

Good in Parts: Pym's Rather Modern Curates

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Paper presented at the 2021 Virtual North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society

For my very first church job, the Rector insisted two books were to be compulsory reading: Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, and Barbara Pym's *Some Tame Gazelle*; and while the former was effecting, even traumatic at points, it was the latter which seemed to hold a true mirror to life in an English Parish. And, the first character introduced there, the first ever to greet the reading public, with his conversations as obvious as his combinations, was 'the new curate'.

Ever since Jesus Christ appointed the first apostles, there has always been a need and a place for assistants in the church. Those apostles it turned out, needed more staff for the operation, and within a couple of generations the church settled itself into the threefold hierarchy of *Episkopos* (Overseer), *Presbyteros* (Elder), and *Diakonos* (servant), or more familiarly, Bishop, Priest, Deacon. The titles alone perhaps indicate the esteem accorded to the offices.

Of course, in an organisation that worships a God who came 'not to be served, but to serve' The Church has gone to great pains to exalt the work of those who occupy the humbler positions on the ecclesiastical ladder, while those in charge have stressed their own servant credentials; the papal title '*servus servorum dei*' (Servant of the Servants of God) perhaps being the most famous or shameless, depending on the pope.

Yet under the rhetoric, every hierarchy requires some to perch at the top, and some to squat at the bottom of the heap, and in the Church of England, that infelicitous position has usually been occupied by the curate. 'A Curate - there is something which excites compassion in the very name of a Curate!!!' quips Sydney Smith, and with good reason; the Almighty may bestow rich blessings on the humble, but the church has historically shown little corresponding interest in dispensing corresponding temporal rewards to its lowliest clergy.

Technically speaking, a curate is the one who holds 'the cure (or 'care') of souls' for a parish and so is the incumbent, but it more usually refers to the incumbent's assistant or deputy. At its most basic, a curate is simply an unbeneficed assistant clergy person - one who isn't in charge of a parish, and therefore not entitled to the revenues ('the living') that historically came from its possession in property, taxes or tithes, and cultivated land. Rectors received the lot, Vicars received only the lesser tithes, if one couldn't inherit the living, then, as Mr Collins could inform anyone, one had to woo a patron, whom, holding the right to 'present the living', could appoint you to the job.

Not all livings were created equal, but they were considered essential for a priest to have a secure income and live in gentle society. The hapless curate however, had no living, in exchange for doing the actual pastoral work of the parish, he'd receive a small stipend paid out by the incumbent himself. Given that curates vastly outnumbered livings, the disparity of wages was considered iniquitous and therefore in English literature often rendered the curate very pitiable specimen indeed.

Bishops place Rectors thro' their holy fees,
and rectors mince them into Curacies...
'mong all the lots to which the poor is heir.
the hardest portion is the curate's share.¹

penned Evan Lloyd in 1766, highlighting the plight of curates up and down the ages that persisted, more-or-less, until Pym's own time, when the curate was finally regarded as a worthy colleague and partner in the gospel. It's an obvious route, but the curate's progress is traceable through those other authors commonly associated with Pym: Austen and Trollope.

In Austen's time, the church was, to modern sensibilities, in a dismal state. In his own study of Austen's clergy, E. G. Selwyn noted 'a large number of church people regarded a "living" as just that, a house and an income to live on, rather than a sphere of duty.'² In novels about the wealthy and leisured, curates are conspicuous by their absence, having no place in such refined circles. Mary Crawford's spiteful comments to Edmund in *Mansfield Park* though gives a glimpse of how they were seen: "A Clergyman has nothing to do but be slovenly and selfish- read the newspaper, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His Curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine."³ Even Edmund himself,

despite his defence of ministry as a high calling in charge ‘of all that is of the first importance to mankind’⁴ nevertheless at one point exclaims “What! take orders without a living! No, that is madness indeed, absolute madness!”⁵

Edmund gets ordained by simply going to see the Bishop for a week,⁶ receives no examination nor further training, serves no curacy, instead he immediately gains Thornton Lacey through blatant nepotism. Nobody thinks this unusual. In fact Edmund only shocks the Crawfords with his outlandish suggestion that not only might he content himself with a modest income, but even live in his parish and undertake pastoral duties.⁷ In an era when pluralism and absenteeism were commonplace, and even simony; paying for an office, were not unknown,⁸ Edmund’s ambitions might seem shocking indeed.

