

“The Profession of a Clergyman”

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Clergymen might be expected to figure prominently in the writing of a daughter and sister of priests of the Church of England. However, Jane Austen's clerical characters, like her father and brothers, functioned within a system which has altered more in the subsequent two hundred years than it had in the previous thousand. Accordingly, details whose significance her first readers could grasp instantly may well sail past us unnoticed—which would be less serious if she were less intent on exploiting subtle gradations of social status, and on presenting priests as potential providers of “establishments” for deserving young ladies. How, for example, did a rector differ from a vicar or a curate? How did a man prepare for the ministry, secure appointment to a particular church, and occupy his time thereafter?

By the time King Alfred the Great died, every square inch of English soil formed part of a *parish*, within which an ordained Roman Catholic priest (who might, at that date, marry if he wished) had been entrusted by the bishop of the local diocese with the cure of souls. (*Cure* here retains the Latin sense of *look after*, as in our term *curator*, rather than of *heal*, since in the average parish soul-sickness, while never absent, was seldom rampant.) Such a *curate* was said to hold a *living* or *benefice*, a term with a neat double implication: his position had come to him as a gift, and gave him an opportunity to do good. For many duties besides the conduct of public worship devolved on him by default, in the sense that, if he did not carry them out, they would go undone: he was a one-man department of health, education, and welfare, as well as record-keeper for the community, since he might be the only literate for miles around. The rudimentary social services which he provided or supervised, since they were available to everyone (devout or not) living within the parish boundaries, could not fairly be financed from the voluntary contributions of regular worshippers, but had to be supported by the most equitable means available in an economy based exclusively on the land and its produce.

Each parish owed its existence to a *founder*—not necessarily the person who organized the first congregation or erected the first church building, but the one who set aside acreage (known as the *glebe*) whose cultivation and/or rental would thenceforth provide the curate with a reliable livelihood. Stress was laid on rendering the priest financially independent of his auditors, who might otherwise be tempted to starve him into preaching what they wanted, rather than what they needed, to hear. The only person likely to be in a position to make such an irrevocable gift of land was, of course, the principal local landowner, who in return became the *patron* of the parish, with *presentation rights*—the power to tell the bishop, whenever the living fell vacant, which priest should next be appointed to it. The expectation was that these rights would remain within the founder's family, passed on by will from one generation to the next. But each patron did well to develop all his skills of character assessment, for once the bishop had inducted his nominee as *rector* of the parish, no provisions existed for dismissing him, restricting his

control over the glebe land, or curtailing his right to receive *tithe*—a percentage of all crops and livestock raised within the parish. No matter how well or poorly he discharged his duties, a rector was ensconced in his benefice for life, unless another patron should offer him a more desirable appointment. He had more security of tenure, and more scope for individual action, than anyone else in the community; no wonder he was called its *parson*, a corruption of *persona*!

Alas! as Archbishop Cranmer was later to reflect, "There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted." This system, beautifully adapted to the needs of the small, stable, isolated communities of Saxon England, was rudely jolted by William the Conqueror, who granted to his followers not only the Saxon thanes' estates, but the presentation rights which went with them. Although many of his knights preferred to go on living in the homes they already had in Normandy, they provided for their new tenants' spiritual care as wisely as they could see how to do. As rectors of the parishes in their gift they nominated not individual priests, but nearby monastic communities, whose abbots they thought they could trust to staff the churches with faithful pastors. Most abbots indeed proved worthy of such trust, according to their lights: they would provide a vacant parish with a *vicar*, whom they could relocate whenever they chose, but they saw no reason to let him keep all the parish tithes if he was willing to work for less.



He protested that he never read novels.

Moreover, these were the years when Rome was insisting, as a matter of discipline, on celibacy for priests; realizing that a single man can live on less than a family, the abbots claimed from each vicar all the tithes which he did not need for actual survival.

Then presentation rights, originally intended for exercise by landowners who knew their local situation intimately, came to be treated as marketable commodities; a patron might sell them to a stranger, or bequeath them to an undying corporation such as an Oxford college. Indeed, Oxford and Cambridge were set up primarily to train priests, and at times they graduated more than the parishes could absorb. Under such conditions, a rector or vicar might be able to hire a young ordinand privately for a flat fee, and set him to work in a parish as a curate with no security of tenure and no access to the tithes. Meanwhile, since a parish was an undying legal corporation which never needed to relinquish any gifts or bequests it received, the relationship between a parish's income and the responsibilities of its parson owed steadily more to chance and less to logic.

