A Victorian Curate

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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.
5. Unemployment and Applications

5.1 Theological Differences and ‘Evangelical’ Credentials

Our narrative now retreats a little to ‘the first few weeks of [Hunt’s] advertising’; but the chronology about this time is not altogether clear, and it is not possible to say whether 1860 or 1861 is meant. Sometime in 1860, during a three-month period of unemployment. Hunt refers to meeting the ‘Rector of a large Parish, not far from London Bridge’. Like Hunt, the rector, Hugh Allen, an extreme Protestant, was an educated man, with several degrees, including a Doctorate of Divinity from Trinity College Dublin (ad eundem, Cantab.). They enjoyed long theological discussions together, and Allen offered Hunt a curacy. At this point, the Pastoral Aid Society, which was to fund the curacy, again raised its head; it transpired in a reference that Hunt ‘was reported to have said to some one in Mr. Walham’s Parish, that the world was not made in six days out of nothing’. Hunt’s progressive theology again does him a disservice, but perhaps more importantly, his almost childlike trust in human nature is of no benefit to him: he confided in the Curate of Edmonton, who promptly told the vicar, which led to them sending ‘a
dispatch to the Society that [Hunt] was one of the rising infidels, who were to be crushed by every possible means. Naturally, this provoked a rejection by the Pastoral Aid Society. Hunt’s tally of rejections had now reached well into double figures.

Continuing with the theme of the conflict between theologies, Hunt relates how about this time he ‘chanced to call one day with a friend on the Principal of an important “Evangelical” Institution’. Mrs Eliza Hunt duly provides details of the person. A theological discussion ensued, in which the two disputants turned their attention to the philosophy of the Rev. Henry Longueville Mansel, who at the time was Waynflete Professor in Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, later Dean of St Paul’s. Here again, we observe a clash of the progressive, open-minded, more academically oriented rationalist churchman and the narrow-minded, more practically oriented Evangelical churchman. The latter, being the older man (Hunt was thirty-four, Green about forty-two), holding a position of seniority, treated Hunt arrogantly, maintaining that ‘God has revealed Himself only in the book’ (i.e., Bible). Hunt’s considered reasoning carried no weight with Green, who declared him an atheist and ordered him to leave the premises.

These two experiences caused Hunt ‘great mental trouble’ and led him to question his calling himself ‘Evangelical’. He realized that there were many of the beliefs and practices of the ‘Evangelicals’ that he did...
not share and concluded ‘that the word “Evangelical” had come to be used conventionally in an improper sense’. He was advised to move away from advertising in the ‘evangelical’ Record, especially since most of the curacies advertised there were funded by the Pastoral Aid Society. He was directed instead towards the Tractarian Guardian and also the Curates’ Registry at Whitehall.

5.2 The Curates’ Registry

Hunt comments on his experiences with the Curates’ Registry with deep resentment: ‘I never forget the feeling of degradation that came over me when I was first reduced to these expedients.’ His fraught quest for ecclesiastical employment had reached a low ebb when he sent in applications through the Registry. He tells how some incumbents continually advertised for curates because they ‘do not know how to use them’ and remarks further on the insensitive and high-handed way in which applicants were often treated. He relates how this fate befell him: ‘One Incumbent,’ whose name I took from this Registry, refused to see me, and sent an angry message that he had ordered the Secretary to take his name off these books two months ago.’ More than just suffering from dejection and low self-esteem, the rejected curates ‘get the reputation of dangerous men’. Their reputation thus makes it all the more difficult for them to break out of this vicious circle, and they find, in Hunt’s words, that they ‘lose caste with the Bishop and the beneficed Clergy’.

11 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 19.
13 An office at 7 Whitehall, entitled ‘Registry for Curates, Curacies, Temporary Duty and Titles for Holy Orders’, it was ‘under the sanction of the archbishops of both provinces’. See, for example, the advertisement in the Clergy List, 1866, p. 12.
14 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 19.
15 ‘Courtney, St. James, Pentonville, an Irishman’, Mrs Eliza Hunt. Another misspelling. This is the Rev. Anthony Lefroy Courtenay, D. D., incumbent of St James’s, Pentonville, a Low Churchman and litigant. See Philip Temple, Northern Clerkenwell and Pentonville (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 379.
16 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 20.
17 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 19.
18 Ibid.
We can only applaud Hunt that he did not, under these circumstances, throw in the towel or change his principled approach.

