

City of Dreaming Spires: Barbara Pym and the Oxford Novel

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And that sweet city with her dreaming spires
She needs not June for beauty's heightening,
Lovely all times she lies, lovely tonight!

Of all those who have written about Oxford, Matthew Arnold has become the most closely identified with the city. Not only did he coin the famous epithet 'city of dreaming spires' but his long poems 'Thyrsis' and 'The Scholar-Gipsy' have been called the two great Oxford poems. His celebrated prose piece in *Essays in Criticism* is considered the city's finest tribute. 'Beautiful city! so venerable, so lovely, so unravaged by the fierce intellectual life of our century, so serene!' His vision of Oxford, 'spreading her gardens to the moonlight, and whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the Middle Age', has inspired succeeding writers.

In 1931, at age 18, Barbara Pym went to Oxford to read English at St Hilda's College. The magic and romance of Oxford filled her with delight. At the beginning of her second Hilary term at St Hilda's she wrote in her diary that 'Oxford really is intoxicating.' She had an active social life, collected a wide circle of friends and became romantically involved with several young men. Her Oxford diaries show her interest in tracking down young men. By 1933, her interest had focussed on Henry Harvey, and she had become friends with the group surrounding him, Robert Liddell, called Jock, John Barnicot, and also Count Roberto Weiss. All of them figure in her first published novel *Some Tame Gazelle*.

Her studies at Oxford and her Oxford friends provided an inspiration that lasted throughout her life. Some of her novels and short stories show traces of Oxford.

In September 1933 Pym noted: 'I desperately want to write an Oxford novel – but I must see first that my emotions are simmered down fairly well.' In her essay 'Love in the Great Libraries: Oxford in the Work of Barbara Pym' Janice Rossen argues that Pym did write the Oxford novel she longed to write, in the sense that she drew on Oxford in her fiction, that she wrote about Oxford feelings, relationships and attitudes. Whereas Rossen examines the theme of the relation between love and work stemming from the university, I want to turn my attention to Oxford as an actual setting in Pym's novels and short stories.

I will focus on Pym's oeuvre but to provide fresh insights into the portrayal of Oxford in literature I will also consider what I would like to call authors of the 'Pym circle': Robert Liddell, Philip Larkin, Hazel Holt. I will also include A. N. Wilson, who holds a prominent position as an author and journalist. He is a great admirer of Pym. In essays on *Crampton Hodnet*, *A Few Green Leaves* and *An Unsuitable Attachment* he praised Pym as 'the chronicler of quiet lives'.

Oxford has been the setting for over 500 novels that range from romance to mystery, from the biographical to the fantastic. I will not discuss the Oxford novel as *bildungsroman*, presenting a character's formative years and awakening but take a closer look on the Oxford novel in the geographical sense.

Pym wrote *Crampton Hodnet* in 1939 – 1940, but did not revise the manuscript for a publisher's consideration. Holt edited it for publication in 1985. At the opening of the novel, Pym describes Leamington Lodge, the home of the elderly spinster Maude Doggett and her plain and no-longer young

companion Jessica Morrow. Pym deftly evokes the ambience of North Oxford, a wealthy suburb north of the colleges, with its Victorian-Gothic houses:

It was a wet Sunday afternoon in North Oxford at the beginning of October. The laurel bushes which bordered the path leading to Leamington Lodge, Banbury Road, were dripping with rain. ... The house had been built in the sixties of the last century, of yellowish brick, with a gabled roof and narrow Gothic windows set in frames of ornamental stonework. A long red and blue stained-glass window looked onto a landing halfway up the pitch-pine staircase, and there were panels of the same glass let into the front door, giving an ecclesiastical effect, so that, except for a glimpse of unlikely lace curtains, the house might have been a theological college.

Miss Doggett takes in a lodger, the curate Stephen Latimer, one of Pym's coddled curates. He is rather cynical about his vocation and becomes even more disheartened in the stifling atmosphere of North Oxford, the residential extension of the University.

'Are there no sick people I ought to visit?' asked Mr Latimer hopefully.

'There are no sick people in North Oxford. They are either dead or alive. It's sometimes difficult to tell the difference, that's all,' explained Miss Morrow.

