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 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.
10. Conclusions

John Hunt wrote *Clergymen Made Scarce* in order to highlight negative aspects of his career that he hoped might be rectified in future especially by an enlightened Bishop of London and afterwards, no doubt, by the Church more generally. As well as setting forth his personal woes, frequently with humour and irony, he hoped to provide a stimulus for reform. Indeed, the Church was in the midst of a slow process of reform, change, and upheaval. In the ensuing decades, some of the ills described by Hunt were addressed, but the wheels of change turned slowly, and it proved hard for many of those in authority to produce radical solutions to problems that would diminish their own power, wealth, and status.

Whether Hunt’s open letter actually had any effect, or indeed was even read by Bishop Tait, is questionable and probably unlikely. The lowly status of a curate and the many demands on the Bishop’s time probably meant that at best it might have been read by one of his staff. Owing to the negative publicity that Hunt’s activities had attracted by the time of its publication, he was probably dismissed as a maverick or rebel who might potentially be dangerous to the wellbeing of the Church institution. The reforms of the Victorian Church and the progress of those reforms have been amply covered in the monumental survey by Chadwick, amongst others.

Hunt’s booklet provides an insight at a personal level and from an individual’s point of view into much that was amiss in the Church. It also allows us to extrapolate more generally a picture of the Victorian Church, its failing system of curacies, and the shortcomings of the system for obtaining incumbencies.

Probably the most salient feature of *Clergymen Made Scarce* is the lack of employment security enjoyed by curates and the haphazard nature of the employment market. Curates were regarded almost as a commodity to be traded. Their status was lowly, and they were expected to know
their place. In society at large, they enjoyed a more respected position but were expected to adhere to certain societal norms of behaviour. They were not expected to step out of line or to be vocal about their lot. This applied particularly within the institutional Church. They had to fend for themselves in the job market, where the law of supply and demand operated, but where many other factors came into consideration. A would-be curate needed to be assiduous in seeking out employment, using every means available. Some curacies were obtained seemingly without much effort, others required many hours of searching in the press, letter-writing, visiting for interviews, preaching trial sermons, and taking trial services, before an incumbent might avail himself of a clergyman’s services. Would-be curates had to suffer the inconvenience and indignity of unanswered letters, fictitious excuses for rejection, and even invalid, futile advertisements. The time and expense involved in travelling, especially to more distant locations, for interview were considerable.

Some curacies were naturally more desirable than others and attracted more applicants. The geographical location, the type of church building (old or new), the social makeup of the parish, the type of churchmanship, the character and reputation of the incumbent all played a role in making some positions more sought after than others. The aspirations of the curate, the work he was permitted or expected to do, the facilities provided, the degree of independence afforded him, the remuneration and accommodation offered him all contributed to the desirability or lack thereof, although these were not always apparent until after an appointment had been made.

The remuneration of a curate could vary greatly; benefits in kind were a further consideration. The salary was often low, but by the 1860s most were about £100 per annum; some indeed were merely on a par with the wages of a manual labourer. There were no allowances for clerical attire or accommodation. Board and lodging were occasionally provided, such as living in a large parsonage house, together with the incumbent and his family, but a deduction was then normally made from the curate’s salary. Some curacies were offered on quite unattractive terms, even without a salary or in return for looking after and funding a household, including animals and servants, during an incumbent’s absence. Good shooting, boating, and bathing were offered
as an enticement in one case. Perhaps the greatest dishonesty was where a curate was persuaded to take services on the pretence that he might be offered employment, but in fact merely to provide unpaid cover for an incumbent’s temporary absence.

Curates needed references from past employers, which could be vindictive or might contain anonymous assertions. Both here and in dealings with a potential new employer, the applicant was often subjected to scrutiny regarding his churchmanship. Sermons could be judged to be lacking in evangelical or catholic ‘truth’. An applicant could be rejected for being a rationalist or serious thinker. In one case, a curate was required to be teetotal as well as an anti-Puseyite and an anti-Rationalist. The prejudice of those in authority was blatant and unchecked. Anyone who had not done the bidding of his master was unlikely to receive a positive testimonial. Not only must they satisfy the incumbent in question, but they were often subject to the prejudices of the society that paid their salary. In the case of evangelical parishes, this usually meant the Pastoral Aid Society, whose strictures regarding evangelical ‘soundness’ could be severe. Progressive theology was mostly frowned upon. Curates were not expected to have dangerous new ideas, such as questioning the account of the creation in Genesis. They were not expected to take issue with the debates of the day or to contribute to them. The most glaring example discussed in this book is the Essays and Reviews controversy. Most incumbents easily formed a negative opinion of the theology contained in it and were content to dismiss, and indeed condemn, it without having read it. They expected their curates to do likewise, which most did. Anyone who had read the book and had soberly evaluated its content was regarded with much suspicion and could face summary dismissal.

