

In Defence of George Austen

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Oliver MacDonagh in *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds* states:

... George Austen, appears to have passed for an exemplary clergyman. . . . For the first three years of his rectorship of Steventon, he was an absentee . . . his uncle had bought him the reversion to whichever of the two adjoining parishes . . . should fall in first, and when Deane became vacant in 1773, he must have supplied its duties, if at all, by a curate until his eldest son, James, could succeed there. . . . Doubtless to raise more money, the rectory at Deane was let from 1773 until James needed it. . . . Thus George Austen was a pluralist (if only in mild form) for most of his clerical life, as well as a non-resident in its opening and closing phases. He was, moreover, only a part-time rector in the sense that he pursued other avocations. He tutored and boarded at home for several years as many as four or five of the sons of the rich or related, and farmed. . . .¹

MacDonagh's facts are correct but his omissions are glaring and his implications unfair. George Austen was, for his time, an exemplary clergyman; he did not merely "pass" for one. MacDonagh excludes from consideration such facts as the size, location and income of George Austen's parishes and the failings of the Church which he served. The author of *Jane Austen Real and Imagined Worlds* ignores, or is ignorant of, the nature of a rural benefice, the duties of its incumbent, and the existence of documents which would record his failure to perform them.

Certainly George Austen obtained his livings by patronage and purchase—necessarily so. Since its beginnings the Church of England had lacked control over clerical incomes and appointments—a state of affairs described by one eighteenth-century preacher as: "The Church's scourge and the Nation's scandal."² At that time 48% of Church livings are impropriated, that is, possessed by laymen. In some cases the patron had right to the tithes (the 10% levy on all produce of the parish) and from them paid the parson a salary—often a pittance. Such a post was called a perpetual curacy and in George Austen's first parish, Shipbourne, he was a perpetual curate.

Most patrons possessed an Advowson: the right to award the living to the clerical candidate of their choice. A relation or friend was often presented to such a living.³ Thus, because Mr. Thomas Knight, the patron of Shipbourne and Steventon, was related to the Austens, George Austen succeeded his cousin, the Reverend Henry Austen of Cambridge, as the incumbent of each of these parishes.

An Advowson was real property which could be bought and sold, as could the next presentation to a living. The Advowson of Ashe and Deane were owned by Charles Wither, Squire of Deane; Francis Austen, George's solicitor uncle, purchased for his nephew the right to succeed to whichever fell vacant first. As the rector, William Hullman, lived at Ashe Park, it was natural for him to surrender Deane before the parish in which he had his home. Thus in 1773 George Austen added to it Steventon and became,

technically, a pluralist. That the reality was somewhat different, this article will show.

Livingings which had not been impropriated were either held by the Crown (9% of the total) or had been appropriated: that is, they had become the property of Bishoprics, Cathedrals, schools, Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, corporations, or parochial clergy. Frequently they became a source of additional income for Bishop's chaplains, schoolmasters, cathedral clergy and the fellows of Oxbridge Colleges.⁴ George Austen's contemporary, rector of the other Steventon, now in the diocese of Oxford, was an example. Dean and tutor of Queen's College, William Fothergill rode to his parish, nine miles every Sunday, to conduct two services and to catechise.⁵ George Austen, elected University Proctor in 1759, did not benefit from appropriations, but after 1761 he made use of the income from Steventon, while leaving in place the curate who had served the parish during Henry Austen's incumbency. Upon his marriage in 1764, however, George Austen went to live in the rectory at Deane, serving Steventon from there. Once the rectory at Steventon was repaired, he moved to it. After his induction to Deane in 1773, he served that parish from Steventon.⁶

MacDonagh's accusations of pluralism ignore the financial situation of Church and clergy. Non-residence and pluralism were not caused simply by the greed of impropiators, appropriators and incumbents. Cost of living allowances, indexing for inflation, and the giving of annual increments are modern solutions to the inflation which has been evident in England since the sixteenth century. Many fellowships, teaching posts, canonries, parishes and bishoprics had stipends fixed many years before; pluralism, non-residence, and the employment of curates, often inadequately paid, were obvious consequences.

