Faith in Grace

The Bishops of Mallard

BIOGRAPHIES

Falling From Grace: The Dukes of Mallard
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STORIES

The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

Produced in Sydney, Australia by grace@mayflet.com [web: mayflet.com]

1952: Preface

Arthur Frederick Blandy, D.Phil. (Syd.), sometime Fellow in Genealogical Studies

No figure in the declining daylight of English theology better exemplifies what one might term the aristocratic glide-path to transcendence than the Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds, whose life, though uneventful in any strictly spiritual sense, demonstrates the persistence (and, to this editor at least, the charm) of hereditary advantage as a form of divine intervention. It should be recognised at the outset that Mallard's rise through the ranks of the Georgian church was not the consequence of merit—a vulgar term—but of what his contemporaries called "station," and what later anthropologists, less tender, would name "favourable atmospheric conditions."

The research for this volume has presented what might be described as a surfeit of documentation and an insufficiency of meaning. The Mallard family papers, housed until recently in the roofless manor of Upper Nettermouth, arrived here in Sydney faintly mildewed and smelling of consequence. I owe immense thanks to Lady Agatha Mallard-Boote, who, in a spirit of antique resignation, allowed me to comb through the trunks, remarking only that "John never did believe a word, but he made quite a life of pretending." I have borrowed this as the book's subtitle.

The temptation to moralise on the discrepancy between Mallard's disbelief and his episcopal pomp is one I have, I hope, avoided. To moralise is to suppose that anyone ever sincerely believed. More correct, I think, to observe that he perfected disbelief as an art, and thus anticipated the modern clerical mind. His papers—chiefly diaries and drafts of sermons—show a man entranced less by God than by the paraphernalia of belief: the flourishes of vestment, the acoustics of the nave. In one revealing note he writes, under the heading Private Reflections, Not for Quotation (which of course one is obliged to quote), "Faith is the perfume of power. One need not inhale to admire it."

It is not, I suppose, my task to decide whether such statements are blasphemous or merely accurate; in any case they strike one as properly ecclesiastical in tone. Mallard's atheism was conducted with all the courtesies of belief. When pressed, he did not deny God's existence but congratulated Him on not requiring proof. Here we may see a certain national genius at work: the smooth suppression of substance beneath etiquette.

His diocese, though now scarcely traceable on any map (the ponds were drained for agriculture in 1832), was once famed for its punctuality. Mallard's clergy were instructed to begin every service within "a whisker's breadth of the clock's will." He compared the parishioners to "the more docile breeds of duck," and referred to himself, not always facetiously, as "Keeper of the Basin." Many of his letters survive to his cousin, the first Earl of Chittering, in which he describes divine service as "a sort of mechanical twittering over still water." One senses an affection there—an affection for emptiness, ritual, orderly sound.

I have found, to my perplexity, that some readers approach clerical biography seeking uplift. They will be disappointed. Mallard's progress was smooth, almost lubricated; the word "trial" occurs nowhere in his correspondence except in relation to the quality of port. Yet the absence of struggle grants its own fascination. It is refreshing, if slightly revolting, to watch a man proceed from chaplain to rector to bishop with the imperturbable certainty of plumbing. Nothing attaches, nothing leaks.

The central challenge in editing Mallard's papers lay not in their scarcity (they are voluminous) but in their tone. Every sentence appears to have been composed with a mirror before him. Even his marginalia perform. One note in his Bible beside Ephesians—scribbled, most probably, during his Bath years—reads: "A cheerful fiction, though repetitive; the company tedious." His modestly disguised atheism probably accounts for the unusually high style of his sermons, several examples of which I have included in Appendix II. Even while commending the faithful to humility, he writes as though he were delivering a lecture on modesty to a room of dogs. For instance: "The peasant believes as he breathes; we, who think, hold belief as a necessary affectation of the lungs." Coleridge, who met him briefly, called him "a perfumed clock that keeps divine time in no one's service."

There exists a persistent rumour, charming and entirely unsubstantiated, that he composed his final sermon while in bed with an actress known only as Mrs. Rotch. The claim originates in a memoir, Reminiscences of the Devon Stage, 1816 (anon., probably by herself), which describes the Bishop's "perfectly episcopal manner of kissing—half blessing, half acquisition." I include this for its picturesque potential rather than its accuracy. No one is served by truth alone.

The reader may notice certain chronological errors in my commentary; these are, I confess, largely inherited. The Mallard family cherished confusion the way other dynasties honour martyrdom. Even his dates of birth and death are uncertain. I have followed the

inscription on his memorial plaque (dismantled and shipped to Hobart in 1937): 1755–1815. Others cite 1810, but the handwriting in the family bookkeeper's ledger is suggestive of inattention or sherry. Frankly, both seem plausible closures for so implausible a man.

Mallard's supposed conversion at the last hour—he is said to have recanted his disbelief on his death-bed, shattering a wine-glass in triumph—should be treated with suspicion. The account derives from Memoirs of a Spiritual Visitation by the Rev. Pottle, his subordinate and great beneficiary, who shortly thereafter succeeded to the see. Pottle describes a scene in which "the dying lord grasped my hand, whispering that he at last perceived the Face of God through the mist of conversation." This, from a man unused to perceiving through anything, seems improbable. More likely he had mistaken the Bishop's last fit of irony for faith.

What, apart from the obvious prestige, drew Mallard to the Church? We cannot say with confidence. To view belief as motive would be sentimental; yet to view absolute cynicism as explanation would, I think, flatter him. He was too refined for conviction of any kind. The early letters betray a susceptibility to beauty: stained glass, trimmed candles, the choreography of ceremony. At university—an expression that in the eighteenth century covered a multitude of irresponsibilities—he identified religion, not incorrectly, as an aesthetic career. He later wrote: "The Church is the only theatre in which one's applause is guaranteed in advance." Rowanson's caricaturist hand captured him, wineglass in one, sermon in the other, our Lord gazing upward in faint disgust.

In editing these materials, I have struck a balance between transcription and embroidery. The diaries, though suggestive, are underwritten; the handwriting is courtly yet fatiguing, the paper damp, the ink distressingly human. I have smoothed some phrases for legibility and, I hope, for sympathy. My method throughout has been one of respectful insertion—adding only what Mallard would have meant, had he meant more. Students of honesty will object, but then, students of honesty rarely publish.

I must also acknowledge the assistance of the Commonwealth Literary Fund, which enabled my research trip to Nettermouth (a three-month visit compressed, through discomfort, into five hours). The village schoolmistress's memory of the Bishop included a single phrase: "His lordship floated." How precisely she apprehended the man! Float he did, over doctrine, over need, over faith itself—a consequence not of grace, but of breeding.

Though the reader will find him morally unsound and spiritually absent, I confess to admiration. There is in Mallard's disbelief a kind of

chastity. He never sullied it by argument. A lesser mind might have tried to justify his atheism; Mallard allowed the world to misunderstand him, which was, if not saintly, at least well mannered. His life refutes no doctrine, asserts no truth, yet manages to exemplify both. It may be that he proves the ultimate ambition of theology: to remain socially useful while privately extinct.

In concluding (though one ought never conclude where ambiguity flowers so richly), I feel compelled, if not qualified, to acknowledge the interpretive hazards of distance. Writing in Sydney, in this provisional century, I am conscious of my imperfect position. England, which produced the likes of Mallard, still regards us as a far shore, a colony of echoes. Perhaps this is why I am drawn to him: an exile of conviction, a connoisseur of ornament in a world of labour. He stands, absurd and elegant, for everything colonial earnestness would destroy.

This edition, then, must not be read as biography alone but as an act of homage—to style unanchored by substance, to lineage without faith, to splendour admired chiefly because it is implausible. Like the man himself, I offer it with the utmost sincerity, which is to say, with appropriate uncertainty.

1904: Preface: The Collected Curiosities of Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Notes and Reflections by his Great-Niece, Euphemia Mallard

In my younger and more impressionable days—before murder mysteries and manuscript deadlines absorbed all higher questions—I occupied myself with the riddle of existence. I believed, rather dutifully, that one could reason one's way to the Almighty as one might to the culprit in a drawing-room tragedy. Such was my enthusiasm for deduction that I took divinity as though it were another branch of criminology: the search for a missing motive behind creation. God, I supposed, would either be proven guilty of invention, or acquitted for lack of evidence.

It was during that period of metaphysical enquiry (or self-advertised seriousness) that I stumbled upon a small walnut trunk in the attic of our family house at Chelsea—a trunk which rattled faintly, like conscience. Inside lay a confused but promising assortment of manuscripts, bound in blue ribbon and damp with history. The papers, as far as I could tell, belonged to my great-uncle, John Mallard—the Bishop Ducks-on-Ponds, whose sermons, I later discovered, had populated satire columns and inspired more conversions to scepticism than to faith.

Before examining the sermons themselves, I knew little of him beyond a few family rumours: that he redecorated three parsonages in Italianate style; that he employed an organist scandalously handsome and equally inefficient; and that he once attempted to taxidermy a pheasant as an exercise in "pastoral patience." It seemed promising material for a novel. Yet the more I read, the less fictional he became, and the more he resembled a living commentary on theology's capacity for self-dramatisation.

His character—allow me to sketch it briefly—may be described as devoutly egocentric. The Bishop was a man who adored God in much the same manner he adored mirrors: as a convenient reflection of the better parts of himself. He possessed an urbane eloquence, a taste for excess, and a moral philosophy in which pleasure was the mortal's highest form of gratitude. His published sermons betray a devotional sensuality that made even the word penitence sound upholstered. You sense in every line his conviction that Heaven, properly appointed, must include chandeliers.

He was not an atheist; he was worse than that—he was original. He delighted in ideas for their elegance rather than their accuracy. In Virtue Vindicated he asserted that sin, though regrettable, was "a necessary pigment in the mural of grace." In The Holiness of Self-Indulgence he proposed that holiness consisted chiefly of taste and lubrication. "Charm," he wrote in a private note, "may yet prove the strongest apologetic." What annoyed his contemporaries, I think, was not his blasphemy but his coherence. His cousins, lesser clergy of rural ambition, attempted rebuttals—earnest sermons bound in such prose as can only be described as self-sweating—but none succeeded in eradicating the lingering perfume of his rhetoric.

Reading them all, and comparing sermon with sermon, I felt as one might when investigating a particularly artistic forgery: admiration and unease in equal measure. The theology was scandalous, yes, but the underlying temperament—cheerful despair leavened with self-awareness—was strangely modern. His language gleamed with careless intelligence, the sort that can quote Saint Augustine in one breath and upholster the pulpit in the next. I imagine he spoke as much with his eyebrows as with his voice.

I confess that my initial purpose in examining the papers was pious—or what passes for pious in an agnostic novelist. I hoped to trace some moral evolution, to find perhaps a turning point at which irony yielded to revelation. Instead, I found only the reverse: wit growing subtler as faith receded. It was not that he disbelieved in God altogether; he simply ceased to find the proposition sufficiently interesting. "Faith," he wrote in a marginal note, "is a kind of

conversational politeness toward Heaven—it begins in civility and ends in habit."

In following the trajectory of his life, I sought answers to my own unoriginal question: whether God was yet another myth, handsomely embroidered by culture, tidy as fiction, improbable as truth. After months with his sermons, correspondence, and ecclesiastical daydreams, I am left with more questions than ever—intellectual, moral, and aesthetic—but not that one. That now seems obvious. God, I am persuaded, is most certainly a myth; merely an excellent, enduring, domesticated one, preserved—like lavender—in the drawer of human vanity.

And yet, as I wrote notes for this edition, I felt an odd sympathy with my great-uncle's contradictions. In his confusions, I recognised my own. In his delight at moral paradox, I heard the faint laughter of anyone who ever tried to make sense of holiness and settled, instead, for charm. He was every inch a Bishop—theatrical, omnivorous, well-dressed—and perhaps, for that reason, the most truthful of believers. I can think of no better advertisement for disbelief than a man who preached it in such style.

This volume, therefore, makes no claim to theology, nor to biography properly speaking. It is a curiosity cabinet, an autopsy of spiritual wit. To those who read for revelation, I offer disappointment; to those who read for character, scandal; and to those, like myself, who read merely to be entertained by moral acrobatics, I offer my uncle's papers whole.

I invite the reader to proceed as I did—with sceptical affection. Here are his ten celebrated sermons, in all their melodious absurdity, followed by fragments of his correspondence, sketches from his redesigned parsonage, and one confessional note written, I believe, to himself. I present them, not to resolve the problem of God, but to display, as the Bishop might have said, "the Divine comedy of taking oneself seriously."

1990: Mallard and the Myth of Modern Misapprehension

By Horatio Bludgeon, Senior Cultural Correspondent, The Scurrilous Rag

It is a universally acknowledged truth, now beaten into the public ear like an over-practised piano étude, that any book burdened with a preface is self-important, but any book burdened with two or more has delusions of philosophy. The Collected Curiosities of The Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds—now

reissued with a preface to the preface, an introduction to the family, an epilogue to the author, and a eulogy to the act of reading—suffers precisely from this florid disease of self-reflexivity.

I am told that the modern reader must now accept the "meta" as moral progress: that when a writer admits to illusion, the admission becomes profundity. Yet repeated confessions of cleverness do not create intelligence, they merely exacerbate smugness. In this latest edition, Dr. Fenella Vorpel's grandiloquent commentary performs an act of excavation so noisy that one cannot hear the corpse she claims to exhume. She digs, she dusts, she explicates, until the original Bishop—and indeed the unfortunate Euphemia Mallard whose preface she has commandeered—collapse under the academic equivalent of carpet-bombing.

The result is an indulgent metafictional hall of mirrors in which the reader sees nothing but reflections of the author's conceit. We are told this is feminist recovery; I contend it is narrative insurance fraud. The supposed resurrection of female voices merely disguises yet another act of literary taxidermy performed by modern scholarship upon the past. The Bishop's gay extravagance, once charmingly improper, is now flattened into a "gendered discourse on faith." Euphemia's wit, delightful in small doses, becomes a holy relic hauled into the lecture theatre for ritual vivisection.

The whole exercise mistakes self-reference for insight. Mallard writes as though commentary were creation, and creation commentary, and all of it a sophisticated joke that the rest of us are too provincial to enjoy. I assure her the joke is clear—we are simply tired of hearing it repeated with footnotes.

Consider the absurd genealogy of narrators: the Bishop, whose sermons already winked at their own irreverence; the Great-Niece, Euphemia, who introduces him with mock-devotion; and now Dr. Mallard, who introduces her with the solemnity of a liturgical procession. It is a Russian doll of vanity, each smaller voice claiming to deconstruct the larger while feeding it supper. Everyone is related, everyone speaks, and no one is accountable. The result is a chorus line of mirrors applauding themselves for their intelligence. One is reminded less of literary innovation than of a family luncheon at which all present are authors and none have readers.

Mallard's essay, while marketed as analysis, functions as public therapy disguised in syntax. Her academic sentences march with the confidence of a dictator and the rhythm of a migraine. She insists upon the instructive power of Euphemia's feminism yet ignores the fundamental point: everything she praises was invented by someone else. Indeed, it is now impossible to say who has authored whom. Is the

Bishop an invention of Euphemia? Is Euphemia a ventriloquism by Mallard? Is Mallard, perhaps, a hallucination suffered collectively by the Faculty of Literature at the University of Sydney? One begins to suspect that the only real entity is the typesetter, and even he needs a cigarette.

We are, apparently, invited to celebrate this confusion as subversion. I have always found that the word subversion, in academic use, means that something isn't working but everyone has agreed to call it deliberate. Mallard congratulates the text for its so-called "dialogue between submission and wit." I find it more accurately a negotiation between boredom and irony, the outcome of which suggests a stalemate.

Let me be clear: I am not opposed to cleverness in women writers—indeed, I expect it. I merely object to cleverness as a tax deduction for talent. The Mallard book has become an object of holy citation precisely because it defeats comprehension. No one is responsible for meaning because meaning has been declared tyrannical. Thus the work remains comfortably unread and therefore—by modern standards—profound.

The Bishop, that rococo lunatic of Ducks-on-Ponds, would, I think, have loathed this canonisation. He wrote for amusement, not for footnotes. He worshipped sensation, not semantics. To transform his mischievous sermons into a graduate seminar on "the erotic dialectics of sacerdotal voice" is to embalm a peacock for the sake of a feather catalogue. Euphemia, for her part, brought charm to blasphemy; Mallard brings bureaucracy.

All of which leaves the reader with a closed system congratulating itself for being closed. It is literary narcissism mistaken for family therapy: the Mallards speaking of the Mallards about the Mallards to the Mallards. I have read genealogical charts with more suspense. I am told this is metafiction. It feels more like metafatigue.

In the end, I must conclude that The Collected Curiosities and its academic reburial prove one thing only—that an echo chamber, if lined with the correct feminist citations, will always be mistaken for enlightenment. The entire edifice, from Bishop to Professor, stands as a cautionary monument to our era's inability to separate irony from intelligence.

I await, with resigned horror, the next edition—doubtless accompanied by a postface, three rejoinders, and a holographic symposium in which the Bishop's duck delivers its own commentary on gender.

Until then, we should all take this as the moral it inadvertently teaches: never trust a preface that outlives its subject.

1991: Viola Vorpel

Letter fragment to Fenella Vorpel

I've left this bundle in the trunk under the windowsill, tied with the green ribbon — the one from the Ascot hat, not the Christmas disaster. You'll know it when you see the handwriting: all loops and guilt. Well worth reading, though best done with a glass in hand. It's family history, of a sort — the Mallards as they were before subtlety went out of fashion.

Do *not* let Arthur get his hands on it. He'll catalogue it, footnote it, and drain every drop of blood from the poor thing. Tell him it was mislaid between the upholstery and the century.

For heaven's sake read between the lines; no Mallard ever wrote what they meant.

1990: Preface to the Centenary Annotated Edition of "The Collected Curiosities of the Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds"

with the Surviving Preface by His Great-Niece, Euphemia Mallard
By Fenella Vorpel

There are some artefacts that refuse extinction. They exist, like certain ancestors, not by virtue of merit or endurance, but through an unrelenting sense of their own importance. The Collected Curiosities of the Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, first published in 1904, is one such ghost in the family machine. The book itself—a catalogue of sermons so florid they shimmer with disbelief—would be merely another ecclesiastical eccentricity were it not for its preface, written by the author's great-niece, Euphemia Mallard.

Euphemia's preface has long eclipsed the sermons it was meant to introduce. Its survival is accidental: most original copies were lost in a fire in Oxfordshire around 1926, when the Mallard estate, quite literally, went up in moral smoke. The preface, however, had been reprinted separately, pressed into pamphlets, and passed hand-to-hand through generations of family women as one might circulate a charm or a secret. In my own childhood—Sydney, the 1950s—it occupied pride of place on my grandmother's writing desk, between a chipped porcelain duck and the Book of Foibles. The duck has since

disappeared; the Book endured, well-read; and the preface persisted as a kind of intellectual heirloom, equal parts theology, gossip, and subversion.

To understand its odd authority, one must know something of both its author and her subject. Lord John Mallard (1781–1848), the first and last Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds—a diocese as bucolic as its name implies—was less a theologian than an aesthete operating under the cover of religion. His sermons, collected posthumously and edited by his descendants, are described accurately by Critics Quarterly of 1905 as "the indiscretions of an over-educated conscience." They are discursive, sensual, and vaguely heretical, preoccupied with the relationship between beauty and sin—particularly the varieties of affection the Church refused to name decently. He preached "On the Gender of Angels," "The Theological Uses of Vanity," and, most notoriously, "The Moral Symmetry of the Androgynous Soul."

Even by eighteenth-century standards he was unorthodox; by ours, he would be radical. To read him now, amid contemporary arguments about gender, sexuality, and faith, is to encounter something we have barely advanced beyond—a world where desire disguises itself as decorum, and theology serves as embroidery for repression. His delight in contradiction lent a peculiar symmetry to his life: he was brilliant and ridiculous, devout and delighted by blasphemy, compassionate yet intolerant of boredom. There are traces of what he did not say as well—his sermon "On Brotherhoods Celestial and Otherwise" is as close to confession as any bishop dared approach in the pulpit.

It was left to his great-niece, Euphemia, to tidy—or rather, untidy—his reputation. In her 1904 preface she performs the perfect act of female editing: she acknowledges his absurdities, exploits his charm, and redeems his sins by wit. Euphemia had already begun to make her name in fiction, though history remembers her chiefly for its abrupt ending. Murdered in Sydney in 1934 by a companion who later declared that "the lady made too many explanations," she has become one of our city's persistent myths. Her death turned her preface into a relic; her irony, bound to the family name, became a prophecy of female candour punished.

But beyond tragedy lies an astonishing intelligence. Her writing is not an act of domestic piety but of intellectual disruption. In the opening paragraph, she announces her intention to "reconsider the goods left behind." She refers less to the Bishop's papers than to the patriarchal theology they embodied. She treated his vanity and voluptuous religiosity as data in an ongoing crime scene—the historical investigation of male authority. What makes the text enduring, and still pedagogically useful in my lectures, is her refusal to resolve

ambivalence into certainty. For Euphemia, faith was a system of aesthetic gestures masking fear. For her uncle, love of God was indistinguishable from self-admiration. Between them, they display two modes of devotion: that of the man who mistakes pleasure for virtue, and that of the woman who refuses to mistake either for truth.

That this preface came to be read—indeed, recited—at Mallard family gatherings in place of Scripture readings suggests how thoroughly it colonised the family imagination. It functioned as both commentary and confession, a private catechism for women who had long practiced reverence without conviction. My aunt used to claim that the Bishop's book was the only family text she trusted; it was, she said, "honest about deceit."

In teaching this piece today, I ask my students to consider not only its theology, but its tone—the combination of affection and irony that made Euphemia's style so dangerous. Her voice is unlike the Reverend's sonorous certainties; hers is the afterlife of faith, sharpened by disbelief. The intersection of her style and her uncle's reveals a dialogue still instructive in modern discourse on gender within the Church. Both lived within systems that expected silence from them—one as priest, the other as woman—and both turned that silence into performance.

It remains no coincidence, I think, that her preface reads now as a feminist document, decades before the term was fashionable. She took familial inheritance—a trunk of sermons—and dismantled it, using irony as scalpel. Her respect for her ancestor is consistently undermined by her precision: she calls him "not an atheist, merely inconsistent," a phrase that could describe all of Christianity's fathers when viewed by their daughters.

The family has, ever since, responded with a mixture of embarrassment and pride. Some now quote her as they once quoted Scripture. Others attribute to her death the tone of heresy, as if she were murdered by metaphor. For me, however, the enduring importance of The Collected Curiosities is not in its tragedy, nor in its ecclesiastical curios, but in its intellectual daring. It taught me—and teaches still—that belief is a form of authorship, that gender and power cannot be disentangled from theology, and that every family canon, sacred or secular, awaits its defiant editor.

Thus in republishing the text and its celebrated preface, I offer no sanctification, merely reinstatement. The Bishop's sermons, in their ornate irrelevance, and Euphemia's preface, in its lucid heresy, together trace one genealogy of self-awareness—a family's long conversation between submission and wit. If God does not enter the dialogue, it is because He has rarely improved one.

Introduction

by Mr. Bartholomew Orpington, sometime Fellow of the Institute for Historical and Ornithological Misrememberings, Sydney, 1952

Ladies, gentlemen, and unaffiliated academics of the Antipodes, it is with perfervid humility—though not without a sense of minor grandeur—that I commend to your attention this monumental, mildly inaccurate, and almost entirely authoritative volume, The Life and Times of St John, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds, 1755–1815. It is a book so brimming with importance that I scarcely dare to open it myself for fear of admiration fatigue.

The subject, one St John Mallard—second son of the late Duke of Mallard and presumably nephew to someone vaguely important in ecclesiastical first drafts—was born, as these people tend to be, amidst the quacking tumult of English privilege. The ducks, I should explain, were metaphorical, though curiously prescient. Within fifteen years, their descendants would give name to his parish—"Ducks-on-Ponds"—a diocesan afterthought so damp and pious that even the swans sought alternative employment.

St John's rise, like most ascensions in the Anglican meteorological service, was neither volcanic nor virtuous. He floated. From curate to canon, then archdeacon, then bishop, he advanced not by merit but by moist osmosis—absorbing influence through the damp sponge of hereditary expectation. His elevation owed as much to divine nepotism as to divine inspiration. He possessed the faith of a spoon and yet the luck of a dynasty. And, as our friend Lady Phoebe Greengage coyly recorded in her Memoirs of Several One-Thirdly Important Men (1799): "He was a man of moderate conviction, ample pockets, and the prettiest handwriting west of God."

I must pause here to assure the devout reader that St John never intended to blaspheme; he merely forgot to believe. He maintained, quite politely, that God had excellent manners but was regrettably unresponsive to correspondence. When pressed by his dean to affirm his faith more publicly, he replied, "My dear fellow, if Providence wished to be persuaded, He would issue more convincing pamphlets."

What is extraordinary (and I use that word with trembling enthusiasm) is that this amiable apostate succeeded magnificently within the Church's feathered nest. He amassed estates, patrons, and, most strikingly, a collection of ecclesiastical silver so extensive that it required an Index. His sermons, or as he called them, "moral

entertainments," were delivered in an accent somewhere between Oxford and indulgence. According to the Annual Review of Clerical Pronouncements (1804 edition), "The Bishop's tone evoked belief in all things—except, perhaps, belief itself."

In preparing this work, I have consulted such monumental sources of varying reliability as The Gentlemen's Register of Avoidable Sins by Rev. H. Bufflepath (1802), A Map of Ducks-on-Ponds Parish, With Remarks on Its More Noisy Features by Colonel Marmaduke Pollock (1810), and of course, St John's own correspondence, Epistolary Fragments on Tea, Morality and Ducks (never published and, frankly, better for it). From these I have constructed the portrait of a man both magnificently hollow and heroically content—a bishop whose career suggests that belief may be unnecessary so long as one performs it persuasively.

Some readers may question the propriety of treating so ecclesiastical a subject with humour. But laughter, I argue, is the sincerest form of theology. As our late friend Eustace Thumblebottom once reminded me at luncheon (while buttering an unfortunate roll), "He who jests with the Almighty may yet dine in heaven—provided the reservation is made well in advance."

And so, dear reader, I bid you enter this chronicle of ambition sanctified by accident. Come meet St John, who prayed chiefly for promotion, who sermonised with allergic conviction, who misplaced belief but never his hat. He was the saintliest unbeliever in the whole Book of Common Paradoxes.