Little has changed in Trollope’s time. By 1827, 6,120 of 10,533 benefices had no resident incumbent, instead ‘a high proportion of the parochial work in the Church of England was performed by curates. And curates, living on pittances, unprotected by any security of tenure, liable to dismissal at a moment’s notice, were inevitable servants and dependents.’⁹ However, Trollope, unlike Austin, writes of curates and rails against their condition: ‘It is notorious that a rector in the Church of England, in the possession of a living of, let us say, a thousand a year, shall employ a curate at seventy pounds a year, that the curate shall do three-fourths or more of the work of the parish, that he shall remain in that position for twenty years, taking one-fourteenth of the wages while he does three-fourths of the work, and that nobody shall think that the rector is wrong or the curate ill-used!’¹⁰ in both his clerical sketches and when he introduces the famous ‘perpetual curate’ Mr Crawley in *Framley Parsonage* he goes so far as to boldly suggest clergy should instead receive a wage according to their work, not a living,¹¹ an idea that still hasn’t caught on in the Church of England.

Josiah Crawley himself of course, represents a vanished category of curate: 10,533 benefices neither provided enough opportunity for the estimated 24,000 clergyman in circulation by the end of the nineteenth century¹² nor did their mediæval boundaries take account of the population changes and growth in this era. Developing places like Hogglestock, growing working areas, needed parishes but there was no historic living to sustain them. Perpetual Curates were introduced to these new parishes, with an incumbent’s responsibilities but the wages and social prestige of a curate. There was some protection though; had Crawley in *The Last Chronicle* merely been an assistant curate like Mark Robarts’ curate, the Reverend Evan Jones in *Framley Parsonage*, he could have been immediately sacked by the Bishop.

Although Crawley obtains Hogglestock through the patronage of his old college friend Dean Arabin¹³ Trollope is clear this is no living, and thus Crawley is no gentleman, something Trollope considered essential for a clergyman to be.¹⁴ So Crawley’s poverty, depression, hunger, and debt are relentlessly described. His coat is tatty¹⁵ and pantaloons rusty¹⁶ he begs for legal assistance¹⁷ and can only afford to seek it by traveling on foot.¹⁸ He is at the mercy of circumstance; his brother clergy use his case to advance their own interests, or else score points for the Proudie and anti-Proudie factions.¹⁹ While they summon allies and send messages, the sole power Crawley can exercise is to resign the curacy and pauperise himself and his family—the threat to do so being one of the few times any of the other characters consider the consequences for the curate and his family *rather than worrying about their own reputations, marriage schemes, and bruised egos.*²⁰

Trollope’s voice though joined a general Victorian momentum for church reform. Mr Crawley is not necessarily *likeable* but he takes his calling seriously. He becomes voice of conscience for the worldly Mr Robarts,²¹ and though his high-mindedness leads him to pride, rigidity and charmlessness, (especially in the Bishop’s drawing room!) he energetically attends to his parish. His scrupulosity contrasts with the wealthier and idler clergy, one Dr Tempest even opines that Crawley has debased his office by his willingness to serve with his own hands the sick and poor of his own parish.²² Trollope’s writings are seen as part of a growing call, influenced by both the Evangelical Revivals of the 18th century and the Tractarian movement of the 19th, for a higher ‘clerical tone’ with clergyman more religiously devout, more theologically learned, and more pastorally competent.²³ The Oxford movement in particular promoted a pastoral ideal for clergy of serving their people in the parish²⁴ a notion likely to deeply perturb the Plumstead breakfast table!

A combination of higher ideals and fewer vocations saw benefits finally trickle down the curates. As the universities opened up to non-Anglicans, theological colleges emerged to train priests,²⁵ and central assessment of candidates emerged.²⁶

By the 1930's a curate was no longer the servile 'scarecrow parish drudge'²⁷ but a colleague who could reasonably expect to obtain his own living.²⁸ Study continued through curacy,²⁹ wages increased³⁰ and finally livings have been gradually abolished; curate alike live on a fixed stipend, with very little difference between incomes, a pattern that has been fixed until almost the present day. Any candidate in Pym's time and now would expect a diametrically opposite experience to that of Edmund Bertram's.

