

Working with Hazel

Laura Morris

*Remarks read at the Annual General Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society
St Hilda's College, Oxford, 3-4 September 2016*

When I first took over representation of the Pym Estate, we had very few papers, just a handful of documents handed over by Barbara's sister, Hilary, before her death. Hazel had become Barbara's Literary Executor, and as such was the fount of most of my knowledge. Gradually I assembled the history of Barbara's previous publishers, both here and in the US – quite a daunting prospect with almost no formal documentation, but Hazel's memory was astonishing and voluminous – and key.

She would say 'I have a feeling there might have been an Italian translation of *Excellent Women* in 1960' or 'Philip Larkin made special mention of that hat' and she was invariably right. Of course Hazel knew Barbara's work as well as her own, and appreciated every social nuance, every tiny, perfect observation in the same way. She was the perfect guardian of the Pym flame. We began to piece together the publishing jig-saw, first reverting rights in the Pym titles originally published by Jonathan Cape. In 2006 we found ourselves in the intriguing position of having interest from both Penguin and Virago for their respective Modern Classics Series. Crucially, Virago was prepared to republish each novel with its own individual jacket and new Introduction, which we felt would make maximum impact, both with booksellers and reviewers. And so it proved – the first trio were quickly followed by the second, and then the third. All book sales exceeded expectations, and were reprinted, some several times.

Hazel knew exactly who should write the new Introductions: she nominated Alexander McCall Smith for *Excellent Women*, Jilly Cooper for *Jane and Prudence*, and Paul Binding for *No Fond Return of Love* – they were delighted to oblige, and wrote them beautifully. And so it continued for all nine books Virago republished, with Hazel herself penning the Introduction to their ultimate volume, *Civil to Strangers*. It was thanks to Virago's brilliant repackaging of the books, with their sparky, idiosyncratic covers, that there was a great resurgence of Barbara's reputation and popularity, even to the extent of *Excellent Women* featuring as a 'Virago Classic' mug! And this success was not just confined to the UK. Through Rosie and Jessica Buckman, who handled translation rights on behalf of the Estate, Pym is now being read not only in France, Italy and Spain, but Russia, Portugal and China too. Also in the US, new editions and e-books began to make their mark. Hazel monitored all these developments with her usual eagle eye. She felt Barbara would have been especially proud to see *Quartet in Autumn*, again introduced by Alexander McCall Smith, appear as a Picador Paperback Classic.

Hazel also had impeccable judgment and instincts. We had to read several screenplays by aspiring scriptwriters – if she said 'this one will never get made', you knew it wouldn't. Sometimes the writer would add some unnecessary plotline or twist that had no basis in the novel itself, which Hazel would have none of. Script and writer were sent packing. We had invigorating chats about our fantasy casting, and Hazel always had strong views about her ideal Pym heroines. So I'm delighted to say that the most recent option on *Excellent Women*, which we signed to young producer Steve Mates, now has the backing of Colin Firth's production company Raindog, and BBC Films. We felt this one might really happen.

Hazel applied the same rigour to her own Mrs Malory series. The books were written exactly as she wanted them published. There was one occasion when a young editor at Penguin USA had the temerity to offer Hazel some

'notes' and had to be quietly told that Hazel's text was not to be altered in any way, apart from Americanization of the spelling. You didn't mess with Mrs Malory!

It was an absolute privilege to work with Hazel over the last twelve years and to have the benefit of her clear eye and calm patience in times of stress or difficulty. I am sure Tom, her devoted son, will keep the Pym flame burning for many years to come.

Laura Morris operates the Laura Morris Literary Agency in London, which represents Barbara Pym's literary estate.