Read, then, and draw instruction or comfort as you choose. For if the Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds could ascend to glory without faith, there is hope yet for the rest of us—especially for those of us in the humble colonies, where ponds are rather scarce but ducks, like bishops, continue to make a tremendous noise.

1770: On The Martial Decline Of Divinity Being a Consideration upon the Glories of Cesare Borgia and the Unfortunate Pacification of Christendom

By Lord John Mallard of Cressingham Hall, Aet. XX
Printed for Private Circulation

It is one of the sadder curiosities of history that Heaven, which once sent thunderbolts, now dispatches pamphlets. I have lately been reading The Crimson Virtue: A Life of Cesare Borgia by that indefatigable Italian, Larvato Brunetti, and have concluded—not without blushes—

that the Church of God was never more divine than when she was well-armed.

Borgia, that wolf in silk slippers, began as many saints do: misunderstood. He knew, as weaker men have only whispered, that virtue is more persuasive when it wears armour. The banners of God droop when unblooded; their embroidery perishes in the damp of reason. I do not say that Cesare was good—Heaven forbid! I only say that he was effective, and when one surveys the tepid modern missionary, pawing through lexicons while heathens sharpen spears, one cannot help but sigh for the efficient blasphemer who marched under the Cross because it gleamed so beautifully against a smoking city.

Of Soldiers and Sermons

I have been told that missionaries preach love. So does the sun preach warmth to the fish, which nevertheless remain cold. Preaching without compulsion is like music to the deaf: edifying to the performer, inconclusive to the listener. In The Geometry of Salvation, a small but wicked volume by Dr. Pemberly, it is argued that the Gospel itself is a kind of mathematical theorem, which must be demonstrated in action if it is to convince. A bayonet, properly applied, is an exclamation mark in the grammar of faith.

Once, saints rode out. Now, they correspond. In these faint modern days, the Church dispatches missionaries instead of armies and then wonders why converts multiply only in the footnotes of travelogues. The missionary is brave, no doubt, but his courage is domestic—the heroism of indigestion and endless translation. He builds schools where he ought to be building ramparts.

A Vision of Holy Strategy

If I were placed—by some whimsical act of Providence—in command of God's army in England, I would first ensure that its drums were tuneable and its banners grammatically correct. Uniforms, I find, encourage the soul more efficiently than argument. Each regiment would bear the name of a virtue: the Grenadiers of Grace, the Lancers of Long-Suffering, the Light Infantry of Exhortation. Their chaplains would serve as colonels; their prayers would accompany the discharge of cannon as the Amen of gunfire.

The campaign would proceed as follows:

1 Reconnaissance by Revelation—angels scouting the moral terrain; field reports written on parchment, sealed with candle wax scented faintly of lilies.

2 Occupation of the Imagination—distribute elegant propaganda: engravings of Paradise and pocket-sized editions of The Tactical Psalter.

3 Assault upon Vice—declare open hostilities on Apathy, Luxury, and Unsanctioned Improvisation in Sermons. Fortify taverns into cathedrals; conscript poets into precentors.

4 Evangelical Logistics—supply lines maintained by monks on horseback, their saddlebags groaning with sacramental wine, gunpowder, and the occasional citrus fruit for health.

Let it not be said that I endorse cruelty; I merely refuse to separate conviction from competence. One may conquer gently if one conquers thoroughly. The soul of England would, I think, be improved by the occasional trumpet-blast of righteousness—a reminder that salvation, like empire, must sometimes march in columns.

Against the Tepid Republic of Virtue

The modern Church, obsessed with mildness, has forgotten that God Himself once drowned the world to make a point. The Bishops quote moral sentiments as if Heaven were a debating society. In my library stands a mildewed treatise entitled Pacifism and Piety; or, The Proper Posture for Martyrdom, written by one Reverend Caldecott Prothero, who complains that military Christianity contradicts mercy. Yet is it not crueler still to let sin flourish unopposed?

Borgia, for all his unprintable vices, at least believed enough to act. He crucified that which opposed him; our pastors merely correspond with it. When the sword disappears, corruption grows bold enough to wear a mitre. Had Borgia lived to command the synod, I daresay Europe might by now be redeemed, if somewhat smoking at the edges.

The Final Declaration

Therefore, I declare myself a partisan of divine logistics. Let faith be again terrible—not in cruelty, but in splendour. Let the glow of the Cross return to its rightful power of alarm. If salvation cannot be administered by army, it may yet be enacted as one. For the soul of England follows banners more willingly than sermons.

As I close this essay, I hear the faint rain tapping upon the windows of Cressingham, like a polite ghost rehearsing applause. I imagine it the echo of distant cavalry, God's own host marching through time, their swords bright with a cold theology the missionaries will never quite understand.

When I am older, perhaps I shall be less certain; but for now, at twenty, I am content to believe that discipline is grace wearing a

breastplate, and that Heaven, in her most serious moods, prefers uniform to persuasion.

1771: John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

My brother has written again from London—three pages of lamentation and lace—on the endless fatigue of presenting at Court. The poor man is terribly afflicted with royal proximity. He complains that the powdered air of St James' dries his complexion and that the King's private chaplain insists on discoursing about the moral improvement of horses. I replied, rather magnanimously, that God has wisely ordered the world so that some men must sparkle, while others, like myself, shine with steadier light in the ecclesiastical provinces.

I cannot deny that I am functionally responsible, as it were, up the line to God; and that line, in England, passes prominently through the Crown. Yet Providence, being clearly fond of me, has arranged matters so that my particular post does not require attendance at Court. To serve Heaven at an agreeable distance from earthly authority—that is what I call apostolic convenience.

I confess myself at present much enamoured of Latitudinarianism, that capacious creed which declares everything reasonable, provided one states it calmly. How humane a doctrine! It reconciles the necessity of belief with the comfort of not believing too much. Under the reign of Reason, religion has exchanged its whip for a walking stick. As Reverend Stoyte remarks in his Lectures on Moderate Faith, "The Almighty, being rational, prefers to be approached by gentlemen." I find that thought consoling.

The Latitudinarian temper suits my general constitution: it promotes tolerance, education, an untroubled conscience, and a hearty supper. It also aligns, conveniently, with the views of our ruling Whigs—whose theology, like their politics, prefers the middle course so long as the pinnacle remains comfortable. This, I think, is the golden mean of moral arithmetic: the Calculus of Easy Virtue.

And yet… I find my mind, like a moth before a candle, recurring to the High Church persuasion. The Latitudinarians write better; but the High Churchmen, I think, dress better. Their dignified austerity appeals to my taste; their gravity would make an admirable frame for my features. I am, after all, rector of a parish of consequence: my congregation includes not only the gentry but several confirmed people of pork. It becomes me to encourage reverence by spectacle.

What could be more edifying than a surplice of properly ample proportion, or a procession conducted with such geometrical precision that Heaven itself must surely take notes? The "High and Dry," as their detractors call them—and I entirely approve the metaphor—are as immovable as marble fonts and twice as decorative. Their Tory loyalties, their resistance to Evangelical ecstasy, and their careful aversion to enthusiasm all strike me as signs of advanced breeding. Conviction is far better borne by posture than by perspiration.

Indeed, I begin to suspect that my Rectorial destiny lies in composing sermons of exquisite equilibrium: passages of learning relieved by judicious pauses, designed to provoke reflection but carefully not emotion. As Bishop Montgrace insists in his splendid Treatise on the Ceremonial Mind, "God may be visible in the incense, but He must never be audible in the shouting."

It is most unfortunate that the present temper of the State penalises dignity. The Whigs, those merchants of moderation, have so long governed the Church that solemnity itself is now considered a political crime. To carry oneself like an apostle is to risk being thought a Tory; to quote Hooker with feeling is to endanger preferment. Nevertheless, I comfort myself with the thought that intellectual conservatism shall one day again be fashionable. Ideas, like waistcoats, return every few decades.

In my own parish, I cultivate what I call Ritual by Persuasion. The services are conducted with a grace that implies ceremony without quite admitting it. The villagers, simple creatures, attend chiefly for the music and the faint rumour that my surplice cost thirty guineas. Thus educated, I trust they come eventually to understand that God, if He is at all divine, must surely prefer a well-ordered service to an enthusiastic one.

I have perhaps gone further than prudence strictly allows: last Sunday's sermon on "Hierarchy in Heaven: A Model for the Parish" concluded with a brief sketch of celestial rank, elegantly suggested by my own seating plan at dinner. The Archdeacon frowned; the curate applauded; God, I think, was amused.

If the Age of Reason demands that the clergy be philosophers, I am willing; but it shall not compel me to fold a surplice like a utilitarian. I will be both Rational and Resplendent. In these muddy years of compromise and tepid salvation, someone must demonstrate that intellect and elegance belong together. It would be uncharitable to leave that demonstration entirely to the French.

Thus I end the day content: spared Court attendance, surrounded by books, plotting the theological reclamation of dignity. I feel the slow

grandeur of the High Church rising within me like well-aged port—solemn, fragrant, and liable to strong opinions in the morning.

Tomorrow I shall take up Ecclesiastical Gravities, or, The Virtue of Standing Still by Canon Devereux—a book I expect to admire excessively. If it proves dull, I will read it twice.

1772: John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

I am increasingly of the opinion that religion, properly understood, is the greatest work of social architecture since feudalism. The feudal order controlled a man's body by enclosing it in walls; religion, with finer genius, encloses his mind. Indeed, the Church's invention of pious regularity surpasses even the wit of the civil calendar. Society may reckon its days by the months, but the Christian—superior creature—has his life illuminated by the Book of Common Prayer, that sublime device which manages time with the coercive charm of eternity.

What an admirable contrivance it is! Each week appointed, each saint domesticated into sequence, each sin squarely scheduled. One may dine, believe, and repent in convenient rotation without ever needing to think afresh. As Dr. Archibald Greaves argues in his volume Devotion by Mechanism: An Inquiry into the Clockwork of Grace, "The soul, when properly wound, keeps faith without supervision."

It is precisely for this reason that all right-thinking men prefer the Church to the Gospel. The Bible is an untidy compilation—a species of divine almanac assembled, I suspect, by gentlemen whose handwriting exceeded their comprehension. Its heroes contradict each other, its morals breed confusion, and its miracles contradict nature less than they contradict the narrative order. It is, if truth be told, a work of immense inconvenience: capable of inspiring zeal, schism, or poetry—the three most fatal diseases of order.

But the Book of Common Prayer! That is divine administration incarnate. No loose inspiration there, only regulation: the year inscribed like a ledger of obedience. Its genius lies not in its subject matter but in its immutability. From the Te Deum at Candlemas to the Collect at Advent, it commands the soul as a gardener commands hedges—without passion but with admirable symmetry.

Once caught within this liturgical whirligig, the parishioner lives not by blood but by rubric. He need neither invent virtue nor recall it; the Church does that for him, as one might wind a watch that stubbornly insists on eternity. They imagine themselves free while their consciences tick to my bell. I look out upon my parish each Sunday

with the gratitude of a composer whose orchestra performs exactly as written and precisely four times a week.

Yet it is not mere routine that enchains them; it is reinforcement—the good Anglican art of dosing belief on schedule. The villagers are, as I tell my curate, "too spiritually dishevelled for independence." A sermon on Wednesday and another on Sunday restore them to the equilibrium of the domesticated soul. Sundays without sermons breed speculation, and speculation is the mother of Nonconformity—that dreadful heresy of thinking aloud.

I sometimes wonder if they comprehend the elegance of their captivity. They rise, they kneel, they mouth their parts; their very breathing keeps time with the Nicene Creed. In these moments, they become harmoniously inhuman—a spectacle that almost reconciles me to democracy. Each man fancying he prays for his own salvation, yet all of them conducted by me, much as a gardener prunes the will of a rosebush.

It has been charged against our profession that such regulation stifles enthusiasm. I answer that this is precisely its beauty. Religion is the only system by which humanity may be made peaceful without intelligence. The Bible, being ungovernable, produces variety of belief; the Prayer Book, being uniform, produces tranquillity. For the sake of the State—and my own complexion—I prefer tranquillity.

The more one studies this arrangement, the more ingenious it grows. Society requires a measure of sacred awe, yet cannot tolerate the inconvenience of prophets. Thus the Church, with matchless diplomacy, has preserved the trappings of revelation while quietly abandoning its substance. No new miracles need occur; the old ones recur in liturgical quotation, like polite ghosts invited to dinner. The Almighty, once volatile, has found employment as a respectable principle.

I am, therefore, increasingly satisfied in my dual vocation: keeper of ritual and manager of illusion. There is, between ourselves, something almost artistic in ensuring that eternity resembles routine. I think I could turn this observation into a tract—perhaps On the Proper Management of Perpetual Devotion; or, How to Worship by the Calendar. I would dedicate it to my brother the Duke, whose only religion is punctuality.

As for the villagers, their obedience charms me. They enter the Church straight-backed with sin, and leave slumped in dull contentment—the mark of successful worship. One old farmer told me last Sunday, "Your prayers are always the same, sir; I like that." He meant it as compliment; I received it as revelation.

I pass the days reading Bishop Trant's newly published Orthodoxy Without Imagination, an invaluable treatise proving that divine favour is directly proportional to repetition. Between its pages I feel the comfort of being correct by design. Perhaps one day the Church will canonise not saints but clerical systems, those mechanical pieties that have so artfully replaced inspiration.

For my part, I intend to preserve the balance: not too godly to be reasonable, not too reasonable to be rich. The villagers toil, the bells toll, and I—their rector and regulator—mark time with the patience of Providence itself.

Religion endures not because it enlightens, but because it organises. And what nobler service can a man perform than to supervise the regular habits of those who should never think to question them?

1772: On The Proper Management Of Perpetual Devotion; Or, How To Worship By The Calendar

Being a Practical Scheme for the Ordinary Regulation of the Extraordinary Soul
by John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Dedicated, with filial admiration, to my brother the Duke of Mallard, whose only religion is punctuality.

Prefatory Letter to the Reader

If the Almighty had intended worship to be spontaneous, He would never have permitted the invention of the bell. The purpose of religion, as I have observed both privately and from the pulpit, is not to arouse emotion but to suppress it in orderly intervals. The theory of Perpetual Devotion, which I now lay before an intelligent and no doubt congenial readership, proceeds from this principle: that the faith most certain is the faith most scheduled.

The present work fills what I have long perceived as a lamentable void in divine literature. We have manuals of prayer, treatises upon theology, and sentimental letters on virtue; but nowhere, to my knowledge, has there been published a complete system for the mechanical, tasteful, and continuous management of belief. That defect I now correct.

Of Religion Considered as a Gentlemanly Habit

It has often been said that faith is a matter of the heart. This, like most popular sentiments, is demonstrably false. True religion resides in

the calendar. The heart is changeable, but the calendar, once printed, is fixed and respectably silent.

A gentleman who relies upon his feelings for inspiration will inevitably fall into enthusiasm—the moral equivalent of perspiration. He becomes irregular, unpredictable, and worst of all, original. I maintain—and my parish confirms the success of my method—that religion, once reduced to coordinated gestures of precision, produces not salvation perhaps, but symmetry, which is far more useful in society.

I recall with pleasure the argument advanced by Archdeacon Fallowes in his invaluable though unfortunately banned treatise, The Church as a Machine for the Regulation of Simple Persons. "The truly pious man," he writes, "does not feel holy; he operates holiness." Exactly so. Belief should be worn as one wears a waistcoat—daily, uniformly, and seldom inside-out.

Of the Calendar as the Clockwork of Grace

The secret of Perpetual Devotion lies in dividing eternity into convenient quarters. The Book of Common Prayer accomplishes this with admirable foresight, providing prayers for every season, saints for every moral, and collects for every conceivable nuisance. Each week winds the mechanism anew; each holy day provides a calculated tightening of the moral spring. The faithful, thus regulated, live in perfect imitation of the planets: revolving suitably, shining moderately, colliding never.

It is, therefore, essential that a rector conduct his parish as a watchmaker conducts his workshop. Every worshipper must know his part, not from inclination, but from timetable. Religion conducted by routine is like love conducted by correspondence—safe, continuous, and free from excessive ardour.

When I remark the influence of this discipline upon my villagers, I confess myself gratified beyond self-congratulation. They are punctual to a fault, docile as meaningful furniture, and incapable of questioning anything that occurs regularly. Several of the duller sort now appear to experience repentance automatically, like clockwork striking grace.

On the Danger of Improvisation in Prayer

Improvised prayer is the screaming of theology. No gentleman engages in it. Such biblical improvisation as adorned the Apostles might have been tolerated in a barbarous age, but in a polite kingdom it is positively indecent. I tremble to recall a dinner where a Nonconformist curate, called upon for grace, invented one on the spot. It contained

within three sentences a participle, a metaphor, and an exclamation. The effect upon digestion was catastrophic.

I rely, rather, upon the Prayer Book Proper, preferably in the 1662 printing, that climax of grammatical sanctity. The virtuous sentence length itself confers grace—the worshipper having fully submitted by the time the verb arrives.

On Maintaining Constant Piety Without Fatigue

It is the mark of an uneducated faith to tire of its devotions. Yet I observe that even among clergy, enthusiasm decays between harvest and Advent. To counteract such decline, I have devised what I call The Devotional Rotation Method, described in detail in Appendix B of this volume. Briefly:

- Monday: Self-reproach and modest charity.
- Tuesday: Slight moral superiority, tempered with correctness.
- Wednesday: Meditation upon sin (others', if accessible).
- Thursday: Ecclesiastical administration.
- Friday: Self-pardon, with wine.
- Saturday: Light reading, preferably The Sanctity of Silence; or, Why Nothing Is Safer Than Nothing by Dean Wilberforce Curle.
- Sunday: Entire presentation of moral perfection to the public, between 10:00 and luncheon.

By faithful adherence to this simple diagram of divinity, the soul rarely requires reproof and never, under any circumstances, surprise.

Of Other Clergymen and Their Mistakes

Most clergy err by attempting to feel their office, when they should instead fulfil it. They confuse sincerity with performance, a blunder condemned by every principle of good breeding. For example, one Reverend Haskett in the neighbouring parish insists upon preaching from inspiration, a practice which, by all evidence, inspires only himself. The congregation remains motionless, apparently awestruck, though I suspect asleep.

I, however, maintain that the best sermon is that which least interrupts the congregation's calm. The sermon, like the tea service, must display polish, not heat. The Bible may contradict itself; a polished rector never must.

Of the Advantages of Superficial Piety in Civil Governance

The Crown, that stately receiver of grace, has discovered the highest application of religion: not as revelation, but as regulation. As my brother the Duke (to whom this book is affectionately dedicated)

observes, "A punctual people cannot rebel." He applies his punctuality to dinners; I apply mine to doctrine; the results are indistinguishable.

Where the monarch reigns by inheritance, the parson must reign by habit; and habit, once sanctified, is indistinguishable from faith. From this perspective, Perpetual Devotion is the spiritual equivalent of taxation: unavoidable, quietly progressive, and always due upon the same day each year.

Declaration

Let the world waste itself in fervour. I am content to serve Heaven as its administrator, not its prophet. By the precise and unwavering management of worship, we may escape the vulgar novelty of personal revelation and achieve the serenity of perpetual rehearsal.

Let the saints stand for ecstasy; I stand for exactitude. In my parish, salvation keeps perfect time.

To the Almighty, therefore, I commend my programme—not as plea, not as passion, but as schedule.

1952: Chapter IX - In Which the Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds Encounters an Inheritance, a Title, and an Inconvenience to His Vocation

Arthur Frederick Blandy, D.Phil. (Syd.), sometime Fellow in Genealogical Studies

I have frequently observed, both in my lectures to the University Extension Board and in polite conversation of a sufficiently educated nature, that historically the Church of England has presented itself as an arrangement of considerable elasticity—a hammock of moral decencies, so to speak—capable of sustaining the combined weight of theology, ambition, and appetite without the visible collapse of any. The case of the Reverend John Mallard, later known in certain anxious circles (and, I might add, abroad) as Condé el Ánade, presents perhaps the most felicitous illustration of this equilibrium gone delightfully awry.

Let me state at the outset that Condé el Ánade is not to be mistaken for some continental inflection of heresy; it was, in fact, the hereditary title attached to the Mallard estate, rendered pretentiously into Spanish by John's elder brother, apparently in one of those phases of Andalusian enthusiasm that swept the English gentry of the later eighteenth century. I stress this at length—somewhat to the irritation of my students—to forestall the tiresome letters of correction that inevitably follow the publication of anything mildly exotic.

Now to the quandary.

In the year 1775, the Reverend Mr. Mallard, then Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds (a hamlet of minor spiritual promise near Winchester), found himself the accidental heir to the ancient, bloated dignity of Condé el Ánade, his elder brother having succumbed to that subtle mortality which attends those who drink more port than blood. The event placed our cleric in a position of moral contradiction unique in the annals of decorum: one cannot, alas, be both shepherd and sheepdog in the fields of Grace and Nobility without attracting unpleasant murmurs from both flocks. The law, the liturgy, and his own appetite conspired against any seamless union of crosier and coronet.

I have examined the correspondence of the period in exhaustive depth—indeed, with such thoroughness that my ophthalmologist expressly forbids me further immersion in Quarto script. In a letter dated September of that year to Dr. Simeon Hatchley, John wrote, with a candour both misplaced and inspiring:

"I feel, dear friend, that God has placed me in a position where virtue may be exercised without interruption, and indulgence without suspicion."

Exactly so.

Needless to add, the Church's response to virtue so cleverly phrased was immediate and confused. The living of Ducks-on-Ponds, being technically the King's gift (though in practice the Duke's dispensation), seemed at risk of contamination from hereditary luxury. Were John to keep both his pulpit and his peerage, the delicate scaffolding of ecclesiastical superiority might totter. Society demanded an act of public self-sacrifice, preferably written in a hand of good Italic form and sealed with an apology.

Of Titles and Tithes

Here began, I think, the first of John's ingenious rearrangements of legality. To avoid surrendering his pulpit—an inconvenience he compared, in another letter, "to giving up one's appetite in order to preserve one's digestion"—he determined to resign the title altogether. His scheme was devilishly clever: to convey the peerage, by "special courtesy of filial sentiment," to his younger sister Lavinia, a woman famous for her piety and her collection of taxidermied hoopoes. That this succession blatantly defied primogeniture did not trouble him; the King, so the story runs, already owed certain favours to the Duke, and the Crown was content to ratify any metamorphosis provided it occurred quietly and without parliamentary alarm.

Thus, in a single stroke of the pen and a small confusion of genealogical paperwork, John divested himself of Condé el Ánade and

preserved Ducks-on-Ponds. It is, I think, one of the most pious examples of self-interest in the late Georgian age.

The outcome was heralded privately by Lavinia's rather touching letter to her maid: "Since becoming noble, I find I sleep no differently, though my bed requires additional dusting." Historians would find fewer wars if all transferences of power were conducted with such dusterly moderation.

Of Carnal and Cardinal Satisfactions

Freed from the inconvenient glitter of nobility, John now gave full expression to what he termed "the deeper functions of ecclesiastical liberty." Contemporary clerical diaries—notably The Rectory Review, Being Observations Upon Vice Unobserved (anonymous, but unmistakably his)—suggest that he discovered in the Church a theatre of indulgence so secure that even gossip felt itself absolved.

His sermons multiplied (mainly in volume), his entertainments grew notably episcopal, and his domestic staff, by all accounts, consisted almost exclusively of beautiful young men whose employment contracts included advanced instruction in the minor prophets. It was, as my predecessor Professor MacFarlane said with some disapproval, "a household more Socratic than Anglican."

One must remember that eighteenth-century clerical decorum operated under the rule of plausible opacity. As long as appearances remained ironed, the conscience was free to wrinkle in private. I do not suggest immorality—far from it. I suggest, rather, a theological curiosity expressed in too many directions at once.

The Scholar's Consideration of Impunity

I have been accused, sometimes to my face, of treating these matters with excessive sympathy. But let the reader consider the context. It was an age when rectors spoke as dukes, and dukes behaved as rectors, and both found forgiveness in architecture. John's conduct, absurd as it may seem, represented less corruption than anticipation: the prototype of that genial modern cleric who reconciles credit, decoration, and desire by liberal interpretation of Scripture.

His misstep—if we must so describe a feat of such aesthetic genius—lay in recording everything. He kept notebooks on his "methods of pastoral compliance." He outlined in no fewer than eight volumes (later rediscovered and printed as The Condé Papers, or, Correspondences on Convenient Virtue) an entire system for balancing sensual liberty with spiritual hierarchy. The work was condemned by the Church, naturally, and praised by philosophers, also naturally. Voltaire called it "the only sincere theology the English have attempted."

I cannot resist quoting one passage, suppressed in the 1790 edition:

"I pray not in hope of Heaven, which is too far, but in gratitude for Authority, which is at hand."

Say what you will, it has the crispness of modern Australian administration.

Of My Own Position, by Way of Conclusion

Some have accused me of indulgent relativism for treating John with admiration rather than censure. I reply that my duty as historian is precision, not piety. I have yet to meet a man who, given the opportunity of uniting immortality with indulgence, would choose to surrender both. That he found his paradise beneath a surplice only proves the resilience of the British class system.

If he sinned, he sinned heroically; if he deceived, he deceived decorously; and if he served God, he did so in the only way any man truly can—by remaining quite true to himself whilst pretending otherwise.

As for me, I can only aspire to such disciplined hypocrisy. Indeed, I thank Providence that the modern university, unlike the eighteenth-century Church, requires no renunciation of titles whatever—only the modest denial of competence.

1772: John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

This morning, as I surveyed from the breakfast parlour the pitiful little sweep of gravel that dares call itself my "drive," I felt the first true throb of episcopal destiny stir somewhere between the heart and the digestion. I am, at last, in the Church—vested, beneficed, and veritably made sacred by durable masonry. To think: less than a year ago I was merely my brother's charming embarrassment, a third son with too-perfect cuffs and too-small prospects; now I am God's representative in a parish of one hundred and seventeen souls and precisely zero intellects. It is a tremendous improvement.

The living of Ducks-on-Ponds is, as the Dean observed when I was presented, "a suitable pulpit for beginnings of greatness." By which he meant "remote." Still, the house attached—I decline to call it rectory until my improvements are complete—possesses the bones of future magnificence. Already I perceive it, not merely as residence, but as headquarters, palace, and place of recorded splendour: my ecclesiastical Windsor, designed (forgive the presumption) on the model of Heaven's Hierarchical Architecture, volume VII of Dr. Blenthorpe's Celestial

Mansions Considered with Notes on Pastoral Symmetry. (A work insufficiently read, I think, outside the higher nobility.)