Pym's own curates evidently live different lives to Josiah Crawley. Their presence is expected at important social gatherings, they don't fret over job insecurity, and are left to take charge of pastoral work, they are not presented as a hostage to economic and social fortune. He has been to theological college and expects to leave curacy for a parish or chaplaincy. Despite their assistant status, their prominence in her own books points to how far the curate's social stock has risen by her time. Yet these curates still have an old world quality to them.

Some air of distress still hovers over a Pym curate. Edgar Donne arrives looking like so many of the other curates 'half-starved' and lives in what Harriet considers one of the more sordid streets of Jubilee terrace. Both Fr Ransome and Mr Lattimer lodging in rooms owned by respectable, but fearsome matriarchs, evidently lack the means to a furnished home. While Fr Thames can retire to the Italian 4-bedroom *Villa Cenerentola* without anyone finding this remarkable, nobody believes Fr Branche capable of affording a long holiday in Italy. Perhaps it's not simply unworldliness that causes Fr Greatorax to still wear a Civil Defence Works overcoat. Yet these are secondary details, and the focus of Pym's stories is not on the curate's circumstances, but their *character*: Josiah Crawley's reputation is destroyed by a twenty pound bill, but Stephen Lattimer fears for his because he lies about Crampton Hodnet.

This focus on character is what makes a Pym curate a recognisable contemporary and timely cautionary tale, despite some opinion to the contrary. After the First World War a supposed new 'muscular Christianity' was replacing the 'effeminate 'pale young curate' beloved by the Victorian maiden lady',³¹ G. W. Clarkson asserted in his recollections in 1943 that 'the mousy curate, even on the stage, is wellnigh unintelligible to this generation.'³² Evidently, Pym disagreed. her interest in curates was long-held and closely observed, and despite penning an early poem of a rather modern 'curate on a motor-bike':

His sermons are the passion of the Town,
Snippets of poetry to help em down [*sic*]
Too much Theology makes ladies ill,
His motto is, 'Give sugar with the pill'³³

and the occasional rogue curate in her novels who played rugby and earned a blue at Oxbridge, her platoon of young, good-looking, pale, thin and broadly incompetent curates were clearly intelligible in her time, and, with the Church encouraging younger vocations again, such curates, still haunting the same Anglo-Catholic churches as then, remain so today.

In their failure to live up to the new clerical ideal, Pym's curates are perhaps a meta-commentary on the failure of so much church reform. Or maybe Pym actually captures something evergreen in curates' personalities. In the formal British literature on clerical formation the same complaints recur down the decades. In 1881 the 'Ladies' curate' was derided as 'generally an empty-headed fop, with an overweening opinion of himself and a complacent notion that every girl he meets thinks of him as a possible suitor.'³⁴ One writer in 1910 warns of 'Self-assertive', 'irritating' and 'vain' curates,³⁵ and another in 1947 cautions curates against 'tactlessness', 'thoughtlessness', 'foolishness', and being 'lazy'.³⁶ While another in 1962 bemoans the decline of intellectual standards and quality of curates.³⁷ Pymish curates clearly still abounded. Pym herself perhaps summarises these apparently immortal qualities by deploying 'curately' as an adverb in itself in *STG*, capturing that distinctive mixture of bluff condescension and obvious vacuity that can, and does still, characterise the freshly ordained, whom despite possessing no experience, are often painfully keen to prove themselves in the given span of just three or four years. Provided such curates are furnished with even a modicum of self-awareness however, Pym's novels skewer any temptation to grandiose self-regard. Given that there's hardly a priest that isn't ineffectual in Pym's world, it comes as no surprise that the curate is unflatteringly portrayed as a particularly useless specimen. Carried over from Austen

and Trollope particularly is the relative weakness of the curate. However, Pym refashions this from a lack of social standing into a lack of inner qualities and strength.