Miss Morrow's statement reminds one of Algernon Swinburne, who thought nobody in Oxford could be said to die 'for they never begin to live.'

Mr Latimer thinks there is no escape from the oppressive atmosphere of Miss Doggett's dark, damp and cold house, this citadel of North Oxford. By contrast, Miss Morrow is a more cheerful person. She loves make-up and pretty clothes and turns to popular music as a means of escape from the gloom of Leamington Lodge. In a passage reminiscent of John Betjeman, Jessie Morrow even has visions of North Oxford being lifted into heaven:

Miss Morrow always enjoyed these summer evenings. The effect of light and sunshine on the heavy furniture, the dark covers, the silver-table, the Bavarian engravings, even on the photograph of Canon Tottle, gave her the idea that there might be a life beyond this, where even the contents of Miss Doggett's drawing-room might be bathed in a heavenly radiance. It was a confused and certainly quite wrong idea but a pleasing and comforting one, to imagine the whole of North Oxford, its houses and inhabitants, lifted just as they were into heaven, where all the objects would be the same in themselves but invested with a different meaning from that which they had on earth. They would all be dear, treasured things because they would be part of the heavenly atmosphere. It was not difficult, Miss Morrow thought, to imagine that heaven might be something like North Oxford.

Jessie Morrow also figures in Pym's short story 'So, Some Tempestuous Morn', probably written in the early fifties. Lying in bed in Leamington Lodge and listening to the rain her favourite verse from Arnold's 'Thyrsis' comes to her mind.

So, some tempestuous morn in early June,
When the year's primal burst of bloom is o'er,
Before the roses and the longest day –
When garden-walks and all the grassy floor
With blossoms red and white of fallen May
And chestnut flowers are strewn ...

Robert Liddell was a close friend of Pym. Like her short story, his novel *The Last Enchantments* pays homage to Arnold in its title. It is also set in North Oxford and reflects aspects of Liddell's sharing a home with his brother Donald in this part of Oxford. Liddell adopts Thomas Hardy's name for Oxford, calling it Christminster.

Andrew, the first-person narrator of Liddell's novel, finds the true spirit of Oxford embodied in the Gothic North. He lovingly depicts North Oxford and its fine examples of Victorian architecture:

Here on either side of the boulevards planted with chestnuts, is some of the most remarkable domestic architecture in Europe. Towering yellow brick piles, embellished with purbeck shafts and freestone copings, house the theological colleges ... In a quarter of an hour's walk the student can observe examples of almost every kind of gothic window: Angevin, Venetian, Spanish and more. Square and saddleback towers abound. Further up, there are red-brick mansions, several which claim Ruskin as their architect, and show each some notable feature, such as a carved pediment to a porch, or a lavish display of dog-tooth ornament.

Andrew applies to North Oxford Arnold's famous lines:

I like to apply to this part of our city the words of another of our poets who spoke of Christminster as 'spreading her gardens to the moonlight, and whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the middle age.'

In *Crampton Hodnet*, Pym presents a comic view of university life in the 1930s, portraying North Oxford as the epitome of pre-war Oxford, carefully evoking place and period. In *The Last Enchantments*, on the other hand, the tone is less light-hearted. Liddell describes Oxford in wartime. Its beauty is threatened by the horrors of World War II.

All through the terrible and lovely summer, as cherry blossom gave way to lilac and laburnum, and they in turn to flowering horse-chestnut, Christminster spread out her gardens to the dangerous, aeroplane-inviting moonlight, whispering with agonised intensity from her towers the last enchantments of the middle age.

Philip Larkin played a major role in Pym's artistic career. His novel *Jill* is also set in wartime Oxford. Pym writes to him in 1964: 'I was amazed at *Jill*. Such maturity – and detachment ... it was difficult to believe it had been written by a boy of 21.'

In stark contrast to Liddell's nostalgic portrayal of the 'city of dreaming spires', Larkin's Oxford is not the city of poetic dream. It is just another nameless city because in wartime the nameplates have been removed from the station. When the student-hero John Kemp arrives by train he is unimpressed.

