

Italian Jobs: Two Nineteenth-Century New College Clergy in Italy

In common with their well-heeled contemporaries, many nineteenth-century English clergy took advantage of more settled political conditions and improved methods of transport to travel to Italy, both with an eye for classical tourism and for health reasons to escape the more deleterious effects of a British winter. As satirised in the character of Trollope's Dr Veysey Stanhope, the amiable clergyman lepidopterist who preferred Lake Como to the rigours of duties in England, they did not always have a good press. A clergy correspondent writing to the Bishop of London in 1847 opined that 'men driven from England in debt or in disgrace are encouraged to seek, and actually do find employment as ministers of English congregations abroad'.¹

Nonetheless, such opprobrium belies the many conscientious clergy who combined a tour to Italy with some chaplaincy work, or at the very least a definite spiritual objective, often at their own expense. And, perhaps not surprisingly for the time, some of the fellows of New College followed this well-trodden path.

Canon Tony Dickinson (himself an alumnus of New College, and recently chaplain at Genoa) has pointed out that one of the earliest chaplains at Genoa, Martin Stow (fellow 1814–24), 'appears to have been funded in part by his Oxford fellowship'.² As Warden Ryan has observed in his chapter in the sexcentenary history of the college: 'a fellowship [in the early 19th century] provided a young man with a modest income on which he could rely until he was able to make his way in the world.'³ In 1821 Stow was licensed to the chaplaincy at Genoa by William Howley, bishop of London and later archbishop of Canterbury (fellow 1783–94), where in 1822 he found himself ministering to Mary Shelley after her poet husband drowned off the nearby coast of Lerici.⁴ Stow's work in Italy ended in 1823 when he agreed to go to India as chaplain to Bishop Reginald Heber, only tragically to die a year later of malignant dysentery on a journey with the bishop to Dacca. Bishop Heber eulogised the 'guilelessness of his nature', his 'fearless humanity', and the 'fervour of his prayers'.⁵

Another such chaplaincy in Italy, this time in Rome, was self-funded by Walter Shirley (fellow 1818–28) almost certainly again on the back of the last few years of his fellowship before he married. His letters and memoir were published in 1850, and we have just been able to source a copy for the college library. As its editor commented in the context of Shirley's appointment in Rome, 'for many years after the first establishment of an English place of worship there, the services of the church and the occasional duty were gratuitously undertaken by such clergymen as accident brought to the spot'.⁶ As befitted a conscientious clergyman, according to his editor-biographer, Shirley 'felt a strong wish to visit Italy, but had been deterred from indulging it by the fear . . . that the excitement of a tour might indispose him for the sober routine of pastoral duties; or . . . divert his mind from the pursuit of spiritual things.' And so 'he made an offer to undertake the duty of the English chapel at Rome during the winter, a labour which at that time was entirely one of love'.⁷ Shirley arrived in Rome on 1 January 1827, and was appointed 'joint minister with Mr Brereton'.⁸

Shirley's letters from Rome reveal a character of striving spiritual integrity, if occasional naivety, not afraid to be outspoken in his views even if they went against prevailing orthodoxies.

¹ T. V. Fosbery, 'The English Church on the Continent', *Colonial Church Chronicle, and Missionary Journal* 1 (September 1847), 110–13, at pp. 110–11.

² Tony Dickinson, *Redeemed from Fire: The Story of Holy Ghost Genoa* (Genova: K C Edizioni, 2022), p. 21.

³ Alan Ryan, 'Transformation, 1850–1914', in *New College Oxford 1379–1979*, ed. John Buxton and Penry Williams (Oxford: The Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford, 1979), pp. 72–106, at p. 79.