Moreover, country livingings did not have a stable income. While urban livingings depended on pew rents and surplice fees (payments for christenings, marriages and funerals) the bases of rural livingings were the tithe and the glebe or parsonage farm. Unless the tithe had been commuted—that is an agreed annual cash payment had been substituted for payments in kind—both the success of the parson's own farm and the size of the tithe depended on the harvest and current agricultural prices. The parish priest, if resident, collected his own tithes, and it was a hard-hearted man who could take a tenth of what little his poorest parishioners possessed. In a bad year, shepherd and flock tended to suffer together.⁷

Weather and markets were not the only problems. Parishes were medieval in origin and their boundaries were feudal and manorial, not logical. Steventon, Ashe and Deane, for example, are within three miles of each other. A parish which was small in compass or population produced little and the tithes were therefore insufficient to support a clergyman. *The Clergyman's Intelligencer or a compleat alphabetical list of all the Patrons in England and Wales with the Dignities Livingings and benefices in their gift* (London, 1745) states that the value of Deane was ten pounds, eight shillings and eleven pence.

The problem of the small and poor parish was not new. "Who," asked one Jacobean preacher, "will serve your five pound, foure pound, twenty nobles cures?"⁸ The answers are obvious: a saint (preferably single), a parson with a private income, or a priest with more than one parish. Pluralism like George Austen's merely did informally what the Church of England has, in later years, done officially: amalgamated small parishes to make them financially viable. A sampling at the end of the eighteenth century showed that almost a third of the parishes in two deaneries were being served by neighbouring incumbents. (An Act of 1813 established a fifty pound stipendiary curacy to ensure that this common practice was not abused by non-residents.)⁹

MacDonagh's comments about the renting of the Deane rectory and the employment of a curate are absurd. What should be done with a house which one cannot sell, and for whose condition one is responsible, when it is situated less than three miles from one's home? Who needs a curate for a parish a short ride away—a parish to which one's daughter and son can walk for dinner?¹⁰

Certainly some clergy profited unconscionably from collecting benefices which they did not serve, and at them various Acts of reform were aimed. In 1803, Sir William Scott proposed a Residence Act which required an incumbent to justify non-residence to his Bishop, unless his livings were within ten miles of each other. Non-residence was excused if there was no parsonage, no suitable accommodation, a benefice income below one hundred and fifty pounds, or the incumbent was ill or infirm. If an exemption or licence was not issued, the Bishop could sequester (impound) the profits of the living. In 1804 a distinction was made between those who did Sunday duty and those who did not, and later years saw the acceptable distance reduced to five miles, then to three; the income from the second living, by 1850, was limited to one hundred pounds. George Austen, with one small and one slightly larger parish less than three miles from each other, would not, even by the measure of the reforming Victorians, have been found wanting.¹¹

While the charge of non-residence from 1761-1764 must stand, George Austen's non-residence between January of 1801 and his death in January of 1805 is a different matter. His move to Bath, leaving James as his curate in the two Hampshire parishes, was a standard, acceptable and necessary practice in a Church which provided no pensions. Non-residence was preferable to the alternative: retaining the living while being incapable of performing the duty.

It is also inappropriate to accuse George Austen of being a part-time priest because he farmed. Farming was a part of his work, not an alternative to it. The glebe was part of his clerical benefice and part of his responsibility. At the end of the century it provided half his income. Jane Austen reported to her sister that the farm paid three hundred pounds, and later added that her father hoped, by raising his tithes, to obtain six hundred pounds a year.¹² This would have had to support the family of the ailing George Austen in Bath, and provide a stipend for James Austen, curate of Steventon and Deane.