What he could see did not look very remarkable; there were hoardings advertising beans and the ATS, people pushing towards a red bus, a glazed-brick public-house. A pony and cart creaked down the road, the man holding the slack reins, a bowed figure in the faint dusk. John looked about for colleges and old buildings, but could only see distantly a spire or two, and watched a woman buying some sprouts at a greengrocer's fifty yards away. His bag stood beside him on the curb.

In contrast, A N Wilson's *The Healing Art* is set in Oxford in the late 1970s. In the *Times Literary Supplement* William Boyd called the novel 'a stimulating and thoughtful book'. Wilson shows the changes wrought in Pamela Cowper, an academic, by her belief that she has only a few months to live. Her story is contrasted with the story of Dorothy Higgs, a working-class woman, who is really

dying, though she does not know it. Their surgeon has inadvertently exchanged the women's X-rays. Wilson juxtaposes Pamela's Oxford, the 'city of dreaming spires', to the Oxford of working-class people. It is symbolic that the beauty of Oxford's crenellated skyline does not reveal itself to the traveller arriving by train. Pamela's friend, John Brocklehurst, a don, returning from Mexico to Oxford, delights in the way the city keeps its secrets.

Beyond the canal, and a few warehouses, he could make out the Venetian water-tower of that church where Pamela was so fond of going. It was, from where he stood, the most impressive architectural monument in sight. A row of scruffy Edwardian shops; a lumpy hotel insultingly aping a classical manner; a railway bridge; the most hideous of office blocks, a cube of black glass: these were the campanile's only rivals for the eye's attention. The delicacy of pinnacles and spires, the grandeur of domes, the ingenuity of buttresses, the proportions of quadrangles, now intimate, now superb, for which the town was more noted in the imagination of travellers, were kept sensibly hidden from view.

The Bodleian Library is one of the oldest and most important libraries in the world. It is a haven for scholars. When in *Crampton Hodnet* Francis Cleveland is in one of his 'loose-endish' moods his wife Margaret suggests he should spend the afternoon in the Bodleian.

'You certainly seem to want to get rid of me,' said Mr Cleveland, 'so perhaps I will go to the Bodleian. It's a comfort to know that there is at least one place left in Oxford where scholars and elderly people can spend a peaceful afternoon.'

In *Civil to Strangers*, Cassandra Marsh-Gibbon, planning to go to Budapest on her own, sends her husband Adam to the Bodleian, because working there is so restful.

To Pamela Cowper, the protagonist of Wilson's novel, the Bodleian represents scholarly retreat from the world.

There were still twelve weeks before she had to start teaching again, and she spent some happy hours one morning recovering the delights of work in an ancient library. The painted ceiling, the bays lined with calf volumes, the misty views of a great dome seen through the low-lying window at her elbow brought peace which set her mind to work again. The obscure pleasures of learning began, after an interval of nearly ten years, to flood back into her brain, as she fingered vellum and resurrected her memories of the great work.

Hazel Holt, Pym's literary executor, was a close friend for 30 years. She is the author of a series of critically acclaimed detective novels. Her sleuth Sheila Malory is modelled on Pym's 'excellent women'. In *The Cruellest Month* Sheila investigates the death of a librarian. The Bodleian has always had a special fascination for Sheila.

I have always loved working in libraries. Especially the Bodleian. When I was an undergraduate it always seemed positive proof that I was a scholar – look at me, I wanted to shout, here in the Bodleian – and the atmosphere, especially in Duke Humfrey, of accumulated centuries of learning had seemed almost a tangible thing, the cloak of history thrown round my shoulders.

His 'Poem about Oxford' reflects Larkin's mixed feelings of irritation and fascination regarding the place where he was a student at St John's College. He reminisces about 'a full notecase / Dull Bodley, draught beer and dark blue'.

Pym did not think of the Bodleian, known informally to centuries of scholars as the Bod, as a dull place. In her essay 'A Suitable Detachment: Barbara Pym and the Romance of the Library' Helen Clare Taylor states that of the romantic encounters we find in Pym's diaries, the most influential for her fiction in general seems to be one that took place in the Bodleian during the early 1930s. It was in this library that Pym's long attachment to Henry Harvey or Lorenzo, as she called him, began. She haunted the library in the hope of seeing him. Her diaries note her visits to the Bodleian.

