

Note

MONTAGUE SUMMERS AND THE BITTON SCANDAL: A REAPPRAISAL*

The early life of the eccentric scholar Montague Summers (1880–1948) prompted a series of queries and replies in the pages of this journal in the decade or so following his death, including one by his first biographer, the Carmelite friar Brocard Sewell (1912–2000).¹ Summers's voluminous but varied writings—on Restoration drama, Gothic literature and early modern demonology—were both part and product of a carefully cultivated public persona, at once Catholic priest and occultist, that seemingly belonged to a bygone era.² Summers dressed, for most of his life, as an eighteenth-century abbé. At the same time, he also encouraged rumours of dark magic: he named his dog after the magician Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, who himself reputedly kept a canine demonic familiar.³ A 1930 *Who's Who* entry, meanwhile, listed 'investigations of occult phenomena' and 'talking to intelligent dogs' amongst his favourite recreations.⁴ Given his purported participation in black Masses, Summers's own published request in this journal for further details on 'prohibited Masses' may also be of interest.⁵

The principal question regarding Summers's formative years is whether he was ever ordained

as a Catholic priest, and if so, whether the ordination was valid—an issue which inevitably bears directly on the credibility of the public persona he adopted in later life. As other queries in this journal noted, there is a gap in his *Who's Who* entry between 1907 and 1917 when any ordination must have occurred.⁶ Summers's autobiography is structured geographically and thematically so as to obscure the virtual absence of any discussion of this troubled period in his life.⁷ The rediscovery of his personal archive in an attic in Manitoba, Canada at the start of the present century has not provided any conclusive documentary evidence of holy orders.⁸ While Sewell has endeavoured to bolster the case for Summers's ordination into almost a 'moral certainty', the evidence adduced below casts doubt on the biographer's scholarly bona fides.⁹

This note will not resolve the ordination conundrum but will throw important new light on a directly related query: the scandal that brought Summers's previous career in the Church of England to a premature end. Sewell's biography noted tersely that, while a curate in the Bristol suburb of Bitton (1908–1909), Summers 'was involved, with another clergyman, in a prosecution on a charge of pederasty' but was 'acquitted'. The accompanying footnote reports that 'elderly parishioners at Bitton still remember this case; but inquiry has failed to discover any record of the proceedings'.¹⁰ This is a tendentious and partial presentation of the evidence available to Sewell, who at the same time also separated its discussion from Summers's 1907 *Antinous*, a collection of poetry that celebrates young male beauty.¹¹

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¹ S.Y. E., 'Augustus Montague Summers', *N&Q*, ccii (1957), 547, and the reply: F.H.A.M., 'Augustus Montague Summers', *N&Q*, cciii (1958), 270; for Sewell's request: M.B. Sewell, 'Montague Summers', *N&Q*, cciii (1958), 270. The resulting 'memoir' was published under a pseudonym: J. Jerome, *Montague Summers: A Memoir* (London, 1965).

² For Summers's output, see T. d'Arch Smith, *Montague Summers: A Bibliography*, rev. ed. (Wellingborough, 1983).

³ B. Sewell, 'The Reverend Montague Summers', in *Montague Summers: A Bibliographical Portrait*, ed. F.S. Frank (Metuchen, NJ, 1988), 3–13, at 5.

⁴ 'Summers, Rev. (Alphonsus Joseph-Mary Augustus) Montague', *Who's Who*, lxxii (1930), col. 3015–16.

⁵ M. Summers, 'Prohibited Masses', *N&Q*, cxvi (July 3, 1920), 8.

⁶ S.Y. E., 'Augustus Montague Summers', *N&Q*, ccii (1957), 547.

⁷ M. Summers, *Galant Show: An Autobiography* (London, 1980).

⁸ For this rediscovery, see G. O'Sullivan, 'The Manuscripts of Montague Summers, Revisited', *Antigonish Review* clix (2009), 111–31, who, at 124, claims that a 'testimonial of ordination' had been sighted but then misplaced. These papers are now at Georgetown University (identifier: GTM-110501), Washington, DC.

⁹ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 20.

¹⁰ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 10.