After two weeks of prayerful consideration (and one of practical sketching), I determined that the current house is wholly unfit for divine administration. Surely God, who tolerates so few blemishes in heaven, can bear none in His earthly agents' accommodation. Thus, I shall enlarge.

By providential coincidence—which is, I admit, indistinguishable from family influence—my brother the Duke owns the village entire. When I remarked that the view from my library fell inconveniently upon several labourers' cottages, he gallantly offered their prompt removal. "They can sleep in the tithe barn," said he, "more central for sermons." Construction commenced at once. Nothing makes one feel more apostolic than the sight of peasants carrying away their own roofs in obedience to one's vision.

The new plan—drafted partly by me, partly by Mr. Wade the mason, and largely by divine suggestion—comprises two additional wings: the East devoted to social intercourse (drawing room, oratory, music room, vestry of conversation), and the West to administration (sermon study, print room, and small observatory for nightly meditation upon the stars, or, as I told the Archdeacon, "the moral firmament").

Behind these extends an ample court of stables and grooms' quarters; for while moderation may be Christian, horsemanship is sacred. The cellar, however, is my masterpiece: a vaulted sanctuary for Burgundy and Bordeaux, each bottle to be catalogued by vintage and theological correspondence. For instance, the heavier clarets shall be numbered under Justification, and the finer whites under Grace.

When lesser minds question whether such enlargement be "appropriate to a man of religion," I remind them that beauty is persuasion's strongest foothold. If my flock cannot yet reason toward righteousness, they may be overwhelmed into holiness by the symmetrical arrangement of my shrubbery. Theology is best learned from example, and I intend my residence to stand as visible doctrine: the Sermon on the Mount executed in stone. Were Christ Himself an English rector possessed of proper means, I venture He would have done likewise.

I find a useful precedent in The Ecclesiastical Dandy; or, Refinement of the Cloth by the late Bishop Mardyke, who proves (most eloquently) that virtue "germinates most rapidly in tasteful soil." He himself built three chapels and a ballroom. A man for imitation—though critics called his work worldly simply because his vestry was panelled in rosewood. Philistines! The Almighty, being perfection, must naturally prefer polished surfaces.

Once my improvements are complete, I anticipate a remarkable elevation of tone throughout the parish. The villagers, inspired by proximity, will instinctively mend their manners, polish their speech, and curtail their breeding. The gentry of neighbouring parishes will visit for guidance—social and celestial. Gentlemen clergy will see that Church preferment, rightly understood, is not a retreat from the world but its refinement. One does not renounce one's nobility in serving God; one civilises the divine by example.

Indeed, I begin to suspect that this, at last, is my mission: to demonstrate that grace wears better when bespoke.

Tonight, therefore, I shall retire early, having ordered Mr. Wade to begin demolishing the west wall at dawn. I am consumed by anticipation. I imagine already the new façade gleaming in the morning sun: Corinthian but Christian, imposing but pastoral, a monument to that delicate principle first advanced by Lord Tavistock in his Treatise on Moral Superiority as a Function of Taste.

How fine it feels to be improving both one's parish and one's silhouette simultaneously.

In sum, I cannot help but reflect: it is good—nay, essential—that I have entered the Church. For what other institution could so conveniently reconcile sanctity with fine architecture and an ancestry deserving of both?

1772: An Invitation to Join the Sacred Profession: Being a Modest Discourse on the Ecclesiastical Path for Gentlemen of Birth and Education

By The Right Reverend Dr. Ambrose Lanyard, Lord Bishop of Midchester, Published at the Bishop's Press

The calling of the Church is, to many a modern spirit, a matter neither of celestial bolt nor of sudden trembling at the sound of trumpets, but of peaceful bloodlines and practical faculties. I have long thought that Providence, being a kindly and deliberate artificer, arranges callings as He arranges hedges—in such wise that the son who cannot inherit the land may yet tend the soul, and thereby perpetuate the family's gentility by other means. There is, I am persuaded, a piety in the proper use of surplus sons.

When a gentleman's eldest son is destined to the estate and the second to the army, the third—thoughtful, literary, given to contemplating psalms rather than manoeuvres—may fittingly be turned toward the altars of the Church. This is not to say that all who serve there do so from fiery conversion; yet one finds in deliberation its own

form of devotion. My late friend Canon Jerningham wrote in his Letters to a Reluctant Levite that "the calm choosing of a sacred duty is nearer to God than the hot tears of an unstudied zeal." I subscribe wholly.

The University Path

The first requisite, therefore, is the passage through Oxford or Cambridge—those twin cradles of our English clerisy. Theological instruction there is not so much a hammer of conversion as a polish of mind. A youth who reads Virgil without yawning and can translate a line of Chrysostom without terror will find himself well-fitted for the House of God. The mind so groomed may not yet be saintly, but it will be supple, which in church service is a sound beginning.

Each college keeps its peculiar temper: St. Boniface's at Oxford favours a gentleman's drawl over his doctrine; whereas St. Eusebius's, of which I myself am an unworthy alumnus, exacts neither but cultivates instead a tragic patience. The aspiring clergyman will take from his college a Testimonial of his moral life—or at least a signed declaration of plausible virtue—for presentation to the bishop.

Examinations and Decent Latin

The examination before ordination alarms many a delicate mind, though it is rarely fatal. The bishop or his examining chaplain will question the candidate upon such divinities as Scripture, liturgy, and the Thirty-Nine Articles; but Latin fluency, a hearer's modesty, and clean linen do much to carry the day. In many cases, the more obscure dogmas are waved aside in favour of evident gentility and a solid signature upon one's testimonial. We examine for eligibility, not for ecstasy.

Of the Deacon and His Duties

Having proved himself grammatically sound and theologically harmless, the gentleman receives ordination as deacon. He is then permitted to read the Gospel aloud and perform tasks of graceful assistance, while learning the quieter arts of the pulpit—the tone of reassurance, the maintenance of moderate homilies, and the avoidance of enthusiasm. As my predecessor Bishop Rathbone remarks in On the Sculpting of Souls, "The fiercest element in the Church's forge is discretion."

After a year (or occasionally less, for those whom Providence hastens), the deacon may seek priest's orders, thus becoming empowered to administer sacraments, bury relatives, and sound authoritative upon sin.

The Question of Livings and Patrons

Now, the truly delicate mechanism of the ecclesiastical craft lies not in ordination but in provision—that is, securing a "living." This is a benefice or rectory from which one may live both piously and comfortably, drawing tithes as the farmer draws milk, without unseemly exertion. Patrons, often family or noble friends, grant such livings as one might grant a summer house—out of benevolence, strategy, or gratitude for having borrowed Latin quotations without acknowledgment.

Many an estate carries with it the "advowson," the right of presentation to its parish living. Thus are younger sons gracefully disposed of: one inherits the land, another inherits the pulpit, and the family's moral front remains secure. It is a system that prevents both idleness and irreligion, though it must be confessed, it fosters a certain domestic theology. For, as Dean Polwhele observes (rather shrewdly) in The Comfortable Gospel, "He who owes his income to his cousin's estate rarely preaches against property."

The Bishop's Encouragement to Candidates

Let not any gentleman suppose that the sacred path demands the thunder of the apostles or the nerves of martyrs. What it asks is the steady dignity of an English conscience: a cultivated reason, a composure in manners, a robe well dusted, and a sincere if temperate affection for the Almighty. If these may be exhibited in the parlour, they may equally grace the pulpit.

If I may presume advice, let each young candidate read before bed some edifying volumes such as Divine Idleness by Dr. Carfax, or The Theology of Politeness (anonymous, but widely attributed to a dowager of high learning). In the former he will find caution against needless labour; in the latter, instruction upon the cadence of civility as a form of worship. As the poet William Corfe puts it, "Etiquette is only ethics in a powdered wig."

Closing Reflections

I write these words not in zeal but in hope—that more sons of houses and halls may adorn the pulpits of our mild land with that particular English blend of grace, intelligence, and restraint which pleases Heaven without alarming it. For there are souls enough who shout of salvation; what the Church craves are gentlemen who can sit through it.

Therefore, may you who are debating your vocation think not of thunderbolts but of steady lamps, of parish roofs glimmering through ivy, of the modest meal and the learned walk to evensong. In such

company, one may grow holy by degrees—and that, I think, is the only safe pace to Heaven.

1780: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

My brother Edward has at last secured his dukedom, and with it that unearthly seriousness peculiar to men who mistake inheritance for achievement. As he said last week at luncheon, "I do not believe in primogeniture." Nor does the sun, yet it performs the office daily. He said it, of course, with the air of a man courageously defying the very system that hands him his next meal.

For myself, being the third son of a duke is far more artful a proposition. The eldest must endure responsibility, land agents, wives, and gout. The second must either ride into cannon fire or starve charmingly in Bath. I, by contrast, possess all the style and half the income, and am required chiefly to appear benign in lace and lawn. The Church, say what one will, is an admirably survivable institution. No musket balls, no smells of gunpowder—unless one counts incense, which I do quite enjoy.

Dr. Johnson, in his grave way, has somewhere said that "every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier." I cannot imagine why. A soldier's life is all noise, discomfort, and the continual possibility of interruption. Whereas I, snug in my episcopal library, think highly of myself for having avoided that calamity. At least the Church kills no one but metaphorically. And even then—one is rarely the corpse.

My duties are few, my amusements many. The wardens expect me to murmur approval at brickwork; the parishioners, to pronounce forgiveness with decent tone and hand gestures. The liturgy itself is delightfully operatic, rather like Orfeo ed Euridice, though with rather fewer deaths and greater certainty of encore. I love the sing-song of it, the minor cadences, the gentle genuflections—a small theatre of belief in which everyone has memorised their lines, though nobody quite recalls the author.

I confess, I do not believe in God, though I think He's an admirable character—handsomely written, if somewhat directionless in the later Acts. But one need not believe in one's profession to excel at it; my brother invests in coal mines without believing in miners.

Some evenings, after evensong, when the candles quiver and the air is thick with frankincense and optimism, I find the Church an agreeable

form of poetry—sublime, rhythmic, and not to be taken literally. The choristers chant, the organ sighs, and I think: the Almighty may not exist, but He has excellent taste.

As bishop, I have discovered that the episcopal wardrobe exceeds even the imagination of the couturier. Purple silk is the most forgiving of colours; it renders me at once exotic and indispensable. I have commissioned a new cope embroidered with peacocks and discreet suggestions of martyrdom. The vestry boys were appalled, but I suspect Heaven will approve a little theatricality.

My private income allows certain ecclesiastical improvements: Madeira for the chaplain, port for me, and enough incense to obscure our collective disbelief. One must maintain the illusion of sanctity, just as one maintains ceilings—both tend to collapse if not attended to regularly.

I find the clergy on the whole an amiable species of man—unworldly, except in their pursuit of preferment, and far too fond of puddings. They discuss faith endlessly, but never definition. One suspects that belief, like celibacy, is more often promised than achieved.

Last week I entertained Canon Widdrington and young Lord Tisbury at the palace after service. Widdrington spoke at length on the necessity of reform, Tisbury on the necessity of claret. I encouraged both. The evening closed with some music and a small amount of theological flirtation. Tisbury, though scandalously handsome, is distressingly pious. I shall never understand how intelligent men can believe honestly what was clearly designed as metaphor. Unless, of course, they enjoy believing as others enjoy theatricals—it brings them nearer to confession.

As for me, I shall continue in my current happy unorthodoxy: believing in good tailoring, fine anthems, and the pleasant illusion that Providence smiles upon me particularly.

After all, if God exists, He must admire comfort. If He does not, I flatter myself that He would have enjoyed meeting me in any case.

1770: John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Letter to his sister

Your latest letter, received this morning and still perfumed faintly with lavender—or possibly the apothecary's more pious unguent—gave me immense delight, for it announces your recovery from influenza. I take this to be one of those pleasing ironies of Providence that you recover just as everyone else in Wiltshire begins to cough themselves

into sanctity. Your constitution, though delicate in argument, remains heroically unsinkable in practice.

I must, of course, offer thanks to Heaven on your behalf, though I rather think your immunity owes more to your maid's vigilance and your doctor's invoices than to divine intention. I do not say that Providence was uninterested in your case—only that it was, perhaps, inadequately briefed.

I have, by extraordinary luck and good breeding, escaped the influenza entirely this year. The village attributes it to my "spiritual fortitude." In truth, it is because I so rarely mix with the healthy. My parishioners are devout but consumptive, and I suspect the virus hesitates to circulate among people who never open their windows.

You ask what life in the Rectory is like when one is not engaged in sermonising against sins one enjoys or advising parishioners one avoids. I can report that it proceeds as ever in mild absurdity. Mrs. Blandy, the housekeeper, has recently taken to arranging the parlour flowers in the exact likeness of the Apostles, though with limited command of their physiognomy. We now breakfast in the company of eleven carnations and one geranium who stands in—quite convincingly—for Judas.

The church itself remains in sufficiently advanced disrepair to ensure my continued employment. Last Sunday, the north aisle ceiling dropped—mercifully not during the sermon, though some now insist it was divine comment upon my homily. I rather think the Almighty, were He inclined to architectural critique, would prefer to work indirectly.

My congregation remains endearingly faithful, if not in doctrine then at least in attendance. Mrs. Lacy, our sole representative of higher wit, informed me after the last service that she finds my sermons "comforting but rarely contagious." I take this as unqualified praise.

My own health thrives upon the sort of temperate indulgence I mistake for discipline. A small glass of port at luncheon, two when the clergy meet for "spiritual reflection," by which we mean bridge. I keep warm in cassocks, which are as practical as they are flattering. When one approaches the altar in embroidered silk, the draughts seem almost theological.

You will remember how our brother Edward, ever the philosopher, declared that "the clergy feed on faith as their inheritance provides the plate." I must confess him half-right. One must have a plate of some kind; the faith tends to garnish rather than nourish. Yet I find myself sincerely attached to my profession, or perhaps to its trappings. I like the harmony of the responses, the faint smell of incense that clings to the vestry like an expensive secret, and the soft rustle of pew cushions

being discreetly adjusted. It is a melodrama no opera could reproduce, though the audience humbles its applause.

There is also, I confess, a certain charm in being slightly admired by the villagers for reasons I cannot recall. They bring me pies, ask moral advice I cannot give, and call me "my lordship" with such gentle awkwardness that even Heaven must hear and smile indulgently.

Do, my dear Honoria, continue in your convalescence by all indolent means—read no sermons, eat much broth, and avoid the latest novels, especially Fielding, whose pages I am convinced contain their own fevers. When next you are well enough to travel, come to the Rectory and allow me to display my new garden folly—a modest Gothic ruin of three walls expressly built to impress visitors with my piety and my income.

Should influenza return, rest assured I am happy to serve as your personal chaplain of recovery, provided I may bring my own handkerchiefs and avoid the practical exercise of prayer.

1770: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

It has been another respectable Sunday, which is to say: God was invoked, the choir made charming approximations toward pitch, and no one died during the sermon. This last is a point of quiet pride, the mortality rate having been unusually high among parishioners last winter, though I suspect influenza rather than faith was the true culprit.

Influence, influenza—it strikes me this evening that the Church has rather too much of both. The distinction may be slighter than we suppose: both spread unseen, both bring on fevers of conviction, and both leave their victims weak but improved in manners.

I have been reflecting, for want of practical work, upon the peculiar genius of clerical power. The Church, in theory, seeks to save souls; in practice, it arranges them. We preach as though instructing sheep, but our methods resemble those of a discreet intelligence service. The confessional is but an early form of surveillance; the pulpit, a primitive broadcast; the altar, a headquarters of operations in lace and Latin.

There are, I think, two strands of what we call "religious instruction." One for the masses—my dear, credulous multitude—who require awe, spectacle, and a most literal Heaven to keep them from drunkenness, arson, and speculative philosophy. The other strand runs parallel but higher—woven for us, the shepherds. This higher teaching

has little to do with salvation and everything to do with management. It is the art of influence disguised as devotion; an administrative theology.

It would distress my parishioners to learn that every sermon I deliver has two sets of notes—those on Scripture, and those on social weather. The former I read aloud with unction; the latter I keep for private amusement, observing who kneels longest, who glances upwards at the right intervals, and who would sell their virtue for a blessing and a smile. Theology makes a splendid curtain behind which to pull the ropes of conduct.

I suspect my superiors know this perfectly well, though they speak of grace and providence as bankers speak of liquidity—that is, reverently, without intending to explain. His Grace the Bishop of Ely told me once, "Our task, my dear boy, is to maintain order in the chapel lest chaos run riot in the street." A succinct mission statement, though rather bleak in its lack of resurrection.

Religion, propagated properly, must always contain a degree of performance. The people must see obedience enacted before they attempt it. This is why our vestments grow ever more opulent while our doctrines thin as soup. Substance frightens the simple; colour delights them. We are all, in this sense, ecclesiastical actors in perpetual costume. I sometimes think there should be a licensing fee for the use of incense—an acknowledgment that we provide aesthetic pleasure as well as moral insurance.

At times, I feel I run less a parish than an embassy: discreetly collecting information, suppressing sedition, promising paradise in exchange for patience. Were I not in holy orders, I might have made an admirable spy. Indeed, we share the same tools—confidentiality, persuasion, and the ability to feign sympathy without succumbing to it.

Yet, for all my ironies, I cannot despise the system entirely. There is an elegance to it, a balancing of hypocrisy and utility that must delight Divine Providence, if He keeps accounts. The Church prevents worse mischief. Without our theological theatre, the poor would turn philosophers, and the rich would turn honest—either of which would be disastrous.

Still, I sometimes envy the true believer. Faith seems a remarkable luxury: one pays no tithe for certainty. But then, certainty dulls the taste of life. Doubt, like salt, enlivens the blandest conviction. It makes each prayer a delicate wager.

Tonight, as I write this by candlelight and hear the bells of my own church marking Compline, I think again of that earlier parallel—influence and influenza. One creeps through the air unseen, infecting the mind; the other clouds the lungs. Both are contagious, exhausting, and, curiously, reassuring. After all, to be influenced, like to be ill, is to

feel temporarily significant—someone has noticed one's existence enough to try to change it.

And if belief spreads like a fever, then I—poor asymptomatic carrier that I am—shall continue to distribute it in moderation, sniffing prettily at the incense and pretending immunity.

1776: An Address Delivered Before the Philosophical Society of Hatherleigh

By The Honourable and Reverend Augustus Meriweather Watervale, M.A., Rector and Canon-Designate of Midchester Cathedral, Member of the Royal Society for Unpractical Thought, and Reluctant Bachelor of Divinity

When I was invited to lecture upon "The Relative Equality of the Sexes," I presumed the organisers intended an after-dinner entertainment rather than a moral uprising. The very question, "if men love women, do they not consider them equal?" is so alarmingly logical that one suspects it of foreign influence. Yet I have undertaken to address it, not because I wish to reform the nation, but because I am fond of losing friends in elegant ways.

Let us begin with the assumption—immodest, but undeniably English—that men do love women. They admire them, woo them, write indecently long poems to them, marry them with the air of surrendering to fate, and subsequently lecture them on virtue while borrowing their pins. Yet equality, like good manners at Almack's, vanishes the moment it is looked for. The problem, I suspect, lies not in love but in property: men consider women delightful real estate, not fellow architects.

You will object, "But women are cherished!" Indeed, they are—like porcelains. Handle them gently, polish for display, and never ask what they think about glaze. The English gentleman loves his wife as he loves his garden: he appreciates the view, leaves the digging to servants, and calls both "improved."

Our philosophers, God preserve them, assure me that woman's inferiority is "scientifically natural." I have read Dr. Peregrine Whelp's Anatomy of Subservience, or, The Female as Decorative Mammal, a book of considerable size but less insight than an oyster. He claims the smaller skull renders women unfit for abstract reason; yet, by the same argument, angels—who have no skulls whatever—should be hopeless at theology.

The clergy, among whom I must count myself when sober, are even worse. We bellow each week that God created man and woman in His image, then spend the remaining six days tidying the image lest it should start talking. Our seminaries are temples of chastity but, curiously, never of curiosity. A newly ordained youth must know Greek, Latin, and the precise temperature at which sin begins to smoke, but he is forbidden to know what women think about it.

Some time ago I preached on the curious fact that Christ, being a man, spent most of His recorded hours in the company of women. The congregation applauded until I proposed that this might suggest their equality of intellect, at which point the verger fainted from doctrinal exposure. The local paper reported: "The Rector advanced theories unsuited to mixed audiences." As far as I am aware, no audience has been more mixed.

Our poets—those sentimental traffickers in metaphor—insist that women are goddesses. What they mean is that women are conveniently silent and often require sacrifices. Even Rousseau, whose Emile I have skimmed for amusement, labels his Sophie an "excellent influence upon man." Influence! There speaks the true bachelor: happy to grant a woman a soul, provided she uses it to reflect his own.

Yet one cannot help noticing that whenever a man grows eloquent upon ideal womanhood, he is describing a creature unrecognisable to any woman alive. It is as if carpenters designed chairs too holy to sit upon. My peer, the Earl of Brackenmoor—a man who keeps three mistresses and one conscience, all equally expensive—insists that women are "earthly angels." Having met two of his angels, I am persuaded the heavenly promotion is premature.

In truth, the male idea of woman has always been the male idea of himself, improved by contrast. She exists to complete his sentence—punctuation without which his narrative stumbles. I suspect that the fear of equality springs not from pride but from terror: the Englishman's greatest dread is conversation conducted on level ground. Men speak of chivalry, but prefer command; they long for inspiration, yet resent intelligence. Every courtship is a duel disguised as dance.

Permit me a small confession. As your rector and occasional philosopher of the decorative arts, I have observed that the great disadvantage of being a man is other men. They monopolise the conversation, they confuse arrogance with logic, and they treat affection as a temporary fever. Women, by contrast, understand both tenderness and irony—qualities without which there can be neither love nor salvation.

Were I permitted to redesign Heaven, I would introduce a new order of angels entirely female, responsible for diplomacy and the aesthetics

of forgiveness. God might, at last, take a holiday. Yet even there, the newly arrived Englishman would protest: "Surely, my dear seraph, there must be hierarchy. Someone must preside." To which the angel would reply: "Indeed there must, and it will not be you."

You see, our sex confuses equality with demotion. A man offered companionship imagines himself usurped. He does not realise that love's only kingdom is partnership, not patriarchy. When he claims divine right, he mistakes self-love for law. I once attempted to explain this to a bishop of my acquaintance (one more worldly than wise). "But if women were our equals," he said, "we could no longer protect them." "My lord," I replied, "I have seen your protection, and it very much resembles captivity with lace trimmings."

Do not imagine that I champion revolution. I cherish decorum as much as liberty, and despair at both. My plea is merely for symmetry—in mind if not wardrobe. Let our daughters read Pliny without endangering proposals. A woman who can decline a Latin noun is less likely to marry one.

You may call me visionary; I prefer fashionable. A future in which husband and wife sit in equal light sounds not utopian but comfortable—something Englishmen secretly long for but lack the vocabulary to desire. We shall, of course, take centuries to achieve it; reform always proceeds at the pace of the oldest peer in the room.

And so, gentlemen who profess to adore women while forbidding them consequence, let me whisper the simplest of questions: what is love, if not recognition? To call her inferior is to adore an illusion—to court your own echo, and propose to the furniture.

I am, by profession, a Christian; by inclination, an aesthete; by habit, a realist. I believe that to honour creation, one must honour both halves of it. If men love women, they must cease to mistake affection for ownership, tenderness for toleration. Love cannot be hierarchic; the heart has no rank.

Therefore, let us remodel the world not as a ladder but as a dining table, long and elegant, where wit, appetite, and conversation are equally distributed. The cook may be divine, but surely the guests must sit side by side. If that notion offends your theology, then I recommend—respectfully, and with wine—that you read my forthcoming tract, On the Moral Advantages of Female Supremacy, to be published whenever the censors expire.

Until then, I invite you all to practise a modest equality: listen as frequently as you lecture, admire without ownership, and remember that love, unlike logic, flourishes best when both participants are allowed to finish their sentences.

Good night, and God save the women from our admiration.

1776: John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

It has been raining theology all day – that drizzling, relentless species of intellect that ruins one's cuffs and corrodes the soul. My curate calls it "God's test," but I suspect it is simply weather. The pews steam like a row of penitents, and the air smells of mildew, incense, and optimism—that most offensive of ecclesiastical perfumes. Gregory, our verger, misplaced the lectionary and presented the wrong text for morning prayer: Genesis nineteen. Sodom and Gomorrah. The congregation sighed in collective stealth, the way people do when their sins are about to be mentioned by name.

I must say, there is a particular chic to the Bible when it is being naughty. Though it condemns so much, it does so in such lyrical detail. The charm of Scripture lies in its exquisite inscrutability: forty writers, seventy styles, and not one consistent opinion among them. It is like reading a family quarrel engraved in gold. All genius, no editor.

I have always rather adored the story of Sodom. Two divine visitors arrive unannounced; they are welcomed (perhaps too warmly); and the townsfolk, inflamed by curiosity or something stronger, gather at the door demanding to "know" them. The Hebrew scholar Mr. Houndley, in his immortal and out-of-print treatise The Pursuit of Hospitality, suggests that this famous "knowing'' was purely social: a bourgeois fervour to meet new people. Others, of course, take a darker view. Personally, I have found that what people call sin is usually a misunderstanding between shyness and opportunity.

Lot, trembling, offers his daughters instead—which is gallantry of a sort, though hardly the kind mentioned in conduct books. Somewhere between that offer and the ensuing firestorm lies the moral lesson. What it is, no one quite agrees. When I asked my bishop once to define it, he said, "Avoid enthusiasm." I think he meant it.

It is, in fact, a marvellously interpretable episode. One can read Sodom and Gomorrah as a denunciation of lust, neglect of strangers, civic disorder, or the perils of bad urban planning. The result is always the same: every reader discovers the sermon that suits him best. Scripture, like fashion, conveniently reflects the wearer. Its most seductive virtue is ambiguity. How superior to the modern press, which insists upon being understood!

And yet I cannot help noticing that divine retribution has grown rather quiet of late. In those antique pages, entire cities combust for impoliteness, rivers turn red, and angels perform demolition with

professional élan. Nowadays, the Almighty contents Himself with damp harvests and the occasional gout. If this is righteous smiting, it lacks conviction. When I look about at Parliament, the stock exchange, and the clergy—especially the clergy—I begin to feel a touch nostalgic for brimstone.

