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The Quest for the Historical Hooker

BY JOHN BOOTY

IT is questionable to what degree the historian or biographer can recover and represent a person out of the past. The task may be one of great difficulty when there is a wealth of material, as is true with regard to John Henry Newman. But the task may be infinitely more difficult where there is a scarcity of evidence, as is true with regard to William Shakespeare. In the quest for the historical Hooker we encounter a moderate amount of material, but we are also left with gaps and, as we now realize, we are confronted by some conflicting evidence, requiring the use of careful judgment. We begin with certain indisputable facts concerning Richard Hooker's life, facts which can be verified by reference to documents which the historian can examine and rely upon.¹ Hooker was born in 1554 at Heavitree in Devonshire of parents who were prominent in their locality but by no means wealthy. With the assistance of an uncle, the young Hooker was educated first at a grammar school in Exeter and then, under the patronage of John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury, entered Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Subsequently he became an instructor in the University, was made a fellow of his college and was ordained to the ministry of the Church of England. There he remained, delivering the Hebrew lecture from 1579 until he departed from Oxford in 1584. Three facts concerning his time at the University are worth noting. The first is that he became the tutor of George Cranmer, whose father was a nephew of the famous Archbishop, and of Edwin Sandys, son of the Archbishop of York who became Hooker's patron after the death of Jewel in 1571. The second thing to note is that in 1580 Hooker was involved in a dispute concerning the election of a new president of his college and was temporarily expelled for supporting the candidacy of John Rainoldes, a conforming Puritan. Lastly, in 1581 Hooker preached at Paul's Cross in London. The sermon no longer survives, but according to later testimony, Hooker attacked certain features of Calvin's doctrine of predestination.

In 1584 Hooker was presented to the living of Drayton-Beaucamp, Buckinghamshire, and then, on March 17, 1585, was appointed Master of the Temple in London. Here Hooker entered the national scene. There are two reasons for saying this: the importance of the place and the importance of the circumstances. The Temple was the parish church of the Inner and Middle Temples of the Inns of Court and was situated in the midst of the judiciary, at the chief home of the common law profession in England. The place was considered strategic, the appointment being the privilege of the Queen acting with the advice of her chief ministers in church and state. The circumstances were also impressive. A year earlier the Master, Richard Alvey, had died, a man of strong Puritan convictions who had as his assistant, filling the office of Reader at the Temple, one Walter Travers. Travers was a most vigorous leader of the Puritan cause and one largely responsible for the drafting of a Puritan discipline for England, a discipline replete with a

presbyterian form of church government. From the point of view of the Queen and her non-Puritan advisers, the Temple had become a trouble spot, a center for Puritan agitation. Against the advice of Burghley, Lord Treasurer of England, who wished to see Travers elevated to the Mastership, the Queen chose the little-known Hooker, the candidate of Edwin Sandys, Archbishop of York.³

It is quite clear that Hooker was appointed not only to be the chief cleric of the Temple Church, but more importantly to rid the Temple of Puritan influence and to return that strategic place to the established church with its *Book of Common Prayer* and its bishops. We know, however, that Hooker was not the first choice of that chief persecutor of the Puritans, John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury. There are reasons for believing that the choice of Hooker was rather a compromise between the Puritan Travers and Whitgift's original nominee, a certain Dr. Bond, who, it seems, would have been little more than a tool of the Archbishop. The Queen, after all, as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, consistently sought after a uniformity which would be comprehensive and often expressed her dislike for extremists. Hooker was no Puritan (as he proved by his sermon at Paul's Cross), nor was he a rabid persecutor (he was, as we know, the protégé of John Jewel and Edwin Sandys, both protestant reformers but moderates, and he had expressed his loyalty to his good friend and mentor, the conforming Puritan John Rainoldes).

