

A late Stuart Leicestershire parson: The Reverend Humphrey Michel

by John H. Pruett

Collective biography can be a useful historical method, for it allows the historian to discern and present general patterns with greater accuracy than is possible by examining a few individual cases. But by concentrating on general patterns, we sometimes lose track of the individuals who formed them; important events in a man's life become a matter of a few tenths of a percentage point, a segment of a sloping line. And in the case of a collective biography of late Stuart parsons, the loss of the individual has other causes as well: information on individual parsons is extremely limited. The documents usually disclose only the bare outlines of a man's career—where he was born and who his father was, where he went to school and what degrees he took, where and when he was ordained, what cures and under whose patronage he served, when he died. Sometimes in the records of court proceedings a parson's feelings and personal habits are for a moment revealed, but most often for gross moral reasons that make the parson an unfair example of his profession. A parson who served his parish well and was universally loved usually earned only a few glowing words on his tombstone. Someday the meek may inherit the earth, but they will probably not inherit the history books.

The Rev. Humphrey Michel was not a meek man, and I make no claims that he was a typical late Stuart parson; indeed, there are valid reasons for thinking (and hoping) that he was not. But his career does reflect some of the problems his clerical contemporaries confronted, and his story is in and of itself an interesting one. Part of what we know about him comes from the few pages of his diary published in 1859,¹ the rest from the same sorts of ecclesiastical documents that mention other parsons so tersely. In Michel's case the documents are much more informative, for when Humphrey Michel filed a return, he usually told far more than he was asked to.

Michel was born in Birmingham about 1650. The Oxford registers simply record that he matriculated as a plebeian and a pauper,² but other sources indicate that his father was specifically a butcher, and that for the rest of his life Michel remained quite conscious of his origins.³ After spending a year at Trinity College, Cambridge, he migrated in 1667 to Oxford and matriculated there as a Brasenose student, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1670 at the age of twenty.⁴ The universities had suffered a setback in enrollment during the Civil War and Interregnum, but their strong comeback in the 1660s meant

that competition for clerical posts continued to be hectic and that even the most talented graduates needed to find influential patrons as quickly as possible. With his inferior family connections, Michel found himself at a severe disadvantage. He failed to win a fellowship and undoubtedly could not afford to stay on at the university at his own expense until he received an M.A.; and canon law required that ordination be performed only when the candidate had immediate prospects of preferment. Already in his career things were looking bad.

Luck intervened in the person of Nathaniel Alsop, a fellow student at Brasenose whose social origins were quite different from Michel's. The son of a wealthy gentleman who became mayor of Leicester, Alsop matriculated at Brasenose in 1655, took his B.A. in 1659 and his M.A. in 1661, and remained on to earn his B.D. in 1670. His family connections quickly won him the rich rectory of Church Langton in the south-eastern part of Leicestershire; at £300 a year it was one of the county's most lucrative livings, and its revenues eventually enabled Alsop to acquire the advowson for his son George. The Alsops were to preside at Church Langton for over half a century, and the line was broken only by the premature death of Alsop's grandson in the 1730s.⁵

Michel probably met Alsop at Brasenose while Alsop was a proctor, and when Alsop acquired Church Langton in February 1670 he appointed Michel his curate in Tur Langton chapelry. On May 30 the following year Michel was called before the archdeacon's court for having served Tur Langton for at least three months without a licence. He had been ordained deacon by the Bishop of Lincoln the preceding December, but with his curate's salary of only £20 or £30 a year, it had hardly seemed worth the effort and expense of obtaining a licence, and he escaped with a warning.⁶ Two years later he was ordained priest by the Bishop of Lincoln and was licensed to serve in Church Langton parish as both curate and teacher. He was still there in 1674.⁷

And then Michel met and married Frances Goodman, granddaughter of Sir Thomas Burton of Stockerston and daughter of Everard Goodman of Blaston, Esq. Exactly what she and her family saw in a poor curate of humble birth is unclear, but she was nearly 30 and perhaps less afraid of marrying a butcher's son than of becoming a lonely spinster. If theirs was a genuine love-match, Michel certainly recognized the advantages of marrying the daughter of an influential local squire. In 1675 the Goodmans named Michel rector of Blaston, and it was probably through their influence that he was made vicar of neighbouring Horninghold in 1677, though the actual patrons were Sir Edward Hungerford and Mr. Edwin Redich. With a combined income from both cures of only £40 a year, Michel was still comparatively poor, but for a parson of humble origins and only a bachelor's degree the marriage was a remarkable coup. It was indeed the major turning point in Michel's career, and through the influence of his in-laws Michel might well hope for future advancement.⁸