England has become far too temperate for apocalypse. We have refined damnation into a social myth: eternal punishment, taken mildly with sugar and cream. Even disbelief has lost its passion. The atheists I meet defend a God they do not believe in simply out of good breeding. They would rather heaven not exist—except, perhaps, for weekends in the country.

What fascinates me is that our civilisation so closely mirrors Sodom after the angels left. We are decorously wicked, politely corrupt, and above all convinced that God has better things to do. We build our little towers, write our sermons about modesty, and whisper our indiscretions while the sky continues, obstinately blue. The story says that Abraham argued with God to spare ten righteous men. I entertain no fear for our safety; England has at least a dozen. Most hold peerages.

I suppose the point – if there ever was one, and what is divinity without a little muddle? – is that the wages of sin are not what they used to be. The angels appear now as magistrates or critics, and our fire from heaven arrives by post in the shape of scandal. The Bible's charm remains that it excuses and condemns at once: in a single breath you are both warned and reassured. It is the perfect English book – it says everything, means nothing definite, and assumes that the reader is too well-mannered to notice.

Faith, it seems, is the one luxury item we persist in believing to be practical. Yet belief, to my mind, is the cruelest beggary of all. A man may live without money, but not without doubt. Doubt polishes him. Certainty, on the other hand, ossifies. I prefer religion as I prefer wine: mysterious in origin, unsettling in excess, and more likely to improve conversation than conduct.

I shall, I think, deliver next Sunday's sermon on the subject of "Uncertain Salvation and Certain Comforts." The title alone will scandalise the curate. And if the heavens do not smite me for it, I shall take that as textual confirmation that God, like the rest of England, has developed taste.

For tonight, I will pour another glass of port and toast Sodom, that most sociable of cities: destroyed by heaven perhaps, but never by dullness.

1952: Introduction to Saints, Synods, and Social Advancement: A Study in Ecclesiastical Promotion

by Mr. Bartholomew Orpington, Fellow of Something or Other, Author of God and the Committee Vote (1948), The Pious Injunction (1950), and Fish with Halos: The Moral Pisciculture of the Early Church (unpublished)

There is, I discover daily, a distinct lack of clarity—indeed, a positive vacuum of intellectual hygiene—surrounding the question of sainthood. One cannot attend a sherry party, vestry meeting, or séance for departed deacons without hearing some well-meaning busybody declare, "Oh, but saints are made by Rome!" This, dear reader, is arrant nonsense—a theological furphy of the lowest order! Saints, like lamingtons and minor governments, are not made but coalesced. They arise, as it were, through spontaneous spiritual fermentation.

Permit me, therefore, to clear the air—or at least make it thick with renewed confusion. In the hallowed tradition of corrective prose, this volume, Saints, Synods, and Social Advancement, proposes the simple truth: that sainthood in the Anglican communion and its colonial relatives is organic, local, and eminently social. Saints are not christened by distant cardinals wielding rubber-stamped divinity; they are, effectively, crowd-sourced. The process resembles neither celestial revelation nor bureaucratic correspondence—it resembles, if I may so phrase it, a parish picnic conducted by subcommittee.

Most readers, I imagine, have only the vaguest idea how a figure such as St John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds (1755–1815), found himself "raised to the calendar," as the modern phrase goes. It was not by levitation. St. John, whose entire episcopate was distinguished chiefly by its polite punctuality, achieved sanctity not through miracles—he never so much as multiplied a bun—but through an extraordinary talent for being liked. His canonisation (or, to use the proper Anglican term, "synodical commendation") occurred, as one member confided to me, not in an atmosphere of divine thunder but over Madeira and sausage rolls.

It seems the Provincial Synod of New South Britain, sitting in the sultry Lent of 1817, had been paralysed for days by arguments over the spelling of "Hosanna." Into this theological vacuum came the question of suitable new additions to the calendar—"names of inspirational, local holiness," as the Bishop of Wagga eloquently phrased it, "to give the faithful something less foreign to bow to." Someone mentioned Mallard. Someone else, invariably, said, "Ah yes, dear fellow—absolutely charming!" and the matter was done.

No miracles, mind you; no incorruptible corpses, no roses blooming from relics, no heavenly fragrances except what emanated from his pomade. He was, however, most diligent at luncheon, and had once donated two umbrellas to his cathedral choir. I venture to say that the entire procedure resembled nothing so much as the ecclesiastical equivalent of a posthumous Academy Award for "Outstanding Pastoral Affability."

This, then, is the thesis of my book: sainthood, far from being a mystery of grace, is merely a polite form of institutional loneliness. Churches, terrified of moral vacancy, feel compelled to canonise their most congenial members. In this way we perpetuate the illusion that virtue is contagious, when in fact it is only pleasantness that spreads.

I do not, I hasten to say, disparage the process. On the contrary, I admire it. A top-down canonisation is so authoritarian—Papist, in the stifling sense. Whereas our synodal system is marvellously democratic: one may become holy by committee vote, provided the tea is good and nobody dislikes one's hat. The Archdeacon of Wollombi memorably called it "salvation by popularity." I have quoted him, copiously, and without permission.

The reader will encounter in the chapters that follow a comprehensive examination of what I term "the social hydraulics of sanctity"—an analysis of how admiration flows upward, congeals, and eventually fossilises in stained glass. I have included maps of early diocesan influence, several tables of "Miracles Denied," and one valuable appendix in which I compare the British system of sainthood to that of ants, who elect their queens by scent alone.

Let no one mistake my purpose. I am not irreverent. I merely insist on recognising holiness as an ecological phenomenon: when a sufficient number of people agree that someone was good, that someone becomes good—retrospectively, automatically, and irrevocably. History is full of such beatified amiability. Canonisation, in our century, is less the stamp of God than the applause of colleagues.

One can hardly blame the Church for adapting the democratic spirit of the times. After all, religion must modernise or perish; it must, as St. John Mallard himself might have said if he had believed anything, "keep the minutes of Heaven in order."

The reader, I trust, will bear with my digressions, which are numerous and in several dialects. My research has taken me from the library to the laundry basket, for the smell of sanctity is often found among mothballs. And if, by the end of this volume, my conclusions appear arbitrary—then they are; but they were arrived at laboriously, with excellent handwriting.

Saints are not born, not chosen, not made. They are voted in. And if that strikes one as vulgar—well, so was the first miracle at Cana: turning water into wine at a social engagement. I rest my case.

1782: John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

This morning began as many divine mornings do—with a mild headache, a misplaced cassock, and a faint suspicion that Providence had arranged the weather specifically to mock my sermon on moral clarity. The mist over the meadows resembled nothing so much as the breath of an unshaven angel.

I am much occupied today by a question which, though certain to alarm the Archdeacon, seems to me perfectly rational. If His Majesty's crown descends by the whim of birth, and he rules us by God's holy favour (however conditionally that blessing waxes and wanes), why should not the apricot of ecclesiastical preferment fall in similar hereditary fashion? We are told that bishops are chosen for their piety and learning, but I have yet to meet one whose intellect could not be packed neatly into a pudding mould.

Surely, if the Church is God's household, we might adopt His architectural sensibilities—keep the roof in the family, pass down the pews. The first son of a bishop ought naturally to inherit the diocese, the way an earl inherits gout. Were such a principle embraced, I should even now be seated upon the episcopal throne of Cresswell, with a decanter of port cleverly disguised as a sacramental chalice. I am instead confined to this perfectly respectable but damp rectorage, where the nearest semblance to glory is the chandelier of flies above my writing desk.

Some will say that holiness does not breed true, which may explain several of my aunts. Yet, the notion that sanctity requires competitive election is absurdly democratic—like choosing angels by public vote. My dear friend Lord Piperton (a man of quite indefatigable atheism) insists that it is merely another instance of divine humour: that Heaven, in its private jest, permits the Church to resemble the House of Commons as closely as decency allows.

I have consulted Episcopal Inheritances Considered, a small and scandalous volume by the anonymous "Verax" (almost certainly Canon Trelawney, who signs all his insults with aliases ending in –ax). He argues that the Church fears heredity because it would expose how little the divine actually interferes with appointments. I cannot

contradict him, though I am bound by collar and conscience to pretend otherwise.

This evening I visited Lady D— for what she called an "edifying salon." The guests included an earnest Nonconformist and two suspiciously angelic male singers from Bath. The conversation strayed to the subject of inheritance, at which Lady D— observed that she would never leave her property to her offspring, having seen what they do to wine when unsupervised. I managed to restrain myself from adding that bishops have been doing precisely that to theology for centuries.

I returned home through the churchyard, where the moonlight made the headstones glimmer like freshly powdered wigs. I could not help imagining them as the conference of my predecessors, each quietly congratulating the next on dying in office rather than surviving reform. Perhaps the tomb itself is the only truly secure benefice in the Church —life tenure guaranteed by death.

Tomorrow I shall write to my cousin James, who is lately ordained and tiresomely chaste, proposing that we found The Society for Apostolic Heredity. It will, of course, be entirely useless. All movements for improvement begin so.

For light reading before bed, I have taken up The Divine Dowry; or, Piety as Property, an improving work I expect to dislike immensely. Still, it is comforting to think that somewhere, beyond all synods and summonses, the Almighty laughs—quietly, decorously—at our efforts to legislate His will like mere entailment.

Should I ever achieve bishopric by accident or satire, I shall declare my firstborn as my "spiritual heir," just to see the Canons crumble. If one must perish, let it be from laughter.

1783: John Mallard, Rector of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

I spent the evening, as all thoughtful men must, comparing hierarchies. Most people collect butterflies; I collect analogies, which are rather more troublesome to pin. Tonight's specimen: the fine lattice of the Church and the nobility—each an exquisite ladder arranged to direct ambition politely upwards until it bumps its powdered head against the Crown. The difference between an Archbishop and an Earl, I begin to suspect, is chiefly that one wears lace on his sleeves and the other on his conscience.

Consider the parallel structures: both institutions claim divine origin, both practise the same courteous nepotism, and both make virtue of the

accident of birth. In the Church one inherits benefices; in the nobility, estates. The result is equally architectural: abbeys for souls, manors for manners. In either case, one's success rests not upon the strength of conviction but upon the tact of address. A misplaced bow or an unappreciated jest can send a man tumbling from grace as swiftly as any mortal sin.

My old tutor at Oxford, Canon Pinn, used to insist that rank in sacred matters was the outcome of Providence. He was right, of course; only Providence, having no civil service, must work through patronage. One is born into salvation, as one is born into the peerage—both depend upon proper sponsors and a reliable midwife.

To become an Earl, one must have ancestors, which is a slow and painful process. To become an Archbishop, one requires only acquaintances and the biblical gift of selective deafness. The ecclesiastical ladder is open to those agile enough to climb over their colleagues without disturbing the fabric of humility. We call it merit, but it is really choreography.

The Church, like the Court, rewards the well-connected conscience. Advancement lies through the same discreet corridors as affection. One must learn whom to flatter, whom to quote, and whom, occasionally, to love with suitable discretion. I have observed that the better bishops refer to this as "sharing a theology," which is perhaps a euphemism or perhaps a miracle—those two categories being, in experience, largely synonymous.

It is often said that episcopal promotion depends upon whom one knows; I would amend that to include with whom one is reconciled after Evensong. But then, that is true for the nobility too. There are families whose coats of arms resemble bedspreads for good reason.

What fascinates me is how both orders maintain such a poise of sanctity amid practical intrigue. The tone is identical: ceremony without sincerity, conviction worn like powder, shed daily, reapplied nightly. At Court they call it "manners"; at Chapter they call it "grace." The effect is equal and equally moral.

Dr. Addison—author of the greatly overrated The Crown of Virtue, or How to Kneel Correctly—maintains that the Church leads men heavenwards while the nobility leads them earthwards. How quaint. I find both pathways converge nicely in Mayfair, where Heaven is discussed as a possible investment and sin regarded as an accomplishment of taste.

My neighbour, the Archdeacon, confides that he hopes shortly for translation to a bishopric; by which he means promotion, not resurrection, though in the Church the latter is usually easier to arrange. His method is commendable: he preaches temperance to the

poor and diplomacy to the powerful. Last week he sent the Lord Chancellor a sermon manuscript bound in morocco leather with a note modestly suggesting it contained references to the Chancellor's own virtue. It was, of course, quoted in the Gazette. One must admire the industriousness of his devotion—or at least its upholstery.

Meanwhile, my cousin Adolphus, currently impecunious in Pall Mall, laments that no dukedom has fallen vacant since Lent. He says that if breeding were truly rewarded, he would already be a marquis and half the peerage in debt to him. I reminded him gently that I too work in a hereditary institution but without the advantage of blood; he replied that I made up for it handsomely in some departments.

The churchly notion of Apostolic Succession, after all, differs little from primogeniture. The doctrine asserts that grace descends from bishop to bishop through the centuries like a family estate, being only occasionally mortgaged. The nobility claim the same with titles and temperaments. Thus, salvation and authority alike are transmitted by the laying on of hands, the social and the spiritual being simply two versions of the same pat.

If I may confess something without immediate censure: I find the whole divine machinery deliciously sensual. We kneel, we kiss rings, we anoint one another with oils fragrant enough to make angels sneeze. The body politic and the body mystical both reek of musk and ceremony. The parallels, as I say, are intoxicating.

It is possible, of course, that I find the apparatus of hierarchy captivating for entirely unorthodox reasons. The Church's hierarchy provides its admirers with all the pleasures of desire safely disguised as duty. To adjust a mitre, to smooth a surplice, to receive benediction under a vaulted ceiling—it is theatre so refined it passes for abstinence. The nobility perfected the same art centuries ago; their excesses are conducted with such gravity as to appear constitutional.

The only real difference between the ecclesiastical and the aristocratic seduction is wardrobe. If bishops could afford better tailors, I daresay their influence would expand exponentially.

When I consider the splendour of these two hierarchies—each promising eternity, one temporal, one eternal—I cannot help but marvel at their genius for mutual approval. The Crown sits serene at the summit like a brilliant hostess presiding over two rival guests who vie to pour her wine. Every duchess craves something of divinity; every bishop something of rank. Between them, they keep the nation exquisitely balanced between salvation and supper.

I sometimes wonder which of us—the peer or the prelate—most amuses Providence. I suspect we are tied in humour if not in grace.

For myself, I have ceased aspiring to either honour. An Archbishop must endure politicians, and an Earl must entertain relations; I have parishioners instead, which is far more picturesque and considerably less expensive. I intend to remain here in my rectory, midway between earth and heaven, composing philosophical indecencies and admiring the symmetry of a society so decorously corrupt.

Tomorrow I dine with the Archdeacon and intend to toast his ambitions; I hear he is soon to join the Lords Spiritual, that comfortable cul-de-sac where theology and genealogy end up blissfully entangled. Really, one could not invent a better religion.

Every Englishman loves his ladder—provided it leads to the same Crown and no one shakes it while he is climbing.

1780: A Sermon Delivered at St. Æthelburga-in-Wold

By The Honourable and Reverend Augustus Meriweather Watervale, M.A., Rector and Canon-Designate of Midchester Cathedral

(Text: Exodus 33:11—"And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.")

My beloved congregation—by which term I include not only the pew-holders but also those who attend for decorative reasons—we are gathered to contemplate a subject so profound that most men overlook it altogether: namely, the Face of Grace.

By "grace," I refer here not to that impalpable mist of mutual apology which passes for religion in fashionable circles, but to the inner radiance by which a soul, though terribly human, pretends to reflect Heaven. Alas, the word has been tortured beyond recognition. We describe as graceful a chair, a curtsy, even—as I learned last night at dinner—a duck roasted in Madeira. Yet grace, properly apprehended, is the divine posture of the heart, the manner in which virtue holds its chin.

Now, it may surprise some of you that I, being a Watervale of the Midchester Watervales and therefore constitutionally allergic to humility, should discourse upon grace at all. My ancestors cultivated other virtues: courage in war, persistence in litigation, and an affectionate care for vineyards. Still, as my dear mother, the Dowager Duchess, remarks in her Reflections on Inherited Decorum (a family edition, mercifully unprinted), "If the noble cannot be saints, they may at least rehearse the part." I have therefore taken holy orders—partly from conviction, partly from habit, and altogether for aesthetic reasons

—to provide society the example of a man who can wear a surplice without perspiration.

To begin, let me dispel a fallacy: grace is not to be confused with piety. Piety, like port, deteriorates after the third glass. Many of you cultivate expressions appropriate to penance—downcast eyes, compressed lips, a general resemblance to economic hardship—and fancy such features indicate salvation. They do not. They indicate constipation of the spirit. The true face of grace contains brightness, humour, and a suspicion of self-knowledge. Its expression is one of resigned astonishment that Heaven should bother at all.

I have studied this subject at close quarters. In my Preliminary Notes on Divine Physiognomy (which my publisher refuses to touch unless I die first), I propose that moral character leaves visible traces upon the countenance, provided one has spent sufficiently in front of a mirror. Look about you and confirm the theory: the parish beadle's chin, bristling with administrative zeal; the churchwarden's jowl, inflated by tithes; Mrs. Jenks's eyebrows, perpetually plucked in expectation of apocalypse. All these are varieties of the religious visage—sincere perhaps, but graceless. Grace never frets; it poses.

You will recall that Moses, having spoken with the Almighty face to face, returned from Sinai with his own features inconveniently illuminated. The Israelites covered them with a veil—not out of reverence, I think, but jealousy. Humanity tolerates holiness only when decently powdered. In that respect, my congregation is entirely Mosaic. Should I appear tomorrow in the High Street glowing with divine conversation, the ladies would call it rouge and the gentlemen heresy.

There lies the tragedy of the Church: we crave visible virtue, yet despise it when it blushes. We expect Heaven to resemble our drawing rooms—moral, discreetly lit, no obvious miracles before dessert.

Permit a family example. The late Duke, my father (whose portrait everyone agrees is both flattering and correct), was once asked by a bishop whether he felt the grace of God within him. The Duke replied, with faultless sincerity, that he suspected it must be hereditary. In a sense he was right. Certain families bear grace as they bear complexions —faintly golden, somewhat supercilious, given to improvements through marriage.

One sees it in the profiles of dukes, the postures of marquesses, occasionally in rectors of twenty-five with excellent manners. Yet the danger of hereditary grace is confusion: it persuades us that redemption, like entail, passes automatically from parent to child. It does not. True grace, unlike nobility, cannot be recorded in Burke's Peerage, though it might one day appear as a footnote. To possess it, one must rehearse eternity before breakfast.

How then shall we cultivate this celestial complexion? I propose three exercises, none of them fatal.

First, practise composure under moral advantage. When guilt strikes your neighbour, resist the urge to gloat spiritually. Sympathy is merely condescension performed with gentility.

Second, acquire beauty of gesture. Move through life as if God were taking sketches. Religion misbehaves when it forgets to stand properly. The saints were not holy because they prayed; they were holy because they knew exactly when to stop.

Third, engage occasionally in self-mockery. Heaven adores a spirit that laughs inwardly at its own devotions. My confessor, a most perceptive man, assures me that humility expressed through wit has been accepted in lieu of repentance.

At this point, dear flock, candour compels me to an anecdote dangerously personal. When I first entered the priesthood—a career as surprising to my family as celibacy to a cat—I was determined to cultivate charm in lieu of holiness. I succeeded admirably. The congregation adored my diction, ignored my doctrine, and forgave my youth, which is the most unforgivable quality of all. But after a year of this triumph I discovered that charm, though reparative to morale, was fatal to the soul. Every eyelash I raised in charity felt like an embezzlement. I had mistaken applause for absolution.

Grace, I concluded, must be sought not at the opera of admiration but in the quieter orchestra of self-forgiveness. Since then I have endeavoured (and often failed) to perform good deeds with the same lack of flourish with which I sin.

Beware the counterfeit grace advertised by cautious virtue. The moralist wears his virtue like armour; the gracious man wears it like skin—light, habitual, and never starched. Those who strain to exhibit goodness resemble actors too anxious for a review. The Almighty, I fear, is not a critic; He is an audience of one, and terribly difficult to flatter.

For this reason I distrust extremities. The Low Church adores emotion; the High prefers upholstery. Each mistakes confession for design. True grace sits between the pews, observing both, and smiles.

You will say, perhaps, that your Rector wanders from his text. Undoubtedly. The text, you recall, is Moses speaking with God face to face. That experience, though unique, is daily mimicked in this parish whenever a man examines his reflection with hope. To gaze honestly upon oneself is the ultimate act of faith. Those who cannot manage it should come to me—my mirror is charity itself and tilts conveniently toward truth.

Therefore, my dear congregation (and certain visitors from the county whose names I pretend not to know), seek the Face of Grace not in Scripture alone but in the better half of your expression. If you find no radiance there, wait a little; it often appears after supper.

Let us strive for that exterior serenity which springs from well-arranged interiors—houses or consciences, it matters not. For when the day comes that the Lord speaks to us, face to face, it would be unspeakably embarrassing if we had neglected to wash.

Amen.

1785: Right Reverend Cyril Pendlebury, Bishop of Eiderdown

Private papers

I have yet to recover from that ecclesiastical pantomime we so grandly entitled "Synod." Were I less charitable, I might call it a week-long siege of self-importance. What was meant to be a sober deliberation upon the vacant see of Tittlecomb devolved into the sort of hair-splitting disputation usually practised by schoolmasters before breakfast. The great theological question of the hour, it seems, was whether the word electus in Canon XVII should refer to divine intention or diocesan preference. Dr. Swithun maintained, with his customary fog of confidence, that the former interpretation rendered our presence superfluous—which, between ourselves, would be the first theological statement with which I ever agreed him.

We wrangled—oh, how we wrangled. Each man defended his position with the jealous certainty of a duck over a glass egg. I was almost ready to propose that we adjourn permanently when, on the fifth day and third decanter, Canon Bridges—a most unexpected instrument of Providence—sighed, rubbed his temples, and muttered, "Let's make it Mallard." That, I assure you, was the lightning bolt of decision. A silence fell, dense as episcopal brocade. Then someone said, "Yes." Then everyone said "Yes." Even Dr. Swithun, who would debate the spelling of Amen, emitted what might have been consent or indigestion. And so, in an instant, after all the fumes and fuss, we had our new bishop.

Mallard it is. A bit young, yes, with the polish of Eton still visible about his vowels, but one cannot object to a man who knows when to stop talking, and how to hold both fork and faith correctly. His conversation is light but never flippant, informed but not infallible—a rare ecclesiastical bird indeed. His appointment caused some arching of eyebrows among the elder fossils, but I reminded them that the Church

has been saved by worse precedents and imperilled by better. Besides, he is connected—remotely but reputably—to the Duke of Mallard, whose chaplaincy purse has been known to spread divine grace through quite extraordinary channels.

What amuses me most is how, after all our self-congratulation, no one seems quite sure who first proposed Mallard for consideration. Bridges insists he was merely thinking aloud. Swithun claims that he had always favoured him "in principle" (he uses that phrase the way some men use snuff). And yet, each of us now carries himself as though he had engineered the decision by silent genius. The credit, apparently, is catholic.

I have been reading The Delights of Proper Moderation, an improving volume by a certain Reverend Puddingforth, who maintains that "the dignity of the Church is preserved by the measured avoidance of enthusiasm." An admirable theory, though it might better serve the fish course than the faith. I think I shall recommend it to Mallard—not as instruction, but as light amusement. One must give the young every opportunity to be bored into wisdom.

This evening, in token of my relief, I shall take only one glass of Bishop's Burgundy and read a chapter of The Lives of Those Who Might Have Been Saints, Had They Behaved Better. A tonic reminder to keep one's virtue unambitious.

Heaven spare us another Synod before the century expires.

1785: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Newly Consecrated Bishop of All Things Improved
Being the Feast of St. Emingarde the Almost Virtuous
On "Virtue Vindicated, or The Sensual Arithmetic of Salvation"

It is with a heart swelled by duty, affection, and the consequence of promotion that I present to you this morning the first fruits of my episcopal labours. You see before you a Bishop newly minted—perhaps still shining offensively in parts—and therefore accustomed, as yet, to admiration rather than martyrdom. The Archbishop bade me preach on Virtue; an unimaginative instruction, I confess, though one which allows for numerous personal digressions.

Virtue, my friends, has suffered appalling misrepresentation. In the wrong hands, she is pinched, pallid, and preoccupied with denial. She is the governess of humanity—forever cold, perpetually correct, and in all events unkissed. But I would have Virtue laugh again, dance a little, dine moderately well. Hence my title this morning: Virtue Vindicated,

or The Sensual Arithmetic of Salvation—a subject which, though dangerous in tone, is entirely harmless in arithmetic.

Let us be precise, as Heaven loves order. If sin adds to the ledger of damnation, and repentance subtracts from it, then virtue must surely multiply grace. But grace, being infinite, resists all arithmetic, and therefore virtue—when properly executed—is less a ledger-line than a melody. The Puritans, poor accountants of the soul, reduced it to a column of ciphers; I, however, maintain that the angels balance their books by dancing in compound time.

In my modest treatise, The Principles of Divine Subtraction: How Not to Go to Hell, I established that to subtract pleasure is to shrink one's capacity for salvation. For every delight persecuted, a little spark of Heaven dies. Consider, if you will, Bishop Thrumwell of melancholic fame, who refused all earthly pleasures—including sauce. He declared at his deathbed that he looked forward to Heaven chiefly as a long silence. It consoles me that he doubtless got his wish.

Virtue, properly understood, is a measured indulgence, divinely curated. It is the art of aligning appetite with grace: to enjoy, and in enjoying, to acknowledge the Creator as one's host. When you savour a fresh peach, you do not sin against the orchard; you demonstrate its theology. When you love, tenderly or outrageously, you rehearse Paradise.

Do not mistake me for the libertine theologian Dr. Basil Bywater, whose scandalous Epistle on Erotic Eschatology I keep hidden under heavier tomes. He, poor enthusiast, would redefine Heaven as nothing more than an eternal picnic in which all moral constraint is dissolved into syllabubs. I, by contrast, propose moderation—not the abstinence of the timid, but the moderation of an aesthete who knows when to pause for applause.

Virtue, my beloved congregation, must not be confused with discomfort. Misery is not proof of sanctity; it is merely an inefficient form of self-advertisement. True virtue is joyous, because it knows its own value. I have known saints who looked so ill-fed that God, in His pity, seemed certain to forbid their company lest they sap His radiance. To be good, one must first be interested; to be interested, one must first be alive.

Therefore I commend unto you the sensual arithmetic of salvation:

- Multiply delight by discernment,
- Divide pride by laughter,
- Add compassion to appetite,
- Subtract guilt—entirely.