Lectures, then to the Bodleian where I talked to Lorenzo for a few minutes which seems to be the highest point of happiness in my life at present.

He came into the Bodleian twice but he did not speak to me – and when I heard his footsteps disappearing out of the picture gallery I nearly burst into tears there and then.

Her affair with Harvey provided material that she used and reused in her writing career.

In *Crampton Hodnet*, the Bodleian offers the possibility of romance. Francis Cleveland meets Pym's *alter ego* Barbara Bird, his student, in the Bodleian by chance. Pym's tone of mingled fear and desire in her Oxford diaries is reflected in Barbara's behaviour.

Oh, supposing he comes in here, thought Barbara Bird in a panic. So great was her agitation that she hardly knew whether she wanted him to come or not. She crouched in her seat by the radiator, with her fur coat around her shoulders, trying desperately hard to concentrate on her work.

Mr Cleveland went on hovering in the entrance to the Reading Room, peering inquisitively among the desks. He was bored, and it was always a comfort to watch other people working. And then he saw Barbara and realised that she was just what he needed.

In *The Cruellest Month*, Sheila Malory's memories of her undergraduate days remind us of Pym's observing Lorenzo in the Bodleian and trying to get him to notice her.

To the young Sheila the Bodleian was a place

where you might, if you were lucky, catch a glimpse of the object of a passion (requited or not, as the case may be), and plan how to find yourself in the next seat, books cosily adjacent.

She reminisces about a handsome young man called Rupert, a name probably chosen by Holt because of Pym's romance with Rupert Gladow.

In my second year I had seen, usually sitting in the same seat at the end of a row, a young man who had intrigued me. I was struck, first of all, by his extraordinary resemblance to Peter Wimsey. I got up from my seat, took a dictionary from open shelves beside him, and, leaning on the radiator in its metal grill, studied him covertly. He was of medium height and slightly built, with a long face, straight fair hair and very beautiful hands – Miss Sayers' hero to the life! ... After that I haunted the library.

Liddell and Pym also focus on the more bizarre aspects of the Bodleian. Liddell comments on the 'curious submarine [life] of the library'.

A newcomer is surprised at the crustaceans scuttling away sideways on the bottom, or at the great goggle-eyed creatures that rise to the surface and gobble for air, until he himself becomes acclimatised, puts on protective colouring, and can no longer be distinguished from other denizens of the aquarium.

In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Dr Nicholas Parnell, Bodley's librarian, is based on Liddell, who worked as an assistant in the department of Western MSS at the Bodleian. Dr Parnell raves about a more worldly aspect of the library.

'Of course we have central heating there now,' said Dr Parnell. 'There have been great improvements in the last ten years or so. We also have a Ladies' Cloakroom in the main building now,' he added, his voice rising to a clear ringing tone. 'That is a very great convenience.'

Pym writes rather prosaically about the Bodleian 40 years after 'a most touching meeting with Henry on the steps of the Radcliffe Camera': 'Beginning in Duke Humfrey then a visit to the Ladies' Cloakroom in the basement of the Radcliffe Camera (where smoking is forbidden), ...'. Dr Parnell with his interest in conveniences would have been delighted.

Helen Clare Taylor argues that in *Civil to Strangers* the Bodleian represents scholarly retreat from the world, romance and donnish eccentricity. To Adam research in the Bodleian will provide a refuge from his lonely house. In Duke Humfrey, 'enshrouded in history, he would find peace and contentment.'

Pym's description of Adam's day at the Bodleian is reminiscent of her own descriptions in her notebook. 'I went to the Dictionary and looked up a word – (an entirely fatuous word) becoz [sic!] he was there - ...'.

Adam's unscholarly behaviour corresponds to Pym's own restlessness and looking up of words in the dictionary.

Adam ... wandered about looking at various books and reading the *Dictionary of National Biography* to see if he could detect any mistakes in it. Then he went up to the Catalogue to look up several books he might want to read. ... Finally he went back to his seat and began a letter to Cassandra, but he found it difficult to write, as he really did not know what to say.