In the 1670s Blaston probably had no parsonage and the one at Horninghold was clearly unsatisfactory. The incumbent of 1634 had complained that his predecessor had rebuilt the parsonage not 'in such manner as it anciently stood but . . . in manner of a cottage, not being so wide

as it was'. In 1703 it was 'very old, decayed, and ill built', with an annual rental value of only twenty-five shillings.⁹ Michel chose not to live in it and lived instead at Blaston, perhaps at first with his wife's family, and in the 1690s he was letting the house at Horninghold to a lay tenant.¹⁰ The churchwardens at Horninghold complained in 1694 that Michel was non-resident and negligent in his clerical duties there, and that the parsonage needed some repairs;¹¹ but Michel probably did not move to Horninghold until 1703, when the old parsonage was exchanged for a 'new well built house' worth thirty-two shillings a year and situated closer to the church.¹² Probably this was the parsonage described in a terrier of circa 1707, and it too was quite modest. A stone house of only three bays with a thatched roof, it had earthen floors and a small adjoining barn of stone and mud, also thatched. Near it stood a thatched cattle shed, and its lot of about half an acre was planted with apple trees.¹³ Michel was living there in 1712 and 1715.¹⁴

Aside from a small close adjoining the parsonage, Horninghold had no glebe, and the outhouses were probably used to store the few tithes Michel could take in kind. In 1707 the land belonging to the manor paid only ten pounds as a fixed rate (a constant source of grievance to Mr. Michel), and small tithes that could be taken in kind from other farms amounted to only ten pounds more, including wool, lambs, calves, colts, pigs, and fruit. Milk had been commuted to two pence for a new milking cow, but the terrier explained that the tithes on barren cattle was presently being disputed between Mr. Michel and the parish.¹⁵

Since Blaston was a donative exempt in most matters from episcopal jurisdiction, no terriers were returned to the bishop during Michel's incumbency and we know little about the living's endowment. Certainly it was endowed with some tithes, for Michel initiated at least three tithe suits from Blaston between 1677 and 1687.¹⁶ In 1701 another tithe suit was taken to the Exchequer, with Michel claiming the full value of the great and small tithes in several closes owned by Sir Lewis Palmer and Mr. Leonard Vowe. Palmer's and Vowe's tenants claimed that the closes had long paid only a small fixed rate and that Michel was the first incumbent in memory to demand tithes in kind. Much to Michel's joy the court declared partly in his favour, ordering Palmer's tenants in the future to pay in kind or hand over the full cash equivalent. The victory must have raised Blaston's revenues considerably, and Michel may have won similar tithe suits a few years later, for by 1706 the living's annual revenues had risen from £20 to £40.¹⁷ For Leonard Vowe, whose tenants apparently continued to pay a fixed rate, Michel felt little love. Eight years later he recorded in his diary that:

Mr. L—V— (they say) dyed, and I doubt as he lived, a drunken God robber . . . and they say was carried home drunk from Bandy Carter's about five or six days before he died . . . yet some fools say he made a good end and made his peace with God. *Proh pacem ffalaciem!*¹⁸

After he moved to Horninghold, Michel was careful to discharge all his clerical duties with dignity and decorum, and the churchwardens no longer complained that he neglected the services there. In fact Michel claimed that it was the parishioners who were lax. He had tried to hold daily common prayer

at Blaston 'till Persecution cousened me of my Key, then stole the Bell-Rope, then the Bell clapper, and then (to top up the sacrilegious climax) the very Bell itself, thus forcing us to a discontinuance of the daily sacrifice'.¹⁹ In 1712 he was having to restrict himself to Wednesday and Friday services, one Sunday service at Horninghold and another at Blaston, and special services for holy days. He offered communion thrice a year, and for pre-confirmation catechizing used only the standard church catechism, 'there being no need of any other to explain such a Plain and Sufficient System of Soul-Saving Christianity'.²⁰ He was swift to report any laxity on the part of the parishioners, occasionally going over the heads of the churchwardens normally responsible for such presentments:

I have before complain'd, and do still [he wrote the officials of the archdeacon's court in 1692], that there are wanting a Better Surplice, Two better Common prayer books (one for the clerk and another for me), a Better Great Bible, a Better Patten, a Better Communion-Table, Locks and Keys for Two Church doors and one chancel door, Three Locks and Keys for the Chest, and another church warden as there us'd to be.²¹