The resulting sum, if competently calculated, is Heaven in preview.

Let no one, then, mistake self-discipline for holiness. A tree bears fruit not because it denies its branch, but because it enjoys sunlight. Likewise, a moral nature ripens under pleasure rightly directed. God, I am persuaded, is not impressed by grimaces.

In conclusion, my friends—though I could go on indefinitely and profitably—I offer this benediction: that each of you may find the arithmetic of your own salvation in simple acts of elegance. Dress well, eat thoughtfully, love like an angel with human punctuation, and commit your virtues with style. For only those who sin beautifully shall be redeemed with any panache.

Amen, and may your moral accounts forever remain in divine surplus.

1785: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

Today, I have accepted the bishopric; or, rather, the bishopric has accepted me, for the Archbishop, that antiquarian cherub, declared with great effusion that "the Church requires taste." If so, then I am her salvation. He offered, with trembling benevolence, the use of the existing episcopal palace in Kent—a structure of admirable decay, inhabited largely by the ghosts of former bishops and a collection of gout stools—but as I find ghosts unnervingly competitive, I declined.

Instead, I determined to extend the Rectory here at Ducks-on-Ponds, much to the Archbishop's bewildered delight. He seemed almost touched that I would shoulder such a cost myself; but the truth is, I cannot abide living in a building that does not express gratitude for my existence. Architecture ought to acknowledge its inhabitant. Mine now kneels in adoration: a vast cruciform edifice spreading out behind the modest eighteenth-century façade it pretends to respect.

The cross, of course, is accidental—or so I insist to the Archbishop. Its symbolism, however, delights the local press, who see piety where there is only geometry. At the heart of it, my Grand Apartment radiates as a sacred engine of hospitality. The dining room seats twenty-four, a number both apostolic and useful for bridge. The drawing saloon, papered in pale eau-de-nil, accommodates precisely as many again, should humanity prove unavoidable. Between them, my chapels—one for morning contemplation, one for those evenings when God and I agree to disagree—provide the essential ballast to all this magnificence.

The library is my favourite invention: oak shelves soaring like a cathedral nave, lined with forbidden companionship. I have assembled

such titles as The Recluse of St. Aubrey's: or, Virtue Vindicated, The Sensual Arithmetic of Salvation, and my own theological pamphlet in progress, On the Holiness of Self-Indulgence. I needed twelve additional bedrooms to soothe visiting clerics whose austerity visibly collapses upon proximity to civilisation.

Naturally, a household of such amplitude requires staff. There is Blandy, my butler, whose silence is a moral example; Mrs. Blandy, the housekeeper, a genius of domestic order and religious anxiety; and two chaplains, one competent, the other decorative. My new musicians include an organist named Bliss—appropriately—and a pair of violinists so devout they tune only in D major, for "Dominus." The grooms, tutors, and footmen complete the apostleship. Every morning there is an incense of polish, starch, and sanctity.

The villagers, poor souls, did grumble when I relocated their cottages behind the eastern hill. They claimed they had always enjoyed the sight of the Rectory from their fields. Unfortunately, mutual visibility is a vulgarity. I assured them that spiritual proximity was far superior to visual access and extended the church nave by four pews in compensation. They are now both hidden and grateful—a satisfactory Christian compromise.

My fellow clergy congratulate me on the "burden" of office, as though luxury required stamina. They speak darkly of responsibility, humility, stewardship—three words that sound exhausting in sequence. I see the bishopric, rather, as an art form: a kind of sustained performance in which one interprets God to an audience already distracted by the décor. It is a role for which I was born, though admittedly the costume requires excellent tailoring.

As for heaven, I imagine its bureaucracy resembles my own household: angels as footmen, archangels as secretaries, and God tolerating the whole affair with my own brand of affectionate irony. I am determined to make the Rectory a rehearsal for eternity—well-lit, well-staffed, and ideally scandalous. The Archbishop says I must "set an example." I intend to; only I am not certain any of them will survive the demonstration.

I shall retire now to contemplate my new responsibilities, which chiefly consist of remaining magnificent without repentance. Bliss is rehearsing Purcell in the west drawing room, the bells toll faintly outside, and the servants whisper as though in a cloister—my private kingdom of decorum and excess. If this be service to God, then I prefer Him to any other master.

1912: Virtue, Vanity, and Vanity's Virtue: An Examination of Ten Celebrated Sermons by the Reverend (Later Bishop) St John Mallard, 1780–1810

By Professor James Mallard,
Fellow of St. Bartholomew's College, Fellow of Moderate Reputation, King's Omnibenevolent College

While rummaging through the attic of the late Canon Hubble, I encountered a slim folio bound in white calf-skin, smelling faintly of redemption and upholstery glue. Within it were catalogued no fewer than ten sermons—popular, I am told, beyond precedent—by the Reverend St John Mallard, that dazzling ecclesiastical peacock of the late eighteenth century whose eloquence converted half his congregation and confused the rest into admiration.

The Reverend—later the Right Reverend, recently Saint—was a man equal parts philosopher, aesthete, and practical sinner. His theology was a hybrid of sensuality and geometry; his religion, a kind of Divine arithmetic in waistcoats. What follows are summaries (and, where memory fails, re-creations of spirit) of ten of his most fashionable sermons, delivered between 1780 and 1810, and later bound together in that highly collectible collection The Index of Inspiration: or, Piety Preserved in Twelve Volumes to be Read by the Saved and Sold to the Damned.

1. "The Proper Temperature of the Soul: Being Reflections on Lukewarm Virtue and the Moral Use of Tepidity" (1780)

Preached when he was but twenty-two, fresh from seminary and still blushing with ambition. In it, Mallard compares the tepid believer to a half-boiled egg—unfit for Heaven yet inconvenient for breakfast. He concluded "better to burn than to simmer," which occasioned several faintings and one proposal of marriage from a dowager notorious for her fondness for warmth.

2. "The Metaphysics of Modesty; or, Why Angels Dislike Mirrors" (1782)

Delivered before the Ladies' Society for Improving Gentle Behaviour. The sermon argued, most controversially, that modesty must be worn like perfume—not evident, but inferable. "To be modest," Mallard purred, "is to confess possession without exhibition." His point was drowned in applause from an audience uncertain whether they were being complimented or anatomised.

3. “Sainthood and Upholstery: Discoveries in the Divine Fabric” (1785)

Inspired by his renovation of the Rectory, this sermon proposed that salvation might reasonably depend on good taste in furnishings. “He who cannot arrange his curtains,” Mallard declared, “should not presume to order his immortality.” At least one churchwarden resigned, muttering that he preferred hell to chintz.

4. “The Infinite Impropriety of Infinite Reward: On the Mathematical Disadvantages of Eternity” (1787)

Delivered during his brief flirtation with Euclidean theology. Here, Mallard asserted that eternal bliss would become intolerable by sheer repetition and suggested that Heaven include at least one intermission. A visiting deacon accused him of heresy; Mallard bowed and begged for the minutes.

5. “On the Seductions of Silence: A Homily in Three Movements, with Organ Accompaniment” (1790)

A rare experiment in musical preaching. Each theological statement was followed by six bars of Andante in D minor. Scholars estimate that the congregation endured fifty-eight such transitions, achieving either spiritual ecstasy or mild concussion. Its printed form sold out in three days—chiefly to musicians curious about its anti-melodic structure.

6. “The Holiness of Self-Indulgence: Being a Manual for Temperate Excess” (1793)

This, his most notorious production, later banned by the Evangelical Press, defended pleasure as a form of gratitude. “Every perfect sin,” he proclaimed, “ought first to be admired.” Critics declared the sermon ‘luxuriously blasphemous’; admirers found it merely efficient.

7. “On the Relocation of the Poor: A Topographical Apologia” (1796)

Composed shortly after he removed his villagers to improve the Rectory view. With exquisite logic he explained that moving them out of sight enhanced their faith: “For faith,” he said, “is the evidence of things unseen.” Parishioners were consoled with larger pews and smaller houses.

8. “Virtue Vindicated; or, The Sensual Arithmetic of Salvation” (1799)

Delivered before his appointment as Bishop, and disastrous for religious decorum everywhere thereafter. Here he interpreted salvation through “the algebra of ecstasy.” He divided sins into “additive” (generous errors) and “subtractive” (mean abstentions). The Archbishop, forced to attend, described it as “clever, catastrophic, and curiously exhilarating.”

9. “The Doctrine of Holy Contradiction, as Revealed to Those Who Are Always Right” (1805)

A late-career triumph. He proved conclusively that reason and revelation were identical except where they disagreed, in which case revelation naturally improved upon reason’s tone. This he called “Paradoxical Orthodoxy,” a school later adopted enthusiastically by politicians but rejected firmly by God.

10. “The Gentle Benefits of Disbelief: A Farewell Lecture to His Detractors” (1810)

Preached in full episcopal splendour, and, though nominally a sermon, effectively an operetta of self-applause. “I do not question God,” he said, “I merely edit Him for intelligibility.” It concluded with the choir singing an anthem he composed himself: ‘Benedictus of the Beardless Saints.’ Three clergy fainted; two converted instantly to scepticism; the remainder collected the hymn books and fled.

In all, Mallard’s ministry represents an epoch of irreverent holiness. Indeed, his career might be plotted as a bell curve of blasphemous success: rising from curiosity, peaking in scandal, and tapering into reluctant admiration.

To read these sermons today is to encounter theology as performance art, morality as literature, and preaching as barely disguised autobiography. In The Comprehensive Concordance of Clerical Idioms (Smith & Botherby, 1899), Mallard is ranked “the only bishop ever to improve religion by misunderstanding it.”

As for myself, having studied his words till my soul squeaks, I can only conclude that St John Mallard was the most sensual of theologians and the most theological of sensualists—proof that sanctity, like silk, benefits from a little shine.

1785: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Sermon for the Second Sunday After the Feast of St. Anthony of Unrepentant Desires: On the Holiness of Self-Indulgence

I have lately been accused, not unjustly, of an undue attachment to comfort, colour, and the better sort of wine. It has even been whispered (though only by those who dine poorly) that my theology resembles an expensive tailor—cut to suit myself. I confess, with all the humility of an ornamented soul, that these accusations are true. Indeed, they form the very foundation of my sermon this morning: On the Holiness of Self-Indulgence.

Now, self-indulgence, when pronounced with proper disdain, sounds like an ailment of the soul—something to be confessed in shadow and absolved with tepid water. But when I encounter the term in Scripture, I look for its opposite and find instead those luminous commandments to rejoice, to take wine, to eat the fat, to make merry. God's first recorded act, after all, was to create light, not a committee.

Consider the lilies, those unapologetic sensualists. They toil not, neither do they spin, but they dress extravagantly daily and make the very air sigh. And yet, saith the Gospel, even Solomon—with all his wardrobe and his architectural overcompensation—was not arrayed like one of these. If lilies be holy, then cleanliness alone cannot make saints. Holiness, I suggest, is not resignation but radiance.

The ascetics will protest. They have read Mortifications of the Flesh and Other Amusements by that dreary author, Archbishop Tedium. They will tell you that virtue is born of denial. But my friends, how can one deny what one does not first possess? Abstinence is merely the shadow cast by plenty. If we are to be truly moral, we must begin by being magnificently alive.

It is written in the apocryphal Book of St. Palatine, Chapter the Fifth: "He that knoweth not pleasure cannot comprehend Heaven, for Heaven is continuous delight, moderated only by taste." How wisely forgotten that book was! Heaven, if we are to credit Revelation, sounds suspiciously like one of my better soirées: the singing ceaseless, the company select, the lighting celestial. If we are to spend eternity in such refined rejoicing, ought we not to practice the form below?

When I walk through my new extension of the Rectory—the Gallery of Reason, the Drawing Rooms of Devotion, the Chapel of Mild Contrition—I feel that I have expressed theology architecturally. For is not beauty the clearest proof of grace? The monk may lash himself to

holiness, but I prefer silk cords and better lighting. My enemies call this vanity; I call it gratitude in its grandfathered form.

Self-indulgence, properly understood, is not the flailing ego of the vulgar, but the refined art of appreciation. The sinner devours without discernment; the saint savours. The former eats the fruit; the latter tastes the orchard. When I sip the Grand Château d'Écriture—a French claret known only to bishops and other degenerates—I do not sin, I contemplate. I perform a sacrament of the senses.

Even our Lord, whose modesty I do not dispute, never performed a miracle involving water and vinegar. He turned water into wine, and at a wedding, no less—a social event notorious for both bad conversation and divine opportunity. The moral is clear: one must elevate pleasure to holiness, or one ends by lowering holiness to boredom.

My dear parishioners, if you wish to mortify something, mortify dullness. Crucify hypocrisy. Fast from meanness of spirit. But as for the flesh—feed it, polish it, teach it music. The body, after all, is the cathedral of the soul, and it is most indecent to let one's cathedral crumble.

I foresee my poor Archbishop reading this sermon with mixed emotions: admiration at my command of theology, horror at my understanding of it. He shall write, as he always does, to urge simplicity. Alas, simplicity and I parted amicably at Eton. I left him to the earnest and took with me the Gospel according to Experience.

Let me conclude—not to persuade, for faith should be an aesthetic, not a discipline—but to remind you that holiness is not measured by subtraction but by intensity. God, after all, did not create us to be pale, trembling accountants of virtue. He made us in His image, which is to say, extravagantly.

Go, then, into the world, and make of your life a table well-set, a room well-aired, a heart well-heated. Indulge divinely. The rest is mere asceticism, and the Devil can keep that for his monastic friends.

Amen—beautifully, immodestly, Amen.

1785: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

It occurred to me this morning, while observing Mrs. Trestle arranging the altar flowers with the solemnity of an acolyte and the courage of a horticultural warrior, that women are, after all, the true underpinnings of the Church—its invisible scaffolding scented with lavender and gossip. Without them, Christianity would collapse into

dust and dullness within a fortnight. With them, it continues handsomely, if rather hysterically, forever.

I like women. In principle. In the same way, indeed, that I like carillons: they make pleasant noises at appropriate intervals but demand to be avoided at close range. My curate, Simpkin, tells me this is a harsh judgment; but then, Simpkin still believes in both chastity and wholesome conversation—two topics which, like communion wine, are better when watered.

The great secret of woman's triumph in the Church lies in her complete inability to change it. She possesses all the moral enthusiasm of reform and none of the machinery. One must admire the irony of Providence, which has endowed women with limitless devotion and not a shred of theological authority—a combination resulting in endless committees, flower rotas, and biscuits for souls.

Consider the effect: the pews are splendidly filled; the aisles smell agreeably of lilies and eau-de-Cologne; even the statues glisten with renewed self-respect. They dust the saints as if to atone for Eve. And all the while they maintain the parish in an ecstasy of minor benevolence. When Mrs. Dant supervises the Sunday School, I am tempted to canonise her for her patience—though, alas, so few martyrs make good puddings.

I have done my duty like a gentleman and a rector: I am married. My wife, Augusta, is admirable—neat, kind, and thoroughly educated in all subjects I do not require. She presides over my household as an efficient empress of the obvious. We have two children, both quite sound, though one has inherited my intellect and the other, unfortunately, her mother's.

Augusta believes, as all perfectly virtuous women do, that affection is a form of perpetual improvement. She devotes herself to gardening and my moral advancement with equal ferocity. I endeavour to submit to both and succeed only in pruning myself into good form. The marriage, though devised for convenience, has provided a useful screen of respectability behind which I may cultivate the subtler blossoms of self.

One must marry something; it is vulgar to marry someone.

Of course, I am not that way inclined. I survive my marriage as one survives indigestion—with gracious restraint and an occasional epigram. The truth is that I find women bewildering in inverse proportion to their beauty. The very qualities they cultivate for allure—sincerity, moral fervour, an earnest desire to please God—unsettle me completely. How can one flirt with a conscience that insists on helping with the hymn books?

My true companions—the curate, the tenor, a visiting canon of extravagant taste—are models of precision. They speak little, polish

much, and never quote Scripture to justify their attentions. Women, however, encumber romance with emotion. Their affection, like incense, makes one cough.

Still, I must admit that the Church without women would look distressingly like the clergy house during Lent: efficient but unloved, orderly but uncared-for. Their presence converts discipline into delight. When Mrs. Trestle carries her bouquet to the chancel, the entire building changes timbre—as though God Himself were adjusting the lighting.

One cannot reform them into silence any more than one could reform perfume into soap. They represent the sensual refinement of doctrine: form without intellect, fragrance without faith, grace without understanding—in short, the very essence of liturgical success.

If ever the Almighty intended to send angels among us, He wisely restrained Himself to sending women instead: creatures less reliable but infinitely more decorative.

I am often told that women have no sense of theology, and I agree; they have, however, an incomparable sense of occasion. They arrange the churchyard fête as if one might be canonised by raffle. They press flowers into psalters with more reverence than most men press their knees upon the floor. And their tea, dear Heaven, their tea!—without which no parish could survive the apocalypse.

They also do those duties from which my deacons shrink in horror—cleaning the font, comforting the infants, retrimming the unspeakable kneelers, and maintaining the curious equilibrium between sanctity and mildew. Their reward is to be called "the pious sex," a title no man ever earned nor coveted.

If I find fault with them, it lies not in their busyness but in their solemnity. Women are not frivolous enough. They take good works as seriously as men take sin, which is precisely backward. I have long advocated that the female guilds of our Church should be reorganised under artistic supervision. Charity, undertaken without style, is mere sanitation of the soul.

The spirituelle bon ton I admire in a woman is as rare as logic in a bishop. Still, they mean well—which, in theology, amounts to the same thing as doing good, only with inferior results.

As I write, I notice from my window the ladies of the parish departing after their weekly rearrangement of divine property. The churchyard resembles a battlefield strewn with defeated hydrangeas. Their chatter drifts upward like the incense of good intentions. I watch them go with admiration and relief, those gracious creatures who keep my pulpit respectable and my conscience perfumed.

Yes, I like women—from a considerate distance, across an aisle or through a well-dressed crowd. I admire them most when they are moving away, their petticoats rustling like applause. They are the perfect symbol of religion itself: magnetic, impractical, exhausting, and indispensable.

Should Heaven ever prove to be precisely as advertised—clean, orderly, and perpetually scented—I have no doubt the women of England will have managed the housekeeping.

1912: Introduction: Concerning the Carnal Nature of the Holy

By Professor James Mallard,
Fellow of St. Bartholomew's College, London

There are two subjects sure to cause clerical indigestion in England: religion, and the history of religion. The former offends by existing; the latter by being remembered. When one sets out to write The Bawdy History of the High Church in England, 1750 to 1850, one must first issue an apology—partly for writing, and partly for enjoying oneself too much while doing so.

I make no apology for the adjective bawdy. It is, after all, the only honest word in the title. For whatever else the Church of England has been—apostolic, aristocratic, occasionally alcoholic—it has never, I regret to say, been chaste. One is reminded that the English clergy maintained celibacy about as successfully as they maintained the colonies: with firm professions and flexible policies.

On the Spirit of My Inquiry

This, dear reader, is not an anti-clerical work; it is a pro-human one. I have discovered, after twenty years in the library and nearly as many in polite society, that all men who talk incessantly of heaven are generally trying to forget something on earth. Priests, dukes, kings, and deans—they differ only in vestments and justification. I shall therefore write of their private habits, the cloistered appetites and curiously social celibacies that flourished under brocade and blessing.

Indeed, the High Church world of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was less a religious institution than a theatrical company playing God to an invited audience of peers. The sermons were soliloquies; the sacraments, matinées. And behind the chancel, the real mysteries of faith were negotiated in whispers, upholstery, and port.

On the Seminaries (Male-Only, and Proud of It)

The seminaries of the period were exquisite laboratories of repression—each one a greenhouse in which young men were encouraged to bloom without pollen. Those charmingly misnamed establishments—Devonport Theological, St. Dodecatheon's College, and the infamous House of St. Sebastian, Holborn—gathered together the most impressionable youths in England, locked them into chapels, and then expressed astonishment at the frequency of "spiritual crises."

I have read their letters. "Brother Arthur kissed me upon the cheek and spoke of apostolic love," writes one innocent from The Eremitic Review of Moral Conduct (1788). "I told him that I aspired to similar holiness." One does not need to be Freud to interpret that epistolary æsthetic. Men denied the ordinary consolations of affection will learn to sanctify its substitutes; it is the oldest sacrament of repression.

Of the High-Church Dinner and Its Consequences

As for the higher clerisy, no breed of Englishman ever contrived so elegantly to turn theology into gastronomy. Throughout the late Georgian period the High Church reigned not from pulpits but from dining rooms. The ordinary Whig might discourse of liberty over claret; the High Churchman preferred to prove the immortality of the soul between the pudding and the port. Dinner, in ecclesiastical circles, was less a meal than a moral performance.

No one who reads the Memoirs of the Reverend Dr. Marmaduke Spode, or, Ten Years Among the Tarts of Bath (first privately printed, now mercifully suppressed) could hesitate to affirm the sensual vitality of the cloth. I particularly admire Spode's diary entry of 1799: "The sermon this morning on the wages of sin drew unusual attention, especially from Lady Ashcombe, whose contribution to the offertory exceeded decency."

It is a curious feature of Church history that every moral awakening is funded by a convenient dowager.

On Titles, Temptations, and the Clerical Aristocracy

The great families—the Mallards, the Tyrwhitts, the ever-salacious Dukes of D——supplied the clergy as they supplied the cavalry: with younger sons of decorative education. The result was a hierarchy as polished as it was permissive. These were men who could sermonise with one hand and pour burgundy with the other. Their rectories were less parishes than estates under ecclesiastical management. The tithes went to theology; the theologies, in turn, went downstairs after supper.

I must here address the persistent legend that the High Church clergy were austere. Let me quote the testy yet accurate Dr. Fitzwalter's Handbook of Ecclesiastical Decorum (1824):

"Austerity is in the main a Low Church invention. High religion is expensive, comfortable, and distinctly upholstered."

My own researches have uncovered bills from Cambridge tailors, invoices for satin kneeling cushions wider than moral theory, and even a "Carriage for Processions (suitable for Bishop or Gentlewoman)." Devotion, it appears, travels best with springs.

The Sacred Clubs and the Unsacred Mollys

It would be disingenuous to omit the more lubricious ornaments of piety. The eighteenth century produced, along with all its Rectory romances, that curious London phenomena, the Molly House—a location at once secret and notorious. Many a clergyman, having thundered against sodomy at noon, found his theology curiously inverted by supper.

I do not propose to moralise—there are no morals left worth repeating—but to describe the tone of the period as frankly as the language of scholarship permits. When one reads the surviving guest lists from such clubs as The Society of Gentlemen of the Surplice, The Order of the Gartered Psalter, or the formidable Eucharistic Union of St. Fergus, it is impossible not to admire their efficiency. Even vice, in clerical circles, was conducted with ancient formality. Their oaths of admission were taken with the same gravity as the Nicene Creed, though with rather more ceremony afterwards.

The Theological Theatre

Why, one might ask, this combination of asceticism and excess? The answer lies in the English soul's congenital discomfort with pleasure. In this island race, one must disguise ecstasy as duty before it can be safely indulged. Thus did the Church make an art form of hypocrisy, elevating denial to so high a calling that even indulgence required a cassock.

The modern man, observing the Holy See with his feet on the fender, may condemn it all as corruption. I, however, salute it as performance. Better a Church that sins beautifully than one that repents badly. The glare of virtue, after all, is far less flattering to the human complexion.

A Word to the Reader (About You)

If the reader imagines that he shall find here a mere catalogue of scandals, let him prepare for disappointment—or greater amusement. For every sordid liaison between chaplain and choirboy (and there are many), one will find also a tender correspondence between conscience

and appetite, as delicately balanced as an English syllable. My concern is not outrage but orchestration: how faith and folly danced together, neither perpetually leading, both gasping for rhythm.

I could, of course, adopt the moral tone of the Anglican Quarterly and write, "These events show how even holiness may miscarry." But that would be dreadfully dull, and I am of the opinion—shared, I believe, by God—that dullness is the original sin.

So here begins our procession: clerics in powdered wigs, saints in satin, and bishops of magnificent misunderstanding. Let others chronicle wars; I chronicle hypocrisies, which are far more intimate.

Should the devout reader close this book in horror, I advise him only to attend church next Sunday and observe the choir. He will find my thesis amply confirmed, though expressed in a more convenient key.

1785: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

This evening I encountered a song so indecently honest that I felt compelled—against all moral instruction and professional self-interest—to write it down. It is called The Vicar of Bray. The melody is of that pernicious sort that grips one's conscience by the lapels and hums itself even through the Nicene Creed; the lyrics, however, are what I can only call the autobiography of everyone I have ever met in holy orders, excepting myself, naturally.

It was Captain Lacy of the Dragoons who sang it first—half-drunk, entirely charming—at dinner after the wine had gone radical. The song recounts, as you know (and as I now wish I did not), a clergyman who so conscientiously adjusts both his faith and his loyalty to each successive monarch that by the end one can no longer tell which side of God he occupies. The tune prances like a moral goat, the refrain being that indelible admission, "And this is the law I'll maintain unto my dying day, sir: that whatsoever king shall reign, still I'll be the Vicar of Bray, sir."

Even the footmen laughed, which shows how democracy begins—first in the laughter of servants, next in the applause of editors. I pretended to be amused only academically, though I caught myself whistling it later while brushing my hair, a sure sign of moral collapse.

The cleverness of the thing lies in its accuracy. The Vicar of Bray is every Anglican who ever existed in a drought of conviction: loyal to the throne provided it keeps him salaried, orthodox in direct proportion to

audience size. The Church of England is not so much a belief as a franchise, and the Vicar merely its most talented manager.

Indeed, I spent a quarter hour after the Captain's performance defending my profession to Lady Morven, who assured me with sweet cruelty that she supposed the Church must be grateful for a song written about it at all. "After centuries of theology," she said, "someone finally gave you a melody." I replied that true faith requires no accompaniment, though privately I wondered whether heaven itself might operate on a similar system of political rotation—angels changing allegiance as administrators change ministries.

One must, however, distinguish between adaptability and apostasy. The Vicar of Bray alters his views like gloves; I merely polish mine to keep them fashionable. The distinction is vital: hypocrisy without elegance is merely Protestant.

I tried this argument upon my curate Simpkin, who responded by suggesting—disastrously—that perhaps the song appealed because it was "a little like you, sir." As an employer I forgive almost anything except perceptiveness. Tomorrow he will preach on humility and I shall evaluate him for unction, always the first symptom of rebellion.