¹¹ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 6–7; M. Summers, *Antinous, and other poems* (London, 1907). In addition to the opening poem, which celebrated the beauty of the Emperor Hadrian's teenage lover, 'To a Dead Acolyte' and 'Menar Es-Sena' (about an Arab boy) are also noteworthy.

A reconsideration is timely. Marion Gibson's *Witchcraft: A History in 13 Trials* recently presented Summers as a 'witch' and 'victim of a witch-hunt' who was unfairly prosecuted for his homosexuality. Gibson's search of the Gloucestershire Archives failed to uncover any sexual offences relating to Summers's time in Bitton, although she acknowledged that the (at the very least) self-confessed Catholic priest was friendly with 'men reported to desire boys as young as ten'.¹² These competing moral framings of Summers reshape his wider biography, encouraging us to cast him either as an abuser or a victim. That same opposition also problematically intersects with the long, homophobic history of conflating homosexuality with the sexual abuse of minors. This note presents newly uncovered evidence which enables a reappraisal of the Bitton scandal.

Augustus Montague Summers graduated with a fourth-class degree in theology from Trinity College, Oxford, followed by further studies at Lichfield Theological College.¹³ On 22 April 1908, he was nominated for the office of curate at St Mary's, Bitton, Gloucestershire, with a yearly stipend of 150 pounds.¹⁴ On 14 June, the Anglican Bishop of Bristol, George Forrest, admitted him into the Holy Order of Deacons, and on the same day licensed him to perform this position.¹⁵ Summers made the required public declaration of assent to the Church's Thirty-Nine Articles in Bitton on 21 June.¹⁶ In 1909, Summers makes his first appearance in *Crockford's Clerical Directory* and *The Clergy List*, both listing him as residing in Bitton.¹⁷

The vicar at Bitton, Canon Henry Nicholson Ellacombe (1822–1916) had taken over the living from his father as far back as 1850. Though by all accounts sprightly for his advanced age, he was in clear need of a curate.¹⁸ Both Sewell and Gibson

have cast the two men as incompatible spirits.¹⁹ Although principally remembered as an expert botanist, Ellacombe—like Summers—was also an avid Italophile, who last visited the peninsula in 1906, and the two clerics could have bonded over a love of that country which also left its imprint on the church of St Mary's itself.²⁰ Sewell's accusation that Ellacombe was 'by no means exemplary in the discharge of his duties' appears baseless, as is Gibson's suggestion that Ellacombe was the 'likely judge' of Summers's 'informal' witchcraft trial.²¹

The only surviving account of Summers during his time in Bitton was by an erstwhile friend, the poet John Redwood-Anderson (1883–1964). The poet recalled 'Monty' depicting Ellacombe as a slave to his stomach, who 'considered eating as the most important thing in life'.²² Summers also invited Redwood-Anderson to stay in the vicar's absence. Writing in 1958, the poet recalled that the vicarage was apparently haunted: at night, Summers had taken him into the garden to observe an unexplained candlelit 'tall and veiled figure' appearing in a top floor window. The next morning, Monty asked Redwood-Anderson to assist 'in the celebration of the Black Mass'.²³ Although the proposal clearly troubled the poet, nothing in his recollection justifies Sewell's subsequent assertion that Redwood-Anderson 'found Summers in a thoroughly neurotic state'.²⁴

Still, there are two indications that all was not well in Bitton. First, the diocesan archives contain no copies of either Summers's appointment or that of his immediate successor, Austin Pemberton Nelson (1876–?)—whose role will become evident below. (Summers's survives among his personal papers.) More significant are the surviving baptism and marriage records—they establish a timeline that points to the brevity of both men's tenure. Summers performed nine baptisms between 26

¹² M. Gibson, *Witchcraft: A History in 13 Trials* (London, 2023), 158, 165.

¹³ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 9.

¹⁴ Ordination papers, 1908, Bristol Archives, Bristol, EP/A/12/1/1908.

¹⁵ 'Assignment to the Church of Bitton', Montague Summers Papers [hereafter: GTM-110501], Georgetown University, Washington DC, Box 17, Folder 2.

¹⁶ 'Declaration of Assent', GTM-110501, Box 17, Folder 2.

¹⁷ *Crockford's Clerical Directory* xli (1909), 1394; *The Clergy List* (1909), 990.