Six hundred pounds a year was a good living—but this was a time when prices had increased by two and three hundred percent because of the wars with France. In earlier and later years times were harder. In 1835 only a third of all livings were worth more than four hundred pounds per annum, another third were worth less than two. (It is doubtful that these figures include glebe income; the focus of the commission which produced them was the commutation of tithes.) Yet Lord Healey argued before the Ecclesiastical commission that four hundred pounds should be a minimum stipend. The expenses of a single cleric were estimated to be between one hundred and fifty and three hundred and fifty pounds a year.¹³ In earlier and equally hard times, George Austen, father of eight, must have needed more than a minimum income. Taking boys as students and boarders was, suggests Park Honan, a way of making use of agricultural produce which fetched low prices elsewhere.¹⁴ Teaching was a usual addition to a thinly-stretched clerical income: it enabled “clergy of more slender fortune . . . to bring up a family,” said one pamphlet addressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury.¹⁵

Yet teaching did not, as MacDonagh insinuates, imply neglect of pastoral duty. He has failed to consider how few souls constituted George Austen’s charge. Park Honan states that there were thirty-three families in Steventon at the end of the century, twenty-four in Deane.¹⁶ No source is noted. The parish register of Deane states that in 1801 there were 131 inhabitants. Unfortunately no figure appears in the Steventon register.

Both parishes were in the Deanery of Basingstoke, in the diocese of Winchester. The registers of Steventon (71M82PR1, 2, 3, 4) and Deane (66M83PR1, 2, 3, 4) are now, with other diocesan records, in the city archives at Winchester.

The parish registers are conveniently in bound volumes. The relevant records are in Steventon register 2, which contains christenings and burials 1730-1812, and register 3, which contains banns and marriages 1754-1812. Deane register 2 contains marriages 1761-1812, banns from 1776-1863. Register 3, a parchment book of 50 leaves, contains baptisms and burials from 1785-1812. The Deane registers also contain a reproduction of a parchment book of 30 leaves dating from 1659-1765. This section has perhaps the most interesting entry of all—a description of the great rains which fell from July 12, 1763, until February 5, 1764, six months before the Reverend Austen and his new bride came to live at Deane rectory.

Next comes a note: “This is a true copy of the old Register from 1738 to 1764.” It is followed by a heading in the same neat hand: “Geo Austen Rector.” All but three of the subsequent entries are in this clear hand, obviously George Austen’s own, until James Austen, Rector of Sherborne St. John, makes his appearance performing a marriage on 27 June, 1793. After this, George Austen disappears from the Deane register until 1795, when he makes two entries. Although his last signature is to be found on a page containing the date 30 October, 1800, his entries between 1795 and 1800 are rare and James Austen’s are common. Evidently George Austen was withdrawing from the life of Deane perhaps because he was not well enough to ride there. The Steventon registers give similar evidence of his

orderly and conscientious attention to duty. The fact that the copy available for study is in typescript makes them less interesting, however.

Leisure, not neglect of his parishioners, left time for George Austen's other pursuits. In order to understand how little demand such small communities made upon even the most conscientious pastor, one needs only to read the registers. A random example, May 1785, shows that George Austen buried Sarah Lovell, widow of Farmer John, privately baptised Mary Martell and subsequently christened her. He also christened Mary Waterman, whom he had baptised in April. (Because of the number of newborns who died, baptism at home in the first days of life was not uncommon.) At Deane no baptisms, christenings, marriages or burials took place. Another sample, March 1795, shows even less activity: Ann Leach, a traveller, was buried at Deane. No babies were born, no couples were married, no parishioner died. Nor were these months atypical. The largest number of entries in any year is fifteen (1765). The median of annual entries is six. Such paucity of activity, together with the frequent recurrence of the same family names, supports the idea that the population of both these rural parishes was small. (It should perhaps be noted that a Jas. Collins, son of Geo. and Sarah, was privately baptised in Steventon in 1789, and that an Elizabeth Woodhouse, daughter of Joseph and Elizabeth, was baptised in Deane in 1775. It is also noticeable that, after James became the incumbent, the registers are less well-kept and the number of those doing duty for the rector increases. James was not the man his father had been.)