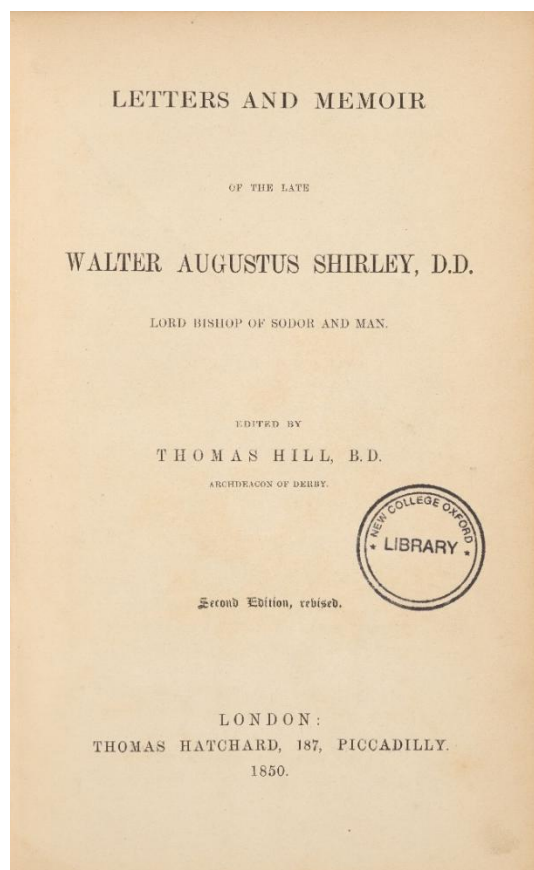
⁴ Dickinson, *Redeemed from Fire*, p. 21.

⁵ George Smith, *Bishop Heber: Poet and Chief Missionary to the East* (London: John Murray, 1895), p. 190.

⁶ Thomas Hill (ed.), *Letters and Memoir of the late Walter Augustus Shirley, D.D.*, 2nd ed. (London: Thomas Hatchard, 1850), pp. 71–2, New College Library, Oxford, RS5414.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 79.



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In contrast to the views of many of his clerical contemporaries, he had already argued in favour of Catholic emancipation on the pragmatic grounds that ‘every species of restriction has a tendency to disseminate, instead of repressing, the opinions against which it is directed’.⁹ In Rome, he was critical of the behaviour of his congregation both in their crowded conversation in church at the end of the Anglican morning service and also in their raucous attendance at vespers at St Peter’s where they ‘do not behave even with so much decency as they would at a concert’.¹⁰ It was to become a recurring theme in his sermons to the English congregation for which he was ‘prepared for a good deal of opposition’.¹¹

But Shirley courted controversy not only from his Anglican congregation. In stressing ‘the importance of our example [of church behaviour] to the Roman Catholics’,¹² he roused the indignation of English Roman Catholics who took ‘the greatest offence’ at the plain insinuation that Anglican liturgy and conduct could ‘demonstrate that a purer faith would be productive of a more holy life’.¹³ With rather touching honesty, Shirley admits: ‘I used one or two expressions which I should not have used, had I been aware of the extreme suspicion and irritability which prevails here’.¹⁴ And perhaps he had learned a political lesson when he reports that ‘the English Catholic Bishop has sent me word that he would be glad to see my sermon; but I know better than to let him have it’.¹⁵

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 83.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 87.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 89.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 93.

Aside from his ministry, Shirley took time to visit the classical sites that had become an indispensable part of an English traveller's itinerary in Italy. Shirley writes in Naples of how he 'went out in search of someone to make a party for Paestum. I saw, looking out of the window, a fellow of New College . . . with whom I agreed to go the next day'.¹⁶ His matter-of-fact account of a chance New College encounter strikingly illustrates how the close social connections of English travellers were simply seen as the natural order of things.

Shirley's chaplaincy in Rome was initially cut short by his return to England on the death of Lady Ferrers, and then Lord Ferrers, who had treated him like a son and had been instrumental in helping him to be elected to Winchester College and thus to New College.¹⁷ Marrying soon after his return, Shirley took his bride on honeymoon to Rome. 'He again undertook the service of the English Church, and used every means in his power to promote among his countrymen a taste for spiritual things'.¹⁸

Subsequently occupied by parish ministry and then as archdeacon of Derby and lastly bishop of Sodor and Man, Shirley never again returned to Italy. But he continued to take an interest in its upheavals, believing it was ripe for religious reform. 'I am thoroughly convinced', he wrote in 1840, 'that a moral volcano may shortly be expected to burst forth in Italy, and it is most important that we should be prepared for such an event and turn it to good account, by having Bibles and religious treatises ready to pour into the country'.¹⁹

Shirley died within a year of taking up his post as bishop, having had to withdraw from giving the Bampton Lectures in Oxford on account of declining health.²⁰ But, in his own words, Italy surely had remained a lasting influence: 'I can most sincerely thank God that I came abroad and feel persuaded that I shall reap a rich harvest from it through the rest of my life—I trust through eternity'.²¹

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¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 300.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 489.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 100.