¹⁸ A.W. Hill, ed., *Henry Nicholson Ellacombe: Hon. Canon of Bristol, Vicar of Bitton and Rural Dean, 1822–1916; A Memoir* (London, 1919).

¹⁹ Sewell calls Ellacombe 'eccentric and not notably edifying': Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 21; Gibson, *Witchcraft*, 159.

²⁰ The chancel floor, for instance, was inspired by the Basilica of St Anastasia in Verona, which Ellacombe had visited in 1900: <https://www.stmarysbitton.org.uk/heritage/a-church-of-two-millennia>.

²¹ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 10; Gibson, *Witchcraft*, 158–159.

²² John Redwood-Anderson, 'Recollections of Montague Summers: The Early Years (1904–1912?)', Local Studies Centre, Richmond upon Thames, L 920, 17.

²³ Redwood-Anderson, 'Recollections of Montague Summers', 20–21.

²⁴ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 10.

June 1908 and 19 February 1909 and officiated at three weddings between 28 October 1908 and 9 February 1909; thereafter his name disappears. Nelson performed four baptisms between 31 [sic] April and 2 May 1909.²⁵ As the register is kept in a uniform hand, the impossible April date for the first three entries suggests that the exact day had not been noted at the time. While no baptisms are recorded between Summers's departure and Nelson's arrival, Canon Ellacombe stepped in to conduct a wedding on 10 April, with Nelson officiating at a second two days later. Ellacombe then assumed responsibility for both baptisms and marriages until he nominated a new curate on 20 September 1909, with an increased stipend of £160. This time, the paperwork *does* survive in the diocesan archives.²⁶

A brief biographical sketch of Austin Pemberton Nelson may help illuminate his role in the subsequent scandal. Nelson was baptised in Henley-in-Arden, Warwickshire on 25 September 1876, as the youngest of the four boys.²⁷ His father William was a Cambridge graduate in Holy Orders but worked as a schoolmaster at Arden House, where the family also lived.²⁸ Upon his early death in 1879, Austin's mother Mary (née Pemberton) married Walter Bicknell in Holborn, London in 1881, with her new father-in-law, John Bicknell, officiating the wedding.²⁹ The 1881 Census lists Austin as 'stepson', aged four, with Bicknell in charge of

both Arden House and a sizable group of boarders.³⁰ Both Nelson and Summers studied at Clifton College, Bristol, but they enrolled 4 years apart (in 1890 and 1894, respectively).³¹ It is therefore possible but unlikely they met then. The pair may have crossed paths at Lichfield; Nelson was ordained a priest there in 1905, around the time of Summers's study at the Theological College.³²

Unlike Summers, Nelson had already held an active, if peripatetic ecclesiastical career, as a curate in Stoke-on-Trent (1902–1904), Longton (1905–1907), and Cheadle (1907–1908) in Staffordshire, with possible shorter positions elsewhere.³³ His last appointment in Cheadle ended in a 'nervous breakdown', with the *Stockport Advertiser* reporting that a physician had ordered the curate 'to seek rest and change of a cruise in the Mediterranean'.³⁴ While the *Advertiser* expressed hope for Nelson's swift return, he next surfaced back in the South West. At some point in 1909, he accepted a position in Wilton, near Taunton, where he performed two baptisms on 29 August.³⁵ The subsequent scandal prompted the archdeacon of Taunton to deny that Nelson had ever been licensed to that curacy.³⁶ His brief spell in Bitton earlier that year is mentioned by only a handful of newspapers following the story.³⁷

Nelson was the unnamed 'another clergyman' mentioned in Sewell's memoir. How much Summers's biographer had discovered is difficult

²⁵ Parish of St Mary, Bitton (Gloucestershire), Baptisms register, 1813–1921, Bristol Archives, 320–22; 'Bristol, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813–1922', *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/61685/images/47946_302022005560_4028-00347); Parish of St Mary, Bitton (Gloucestershire), Register of Marriages, 1897–1934, Bristol Archives, 147–52; 'Bristol, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754–1938', *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/sharing/58166405>).

²⁶ Register of nominations to stipendiary curacies, Feb. 1902–Sep. 1910, Bristol Archives, EP/A/13/13.