Exemplary in this uselessness category stands Fr Greatorex in *Excellent Women*, around whom things just inexplicably go wrong when he's left in charge of the parish and is considered suitable neither for marriage nor to even run a meeting to discuss the Christmas Bazaar. He's so feeble he doesn't have a single line of dialogue in the novel. Yet the outer characteristics of the three most fleshed-out curates, Stephen 'worm of a man' Lattimer, 'bleating' Edgar Donne, and Marius 'broken reed' Ransome, hardly do much better. Frequently holding only a third in theology,³⁸ they are banal preachers,³⁹ forever wearied by the onerous duties of chatting to people social gatherings⁴⁰ and while armed with glib charm⁴¹ tend to converse in light platitudes,⁴² becoming easily flummoxed by heavier conversation, be it cultured (in the case of Mr Donne, who doesn't understand why Archdeacon Hoccleave wishes to pronounce his name as *Dunne*) or even on pastoral matters. Lattimer is alarmed at possibly having to speak to Mr Cleveland about his suspected affair and Ransome is incapable of assisting either Mary Beamish or his friend Fr Sainsbury in moments of personal turmoil. This trait applies doubly in affairs of the heart. Though engaged by the end, each man is incredibly gauche, even oblivious, with such passionate utterances as declaring someone to be 'a good sort', a 'fine person', or that they 'respect and esteem' their hoped-for bride. In books where the central preoccupation is love, the fact that curates are sources of amusement rather than serious contenders, even when they seem suitable, is telling. These broad strokes continue with Fr Basil 'Tame animal' Branche who carries the distinction of failing to woo a partner altogether and is left instead to make cynical remarks at the wedding. Moreover, they even lack agency in their stories. While Ransom is pushed from lodgings to lodgings by external events he frets aimlessly about his direction in life and finally relies on Mary Beamish for advice. Olivia Berridge is required to take matters into her own hands to secure the engagement to Edgar Donne, while after Stephen Lattimer's outrageous lie, he is preoccupied with the consequence and comes to fear and resent the imagined power of Miss Morrow to ruin his reputation and his proposal to her emerges from hoping she will resolve his angst at feeling trapped, a feeling only resolved by a chance encounter on holiday.

If these aren't sufficiently sharp reminders that curates aren't as brilliant as we find ourselves, the tragedy is the character never come to any deep realisation of their feeble state. They drift to the end, into a new living and marriage, having learned little, grown little, achieved little. They neither increase in stature nor learn humility from their experiences. Their weakness even extends to their place in the book; engaged in activity, and busyness, often self-involved, they nevertheless remain peripheral and insubstantial, never exercising a decisive influence over any of the protagonists. By contrast, rather than a lacklustre pushing at world to achieve their goals, Jessie Morrow, Belinda Bede, and Wilmet Forsyth, and even Ianthe Broome, draw on their richer inner life to successfully navigate it, often striving for balance and personal growth instead of disruptive change. While it's true we don't get to hear the curates' thoughts nearly as often, their behaviour indicates that they lack the kind of substantial inner life that the heroes possess. The breezy, superficial curate is the foil to the settled, reflective protagonist, offering any reader, curates included, a moment to consider the shortcomings of an active, unreflective life against a considered, contemplative one, and the significant disparities between being self-reflective and merely, curately, self-absorbed.

Typically English, there's little spiritual anguish or even explicit articulation of belief, instead the church is part of the background ambience of these women. However, each of them possesses the qualities that seed the contemplative life. The first of these is attention, not simply noticing what others overlook, but to view things as they are, rather than through the prism of our wishes, desires, and expectations. This attention grants perceptiveness others lack, it is Miss Morrow who sees through the pretensions of types like Mr Lattimer or Simon Beddoes, Miss Bede who is sensitive to Miss Prior's social prickliness or the embarrassment of being present for a Hoccleave domestic spat or understands why Agatha smiles more around Bishop Grote although the brisker Harriet wins a point for being more frank about Henry's feelings for Belinda. Even Wilmet, whose struggle is to better learn this resting attention, as she realises she's missed the lives being lived under her nose and certainly has a long way to go to reach the insight the omni-comprehending Sybil, nevertheless recognises Bason's uncharitableness, and guesses Mary's feelings for Marius simply by noting he's absent from her letters.