The eighteenth century church lacked evangelical fervour and its Bishops were political appointees whose first duty was to support the government in the House of Lords.¹⁷ It possessed, however, an old, established administrative routine.¹⁸ Although its efficiency varied from diocese to diocese and incumbent to incumbent, it did produce documentary evidence of the life, work, and expectations of the dioceses, deaneries and parishes of the Church of England. Thus, in addition to the parish registers, the Archives possess other documents from the period of George Austen's incumbency at Steventon and Deane. These include Act books (21M65A2), Visitation records (21M65B1), Visitation returns (21M65B4), Presentments (21M65B2), and the Bishop's Book (21M65B5/1), which lists the parishes and clergy summoned to attend the Bishop, and is annotated with the details of attendance, fees, and presentments.

Presentments were the reports of the Church wardens. Two wardens were chosen each year, often at Easter. One was appointed by the Vicar, the other by the parishioners. Their duties were unpaid and multifarious. At the end of their year of office they had to report to the diocese, in writing or in person, on the state of their church and its furnishings, the behaviour of their fellow-parishioners, and the dutifulness or otherwise of their parson, clerk and sexton. The only surviving presentment from Steventon states that all was well.

Visitation articles are the questionnaires sent out to clergy in preparation for the diocesan review of parishes by the Bishop or his appointed deputy; such reviews were known as visitations and were supposedly annual with a

primary visitation (major review) every three years. Visitation returns are the parish clergy's responses. Whether these are more illuminating than presentments depends on the articles. The Winchester records are disappointing both in content and completeness. It may be that attendance on the Bishop at his visitation made a written report unnecessary; it may be that deaneries were surveyed in rotation; responses may have been lost or destroyed. Whatever the reason, only one return from Deane, made by William Hillman in 1765, and one from Stevington [*sic*], made by George Austen in 1766, survive. Both are pedestrian.

So are the articles. Were the Church and chancel in repair? Were all necessary things provided for celebrating Divine Service and the Holy Sacrament? Was Divine Service performed twice every Sunday and was the Sacrament administered often enough for all to receive at least three times a year? Was there a register for christenings, marriages and burials as the law required? Was there a terrier? (Not a small dog but a description of the church territory in the parish: its parsonage, gardens, orchard and glebe, buildings and churchyard, with a note of all the pensions and dues belonging to the vicarage.) Was there a curate? What was his stipend? Was it enough? What were the impropriations? (i.e. what did the patron get out of the parish?) Was the curate to request an increase? Was the parsonage in repair? Was the churchyard fenced? Had any dead bodies been removed without a faculty from the ordinary (i.e. permission from the Bishop)? Were there any professed dissenters or any Catholics? Were there any benefactions? Was there any abuse of charity? Had the church officers done their duty?

William Hillman replied "Yes," to the first four questions and the last, "No," to all the rest. George Austen replied in the same vein. "Stevington" had services twice on Sunday and communion three times a year. He had no curate and was resident. (This is interesting; he was at the time living in Deane rectory and apparently thought of Deane and Steventon as a unit; technically he was living in the next parish but one.) There was no terrier; there were no dissenters, no benefactors, no disorderly removal of bodies, no added pews or galleries; all the proper registers were in place and his churchwardens did their duty.

Other visitations certainly took place for in 1788 George Austen received a letter of orders (a summons), "at the primary visitation of the Honorable and Right Reverend Father in God Brownlow, to the parish church of Basingstoke in the county of Southampton." Both Mr. Austen and his churchwardens are shown as having attended. It is likely that they did so on a more regular basis than the few surviving records indicate.