²⁷ Henley-in-Arden, Warwickshire, baptism register, entry for Austin Pemberton Nelson, 25 September 1876, image 467; Warwickshire, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813–1910, *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/2446/images/4290802_00467).

²⁸ William Nelson matriculated at Jesus College in 1856: *A Cambridge Alumni Database* (<https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/>); 'Clergymen Married', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 15 January 1870. His Cambridge matriculation entry notes that he was 'in Holy Orders but held no cure.'

²⁹ St Saviour, Highbury (Islington, London), parish register, marriages, entry for Walter Leonel Bicknell and Mary Nelson, 6 January 1881, page 6; London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754–1940, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>; accessed 23 March 2026).

³⁰ 1881 census of England and Wales, RG11/3104, fol. 98, p. 21, household of Walter Bricknell; The National Archives (TNA), Kew; '1881 England Census', *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7572/images/WARR_G11_3104_3107-0197).

³¹ *Clifton College Register, 1862 to 1947* (Bristol, 1948), 164, 192.

³² 'Lichfield Ordinations', *Birmingham Gazette and Express*, 20 March 1905.

³³ Stoke-on-Trent and Longton are reported in his last entry in *Crockford's Clerical Directory* xli (1909), 1048; he apparently served in Henly-in-Arden in between these two positions, judging by a published letter to the *Birmingham Gazette*, 29 September 1905.

³⁴ 'Health of the Parish Curate: Nervous Breakdown', *Stockport Advertiser*, 27 November 1908.

³⁵ Parish of Wilton (Somerset), *Register of Baptisms*, 1909, 126, Somerset Heritage Centre, D/P/wilt/2/1/8; 'Somerset, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813–1914', *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/60857/images/englb030d_d-p-wilt-2-1-8_m_00126).

³⁶ Letter to the Editor by W.H. Askwith (dated 29 October 1909), *Taunton Courier*, 3 November 1909.

³⁷ For example, 'Austin Nelson, aged 33, ...', *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1910.

to construct, as his personal archive appears to have been lost. Nevertheless, one of Sewell's correspondents, the publisher Sir Francis Meynell was 'told by someone who claimed to have been a parishioner of [Summers] that he had been in Holy Orders of the Church of England but had been defrocked as a result of an accusation of paederasty'.³⁸ In reply, Sewell denied the charge: 'Summers I think was never unfrocked in spite of his supposed misdemeanours [*sic*] in the C. of E.'³⁹ Sewell certainly had access to John Redwood-Anderson's memoir, which offers close to first-hand evidence of an 'unsavoury episode involving either the seduction, or the attempted seduction, of a choir-boy at the church in which Monty was a deacon.' Fearing imminent arrest by the police, Summers was in need of a continental hideaway. Redwood-Anderson knew 'of such a place, a little-known retreat in Belgium. The very next day he took ship for Antwerp'.⁴⁰ The then-current vicar of Bitton, Rev. Albert Jenkins, also made inquiries on Sewell's behalf which revealed 'a partiality for small boys'. The vicar learned from an elderly parishioner of 'a Police prosecution concerning Summers and another priest named Austin Nelson. I am not sure of the result, but my informant is certain that Montague was the leading offender, while Nelson suffered the most'.⁴¹

Nelson's involvement helps resolve much of the confusion surrounding this episode in Summers's life, since the surviving records of his prosecution direct the search beyond Bitton and Gloucestershire. Nelson was arrested in Bath, Somerset, at 10.35 am on 20 October 1909 for an act of gross indecency allegedly committed two days earlier.⁴² Crucially, Summers too can be linked to this city. While Reverend Jenkins was not 'certain of the place of prosecution', Redwood-Anderson clearly placed the incident there, linking it to an earlier curacy:

'he had learnt, through some rumour in Bath, that the police were after him'. The poet had placed this episode before Summers's time in Bitton (although he could not, in fact, remember the village's name). This chronology cannot be correct, however: the date and circumstances of Summers's ordination as deacon rule out an earlier curacy. At the outset of his memoir, Redwood-Anderson acknowledged that 'there is a good deal that I may have forgotten, especially in the matter of dates of the exact order of events' and he appears to have muddled their sequence here.⁴³ There are, however, also indications that Summers had begun spending time in Bath while still a curate in nearby Bitton. His 1910 entry in *Crockford's Clerical Directory* lists him as resident at 3 Queen Square, Bath, a lodging house, but he may already have been staying there intermittently from September 1908 onwards when a local newspaper first announced his arrival.⁴⁴