When churchwardens neglected to present moral offenders, Michel bravely shouldered the burden himself, though on one occasion his notions of moral laxity were a bit strange. The officials at the archdeacon's court must have puzzled over his presentment of a Horninghold yeoman and his wife for 'disorderly walking' in 1691, for they wrote to Michel for clarification. 'Disorderly walking', Michel patiently explained (citing appropriate passages in the Pauline epistles), meant walking 'not according to the Rule of Christ's Gospel', which in turn meant 'Railing against their minister, I mean evil Speaking against him, such as brings him into reproach and disgrace'. What had happened was this. Squire Paine had proved an unsatisfactory tenant in Michel's parsonage at Horninghold, so Michel had consented at John Marshall's request to let Paine go and turn the property over to Marshall and his wife. Somehow, probably through Michel, word spread through the village that Marshall had underhandedly connived to get Paine turned out, and Marshall was embarrassed by his neighbours' unfavourable reception of the news. The next Sunday as Michel was stepping down from his pulpit, Marshall rose from his seat and rebuked Michel for humiliating him before all the village. 'Some were observ'd to laugh in the church', Michel wrote the court, and 'I was a little asham'd'. But when he walked over to Marshall and asked to see him privately, Marshall continued to accuse Michel of malicious falsehoods. At this point Michel's wife, 'seeing me thus rudely affronted and reflected upon as a Liar in the face of the Congregation', jumped into the fracas and said, 'Goodman Marshall, you did not absolutely say, I desire you to turn out Squire, but you Sent word by your wife and Goody Ridgway That if Squire was turn'd out you would be Tenant'. This only further infuriated Marshall, who continued to rail. 'And that a Railer is a disorderly walker too', Michel piously concluded, 'can hardly be denied'.

Marshall's disorderly walking also lay in his 'Schismatical walking to hear a separate Minister', in 'falsifying his Promise to me of Taking my house', in

'selling my Tithes-Pigeons without making me satisfaction', and in 'Ingratitude to me, who had been an Instrument under God of Raising him from a poor to a realty condition. These I think are sufficient tokens of disorderly walking'. But Michel flexed his fingers and continued writing. 'I will not now lay to his charge a Tithes Pig of mine stollen from the Church Porch and Eaten at his Mothers house, and Tithes corn taken and cast away to be destroyed in a deep Ditch. If he were guilty of these things, I pray God to give him the Grace of Repentance, and Especially that part of it, Restitution'.²²

Michel's wrath also descended upon local Dissenters. Bishop Wake regularly asked in visitation returns for the number of Dissenters living in a parish and the names of their leaders; most ministers merely returned the desired minimum of information, but Michel's opinions were too strong to be contained. In 1712 he wrote Wake that he was 'Pester'd and Petrify'd with such scandalous Schismatics and Hereticks', and in 1715 that 'One Presbyterian Synagogue of Satan is upheld at Horninghold sometimes by some poor Straglers whose Soul-Seducing and Soul-damning Teacher is sometimes Pyot'. This latter report was accompanied by references to two Biblical verses showing that 'synagogue' was justifiable nomenclature for a Nonconformist meeting house.²³

Not surprisingly, Michel was an ardent country Tory, voting for the Tory candidate for Parliament in 1707 and frequently proclaiming his devotion to the House of Stuart.²⁴ On 30 January 1712 he registered the birth of his third son and noted that it came on the anniversary of that 'direful day whereon the Presbyterians and Independents murdered King Charles, the best of all Kings but one—King Jesus'. But rejoicing was still called for, because the child's baptism a week later (as 'Charles') fell 'in the tenth year of the prosperous reign of our most pious queen Anne; who by act of parliament restored her tenths and first fruits to the poorer Church of England clergymen for their better maintenance, and whose most royal and religious restitution all impropiators, though parliament-men, are infinitely concerned to follow'.²⁵

However devoted Michel was to Anne as the granddaughter of that 'ever memorable martyr', he was hardly a slavish idolator of unchecked monarchy. Monarchs were 'no more exempted from Obedience to the Laws of Piety and Charity, Equity and Sobriety, than the meanest of their Subjects', and they must rule by 'Reason, Law, and Religion'. Nor did his fervour for the Stuarts lead him into the paths of Jacobitism; that was clearly treasonous and, worse still, un-English, for its association with French absolutism and the *loi salique* was 'enough surely to turn any English stomach'.²⁶