We know that Hooker and Travers (who remained as Reader, that is afternoon preacher at the Temple) at once clashed.⁴ Thomas Fuller, the seventeenth-century historian, was basically correct, although he was exaggerating, when he said that "the pulpit spake pure Canterbury in the morning and Geneva in the afternoon, until Travers was silenced."⁴ Travers was removed from the Temple by Whitgift in March of 1586, but before that happened he openly attacked Hooker for his teachings concerning predestination, for his understanding of the assurance of the Word in Scripture, and for his conviction that salvation was possible within the Roman Church. More immediate and pragmatic, however, was Travers' firm conviction that Hooker could not be the pastor of the Temple Church unless elected to that office by the congregation. He argued that the Queen had no right to appoint Hooker without the allowance of the congregation, an argument which he rooted in Scripture. Thus the basic conflict emerged between Travers, who believed that the only right government for the Church of England was that of the apostolic Church most perfectly manifested in Calvin's Geneva, and Hooker, who believed that the Church was under no obligation to imitate the church government either of apostolic times or of the sixteenth-century Genevan Church. Travers sought for obedience to the positive commands of Scripture in matters of polity, while Hooker argued that Scripture neither gave nor was intended to give a pattern for the outward government of the Church, but rather presupposed the operation of natural law and positive human laws in such matters.

It was out of this conflict that Hooker's *magnum opus* was born, the book which has been described as the definitive exposition of the Elizabethan settlement of religion, the first serious, systematic theo-

logical work of the reformed Church of England, the most profound literary response to the challenge of English Puritanism. It is not possible here to explore the contents of Hooker's eight books *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, although such an exploration would be of value for its own sake and in relation to our quest. We must be content to acknowledge that the first four books of the *Polity*, setting forth the philosophical framework of the universe of laws in an Aristotelian-Thomist mode and then taking up the Puritan arguments in relation to the authority of Scripture, the authority of the Church, and the nature of ceremonial in the Church, were published under the patronage of Hooker's former pupil, Sir Edwin Sandys, in 1593. The fifth book, a detailed examination of Puritan objections to the *Book of Common Prayer*, was published in 1594. And the final three books, concerning ecclesiastical discipline, government by bishops, and church-state relations, were all published posthumously, books six and eight in 1648 and book seven in 1661, although there is evidence that all three were ready for publication in Hooker's lifetime in more complete form than they possessed when finally printed. So important was the publication of this great work that to a certain extent all other facts concerning Hooker's life pale before this one. Hooker is best known today by theologians, historians, political scientists, and literary historians as the author of the eight books of the *Polity*.

Hooker remained at the Temple until 1591 when he was presented to the living of Boscombe, Wiltshire, and then in 1595 went to Bishopsbourne in Kent where he resided until his death in 1600. Very little is known concerning the last years of his life, except for the fact that he continued working on his treatise and at the time of his death was preparing a rebuttal to a Puritan pamphlet written against him in 1599.* Thus, as we record Hooker's death, we have the sum total of the basic factual data which has been available to us from that time until the present.

* * * *

I have said nothing of Hooker's marriage or of his domestic life. This is because, until recently, the information concerning this side of Hooker's life has been a matter of debate. At the end of the nineteenth-century Sidney Lee questioned this information, and he was not the first to do so.* What we have known concerning Hooker's marriage has been conveyed to us by a magnificent biographical sketch written by Izaak Walton, that master of the English language and author of the basic text for all who would indulge in the pursuit of the trout and the bass, *The Compleat Angler*. Honest Izaak presents Hooker as a judicious, mild-mannered, brilliant person who yearned for domestic tranquillity but was vexed with a shrew of a wife. According to his story, Joan Churchman, an ugly, ill-tempered woman, was forced upon the bashful, dim-sighted Hooker by her anxious, scheming mother. Walton speaks of the misery of Hooker's marriage, the scholar being plagued by a sharp-tongued wife who imprisoned her husband in a routine of menial, domestic chores. He reported that on one occasion Sandys and Cranmer visited Hooker at Drayton-Beaucamp where they found him reading the odes of Horace while tending sheep and then

watched as Joan Hooker ordered her husband away from them to rock the cradle. In Walton's biography Joan Hooker is shown to be a woman who brought to Hooker

neither beauty nor portion; and for her conditions, they were too like that wife's, which is by Solomon compared to "a dripping house": so that the good man had no reason "to rejoice in the wife of his youth", but too just cause to say with the holy prophet, "Woe is me, that I am constrained to have my habitation in the tents of Kedar!"

