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**WHEN THE PRIEST IS A WOMAN:  
FEMALE CLERGY AND THE DETECTIVE NOVEL**

Linda K. Robertson

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From the classic Father Brown mysteries to the Father Dowling stories of recent book and television fame, clergymen, particularly priests, have been amateur detectives or at least active participants in many mystery novels. Sometimes the priests become involved because a parishioner or acquaintance is a suspect or the crime occurs on church property; sometimes they are suspects themselves; sometimes they are brought into a case because of their specialized knowledge of the Church or of human behavior. Although they are often viewed by outsiders as somehow naive, this is rarely the case. As Father Brown says to Flambeau in "The Blue Cross": "Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?"<sup>1</sup>

Although generally less well known than Msgr. Blackie Ryan or Father Robert Koesler,<sup>2</sup> a large percentage of the detective-novel priests are Anglican. This is true of British novelist Canon Victor Lorenzo Whitechurch's character Vicar Westerham, of C. A. Alington's archdeacons, of American writer Margaret Sherf's Martin Buell, and of numerous others.<sup>3</sup> However, women of any denomination are notably scarce in clerical detective fiction.

In the post-World War II novels of Matthew Head, Dr. Mary Finney and Emily Collins are missionaries in the Congo.<sup>4</sup> More recently, David Willis McCullough's amateur investigator Ziza Todd is a member of the Presbyterian clergy, although she holds non-traditional positions in youth ministry.<sup>5</sup> Religious orders provide a much larger variety of women. From H. H. Holmes' Sister Ursula of the 1940's to Monica Quill's Sister Mary Teresa, to Sister Carol Anne O'Marie's delightful Sister Mary Helen, there have been a variety of nuns as major characters in detective fiction.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, despite their membership in a variety of orders, not one of the nuns mentioned happens to be Anglican. However, the only women priests are, of course, Anglican, and a number of them appear in Isabelle Holland's novels.<sup>7</sup>

Like male priests, Claire Aldington and other female Episcopal priests combine the performance of their professional responsibilities with their involvement in crime. They draw a sense of peace and a restoration of perspective from prayer and from the Mass; they use

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their understanding of the church and their knowledge of people to solve puzzles. However, two key differences affect character and plot when the priest is a woman. The women often have family responsibilities, sometimes both a husband and children, and they always face lack of understanding, criticism, or even threats from people who disapprove of the admission of women to the priesthood. The Reverend Doctor Claire Aldington, Holland's main character, is in her mid-30's, holds a degree in clinical psychology obtained before she entered seminary, and works as one of several assistants at St. Anselm's Church in New York. She has primary responsibility for the pastoral counseling department in a large parish with many activities, including an internationally famous boys' choir. In fact, St. Anselm's seems very like the Church of St. Thomas on 5th Avenue, although Holland gives her fictional parish an address a few blocks away.

Aldington explains her duties to police detective O'Neill: "I'm a pastoral counselor. That is, I work in the chancel on Sunday—read the liturgy, consecrate, conduct the service or assist—like any of the other priests. But during the week I conduct private and group therapy."<sup>8</sup> She preaches two Sundays each month at the 9:30 family service, and occasionally at the 11:00 Eucharist at which the famous boys' choir sings.

So much for the description of her official functions. However, one might also expect some exploration of the spiritual life of a priest. As the first person narrator of *A Fatal Advent* she explains, "Participating in the liturgy, leading the prayers, reading the lessons from the Old and New Testaments—all these gave me the sense of sharing immense and ancient riches; they brought peace, assurance, even exaltation. But composing a ten-minute homily was a duty that I avoided as often as possible."<sup>9</sup> Later, she describes her response to a weekday noon Eucharist: "Celebrating the liturgy had always either calmed me, when I was upset, or exhilarated me, when I was depressed or tired. Some magic in the ancient words seemed there, regardless of my mood."<sup>10</sup> In *A Lover Scorned* she celebrates an evening Eucharist and finds the "words and ritual healing and restoring."<sup>11</sup> Sitting in the congregation at a 7:30 a.m. weekday service, she reminds herself that she once attended the early Eucharist daily: "Then life and a busy schedule and not enough time to sleep had interfered, and she attended only when she was the celebrant and was much the poorer for it. Sitting there...she marveled how she could have let slide anything so necessary to her peace of mind."<sup>12</sup> The spiritual benefits and meditative nature of

various services are emphasized on a number of occasions in the novels.

