

Peculiar people

reviewed by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

One of my favorite lines in modern "religious" fiction comes from Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. The redoubtable country preacher, Hazel Motes, informs his landlady that he is a preacher in the "Church Without Christ" ("where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way"). To which the woman innocently replies, "Protestant?" This is fiction and very funny, but it also reveals the author's considered appraisal of the state of southern Protestantism, especially its preachers. As a Catholic, O'Connor seems always to be asking with amazed incredulity, "What is it with these people?"

In his stylish anthology of reminiscences and literary portrayals of the English clergy, compiler Raymond Chapman is posing a similar question: What is it with these clerical types? Or, more accurately, what was it? As a retired English professor at the University of London and an Anglican priest, Chapman is more than qualified to chronicle the peculiar character of the pastoral life. In his book's introduction he writes that today "there is less discernment of what the life of a priest or minister is really like, but perhaps there never was a time when those outside this or any profession really penetrated its nature." He is absolutely correct, and he has set out to right this perennial wrong with almost 200 scenes from clerical life, excerpted not only from famous authors like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, John Henry Newman and Thomas Hardy but also from the memoirs and diaries of not-so-famous clergymen and clergy-watchers in 16th-through 19th-century England.

Although he includes a few American voices, such as Mark Twain and Emily Dickinson, Chapman has focused almost exclusively on the English because, as he says in his introduction, the combination of clerical privilege and class resentment has given to the English church a character all its own. The American reader will make mental notes on authors excluded, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herbert Melville, C. S. Lewis, O'Connor, James Baldwin, Peter DeVries, John Updike and many others, and perhaps begin to outline a corresponding American anthology.

This is an easy book to read--in small portions--but a hard one to review because its vignettes do not add up to a single theme or a grand conclusion. Its title does accurately convey the polar extremes that characterize literary appraisals of the clergy and, as always, the "peevish and perverse"--to say nothing of the tragic and fallen, who are largely excluded from this genteel volume--are more fun to read about than the "godly and righteous." Lawrence Sterne's portrait of a preacher who says, "The excellency of this text is that it will suit any sermon--and of this sermon, that it will suit any text" unfortunately rings truer than the more inspirational portraits wrung from George Herbert or George Eliot. Harriet Beecher Stowe's picture of the liberal Dr. Cool Shadow's treatise on "Christianity a Dissolving View" made me want to pick up her novels again.

Still, we can draw a conclusion or two ourselves. The first has to do with the overwhelming banality surveyed in these portraits of clerical life. When a parishioner's major concern about the prayer book is deciding what material to use to have it bound, the Church of England is in big trouble. When the local parson's flatulent pomposity seems to be all there is to report about him, the clergy types among us might at least take a glance at the self-importance with which we pursue our callings.

Finally, why have so many authors, both amateur and professional, written so much about clergymen's--women are no-shows in this book--achievements and foibles? Might it be because the pastoral care and pronouncements they deliver, even when imperfectly and "peevishly" done, really matter?