In 1940 Professor C. J. Sisson, of the University of London, published the results of his research into the archives of the Court of Chancery where he discovered records concerning a suit brought against Sir Edwin Sandys by Hooker's widow and three daughters.⁸ The depositions taken for the trial expose Walton's story as false not only concerning Hooker's marriage but concerning much else besides. We now know that Honest Izaak was misled by the defendant, Sandys, and his friends, who turned upon Mrs. Hooker and her children and spread the most vicious lies concerning Hooker's marriage. We now know enough to believe that Joan Churchman was not forced upon Hooker, but was wooed and won. Indeed the marriage was of great advantage to Hooker, providing him with an entrance into a prosperous and influential family, Joan's father being a most distinguished London merchant, rising to become Master of the Merchant Taylors' Company in 1594. Walton's story concerning the visit of Sandys and Cranmer to Hooker at Drayton-Beaucamp is now recognized as being entirely false: Hooker never took up residence there, nor was he married at the time when he might have been there. Furthermore, it is evident that Hooker had no need to be occupied with household chores. He lived with the Churchman family during the entire period of his residence in London, there enjoying the benefits of a household replete with an efficient staff of servants. We need no longer be disturbed that in contradiction to Walton's tale Hooker referred to Joan in his will as "my well beloved wife" and made her his sole executrix and legatee.⁹

Sisson's discoveries, when combined with the insights of modern studies of Elizabethan Puritanism and with the on-going debate concerning Hooker's theological position, cast light upon other aspects of the theologian's life. The destruction of the vicious myth concerning Joan Hooker involves much else besides. For instance, on the basis of the old story, it was believed that Mrs. Hooker was largely responsible for the mutilation of Hooker's literary remains. There is the cloak-and-dagger tale of three Puritan-minded men entering Hooker's study at Bishopsbourne after his death and with the collusion of Joan Hooker (who married one of the culprits) destroying the papers of the man who led the literary offensive against Puritanism.¹⁰ We can no longer lend any credence to this fanciful story. Instead, we now know on the basis of depositions taken in the Court of Chancery that Hooker's father-in-law, John Churchman, following the instructions of the legal will, sent a servant to Bishopsbourne to take possession of Hooker's manuscripts. These, including manuscripts of the last three books of the *Polity*, were carried to London in a cloak-bag. At a meeting including Sir Edwin Sandys, the Caroline high-churchman Lancelot Andrewes, and two others, the manuscripts were divided up for possible editing and

publication.¹¹ Here are the men who must bear the responsibility for the delay in printing Books VII and VIII on episcopacy and royal power. In all likelihood any distortion or mutilation of the manuscripts upon which the printed books were based must also be attributed to them. On the basis of this knowledge a most astounding conclusion virtually forces itself upon the student. Whereas previously it was thought (and Walton implies as much) that the manuscripts for books six through eight were mutilated by Puritans, so mutilated that they could not be accepted as Hooker's own work, any tendency towards a Puritan position being a matter of forgery and not of Hooker's own doing, it now appears most likely that high-churchmen such as Andrewes, men espousing divine right theory, disliked and feared what Hooker had written and deliberately suppressed the manuscripts.