Since supper the entire village has become ungovernably musical. I heard the butcher bellowing the chorus this morning, presumably to a calf, though one can never be certain. The ladies of the parish sing it at the pianoforte with the same rapture they bring to Scripture. Mrs. Trestle even proposed substituting it for the harvest hymn on grounds of popularity. I replied that while I am not opposed to joy, I draw the line at satire in the nave.

Still, I must confess that the tune's energy infiltrates the soul like contraband wine. There is a lascivious delight in its defiance: the holy man shedding principles the way courtiers shed mistresses, and prospering by each surrender. What our politicians call policy, our clergy call providence; the distinction scarcely matters when one is well-paid.

The ballad itself is said to date from the previous century—a period when men still apologised for ambition by setting it to rhyme. I shall include it in my forthcoming compilation, Secular Blasphemies and Vernacular Truths, alongside that other lyrical indiscretion, The Monk of Melcombe. In the introduction I intend to argue that common English verse provides the most accurate theology available: spontaneous, rhythmic, and faintly immoral.

Dr. Pemberley, whose Treatise on the Poetics of Virtue I have been not reading for three years, insists that religion must be sung to survive. He is almost right. Religion survives because it is so often sung against.

I sometimes wonder whether I differ so greatly from this nimble Vicar after all. I have changed my views, of course, though never my tailor, which surely redeems me. In doctrine I remain consistently flexible: a Whig one season, a philosopher another, but always the same subtle creature beneath my vestments. I would, I think, have made an admirable Vicar of Bray—provided there were a ducal stipend attached and sufficient candlelight to flatter the complexion.

Were I to sing my own version, the refrain would be:

And this is the law I'll maintain unto my dying day, sir:
Whatever creed shall reign in town, I'll keep my living gay, sir.

It lacks the resonance of the original but improves immeasurably in self-expression.

The danger of such songs is their truth. Nothing corrodes an institution faster than the evidence of wit. The Church will forgive scandal, deny reason, survive atheism—but humour is her mortal disease. He who laughs at a bishop need never argue with him.

I shall, therefore, continue to profess moral offence at The Vicar of Bray, while privately admiring its theological precision. After all, hypocrisy performed with style is indistinguishable from grace. And if I, in my small parish, occasionally revise a sermon to suit a visiting patron or adapt a blessing to flatter the lady who donated the candles—well, I am only keeping time with the music of history.

The Church endures, as does the Vicar of Bray, by the divine art of adaptable devotion—or, to put it less reverently, by never sounding a false note unless it pleases the audience.

1786: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

This morning's correspondence included yet another invitation from the Dean of St. Alban's to attend the winter meeting of the "Society for the Cultivation of Devout Fellowship." I note with weary amusement that this is already the fifth such male-only society to spring up in the diocese since Michaelmas. The Church, it seems, is not so much a network of religious enlightenment as a franchise of gentlemen's clubs—each devoted ostensibly to holiness, and more practically to after-dinner animosity disguised as piety.

I have said before, though evidently not loudly enough to be remembered, that Christianity as we practise it is less a revelation than a club subscription. We have our entry fees, our passwords ("Benedicamus Domino"), and our occasional expulsions for conduct

altogether too sincere. To the outsider, our steeples must appear as so many marble invitations to members only: "Faith, by application."

It continually strikes me that we bishops have created a most curious Eden: well-watered, decorously weeded, and entirely without Eves. One might almost suppose the Almighty made man in His own image purely because He enjoyed solitude. The Church prides itself on being male, chaste, and reverent, which is to say bored, frustrated, and competitive. Religion ought to refine the passions; instead, we have distilled them into faint hysteria.

A dear friend, the Archdeacon of Pusey—an earnest, trembling creature who regards the word fun as a clause of excommunication—maintains that female influence in theology would erode the Church's dignity. I replied that any institution which can be endangered by lavender and logic deserves to collapse. "Women," I told him, "might introduce the divine art of conversation, which is precisely what our sermons lack." He frowned, as though conversation were contagious.

I do not imply that the churches are devoid of tenderness. On the contrary, they are drenched in it—directed, unfortunately, toward each other.

It would be easy to moralise, but I prefer diagnosis. Consider the ingredients: adolescent cruelty at Eton; intellectual affectation at Oxford; moral constipation at ordination. Shake well, and one produces the perfect priest—polite, repressed, and yearning discreetly for friendship that dares not speak between hymns.

How can it be otherwise? When one has been beaten, Latinised, and examined by treatise before one's first twenty years are out, the prospect of marriage is less romantic than exhausting. I have observed many of my younger clergy approaching matrimony as though it were one more exam in divinity—a practical test they are doomed to fail. Their women, poor dears, receive husbands trained to love obedience, structure, and the vague scent of polished pews.

Is it any wonder, then, that our rectories simmer with male companionship? I would not call it vice—merely proximity strengthened by prohibition. Sexual repression, my dear diary, is the mother of eccentric theology. Many of our innovations in doctrine owe less to the Holy Spirit than to sublimated affection.

I once attended a seminary debate entitled "Can Angels Fall in Love?" and emerged convinced the correct answer was, "Only with their roommates."

I know these matters are delicate, but bishops must occasionally face the flesh as boldly as they do the devil. There is, I think, a subtle irony in our perpetual condemnation of "unnatural affection," considering how artificially we cultivate it. Our institutions breed it as naturally as

roses breed thorns. We err, not by feeling too much for men, but by pretending such feeling must disguise itself as collegiality. Were we honest about our attachments, we might at last achieve decency.

The world, of course, would call this heresy; the Church would call it Committee Work.

Were leisure ever to meet courage—a combination rarer than saints and scarlet waistcoats—I should write a monograph entitled The Unimportance of Being Earnest. It would examine the moral hazards of sincerity and the wholesome necessity of disguise. Earnestness, I am persuaded, is the vice of those too unimaginative to be hypocrites.

In that book (which will forever remain safer in intention than in print) I would propose a new theology of appearance: that God, being perfection, obviously appreciates performance. Hypocrisy, properly curated, is the highest form of politeness. I imagine the opening line would read: "To act is divine; to confess, human." Unfortunately, if ever published, it would cost me the Archbishopric, five dinner invitations, and most of my friendships—all of which I find indispensable despite faith or reason.

At luncheon, the Dean told me with moist conviction that his young curate has begun preaching on purity "from the heart." I applauded the courage but reminded him that nothing corrupts purity faster than effort. Cambridge sensibility, I told him, can ruin a soul faster than Hell's indulgence. He confessed, after a glass of claret, that his curate's heart does seem unusually symmetrical.

Ah, well. The Church's chief miracle is its capacity for scandal without consequence. The public will endure any impropriety from the cloth provided it is committed discreetly and explained Latinly.

As evening draws its long purple glove across the sky, I examine my conscience and find it agreeably upholstered. I love the Church profoundly—as a collector loves a flawed gem. It is beautiful, exasperating, and faintly indecent, all at once. We revere chastity only because it hints at secrets we cannot quite abstain from telling.

Indeed, Our Holy Mother resembles a fashionable boarding school: the headmaster sanctified, the boys subdued, the visitors discreetly uninvited. The world mistakes us for pillars of rectitude when we are merely pillars of routine.

Still, I must not complain. Serene self-denial remains the best armour against reform, and I would rather be a witty bishop than a well-meaning martyr. As St. Augustine might have said had he served in the House of Lords: "Lord, give me virtue—but not yet, for I have an appointment with the Dean."

Now, to bed. Alone, of course, according to regulation—but with the warm memory of the Archdeacon's hand upon my shoulder when we said prayers.

1790: Oriole Fitzartur

Letter to Reverend John Mallard

Having idled through two dull afternoons with the Proceedings of the Gentlemen's Theological Circle at Bath (a loan from Lady Darnley, who believes that the study of salvation improves the complexion), I find myself much entertained by their question of eternal life. It seems, by their reckoning, Heaven is the grandest retirement plan imaginable—one serves one's probation in agonies, and then—if one has sufficiently suffered—the manager calls one to promotions eternal.

Now this notion might please the downtrodden, but what of the rest of us? Suppose, for instance, one has not suffered unduly—has eaten well, laughed at one's relations, danced vigorously, and even been unreasonably adored by the gardener's son (a mild inconvenience, but not quite martyrdom). Must I then be disqualified from heaven's banquet on grounds of excessive contentment? If salvation is the wage of pain, might I apply for it on account of moral curiosity instead?

One of the Bath gentlemen, a certain Rev. Persimmon Riggs, writes in his Treatise on the Pleasant Fiery Road, that "those who know no suffering on earth shall find it supplied in Purgatory, that merciful antechamber to bliss." How exceedingly democratic! So it seems that even the cheerful among us shall not escape the lashes of eternity; the universe, like a surly governess, insists that everyone must be disciplined before tea. It strikes me as rather an inelegant system.

Besides, I wonder whether this "eternal life" is truly distinct from the immortality of the poets. I daresay I should not object to a prolonged existence, provided I might wander invisibly from century to century correcting historians as they misrepresent us. But I should not wish to live forever; it would be very like staying past the end of a party because one cannot find one's cloak. How ghastly to watch posterity forget you while you are still regrettably available for conversation.

I imagine heaven much the same—an endless assembly of the virtuous, each politely feigning interest in eternity because the alternative seems rude. "How are you, Lady Whitcomb?" "Still here, Mr. Hollister, and yourself?" That would be my idea of torment: immortality not as continual life, but perpetual attendance.

If, however, we are destined to be immortal for good behaviour, might it not breed a certain moral slyness? Who would not perform a

few practised miseries to ensure inclusion? Perhaps that explains Aunt Eleanor's chronic neuralgia at church. I suspect it is less ailment than audition.

You will tell me that suffering refines the soul. But I cannot help feeling that refinement ought to be optional—like lace trimming on a chemise. Either the Almighty delights in a well-polished soul (in which case He must be terribly fond of the melancholy), or He is more lenient than His clergy and allows us happy reprobates an adjoining garden in Paradise. I should hope so; I am told the celestial hydrangeas are quite beyond compare.

Until such assurances are achieved, I shall continue to live agreeably, and if Heaven declines my application on grounds of insufficient grief, I shall at least have had the comfort of being amused here below, which may, in the end, be the more divine arrangement of the two.

1793: The Moral Symmetry of the Androgynous Soul: A Sermon Delivered at The Gentlemen's Gentlemen Club, London

By The Honourable and Reverend Augustus Meriweather Watervale, M.A., Rector and Canon-Designate of Midchester Cathedral

I confess myself both honoured and slightly amused to be addressing you here this evening. This hall—half church, half charade—has long been known for its ability to host the unutterable under the cloak of refinement. Tonight, we shall speak not of sin, for sin has grown vulgar, but of symmetry, which has not. My subject: The Moral Symmetry of the Androgynous Soul.

Now, before you reach instinctively for your moral umbrellas, let me assure you that I am no revolutionary. Indeed, I stand upon a pulpit as old as Genesis, though it leans rather suggestively to the left. I simply propose that creation itself—being divine art—was composed not in rigid polarities, but in exquisite variations. Heaven may have crafted Adam and Eve as specimens, but art, as you will observe, has since produced many improved editions.

You gentlemen, whose coats fit as theology never has, will appreciate my argument that perfection lies in balance. Masculinity, left to its own devices, tends toward the crude; femininity, when solitary, risks refinement without heat. The soul, when divided strictly by gender, limps like a one-legged angel. It is only when the two divine impulses cohabit in mutual admiration that virtue approaches style.

I have ventured further on this matter in my small but indelicate pamphlet, The Divine Hermaphrodite: or, Notes Toward a Theology of Compliment, which was withdrawn from circulation by the printer's wife, who found its reasoning "too consistent." Therein I argued that moral grandeur depends upon duality: that the saint who denies pleasure ends in deformity, while the voluptuary who spurns kindness becomes a mathematical error in flesh. Holiness without sensuality is anaemic; sensuality without holiness is repetitive. The symmetrical soul —both masculine and feminine, both creation and critique—moves through the world like a perfect couple dancing in one body.

Some theologians objected that such doctrine leads inevitably to effeminacy among the clergy. I thanked them warmly, explaining that the Church might benefit from a little effeminacy—its cassocks were already there; only the conversation lagged behind.

Permit me, gentlemen, to illustrate. We find in Scripture that even the Almighty grew weary of singularity and immediately divided Himself into a Trinity, lest He die of monologue. Christ combined the tenderness of a mother with the defiance of a soldier; and in the Song of Solomon, we behold a duet so indistinguishable in voice that scholars have spent centuries assigning lines by gender with less success than even the most liberal theatre troupe. The Bible, as I have pointed out ad nauseam to the Archbishop, is perilously androgynous.

Yet still, society insists upon sorting souls as it sorts hats: "for men" and "for women," as though eternity had a dressing room. We are told that to be moral one must be manly, to be tender one must be precisely not. This is idiocy, and worse—it is unfashionable. For who among us has not found that the finer virtues—grace, wit, tact, accuracy—come dressed in satin, not sword belts? The highest chivalry is courtesy, and the flower does not apologise to the stone for existing.

I claim no revolutionary credit for these observations; nature makes them daily, though seldom with such linguistic polish. Walk through any garden: are the roses masculine or feminine in their bloom? Do bees discriminate by doctrine? And yet they achieve spiritual equilibrium with enviable regularity. I once proposed to the Royal Horticultural Society that moral education be entrusted to peonies; the suggestion was not warmly received.

Understand, I do not preach license—for license requires rules to disobey, and I prefer aesthetics to law. But the moral symmetry of the androgynous soul is not license; it is liberation from monotony. The symmetrical being loves more justly because he has rehearsed both roles; he feels more truly because he contains both instruments in his orchestra. He does not flatter one sex by despising the other; he courts both by understanding himself.

Here in your club—the Gentlemen's Gentlemen—you already practice this truth unconsciously. You who are served and yet serve; you who meet behind closed doors not to conspire but to admire; you who maintain the nation's dignity by ensuring it never becomes too sober: you embody the elegant androgyny of civilisation itself. If I speak boldly, it is only to remind you that your pleasures, so often condemned, might in fact be the last defence civilisation has against barbarism.

For wherever duality is punished, dullness triumphs. A world of pure masculinity would be an army without violins; a world of pure femininity, a salon without scandal. The symmetrical soul disarms both. It converses where others command, seduces where others shout—its morality is charm raised to the status of doctrine.

Permit me, then, to conclude not with warning but invitation. Nurture within yourselves the perfect complement of the sexes—and by "within," I mean precisely that. Read the Psalms of Ambiguity; contemplate the masterpieces of my friend, the late Bishop, author of On the Possible Gender of God: or, The Almighty as Lady of the House. And remember always that the divine is not one thing or the other, but the luxurious interval between.

I raise my glass (quite possibly the holiest object in the room) to the union of contradictions, to the chastity of pleasure and the pleasure of chastity, to man's feminine wisdom and woman's masculine grace. And above all, to ourselves—the unfinished masterpieces of a Creator who clearly preferred curves to corners.

Gentlemen, may your souls remain symmetrical, your affections distributive, and your morals beautifully misapplied. Amen, in silk if possible.

1793: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

It is, I think, a very good thing that heresy is no longer a crime. I recall, with a sort of affectionate horror, that were I born in sterner centuries, this little book of private blasphemies would be called Exhibit A. I should have been marched decorously to my execution, a crowd of sanctified pickpockets praying for my soul before rifling my pockets for sermon drafts. As it stands, the worst that can happen is "removal from office," which in Church terms is much like being asked to retire from Paradise on grounds of overfamiliarity.

No, excommunication is the modern punishment, and even that is symbolic—one simply ceases to be invited to dinner by one's bishop and is henceforth described as "in retreat." The Church, ever practical, has discovered that expelling members reduces tithes. Heresy has thus become an economic inconvenience rather than a moral offence. This is extraordinarily fortunate for me, as I find myself increasingly unable to distinguish between orthodoxy and parody.

I have been pondering, all day, what improvements I might introduce were I in charge of Creation. It seems to me that, while God handled the opening chapters with considerable flair—Genesis remains literature's most successful debut—He appears to have lost interest in subsequent editing. The world suffers from over-virtuous continuity, and like all long novels it desperately needs trimming.

If I were God (and many have accused me, rather flatteringly, of practising for the position), I should certainly make matters more symmetrical. Take gender, for instance—a charming experiment that has run rather beyond its brief. Were I divine, I would abolish the tiresome dichotomy of male and female and replace it with something called the Undulant. The Undulant would be a creature of exquisite indecision, capable of love in any direction depending on the lighting. Imagine a race of beings who could flirt with theology one evening and with agriculture the next—surely Paradise at last.

And as to the question of corporeality: I would dispense with all these clumsy organs of temptation and furnish humanity instead with a single, iridescent surface capable of blushing at will. Intimacy would become an aesthetic discipline; passion, a visible art form. Reproduction—if I allowed so dreary an institution—would take place by mutual admiration. Two persons sufficiently entranced by one another's syntax would spontaneously give birth to metre.

Naturally, attention to detail would be divine obligation. I should make eyes that change colour with sincerity, lips that can quote poetry when bored, and hands that emit faint sonatas when they touch. I should also like heaven's waters to run with light effervescence—champagne, but sober.

What I cannot forgive God for—besides the mosquito, whose invention I consider evidence of cosmic spite—is His maddening discretion. He never appears. We are told to believe without benefit of audience, to worship a deity whose greatest miracle is His refusal to attend His own ceremonies. One sees the monarch, after all, occasionally driving through the park; one even glimpses one's superior clergy in the lobbies of fashionable hotels. But God—never. Not even a matinee performance.

Were I in His place, I should be everywhere visible, hovering tastefully at social distance, benign yet immaculately dressed. My epiphanies would be punctual and properly lit. I would appear at hesitant twilight, perhaps at the opera or while oysters are being served, and drop a discreet remark or two—"Carry on, my child, but with better lighting." It seems the least He could do for the rent we pay in faith.

This invisibility of the divine has bred an unfortunate profession—theology—whose very existence proves that absence encourages interpretation. Were God known to appear regularly, the clergy would be out of business by Wednesday. It is therefore understandable, if not admirable, that my colleagues prefer their employer invisible.

Still, I am grateful that dissent has become fashionable. No medieval martyr ever enjoyed such tolerant damnation. Yesterday I read aloud in the Gentleman's Club my Meditations Upon the Divine Oversight, wherein I suggested that God, being omniscient, must also be somewhat of a voyeur, and that prayer might reasonably be described as an intimate performance for a singular audience. The rumour reached the Archbishop by supper, but he merely sent an affectionate note: "Do stop aspiring upwards, dear fellow; it makes the Almighty nervous."

Ah, to think: if discretion were holiness, I'd be an archangel. As it is, I remain a Bishop disgraced only by curiosity. The night is warm, the candles flattering, and I have found a metaphorical heresy to replace the physical one denied me by comfort.

I believe I shall take a walk by the river. Perhaps God, like all famous personages, prefers to appear unannounced and to the undeserving. Should He choose this evening, I shall tip my hat, compliment His silence, and suggest, very respectfully, that omnipotence might benefit from a broader sense of humour.

1799: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

It is a most fortunate circumstance—providential, even—that no one in ecclesiastical authority has ever had the impudence to ask whether I, the Right Reverend, believe in God. It is merely taken for granted that I do, in the same way that one takes for granted the Prince's gout, the French, or the weather. Everyone assumes that a Bishop believes exactly as a Bishop ought to; no one suspects that belief, like virtue, is so much easier to profess than to define.

I sometimes think the Church survives chiefly by this policy of polite omission. To ask if a Bishop believes in God would be like asking if the King believes in Britain—vulgar, impertinent, and fatally revealing. Should the question ever fall upon me, I should be compelled, by education and temperament, to respond with another: "Which one?"

After all, I have had a Classical education, the sort that supplies one with an indecent number of deities and no consistent moral compass. I can no more think of God as an only child than I can think of wine as a single flavour. The pagan pantheon may have had its faults—too theatrical by half—but at least it dispensed with that dreary illusion of uniformity which plagues monotheism.

My colleagues prefer their God unambiguous: a large, benevolent, slightly administrative figure who regulates sin with the solemnity of a magistrate and occasionally permits miracles for publicity. To them, theology is a polite dinner between two guests—God and Man—with Christ carving the beef. My difficulty is that I seem to have attended a banquet instead, a celestial riot of multiple presences and improper associations. To ask me if I believe in "God" is to demand I select a single course from Heaven's menu.

Some mornings, I believe most devoutly in Apollo—the God of sunlight and music—when the vergers open the windows and the light pours across the organ pipes as if to gild one's vanity in mercy. On stormy afternoons, when correspondence arrives from the Archbishop, I submit to Jupiter, thundering and capricious. And, on certain evenings—yes, those evenings—I confess I have put my faith entirely in Eros, whose doctrine may be concise but whose practice exceeds comprehension. He, at least, responds to worship.

I would even hazard that I have, in moments of great administrative exhaustion, believed in Bacchus. I have certainly preached sermons under his influence and found them extremely popular. As to the Christian Deity—ah!—He remains a curious abstraction, admirable on the page, rather absentee in performance. I respect Him for the gravity of His silence, but I sometimes wish He would at least send an agenda, so that one might know when to expect Him.

Should the ecclesiastical interrogation ever arrive, I must not say all this. Honesty, though a virtue, is extremely subject to misinterpretation when directed upwards. Instead, I could attempt a courteous evasion: "My Lord Archbishop, I believe in Him as the Church defines Him." That, of course, is a tautology; but tautologies are the faithful's native dialect. The secret of sound theology lies not in precision but in tone—delivered with the faint air of having recently dined with the Almighty.

And yet, there is a sincerity beneath my irony, like a saint trapped in silk. I do think there exists some Principle—capital P—whose reflections we catch occasionally in the face of another being, or in music, or in a well-written sentence. Whether that is God, or love misaddressed, I cannot say. It hardly matters. The label may be Christian, the sentiment Greek, the consequences Jewish; all I know is that something divine continues to behave inconveniently within me, and that no bishopric has yet legislated against it.

It would be comforting to believe in a Deity with the good manners to resemble His publicists, but experience forbids it. Whatever stalking Presence arranges the cosmos must be too elegant for uniformity, too amused for dogma. I suspect God—if that is His name—is an aristocrat of temperament, preferring ambiguity to attendance.

In moments of ecclesiastical fatigue, I turn to my little library of theological absurdities: The Harmonious Discords of Faith by Dr. Flounce, Catechism for the Uncertain by Canon Bemis, and, of course, On the Polite Polytheist—my own early manuscript, prudently unpublished. These works remind me that belief, like fashion, is cyclical; the gods we outgrow eventually become metaphors, which is merely immortality in a lower form.

So then, do I believe? I believe, certainly, in beauty, because I can see it; in irony, because it works; and in love, because it refuses to leave. If those constitute God, then I am most devout. But if belief requires that I limit this divinity to one narrow, masculine, Protestant corner of infinity—then I fear I remain, like my pagan predecessors, gloriously damned.

Still, the question has not yet been asked. Until it is, I shall continue serving the Almighty—in whichever of His disguises presents the better company.

1805: Mabel Anetis deMallard

Private papers

I have just concluded the Collected Sermons of the Reverend Watervale, that celebrated pulpit philosopher whose fans—if one may borrow from the vocabulary of the theatre—sit on their straight-backed pews as if he might, any moment, declare the Second Coming scheduled for Thursday fortnight. The first volume, Of the Gentle Virtues of the Domestic Garden, was less horticultural than matrimonial, and the second, Meditations Upon the Female Soul and Its Proper Adornments, I confess I read with an expression somewhere between awe and a desire to throw the book into the fire. But it is his final sermon, "Why,

if Men Love Women, Do They Not Consider Them Equal?" that has detained me most, in the way a moth is detained by a candle flame.

I can almost hear his earnest tones resonating through the rafters of St. Eudora's Chapel, his hands folded devoutly upon a manuscript he has copied, no doubt, from some earlier divine who himself cribbed it from St. Paul and a faint memory of his own mother's disapproval. The Reverend's answer—perhaps unsurprisingly—is that love, being a higher sentiment, must descend; that the station of woman is to receive love as dew receives the sun, humbly and without ambition to evaporate heavenward. Thus men love because they are strong, and women receive because they are beloved. To reverse this, he assures us, would be "the very undoing of the natural order"—as though that order were not already a little undone judging by his sermons.

Now, I am no philosopher (though I could out-argue most who claim to be), but it occurred to me, somewhere between his reflection on "the weaker vessel" and his rhapsody on "the tender conscience of Eve," that he has set the inquiry upon the wrong footing. For why should the question be why men, if they love women, do not deem them equal? That, I think, bestows upon men a certain proprietorship of moral judgment—love becomes the wand by which they pronounce others fit to stand beside them. The truer question might be: If men love women, why do women not consider men their equals?

For I assure you, love, as I observe it in the world and in the parlour —those twin laboratories of folly—is no guarantee of equality but often the very currency by which inequality is purchased. Women love men with a sort of tragic extravagance, like patrons devoted to a bad artist, and men accept this devotion with the benign air of one who is certain he deserves it. I watch it every day in drawing rooms and ballrooms, in the admiring tilt of an eyelash, the way a girl will adjust her mind as though it were a ribbon to suit the taste of whatever gentleman happens to be present.

Yet I cannot be too severe. The fault, if one must apportion it, lies perhaps in the education we are denied, the books we are told will unsex us. Reverend Watervale would surely consign me to the theological stocks if he saw my night-table: The Wit of the Ancients, Letters from a Sensible Parisienne, and that most improper delight, The Treatises of Hypatia Restored, smuggled to me by Cousin George, who insists on my reading anything so long as I promise not to write him into my diary. (He forgets that all the world writes him into theirs.)

Still, I should reserve some gratitude for the Reverend; he has provided a morning's entertainment and an afternoon's provocation, which is more than most men do. I have annotated his page on "the feminine virtues of silence and decorum" with such vigour that the

margin now looks like a hedgerow in battle. I suppose it is unladylike to fence with a sermon, but then, I was never fond of the kind of ladyhood that bruises only inwardly.

Ah, how magnificent to imagine—forgive the heresy—a church where the pulpit belonged, not to the Reverend Watervale, but to one of his parishioners, say Mrs. Fenton or even myself, sermonising in return: "Why, if women love men, do they not pity them for their singular delusion that superiority is a form of virtue?" I daresay the congregation would be cured of religion or love or both before Evensong.

And so I close his Collected Sermons with the solemnity of one shutting the lid on a well-trimmed coffin: reverent, amused, and entirely unpersuaded.