5.3 The Guardian

The first advertisement in the High-Church Guardian, which Hunt had never used before, provided an impressive total of thirty-six responses. Hunt ‘was introduced to an entirely new class of men’. The responses were from diverse clergymen, often with idiosyncratic wishes, habits, and sometimes devious motives. The main drawback was their inability to offer adequate remuneration, since there was no High-Church equivalent of the Pastoral Aid Society.

5.4 English Graduates Only

Among the more eccentric responses from the Guardian was a disapproving observation from one incumbent that Hunt had not ‘graduated at an English University’. As we have already seen, there is no record in the St Andrews Biographical Register that Hunt graduated at all; his only recorded degree listed there being ‘D.D. 9.2.1878’. He is, however, presented as ‘The Rev. John Hunt, M.A.’ on the title pages of his comprehensive three-volume Religious Thought in England from the Reformation to the End of the Last Century and frequently in the press. Earlier publications, such as the Essay on Pantheism, for which he attained a certain notoriety, and which was placed on the Index, did not list a

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19 ‘I had hitherto conscientiously avoided this class, as I had always looked on High Churchmen as a generation of simpletons. They had built Churches and kept them clean. They had abolished square pews in prominent places for the rich, and free benches in obscure corners for the poor. This exhausted the catalogue of their merits’, Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 20.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 See above, p. 10.
25 See the review in the Spectator, 24 November 1866, p. 20: ‘The curate of St. Ives has redeemed the credit of his order. The Church of Rome has awarded him its most distinguished honour of the Index in company with Dr. Pusey and the author of Ecce Homo...’, ‘Review of: An Essay on Pantheism by the Rev. John Hunt’, Spectator,
degree, the author being given only as the ‘Rev. John Hunt, Curate of St. Ives, Hunts.’ Non-Oxbridge graduates were evidently seen as inferior, while those from the theological colleges such as St Bees were looked down upon by all, as is apparent even from Hunt’s acerbic remarks about ‘clerical colleges’:

With one [incumbent] I entered into correspondence, and was finally refused, because I had not graduated at an English University. This indeed was the case with some of the most desirable Curacies that turned up. I felt this too as a hardship. It was not fair that I should be classed either with the ‘literates,’ or the ‘illiterates,’ of the Church. I was not an ignorant man, and I knew I was not. I had sat at the feet of Sir David Brewster, I had learned Metaphysics from Ferrier, and other sciences from other great doctors eminent in their day. It was too bad that I should be classed with men from the Clerical Colleges—institutions whose very existence is one of the greatest scandals of the Church.

This blatant discrimination evidently rankled with Hunt: he defends his alma mater and, it seems, the honour of his country of birth.

5.5 Privilege and Parsimony

One more fruitless application concludes this stage of Hunt’s ‘curacy hunting’. It is a tale of privilege, wealth, and parsimony: ‘One Guardian application was from a High-church Rector in a fashionable part of

24 November 1866, p. 20. The Index Expurgatorius was ‘strictly, an authoritative specification of the passages to be expunged or altered in works otherwise permitted to be read by Roman Catholics. The term is frequently used [as here] in England to cover the “Index Librorum Prohibitorum”, or list of forbidden books (not authors, as sometimes thought)’, Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer, and Daniel Hahn, Index Expurgatorius (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199214921.013.3126
27 ‘In the Church of England: a person who is admitted to holy orders without having obtained a university degree. Now hist.’, OED.
30 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 20.
31 This is Hunt’s term, Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 20 and passim.
32 ‘Thomas Jackson’, Mrs Eliza Hunt.
London. He asked that I might preach on trial, as the congregation paid and selected the curate, “High Churchism for ever,” I said, “if this is to be the practice.” While the individual details will not be pursued here, the episode may serve to show Hunt’s desperation to gain remunerative employment and his willingness, if only temporarily, to set aside his principles in a way reminiscent of the Vicar of Bray.

Of course, things did not turn out as he had hoped, but ‘the whole affair was a swindle, no Curate was wanted. The Rector for certain reasons had to be out of the way, and by this device he got his duty taken without expense, for two months.’ A sharp contrast is painted between the beau monde, attending church in their fashionable carriages to hear the obese and dishonest rector preach and the poor folk in an impoverished part of town, to whom the same man had preached as a visitor on another occasion and from whom 10s. 6d. had been demanded for a carriage to convey the clergyman to and from church. Another ugly facet of the moral double standards that the Victorian Church tolerated is thus revealed.

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33 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 20.
34 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 21.