

Barbara Pym and Social Anthropology

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Barbara Pym worked for twenty-eight years – almost her entire working life – at the International African Institute (IAI); throughout this period she edited the Institute's prestigious quarterly journal, *Africa*, scores of scholarly anthropological monographs, and over sixty volumes of the *Ethnographic Survey of Africa*. Few professional anthropologists can have given such scrutiny to so much ethnographic literature. With most of her authors she corresponded; but many would call at the Institute to discuss manuscripts, have a cup of tea and chat. Thus many of the characters who appear and reappear in her novels are anthropologists; but it is only in her fourth novel, *Less Than Angels*, written c. 1953-54, after seven years at the Institute, that they take the centre stage. As Barbara Pym herself wrote, 'It is surely appropriate that anthropologists, who spend their time studying life and behaviour in various societies, should be studied in their turn.' (LTA blurb).

The central figure, better developed some say than most of Pym's men, is Tom Mallow, an anthropology graduate student recently returned from his African field work. The theme, in this 'almost-a-love-story', is his relationship with three women: first, Catherine Oliphant, a slightly older writer of popular fiction who befriended him on a cross-ferry steamer, offered him a bed, and with whom he then lived on his returns to London in an ill-defined relationship; she mothers him but has little empathy for anthropology. Second in order of appearance is Deirdre Swan, a first-year anthropology student who quickly developed an infatuation for Tom; and lastly Elaine, his childhood sweetheart of days long before his commitment to anthropology. Then we have Mark Penfold and Digby Fox, final-year undergraduates, and three older anthropologists who appear repeatedly in the narrative: Alaric Lydgate, Father Gemini and Jean-Pierre le Rossignol. Their interaction mainly takes place within an academic scenario, Professor Felix Mainwaring's Foresight Centre for Anthropological Research with its bevy of lady functionaries, and a domestic scenario, the home of Deirdre's mother and aunt. This is Barbara Pym's field of study.

Today, ethical rules of social science research urge that informants should be shown its results, before publication, for their comment. Sadly, in a most un-Pym like device, Tom was killed in Africa before the novel ends. It has thus fallen to me, rather belatedly, to assess Tom's reaction to his portrayal in the novel.

My qualifications for this task: I am almost of the same age as Tom (26 years in 1953), was an anthropology graduate student doing fieldwork in Nigeria in the early 1950s and shared apparently many of Tom's interests in land tenure, chieftancy, and local politics. At Oxford in 1945-48, reading Geography, I attended anthropology lectures, and during a year at London School of Economics (LSE) before leaving for Nigeria I became close friends with several students of Daryll Forde, Director of the Institute and Professor of Anthropology at University College, students who later arrived in Nigeria. I was never his student, though he did much in later years to help me in my career. I first visited the Institute

in its Lower Regent Street home, and subsequently, in the '50s and early '60s during my home leaves, was a fairly frequent visitor to the Fetter Lane office – discussing my own publications, chatting and taking tea.

Furthermore, I grew up in a very church-oriented family – though not quite so High Church as Barbara Pym's; my own faith lapsed in my late teens so that, whilst I could appreciate Pym's world of clergy and excellent women, I could no longer share it.

I will comment on Pym's picture of academic life at the Institute and the world of anthropologists, both faculty and students. Pym makes no overt classification of her anthropologists, but she does in fact skilfully delineate their differences, and these I shall explore. This will give me the opportunity to contrast her craft as a novelist with that of the social anthropologist. Returning to my main theme, I shall show how the popular image of anthropology in the early 1950s diverged from the reality of the social anthropological milieu experienced in the Institute. I think it was Pym's difficulty in reconciling these that influenced her novel. Whilst I feel, on Tom's behalf, that she has given a very fair and not unflattering picture of him, both he and I are most distressed by the disparaging image of him attributed to Pym by her subsequent commentators.

The atmosphere at Professor Mainwaring's research centre portrayed by Pym is so close to my own memories of the Institute that whenever Mainwaring's beard is mentioned, a voice within me expostulates 'but Daryll didn't have a beard'. So close too is her description of the public lectures. The alternate solidarity between students and their rivalry for awards and patronage is finely drawn. But there is little specifically anthropological here – there were many similar professional bodies in London, and students of all disciplines are alike in the respects noted.

The Institute was founded in 1926 as the International Institute for African Languages and Cultures by senior administrators – Lord Lugard and his French counterparts – missionaries, and academics such as German linguist Die-drich Westermann. Bronislaw Malinowski, founder of the new social anthropology and professor at the London School of Economics (LSE) quickly lent his support. So in the '30s the Institute was a centre attracting not only academic anthropologists – several of Malinowski's earlier students were funded by it – but also administrators and missionaries, amateur anthropologists of an earlier period guided by the now notorious manual, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*.