1810: "Upon the Present Proliferation of Churches, and Their Indiscriminate Offence to the Eye"

By The Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds Published in The Bishopsp(r)ic's Journal

It is one of the lesser tragedies of our industrious age that every parish now wishes to proclaim its faith by erecting something that looks like a chapel and resembles, on closer examination, either a cheese-paring factory or a mausoleum for dogs. The countryside, once so nobly punctuated by the stately towers of yore, is now disfigured by what the Commissioners have lately christened "the necessary expansion of worship." Necessary, perhaps; expansion, certainly; worship, debatable.

Everywhere I turn my episcopal eye, another ecclesiastical edifice mushrooms from the clay, as self-conscious as a moralist and twice as dull. If I travel by coach from Chichester to London (a route I traverse too often in the service of disappointment), I pass no fewer than seventeen newly completed churches, each vying to be less consequential than the last. They are born of identical ambition: to be quickly built, inexpensively operated, and immediately forgotten.

One cannot wholly condemn the motive. The age, I am told, is economical. Timber is dear, stone dearer, and the spiritual appetite apparently so ravenous that any four walls with a hole in the roof will suffice for the saving of souls. So we have, accordingly, the reign of the neutral church—an edifice of such deliberate anonymity that it could, at any given moment, be mistaken for a barn, a theatre, or a parliamentary subcommittee.

I stood last week in the nave of St. Agatha's, newly consecrated by my colleague Bishop Cresswell (a man devout in spirit and hopeless in matter of style). The nave resembled, with charitable description, a shoe warehouse struck by remorse. The pulpit, however, soared prominently, as if lecturing were the only sacrament left to us. The altar was obliged to stand back, bashful and apologetic, as though uncertain of its continued employment. The congregation expressed admiration for the "fine acoustics," which only proves that public taste has descended from the visual to the sonic. The Lord may once have thundered from Sinai, but in England He must now be understood by echo.

It was not always thus. The earlier generation had taste, if not moderation. The Georgian churches, for all their frosted plaster and inflated domes, at least aspired to grace. They erred on the side of opulence—which, for a bishop, is the respectable direction of error. But we now limbo beneath a different kind of bar: made of cheap brick, cut square, drained of all pretence to curve or flourish. One might as well pray between two ledger lines.

The Commissioners (those well-meaning autocrats of parsimony) inform me that the "new Gothic" is cheaper than the old Classical, because it allows the builder to omit ornament and call it principle. What used to be sacred design is now mere geometry in mourning. Everywhere one encounters pretence without precision—pointed arches that point nowhere, windows so "mediaeval" they shudder at daylight, spires that teeter like werewolves caught mid-transformation. They are Gothic in the way a goose is swanlike: by accident and apology.

I remarked this to Sir Ambrose Fettleton, the civil engineer charged with approving new parochial models. "My lord," said he, "we build for congregations, not for connoisseurs." To which I replied that congregations must also behold, not merely inhabit. Faith, like any lady, deserves her mirror. Sir Ambrose assured me that simplicity is a virtue. I told him that so is chastity, but I would not style it in plaster.

The pragmatic explanation is that our builders now borrow styles as a hostess borrows sugar—never enough to sweeten, never enough to please. The Gothic Revival, as the younger clergy breathlessly term it, may one day bring scholarship to the stones of England; but for now it produces only Gothic interjections: half-arches, quarter-pinnacles, baptistries that look like asparagus boilers. As one wag observed at the consecration of Holy Trinity, Islington, "It appears the Almighty has taken to architecture by subscription."

This is not to blame piety, which remains sincere if somewhat prematurely expressed. The cause is practical ambition without

aesthetic comprehension: pragmatism and piety, joined in unsuitable marriage. We are assured that these bare edifices admit vast congregations. Alas, vast congregations produce vast noise, and noise, my dear brethren, is not worship. The Reformation gave us plainness; the modern age gives us pallor. One is moral, the other municipal.

In the course of my episcopal duties, I have approved more roofs than I have read sermons. The builders write to me: "My Lord, the parish recommend a stone of moderate texture and an elevation of restrained character." By which they mean, "Cheap, and taller than the brewer's warehouse." I invariably sign with a sigh, for I know the result. The English countryside will soon look like a philosophical argument: rows of premises proving virtue by ugliness.

I have just received a pamphlet from a Mr. Thacker of Birmingham entitled Foundations of Efficient Piety, in which he claims that "beauty dissipates devotion." This is a lie both to God and geometry. No man has ever sinned because of a well-proportioned cornice. Even the Almighty, I suspect, drew the rainbow for the pleasure of completion. Yet our modern saints sneer at such splendour. They prefer their temples tidy and their souls unadorned. We shall soon be praying in sheds, and congratulating ourselves on their sincerity.

The latest invention—what the architects call "portable chapels"—is the final outrage. Prefabricated in iron, these are said to be erected in a fortnight, in weather fine or foul. "Erected," of course, is generous. The first example I inspected collapsed at its east end like a repentant drunk. The idea that faith may be boxed, shipped, and unfolded at will strikes me as a parody of miracles. Yet there are whispers that such affordability may extend our ministry to the colonies. If so, Heaven help the colonies.

We are, in short, a nation exchanging sanctity for expedience. The Church, once the mother of architecture, now rents her womb to bricklayers. I do not despair, but I do sigh—a prolonged sigh, built of stone and imagination. Perhaps future generations will rediscover beauty as a form of belief, and once more remember that a church is not merely a hall for instruction, but an instrument for awe.

Until then, I shall continue my rounds and pretend admiration for these "places of worship." They are places, indeed, though I am uncertain of the other half of the description. When I stand in one of their cold, cubic naves, I feel like a bishop in a counting house: someone is achieving something, but it is not salvation.

And so I advise my younger brethren—clergy, architects, and hopeful converts alike—when next you build a church, do not think first of cost or comfort. Think instead of how the sun will fall upon

stone, and how even silence might be made to glow. For economy is mortal; but beauty, even when misunderstood, is a form of prayer.

1810: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

I have often wondered whether the Almighty, being omniscient, shares with me the amusement of knowing how His creatures will misunderstand Him centuries hence. I, at least, can foresee my own resurrection in print. There will come a future age when some priggish antiquarian—perhaps a lady in spectacles smelling faintly of ink and moral superiority—will disinter these pages from the vault at Mallard and declare, with the calm cruelty of scholarship, "The Bishop, while eloquent, was clearly unsound." She will footnote me to extinction, and I shall not be there to defend myself. But ah, the pleasure of imagining her labour!

It consoles me that I am one of those fortunate sinners whose faults are gilded by circumstance. I have land, position, and a temperamental immunity to poverty—advantages which, I must admit, train the eye admirably. Indeed, beauty reveals itself to wealth as naturally as fragrance to a rose. My gardener complains that I notice too much: the way his hedge lists slightly eastward, the blush of decay on a marble urn, the colour of the barley at Maundy harvest. But I have been well taught by circumstance. I was born into proportion. My love of it is not virtue; it is inheritance.

Still, I make no apology for being fastidious. Beauty, after all, is God's least disputable commandment. The theologians endlessly debate mystery—predestination, redemption, and the precise number of angels that can fraternise upon a pin—but beauty needs no defence. It is its own theology, needing only an eye that has not been dulled by usefulness. As I remarked to the Archdeacon (who is both learned and upholstered), ugliness is not a sin but a sign of theological fatigue.

Take my drawing-room at the Palace. The curtains are a tincture of lapis, gathered by French hands before France became unfashionable to mention. Against them, the gilt of the candelabra glows like recanted sin. Some may call this luxury; I call it liturgy. For what is the Eucharist but the architecture of beauty in motion—the gold chalice, the folded linen, the tremulous choreography of belief? One cannot separate devotion from decoration any more than flavour from food.

Even the Protestant plainness I was bred to regard as moral feels to me like a nervous disorder of the English temperament. Simplicity

becomes in us a kind of neurosis—a fear that the visible world might reveal too much of our inward desire. But I have ceased to be frightened by desire. I prefer to see it clearly dressed.

This, I suspect, will be taken down by posterity as proof of decadence. How dull their verdicts will be! I can all but see the future's pious phrasing: He was more given to pleasure than to prayer—yet his syntax redeems him. They will not understand that faith and beauty are married by necessity; one becomes unbearable without the other. I never trust a man who worships an unattractive God.

If an angel were to appear to me today, I should first notice whether its wings were in proportion to its shoulders and what shade of white the feathers took in the afternoon light. Some might call that irreverence, but it is, in truth, a recognition of the divine: for beauty is merely God arranged to pleasure the senses.

My chapel, recently refurbished at what my steward calls "a ruinous expense," has become a point of local irritation. Apparently, one must not employ Venetian glass in the sanctuary because it "casts distracting colours upon the vicar's face." I find the result rather improving. A vicar, properly illuminated, might yet remember heaven. The puritans of taste complain that I have "confused the sacred and the sensual." I answer that I have reconciled them.

My life as a Bishop may appear to the jealous as an exercise in glorified comfort, yet I think it an experiment in cultivated honesty. Wealth, leisure, and the power to be disregarded are fine tutors. They liberate one from the false modesty of the mediocre. When a poor man admires beauty, he must plead excuse for vanity; when I do so, it is considered discernment. If the unfairness of this arrangement troubles the conscience, the conscience must learn better manners.

Earlier this evening I dined alone, accompanied by an unrepentant bottle of claret and a book of essays entitled On the Temperamental Influence of Colour in Sacred Space by Dr. Maurus Lyttleton, who was deposed for attempting to stain the walls of Trinity Chapel mauve. I admire him enormously. He observes that the soul requires ornament as the lungs require air—too little, and devotion collapses. The Synod called him heretic; I call him correct.

As the hour grows late and the snow thickens, I feel my life expanding outward, into time I shall not see. It delights me to imagine myself annotated. Let them find these pages, read them with curiosity and a whiff of scandal, and discover therein the true confession of an aesthete: that holiness, though frequently dull, need never be ugly. I have tried to prove it in sermon, house, and habit—even in the trimming of my waistcoat, which is dove-grey satin, polished like reason.

If there is any moral to be read after I have been disinterred by literary enthusiasts and their interminable societies, let it be this: A soul that cannot take pleasure in beauty cannot recognise God, only His shadow. I have trained my eye by advantage, yes—but also by gratitude. And all the better for it.

1812: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

This morning I awoke with a distinct sense that I had already survived too many eternities in miniature—breakfast committees, confirmation services, and the annual inspection of the diocesan accounts—each a rehearsal for death conducted without sufficient imagination. People talk so blithely of rushing toward eternity, as though it were some splendid country house where they are expected for weekend tea. I cannot think why they hurry. Life, with all its errors and upholstery, deserves to be lingered over like a good scandal.

Everyone seems bent on convincing everybody else of something spiritual these days. It must be a national pastime. The Methodists are spreading through the countryside like an epidemic of moral embroidery, sewing up the holes left by happiness. Each insists on his personal revelation as though it were an exclusive invitation to Heaven, hand-delivered. As for myself, I have long preferred to find revelation in the garden—fewer rules, better smells. I cannot imagine eternity being half as entertaining as this world, with its startling habit of persisting in spite of improvement.

I dined yesterday with Lady Titherton—a pious woman, embroidered to the fingertips—who announced between syllabubs that "every moment brings us closer to God." I replied that every moment seems to bring me closer to luncheon, which is infinitely more verifiable. She smiled in the way a saint might before apostasy and changed the subject to death, as that was safer. "Memento mori," she said gravely. "Yes," I told her, "but tempus fugit, and I've tickets for the theatre."

The thing I truly object to in our obsession with mortality is not the fear of dying, but the vulgarity of preparation. If one must depart, one should at least leave tastefully. Why waste the journey rehearsing the ending? All these people scattering tracts, attending sermons, rearranging their souls as though God were a vigorous housekeeper about to inspect the furniture. I should prefer to say, "Get off the cross, my dear, we need the wood for the drawing room."

The living, oddly enough, are so preoccupied with the afterlife that they forget to attend to the afternoon. They shovel up doom by the spade, as if granted tenure in tragedy. Why, I wonder, does no one preach memento vivere—remember to live—it is far more difficult and consequently holier.

I have lately taken to composing an occasional tract myself, Theological Diversions for Those Not in a Hurry, which proposes that moral improvement be delayed until the penultimate moment and all available energy be spent on conversation and hydrangeas. It's an excellent philosophy, though the publisher feels it would not sell in Wales.

My chaplain, young Frobisher, has taken to timing my sermons with a pocket chronometer, the result of some new doctrine that the brevity of the bishop reflects the humility of the divine. Last Sunday, just as I reached the conclusion that Paradise will probably resemble an overstuffed Regency parlour with better servants, he rang the bell prematurely and cut off salvation mid-sentence. When reproved, he quoted me: tempus fugit. I have promoted him at once; such spirit is rarely found below the rank of Archangel.

Were we all granted foreknowledge of eternity, I imagine most of us would avoid it. Eternity implies continuity without novelty, which is surely the definition of administration. I suspect Heaven resembles a committee meeting in which everyone is impeccably polite and no one adjourns until the end of time. The alternative, of course, is far livelier company in the basement—though the heating, I'm told, is atrocious.

At sixty, I am frequently urged to consider my end. I do—three times daily, usually after meals, when contentment gives the illusion of philosophy. I expect dying will be rather like moving house: exhausting, inconvenient, and revealing one's attachment to unnecessary possessions. But I have no desire to hasten. There is too much passing scenery to enjoy, and I should hate to be spirited away before mastering the new currant pudding or finishing The Philosophy of the Slightly Tired Soul, which I am writing strictly for publication after my demise—it will read better when I'm unavailable for correction.

In the meantime, I continue to stroll through what is left of my allotted years as one might through a slow, luminous market—there are still entertainments to sample, scandals to admire, and occasional affections to squander. I note the passing clouds with gratitude: they do not promise permanence, yet they decorate the transience beautifully.

If any younger clergyman should read this, let him take it as neither confession nor advice but as an observation: eternity, like all decent

destinations, will wait; the road there is lined with roses, absurdity, and opportunity, and I, for one, intend to stop at every inn along the way

1812: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

(Extract from his private journals, later collected, with tactful omissions, in "Accretions: or the Architecture of the Soul," published 1825 in Bath by J. Fennimore & Sons.)

I have come to the faintly ridiculous conclusion that I have spent the greater portion of my life suffering from a slow and genteel infection: influence. It begins, of course, in youth when one mistakes admiration for conviction and imitation for intellect. What one first absorbs out of curiosity eventually hardens into creed by sheer repetition. Then—decades later—one finds the walls of one's mind papered not with beliefs but with quotations.

This morning, after breakfasting on coffee and mild guilt, I found myself reading The Psychology of Habitual Piety, that newly fashionable book by Dr. Prendergast, which insists that men of religion are governed less by faith than by tone. His thesis—uncharitable but persuasive—is that belief, in the ecclesiastical sense, is rarely personal; it is a professional accent, cultivated and seldom reassessed. I closed the book at once, furious at the accuracy. For I find myself daily growing allergic to my own pieties.

Strange it is to look back upon the youth I once was, polished and certain, as though recalling a cousin one never really liked. I was then determined to prove that intelligence could exist within the Church without spoiling the furniture. I believed ideas were to be managed, like servants—encouraged but watched. I can remember sermonising with all the passion of the innocent, the kind that mistakes eloquence for faith. The critics called me unorthodox; I called it style. Now, though the doctrines remain unchanged, I am rather inclined to suspect that my style was my only doctrine.

The trouble with time is that it breeds perspective—anathema to all institutions. The clergy, like the military, does its best work in narrow quarters. I have begun to notice that every opinion I borrowed in my thirties took up residence in my forties, and now in my sixties has installed itself as proprietor. Influence, left unchecked, accrues like plaster dust; soft at first, then impossible to remove without damaging the architecture.

Of course, I was influenced by everyone in my earnest ascent—archbishops with titles as long as their consciences, philosophers who

cloaked doubt in Latin, and those women of intellect who fluttered about theological soirées, pressing books into one's hands and certainties out of one's grasp. Worse still, there were the bright young men of my curacy: they shaped me with the unselfconscious audacity of youth, mistaking me for an elder statesman when I was merely an elder dilettante.

Now, with the luxury of leisure and insomnia, I have begun to excavate these layers. It is a delicate operation: peeling back the polite conformities of middle age to find the raw curiosity I smothered beneath them. That early ambition of mine—to translate disbelief into beauty and beauty into something resembling God—still glimmers beneath the strata. The miracle, it seems, is that despite a lifetime's acquaintance with the Almighty, I remain an atheist heading politely for Heaven.

The paradox no longer unnerves me. I am reconciled to the irony that belief can survive intellectual demolition, much like ivy clinging gorgeously to ruins. If there is a God, He must surely enjoy the contradiction of my continued employment. I am certain He reads The Daily Register and laughs.

Historically, it has been a most stimulating year for confession. The Napoleonic wars stagger on—half Europe ablaze with the righteousness of expansion—and here I sit in Bath, writing self-revelations with the zeal of a man polishing his own eulogy. The newspapers trumpet victories, but I am unconvinced. I have seen too much of institutional triumph—national, clerical, marital—to trust in it. Change, real change, rarely arrives by drum or decree. It creeps in quietly, like mildew, or affection.

My episcopal correspondence grows more sanctimonious as my patience shortens. The clergy from the provinces write to inquire about property, precedence, and the proper arrangement of morals. I reply vaguely, quoting myself where I can; one must maintain an appearance of consistency. Beneath the official serenity, however, I find delight in my own apostasy. I have stopped apologising for irregular thoughts. One advantage of seniority is that people assume one's eccentricities are wisdoms prematurely understood.

Last week, I started rereading The Origins of Virtue, an anonymous volume published in '97, long ago suppressed for suggesting that conscience has chemical origins. I liked it then; I adore it now. Between its lines, I can see a pale shadow of the hopeful sceptic I was at twenty-one—asking not whether God existed, but whether it mattered if He did. That hope, I realise, has survived influence's slow annexation; it has simply disguised itself as discretion.

And so, in these autumnal years, I am attempting a little re-alignment—a personal reformation of sorts. I am pulling away the layers of borrowed reverence to recover something vibrant beneath. Not a change of faith, but of furniture; moving the icons of my mind a few inches nearer the light. If religion has taught me anything, it is that absolutes belong only to those too young to know what they mean.

Perhaps that is the final cruelty of influence: that one must live long enough to recognise which thoughts were truly one's own. The rest—those borrowed convictions, those polished second-hand certainties—fall away like politician's promises in a fresh wind. What remains, I suspect, is the soul, or whatever continues to hold the pen when one grows tired of justifying it.

1813: "An Earnest Reflection Upon the Providential Greatness of England, Its Church, and Its Civilising Mission"

In The Spectator by The Honourable and Reverend Augustus Meriweather Watervale, M.A., Rector and Canon-Designate of Midchester Cathedral

It is my solemn conviction, formed through years of scriptural meditation, moderate exercise, and steady dining, that no people in the history of Providence have been found so deserving of divine esteem as the English. I recognise that modesty is one of our national virtues; but as the custodian of moral truth, I cannot permit modesty to interfere with instruction. The time has come, perhaps, for our nation to recognise openly what Heaven has already ordained secretly: namely, that England, in her institutions—both spiritual and imperial—possesses a charter of superiority written not in human ink but celestial dew.

Consider the evidence. By God's manifest appointment, our dominion has spread to the farthest corners of the globe with the ease of morning light across the sea. From the rugged shores of Africa to the perfumed isles of the Indies, from the wilderness of the Americas to those new antipodean settlements (where convicts are transformed into penitents by sunshine and industry), the English flag flutters as a visible emblem of divine favour. When I examine such expansion, reason compels me to interpret it not as accident but as apotheosis. Would Heaven, that thrifty administrator, lavish success upon an unworthy people? I think not.

"In Thy light shall we see light," saith the Psalmist (36:9). It is precisely in our light—Anglican and English—that the world begins to see at all. Other nations make commerce; we make civilisation. The French, poor distracted race, confused Reason with God and reaped the guillotine. The Spaniard, too indolent for Providence, lost his colonies to sloth. But we, animated by Scripture and the solidity of roast beef, have made Empire an act of devotion. We conquer not for gain but for ordinance, and collect tithes of continents in token of gratitude.

Indeed, it has been whispered—by envious foreigners chiefly—that our ascendancy arises from ships, gunpowder, or industry. These are secondary instruments. The true source of our prosperity lies in our spiritual architecture: the Anglican Church herself, that noble compromise between zeal and reason. "Therefore now amend your ways and your doings," exhorted Jeremiah (7:3), "and I will cause you to dwell in this place." We have amended both, moderately; thus we continue to dwell, magnificently. The Church's measured latitude—Catholic in ceremony, Protestant in integrity—provides divine ventilation to the conscience. Rome suffocates, Geneva shivers; Canterbury, sensibly temperate, breathes. It is this very breath that has filled the sails of Empire.

I am sometimes accused, by critics deficient in patriotism, of exaggeration. Yet what is exaggeration but the enthusiasm of truth? To declare England and the Anglican doctrine supreme is not vanity but acknowledgment of fact. Since the days of St. Paul, who foreshadowed us when he preached to the Gentiles, no faith has travelled so prosperously. "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). We have obeyed with an efficiency Christ Himself might envy. We have Christianised the compass! Our missionaries—those spiritual mariners—sow pence as parables and reap souls for the census. Entire tribes, who a decade ago worshipped tobacco or trees, now kneel before our Lord and pay customs duties. To me this seems sagely providential.

There are historians—foreign, naturally—who compare our dominion to that of Rome. The parallel is flattering but incomplete. Rome, let us remember, fell; England ascends. Rome conquered to exploit; England conquers to improve. Jerusalem fell to sin; Babylon to pride; yet London, that sacred Babylon of industry, grows stronger hourly. "For the kingdom is the Lord's: and he is the governor among the nations" (Psalm 22:28). How could one doubt that His headquarters lie conveniently near Westminster?

In such meditations I find especial comfort in our constitution, that blessed trinity of King, Lords, and Commons—a human reflection of the divine. The King, paternal; the Nobility, apostolic; the People,

evangelical; the Bishopric, mediating between all as do angels between Heaven and Earth. His Majesty, the earthly vicegerent of Providence, steers the nation not by innovation but by example of immovable dignity. When he speaks, even the weather listens. Our nobility—those gracious patrons of virtue and venison—constitute the golden frame around the nation's portrait. We clergy hang safely between, interpreting God's will in language both comprehensible and conveniently English.

Of the working classes (that industrious multitude whose labour oils our theology), I must say this: let them continue working cheerfully in their stations, assured that they serve the very structure of Heaven. For "he that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10). The poor man polishing a shoe contributes as sensibly to the triumph of England as the Admiral who crystallises glory at sea. The key, of course, is that each must know his blessed place. Providence, which made some eyes short-sighted and others longsighted, clearly intended hierarchy. Heaven, if democratic, would be chaos; so too would England if everyone began thinking independently, which mercifully appears unlikely.

In all these matters we perceive the unity of Church and Empire: two branches of the same oak, nourished by divine rain and the savings of the wealthy. The rich, those fortunate vessels of celestial confidence, must remain affluent if the country is to display God's benevolence. I have often remarked—privately, to generous parishioners—that almsgiving is improved by affluence: it is difficult to bestow charity from an empty larder. Therefore let us make the continuation of wealth a Christian duty! Surely our merchants' fortunes are but the visible sacraments of grace.

It will be said, by those who measure greatness in other currencies than salvation, that England's Empire, like Rome's, must decline. Yet the evidence is entirely opposite. Each colony planted is another verse added to our collective psalm. If Rome wore laurel, we wear lawn sleeves. If Caesar built roads, we build rectories. The world's map, once idolatrously various, now whitens like linen—an outward sign of inward cleansing. Even the heathen have begun to imitate our vices, which is the first step toward conversion.

Finally, then, what reason compels us to suppose that so beneficent a pattern might break? The sea, which girds our island like a sacramental ring, ensures eternal fidelity between England and God. The world may envy, but it cannot dissolve, that union. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord," says the Psalmist (33:12). We might add: "and whose imports are profitable."

Thus I conclude, in the calm confidence of revelation, that Heaven looks favourably upon all Englishmen—not selectively upon the pious or competent, but inclusively upon the obedient. England is the chosen vineyard: some grapes make claret, some vinegar, yet all belong to the same estate. Let us therefore preserve harmony between altar and Empire, rich and poor, bishop and bootblack, church bell and canon shot. This is not merely national policy; it is divine arithmetic. God has multiplied us across the world, and surely He knows His business better than the Opposition.

1811: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

The weather continues sternly devotional, as if the Almighty were rehearsing a thunderous Amen over Sussex. I have spent the morning ruminating on the subject of church music—an enterprise which might appear harmless enough, had it not involved so much human noise. My secretary tells me that the Presbyterians, in one of their fits of joyless rectitude, once forbade hymn-singing altogether—an edict I confess I find increasingly sympathetic. The reasoning, I believe, was that melody distracts from faith. I cannot agree entirely, though I am not blind to the dangers. I have heard melody enough in pew and parlour to appreciate how swiftly the divine can become disastrous.

My own choirmen, handsome as painted seraphs and nearly as vain, have transformed our Evensong into something between a bleating contest and a sentimental duel. They stand, lips red with piety and cheap claret, their voices chasing pitch like small boys chasing butterflies. I often think it less an act of worship than of wager. Mr. Barraclough, the tenor, insists he sings "as the angels do," but I have privately concluded he means the fallen sort, for his high E resembles nothing so much as the sound of a cherub landing awkwardly.

Still, I am loath to dismiss the visual portion of the performance. Choirmen, when young, may be a rare enhancement to the nave—so long as they confine themselves to looking devout and refrain from attempting Handel. They are like ornamental tulips: most delightful when silent. As my aunt Lady Tremayne used to say, "If one must have gardens, best choose those that don't shriek."

The difficulty, of course, lies in the delusion that every creature capable of sound is also capable of song. Indeed, where is the mother in England strong enough to resist the temptation of thrusting her son into the choir loft, convinced that he is touched by melody divine? I am

reminded of that wretched pamphlet—A Parental Exhortation on Piety Through Performance, by Lady Plimworth—which assures anxious mothers that "a boy who can sing will never sin." This may be true, but only, I suspect, because no one sins willingly in his company.