By following national political trends through the *Monthly Mercury* and political newsletters, Michel became convinced that virtue everywhere was being corrupted by Whiggery. On 28 March 1709 he recorded in his diary that 'Sir Littleton Powis, Judge, about Lady Day, 1709, acquitted one Barrett, though a murderer, being of the Whig party and we doubt a briber or somebody for hire . . . The Whig party causes (they say) generally prevail among the Judges, Justices, etc.'²⁷ Meanwhile his watchful eyes saw Church

and State even in Leicestershire in danger of subversion from both Whigs on the left and Jacobites on the right. He was shocked when he heard the Whig candidate for Parliament had claimed he could justify the execution of Charles I; he was equally disturbed when, from some casual remarks made by his own sister-in-law, he 'perceived she was an obstinate Jacobitess, though she had my two unanswered sermons against Jacobitism'.²⁸ Michel did his best to defend truth and justice from assaults on both flanks. On 12 April 1709 he gave 'one Mr. Boucher, a Jacobite minister out of place, my two sermons against the Jacobites and my sermon upon the Queen's coronation to convert him'; meanwhile he lent Sacheverell's sermon and *Eikon Basilike* to an obstinate Quaker.²⁹

But Michel did not rest content with serving Church and Queen in two remote country parishes; he hoped eventually to find a rich benefice where his talents might be more usefully employed and his labours reap greater rewards. Unfortunately these were to remain mere hopes, for his tactlessness and pomposity quickly alienated all those who might have helped him. His first mistake lay in falling out with his wife's relatives over the matter of Blaston's tithes. When he came to Blaston he was ignorant of what tithes were due to the incumbent, and he allowed his wife's brother to contract a small and, as it turned out, very unfair modus. Convinced that every parson deserved a full tenth from his parishioners and that anyone who paid a farthing less was a sacrilegious 'God-robber', he picked and nagged at his brother-in-law's conscience until he caved in to Michel's demands.³⁰ The victory was pyrrhic, for it cost him whatever advantage he might have wrung from his connections with the Goodman family. In 1684 another of his wife's brothers, a wealthy gentleman of Great Easton, left £800 to the poor; the trustees of the charity were to be Michel's brother-in-law, the incumbents of Medbourne, Hallaton, and Bringhurst and their successors, and 'the successors to the present minister of Blaston', not Michel himself. Michel self-righteously (but accurately) saw in this 'one thing notable, malice against me . . . because by God's grace I had preached his brother Everard into right Christian charity and a right payment of his tithes to me; which he, his mother, brothers, and other relatives were utterly against'.³¹

At any rate the Goodmans were already on the way out; they sold Blaston manor in 1679, and Michel found it even more difficult to get along with their successors, the Conyers family.³² Michel unabashedly arraigned Edwin Conyers from his pulpit for sacrilege in paying so few tithes, and shortly after Conyers' death in 1701 he sent Mrs. Conyers a most disturbing letter. He had received four pounds from her for tithes, he said, but that 'being not a Groat in the Pound-rent to the minister of God's word and Sacraments is but an old Sacrilegious Payment'. Her tithes on the estate 'so cheaply bought of my wife's Brother' should have been twenty-five pounds or more, and if she paid a penny less she was 'highly and cursedly guilty of an Annual Sacrilege, of Robbing God himself in Tithes and Offerings'. Lest the bereaved widow not be moved by conscience, let her have a taste of fear: her husband had been equally guilty in this matter, Michel stormed, and 'therefore I alwayes Pityed the dismal futurity of his Poor Soul'. Her husband was 'now beyond hope, his

day of Grace and Salvation being suddenly Past', and 'eternal wo be to you, if in this your fleeting state of Repentance you make me not a full and Speedy Recompence for your detention of my Tithes'.³³

Unfortunately he did not stop there. Michel's hatred of her husband Edwin, originating in the tithe dispute, ended in several libelous sonnets he composed to commemorate his enemy's departure from this mortal life. Entitled 'Ned Conyers Ghost' and 'Mother Midnights Contemplation upon Conyers Hatchment', they were passed about the neighbourhood from hand to hand and gleefully read by Michel to any callers at the parsonage who cared to listen. Eventually the churchwardens of Hallaton discovered them and found them not only libelous but containing 'several words, sentences, and expressions which lead to the corruption of good manners, and are filthy, lewd, and vitious and conteyne ribaldry to the depravation of the minds and morals of such persons who have seen or read or shall read the same'.³⁴

The sonnets traced Michel's conception of the impious career of Edwin Conyers, J.P., from the time of his gentle birth ('At famous little Bowden or much thereabouts/My Dagle Tale Mother like a fart blurt me out') to his posthumous descent into the nethermost depths of the fiery lake. In between came several verses devoted to immortalizing Conyers' predilections and speculating on the causes of his demise:

When I called my Dogs Servants, then loud was my Whistle,
And tho' that I Crackt most was the strength of my Pistle;
For I thought itt as strong as my Armour of Steele,
Yet swiveing itt to oft, I began for to reel
And to run att my Codpiece, which noe drug would heale.
Quoth then to Venus, Dear Madam, fare you well,
For from your merry patch I am going to Hell.³⁵