Matters were further complicated by the dissolution, under Henry VIII, of the monasteries, which had spent four centuries accumulating presentation rights. These, like the abbey's real estate, the King doled out as he pleased to favoured loyal subjects, who proceeded to bequeath and traffic in them as they saw fit. Possessors of disposable income often bought them as investments—and rectorships as well, with their accompanying claims to tithes. Shakespeare, for example, bought the right to receive in tithes from parishes around Stratford-upon-Avon an annual amount equal to the price of his house! (It was this arrangement, and not his neighbours' recognition of his genius, which ensured his burial beside the high altar of the church where he had been baptized and married.) Thus we find a sizeable group of people living comfortably on the tithes of parishes which they never saw, while the men actually providing pastoral care to the tithe-payers survived as best they could on subsistence wages. True, after the break with Rome, English priests might once again marry; but a parish with even half its income irrecoverably alienated would hardly tempt a young lady of spirit to preside over its tumbledown parsonage.

A daughter born in 1675 to the rector of a small rural parish like Steventon would have been less likely to write novels, however great her natural talent, than to go into domestic service, if thereby the family income might be stretched to send one of her brothers to Oxford; the rest would have to make do with apprenticeships or trade. Jane Austen's career, a century later, was possible only because, during her parents' youth, the population of England inexplicably began to rise steeply and steadily. Increased demand for foodstuffs drove up the price of crops, and in time the value of land—and of tithes. For the first time in decades if not centuries, a clerical career became attractive not just to bright lads who viewed it (somewhat like school-teaching for three generations of North American girls) as a first step out of the working class, but to the younger sons of landowners. Because their older colleagues of humbler origin took so many decades to die out, their progress toward dominance of the profession was slow but inevitable: they were better informed and educated, their family connections gained them easier access to patrons, and their prospects allured more ambitious and affluent, if not more agreeable or affectionate, young ladies.

Jane Austen's productive years happened to coincide with the final stages

of this process, with the result that, in each of her novels, a generation gap is discernible—if, having grasped the background, we know where to look for it. Except in *Love and Friendship*, she steered clear of the degree of coincidence which shaped her father's career, for he had been quite implausibly lucky. His distant cousin, Thomas Knight, was patron of Steventon, which fell vacant just when he needed it; later his wealthy lawyer uncle, Francis Austen, bought him the right of next presentation to the adjacent parish of Deane. But he decided to retire only after his son Edward, the adopted heir of Thomas Knight's son, had become patron of Steventon, which he was willing to bestow on his brother James. The tithes of Deane must have maintained the family in Bath, since only after their father's death did the Austen sons arrange to contribute toward their mother's support; the selection of Deane's next rector would rest with the heirs of whoever had dealt with Francis Austen. (When James Austen died in 1819, Edward Knight was still patron of Steventon, fully entitled to pass over James's son and name as rector his own son, William.) But George Austen's death deprived his womenfolk only of money, not of the social status which their family connections conferred on them independently of his work. His daughter was thus not left, like Miss Bates, dependent on such respect as people chose to accord her in virtue of the position her father used to occupy; and perhaps, like Charlotte Lucas, "she felt all the good luck of it."

At any rate, her heroines in their twenties appear, like Mr. Collins, to "consider the clerical office as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom," whereas their parents would accord more importance to his proviso "that a proper humility of behaviour is at the same time maintained." These middle-aged characters have simply continued the condescending attitude they were taught in childhood, when most of the priests they encountered had indeed emerged from families of lower status than their own.

Sir Walter Elliot can be trusted to articulate his generation's view least subtly: "Oh! ay,—Mr. Wentworth, the curate of Monkford. You misled me by the term *gentleman*. I thought you were speaking of some man of property: Mr. Wentworth was nobody, I remember; quite unconnected . . .". Mrs. Ferrars finds Edward's choice of a vocation "not smart enough." Granted, General Tilney, surely her match in snobbishness, seems not to share her opinion—but then Henry is not, like Edward, an eldest son. Darcy's father, whom his son considers wise and good, seeks to reward the faithful service of his steward Wickham by proposing ordination for bright young George; apparently he sees this as a sufficient step upward for the family in one generation. Mr. Elton sees nothing out of line in contemplating marriage to Miss Woodhouse, even if he has to get drunk before proposing to her; but would his predecessor, who married Mrs. Bates and brought up Miss Bates, have had the temerity to propose to Emma's great-aunt? Miss Ward, inspired by her younger sister's captivation of Sir Thomas Bertram, settles for Mr. Norris only after she despairs of doing better (was his presentation to the rectorship of Mansfield made conditional upon his marrying her?); thirty years later, her nephew Edmund's vocational choice daunts but does not dissuade Mary Crawford.