We also see Claire Aldington working with other members of the staff and interacting with clients. She is a “practical, pragmatic and rather down-to-earth” woman who is “inclined to help people where they are” rather than attempting to change the way the world works—as her late husband Patrick did.<sup>13</sup> She gives her clients their full time and is generally able to “block out everything except the client sitting across from her.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, she is subject to doubts, anger, and frustration both in her work and in her personal life. Critic William David Spencer, who wrote *Mysterium and Mystery: The Clerical Crime Novel*, clearly dislikes her. He describes her as “a rather catty, unpleasant person,” based on her appearance in *A Death at St. Anselm’s* alone, but he does admit that Holland shows that “the clergy are indeed human.”<sup>15</sup> The first-person narrative of *A Death at St. Anselm’s*, is as Spencer points out, unusual in clerical mysteries. The extent to which we hear her thoughts in the first novel and continue to see much of her personal life in *A Lover Scorned* and *A Fatal Advent* allows a more revealing picture of the total person than is generally the case of priest-characters. Spencer summarizes his analysis: “Unpleasant and obnoxious as she may be, collar not withstanding, the Reverend Claire Aldington strikes a truer ministerial note than many more integrated and at times nearly superhuman clerical sleuths. She is in a true sense the image of a suffering servant.”<sup>16</sup>

Claire Aldington may not be up to Spencer’s standards for the ideal priest, the ideal clinical psychologist, or the ideal woman. However, in *A Death at St. Anselm’s* as a widow who has an eight year old son, a thirteen year old anorexic stepdaughter with a meddling grandmother, a murdered business-manager colleague, a rector who tries not only to undermine her program but to blame her for the crime, and a budding relationship with conservative banker and vestryman Brett Cunningham, she does well to salvage both her professional and personal lives. In the next two novels, the character continues to develop in both her clerical and private roles.

What makes Claire Aldington different from her male counterparts? One thing is her role as a clinical psychologist. Some characters resent her level of education and specialization; some do not understand or agree with the function of psychological counseling; some (despite her doctorate and experience) find it difficult to believe she is a real counselor because she lacks an M.D. degree, works in a church, and calls the people she counsels clients instead of patients; some resent the

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expenditure of church resources on a pastoral counseling program (although clients pay on a sliding scale according to their means). All of these issues *could* also apply to a male priest in the same job. Whether they *would* all actually apply to the same extent is debatable.

There is one indisputable difference: Claire Aldington is a woman. Not everyone, clergy or laity, male or female, is ready to accept a woman as a priest. This is no surprise to her or to anyone else. She is the niece of a bishop who held out against the ordination of women, the revised prayer book, and even folk masses.<sup>17</sup> She, like anyone else acquainted with the Episcopal Church since the 1960's, is fully aware of the pressures for and against a variety of changes. As her friend and colleague Larry Swade points out, St. Anselm's too has had its history of battles between conservatives and liberals: "outreach against anti-outreach, the Dear Old Prayer Book against the Horrid New Rite, the ordination of women."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, she is subject to the standard argument against working women, particularly those with children. In a moment of self-doubt, she is reminded of the claim: "*What you ought to do is stay home and take care of your children...All the ancient voices were there, internalized, combining with the severe, reproving voice of her own mother...*"<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in *A Lover Scorned* Swade states that as a "female cleric in a male bastion," she seems "blessedly free" from what she refers to the "insecurities and defenses afflicting women clergy."<sup>20</sup> Despite her vocation, Claire Aldington is not a strong feminist; neither is she remarkably assertive. Nevertheless, negative reactions from others to her vocation range from cold looks to critical remarks to the ominously threatening comment from a priest's sister: "...I consider that a woman—any woman—who tries to take over the sacramental duties of a man like my brother is committing some kind of blasphemy and should be punished. As you will be punished...."<sup>21</sup>

Claire Aldington is always balancing her professional responsibilities with her personal commitments. She offers this explanation to the new rector, Douglas Barnet: "I have my therapy work and am not that involved in the women's or discussion groups or the Bible studies—probably not as much as I should be. But I have the two children at home and try not to be away more than a couple of nights a week."<sup>22</sup>

There is also a developing relationship with Brett Cunningham. From serious antagonism over the funding of the counseling program and other parish issues at the beginning of *A Death at St. Anselm's*, to some rather stormy dating through *A Lover Scorned*, to a mutually

supportive marriage in *A Fatal Advent*, this relationship also requires time and energy. When she and the children are threatened, Cunningham wants to marry her immediately and move in to provide additional protection. Believing in the value of a traditional religious ceremony, she holds out for a church wedding, although a small private one, instead of going to City Hall. As she tells Detective O'Neill, she is both a priest and a mother with children at home, and she has " 'always believed in the precept. Don't tell, do.' " <sup>23</sup>

In the second Claire Aldington mystery, *A Lover Scorned*, two women priests of Claire's acquaintance are killed and brutally mutilated, and the murderer almost adds her to the total. Because of her acquaintance with Detective O'Neill, the fact that she knew the Reverend Ida Blake, and her knowledge of the church, Claire Aldington is brought into this case from the first.

Another woman priest, the Reverend Sarah Buchanan edits a church magazine and assists at St. Paul's on the Lower East Side. In speculating about the reasons for the death of Ida Blake (was it a woman hater, a woman-priest hater?), she describes her former fellow seminarian: "Ida was so ordinary—your nice, bright, wholesome girl, who came along at a time when it was possible for a woman to be ordained and who decided to devote her life to serving God and her fellow humans." <sup>24</sup> She tells Claire, "I'm as anxious to help the police find her killer as you are" and points out that if the motive was Ida's vocation, she too has a "vested interest" in the apprehension of the killer. <sup>25</sup> There is another, not too surprising, source of tension in her professional life. Before rushing away after a lunch, Sarah explains, "My boss is one of those who feels the Church made a grave mistake in letting women be ordained, and I don't want to feed his paranoia by being late around production time." <sup>26</sup> Again, simply being a woman adds another dimension to the common pressures and rewards of the priesthood.