What for Michel had been a bit of naughty fun led in 1702 to a lengthy libel suit and public humiliation. The judges of the archdeacon's court failed to find the sonnets sufficiently scandalous to merit defrocking, but Michel was forced to make public apologies, and he saw most of his hopes for future advancement rapidly evaporating.³⁶

Even now he did not despair completely, and he began trying to establish contacts beyond the parishes where his trial had been so publicized. Mostly these contacts were to be sought through a series of sermons Michel began publishing while the trial was in progress.³⁷ He hoped their sale would augment his income as well, but his publisher was a Dissenter who disliked Michel's Tory opinions and kept most of the sermons under his counter, thereby dampening Michel's hopes of both future preferment and immediate profits.³⁸ Some did manage to circulate, and they were aimed at the large audience of conservative country Tories Michel felt would make the most agreeable patrons. Lashing out at Catholics and Dissenters alike, they vilified the murderers of the martyred King Charles but had equally venomous words for Jacobites and Non-Jurors. That hope of personal advancement lay behind their publication is undeniable, but Michel sincerely believed in everything he wrote and thought his sermons an able 'defence of the present government, both in church and state'.³⁹

Sadly, there were few takers and no offers of preferment. He sent a few copies to the earl of Nottingham, but all the earl sent him in return was a large haunch of venison.⁴⁰ Perhaps rumours of his sour temper had spread; or perhaps the fault lay in the sermons themselves, proclaiming high political and moral truths but often lapsing into personally motivated assaults and apologies. Too many people criticize 'Sound and serious Sermons', began his composition on the coronation of Anne, but he would brave the storm, he who had 'all along Suffered so much devilish and damnable Detraction'. What followed was a fairly competent exposition of the rights and duties of a limited monarch, but towards the end the old preoccupations crept back in: the monarch must reform 'all God-robbers by restoring all those things that are God's, such as Tithes and Offerings, unto the hallowed Hands of the Gospel Ministers'.⁴¹ This was not very encouraging to prospective patrons.

When publications failed to produce results, Michel turned to his bishop and the comforting belief that his frustrations were partly the fault of aristocratic bastards. At the bottom of Wake's parochial questionnaire of 1715 he wrote, 'I take this Good occasion to beseech your Paternity, not to forget your Poor Son's Vicarage at Horninghold when King Charles the Second's natural sons are dead, who they say Eat and Drink up the Late Good Queen's Bounteous Piety, which she Intended for us!'⁴² Wake was unmoved. The episode of the scandalous sonnets had occurred before Wake became Bishop of Lincoln, but reports had probably filtered through. Certainly rumours of subsequent poetic forays had reached him: writing about his Leicestershire visitation in 1709. Wake recorded in his diary on May 31 that 'Mr. Mitchell was accused to me for reading some odd verses of his own in the Church'.⁴³ What the verses were is unknown, but let us hope they were not the infamous sonnets. At any rate, nothing came of Michel's episcopal pleas.

Nor did anything come of any of his other pleas, for when Michel died in 1722 he was still the incumbent of the same two Leicestershire livings his marriage had gained him in the 1670s. He was unwilling to admit that this might be partly the result of personal inadequacy; instead he persuaded himself that the furor over the sonnets had been the working of a 'Hellish Confederacy' against him.⁴⁴ He saw drunken God-robbers carrying off his tithes and insulting his integrity; he knew the Presbyterians and Jacobites were in league to keep him low. His sense of deprivation was scarcely alleviated when he contemplated his immediate neighbours, the rector of Medbourne and the two rectors who served the north and south halves of Hallaton, for these rectors enjoyed all the advantages Michel lacked.

William Fenwick, rector of South Hallaton and the son of a Newcastle physician, had won a fellowship at St. John's, Cambridge, taken an M.A. in 1680, married the daughter of a Winchester fellow, and received about ninety pounds a year from his parish living.⁴⁵ George Stavely was the youngest son of Thomas Stavely of Belgrave, Esq.; his M.A. had come from Emmanuel, and his income at Medbourne amounted to £180 a year.⁴⁶ Theophilus Burdett, M.A., the rector of North Hallaton, also came from a higher social class. The Burdetts had been Leicestershire clergyman since the 1580s; Theophilus' father had been rector of Gumley, his uncle Henry was rector of Burton

Overy, and his great-grandfather had been the earl of Kent. In addition to the ninety pounds a year from North Hallaton, Burdett held Nether Broughton in plurality to complete his yearly revenues of £175.⁴⁷

