

BISHOP JOHN CUTHBERT HEDLEY A CENTURY ON

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A neglected tomb and its forgotten occupant

Three years ago, the news website of the BBC posted a photograph of a magnificent and imposing tomb in Cathays cemetery in Cardiff which had recently been restored. It was described as a monument to a once notable, but now forgotten bishop who had championed the cause of Catholic Education, the Benedictine John Cuthbert Hedley, Bishop of Newport and Menevia for almost thirty-five years. The news-story reported that there was no-one left to take care of the grave, that there was grass growing through cracks in the masonry, and that the Latin inscription had become illegible. However, the friends of the cemetery and the Archdiocese of Cardiff stepped in, and on 31 January 2012 the tomb was re-dedicated by Archbishop George Stack.

This year marks the centenary of the death of Bishop Hedley, and both this anniversary, and the recent restoration of the bishop's tomb provide an impetus for rehabilitating an important figure in the history not only of the English Benedictine Congregation, to which he belonged, but of the Catholic Church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Having twice been tipped for the see of Westminster, and being credited as "the leading intellectual among the Catholic bishops at the turn of the century, and the first of them to take the modern world seriously," it is surely time to re-evaluate the life and work of this almost forgotten monk-bishop.

Hedley is remarkable, above all for his longevity. He was born at the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria, and died as the Great War was entering its second year. At his death he was the oldest and the second longest-serving bishop on the national hierarchy. He had overseen the expansion of the diocese from a population of 40,000 Catholics and 47 churches in 1881, to a population of 80,000 Catholics and 80 churches in 1915. He had interacted with some of the most prominent intellectuals of his day and had raised his head above the parapet to write articles on the great issues of the day such as the relationship between science and religion, the authority of scripture and Catholic

education and was editor for six years of an influential national journal, *The Dublin Review*. Hedley was also a prolific author of seven books and over 25 articles.¹ He was in regular demand over forty years as a retreat-giver and preacher. He was remembered as a powerful speaker but not, apparently, an orator and the heavy intellectual content of his sermons and retreat conferences may have been earned him the sobriquet of “Deadly Hedley.”

Hedley is also of interest because he straddled two worlds within contemporary English Catholicism: the clerical authoritarianism of Cardinal Manning and the Ultramontanes, and the open engagement with the problems of secular thought, of John Henry Newman. Hedley also lived to see the modernist crisis and its effects. He appreciated the struggle of Newman and others to come to terms with the challenge of the modern world.

Hedley’s life also provides a useful lens through which to study the fortunes of the English Benedictine Congregation in the late nineteenth century at an important stage in its development. Hedley cut an influential figure in what became known as the “Constitutional crisis,” a controversy about the nature of the English Benedictine Congregation fought between those who wished to reform the Congregation by abolishing the two missionary provinces of Canterbury and York and establish autonomous monasteries, and those who wished to preserve the status quo.² Hedley did not favour Congregational Constitutional change, principally on practical grounds – he did not think it expedient for the parishes, which had their own superiors and organisation in the form of Provincials in the north and south, to be subordinate to the monasteries. He considered that the monasteries and the parishes had different aims and therefore should be kept apart. Hedley saw the tensions between the monastic life and the parochial life but did not believe that they were irreconcilable. He combined the two in his own person and succeeded in developing a spirituality that was both monastic and yet adaptable to the needs of Benedictines working on parishes. Having been a Professor at Belmont, the common novitiate and house of studies for the English Benedictines, he was well known in the Congregation and through his guidance and encouragement the houses of the Congregation entered a new world with broader horizons.

¹ A list of Hedley’s articles is helpfully provided in J. Anselm Wilson, *The Life of Bishop Hedley*, Burns & Oates, London 1930, 220-221.

² See Augustine Clark, “The Return to the Monasteries,” in Daniel Rees (ed.), *Monks of England*, SPCK, London 1997, 213-234.