While Summers appears to have escaped punishment altogether, Austin Nelson's prosecution can be reconstructed in considerable detail.⁴⁵ His middle name was consistently omitted from the reporting and the surviving trial records—in fact, Pemberton was later crossed out on the paperwork recording Nelson's subsequent defrocking, perhaps out of respect to his mother's family.⁴⁶ On 21 October, the 'Clerk in Holy Orders' was remanded into custody by the Bath police court on the charge of 'being a male person unlawfully commit [ting] an act of gross indecency with another male person'.⁴⁷ The allegations were sensitive enough for the court to decide to hear them in camera, much to the outrage of the local press.⁴⁸ The charge was nevertheless picked up by newspapers across the country.⁴⁹

⁴³ Redwood-Anderson, 'Recollections of Montague Summers', 16, 1.

⁴⁴ *Crockford's Clerical Directory* xlii (1910), 1411; the address matches that given in 'Latest Arrivals in Bath', *The Bath Chronicle*, 3 September 1908. Jenkins saw 'photographs' of Summers 'in fancy dress, arrayed for a Ball at Bath.'

⁴⁵ 'Serious Charge against a Clergyman: Bail Refused', *Somerset Guardian*, 22 October 1909.

⁴⁶ Taunton, Somerset Archives, D/D/bd/18.

⁴⁷ Bath Record Office, 0136/2/5/38, Petty Sessions Register of Summons, Bath, 221–22. Bail was initially refused; Nelson was on remand from 26 October: *ibid.*, 236.

⁴⁸ 'Though no one will be inclined ...', *The Bath Chronicle*, 4 November 1909.

⁴⁹ For example, 'The Rev. Austin Nelson ...', *North Mail, Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 3 November 1909; 'The Rev. Austin Nelson ...', *The Cornishman*, 11 November 1909.

³⁸ Sir Francis Meynell to Fr Brocard Sewell, 5 April 1957. Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 9813/C1/108.

³⁹ Fr Brocard Sewell to Sir Francis Meynell, 15 April 1957. Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 9813/C1/108.

⁴⁰ Redwood-Anderson, 'Recollections of Montague Summers', 16.

⁴¹ Albert Jenkins to Patrick Middleton, 29 November 1957. Richmond upon Thames, Local Studies Centre, L.920. Middleton, an Oxford undergraduate, had been hired by Sewell to make inquiries. After the two fell out over remuneration, Middleton persisted in his investigation. Jenkins's letter reveals he had already received a request from information from 'a Roman Catholic', presumably Sewell.

⁴² 'Serious Charge against a Clergyman: Bail Refused', *Somerset Guardian*, 22 October 1909.

Bail was not applied for. Nelson remained in custody until his trial at the Somerset Assizes in Taunton on 20 January 1910, when he pleaded guilty on advice of counsel.⁵⁰ This plea, no doubt, curtailed public discussion of the case to some extent—the presiding judge certainly considered ‘the prisoner [was] well advised to plead guilty’.⁵¹ While the early twentieth-century press was notably reticent in reporting sexual offences, some details were nonetheless picked up: one local newspaper even reported the identity of the other ‘male person’ listed on the indictment (to be discussed below).⁵² Reporting on a local curate’s ‘downfall’ and ‘shocking depravity’, the *Taunton Courier* stated that in June 1909 the prisoner ‘got to know a boy at Bath, and on October 18th committed the offence with which he was charged’.⁵³

The verdict was again reported nationally.⁵⁴ Nelson’s defence lawyer attributed the crime to his earlier ‘nervous breakdown’—‘due to the condition of mind, and not to natural tendency’—and accepted the need of ‘restraint’ in the hope of avoiding hard labour.⁵⁵ Encouraging Nelson to face his punishment ‘like a man’, the judge nevertheless imposed a sentence of eighteen months hard labour.⁵⁶ The Bishop of Bath and Wells, George Kennion, registered Nelson’s automatic disqualification from the priesthood early February 1910.⁵⁷ The subsequent Good Friday the bishop took the unusual step of visiting HMP Shepton Mallet, where Nelson was a prisoner, to preach the afternoon service. Kennion found the prisoners’ demeanour ‘reverent’ and their singing ‘hearty’.⁵⁸ Whether he also interviewed Nelson privately

cannot, of course, be proven but seems likely. The 1911 census shows Nelson working in the prison’s brass foundry.⁵⁹ He was released on 19 April and completely vanishes from the record after that.⁶⁰

