

BARBARA PYM 1913–1980

Barbara Mary Crampton Pym died on January 11, 1980. Born at Oswestry, Shropshire, in 1913, she was educated at Huyton College, Liverpool, and at St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she graduated in English in 1934.

During the war she worked in censorship, later joining the W.R.N.S., with whom she served in Naples.

From 1958 till her retirement in 1974 she gave devoted service to the International African Institute, as editorial secretary and assistant editor of *Africa* under the Institute's director, Professor Daryll Forde.

For those of us who were associated with the International African Institute in its earlier, more leisurely-paced and less practically-gearred years, one of the pleasures and rewards to look forward to, for both the academically-minded colonial administrator on furlough and the starry-eyed American graduate student setting out on his first African field-research trip, was to call in at the Institute, then housed in its cobwebby rabbit-warren in New Fetter Lane, and to have a chat with Barbara. Such was her modesty that, even if we at least accepted that this gentle character (though for all her shyness nothing could suppress for long her vivid gift for kindly humour about those whom she met) really was the editor of that scrupulously produced, prestigious and prized-by-the-budding-scholar journal, the IAI's *Africa*, it was by no means a matter of instant recognition that here, too, was an established authoress—as they were correctly described in those helpfully pre-unisex days—who was publishing a novel every two years between 1950 and 1961. Indeed, it was a good three years beyond its publication in 1955 that this writer first read one of Barbara Pym's novels, *Less than Angels*, lent to him by an American anthropologist admirer of Barbara. When he did read it, one night at the discreet Cosmos Club in Washington D.C., so spontaneous was his repeated laughter that the courteous Virginian in the next room tapped at the door to make a solicitous enquiry about the reader's state of health (or was it mind?).

Perversely, high success did not attend generally on her novels, and when in 1961 her publisher turned down her seventh, Barbara Pym was so dejected that she vowed she would never write another. For the next fifteen years she held to her resolve, directing her literary talents into her careful and conscientious editorship of *Africa*. It was not until after her retirement from the Institute, when she and her sister Hilary, who had been in the BBC, took an attractive cottage in the typical Oxfordshire village of Finstock, that Barbara gave in to the dictates of the writer's creative urge, and started work on another novel. Even now, she had no intention of publishing again.

It was then that one of those literary ironies which frequently characterize the life of a writer of fiction (although he or she would be accused of exaggeration were it to be woven into the plot) came about. To mark its 75th year of publication, the *Times Literary Supplement* decided to invite the views of a panel of well-known writers and critics on which, in their view, were either the most over-rated or the most under-rated novelists of the century. Barbara Pym, to her disbelief yet delight, achieved the distinction of being named twice in the second category, the judges being no less than Lord David Cecil and Philip Larkin. Comparisons were made to the grace and gentle wit of Jane Austen, the rueful observation of Anthony Trollope. Commercially, the result was predicatable. Publishers sought her out; she finished *Quartet in Autumn* in 1977 and, widely praised, it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize; a year later *The Sweet*

Dove Died appeared, to equally favourable reviews; and now the original sextet, long since allowed to go out of print, were quickly reprinted. This time the sales handsomely exceeded their record of the 1950s. To the quiet satisfaction of all her friends, Barbara Pym had made her own return of love, to take her rightful place among contemporary novelists.

It is for the literary critics to explain Barbara Pym's welcome reversal of reputation. Some already have, pointing to the lesson that what is ultimately significant in ensuring a novelist's survival is neither the seesaw of fashion nor the volume of quick-turnover sales, nor yet the momentary acclaim on the box or screen; rather it is the acclamation of a group, small but soundly-based, of discriminating and determined admirers. Other have noted how her own life could easily have served as a plot for one of her own books (it did not) and have commended her successful miniaturist's skill in perceiving and conveying the small poignancies and comedies of everyday life. For most members of the International African Institute, it is by her dedicated work for *Africa* that Barbara will be so fondly remembered, and especially for the warmth of her welcome to unheralded callers at New Fetter Lane and later in High Holborn, where she would quickly charm them into believing the unlikely story that in no way could their visit be an interruption to her coping with the yards of galley proofs or the mountains of books for review on her desk.

Barbara Pym's second novel, published in 1952, bore the title *Excellent Women*. The term connotes a category of wise, witty and well-bred sociability which, in the mind of Barbara's many admirers, will serve as a neat epitaph for this modest, gentle and urbane colleague and friend.

A.H.M. K-G