The eventual publication of books six and eight in 1648 and book seven in 1661 occurred against the wishes of the hierarchy of the church at times which are themselves significant. Book eight, on royal power, appeared just as the monarchy was falling and can be construed as supporting a moderate view of monarchy over against the Caroline emphasis upon divine right. Book seven was published at the time of the Restoration and could be construed as presenting a moderate view of episcopacy against the more strident views of some Restoration prelates. When the whole lot was published in a new edition of the *Polity* in 1661-2 it was apparently imperative for a certain segment of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to discredit the posthumous books, destructive as they were in relation to the Caroline doctrine of church and state. To accomplish this Walton was commissioned by Archbishop Selden to write a new life of Hooker. As Sisson says:

This *Life*, prefacing all future editions of the *Polity*, beginning with that of 1666, prepared the reader's mind for resistance to doctrines and positions which were suspect and might represent, not the thought of the great apologist of the Church, but the corruptions and substitutions of her enemies.¹²

Walton was thus at the very least a tool in the conspiracy to distort and conceal the historical Hooker. Today, books six through eight are accepted as representing Hooker's own mind on the subjects with which they deal. This acceptance was already well under way before Sisson unearthed the substantiating evidence. It was bound to happen, for modern scholars have traced out Hooker's thought which is noted for its coherency and have been forced to conclude that what Hooker had to say concerning episcopacy and royal power in the posthumous books is in line with all that he had heretofore written.¹³

* * * *

At the very outset of his treatise Hooker committed himself to the task of producing a highly coherent, consistent argument against the Puritans. He wrote:

For as much help whereof as may be in this case, I have endeavoured throughout the body of this whole discourse, that every part might give strength unto all that follow, and every later bring some light unto all before. So that if the judgments of men do not hold themselves in suspense as touching these first more general meditations, till in order they have perused the rest that ensue; what may seem

dark at the first will afterwards be found more plain, even as the later particular decisions will appear I doubt not more strong, when the other have been read before.¹⁴

Against the Puritan insistence upon the absolute authority of the Bible in all matters, including worship and government, against their attack upon the *Book of Common Prayer* and the established government of the Church of England by queen and bishops, Hooker began his treatise with a discussion of the great variety of ways by which God works in history. He presented his view of the universe, a view modelled after the Aristotelian-Thomist description which he inherited, as one of laws: God's law for Himself and for His creatures, the latter including the law for angels, the law governing inanimate nature, the moral law of reason, positive-human law whereby societies are governed, international law or the law of nations, and divine law revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed to by Scripture. In all matters concerning man's salvation the revealed, divine law is essential. Full weight can only be given to his teachings on this matter when following the advice of FitzSimmons Allison we consider Hooker's teachings concerning salvation in his sermons on election and justification.¹⁵ Hooker strove with great zeal to guard against attributing more than is right to natural man. Natural man is fallen and cannot attain to salvation without faith in Christ. Egil Grislis has argued this point in Hooker with great force against Gunnar Hillerdal who views Hooker as a most dangerous rationalist.¹⁶ Hooker himself said:

Whatsoever we have hitherto taught, or shall add hereafter, concerning the force of man's natural understanding, this we always desire withal to be understood; that there is no kind of faculty or power in man or any other creature, which can rightly perform the functions allotted to it, without perpetual aid and concurrence of that Supreme Cause of all things.¹⁷

Danger there is in Hooker's teaching as there is in any theological construction. Nor can he be absolved of all responsibility for the works-righteousness teachings in men such as Jeremy Taylor. But I am at least certain that Hooker was as concerned to avoid the Pelagian error as he was to avoid the naive biblicism of some of his Puritan opponents.

Hooker's argument concerning the laws of the universe was presented in order to demonstrate the errors of the Puritans. Revelation in Jesus Christ was given for a purpose and that purpose is the salvation of fallen men and women. It was not given in order to provide rules for the construction of ecclesiastical polity. Nor was it given in order to lay down rules for the government of civil society. The external government of church and state is rooted in natural and positive-human law, a fact presupposed by Scripture. This does not mean that such government is not under the judgment of and must not be responsive to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. It simply means that Scripture is not dealing with the outward forms of such government. This rooting of ecclesiastical and civil government in law was basic to his argument against the Puritans and led Hooker into the tragic situation in which he ended his life. And this is so because his point of view collided with

the developing doctrine concerning episcopacy and the gradual emergence of the divine right theory of royal power.