The identity and age of the ‘another male person’ named on the indictment, Septimus Bailey, are also relevant and revealing. Septimus was born—as his name suggests—as the seventh son to Samuel and Hannah Bailey on 11 October 1893. His year of birth would shift over an eventful life which saw him migrate, in the footsteps of several older brothers, to the USA weeks before the outbreak of the First World War. His enlistment papers for the US Army in 1917 give his year of birth as 1891; the military veteran headstone, erected after his death in 1981, lists 1896.⁶¹ Given that the month and day remain constant, it may well be that Septimus himself was never sure as to his age. His baptism on 3 November 1893, however, leaves little doubt in this regard.⁶² At the time of the incident in October 1909, Bailey would therefore have just turned 16, when Nelson was 33 years old. Bailey does not appear to have been charged. His age and presentation as a ‘boy’ victim in the local press are legally significant. Although the infamous 1885 Labouchère Amendment made no distinction according to age or consent, treating Bailey as a non-consenting partner meant that his evidence did not require corroboration.⁶³

⁵⁰ The indictment and verdict survive but these shed no meaningful new light on the trial or the offence committed: Kew, National Archives, Assizes 25/75/6, Assizes 28/81.

⁵¹ ‘Charge against a Clergyman: Sentence at Somerset Assize’, *Somerset Guardian*, 21 January 1910.

⁵² ‘Charge against a Clergyman: Sentence at Somerset Assize’, *Somerset Guardian*, 21 January 1910.

⁵³ ‘Taunton Curate’s Downfall: Shocking Depravity’, *Taunton Courier*, 26 January 1910.

⁵⁴ For example, ‘Sentence on a Clergyman’, *The Times*, 21 January 1910.

⁵⁵ ‘Serious Charge against a Clergy Man’, *Central Somerset Gazette*, 28 January 1910.

⁵⁶ ‘Charge against a Clergyman: Sentence at Somerset Assize’, *Somerset Guardian*, 21 January 1910.

⁵⁷ Bishop’s Register of George Wyndham Kennion, South West Heritage Trust, Taunton, D/D/breg/42, 186. The entry is undated.

⁵⁸ ‘Visitors’ minute book, 1824–1927’, Shepton Mallet Gaol, South West Heritage Trust, Taunton, Q/AGS/7/1, unpaginated entry dated 25 March 1910.

⁵⁹ 1911 census of England and Wales, RG14/14501, H.M. Prison, Cornhill, Shepton Mallet, Somerset, schedule 13, The National Archives (TNA), Kew; accessed via *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/sharing/57736856>).

⁶⁰ ‘Gaol register, 4 Apr 1908–29 Apr 1911’, Shepton Mallet gaol records, South West Heritage Trust, Taunton, A/BRI/2/5, fols. 157v–158r.

⁶¹ USA, World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918, Septimus Bailey, Douglas County, Nebraska; Records of the Selective Service System, Record Group 163, National Archives and Records Administration; accessed via *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/6482/images/NE-1711756-5114>); USA, Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1861–1985, Septimus Bailey, Private, US Army, service no. 21961944, died 1981, Garner Township Cemetery, Colorado Bluffs, Iowa; Applications for Headstones and Markers, 1970–1985, Record Group 15, National Archives at St. Louis; accessed via *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2375/images/2375_13_01102-02424).

⁶² Twerton, Somerset, Church of England parish register, baptism of Septimus Bailey, 3 November 1893; South West Heritage Trust, Taunton, D/P/twn/2/1/10; accessed via *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/60857/image/s/42886_1831109388_0634-00027).

⁶³ H.G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century* (London, 2003), 28–29.