Dismissal could take place at the whim of a capricious incumbent for often spurious reasons. The curate often had no recourse to the bishop or other authority in the case of unfair dismissal. Bishops would almost invariably take the part of the incumbent in a dispute if they became involved at all.

There was a strict hierarchy of parish clergy. The incumbent frequently saw himself as an absolute ruler in his parish, which he regarded as his personal fiefdom. His wishes were to be obeyed by his curates, and in practice, he was subservient to no-one. An exception to this is seen in the
case of rural parishes, such as Burley, where the squirearchy held sway and the incumbent was second in status after the squire. In such cases, the incumbent was required to do the squire’s bidding.

Incumbents were frequently at pains to ensure that their curate did not outshine them in any way, and they took steps to prevent this. Many incumbents had obtained only a modest degree from Oxford or Cambridge but had given up all pretensions of scholarship subsequently. Nevertheless, they were arrogant about their education and the social status that it conferred. Those parish clergy who continued with scholarship and published serious works on theology were regarded mostly with suspicion. A curate was not expected to be acquainted with progressive theology, especially not of the continental variety. German theology in particular was denigrated as ‘neology’. It was not seemly for a curate to show an acquaintance with German culture or the German language.

Although scholarship was little appreciated, social considerations weighed very heavily. An incumbent was, by dint of his calling, a gentleman. Such a gentleman was provided with a large house, in which he and his wife employed several servants and in which the family could live a gentrified life. To a gentleman’s life belonged appropriate pastimes, which could range from an interest in nature to foxhunting and more. Some hobbies, such as the practical study of anatomy, demonstrated an excess of zeal, and opinions were divided as to whether these were an appropriate interest for a clergyman.

A suitable university education belonged to an incumbent’s station in life. A curate who had graduated from Oxford or Cambridge had not only the ideal academic credentials, but more importantly had received an education alongside aristocrats and men of high standing, thus fitting him for his future role of leadership in society when he became an incumbent. Clergymen, more especially curates, who had not enjoyed such a privileged education were looked down upon. A strict educational hierarchy existed, in which, after Oxford and Cambridge, Trinity College Dublin was ranked, followed by Durham University and King’s College London. Last came the theological colleges, such as St Bees, which turned out ‘literates’, on whom all other clergy were content to look down.\(^1\) The Scottish universities, despite their venerable history

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\(^1\) Cf. ‘The Deficiency of Curates’ (letter), in *The Times*, 10 September 1864, p. 12.
and academic strengths, appear not to have fitted into this pattern. No doubt their location in a different country, with a separate national church, contributed to this sense of otherness and perceived inferiority.

Although the concept of racism is scarcely appropriate in this context, there was a strong feeling that Britishness equated to Englishness and that people from Wales or Scotland were different. It was unusual for a Scotsman to enter the Church of England, even if Archbishop Tait was a very prominent example. Tait, however, was the child of a landowner and continued his education, after the University of Glasgow, at Oxford. He thus fulfilled the criteria of social status and university education, even if the land of his birth was ‘wrong’. We have observed how speaking with a Scotch accent and not having a degree from an English university were genuine disadvantages. More important were social status and parentage. A man of lowly parentage would have a much more difficult career path.

The easiest route to preferment was through social connections, especially wealthy aristocratic heritage. A curate from the right background could gain preferment in two years. A man without the right connections, especially one who was deficient in other respects, could not expect to be recognized solely on his own strengths, such as intelligence, ability, and scholarship. These were potentially more of a hindrance than an advantage. To make a gentleman from such material was evidently considered a peculiarly difficult task.

The next easiest path to preferment—one open to all with the necessary means—was to purchase the advowson to a living. Wealthy parents or relatives furthered aspiring sons and nephews in this way. A friend might also act as an intermediary.

A curacy was essentially an apprenticeship with no fixed time limit. Indeed, some curates never succeeded in gaining an incumbency. It was not unknown for a man to serve numerous curacies for many years, although the norm was two years.

The death of the incumbent was a time of uncertainty for a curate, as the new incumbent was under no obligation to maintain his services. Especially if he differed in outlook from the incumbent, the curate might expect to be replaced.

Gaining preferment on merit was the exception.