, as ought to make the Church glad that such gifts are still consecrated to her service.

As before in Walham Green, Hunt did not have a licence in the parish, hence he had no possibility of appealing to the Bishop. It appears that Hunt was not required literally to leave at once, since in the ensuing narrative he explains, with regard to a trial Sunday engagement in a new parish: ‘As I had not left my other Parish I could not do this without giving up my emolument for the Parish I was now in.’

Two metaphors enter the narrative at this point, the first, a rueful nautical one, ‘I was again afloat in search of a Curacy’, suggesting

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 16.
drifting at sea, possibly after a shipwreck; the second, a witty literary allusion, ‘Mounting my Rosinante (the Record), I set out in quest of new adventures.’ The reference to ‘Rosinante’, Don Quixote’s steed, well known for its former status as a workhorse or nag, is on the surface a humorous quip, meaning ‘mounting my trusty old workhorse’. But it implies greater subtlety, inasmuch as the Record had proved to be successful at finding Hunt new ‘adventures’ in the past, which, however, were mostly of a questionable nature. Moreover, Don Quixote, to whom Hunt implicitly compares himself, with its picaresque themes and problematic encounters, provides a fitting analogy to our clergyman himself, burlesque and tragic at the same time.

And so, Hunt applies for his fifth curacy, this time ‘in the neighbourhood of Oxford Street West’. This turns out to be All Saints’ Church, Norfolk Square, Paddington, dating from 1847, closed in 1919. He had an earnest theological discussion with the incumbent, Edwin Henry Steventon, in which the latter showed a profound knowledge of theology, but Hunt’s willingness to embrace, and engage with, complex contemporary theology, including aspects of Essays and Reviews, led to a situation where he judged ‘it was evident from the beginning that we were not to make any engagement’.

After this unsuccessful encounter, Hunt responded to ‘another application from the South East’. A missive from the Rev. Alfred William Snape, St Mary Magdalen, Old Kent Road, Bermondsey, distinguished itself from the rest by bearing a Latin motto, namely ‘Timere vel mutare sperno’. Hunt’s testimonials proved not to satisfy the incumbent, and he was informed he ‘would not be wanted on Sunday’.

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16 Cf. OED, s.v. ‘Don Quixote gives this name to the horse on deciding to use him as his steed. It is formed as a deliberately noble-sounding name, punningly Spanish rocin horse, hack [...] + ante before [...], with allusion to the animal’s former status as a workhorse or nag.’

17 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 15.

18 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 16.


20 Mutare Vel Timere Sperno (‘I scorn to change or fear’) is the motto of the Dukes of Beaufort. The transposed order Timere Vel Mutare Sperno occurs also elsewhere, e.g., for the Deffray family. Whether any dynastic association was thereby implied by Snape is unclear. It might indicate a tenacious, pugnacious nature. Cf. Gustave de Rivoire de la Bâtie, Armorial du Dauphiné (Lyon: Perrin, 1867), p. 401.

21 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 16.
Garratt of having referred to his refusal to sign the petition against *Essays and Reviews*. In his reply to Snape, in which he insisted on coming, as he had had to give up another engagement and would thus have been financially disadvantaged,\(^\text{22}\) he wrote at the end of his reply ‘in large letters *Timere vel mutare sperno*’. He thus showed fortitude and resilience, not without a hint of arrogance in displaying his classical education, by turning the motto against the originator. Presumably, the irony was not lost on his correspondent.

It is not clear whether Hunt actually ‘read prayers’, as he had initially been requested, but he was obliged to listen to a sermon that seemed ‘specially written for [his] benefit’, in which ‘The preacher maintained that the Spirit never taught, except through the Bible.’ Hunt was at odds with this theology and had in other ways made an unfavourable impression. Unfortunately, he had trusted that Garratt would write a favourable testimonial and ‘reckoning that this engagement was certain’, he had resigned his other parish. Thus, he ‘was thrown out of employment altogether’.\(^\text{23}\) In exasperation, Hunt explains:

> Three months were spent in advertising, corresponding, having interviews, and preaching trial sermons. I advertised in the *Record* twice a week, and had about a dozen answers to each advertisement. The working of the Curate system was revealed to me during these three months as I hope it never was to another before me, and I trust for the sake of the Church of England, it will never be so revealed in the experience of another after me.\(^\text{24}\)

By this stage, he had reached a state of cynical disdain for the system of appointing curates. He relates a series of five luckless applications and the responses he received, ranging from one from Samuel Garratt, a relation of William Garratt’s,\(^\text{25}\) who was not on friendly terms with him,\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{22}\) It had been agreed that Hunt would receive two guineas (approx. £261 in 2020) for his trial engagement.
\(^{23}\) *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 16.
\(^{24}\) *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 17.
\(^{25}\) ‘Garrat, Little Queen Street’, Mrs Eliza Hunt, another misspelling. Little Queen Street ran between High Holborn and Great Queen Street, along what is now the northern end of Kingsway. See GENUKI, ‘Genuki: Holborn Deanery Anglican Churches in 1890/1903, Middlesex’ (GENUKI), https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/MDX/HolbornStAndrew/churches. Samuel Garratt was incumbent of Trinity Church, St Giles-in-the-Fields, London (1856–1867), BA, Trinity Coll., Cantab., 1839; MA 1865, *Crockford’s* 1860, p. 225.
\(^{26}\) Cf. *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 17.
to a feeble excuse from another incumbent\textsuperscript{27} to the effect that he had changed his mind about having a curate, to the sanctimonious assertion that his trial sermon was ‘lacking in the fulness of Evangelical truth’,\textsuperscript{28} to a position with no salary attached, to a bizarre interrogation on twelve numbered points by one who signed only with the initials H. L.,\textsuperscript{29} to whom Hunt replied that he considered H. L. ‘half-cracked’, despite which he met him again later and was actually offered a position by him, which Hunt had to refuse because he had accepted another appointment. On this group of responses Hunt comments, with justification: ‘Many of the letters were great curiosities.’\textsuperscript{30} They exemplify the foibles and many of the idiosyncrasies of the contemporary clergy.

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\item \textsuperscript{27} Not specified by Mrs Eliza Hunt.
\item \textsuperscript{29} ‘Robinson, Chelsea’, Mrs Eliza Hunt. William Woolhouse Robinson, \textit{Crockford’s 1865}, p. 540, St John’s Coll. Camb. B.A 1826, M.A. 1829; Deac. 1826, Pr. 1828 was incumbent of Christ Church, Chelsea. Amongst other things he wrote \textit{A Clergyman’s Reasons for Teetotalism} (1870), which would explain why one of his twelve questions concerned this subject. It is unclear what H. L. represented.
\item \textsuperscript{30} \textit{Clergymen Made Scarce}, p. 17.
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