When Humphrey Michel composed his sonnets on Ned Conyers, he did not forget these three. Apparently Michel's dire prophecies of fire and brimstone had almost brought the ailing Conyers over to Michel's views on tithing matters when these three 'pimping parasites' sneaked up to Conyers' death bed, heard his last confession, absolved him of all his sins, and let him die with a clear conscience. Michel was outraged. Fenwick, Burdett, and Stavely had clearly betrayed their profession and maliciously assaulted one of their less fortunate colleagues. Michel could only ask:

Were ever three such hatchment divines before known
As prig-Stavely, and prig-Fenwick, and yong-prig-roan,
To daub up so long sacrilegious conversation,
Now trampling on a death-head, cock-sure of salvation?
No. In claret, sack, brandy, they are three kings at Arms,
And for Ale-tubs more painful than in pulpiting Charms.⁴⁸

Michel's spleen also flowed into the venomous letters he dispatched to Burdett and Fenwick. Each was a 'pompous, pampered, periwig'd, powdered priest'. It was the wigs especially that bothered him, symbols of a life-style Michel clearly could not afford and could only scorn with pretended humility. Fenwick's wig in particular galled him: it fell to Fenwick's shoulders. Michel felt it his duty to warn Fenwick that 'by such modern, Popish, and Pagan Pride, Pomp, and Vanity . . . you'l at Last Provoke . . . natural Envy and Antipathy, if not to the downfall, yet to the Detriment of our Dearest Church'. Lest this happen, Michel prayed that Fenwick would make such a 'due distinction between your Proud Person and humble function, that our Priesthood may not so bitterly suffer for the sake of your Periwig-Pates as Troy did for Helena'. Then came the ultimate jab: St. Paul 'hath excluded all effeminate Persons (parsons not excepted) from the Kingdom of God'.⁴⁹

Michel next turned to Burdett's alleged greed and dependence on family connections for his rich benefices. 'This Garagantua is so prodigiously proud and covetous', Michel jeered, 'that Two six score pound benefices are but middling maintenances for his voracious Paunch and Sparrow mouth'. Where would Burdett be without 'Nuncle Harry's' Burton Overy? Probably in the poor chapelry of Burton Lazars, a cure 'more proper for such unprofitable animals'.⁵⁰ Michel had had to depend on Nathaniel Alsop, son of a gentleman, for his first curacy, and on his wife's gentle family for his two parish livings. No doubt he wished that like Burdett he could have depended on his own family instead. But Michel's father had been a butcher, a fact of which everybody was aware and of which Michel was acutely self-conscious. When Burdett reminded Michel of his humble origins, Michel lashed back:

But what ailes Garagantua to be so mad that a butcher's son become a parson, when [your own] wife sold Butter, cheese, and eggs at Harborough cross? Where's the hurt, where's the shame? For were not the antient sacrificers in a manner so many slaughterers? Is not

Garagantua's next proud self-conceited, vainglorious neighbour but little better than the son of a collier? Is there not now a right-reverend prelate the son of a taylor? A learned priest hard by the son of a Baker? Another the son of an aleman? Another the son of a mason? Another the son of a hatter? Another the son of a plowman? Another the son of a stocken maker? And another the son of a card-maker? Were not Cardinal Wolsey and Lord Chief Justice Scrogs both the sons of a butcher?⁵¹

Of course Michel was right, up to a point. In the late seventeenth century the deck was indeed stacked against parsons born without good social connections, and Michel was hardly responsible for his father's occupation. But on the other hand there were numerous examples of clerics from humble backgrounds who had made it to the top, and Michel was his own worst enemy in his vituperative outbursts about hellish confederacies and in his deliberate alienation of his neighbours. In the end he fell back on reverse snobbery, telling Burdett that 'the honest butchers . . . the honest hogherds . . . are more honourable than any such priestly prigs', and that eventually Burdett's preaching would be 'peack'd and Indicted . . . as pitiful pedantry'.⁵² Michel would show them. If he could not beat them in wealth and social pretensions, he would beat them in pulpiting charms; he would bring his parishioners to piety and humility even if he had to break them in the process. Fenwick had his doubts. When he finished reading Michel's letter he drew himself up, reached for his pen, and at the bottom wrote that in all his life he had 'never read anything wrote with less Wit and more Gall. I heartily pray God to forgive the Author and bring him to a more meek and humble and Christian temper'.⁵³