Biographies, studies and sources for a new biography of Hedley

To date, the only substantial biography to have been published about Hedley is the rather hagiographical account authored by his former secretary, Dom Anselm Wilson, which was published in 1930. The late Dom Bernard Green of Ampleforth summarised Hedley's life and achievements in a paper read to this Symposium in September 1987 that was later published in *The Ampleforth Journal*. In 2004 an article about Hedley appeared in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* penned by yours truly. Interestingly, Hedley was the subject of a Boston College M.A thesis, entitled "Hidden in the Quiver of God: Bishop John Cuthbert Hedley on Priestly Formation for Preaching," written by Jeremy Gilbeau in 2002.³

It is surely time for a new biography, especially now that new archival material has been discovered, both here in England and in the archives in Rome of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which were opened for the first time to researchers by Saint John Paul II in 1998. A group of scholars who were among the first to gain access to these archives published a book of their findings in 2006 in a book entitled *Negotiating Darwin*, which is a collection of six case studies of late-nineteenth century Catholic thinkers who were suspect of trying in varying degrees to incorporate evolutionary thinking into Catholic doctrine in the generation after Darwin's seminal work appeared.⁴ One of these studies is devoted to Bishop Hedley.

Meanwhile the vast collection of Hedley correspondence in the Ampleforth archives is in the process of being digitised thanks to the sterling efforts of the archivist, Dom Anselm Cramer, and this collection will I'm sure will be a treasure-trove for Hedley researchers. I have yet to locate Hedley material in the archives of the Archdiocese of Cardiff but back in 2000 I visited the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth and was given a list of over 100 box files of Hedley letters and documents that were then unlisted but in storage there. Some years ago Abbot Geoffrey Scott discovered a cache of Hedley letters among the papers of Edmundian Austin O'Neill

³ J. Anselm Wilson, *The Life of Bishop Hedley*, Burns & Oates, London 1930; Bernard Green OSB, 'Bishop Cuthbert Hedley 1837-1915,' *The Ampleforth Journal*, XCIII Part I (Spring 1988), 21-28; Alban Hood, 'Hedley, John Cuthbert (1837-1915)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/48462>, accessed 15 April 2015]

⁴ Mariano Artigas, Thomas E. Glick and Rafael A. Martinez, *Negotiating Darwin: The Vatican confronts Evolution, 1877-1902*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2006; Jeremy Gilbeau, 'Hidden in the Quiver of God: Bishop John Cuthbert Hedley on Priestly Formation for Preaching,' unpublished M.A. thesis, Boston College MA, 2002.

(1841-1911), President of the English Benedictines and Bishop of Port Louis, Mauritius from 1896 until 1909. The correspondence spans over twenty years, from 1888 until 1911 and contains Hedley's comments on a whole range of contemporary issues in which he was involved.

Focus of this paper

The purpose of this paper is not to re-tell Hedley's story, but to highlight one particular issue which exercised the bishop's mind over a period of thirty years. There is insufficient time this morning to summaries the main features of Hedley's career but a list of dates may provide a basic outline:

1837 – 15 April - Birth of Hedley in Morpeth;

1854 - Clothed at Ampleforth;

1862 - 19 October -Ordained priest, and shortly afterwards sent to Belmont as a Professor at the Congregational novitiate and house of studies;

1873 - Consecrated as auxiliary bishop to Bishop Thomas Joseph Brown of Newport and Menevia;

1878-1884 – Editor of *The Dublin Review*

1881 - Appointed Bishop of Newport and Menevia

1915 - 11 November – Dies in Cardiff.

Hedley and Evolution

One subject that captured Hedley's interest over three decades, was that of evolution. The English Naturalist, Charles Darwin had published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, overcoming scientific rejection of earlier concepts of transmutation of species, and by the 1870s the scientific community and much of the general public had accepted evolution as a fact, but the Catholic Church was slow to give any official pronouncement on the subject. It was in fact not until 1950, until the publication of the encyclical *Humani generis*, that Pope Pius XII confirmed that there is no intrinsic conflict between Christianity and the theory of evolution, provided that Christians believe that the individual soul is a direct creation by God and not the product of purely material forces.