Thus rooting all power of government in law, Hooker was led to conclude that the basis of all power is located mediately in the people from whom all positive law proceeds. He did not teach any strict theory of social contract, but he did locate the source of royal power in the original assent of the people to such power and believed that all such power was limited by law and custom, located in the common law tradition of England. When Bancroft, one of Whitgift's henchmen, asserted the apostolic succession of bishops and thus placed them outside of human law, or at least tended to do so, he was teaching something antithetical to Hooker's basic position. We can understand Bancroft's urge to preach as he did; the Puritans rooted their polity in Scripture and thereby sought for it an absolute authority apart from the state. In a sense it was natural that their enemies should seek to root the established polity of the Church of England in a similar way. But in so doing, they were departing from the nascent tradition of the English Reformers and were saying something which try as he might (and there is evidence of his spending some effort on the matter) Hooker could not say. Professor Houk, speaking of Book VII, has said:

The theory of apostolical succession viewed the episcopacy as an order derived not from the whole church but descending from the apostles, a class within the Church. Hooker's theory of the Social Contract and of the sovereignty of the people was so fundamental with him that he would have been slow to accept a newly-advanced theory incompatible with it.¹⁸

Hooker was in a similar difficult position with regard to royal power and his writings on the subject reflect the mixed nature of the English constitution and the situation of his own time when it was difficult for anyone to reconcile Tudor despotism with legal constitutionalism. Hooker tried to do so and largely failed. He failed because he could not reconcile two things which were basically opposed. Neither Queen Elizabeth in his day nor royal theoreticians of the next century could agree with Hooker where he wrote:

It is neither permitted unto prelate nor prince to judge and determine at their own discretion, but law hath prescribed what both shall do. What power the king hath he hath it by law, the bounds and limits of it are known; the entire community giveth general order by law how all things publicly are to be done, and the king as head thereof, the highest authority over all, causeth according to the same law every particular to be framed and ordered thereby.¹⁹

* * * *

At the end of this all too brief quest for the historical figure, Richard Hooker, I find a lonely man, whose domestic happiness must have been all the world to him. He was thrown into the battle against the Puritans to convince them of the error of their ways. In obedience to command he sought to reason with them, but it was no time for reason. The Puritans were men whose consciences were deeply troubled, men hounded out by a coercive and frightening alliance between church and state. By the time Hooker's first four books were published, the Conventicle Act was promulgated and presbyterian Puritanism was

suppressed. It was suppressed by force, not by reason, and went underground to emerge again as a power too great to be put down without further and greater bloodshed and tragedy. Nor was his argument acceptable to those in authority over him. As I have said, his basic theses led him into conflict with developing theories of ecclesiastical and civil government. I have no solid proof for this, but I believe that Hooker himself was fully aware of what was happening. It is to be seen in the ways in which he struggled with his books on bishops and kings. It now seems apparent that books six through eight of the *Polity* could have been published in Hooker's own lifetime had he wished this to happen, but he must have known the kind of reception they would receive and we know the reception which they received after his death. It is no wonder, then, that he should end his life by retiring, first from the centre of the political stage in London and then from London itself to the quiet of a country parish in Kent.

It is perhaps possible to see in the loneliness of Hooker one aspect of his greatness, the greatness of a man who though tempted to do so will not surrender the truth which grasps him for the sake of wealth or honour. When a clergyman of the Protestant Episcopal Church is instituted as rector of a parish he is enjoined not to be a man-pleaser. Hooker lived, perhaps as much as is possible to any man, in obedience to God: he was, in the end, no man-pleaser.

I have written concerning some of the highlights in my personal quest for the historical Hooker. I have no way of telling how greatly my findings have resulted from my own predilections. But I do know that as a result of this quest my opinion of Hooker has undergone some change. Whereas I formerly viewed him as a static figure, the author of the definitive description of the Elizabethan settlement of religion, a judicious, reasonable, self-confident, authoritative divine whose only anguish was in his marriage, I now view him as a man living at the vortex of historical development in his time, thrust this way and that, seeking to defend church and state in England as established by law in accordance with his closely defined understanding of God's working in nature and in Christ, unable to do so to the satisfaction of partisans to the left or the right, spending his final days in loneliness, his greatest solace being his marriage. Furthermore, whereas I once viewed him as the first formal theologian of the Church of England who laid the foundation for all to build upon, the father of an Anglican theological tradition, I now view him as a man who was little understood in his time, whose successors used him to buttress theologies which were sometimes antithetical to his own.

In our day we are witnessing the beginnings of a rediscovery of Hooker, a live possibility now that he is no longer regarded as *the* theologian of Anglicanism, a rediscovery which may contribute to a new understanding of the normative roots of our tradition, for once Hooker is acknowledged to have lived in close relationship to the Reformation side of our history and is no longer to be associated with the rationalistic, works-righteousness tradition of some of the Caroline divines who came after him, we may be able to perceive the great wealth of truth proceeding out of his point of view, a wealth of truth which may assist us in the

present as we wrestle anew with the conflicts between nature and grace, creation and redemption, humanism and biblical evangelicalism.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Sidney Lee's article on Hooker in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (New York, 1891), xxvii, 289-295.

² Cf. Letters in Walton's *Life*, Hooker, *Works* (7th Keble edn., Oxford, 1888) i, 28-31.

³ The basic information is contained in Travers' *Supplication to the Council* and Hooker's *Answer*, Hooker, *Works* (7th Keble edn.), iii, 458-596.

⁴ Thomas Fuller, *The Worthies of England* (London, 1662), 264.

⁵ Hooker's notes on *A Christian Letter* are contained in Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 215 b, and Trinity College, Dublin, MS A5. 22. The notes in the Corpus MS are to be found scattered in footnotes in the 7th Keble edition of Hooker's *Works* and the Dublin MS is printed on pages 537-697 of the second volume of the same work.

⁶ *Dictionary of National Biography*, xxvii, 290.

⁷ Walton's *Life*, Hooker, *Works* (7th Keble edn.), i, 24.

⁸ I rely heavily upon C. J. Sisson's *The Judicious Marriage of Mr. Hooker and the Birth of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (Cambridge, 1940) in that which follows and particularly for his correction of Walton's *Life*.

⁹ For Hooker's will, cf. his *Works* (7th Keble edn.), i, 89, footnote 1.

¹⁰ Cf. Walton's *Life*, Hooker, *Works* (7th Keble edn.), i, 92.

¹¹ Cf. Sisson, *The Judicious Marriage of Mr. Hooker*, Chapter 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 108.

¹³ Cf. Arthur S. McGrade, "The coherence of Hooker's Polity: the Books of Power," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xxiv, (2), April-June, 1963, 163-182; and R. A. Houk's edition of *Hooker's . . . Book VIII* (New York, 1931), Ch. 6.

¹⁴ Hooker, *Polity*, I. i. 2.

¹⁵ Cf. *The Seminary Journal* (Virginia), xvii (2), December, 1965, 44.

¹⁶ Cf. Gunnar Hillerdal, *Reason and Revelation in Richard Hooker* (Lund, 1962), 147; and Egil Grisliis, "The Role of Consensus in Richard Hooker's Method," *The Heritage of Christian Thought*, eds. R. E. Cushman and E. Grisliis (New York, 1965), 72.

¹⁷ Hooker, *Polity*, I. viii. 11.

¹⁸ Houk in his edition of *Hooker's . . . Book VIII*, 75.

¹⁹ Hooker, *Polity*, VIII. viii. 4.