When Michel's diary opens in 1707 it is already the work of a frustrated man beset by advancing age and personal misfortune. On 13 November 1707 he recorded that 'My dear wife dyed of fifteen days' sickness, being about 62 years of age, and about her usual time of going to prayer; she told me and her sister about the beginning of her sickness that her wicked son John had broken her heart, which I believe in a great measure to be true'.⁵⁴ This was the Michels' second son, the 'J.M.' who not long after was 'drunk and running about like a drunken sot, though he promised his mother upon her death bed he would not lead such a drunken course of life any more'.⁵⁵ Meanwhile Michel's daughter had left home and had grown 'so impudent she sent me a patched shirt and her brother the whole one'.⁵⁶ His elder son had done somewhat better, taking a B.A. at Cambridge and serving as curate to his father at Blaston in 1699 and 1701. But in 1710 he was still only a Northamptonshire curate, and Michel heard he had performed an undesirable marriage without the consent of the couple's parents, 'so rebellious a rogue was the son, and so rebellious a jade was the daughter'.⁵⁷ Michel must have lamented his own children's rebelliousness and worried about their future as he saw his old prig-pated enemies' sons succeeding to rich country livings, while he was able to leave his family an estate of only fifty pounds.⁵⁸ Could he have done more for his family? It was perhaps the first time in his life that he had ever known self-doubt, and he tried to take

consolation in a sympathetic neighbour's advice that the 'Bishop of Durham and his lady were both virtuous parents, and yet their children were as great reprobates as any, and all are come to nothing'.⁵⁹

If in his declining years Michel sometimes wondered what his own life had amounted to, the old vigorous self-assurance was still there and ready to spring back. He was still able to denounce regicides, sacrilegious God-robbers, Whigs, Presbyterians, and Jacobites with the same venom. Moreover on 20 January 1711 he wrote, 'Paid then to Mr. Anthony Fish, the hatter, for my wedding hat, 12s., with a rose hat-band'. Michel had married again, this time to a local widow who presented him with his son Charles the following year.⁶⁰

He also developed a lively interest in witchcraft, recording the results of several dowsings of local suspects. On 18 June 1709 he attended the water trial of Mary Palmer, a cripple, who 'though bound hands and feet did not sink but swim before all the said company, whereas one Joseph Harding . . . did not swim, but sunk immediately like a stone before us all'.⁶¹ Michel thought that Goody Ridgway, involved in his embarrassing denunciation by John Marshall eighteen years before, had 'in all probability bewitched to death' one Frances Sharp. Mrs. Sharp had seen her appear 'in very terrible shapes' and could not eat or drink for eleven days because 'the little thing in her bosom told her she must do neither'. Michel decided to preach the witches away (as he had the Jacobites), and on October 2 a 'wench of the widow Barlow, a supposed witch, went out of the church when I had named and read my text, Deut. Chap 18. where is the word witch'⁶²

But above all Michel took an interest in the number of his old enemies who were being carried off to their graves. In October 1707 the Hon. John Verney died soon after his wife, both of whom were 'secret persecutors of me and encouraged all the rest of the Prig-pated Patrons in their unjust Law-suit against me . . . I know one who hoped and prayed that he might not live to be a lord, not his wife a lord's lady. And his father [Richard Verney, Baron Willoughby de Broke] is now at Allexton, surviving both'.⁶³ Theophilus Burdett, the prig-pated rector of North Hallaton, passed on in January 1711—'another of my persecutors . . . suddenly deprived of life, according to that commination of David, "God ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors". So that other commination of God, "Cursed be he that smiteth his neighbour secretly". Amen'.⁶⁴

If at the end of his life Michel could not be proud of his material success or the fortunes of his children, he could at least find grim satisfaction in his ability to endure. Born during the Interregnum, he had seen the Stuarts return in 1660, the papists vanquished in 1688, and the Church protected by his beloved Queen Anne; he had seen Anglicanism restored and defended against its enemies; he had done battle against Dissenters and Jacobites and sacrilegious God-robbers; he had seen his enemies fall spent and dead while he survived to gloat. So it was with the usual self-assurance that he could look forward to that final reward, the one that must come to all good Anglicans and patriotic Englishmen; and when he died in 1722, he was laid to rest beneath the altar of Blaston St. Giles'.⁶⁵ This was his last and perhaps most characteristic request. *Requiescat in pace.*

Notes

By mutual agreement of the author and the editors, this article will appear concurrently in the *Journal of Religious History*