Are we ready to listen for unfamiliar overtones in Mr. Collins' monologue at the Netherfield ball: "The rector of a parish has much to do . . ."? At twenty-four (the minimum age specified by the Prayer Book for ordination

to the Anglican priesthood) he has stumbled, as every guest at Netherfield and every original reader of *Pride and Prejudice* would realize, into a situation so exceptional and enviable as to be worth extolling in public. As a rector, he has access to all the tithes of Hunsford, which can never have been assigned elsewhere; no wonder he can make a point of writing his own sermons, unlike a curate whose time and energy would have to go into fending off starvation by grubbing in the glebe. Again, the presentation rights to Hunsford have remained in a local family, and Lady Catherine could afford to exercise rather than sell them, lucrative though they could be. At least, by selling the next presentation of Mansfield to Dr. Grant, Sir Thomas Bertram apparently got enough money to settle Tom's gambling debts; while John Dashwood calculates that Colonel Brandon could have sold the next presentation to Delaford, which yields its rector £200 a year, for £1,400—seven years' salary! Having been put to no such expense, Mr. Collins can afford to devote himself to "the care and improvement of his dwelling," even though he presumably intends to move eventually to Longbourn and hire a curate for Hunsford. But many rectories were at that time barely habitable, after decades of occupancy by families too poor to make any but minor repairs. Canon law directed that, whenever a rector vacated a parish, he or his heirs should bear the expense of putting the house into shape for the next occupant; this process, termed *dilapidations*, has caused the enduring animosity between Mrs. Norris and Dr. Grant—"their acquaintance had begun in dilapidations, and their habits were totally dissimilar." She had been responsible for making good, to the Grants' satisfaction, the wear and tear which the house had sustained while she was its mistress; with what a good grace she paid up, we can imagine.

In the one improvement Mr. Collins specifically mentions, the shelves in the upstairs closet which Lady Catherine approved, he displays more prudence than does Henry Crawford in advising Edmund to landscape his parsonage at Thornton Lacey so that it will look like a gentleman's residence. As long as Mr. Collins sticks to interior alterations, which his poorer parishioners cannot see unless he invites them inside, they will assume that he cannot afford to give them any kind of material relief. As matters stand, he simply reports cases of hardship to Lady Catherine, who "sallies forth . . . to scold them into harmony and plenty." While she may gladly play Lady Bountiful in order to meddle and bully with impunity (how soon will Mrs. Elton develop her talents in that direction?), other landowners similarly regard themselves, and not the clergy, as the logical providers of tangible charity. Mrs. Reynolds expects Darcy to be like his father, "just as affable to the poor"; seeing Fanny momentarily free, Mrs. Norris offers her sewing "from the poor-basket"; Emma keeps an eye on the cottagers of Highbury. The Morlands, although they can afford to give James a curacy and Catherine a respectable dowry, know better than to give the impression that they can cope with anything beyond the needs of their own large family; but if Catherine's occupancy of the rectory which General Tilney has renovated for Henry should extend into Queen Victoria's reign, she will be plodding to the needy with beef-tea and blankets until her legs—or rather, *limbs*—give out.

Jane Austen never chooses to depict an older clergyman; we hear of, but never meet, Dr. Shirley, whose health has deteriorated during his forty years of ministry to the point where he really should, in Henrietta Musgrove's

view, expedite her marriage by engaging Charles Hayter as his curate. Presumably an honorary doctorate in divinity had been conferred on him long after graduation from the college he attended in his late teens; but he could, without ever going near a university, have fulfilled to some bishop's satisfaction the only four conditions laid down by the Prayer Book for ordination: "a person of virtuous conversation, and without crime . . . learned in the Latin tongue, and sufficiently instructed in Holy Scripture." Only in our credential-obsessed era do these provisions appear slack; a bishop was fully entitled, after meeting a candidate and forming a personal assessment of him, to conduct as searching or as perfunctory an examination as he might think fit. (Henry Austen, on deciding to take orders, sought out the Bishop of Winchester, whose appointment to that wealthy see had been blatantly engineered by his brother, Lord North, during his time as prime minister; even so, he took care to refresh his familiarity with the New Testament in Greek, only to be told by the prelate, "As for this book, Mr. Austen, I daresay it is some years since either you or I looked into it.") A university might indeed help students advance toward "an easy perusal of the Roman authors," as Dr. Johnson put it, but that was not their main reason for going there. They enrolled at Oxford or Cambridge primarily to learn from exposure and inference how a gentleman ought to behave in any situation. Mr. Collins' social ineptness results partly from his "having merely kept the necessary terms, without forming [at his college] any useful acquaintance"—not just potential patrons, but friends who might invite him to stay at their homes, giving him a chance to observe how their fathers managed their estates, and how the local parsons ran their parishes, since both operations required similar skills. (Mr. Yates is making such a series of visits, even though he uses his time to pick up girls rather than ideas.)