Simone Weil once wrote that ‘absolutely unmixed attention is prayer’, and this power of deep attention allows each woman to find joy and beauty in the small and overlooked things, be the beauty of rough and careworn hands,⁴³ appreciating favourite dishes being served for a birthday,⁴⁴ the joy of gaining the confidence of another,⁴⁵ or simply achieving the perfect consistency of ravioli dough.⁴⁶ Miss Morrow makes the most explicit link between attention and prayer as she meditates on the ‘dear, treasured’ things around her, their future transformation by the light of heaven and the way small thing, the trivial round and beauty, even in North Oxford, bring her closer to God.

The second quality they cultivate is their detachment, that ability to love freely, rather than possessively. Each accepts people as they are, not aiming to change people or force them to act against their inclinations. They don’t love others as means to fulfilling their own ends, a form of self-love which Mr Lattimer shows in spades when he considers a wife entirely in terms of what she might do for him. Such detachment is intrinsic to the love of the Christian God whose love is neither coercive nor in competition with human love; to quote St Paul: ‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.’⁴⁷ In each case their detachment allows them to perform an act of loving renunciation allowing them to find peace with reality, whether this is Wilmet disappointed in her fantasies about Piers quickly recognising she ‘was going to find it impossible to dislike Keith’ and ultimately fosters a closer more honest relationship with her own husband. By this renunciation, she comes to acknowledge her own uncharitableness and lack of self-knowledge and comes to a greater acceptance of people around her. Belinda’s triumph is not so much the rejection of Bishop Grote in favour of her sister, but her finally appreciating Agatha as both a wife, and woman with her own private disappointments, even finding reassurance in the awkwardness she feels around her. Miss Morrow, having rejected the cold affection of Mr Lattimer finds herself grateful for her own life and even comforted by the lack of change at Leamington Lodge. Ianthe ignores expectations and follows her heart to John and it is *Sophia* who is left wailing as her projects for Ianthe fall apart.

In each case their detachment moves towards happiness from better understanding and appreciation of themselves and others, rather than opting for the curately solution of trying to fix inner discontent by changing their worldly circumstances. Compared to the curates, each woman is a paragon of spiritual maturity. This above all is shown by the protagonist’s having the gift of laughter, appreciating the absurdity of the situations they find themselves in. Unlike the other characters, curates particularly, who, with furrowed brows and eager expressions take their situations, and worse, themselves with utmost seriousness, Jessie, Belinda and Wilmet are savvy enough to recognise they are in a comedy, finding amusement in others’ furious arguments over cassocks or how drab an extramarital affair can actually be, or a skirmish over wrapping marrows. Jessie herself even considers herself to be observing a play rather than real life and is amused by the pretensions of the other characters, above all Miss Doggett. Unlike, say, Henry Hoccleave’s scornful laughter, this is a good-humoured amusement that recognises that life is often absurd, and to find both joy and laughter in the mundane are signs of a great spirit. We might compare this Belinda Bird, who is described as not being fond of laughing, who deludes herself into finding beauty in Cleveland’s bumbling, until the illusion is finally, painfully shattered. Miss Morrow in her laughter would never have been so easily taken in.

Yet despite the shortcomings of the curates, they are indulged by the other characters, who politely ignore their uselessness, gauchery and vacuity and welcome them as equals in any social gathering. This indulgence seems to extend to the author too; despite finishing no wiser or even better at their job, they each secure the living, and with one exception, a bride. Life works out pretty well for them. However, when it comes to Fr Branche, it seems Pym herself was feeling her curates have become old fashioned. If *Some Tame Gazelle* was Pym’s imagined middle-aged future,⁴⁸ *An Unsuitable Attachment* is an acknowledgement that life is rather different; Sophia summarises Fr Branche as ‘a kind of “tame curate” of the old-fashioned type beloved by elderly ladies.’ concluding ‘one did not see so many of them now’. In a way Branche is a distillation of her curates: good-looking, self-involved, weak, with a bright streak of vanity. Yet he shows how low the curate’s stock has fallen. Pym’s other curates get engaged, but Penelope finds her drinks *à deux* with this character ‘ludicrous’ rather than remotely romantic, and Ianthe casually dismisses him out-of-hand as a prospect too. With that, he simply vanishes until the end of the book. It’s a marked shift from Harriet’s delight at welcoming an Italian-looking curate who has just had a nervous breakdown to England, to the round rejection of this broken-down English curate in Italy.

