A Victorian Curate

As with all Open Book publications, this entire 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 Gaş.

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.
Brief mention has already been made of Hunt’s unfortunate experiences at St Botolph’s, Aldgate. This episode brought him to national attention in the press. The more scurrilous reports criticized or ridiculed him, whereas a few publications came to his defence. We have fairly precise dating in Hunt’s account: ‘It was some time in September 1863, when I entered on my duties as Curate of one of the City churches.’\(^1\) He continues by setting the scene:

The parishioners were ‘Jews, Infidels, Turks, Heretics,’ and other Dissenters. Those who attended the Church were a few shopkeepers and their families. Those who were of the Church, but did not attend it, were a multitude of paupers. As an old City parish it had immense charities, and as it consisted of many small tradesmen, it abounded in men eager for public offices.\(^2\)

Hunt realizes that the kind of work that he wished to do with the ‘working men’ was unfeasible, and having tried unsuccessfully to find some suitable ecclesiastical occupation where he could work ‘without the interference of any paltry Incumbent’,\(^3\) he took advantage of living in the capital city and pursued anatomical studies at St Bartholomew’s Hospital. He writes: ‘as a student of theology, seeing that nearly all theological questions impinged on the question of nature, I felt it my duty to include among my studies, anatomy and physiology.’\(^4\) A reduction in the size of the parish by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who cut off half to form a new district, meant that Hunt’s remaining time in the parish was reduced to three months.

---


\(^2\) *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 23.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 24.
In the meantime, however, a scandal occurred that caused the incumbent to inhibit Hunt from acting as curate of the parish. The basic facts are simple, but the ramifications became complex. Hunt gives only a sketchy overview in *Clergymen Made Scarce* of what happened, not even mentioning the fact that at issue was a dead unborn child, a foetus, which Hunt had stored in the vaults of St Botolph’s Church for the purposes of dissection.

Hunt’s behaviour in this episode is telling. The information gleaned from articles in the press is more ample than that which Hunt divulges in *Clergymen Made Scarce*. The large number of identical or very similar articles and their content attest to the singularity of Hunt’s conduct. These are entitled ‘Singular Freak of a Clergyman’ and similar. Some are longer and go into more ample detail, such as the article in *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, entitled ‘Extraordinary Charge against a City Clergyman’, which gives us most factual information. The proceedings are described as being of a ‘very extraordinary character’ and provoking both ‘remarkable interest’ and ‘revolting rumours’. The articles, without exception, are condescending to the church officials and often supercilious in tone. Those in *Punch* attempt to be humorous, while that in the *Spectator* provides a more intellectual and balanced assessment. It treats the situation soberly from various different angles, including whether Hunt acted with common sense. As with the *Punch* articles, discussed below, condescension is shown towards the jurymen. Common to all the articles is the overt expression of opinions.


6 Here used in the now less common sense of ‘A sudden causeless change or turn of the mind; a capricious humour, notion, whim, or vagary’, OED, s.v.

7 *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 16 November 1864, p. 4; *Sheffield Independent*, 16 November 1864, p. 4; *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 17 November 1864, p. 3; *Bedfordshire Mercury*, 19 November 1864, p. 7; *Sussex Advertiser*, 19 November 1864, p. 2; *Thanet Advertiser*, 19 November 1864, p. 3; *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, 20 November 1864, p. 2; *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 20 November 1864, p. 3; *Sussex Advertiser*, 22 November 1864, p. 8; *Sussex Advertiser*, 23 November 1864, p. 4.

8 Ibid.

The dramatis personae are: 1. the enlightened intellectuals (Hunt, Drs Thynne, Holman, Barnes), 2. the unenlightened clergy (Roberton), 3. the petty bourgeoisie (Churchwarden King, William Bigg, Vestry Clerk Clines and the coroner’s jury), 4. the proletarians (Gaslighter/Steeple Keeper Parkhole and Sextoness Hammond), 5. Coroner Payne.

The basic facts are these: Hunt obtained a male, seven-month-old foetus from a medical friend, Dr Thomas Thynne, for the purposes of dissection. The foetus was stored in the vault of St Botolph’s Church. Hunt sent a message via the Sextoness, Mary Hammond, to a church functionary, Walter Parkhole, the Gaslighter and Steeple Keeper, to buy a pot to boil water, for which he gave him a shilling. Parkhole, having seen the foetus, wrapped in newspaper, refused, thinking the pot was intended for boiling the foetus. Parkhole informed Hammond and one William Bigg, presumably another church official, possibly a churchwarden.

The mix of class and education is interesting. Hunt is high-handed in his instructions to the church functionaries and in refusing to divulge where he obtained the foetus. He clearly regarded it as a matter that did not concern the lower orders. It is not until the court proceedings that he gives full information and explains the circumstances, including his motives for dissection, namely, to increase his anatomical knowledge, which would in turn help his theological enquiry and his pastoral ministrations. His contempt, especially for Churchwarden King, who initiated the legal inquiry, and the coroner’s jury is clear.

Hunt’s comments about the people concerned in the incident show condescension towards those whom he considers to be of lower status and intellect:

I kept these studies as secret as I could, till a Churchwarden,11 one of the officious small tradesmen of the parish dragged them to light. A coroner’s jury, consisting of sixteen of these small shopkeepers, condemned my studies, and brought down on themselves and the whole of the Parish

---

10 The vault is of brick. There are photographs of it in modern times when it was used as a shelter for homeless people. See ‘Malcolm Johnson At St Botolph’s | Spitalfields Life’ https://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/03/11/malcolm-johnson-at-st-botolphs/. See also Malcolm Johnson and R. Londin, Crypts of London: Past and Present (History Press, 2013) https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ksMSDQAAQBAJ.