The evidence for Summers's involvement in the events leading to Nelson's indictment is circumstantial but strong. John Redwood-Anderson's recollections clearly link Summers to an incident in Bath, and, even if second-hand, the testimony of the Bitton parishioners accords with the surviving documentation. Summers also appears to be the only connection between Nelson and Bath. Perhaps Nelson became a convenient scapegoat; the stepson of a deceased schoolmaster certainly lacked the influence and resources of the Summers family.⁶⁴ Summers's sudden disappearance from public view and from the South West also suggests his involvement. On 5 June 1910, Summers was confirmed in the Catholic Church in Walworth, Greater London. His entry into the Church provided him with an additional set of first names (Alphonsus Joseph-Mary Augustus Montague).⁶⁵ The 1911 Census places him in a London boarding house under the name of 'Montague Joseph Summers' and records the first known instance of Summers identifying himself as a 'Roman Catholic Cleric'.⁶⁶ From that year onward (until ca. 1926), he also taught at a succession of London schools, where his pupils knew him as Michael (or 'old Mick') Summers.⁶⁷ The move to London and the change of name suggest deliberate distancing and evasion. Equally striking is that, when he re-emerged in the public sphere in 1914–1915 with the first in a series of editions of Restoration texts, Summers presented himself not as a member of the clergy but as a man of letters, before reverting to his clerical persona.⁶⁸ More revealing than his otherwise persistent pursuit—or pretence—of religious orders is their temporary erasure.

What cannot be established, however, is equally important. The precise nature of the 'shocking

depravity' alluded to in press reports of Nelson's trial remains unclear, and we cannot conclusively show that it included the performance of a Black Mass. The request to Redwood-Anderson for assistance in such a rite can only be suggestive, even when set alongside firmer evidence for Summers's participation in similar acts in the later 1910s.⁶⁹ We should, however, note that Septimus Bailey, as a seventh son, could have held a particular appeal for an occultist such as Summers, given the common folkloric belief that such individuals possessed special magical or healing powers.⁷⁰ Moving beyond the archival record, Sewell reported an 'authoritative tradition' among Bristol's older Catholic clergy. Summers's ordination to the Catholic priesthood in England may have been blocked by the Bishop of Clifton, William Lee, following a chance encounter with an Anglican counterpart. (Summers may subsequently have obtained irregular ordination abroad.)⁷¹ Bishop Kennion's visit to HMP Shepton Mallet may lend this 'tradition' some further credibility.

The present reappraisal has shown that the scandal was far from imaginary. While questions remain, key details—not least its location—can now be corrected. Other aspects of Summers's early life, including his ordination to the priesthood, still await definitive answers that would further clarify the construction of his striking public persona as both priest and occultist. While the episode certainly bears on broader histories of clerical scandal and sexuality, it offers an altogether different lesson as well: this reassessment reveals how fragmented records, when filtered through frameworks of persecution, can be made to support morality tales that the evidence itself cannot bear.

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⁶⁴ Augustus William Summers was a director of the Bristol Water Works Company.

⁶⁵ Walworth, English Martyrs (Surrey), *Confirmation Register*, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark, 5 June 1910, entry for Augustus Montague Summers; 'Roman Catholic Parish Congregational Records', *Findmypast.co.uk* (<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=PRS%2FROMCATH%2FCON%2FSOUTHWARK%2FI%2F0115583>).

⁶⁶ 1911 Census of England and Wales, RG14/79, schedule 162, 61 Oxford Terrace, Hyde Park, London; The National Archives (TNA); accessed via *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2352/images/rg14_00079_0327_03).

⁶⁷ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 24–25.

⁶⁸ See e.g., 'The First Woman Novelist: Aphra Behn', *Central Somerset Gazette*, 20 August 1915; 'Aphra Behn', *The Observer*, 22 August 1915.

⁶⁹ This event, in late 1918, involved the young actor Anatole James, who provided Timothy d'Arch Smith with a detailed account: T. d'Arch Smith, 'Montague Summers', in *The Books of the Beast* (Oxford, 2020), 72–73.

⁷⁰ S. Young, 'What's Up Doc? Seventh Sons in Victorian and Edwardian Lancashire', *Folklore* 130, no. 4 (2019), 394–414.

⁷¹ Jerome, *Montague Summers*, 14.

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Note