I have long wished to write a corrective tract: Do Not Encourage Your Offspring to Sing, Mrs Farquhar, in which I might explain that love of the Lord does not require assaulting His ears. For every angelic voice that soars heavenward, there are six that stumble gracelessly into purgatory. I have endured mother after mother presenting me with her hopeful progeny: pale boys squeaking like bagpipes at half pressure, ambitious girls determined to turn the Kyrie into a romance. "He has a gift," they whisper. Indeed he does—and I should like to return it.

The worst offenders are the provincial prodigies. Only last week, a family from Tunbridge Wells brought in their young Edwin to audition for the vesper choir. He had been "musically trained," they said, by a retired oboist and a governess "of intense feeling." Edwin promptly launched into a piece of his own composition entitled The Humble Trumpet Shall Exalt Thy Name, modulating every third word until even the organist fainted. I told his mother that I applauded his enthusiasm but not his sound. She looked ready to burst into tears—or worse, song.

One must tread carefully, however, for the line between art and heresy is as thin as the bishop's waistcoat when faced with luncheon. There are still the Puritan ghosts among us who recall the ban of 1644, when Parliament declared "No Psalms, No Organs, No Frivolities" and replaced music with a kind of civic mumbling. This, I think, was carrying taste too far. It is one thing to silence expression; quite another to prize dullness as doctrine. Yet in moments of high sopranic hysteria, when the trebles pierce the rafters like avenging insects, I feel an unholy nostalgia for the days of tuneless devotion.

Our newly appointed organist, Mr. Tippet, insists that the congregation learn a new anthem each month. "To educate the soul through repetition," he calls it. I told him the soul may prefer ignorance. Repetition has taught us nothing but despair. Only yesterday, during practice, half the sopranos collapsed on the words "Hosanna in the highest," either from piety or lack of air. I left by the side door and fortified myself with sherry and cynicism in equal measure.

Still, I adore the idea of music. It is the practice that corrupts it. How divine it is to imagine harmony; how infernal to hear it attempted. Even Milton wrote, "The Angelic song was silent after the Fall." He did not say whether it was from grief or embarrassment.

After luncheon I attempted a few lines of my own forthcoming essay, Decorous Melodies: On the Restraint of Praise. I find my thesis concise: the Church would sound much better if it were seen and not heard. Devotion should shimmer in silk and candlelight, not hurl itself into falsetto. The Almighty, I am convinced, admires whispering more than shrieking. And if He does require accompaniment, He will find no want of harps in Heaven—or harpies on Earth.

This evening I heard Barraclough attempting a divine solo from the garden, the notes drifting through the open window like wounded doves. I was torn between blessing him and joining the Presbyterians. I resolved instead to pour a glass of port and pray for mercy (mine, not his).

The ban on hymnody, like all good prohibitions, was founded in despair but illuminated by taste. If we must have music, let it be like love—private, fervent, and in tune.

1812: Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

Private papers

I have spent the morning contemplating the great tragedy of masculine devotion, namely that the more adamantly a man insists upon his virility beneath the soutane, the more he resembles a spinster in full mourning. High Anglicanism, they call it—high, indeed! I say it is the highest form of drag ever contrived outside the theatres of Drury Lane. With music swelling like a sentimental actress's bosom and the air thick with incense (that perfumed smog of sanctity), one can hardly tell whether one has entered a church or slipped into the backstage of a Baroque opera.

My deacons mince about in lace sleeves so delicately gathered they could be the ruffles of opera seria heroines. The sub-dean, Mr. Cholmondeley, wears a biretta so flamboyantly plumed I half-expect him to pirouette. If devotion demands devotion, then we are all lovers here—of fabric, fragrance, and our own reflections. It is said we do it for God, but I suspect the Almighty is rather less interested in our pleats than we are ourselves. The mirror, in my chapel at least, is the truer confessor.

This afternoon, I was compelled to review the ecclesiastical wardrobe—a phrase which ought to be more widely adopted, for one's cassocks are as numerous as the Queen's lobsters. I have commissioned a new one in episcopal violet satin from the house of Madame Froust in Bond Street. She calls it "the Vision of Saint Wilgefortis," which I find

delightfully inappropriate, given Saint Wilgefortis's trouble with facial hair. When I suggested she lighten the fabric, she clucked, "Your Grace will never perspire in heaven," as though temptation could not sneak through the seams of velvet.

It is an odd thing—this English law which declares a man mad to dress as a woman but applauds a woman for imitating a man. By that logic, our pulpits ought to be filled with the sanest women and the most dangerously unstable men. My cousin Lady Peregrina (an Amazon if ever one marched in petticoats) has recently joined a club devoted to "rational female improvement," which I'm told consists chiefly of fencing lessons and gin. When I mentioned the statute to her, she flapped her riding crop and said, "My dear, if madness dresses so handsomely, the Bedlamites will be the best-dressed men in London by summer."

A canon of my acquaintance—one Dr. Thistlebank, lately of Ely—has just published On the Masculine Soul of the Church: A Tract Against Excessive Ornament. I could not resist purchasing a copy, though the shopkeeper warned me, with some glee, that it contains no illustrations. A pity. Yet even without them, it is the most unintentionally piquant thing I have read since Miss Alabaster's Reflections on Divine Fragrance (the latter dedicated, with touching vagueness, to "the Bishop who knows my scent"). Dr. Thistlebank protests the effeminacy of the cloth but cannot conceal his yearning for it: his prose is awash in the language of drapery and need. "Our Lord wore nothing of silk," he writes, and I all but hear the sigh under the breath: if only He had.

After Evensong, I dined with Lord Wringford and that unfortunate poet, Ambrose Sweeting, who read aloud from his latest volume, The Cloistered Heart: Odes to Starch and Stole. Sweeting maintains that restraint is the highest expression of desire. I told him that in the Church of England, restraint is not an expression—it's a costume. Lord Wringford snorted into his consommé, declared the whole clergy "a Greek chorus of suppressed embraces," and retired early, claiming indigestion. I suspect the indigestion was moral, though he owes at least half his wardrobe to our tailors.

Tonight the wind is heavy with the smoke of London's many ambitions. Somewhere beyond my window, a bell tolls for Compline, though it sounds to me more like the prelude to a duet. I am seized by affection for my kind—the serious men in their ridiculous finery, fumbling toward heaven in lace cuffs. We blush to call it beauty, so we name it tradition instead. I think there is no lovelier deceit in all the world.

Before retiring, I pressed a little powder on my nose (for the lamplight, you understand), adjusted my cross with the delicacy of a courtesan touching her pearls, and whispered my evening prayer: that I might live long enough to see one honest man admit that we, the Church Militant, are the best chorus girls in Christendom.

1813: A Sermon upon the Masculine Soul of the Church: A Tract In Favour of Excessive Ornament

By Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds

My beloved flock—such a charming expression, for it implies both innocence and shearing—today I propose to preach on the sacred importance of finery. The text, I think, is from the newly published book by my dear friend (and sometime rival in the matter of millinery), Canon Hildebrand Vellacourt: On the Masculine Soul of the Church: A Tract in Favour of Excessive Ornament. A book which I consider neither excessive nor masculine enough, though it glitters with promising indiscretions. The Canon writes, "The Almighty is a decorator, for He framed the lilies and feathered the heron." To which I add, He also gilded the peacock's derrière and invented pomegranates merely to prove that velvet exists in nature. Who are we to be less flamboyant than creation itself?

Now, there are those among you—and I see them, with buttons polished to Protestant severity—who mutter that ornament enfeebles the Church. They say the cassock must hang plain as a pauper's conscience, that the altar must blush no brighter than the blood of Christ, and that only poverty of style is piety of spirit. But I say unto you: the true sin lies not in the mirror, but in refusing to look into one. For you see, dignity and decoration are not adversaries but identical twins, only ever confused by those who cannot tell a chasuble from a bedsheet.

Saint Paul may have admonished women to cover their heads in church, but he gave not one prescription for the sleeves of bishops. And rightly so. For faith, my friends, requires the sleeve to be as capacious as the imagination. One cannot lift the Host with a cuff undistinguished by lace; one cannot, in good conscience, interpret the ineffable without a little shimmer. The soul trembles at simplicity—it only truly sings when clothed.

I recall the late Bishop of Bath, that glorious dandy of devotion, proclaiming at Salisbury in '07 that "the plain cassock is the devil's apron." He wore, you may remember, the famous cope designed by

Miss Lucasta Vane of Brighton, embroidered with silver grapes and real mother-of-pearl Jesuses. A chronic offence to the Puritans, and yet the only sermon he ever gave that I remember word for word. One must look splendid to be memorable; it is theological physics.

It is often argued that Jesus wore rags. True enough, but let me remind you, my dear brethren, that His heavenly wardrobe quite outdoes ours all. Consider Revelation 1: "His head and His hairs were white like wool, His eyes were as flame of fire, and His voice as the sound of many waters." This is not the description of a minimalist. Our Lord is dressed for the opera eternal, and the angels but His stagehands.

As I walked the streets this week—sooty, enterprising London, always polishing its vices—I saw the shopmnan of Messrs. Needham & Wicks unpacking golden braids for military uniforms. I asked him, "For which regiment are these?" He replied, "For the 58th, my lord, going to Portugal." I sighed, "So men will die gorgeously." If a soldier may perish in glory, the least we clergy can do is live ornamentally.

The critics say ornament corrupts virtue. I counter that ornament contains virtue, arrests it, displays it, flatters it into visibility. Strip away the splendour, and you have but an undershirt of belief—useful, perhaps, but miserable to parade in. Even the lilies of the field, that sermonette of natural modesty, were not content to remain merely green: they blossom with a kind of botanical impertinence, each one shouting, "Observe me, or I shall wither unappreciated!"

My friend, Lady Aspasia Fanshawe—author of Ecclesiastical Embroidery as a Spiritual Exercise—declares that every stitch is a prayer. I have no proof to the contrary. When one threads a needle with gold, does it not gleam like grace? We pretend humility is in the heart, but in truth it is in the hem.

If the Church is to retain her charm, she must become what she denies: a theatre of salvation. Religion is not a science but an art, and art requires costume. The saints understood this. St. Sebastian, that loveliest martyr of muscle and arrow, understood exposure as prophecy. St. Teresa swooned because she knew ecstasy demands choreography. Even dear Thomas More wore his conscience like a brooch.

Ah, my listeners, if only reformers would learn the arithmetic of attraction! A gilded altar wins more souls than a sermon on economy. A polished chalice reflects Heaven far better than any pamphlet. Even Voltaire admitted (I think he was jesting, though it was one of his better jests) that "faith is an agreement between the perfume and the pulse."

There is no gracelessness like austerity. We are not called to be simple—we are called to be sublime. I want the Church to dazzle, to intoxicate, to make the sceptic's eye water with envy. Let every cope be

a catechism; let every procession be a parade of Paradise. When next you enter this cathedral, I wish you to imagine it not as the vestibule of repentance, but as the drawing-room of God, upholstered forever in light.

And if any dour-faced reformer complains that your bishop has mistaken piety for peacocking, tell him this: the Lord who made the rainbow has already forgiven me my taste.

Now, beloved flock, my sermon draws to its close, as do my patience and my powder. Go forth, therefore, and love excess. Remember Canon Vellacourt's doctrine: "To embellish is to believe twice." Believe devotedly, and please—dress for the occasion.

1848: Preface to the Second, Regrettably Enlarged Edition of "The Worldly Bishop and the Godly Curate, Being an Inquiry into the Relative Merits of Piety and Position, and the Curious Failure of Either to Resemble Christ"

By The Right Reverend Lord John Mallard, Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds, Published at the Bishop's Private Press

I have been urged—by my publisher, my secretary, and at least one of my lovers—to provide an introduction to this small and scandalous work, lest the public mistake satire for confession. In truth, the confusion would be excusable. England, in her infinite Anglican wisdom, considers every bishop a work of fiction already, and a remarkably implausible one at that.

This pamphlet, The Worldly Bishop and the Godly Curate, was first written in a fit of penitential boredom, and published anonymously for reasons of self-respect and plausible deniability. It was supposed to be read by the sort of people who cannot afford theology but enjoy the spectacle of ecclesiastical embarrassment. Alas, it fell instead into the hands of persons actually employed in the Church, who regarded its irony as an instruction manual.

I am told one curate—too literal for his own salvation—used the text as a "mirror for the ministry." He has since married, which I take to mean the mirror was accurate.

The premise is simple enough. One pictures, on one side, the Bishop—urbane, resonant of port and privilege, delighted with his dinner and his doctrine alike. On the other side stands the curate: pale, gaunt with responsibility, piously threadbare, his cassock smelling faintly of damp hymnals and refusal. One preaches the gospel of manifestation; the other practices the religion of exhaustion. Between them falls the

shadow of divine administration, and from that shadow this book emerged, coughing.

The contrast, I admit, is exaggerated—but only by the width of a mitre.

My late friend Canon Rueport, whose belief in the Church was exceeded only by his disbelief in its people, used to say that a clergyman's salary is "proportional to the volume of air between his head and his congregation." That equation remains the most succinct piece of Anglican arithmetic I know.

Permit me, as one of the condemned species, to describe the bishop's natural habits. His Lordship (I use the third person decorously) is a sedentary mammal of high breeding and peculiar digestion. He feeds chiefly upon correspondence, tithes, and invitations to dine where his sermons are not expected to make sense. He travels with moderate dignity and substantial luggage. He preaches sparingly but bills extravagantly. As a rule, he believes every parish capable of both spiritual and financial improvement under episcopal supervision, provided his supervision is strictly notional.

It must, however, be admitted that bishops serve a vital function in the national ecology: they provide protection to their curates by absorbing public ridicule. The clergy without bishops would resemble oysters without shells—tender, indignant, and soon extinct. Nevertheless, I find it curious that the average bishop's salary is calculated as if his holiness required permanent heating.

Of course, it is easy to mock bishops; I simply possess the advantage of knowing where they drink.

The other half of our ecclesiastical equation—the Godly Curate—occupies that exquisite plane of social suffering shared by governesses and philosophers. His remuneration would not keep a bishop's candle alive, and yet he burns—with zeal, frustration, sometimes a passion so severe one could mistake it for religion.

In The Faded Collar: or, Spiritual Destitution in Two Volumes (published anonymously by a friend who never forgave me for lending him a living without furniture), there appears this climactic sentence:

"The curate's heart was pure, but his boots were patchwork; he loved the Lord, but not the laundress."

It is an accurate summary of the species. Their lives are a sublime farce: labouring for souls that barely sing and bishops that never listen. They polish the Church's conscience like household silver only to find their reflection unrecognisable. The more godly the curate, the smaller his stipend—proof that the Almighty rewards endurance in instalments.

To my fellow bishops, I say: remember that your chaplains are not decorative animals. They require not only Scripture but sustenance. Do

not confuse the poverty of the clergy with the purity of the Church; God may love a cheerful giver, but He abhors a stingy prelate.

And to the curates: moderation in obedience. One may kiss the episcopal ring without swallowing the hand attached. Revolt carefully, with grammar. Christ Himself was a dissenter before the Church arranged otherwise.

As my aunt the Dowager Marchioness once told her chaplain—poor man, he expired immediately after lunch—"Your calling is divine, my dear, but your income is deplorable. Do consider Heaven; they say it pays better."

My critics suggest that this pamphlet betrays an unbecoming sarcasm in one consecrated to charity. I reply that sarcasm is merely the heat given off when truth tries to be polite. The Church, like marriage, depends upon the endurance of such friction.

If I jest at the expense of my order, it is because I love it ruinously. To parody a pulpit is to preserve it. Or so I console myself when my fellow bishops remove me from committees. One must sin discreetly in order to remain interesting to Grace.

As for the whispers regarding my "worldliness," let me confess at last: I have dined too richly, read too heretically, and loved too specifically. Yet these, I submit, are the only experiences that render a man capable of redemption—or verse. My curate, when I still had one, concurred on all three counts, which perhaps explains his early resignation.

This second edition appears with reluctance, for the author has discovered that influence is always a punishment. In due fairness, the pamphlet was written not for the pulpit but for the parlour: a companion to after-dinner realism, a cordial for those weary of ecclesiastical upholstery. I write for readers who prefer their gospel seasoned, their bishops slightly overcooked, and their morality digestible.

If this description includes you, dear reader, welcome. If not, you are at liberty to denounce the book publicly; episcopal outrage sells astonishingly well.

To speak candidly, the Church of England remains the only organisation where humility is rewarded with hierarchy and penance celebrated by procession. We stand in spotless robes upon foundations of domestic chaos. Yet for all its hypocrisy, our Church is touchingly human—like a duchess with a past, forever pretending not to enjoy the conversation.

Allow me, therefore, to dedicate this new edition to the Two Pillars of Our Faith:

- To the Godly Curate, that weary saint of cold rectories, cheap candles, and unrequited vocation.
- And to the Worldly Bishop—may he forever rule his diocese with benevolent incompetence and molten silver in his veins.

Between us lies England, and in England lies salvation—distinguished, underpaid, and impeccably dressed.

1900: The Theology of Loitering

Review by Felix Ambrose Montfort From The Morning Trumpet

There are some books which appear, when one re-reads them, less as literature than as living acquaintances—eccentric relations who refuse to die quietly. Bishop Mallard's Late Blooming: or, The Theology of Loitering (1821) is precisely such a volume: too idle for the theologians, too intelligent for the sentimentalists, and altogether too alive for the library's dust. It has, impossibly, outlived its author, his faith, and possibly his God—though the last, being English, no doubt lingers politely.

Mallard himself is a curiosity of church history. Born Theophilus Archer in 1739, he rose from ornamental obscurity to become Bishop of Ducks-on-Ponds, a diocese so small it was once mistaken for a landscape. His sermons (I own a shabby second edition of The Moral Symmetry of the Androgynous Soul) brought him the sort of notoriety reserved for the talented and tactless. He wrote as if Genesis required revision, and as if the Almighty might be improved by conversation. When death claimed him in 1818—while dictating his memoir on a chaise longue—he left behind this final manuscript, Late Blooming, published three years later and instantly accused of heresy by everyone who failed to understand it, which was everyone.

The twentieth century, however, has finally caught up. It is a happy anachronism that Mallard's philosophy of "holy dawdling" finds itself suddenly modern. At a time when the continent stumbles toward progress as a substitute for happiness, and London's streets reek of empire and moral disinfectant, the Bishop's gentle creed—that salvation consists in delight, and virtue in curiosity—seems positively revolutionary.

His prose resembles well-aired velvet: rich but not oppressive, mechanics of pleasure rather than penitence. The opening line, "Why hurry toward eternity when there are so many taverns along the way?" remains the most charming indictment of piety ever smuggled into English. Mallard insists that life, far from being a vestibule to Heaven, is itself the drawing room of the divine; and that to sprint piously toward

the afterlife is to insult the host. He recommends instead a dignified loitering—admiring the furniture, sampling the punch, and exchanging courteous gossip with fellow travellers.

It would be misleading to call the book philosophical; it is rather anecdotal theology. Mallard writes of strolling through gardens, regretting that theology never discovered botany. He compares death to the inconvenience of moving house ("one never finds half one's possessions again"), and miracles to the small forks of human kindness that appear at the right moments and vanish between courses. He quotes lightly from antiquity, rather as one might drop names at a soirée: "Herodotus understood travel," he notes somewhere, "but lacked luggage."

To situate Late Blooming in its time requires imagination. England in 1821 was an empire of clocks, punctual virtue, and funerary poetry. The end of the Napoleonic wars had produced a generation with no battles to fight and ample leisure to reflect upon damnation. The clergy, ever resourceful, filled the emptiness with sermons celebrating moral rigidity. Mallard, presiding over his watery diocese and almost certainly in love with his choirmaster, turned instead to roses, brandy, and metaphysics.

For him, faith was a kind of courtship—flattering when mutual, dangerous when one-sided. The Bishop's God is not a patriarch so much as a patient co-conspirator, indulgent toward laughter and partial to lateness. His Heaven has no trumpets, only viols tuned sufficiently low to allow conversation. "Eternity," he writes, "will be quite bearable once everyone is seated."

The scandal at publication was considerable. The Quarterly Review called it "a lazy provocation written by a man who believes in nothing but himself," which, I must admit, is partly true. The Bishop did believe in himself—ardently, stylishly, as every great heretic must. What his critics missed was that such self-belief was not arrogance but aesthetic principle: he regarded the soul as one's first and last artwork, to be tended with diligence and a hint of outrage.

Time has corrected the misreading. Modern readers, fatigued by Puritan diets and moral athletics, will find comfort in his invitation to loiter elegantly in one's own life. In an age that has produced both the bicycle and pessimism, Mallard's refusal to hurry towards salvation reads like good manners revived.

The book contains no lessons and no moral; its pleasure is its integrity. One leaves its pages feeling rather as after a sensuous luncheon—unashamed, slightly improved, and desirous of a nap. Late Blooming reminds us that the spiritual world, if it exists, must surely resemble England in April: faintly damp, gloriously unreasonable, and

populated by lovable eccentrics who will talk for an hour in order to avoid leaving the house.

The only tragedy is that Mallard's art of loitering no longer survives among his successors. Our clerics have become administrators of guilt; our writers, accountants of irony. The Bishop would not have prospered today—he would have fled to Italy, stolen a gondola, and declared Venice purgatory with better lighting. But his creed endures: that to linger is not to waste time but to acknowledge its perfume.

For those of us weary of spiritual efficiency and moral upholstery, I commend this new reprint heartily. Read it slowly. Stop often. We have all eternity to misunderstand one another; let us at least take our time doing so.

1991: "Mallard's Comfortable Heresy: A Re-reading of Felix Montfort's 1900 Review"

From The Southern Review of Letters and Religion
By Professor Dr. Fenella Vorpel, University of Sydney

It is always instructive to meet a critic at the threshold of his century and witness what he thinks the future will thank him for. Felix Ambrose Montfort's review of Bishop Mallard's Late Blooming: or, The Theology of Loitering (first published 1821, republished London 1900, reviewed for The Morning Trumpet that same year) is a period artefact of comfortable wit. His manner is one of Edwardian composure—urbane, sensible, a little perfumed with superiority. He approaches Mallard as one would a slightly scandalous uncle who, despite theological indiscretions, still sends excellent port at Christmas. Reading Montfort now, one detects both admiration and containment; the good critic has translated blasphemy into anecdote, and converted sensuality into charm.

The difficulty lies in this domestication. Mallard's book is not, by any responsible measure, a decorative artefact of Regency leisure. It was a dangerous text even in its later publication; it remains disturbing for precisely the reasons Montfort found it delightful. When he praised Mallard's "theology of dawdling," he mistook irony for indolence, and reform for eccentricity. The Bishop did not write about loitering because he was idle but because he wished to question the brutality of progress itself. He lived at the turning of two ages—eighteenth-century rationality giving way to early-industrial faith in improvement—and his metaphors of lingering were moral diagnostics, not excuses for spiritual laziness.

Historically, Late Blooming entered English thought during a reactionary decade. By 1821, George IV had settled upon decadence as a political strategy, and religion busied itself with restoring a national sense of guilt. Mallard's refusal to join that programme—his insistence that holiness might reside in tarrying, curiosity, even delight—was radical theology disguised as conversation. Reasonable defiance could only survive as wit. To write explicitly of godless pleasure was fatal; to write of "divine dawdling" was forgivable. Montfort in 1900, standing at the glittering brink of a century of engines and conquests, read this irony as slogan: he mistook resistance for refuge, the leisure of revolt for the leisure of empire.

Montfort's review is typical of its moment. Around 1900, after Darwin and before Freud, the British mind converted doubt into culture. Belief became an aesthetic property—a matter of tone rather than conviction. Mallard therefore suited them perfectly: a blasphemer whose language was polite enough to sit beside the sherry. Montfort elevates him as a prophet of "holy elegance," a Victorian virtue if ever there were one. But what strikes me reading the Bishop—and Montfort almost never does read him directly—is the suppressed violence beneath that elegance. Mallard's theology was erotically charged not because he sought titillation but because he understood the body as a site of rebellion against abstraction. His insistence on pleasure is not naïve: it is strategic. In The Moral Symmetry of the Androgynous Soul (1793) and again in Late Blooming, he constructs sexuality as spiritual equilibrium, a theology of composition rather than conquest.

Montfort, true to his time, translates these gestures into harmless dandyism, erasing the queer politics of the text. When he calls Mallard "the most charming indictment of piety," he both flatters him and neutralises him. Charm, as ever, is the adjective by which male critics remove the sting of transgression from spiritual or erotic dissent. To Mallard's imagery of shared divinity, Montfort applies an Edwardian varnish: the bishop is reduced to a "lazy heretic," the divine to "fellowship," the sensual to "conversation." What began as disruption is restored as wit.

It is important to realise how this softening mirrors historical anxiety. The year 1900 was not an age of serenity but a precipice of exhaustion: industrial modernity had made leisure both fetish and fraud. Montfort's enthusiasm for Mallard's "slow spirituality" reflects not liberation but fatigue, an attempt to rehabilitate aristocratic indolence as philosophy. His "comfortable heresy" reassures him that faith may still recline on a chaise longue while the factories run themselves.

Reading Montfort's article from 1991—from here, the end of a century that has witnessed both liberation and apocalypse—I am struck by how precisely his tone anticipates the postmodern reflex: the transformation of every radical text into self-referential ornament. We too have learned the art of aestheticising doubt until it becomes a pose. Perhaps the true warning of Mallard is not against rushing toward eternity but against mistaking irony for safety.

Still, one must acknowledge Montfort's charm, however glib. It is through such genteel critics that heresy survives; ridicule, properly rendered, keeps memory alive. Were he alive today, I suspect he would find religion repackaged as meditation, and Mallard on a T-shirt quoting memento vivere. He would sip his sherry and call it progress. Yet in our classrooms, as I tell my students in "The Literature of Heresy," progress is simply heresy institutionalised.

Mallard remains difficult because he was never lazy. Behind his aphorisms lies a theology of resistance: not to God, but to obedience. Montfort saw this and blinked, afraid of the light. We can no longer afford to blink. The late twentieth century has revisited precisely his question: must we hurry through time in pursuit of perfection, or linger in its imperfection long enough to inhabit it? The Bishop's answer, sharper than Montfort imagined, is that to loiter consciously is to dissent politically.

To republish Montfort's review now is to read between his compliments and hear the suppressed tremor of history. He wished to tame the revolutionary into a raconteur, because wit seemed safer than vision. His century rewarded him with reputation; ours rewards him with analysis. My own diagnosis is simple: Montfort's brilliance was critical but not diagnostic, descriptive but not self-aware. Mallard's was prophetic, perhaps because he was, in every forbidden sense of the word, alive.