11 ‘David King’, Mrs Eliza Hunt. Hunt arrogantly refers to King as ‘a fool, and a big fool’ (cf. fn. 6, p. 6).
authorities, the ridicule of the public press, including the sarcasms of *Punch*.\(^{12}\)

In fact, *Punch* published two articles that referred to the incident. The earlier article was published in November 1864 and pours scorn on the tradesmen who constituted the coroner’s jury, especially for their temerity in suggesting ‘it would be better if [Hunt] confined his studies to matters of a clerical nature to the exclusion of the study of anatomy’.\(^{13}\) The style and approach of *Punch* in the nineteenth century were condescending in the extreme, and the ‘humour’ that was aimed for, using irony and sarcasm, finds little resonance with a twenty-first-century audience. To refer to members of a coroner’s jury, however inadequate their education, as ‘vulgar blockheads’ is unthinkable to a modern reader. The second article, from December 1864, to which we had occasion to refer briefly above, once again takes up the cudgels against the jurymen and also this time ironizes the behaviour of the incumbent in sacking Hunt. This time the humour is perhaps better conceived: ‘The rumour that the rector\(^{14}\) of St Botolph’s, Aldgate, has, under circumstances such as these above stated, discharged his curate, the Rev. Mr. Hunt, is evidently an invention of the Jesuits, designed to damage the Church of England.’\(^{15}\)

As we have seen from the press articles, Hunt’s misfortunes were still plaguing him—the incumbent dismissed him as curate, and the curate had no success in appealing to the Bishop.\(^{16}\) St Botolph’s had been Hunt’s sixth curacy, which he left at the age of thirty-seven. His hopes of finding subsequent employment were now at a low ebb, as he was in need of suitable references. Despite the Bishop’s exacting ‘from the Incumbent a promise that he would be [Hunt’s] referee’, Roberton\(^{17}\) ‘took the first opportunity of breaking the promise’. Criticism of the Bishop is implied through Hunt’s damning with faint praise: ‘I had

---

13 See Appendix, below, p. 186.
14 The incumbent was a perpetual curate, not named by Mrs Eliza Hunt. His details are: ‘ROBERTON, James Matthew, 16, Devonshire-square, London, N.E.—Magd. Hall, Ox. B.A. 1851, M.A. 1853; Deac. 1850 and Pr. 1851 by Bp of Win. P. C. of St. Botolph’s, without Aldgate, City and Dio. Lon. 1860’, *Crockford’s* 1865, p. 535.
15 *Punch*, 17 December 1864, p. 251.
16 See *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 24.
17 Mrs Eliza Hunt’s writing is only semi-legible here. The letters following ‘Rober’ are not easy to decipher.
heard it mentioned as one of the Bishop of London’s failings, that he never took the side of a Curate, but I did not believe it. His lordship judged the matter with considerable impartiality. Hunt then explains how, ‘but for the voluntary service of a neighbouring Rector, [he] would have had difficulty in getting a Curacy either in London or any other place’. At this point, he refers to the infamous case of Bishop Colenso. It is noteworthy that Colenso’s trial and appeal took place at the same time as Hunt’s troubles at St Botolph’s (1863–1865). The happenings are an occasion for criticism of Church government and the Church’s lamentable treatment of curates:

The decision in Bishop Colenso’s case has demonstrated to the world that the Church of England is an ecclesiastical body without Church Government. The case of every Curate in the kingdom would prove the same thing. Every rightminded man will rejoice that the state has protected Bishop Colenso from the arbitrary persecution of the Metropolitan of the Cape; but that state which shields Bishops and Incumbents, leaves Curates unprotected. The law only enables the Incumbent to kick the Curate, and gives the Bishop the power to help the Incumbent to do it more effectually.

One final application was made in the metropolis before Hunt left for the country—it was with ‘an “Evangelical” Rector of the purest species’, but the whereabouts of the parish is not specified. It did not lead to an engagement but to some theological discussions with the incumbent. This first part of Hunt’s ‘letter’ concludes with some telling words:

After this eventful experience—this battling simply to be allowed ‘to spend and be spent for Christ,’ I speak seriously, many will ask if I am not sick of the Church, and of religion, too? Most men would have renounced both, I have renounced neither. My words, like those of the Abbé Lamennais are still Les paroles d’un Croyant. Frederick Robertson marks it as one of the characteristics of Jesus that He never despaired of humanity, though no man suffered more than He from the baseness and the hypocrisy of men. And Mr. Renan has a grand thought. He supposes that when Jesus came to Calvary, and His great soul was clouded with sorrow, a half repentant feeling may have crossed His mind that He was

18 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 24.
19 See Chadwick, Victorian Church II, pp. 90–97.
20 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 25.
21 Ibid.
suffering too much for such a worthless race. Such a feeling may indeed have crossed the mind of Jesus, but it could only have been a momentary temptation. The true spirit has within it a perennial spring of faith. We that do live, live by faith.

We walk by faith. In faith we follow the ‘Noble Initiateur.’ 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.

I am, my Lord,
Your Lordship’s obedient Servant,

A PRESBYTER. 22

Within these words lie sentiments of dejection and resignation, but also an assertion of faith to persevere, despite the unfortunate hand that Hunt had been dealt.

22 Ibid.