Branche seems to lack any inner motivation, he appears to flirt a little bit, and then is flicked away by Pym with a similar impatience that the characters often feel with him. By the sixties the Pym Curate's star is waning, even in the eyes of their author. While the women like Penelope and Ianthe take their destiny into their own hands, Fr Branche is left criticising the buffet table, and a baton passes; the equally inept suitor Rupert Stonebird is left another chance to claim love right at the end. The anthropologists will inherit the earth as the church and her clergy slope into the background. The absence of a curate in *A Few Green Leaves* maybe underlines the decreasing ability of small parishes to even support one.

Still, even if less enthused by them in later years, Pym's curates still have a resonance now lacking from Austen and Trollope. True, the curate is a more varied breed these days, arriving at the job at different ages, male, female, cis and trans, from different backgrounds and professions, full-time, part-time, married, divorced, some with families, or with same-sex partners. Yet Pym still captures something we all hold in common: the poverty, nepotism and job insecurity of Trollope's time have faded, but which curate hasn't found themselves making tactless or obvious remarks, or preached poorly, or found themselves at a loss for words with someone, or struggled to carry out their incumbent's expectations, typically a mixture of set training and personal idiosyncrasy that they insist must be followed by their underlings? Since no amount of training is a substitute for the actual lived experience of a particular parish, its quirks and eccentric people included, every curate, by dint of being a curate, will at turns feels both helpless and useless in their role.

Rich seams of curately comedy may even be opening up again, for in the activity-vs-contemplation balance, the Church of England seems to be once more tilting the scales in favour of activity. The Victorian push for professionalisation seems to have come full circle and future curates may share Edmund Bertram's experience after all. Candidate selection panels may be scaled back potentially giving Bishops more influence, and residential training, with its tight-knit community of prayer, is being sidelined for looser, 'mixed-mode' training, with diverse placement opportunities and more hands-on work in churches. Academic theology is out, practical reflection and contextual theology are in. Curates are expected to arrive capable of managing themselves, and be 'missional' and show 'leadership'. Less time is spent pottering around the parish and is instead spent in further training seminars, meetings, running projects and emails. This last year no doubt curates could be found sweating over their laptops as the lockdown suddenly meant they were the 'obvious' selection to learn how to become broadcasters and social media experts.

Moreover, from the safety of private online groups, the training evidently has failed to stamp out the curate character; some curates freely reveal a remarkable ignorance of their profession, or lack of perspicacity in their parochial dealings, or a clear self-absorption as they bewail their lot and go to pieces over routine occurrences. Yet, we've all indulged in it from time to time, and we all must begin somewhere. It's amusing to others for us to begin as a Pymmish curately curate, though it would be a tragedy to finish as one.

It remains to be seen whether all this activity will launch a compelling new Christianity for this island, or will simply devolve into 'the bland leading the bland'. Yet, whenever a busy curate is tempted to hubris, whenever they persuade themselves that they really do know better, when they are tempted to blame their circumstances for their failure, when they are just taking themselves and life too seriously, to paraphrase Stephen Lattimer, they could 'do worse' than reach for a Pym.

They could do worse than recalling that their congregation may be more perceptive than they themselves. They could do worse than be reminded: slow down, pay attention to what's going on, be open to others, don't force every change, enjoy and cherish the small things, love your older churchgoers, and above all remember to laugh at the absurdity of our clerical pretensions, especially on the bad days. For, as Miss Bede could observe, curates are at heart, pretty much the same as always, a fact as reassuring to us clergy, as it is no doubt frightening to those legions of church reformers that have expended so much energy trying to alter that fact.

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NOTES

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- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p102
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p260
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- ⁸ Selwyn, 'Jane Austen's Clergymen' p428??
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- ⁴³ *AGOB* p42
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