No mention of evolution was made in the pronouncements of the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) but in its third session, on 24 April 1870 in its Dogmatic

Constitution on the Catholic Church, in chapter four, in a section entitled "Faith and Reason," the Council declared:

9. ...all faithful Christians are forbidden to defend as the legitimate conclusions of science those opinions which are known to be contrary to the doctrine of faith, particularly if they have been condemned by the Church; and furthermore they are absolutely bound to hold them to be errors which wear the deceptive appearance of truth.⁵

By the 1870s, the popular Catholic perception was that it was possible that the gap between Catholic faith and evolution might be leaped, but that the gulf between Catholicism and Darwinism was more difficult to bridge due to “pressures that were emotional and theological rather than intellectual and scientific.” Some Catholics believed that it was possible to view evolution as a purely scientific subject, but that “...Darwinism...had acquired too many connotations to be viewed in that narrow light,” for “Darwinism, as opposed to evolution, conjured up atheistic philosophies, threats to dogma and heretical notions about the creation of man”. Many Catholics held the opinion that Darwinism was the underlying cause of society’s spiritual decay, and in the words of John Morrison “Darwinism conjured up the same image as the Devil in the eyes of most Catholics.”⁶

Hedley entered the debate on evolution at the end of the First Vatican Council, in an article for the *Dublin Review* entitled ‘Evolution and Faith,’ in July 1871, an article which was concerned with the truth or otherwise of the theories expounded twelve years earlier by Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species*, but with the question of how far his evolutionary theories were compatible with Catholic faith. Hedley argued that “it is not contrary to Faith to suppose that all living things, up to man exclusively, were evolved by natural law out of minute life-germs primarily created, or even out of inorganic matter,” but that “it is heretical to deny the separate and special creation of the human soul” and that “to question the immediate formation by God of the bodies of Adam and Eve – the former out of inorganic matter, the latter out of the rib of Adam – is...proximate to heresy”.⁷

Hedley and Mivart

⁵ <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum20.htm#Chapter 4>. On faith and reason, [accessed 10 April 2015].

⁶ John L Morrison, ‘William Seton: A Catholic Darwinist,’ *The Review of Politics*, 21.3 (1959), 572, 575, 577.

⁷ *Ibid*, xxii.

In the article Hedley refers to the recently-published book entitled *The Genesis of Species* by the English Catholic biologist St George Jackson Mivart (1827-1900) which Hedley had reviewed in the previous issue of *The Dublin Review*. Mivart's work had challenged Darwin's theory of natural selection and Hedley praised the book for its "solid learning" and its author for "defending Revelation whilst doing justice to science at the same time." Mivart, in the words of Hedley, demonstrated that "with creation, absolutely considered, physical science has nothing to do, and with regard to the creation of the human soul, "Physical science must be silent, and Reason and Revelation allowed to speak." ⁸

However, sixteen years later, in 1887, Hedley published a tough critique of two articles Mivart had written in the journal *Nineteenth Century* in which Mivart had argued that the controversy surrounding Galileo demonstrated that God had assigned the clarification of scientific matters, whether mentioned in scripture or not, to scientists and not to theologians or the Roman authorities. Hedley reproached Mivart for views which, taken literally, would lead to heresy and focussed on the lessons that the Church could take from the case of Galileo and outlined what attitude Catholics should adopt when considering these scientific points that are mentioned in the Bible.⁹ Mivart's position on the evolutionary origin of the human body met with opposition, but did not lead to any official condemnation by any Church authority. After some of Mivart's articles were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books by Rome in 1893 and after him being prohibited by his bishop, Cardinal Herbert Vaughan of Westminster from receiving the sacraments in 1900, many took it for granted that Mivart had been disciplined for his views on evolution, whereas in fact the issue was his suggestion that hell is compatible with some kind of happiness, an issue which had nothing to do with science or with evolution. It was 1898 before Hedley returned to the debate concerning evolution, by which time there had been a few developments which altered the contours of the debate.

Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903)

Pope Leo XIII who was elected to the papacy in 1878, was known initially to advocate a more open approach to science than that of his predecessors, but also to be frustrated by opposition to this within the Vatican and leading church circles. In a letter of February 1882, Leo referred to his first encyclical, *Aeterni Patris* of 1879, which had

⁸ *The Dublin Review*, April 1871, 482.