Is there a special connection between priests and detection? In his article "Sleuths in the Parish," Father Roland M. Kawano points out that Father Brown, like Jane Marple, Hercule Poirot, and Rabbi David Small, possesses the essential quality of being "humble before the evidence." Likewise, he says, in confronting the difficulties of pastoral ministry, "to see things as they are is to take a long step toward a solution." <sup>27</sup> As he shows, there is, in fact, more resemblance between the demands on fictional detectives and on parish priests than might be expected. Religion and detection seem natural companions, from Daniel's Old Testament puzzle solving to the latest Andrew Greeley

bestseller. As we read contemporary versions of the clerical crime story, however, we are increasingly asked to examine the place of the priest as a member of the clergy and as a man, or a woman, in the modern world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *The Father Brown Omnibus* (New York, 1951), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>William X. Kienle has published several Father Robert Koesler novels, beginning in 1979. Andrew M. Greeley has published Msgr. Blackie Ryan novels since 1985.

<sup>3</sup>William David Spencer. *Mysterium and Mystery: The Clerical Crime Novel* (Ann Arbor, 1989), pp. 194, 207, 214.

<sup>4</sup>T. J. Binyon, *Murder Will Out: The Detective in Fiction* (New York, 1990), p. 65.

<sup>5</sup>David Willis McCullough, *Think on Death* (New York, 1991) and *Point No-Point* (New York, 1992). In *Think on Death Ziza* (long *i* to rhyme with *Liza*), Todd is a seminarian researching American religious communities for a masters' thesis. While visiting a corporation, which was once a utopian community in Smyrna, New York, she tries to solve both past and present mysteries of the community. In *Point No-Point* she is a youth minister for an inter-denominational Sunday school in a small Hudson River town. She does not have traditional parish-ministry experience, and again in this novel the focus is not primarily on her clerical role.

<sup>6</sup>Sister Carol Anne O'Marie *A Novena for Murder* (New York, 1984). Writing as H. H. Holmes in the 1940's, William Anthony Parker White produced Sister Ursula, whom William Daniel Spencer terms an "archetypal" figure of the "wise woman" in his study *Mysterium and Mystery: The Clerical Crime Novel* (102). The French Sister of Charity, physician, and wielder of a Father-Brown-like umbrella, Soeur Angele appeared in the 1950's (Spencer 107). More recently, we have Sister Mary Teresa, like Father Roger Dowling the creation of conservative philosopher Ralph M. McInerny. Under the name Monica Quill, McInerny has created a retired professor of history who still pursues serious scholarship when she is not solving mysteries. The other investigator-nun of contemporary note is Sister Carol Anne, O'Marie's Sister Mary Helen. Although she has retired to mount St. Frances College for Women in San Francisco, Sister Mary Helen is anything but withdrawn from the activities of the college, or from her own enjoyment of a good walk or a good book—preferably a mystery, tucked carefully into her "faithful paperback cover—one with ribbon markers and all" (*A Novena* 14). As she explains to young Sister Anne, "Late Afternoon...old gray-haired nun...sitting alone with book in lap. Everyone expects a prayer book. Right?" "Then, why blow the stereotype?" (15). See also Ralph McInerny, *Second Vespers* (New York, 1980) and

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Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel, A History* (New York, 1985).

<sup>7</sup>Isabelle Holland, *A Death at St. Anselm's* (New York, 1984); *A Fatal Advent* (New York, 1989); *A Lover Scorned* (New York, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>Holland, *Death* 67.

<sup>9</sup>Holland, *Death* 136-37.

<sup>10</sup>Holland, *Death* 220-221.

<sup>11</sup>Holland, *Lover* 90.

<sup>12</sup>Holland, *Lover* 131.

<sup>13</sup>Holland, *Death* 172, 110.

<sup>14</sup>Holland, *Lover* 55.

<sup>15</sup>Spencer 248, 252.

<sup>16</sup>Spencer 253.

<sup>17</sup>Holland, *Death* 9.

<sup>18</sup>Holland, *Death* 39.

<sup>19</sup>Holland, *Death* 47.

<sup>20</sup>Holland, *Lover* 10.

<sup>21</sup>Holland, *Lover* 243.

<sup>22</sup>Holland, *Lover* 107.

<sup>23</sup>Holland, *Lover* 231.

<sup>24</sup>Holland, *Lover* 25.

<sup>25</sup>Holland, *Lover* 27.

<sup>26</sup>Holland, *Lover* 28.

<sup>27</sup>Roland M. Kawano, "Sleuths in the Parish," *The Christian Ministry* 17.3 (May 1986), 27-28.