The interval between graduation and attainment of ordination age might also be spent as domestic chaplain in a wealthy household, like that of the Rushworths at Sotherton, where only within living memory have daily prayers in the chapel been given up. Since the form of Anglican worship varies little from one Sunday to the next, a man who had engaged in it all his life, even as a matter of social obligation, would need little specific training in the art of leading it; and nobody objected to his reading the published sermons of eminent divines to his congregation until he deduced from their example how to compose his own. Henry Tilney, James Morland, Edward Ferrars, and Mr. Elton do in fact possess the skills needed for the work expected of them; what we chiefly miss in them is a sense of vocation. Unlike Edmund Bertram, they give no outward sign of responding to an urge too strong to be resisted.

Critics have long marvelled at Jane Austen's apparent indifference to the French Revolution, despite her sharing first a roof and later a brother with her cousin Eliza Hancock, who lost her first husband to the Terror. Yet she was writing about, and for, people whose sense of security had been profoundly shaken by that cataclysm and its forerunner, the American War of Independence—which might, so churchmen argued in the 1780's, have been averted if each colony had had an established church, and every community a rector alert to stirrings of sedition among his people, whom he could either have calmed down himself or reported to the civil authorities. Soon this view received dramatic vindication from events in France, where the local curés tended to side with their parishioners against the government

and their own bishops—who had, like the landowners, spent more time intriguing at Versailles than exercising a restraining influence in their own bailiwicks. While the English bishops had not been notably more diligent than their French counterparts, parliamentary elections had compelled the English peers to keep somewhat in touch with the sentiments of their tenantry. If, then, the landowners and the parish clergy were to work in concert, they might be able to ward off the kind of upheaval which was convulsing France. So, at any rate, reasoned one network of astute Anglicans, whose outlook Jane Austen was to commend in a letter of 1813—the Evangelicals.

During the Austens' time in Bath, and for years before and after, the most prolific Evangelical writer, Hannah More, was producing her "Cheap Repository Tracts" in the Mendip Hills, a mere twenty miles from the Pump Room. Since these tracts sold by the million, Jane Austen could hardly have remained unaware of their existence, or of their author's basic premise: that English workers would never revolt against squires and parsons whom they regarded as their personal friends and protectors. By living on their respective properties, and working hand in glove, local spiritual and temporal authorities could gain the labourers' confidence and good will by demonstrating concern for their individual well-being—or, in a pinch, get wind of any intended sedition in time to nip it in the bud.

Whether Jane Austen's view of the responsibilities of squire and parson was borrowed from, or merely happened to coincide with, Hannah More's, she does portray several parishes where these joint guardians of the public peace are conscientiously on the job. Between them, Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins know exactly what is going on in every corner of Hunsford; however ham-handedly, they do discharge the duties of their stations in life. While Mr. Allen goes to Bath, Mr. Morland tends the territory; Darcy must repose equal confidence in the local rector's ability to monitor discontent in Derbyshire while he visits Netherfield, London, and Rosings—though he goes home at harvest time. To keep the peace of Highbury, Mr. Knightley needs little help from Mr. Elton or anyone else; even so, Mrs. Elton's plan for a musical society is straight out of the Evangelicals' strategy manual. Dr. Grant could hardly be expected, during Sir Thomas Bertram's absence in Antigua, to curtail his time at table even to deal with apprehended insurrection; but then, any mob likely to form around Mansfield would have as its immediate priority the tarring and feathering of Mrs. Norris, which the rector might not wish to interrupt too soon. Once back, Sir Thomas dismisses Henry Crawford's suggestion that Edmund might administer his new parish from nearby Mansfield: "... a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident ... [by living elsewhere] he does very little either for their good or his own."

But neither of them needed to counsel the young man who had previously told Mary Crawford, at the risk of losing her friendship, "... and it will, I believe, be everywhere found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation."