

1-1-1986

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Recommended Citation

Simone, Roberta (1986) "On Campus with Barbara Pym: *Crampton Hodnet* (1985) and *An Academic Question* (1986)," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol2/iss1/15>

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ROBERTA SIMONE

On Campus with Barbara Pym: *Crampton Hodnet* (1985) and *An Academic Question* (1986)

Crampton Hodnet, Pym's earliest completed novel, was written in 1939 and 1940 but set aside when she got too busy with her war work to pay any more attention to it. After the war, she thought it to be "too dated to be publishable," and concentrated instead on *Some Tame Gazelle*, which was to be her first published novel (1950). Five more of her novels were published prior to 1961, after which, for 16 years, her manuscripts were rejected for fear of an insufficient audience. During that period of rejection, in 1971, Pym tried something new, a "Margaret Drabble sort of effort," perhaps in order to appeal to a larger audience. But though she wrote *An Academic Question* in two different drafts, she was satisfied with neither and set the novel aside to work on *Quartet in Autumn*, returning to the style with which she felt comfortable. After Phillip Larkin and Lord David Cecil praised her in 1977 as "one of the most underrated writers of the century," four more of her novels were published, one posthumously; and both publishers and public have wanted more. "More" has been lodged in the Bodleian Library, Oxford since her death in 1980.

These two academic novels were retrieved and "smoothed out" by Hazel Holt, Pym's long-time friend and associate at the International Institute of Africa in London — where Pym was assistant editor of the journal *Africa* — and, after Pym's death in 1980, her literary executor and editor, with Pym's sister, of her Autobiography in Letters and Diaries, *A Very Private Eye* (1984). Although both novels are set in universities and in both we are aware of Pym's sharp eye for the ludicrous and her deftness in turning a neat phrase to express it, in *Crampton Hodnet* she clearly has some fondness for what she is satirizing; in *An Academic Question* she clearly does not.

Of *Crampton Hodnet* Holt says in her preface, "So far everyone who has read the manuscript has laughed out loud — even in the Bodleian Library." Indeed, it is the funniest of her novels, cheery and overt rather than wry and subtle, her customary tone, in its portrayal of "ordinary lives." Perhaps this is a result of the youth of the author — she was in her twenties; perhaps because of the time of the setting — pre-

War, the early Thirties; but perhaps mostly because of her obvious affection for the place of the setting — Oxford, where she had herself recently been a student of English literature. Apparent, despite the satire, are respect for the university and its library; aesthetic appreciation for the lovely grounds, especially the Botanical Gardens, where each spring, in a kind of ritualistic “ballet,” the dons, students, clergy and townspeople come to enjoy the weather and the flowers; and fond memories of punting on the river and lunching with bottles of German wine on the shore, as well as for the cosiness of the student tutorial at the don’s own home, his wife acting as a mother-substitute for the students and hosting the Sunday afternoon teas.

The satire of the types that only such a place could breed is particularly good-humored. Silly but very human things go on in and around the hallowed halls. Edward Killigrew, the librarian, wears crepe-soled shoes to creep unnoticed behind supposedly scholarly tête-à-têtes, hoping to pick up interesting gossip for his elderly mother to disseminate at tea parties. Students and dons in mittens and mufflers vie for the seats near the hot-water pipes or hover around the dictionaries and encyclopedias in order to run “unexpectedly” into each other. The life of a don is comfortable: security and prestige come with the position. Francis Cleveland, lecturer in 17th Century poetry, has nothing to do but “give the same lectures and tutorials” he has given for the past twenty-five years. Young women love his handsome, distinguished looks and subtle jokes. Francis has been writing for an even longer time a book on his ancestor, poet John Cleveland. His wife will not help him with it, “because she feared that with her help it might easily be finished before one of them died, and then where would they be?” However, she encourages him in his “hobby” to keep him from being too much around the house: “If he walked it would take him twenty minutes to reach the library. He might spend twenty minutes talking to somebody or looking up books in the catalogue and then, by the time he had walked home again it would be teatime and his afternoon would have been nicely filled in.”

As any Pym reader has come to expect, the parish church also lends focus to the lives of the characters, though it is more social than spiritual, and in North Oxford the scholarly and the clerical come together. The vicar Mr. Wardell, tells the titled mother of a student who is the guest speaker at the church garden party: “I shall open the proceeding with a prayer; it is customary, you know,” he added, as if in apology. “And then one of the church wardens will introduce you.” Francis’ elderly aunt, Miss Doggett, supplies lodgings for the newly arrived, handsome bachelor curate, Mr. Latimer, who provides the title for the novel. Crampton Hodnet is an imaginary village in the Cotswolds, to which he can be called unexpectedly when he wishes to avoid an unpleasant duty, like attendance at evensong (reminiscent of friend Bunbu-

ry in the *Importance of Beng Earnest*). Nobody investigates whether the place really exists, because it sounds plausible, and anyway their lives are nicely circumscribed by North Oxford, with occasional trips to London to check a reference at the British Museum or to shop on Oxford Street. For anything more romantic, or for “Crampton Hodnet” sorts of escapes, there is Paris, where, as Miss Doggett explains, there is a very good hotel: “All the staff spoke English, the cooking was entirely English, and the visitors too.”

In this place, so dominated by comfortable tradition and routine, it seems that nothing ever changes: the dons “realize that it must be time for a certain set of lectures that were given only in the winter term” because their wives have “made them put on woollen underwear.” And yet there is “something very disturbing about the Spring in Oxford.” Students and dons alike have a “sudden impulse” to shed their grays and browns for yellows and greens, and then actually *do* shed their mufflers and mittens. Romance blossoms. The bright and pretty undergraduate, Barbara Bird, finds other students either too “lumpish and unintelligent” (like Simon Beddoes, who wants to be Prime Minister someday but misplaces the apostrophes in his letter to young Anthea Cleveland) or “effeminate and conceited” (like Michael and Gabriel, who “dance very prettily” in the path of the Botanical Gardens, imitating Diaghileff in the “Rites of Spring.”) But Francis Cleveland is a worthy object of her love. She hopes to “save his life, minister to him when he is romantically ill,” or at least to provide him with the intellectual companionship which Mrs. Cleveland (although Barbara “wished she weren’t quite so nice”) can’t possibly give him: “. . . one couldn’t imagine them reading poetry together. . . this being her main idea of a happy marriage.” Francis finds himself captivated, but is uncertain of just how much her “amorous eyes” promise and knows of “nothing in the invaluable *Cambridge History of English Literature* — nothing indeed in the whole Bodleian, even — to provide the answer. . .” When Barbara is pressed to provide the answer, she is dismayed: “How could she explain to him what her love was like? That although it was a love stronger than death, it wasn’t the kind of love one *did* anything about? On the contrary, doing nothing about it was one of its chief characteristics, because if one did anything it would be different — it might disappear altogether.” And, of course, the attempt to do something is the romance’s disaster: A “Crampton Hodnet” escape to Paris runs into a dead-end in Dover — a coming of age for Barbara and a return to cosy familiarity for Francis. But each is the better for it.

Romance is approached in a very rational way by the curate Mr. Lattimore, who, realizing that there was “something comforting about the idea of having a helpmeet. . . who could keep others off and minister to his needs,” proposes to Miss Mor-

row, Doggett's paid companion. She judges him rightly and refuses, for "even her standards were higher than that. . . she wanted love. . . and could not help thinking that one usually married people in spite of faults rather than because of virtues" (which she will actually do in the later *Jane and Prudence*, 1953). Lattimore finds his love in Paris, eighteen-year-old Pamela, of a good English family, to whom he becomes "unofficially engaged in a way."

The seasons of the natural world, of the church, and of the academy come and go. For the latter, the rebirth comes in the fall. A year passes and once again on a lovely October day, "Oxford was full of hopeful young freshmen, smoking new-looking pipes, . . . and groups of chattering young women . . . crowded into Blackwell's to buy second-hand copies of the Pass Moderation set books." Mrs. Cleveland has a new set of students to tea, and Miss Morrow muses: "it had been just like this at the beginning of the last academic year. . ." and "it was somehow right that it should be."

It is finally Miss Morrow's consciousness that anchors this book in a bobbing sea of consciousnesses. Temporarily satisfied with being the unobtrusive companion to an old bully who needs a constant presence to contradict, Miss Morrow takes pleasure in observing others, with the perceptive sense that tradition and routine provide some comfort in life and that the ludicrous provides some amusement. This seems to be the message in most of Pym's novels, and it is interesting to see how early in her writing career Pym fastened on that theme.

This theme is differently expressed in *An Academic Question*. Where the tone in *Crampton Hodnet* is almost gleeful, here it is full of disdain. Where her experience as Oxonian and literature student had given her satire the insider's touch, here she is the outsider, lampooning sociologists and anthropologists at a new university during that period of academic upheaval, the late Sixties. The story was inspired by an "academic wrangle" in the journal she edited, and, as she wrote to Philip Larkin: "I have never been to Africa, nor have I a degree in Anthropology, but I know the jargon now. . ."

In this novel the story is told from the limited point of view of only one character, the narrator Caro Grimstone, who has neither the appreciative sense of humor nor the easy satisfaction with an unadventurous life of Miss Morrow. Caro is a twenty-eight year old "graduate wife" (that is, a college graduate married to a faculty member), who seems to have no interests at all, not even much in her pre-school child Kate; and her husband Alan is a "youngish" professor of Sociology, with a Ph.D., whose only interest is advancing his career through scholarly publication. At this university (strangely enough never named, perhaps to suggest its typicality rather than any uniqueness) everything is as different from Oxford as it can be. For one thing,

the past is not lovingly preserved but rather pushed out of the way as much as possible: "The town had been a spa in the eighteenth century. . . and the pump room was a sad deserted building. . . The university had grown up from the local technical college and was regarded with dislike. . . and suspicion by the local residents. . . The complex of modern buildings. . . looked as if they might have been made from a child's box of bricks with a few neogothic pinnacles jutting up at the corners." Any concern for aesthetics is merely perfunctory: The grounds "had been planted with very new-looking spindly trees." A dead pigeon lies in the shallow moat surrounding the library. And in a "commanding position on a little hillock is a "sort of statue which resembled the lower half of a torso with the thighs spread out. Something had been added to it in red chalk."

The students and faculty are neither genteel nor romantic, and nobody seems very glad to learn or teach. The students "concerned themselves with trivia, ranging from the provision of slot machines for contraceptives to complaints about the food." Some of them carelessly burn out a wing of the library during a Guy Fawkes Day protest rally. The faculty eat at the "clean functional. . . refectory. . . refueling themselves at the trench to enable them the better to support what most of them consider a crushing teaching load. . . as much as eight or ten hours a week." For these professors, insecurity makes competition the order of the day. Only attacking and one-upping each other in scholarly journals (" . . . what you published and where was about the most important thing in the world") would give them the chance to move "onwards and upward" in academia, "perhaps even to America." Finally, the head librarian has "no interest in books for their own sake and did his best to discourage visitors to his library from taking books out of the shelves and reading them."

Besides the narrator's name, Grimstone, which aptly represents both the tone and the setting, other names suggest Pym's attitude: The self-impressed Dr. Iris Horniblow delivers the year's Dabbs (suggesting dabbings?) Memorial Lecture. One anthropologist, Dr. Kenneth Digby (a shoveller?) gives a eulogy for another — Dr. Esther Clovis (an axe handler?). And the effeminate dandy "Coco" Jeffreys is more an expert in the fashions of clothing than he is in his field of inquiry, Caribbean Immigrant Patterns.

The discipline and its jargon are made much fun of. Caro thinks Horniblow's lecture "Patterns of Neighborhood Behaviors" will be interesting, "for what could be more fascinating than the study of a community one actually knew? . . . But after a very few minutes it became apparent that the dead hand of the sociologist had been at work" when she hears the words "interaction," "in-depth", and "grass-roots." The old-fashioned Dr. Cranton notes: "In my day. . . behavior of neighbors over the gar-

den fence would hardly have been deemed worthy of serious academic study. The trouble is we're running out of primitive peoples so we're driven back on ourselves." But a faculty wife is glad that there are "opportunities for field work on one's own doorstep." Coco does his research by hanging out with the "West Indian factory workers and bus drivers in a pub in the town," and giving them questionnaires to fill out. His article hasn't got a title yet, but he tells Caro, "Some aspects of something always sound right, doesn't it?" Little Kate calls her grandmother "Nana to her face and Grannie" to Caro, making her "wonder if she was already showing signs of a brilliant mind that could easily master the subtleties and ramifications of kinship terminology."

Marriage may not have been exciting in *Crampton Hodnet*, but here it is not even cosy. Caro waits in bed at night for her husband, listening to the click click of his typewriter producing his latest article. Even attempts at romance are joyless. Alan has a brief affair with his London editor's secretary, who, he tells his wife, is that "stupid girl who messed up the diagram . . . a hopeless sort of person." Caro's sister Susan is not surprised: "After all, you've been married about seven years . . ." As for Caro, she can think of nobody to have an affair with: "The men don't have time for that sort of thing . . . They're always writing reviews or articles or giving lectures and going to seminars . . ." Iris Horniblow has divorced her husband, about whom nobody knew anything except that he "was a rather meagre-looking man in a navy suit," and has taken up with a twenty-four year old revolutionary with a "kind of hardness and ruthlessness about him". Caro "pitied her, seeing the end of the affair before she did."

So that they will not waste their college educations, academic wives are also expected to contribute to scholarship, either by typing their husbands' drafts or sorting their files or doing clerical work in the library. Caro has no practical skills, so decides to read to the elderly at the nursing home run by Sister Dew (who had appeared in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, written in 1963 but not published until 1982). However, there she can be of even greater use to her husband, because she will have access to the "unexpurgated version" of the *Tales Told by the Black Washeli*, in a box by the bedside of the dying ex-missionary and amateur anthropologist Reverend Stillingfleet. Alan's theft of that manuscript enables him and not his competitor, Professor Maynard, who has tried subtler means, to write the innovative article that will assure his academic future. Alan shows "academic scruples" if not moral ones (Caro thinks) by wanting her to get a part-time job in the library so as to sneak the stolen manuscript back into the pile of posthumously donated Stillingfleet papers rather than burn them: "It is vital material," he says, "and must be available for other scholars now."

Even the slightest bit of spirituality is absent in this novel. There is no clergyman but a dying one, and there is no parish church. Instead the campus has a “non-denominational meeting-house” backed up against a parking lot. The Dabbs Memorial Lecture is set back to November 1st, which nobody seems to notice is All Saints’ Day, so as not to conflict with Guy Fawkes Day. Dr. Clovis’ memorial service is held in a London church, but the service contains only “some non-committal hymns,” and her eulogy is delivered by another anthropologist. Caro visits her mother’s village church, bemused by her mother’s absorption, while she can only wish that she could “feel something for the goings-on at the altar.” Even that staple of social life from Pym’s other novels, the church jumble sale, is pre-empted by cynical old Dolly’s such sales in her used-book shop, for the benefit of stray animals rather than for church charity.

As in *Crampton Hodnet*, the passing of time is also here measured by academic seasons, but only by those. And instead of the familiar renewal of the Oxford autumn, in this new university, at the beginning of the fall term, there is upheaval: “More assertive students and . . . lecturers, fresh from the London School of Economics with revolutionary ideas about the way things should be organized.” They want to “do away with everything . . . the students to decide on their own courses and what books they should read — and to abolish written work and exams . . .” Unlike Miss Morrow, who finds comfort in patterns and cycles, Caro is glad that life is “on-going,” though she thinks she may change her mind later. Only Dolly looks for natural renewal, in the Spring, when the hedgehogs will come out of hibernation.

Perhaps Pym’s attitude is not so “sardonic . . . towards academics and particularly those in the new universities” as Alan accuses Dolly of being. (Dolly claims that the droppings of her hedgehogs are more useful than written examinations are: “. . . such tangible evidence of another kind of life.”) But Pym does hint rather deliberately that with no tradition, no comfortable routines, no idea of community or parish, there is neither comfort nor amusement in life. And studying the traditions and patterns and communities of others is no substitute for living in and with them oneself.

Caro’s new elderly patient seems more genuinely pleased with her life than any of the academics do, though they might see her life as having been trivial. She likes to have hospital romances read to her, and she too has a box full of papers, her whole life, as she suggests, in a box — love letters written to her by a doctor whom she almost married: “a far cry from Stillingfleet’s stuff,” says Caro. But the wiser Dolly sees it as equally valuable: “. . . it is all *life*, . . . and no aspect of life is to be despised.” It could be said that Barbara Pym based all of her writing on that tenet, by observing and recording aspects of lives that others might find to be a “far cry” from exciting or even significant.

Pym fans must be grateful to Hazel Holt for making this novel available to more than the “immediate circle of . . . friends” whom Pym thought might like to read it, because it gives us not only a sly look into the new university of the late Sixties, but also the understanding that however trivial the lives of the characters of her other books may seem, the lives of the characters of *An Academic Question* are not only trivial but empty. I am glad, however, that Pym abandoned the direction of sardonic satire after one attempt, to return to her gentler mode, that seen so early in *Crampton Hodnet*, and I eagerly await other Holt rescues from the Bodleian collection — perhaps her 1941 “spy novel”?