⁹ John Cuthbert Hedley, 'Dr Mivart on Faith and Science,' *The Dublin Review* (October 1887), 401-19.

advocated a return to the scholastic thinkers of the Middle Ages, most especially the Angelic Doctor St. Thomas Aquinas, and the related philosophical system of Thomism. Pope Leo remarked that: “a number of eminent minds have made beautiful and fruitful discoveries. It becomes us the less to ignore them...he who defends the Faith must devote himself to the study of the natural sciences more than in the past.”¹⁰

However, a decade later, In November 1893 Leo issued his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, "On the Study of Holy Scripture". It was intended to address the issues arising from both biblical criticism and new scientific theories, and their relation with Scripture. Nothing specific concerning evolution was said in the encyclical, and initially both those in favour and against evolution found things to encourage them in the text; however a more conservative interpretation came to be dominant, and probably because of this Leo stressed the unstable and changing nature of scientific theory, and criticised the "thirst for novelty and the unrestrained freedom of thought" of the age, but accepted that the apparent literal sense of the Bible might not always be correct. In biblical interpretation, Catholic scholars should not "depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it untenable or necessity requires". Leo stressed that both theologians and scientists should confine themselves to their own disciplines as much as possible.¹¹

Hedley and Zahm

Five years after the publication of *Providentissimus Deus*, in 1898, Hedley penned an article in *The Dublin Review* entitled “Physical Science and Faith,” in which he crossed swords with another prominent Catholic scientist, this time the American, John Augustine Zahm (1851-1921), a priest of the Holy Cross order and Professor of Physics and Chemistry at the University of Notre Dame.¹² In 1896 Zahm had published a book, *Evolution and Dogma*, in which he argued the compatibility of evolutionism and Catholic doctrine. What was problematical with Zahm’s work was his claim that “theistic evolution” was a Catholic idea developed and taught by the most eminent saints and doctors of the Church. Zahm declared that

There is nothing in Evolution, properly understood, which is antagonistic either to revelation or Dogma: on the contrary, far from being opposed to faith,

¹⁰ Quoted in Morrison, *ibid.*, 579.

¹¹ Barry Brundell, “Catholic Church Politics and Evolution Theory, 1894-1902,” *British Journal for the History of Science* (2001), 83-84.

¹² John Cuthbert Hedley, ‘Physical Science and Faith,’ *The Dublin Review*, 123 (October 1898), 241-61.

evolution, as taught by St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas , is the most reasonable view, and the one most in harmony with the explicit deliberations of the Genesis narrative of creation¹³

Although he had not claimed that St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas had conceptualised an evolutionary theory in the modern sense, Zahm held that their principles were compatible with his theory and provide support for it. In an era of philosophical and theological crisis that witnessed a renaissance of St Thomas Aquinas expressly promoted by Pope Leo XIII, it was inevitable that there would be an adverse reaction to Zahm's claims from those in Rome who supported Neo-Thomism and had nothing good to say about evolution, which was frequently used as a weapon in favour of materialism and agnosticism. They must have been affronted by seeing their great hero, St Thomas being used to support a theory they deemed contrary to Catholic doctrine, and unsurprisingly, the book was brought to the attention of the Holy Office in Rome following its denunciation by Vatican consultor Archbishop Otto Zardetti. The appearance of the French and Italian editions of *Evolution and Dogma* provoked the Congregation of the Index in 1898 to issue an injunction against further publication and distribution, although apparently this was never enforced. Zahm was a faithful Catholic, and when friends in Rome warned him that the book was about to be placed on the Index, he immediately wrote to the publisher of the Italian edition to slow its distribution. Convinced that the truth for which he had worked would in due time be manifest, he had made his point and was content to follow the orders of the church he loved and served. The decree of condemnation was not published, and Zahm never issued a retraction.

Hedley's review of Zahm's work appeared in the midst of the events just described. Although he praised Zahm's book, *Evolution and Dogma*, and cautiously contended that it was possible to square evolution with the existence of a creating God, Hedley also expressed reservations about other aspects of Zahm's theory in regard to biblical interpretation:

On the subject of scripture, it can hardly be said that Dr Zahm, however useful his studies may be to the ordinary Catholic, really gets to the heart of certain questions which at present are awaiting definite statement. It is not enough...to assert in general terms [as does Dr Zahm] that 'revealed truth and dogma are compatible with the most perfect intellectual freedom.

¹³ John A. Zahm, *Evolution and Dogma*, John Murphy & Co, Baltimore 1897, 300.

Hedley asserted “it would be not only a mistake, but also an offence against religious faith, not to start with a firm hold of what is taught by the Church.”¹⁴

Furthermore, according to Hedley: “there are many questions, especially those relating to the primeval man, to the constitution of material things, in which it would be not only a mistake, but also an offence against religious faith, not to start with a firm hold of what is taught by the Church, indirectly and implicitly, in theological dogma.”

In his article, Hedley had contended that the majority of educated Catholics had come to accept evolution. However, in contrast, a consistently and aggressively anti-evolution position was taken by the influential Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which, though unofficial, was generally believed to have accurate information about the views and actions of the Vatican authorities. The opening in 1998 of the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith revealed that on many crucial points this belief was mistaken, and the journal's accounts of specific cases, often the only ones made public, were not accurate. The original documents show the Vatican's attitude was much less fixed than appeared to be the case at the time.

Reaction to Hedley

The news of Hedley's article was picked up by the Jesuit editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Salvatore Brandi who denounced Hedley for supporting and propagating the views of Zahm. Brandi later admitted that he had not read Hedley's article, but had trusted blindly in an article in *The Tablet* which had published a favourable comment on the bishop's article, without mentioning the bishop's doubts and reservations about some of the views expounded by Zahm. Hedley responded immediately, in a letter to *The Tablet* which Brandi and others later presented as evidence that Hedley had been censured by the Holy See, which in fact he had not. The truth of the matter was that at no point during the Nineteenth century did the Holy See make any public condemnation of the theory of evolution, nor was Hedley ever censured for his article.

Recent archival discoveries (1)

In their book, *Negotiating Darwin*, the authors explain that in principle it was within the jurisdiction of the Holy Office to examine and prohibit a book, with the decision being communicated to the Office of the Index for promulgation. In practice, however, it

¹⁴ Hedley, 'Physical Science and Faith,' 258-9.

was the Congregation of the Index that handled both the examination of and the judgment about the books that had been denounced to it by church authorities. The authors examine six cases featuring Catholic thinkers who were suspect of trying in varying degrees to incorporate evolutionary thinking into Catholic doctrine in the generation after Darwin's seminal work appeared. One of the cases they examine is that of Hedley's review of Zahm's book. The authors observe that in the case of some, evolution was a relatively unimportant aspect of their thinking; with others it was central to their theological project. They conclude that Rome never formulated an explicit condemnation of evolution as a doctrine and seems to have taken a rather pragmatic approach to the issue. The debates internal to the Congregation of the Index reflect a general concern for rejecting evolution when applied to the human body, but the only condemnation ever issued was internal, and the decree was never published.

In 1899, in response to the article written by Brandi in *La Civiltà*, Hedley wrote a letter to *The Tablet* questioning the authority of Brandi's article and questioning its premise that the Holy See had in fact spoken definitively on the subject of evolution, a letter which has been interpreted as Hedley's retraction of his article in *The Dublin Review*. Writing afterwards to his friend, the Anglican clergyman, the Reverend Spencer Jones, Hedley declared that "no article or portion of any article of mine has ever been censured by the Holy See".¹⁵ *La Civiltà* quickly responded with a three-page comment entitled "Evolution and Dogma. The Erroneous Information of an Englishman,"¹⁶ an article which, although it cited no concrete action of the Holy See in the case of Zahm and Hedley, was to be regarded as official data for subsequent historians and scholars, and effectively erroneously implied that Hedley had been censured by the Vatican. This myth was propagated by a number of authors of theological commentaries as late as 1996, when the theologian Juan Luis Ruiz de la Peña, stated that

In February 1895, the [French Dominican theologian] Dalmace Leroy was required by the Holy See to correct his stance [on evolution]. The identical requirement was asked of Dr Zahm four years later, just as in the case of two bishops, the Italian Bonomelli, and the American Hedley.¹⁷

¹⁵ Cited in Spencer Jones, *England and the Holy See: An Essay towards Reunion*, Longmans, London 1902, 235-6.

¹⁶ Salvatore M. Brandi, 'Evoluzione e Dogma. Erronee informazioni di un inglese,' *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 18th ser. 6 (1902) 75-77.

¹⁷ Juan Luis Ruiz de la Peña, *Imagen de Dios. Antropología teológica fundamental*, 3rd edition, Sal Terrae, Santander 1996, 251

However, examination of the archives of the Holy Office has revealed that it had not ordered Leroy or Zahm to do anything, and in the case of Bonomelli and Hedley (who of course was English and not American) there was no official intervention at all by the Holy See.¹⁸ A shadow of suspicion had been cast quite unjustly on Zahm and on Hedley which has only recently been dispelled.

Recent archival discoveries (2)

The recently discovered cache of Hedley letters in the Douai Abbey archives sheds more light on the Zahm episode and provides further evidence that the bishop, far from supporting the views of the American priest, actually regarded him with suspicion. Writing in March 1901 to the Edmundian bishop, Peter Austin O'Neill, Hedley reported that he had recently received a visit from Zahm who had invited him to give some lectures in the United States. Hedley remarked:

I do not know if I should go out under Dr Zahm's auspices. It is not only that he has been condemned by the Holy Office (although the condemnation has not been publicised), but I do not think very highly of his taste.¹⁹

Other English Benedictines on Hedley

Some years after Hedley's death, Abbot Cuthbert Butler praised his articles as "a model of the manner and temper in which theologians should handle problems in the region of Catholic Faith raised by theories of scientists". Butler observed that in Hedley's writings there is

no carping at scientists and their methods; no impatient endeavours to prove them wrong; indeed no discussion of the scientific side of the case at all: but a sober, and learned sifting of the bearings of the theory as stated in Catholic faith or theology.²⁰

Wilfrid Ward on Hedley

Others who knew Hedley outside the English Benedictine Congregation were unwilling to believe the myths about Hedley's so-called retraction propagated by *La*

¹⁸ Artigas, Glick & Martinez, *Negotiating Darwin*, 25-6.

¹⁹ Douai Abbey Archives, VIII A O'Neill₂, Hedley to O'Neill, Llanishen, Cardiff, 25 March 1901.

²⁰ *Evolution and Faith with other essays by Bishop Hedley*, edited by a monk of Ampleforth with an introduction by Dom Cuthbert Butler, Monk of Downside, Sheed & Ward, London, 1931, xiv.

Civiltà and after his death provided a more accurate and rounded assessment of his character. They testified to his strength of character, his mental openness, and above all, the balance of his judgements. In his tribute to his predecessor as editor of *The Dublin Review*, Wilfrid Ward (1856-1916) observed that “Bishop Hedley is keenly alive to modern needs...his wide reading and his constant brooding thought” brought “great unity and great mellowness of intellect” to his writing, “a width which comes not only from sympathy with those whose standpoint is far removed from his own, but from knowledge of the immense variety of thought to be found in the great Catholic writers of the past.” Ward asserted that “it needs a very rare and sympathetic imagination to realise without personal contact an intellectual world wholly dissimilar to that in which you live. It is one of Bishop Hedley’s triumphs that he did so to a remarkable extent.”²¹

Conclusion

It is clear from this paper that some of the issues tackled by Bishop Hedley, such as evolution were extremely complex and that the tangled threads of the debate are not easy to untangle. Yet I hope to have shown that the bishop, far from being an “erroneous and misinformed” Englishman, was a sober, measured and incisive commentator on important issue of his day and that in the light of the recently discovered archival material discussed in this paper, it is surely time to produce a new biography of a neglected English Benedictine bishop who lived through some extraordinary times. The current generation of Catholics in Wales has done Hedley the service of restoring and re-dedicating his tomb; is it not then our responsibility, as his English Benedictine successors, to restore his faded image, revive his spirit and allow it to breathe anew into the Congregation and Church of our own time?

²¹ Wilfrid Ward, ‘Bishop Hedley,’ *The Dublin Review*, CLVIII (January 1916), 3, 4.