1. J. H. Hill, ed., 'The Diary of the Rev. Humphrey Michel', *Associated Architectural Societies' Reports and Papers*, V (1859), 187–195
2. J. Foster, *Alumni Oxoniensis* (Oxford and London, 1888–91), Pt. 1, III, 1008
3. Leicester Museum, 1D41/4/XLVIII/75
4. J. and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigiensis* (Cambridge, 1922–54), Pt. 1, III, 181; Foster, *Al. Oxon.*, Pt. 1, III, 1008
5. Foster, *Al. Oxon.*, Pt. 1, I, 20; J. H. Hill, *The History of the Parish of Langton* (Leicester, 1867), pp. 62–63
6. Leics. Museum, 1D41/13/78, f. 79v.; Lincolnshire Archives Office, L.C. VI, f. 200
7. Lincs. Arch. Off., L.C. VIII, f. 96; Leics. Museum, 1D41/34/1 (typescript copy); 11 June 1673
8. Lincs. Arch. Off., Reg. XXXIV, f. 19; Ben/8/6, 7; Hill, 'Diary', pp. 187–188; Venn, *Al. Cant.*, Pt. 1, III, 181
9. Lincs. Arch. Off., Ben/2/51; A. P. Moore, 'The Metropolitan Visitation of Archbishop Laud', *Associated Architectural Societies' Reports and Papers*, XXIX (1908), 487
10. Leics. Museum, 1D41/4/XLVI/134
11. *Ibid.*, 1D41/13/82, f. 78v
12. Lincs. Arch. Off., Ben/2/51
13. *Ibid.*, Terriers, vol. 23, p. 420
14. Wake MSS (Christ Church Library, Oxford), CCLXXVII, n.f.: Blaston
15. Lincs. Arch. Off., Ben/8/60; Ter., vol. 23, pp. 421–422
16. Leics. Museum, 1D41/11/68, f. 115; 1D41/11/75, ff. 199v., 223v
17. W. G. D. Fletcher, 'Documents Relating to Leicestershire', *Associated Architectural Societies' Reports and Papers*, XXII (1894), 285
18. Hill, 'Diary', p. 192
19. Leics. Museum, 1D41/4/XLVIII/76
20. Wake MSS, CCLXXVII, n.f.: Blaston
21. Leics. Museum, 1D41/21, unnumbered box: Horninghold, October 1692
22. *Ibid.*, 1D41/4/XLVI/134
23. Wake MSS, CCLXXVII, n.f.: Blaston
24. Cambridge University Library, MS. Mn.vi.61, ff. 200–223: Blaston
25. Quoted in J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (London, 1795–1815), II, 450
26. Humphrey Michel, *Sovereignty Subject unto Duty* (London, 1702), pp. 8, 13, 15–16
27. Hill, 'Diary', pp. 188, 192, 195
28. *Ibid.*, p. 189
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 194
30. Leics. Museum, 1D41/4/XLVIII/74
31. Quoted in Nichols, *Leics.*, II, 449–450
32. *Victoria History of the County of Leicester* (London and Oxford, 1907–64), IV, 22
33. Leics. Museum, 1D41/4/XLVIII/74
34. *Ibid.*, 1D41/4/XLVIII/64
35. *Ibid.*, 1D41/4/XLVIII/65, 71
36. *Ibid.*, 1D41/4/XLVIII/64–77; 1D41/11/76, f. 215v
37. *Duplex in Carolicidas Querela, or the Innocent Blood of King Charles the Martyr* (London, 1703); *St. Paul's triumphant Confutation of all the late Jacobinical Schism and Sedition* (London, 1702); *Sovereignty Subject unto Duty* (London, 1702). There were others on Christ, Marlborough's victories, and the union with Scotland. See Hill, 'Diary', p. 191

38. Hill, 'Diary', p. 189
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 194, 195
41. *Sovereignty Subject unto Duty*, pp. 3–4, 16
42. Wake MSS, CCLXXVII, n.f.: Blaston
43. Lambeth Palace Library, MS. 1770, f. 80
44. Leics. Museum, 1D41/4/XLVIII/74
45. Venn, *Al. Cant.*, Pt. 1, II, 131, 132; Fletcher, 'Documents', *A.A.S.R.P.*, XXII, 278
46. Venn, *Al. Cant.*, Pt. 1, IV, 152; Fletcher, 'Documents', *A.A.S.R.P.*, XXII, 304
47. Venn, *Al. Cant.*, Pt. 1, I, 256; Fletcher, 'Documents', *A.A.S.R.P.*, XXII, 250, 278
48. Leics. Museum, 1D41/4/XLVIII/74, 77
49. *Ibid.*, 1D41/4/XLVIII/75, 76
50. *Ibid.*, 1D41/4/XLVIII/75
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. Leics. Museum, 1D41/4/XLVIII/76
54. Hill, 'Diary', p. 188
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, p. 189
57. *Ibid.*, p. 194; Venn, *Al. Cant.*, Pt. 1, III, 182; Lincs. Arch. Off., Reg. XXXV, ff. 60v., 76v
58. Leics. Rec. Off., PR/1722, unnumbered: H. Michel
59. Hill, 'Diary', p. 189
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 194, 187; Nichols, *Leics.*, II, 450
61. Hill, 'Diary', p. 193
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.*, p. 188
64. *Ibid.*, p. 194
65. *Ibid.*, p. 188