The response of Hinton, rector of Chawton, does survive from 1788 and gives a rather better picture of his parish than is provided for Deane and Steventon by the 1765-1766 returns already quoted. The compass of the parish ground was nine or ten miles, and it contained about 290 souls; five marriages, thirteen births and five deaths had taken place in the past year. (Unless 1787-1788 was a bumper year for occasional duty in Chawton, this suggests it was a considerably more populous parish than Steventon.) Hinton's curate was licensed not to Chawton but to the neighbouring parish.

(Here too, apparently, were two small parishes operating as a unit.) There were no papists or dissenters but the patron, Mr. Knight, supported a school, where Ann Green taught the children of the poor to read and work.

The duty of the clergy, the visitation articles imply, is taking services regularly, keeping records, and supervising the church officers and property. The Evangelicals and the High Churchmen were soon to extend and revivify the Church's vision of its work in the world. George Austen may have belonged to the old order rather than the new: for that it would be unfair to blame him. The surviving documents demonstrate that, though the opportunity for complaint existed, no complaint of him was ever made. In a church where expectations were low, this is less significant than the fact that, by habit, he apparently met requirements which only a later and more exacting age would put in place.

How much he visited, whether he catechised regularly, cannot be determined. His daughters' acquaintance with the needs of his poor parishioners suggests that George Austen did not define his duty as simply the taking of Sunday services.¹⁹ Certainly the parish registers demonstrate that for more than twenty years in Deane, and more than thirty in Steventon, George Austen christened almost every baby, performed almost every wedding and officiated at almost every funeral. He also visited the homes of his parishioners to baptise their newborn infants.

The evidence available does not support MacDonagh's insinuations of worldly or materialistic disregard of clerical function. Rather, it indicates that George Austen was an exemplary clergyman by the standards of an age more demanding than his own. If, as seems likely, his daughter based her ideas of clerical duty on his work in Steventon and Deane, Sir Thomas Bertram's insistence on the importance of a resident rector may be Jane Austen's oblique tribute to her father's long and devoted service to the parishes in his charge:

... a parish has wants and claims which can only be known by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. ... he might read prayers and preach ... he might ride over every Sunday ... and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman ... every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own.²⁰

NOTES

¹ Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen Real and Imagined Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 2-3.

² Richard West, *A Sermon preached at the feast of the Corporation of the Sons of the Clergy, Dec. 3, 1700* (London: For S. Smith and B. Walford, 1700), 16.

³ Richard Brown, *Church and State in Modern Britain 1700-1850* (London: Routledge, 1991), 97.

⁴ Peter Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence* (Cambridge: Clark & Co., 1989), 34-35, 173-76.

- ⁵ Bishop's transcripts, Parish Steventon, Bundle 4, Towbridge County Record Office.
- ⁶ Park Honan, *Jane Austen, Her Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 14-17.
- ⁷ Park Honan, 154-55.
- ⁸ William Loe, the Elder, *the joy of Jerusalem and woe of worldlings* (London: T. Haveland for C. Knight and J. Harrison, 1609), sig.H3.
- ⁹ Virgin, 151ff.
- ¹⁰ R. W. Chapman, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, 2nd ed. reprinted (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 90.
- ¹¹ Virgin, 151-60.
- ¹² *Jane Austen's Letters* 81, 103.
- ¹³ Virgin, 93-94.
- ¹⁴ Park Honan, 17.
- ¹⁵ Virgin, 87-99.
- ¹⁶ Park Honan, 27.
- ¹⁷ Norman Sykes, *Church and State in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Bell and Co. for The Historical Association, 1930), 1-5.
- ¹⁸ "The reform of the Church after 1832 was the first thorough administrative overhaul since the Norman Conquest. The Reformation had been concerned with doctrine and liturgy, but day-to-day administration had remained medieval. . . ." A. B. Webster, *Joshua Watson* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954), 78.
- ¹⁹ *Jane Austen's Letters*, 25, 45, 75.
- ²⁰ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, R. W. Chapman, ed., 3rd ed. revised (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 248.