As Adam is preparing to leave the library, he is addressed by a clergyman with a suit that looks quite green with age. The clergyman wonders whether Adam has ever given a thought to those who died in the Bodleian or as a result of working there. He is doing research on that subject for a thesis for the degree of Bachelor of Letters. Adam hastily leaves the library to go to Budapest and reclaim his marriage.

Pym's portrayal of romance in Oxford is often tinged with subtle irony. In *Crampton Hodnet*, Anthea Cleveland, thinking of Simon Beddoes and tossing and turning in bed, goes to the window, leans out and blows kisses in what she imagines is the direction of his college, 'but which was actually, and most unsuitably, the nearest way to a seminary for Roman Catholic priests.'

From Miss Morrow's room in 'So, Some Tempestuous Morn' it is possible to get a glimpse of the theological college 'with its architectural extravagances, coloured brickwork, pointed Gothic windows and little towers.' The college is probably modelled on Keble College, designed by William Butterfield, a convinced follower of the Oxford Movement. Miss Morrow pictures the students behaving in a devout manner in their cell-like rooms. When, however, she sees a strikingly handsome clergyman open the gate and push his bicycle in, her vivid imagination makes her think of his breakfast.

A hearty manly breakfast of mutton chops and beer ... no, hardly that, many Oxford breakfasts were not what they were and perhaps men were not either. Tea and cornflakes, more likely, ...

On an impulse she waves to him and he smilingly raises his hat to her.

There is a close connection between Pym's own experiences and her fiction. It is not only her student days in St Hilda's but also her visits in later life which inspired scenes in her novels.

In 1979 she writes to Larkin:

I went to lunch at St Hilda's on Saturday and had the usual consolation of not looking as old (or as fat) as some of my contemporaries! They were having a Gaudy but I didn't stay for it.

Attending a reunion at her college at the opening of the novel *Jane and Prudence*, Jane recalls the days when she was a tutor and Prudence her pupil. When walking in the college garden – recognisably St Hilda's garden – 'with glimpses of grey towers through the trees and the river at their side' the two women reminisce about 'those days of wine and roses'.

Drawing on two occasions when Pym was invited to a college feast she describes an anniversary dinner at an Oxford college in the short story 'Across a Crowded Room' and contrasts the fresh young voices of the singers in the gallery with the scene below, 'which was not, on the whole, fresh and young.'

In the same vein, Wilson writes about a college dinner at John Brocklehurst's college, attended by Pamela, and satirises its 'marginally absurd ceremonies'.

Brocklehurst's college is modelled on Wilson's own college, New College. In the concluding scene the author sets fire to the whole institution and burns it down, which John Dougill in his book *Oxford in English Literature: The Making, and Undoing, of "The English Athens"* interprets as an act of revenge on the college for not extending Wilson's teaching contract. William Boyd calls the razing of the college 'a fine example of imaginary *schadenfreude*, a scene in the best black-comic tradition.'

Fifteen years after going down Larkin said in *Required Reading*: 'I didn't approve of Oxford and I don't want to go back there. It crushes the spirit in a more subtle way than I had imagined possible.' Fifteen years later still, in 'Poem about Oxford' he at least allowed the possibility that the city might have 'stuck' in his mind 'as a touchstone / of learning and *la politesse*'.

Jill is set in the 'blacked-out and butterless days' of his poem. Oxford is subject to the black-out from dusk to dawn, 'sheets of plywood across the windows in the bedroom' and closed shutters in the sitting-room of the protagonist's rooms in his college.

In Pym's spy novel *So Very Secret*, begun in 1940 and set like Larkin's novel in wartime England, the heroine's friend is a don at St Margaret's, a women's college in Oxford, based on St Hilda's. The college garden is no longer steeped in romance as in *Jane and Prudence*. It is a place where the lawn has been dug up for growing potatoes.

Larkin's realistic and unsentimental portrait contrasts with Liddell nostalgic vision. Here is Andrew saying good-bye to Oxford in 1940: 'Wherever my bones lie, I am *Collegii Verbi Dei apud Christimonasterienses olim scholaris*: in the hour of death and in the day of judgement that may not matter very much, but nothing can take it away.'