A Victorian Curate

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 fluent 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.
6. Final Metropolitan Applications

Before our hapless clergyman introduces his ‘grand finale’, the episode he chose to conclude the first part of his open letter, which concerned mainly his experiences in the metropolis (i.e. the part which formed the first edition of the work), Hunt deals with his penultimate applications, one of which was successful and led to a longer engagement.

6.1 Mistaken Identity

The first application resulted in an amusing incident. In response to an advertisement by Hunt in the *Record*, an unnamed potential employer had contacted him under the misapprehension that he sought employment as a footman. The potential employer and his wife interviewed him, thinking he was a servant. Presumably, Hunt was not wearing clerical dress, as he had had to leave his lodgings in a great hurry, in order to keep the appointment, otherwise it is puzzling that his calling was not recognized. Of interest for our purposes is Hunt’s reaction to his treatment. He feels that the haughty conduct of his potential master and especially mistress is a further and pronounced example of the condescension with which he had frequently been greeted during his curacy-hunting: ‘During the two months I had been in search of a Curacy I had got a good many knocks on the head from unfeeling and fickle Incumbents that wanted Curates, but now I thought surely I have come to the last step of degradation, anything after this.’

Even more harsh words are devoted to the gentleman’s wife, whom Hunt mistakes for a rector’s spouse: ‘And then these Incumbents’ wives! What

---

1 *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 22.
mischief do they not make! If this gentleman is the Rector of a parish, evidently his wife is the Di-Rector. Shall not I as a Curate protest against this monstrous government of women? Shall I not assert the equality of all members of the priesthood? Such male chauvinistic language may strike a dissonant chord with a modern reader, but these attitudes were evidently acceptable in Victorian society. Just as Hunt, the presumed servant, is castigated by the lady of the house for sitting down in her presence without permission, so he in turn feels justified in chiding her for interfering in the all-male preserve of the Church. Nevertheless, the situation is resolved, and the humour thereof is perceived by all.

6.2 Hoxton

The successful application came at Christ Church, Hoxton, just to the east of St Philip’s, Arlington Square, where Hunt had held his first metropolitan curacy. It is referred to first in a somewhat curious way in the context of university graduates:

I had an interview with one Incumbent who would have nothing but a University man for his Curate. He was an M.A. of Cambridge. It was about the time of the Prince of Wales’ marriage. He was very wroth that it should be permitted in Lent. I asked if he knew the custom of the Catholic Church before the Reformation as to marriages in Lent. ‘Reformation,’ he said, ‘was there any Lent before the Reformation?’ I was thankful for once that I was not an M.A. of Cambridge.

Hunt clearly cannot resist disparaging the inferior knowledge of this MA of Cambridge. Nonetheless, it appears that he felt a degree of inferiority himself with regard to his university education, as with his social status and upbringing: the phrase ‘for once’ appears to indicate that normally he would have been happy to be classed with the graduates of one of the

---

2 Ibid.
4 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 20.
ancient English universities and thus to belong to the privileged class of clergymen for whom it was scarcely necessary to exert themselves, in order to gain preferment.

Mrs Eliza Hunt identifies the incumbent and parish as ‘Henry Kelly Christs [sic] Church Hoxton’. The reference to the ‘Prince of Wales’ marriage is puzzling, since Hunt had joined this parish much earlier, certainly by November 1861, when there is a reference to him in the press. Maybe the ‘interview’ was not related to Hunt’s application or the conversation about the Prince of Wales’s marriage was not in any way related to Hunt’s initial application. An alternative explanation would be that Mrs Eliza Hunt had misidentified the incumbent here (e.g. in the transcription of the names from another source), but this would not explain the dating unless this ‘interview’ came after Hunt left Hoxton and before he went to St Botolph’s, Aldgate.

Instead of continuing with the narrative concerning this parish (assuming Hoxton is meant), which is not at this point accorded any kind of detail with which later to identify it, Hunt interposes two other episodes, with which we have already dealt above, viz. ‘Privilege and Parsimony’ and ‘Mistaken Identity’. The church is henceforth referred to as ‘the Parish adjoining Mr. Arlington’s’, and it is not identified as being the same place that had been mentioned in the context of the ‘Incumbent who would have nothing but a University man for his Curate’. Mrs Eliza Hunt does not identify it in this context, but, from press reports, we can establish that it was Christ Church, Hoxton. Hunt reports how obtaining employment here caused him ‘long toil and great waste of money’.

Initial problems in gaining a licence here were exacerbated by an over-cautious attitude on the part of Garratt in providing a testimonial.

---

5 Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, married Alexandra of Denmark in St George's Chapel, Windsor, on 10 March 1863.
6 Evening Standard, 18 November 1861, p. 2.
7 ‘Parish adjoining Mr Arlington’s’, i.e., next to St Philip’s, Arlington Sq., viz. Christ Church, Hoxton. It was founded in 1840, closed after 1953, GENUKI, ‘Genuki: Christ Church, Hoxton, Church of England, Middlesex’ (GENUKI), https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/MDX/Shoreditch/ChristChurch
8 The Rev. John Hunt, of Christ Church, Hoxton, spoke from I Numbers, 22nd chapter and 30th verse — Am I not thine ass? The sermon was eloquent …’, Morning Post, 22 November 1861, p. 2.
9 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 22.
A further testimonial was given by ‘the Vicar of the old Parish out of which Mr. Walham’s [i.e. Garratt’s] was originally formed’, whom Hunt describes as ‘a sensible man [who] had always been friendly to me’. The problems were set aside when the Bishop gave him a licence ‘without troubling any of them’.

The previous incumbent had been ‘an extreme High Churchman’, and when he left, the congregation left with him. Hunt therefore had the opportunity to build up the congregation. A series of minor problems and disagreements slightly marred his stay, but he gradually increased the congregation and remained in the parish for two years. Unusually, he left of his own accord to go to another parish.