Typical of the former was Alaric Lydgate, a prematurely retired administrative officer who had spent eleven years of his service in the area where Tom Mallow carried out his field work. He came to live next door to Deirdre. From the copious notes collected a few minor publications had resulted; but most lay, unsorted, in his trunks. His feelings of duty to write these up finally cracked with his recognition, prompted perhaps by Catherine, that his material was now obsolete, redundant. Typical too of this period were the missionaries whose faith in proselytising and pastoral work

was failing and who turned to linguistic study; however academic their approach, the long-term outcome could be a vernacular translation of the Bible – and this enabled them to remain within their church, free to practise their personal faith according to conscience. Father Gemini is the exemplar here.

But from the late 1940s these ethnographers, as I shall term them, were being overtaken by the professional social anthropologists, trained by Malinowski himself and by his own students located primarily in the LSE and Oxford.

Malinowski's contributions lay both in his concept of anthropological practice – extensive fieldwork rather than flying visits, and theory – the functional interdependence of all aspects of culture.

Following his example, his students spent long periods – then often one and a half to two years – in the field, with hopes for return visits. They lived in the villages with their informants; a biographical film of Malinowski is entitled *Off the Verandah*. They learned the local language and not only observed but participated in the daily lives of 'their people'. They tried to grasp the view of the world experienced by their informants as well as offering their own explanations.

Fieldwork of this kind in an alien, exotic culture was a traumatic experience – an initiation or, as some might add, the equivalent to undergoing psychoanalysis. One was not a 'proper' anthropologist without this – fieldwork in one's own culture would not do. The returning fieldworkers were hailed in their departments as heroes; they regaled their juniors with descriptions of 'their people – the most wonderful that you could hope for' and of their excellent rapport with them – for such was necessary to validate their data. Mark and Digby revered Tom; Deirdre was infatuated.

In focussing on the interdependence of the parts of a society, social anthropologists studied a process – how did societies reproduce themselves, or change – and this posed a problem to be studied. They were no longer 'butterfly collectors' of discrete cultural traits studied for their own sake or because they might be forgotten; nor, *pace* Professor Mainwaring (of the generation trained at the turn of the century) was the collection of data intended for the use of missionaries and government officials to aid them in their work (LTA p 15).

Between these social anthropologists and the older ethnographers there was inevitable tension, manifest in *Less Than Angels* in the altercation over the garden fence between Alaric Lydgate and Tom Mallow. The ethnographers accused the social anthropologists of spending much less time in the field than they had, and of therefore knowing less. In these battles Barbara Pym is even-handed. In the face of Tom's thesis, Alaric burns his notes in a Guy Fawkes bonfire; but Father Gemini persuades the benefactress Millie Foresight to switch her funds from Mainwaring's fieldwork fellowship to his own project on the origins of the word *hyaena*. In the unperformed radio play, 'Parrot's Eggs', it is Canon Song who rightly understands the significance of the gift, not the middle-aged woman social anthropologist Miss Jellink; but their rivalry ends in marriage. Honours even!

Barbara Pym herself drew attention to the similarity between her own craft as novelist and that of the social anthropologist – though there are differences too. Both par-

ticipate in the arenas they describe – she was an active member of her church. Both carry, figuratively, their little notebooks, but whilst she notes only the comic or bizarre, the social anthropologist – impossibly obliged to record everything – nevertheless notes the mundane, for one never knows when it might prove significant. Pym the novelist catches the nuances which so vividly characterise a relationship; the social anthropologist is building the bare bones, the basic rules of the structure.

Both emphasise 'detachment', but they imply different things. The social anthropologists contrast the world view of informants with their own external appraisal. They must behave even-handedly towards all sections of the community, not being partisan towards any one faction. In the early '50s they displayed a range of attitudes towards on-going social change. Some saw it proper to remain in their academic ivory towers, doing nothing to change the society studied; others, I suspect the majority, whilst not actively intervening in the process of change, hoped at least that their studies might prove useful to their informants. Tom certainly felt this, as he expressed in his crisis of conscience just before completing his thesis (LTA p 105).

For Barbara Pym, however, detachment is being 'the fly on the wall', not the participant observation of the social anthropologist. Her 'excellent women' are always peeping behind curtains, from upstairs windows; she herself eavesdrops in cafes, on the buses. This derives not from the novelist's craft but from her own personality. Though quite active in her church and community, she was never involved in movements, protests, or major projects, and neither are her characters. Her novels are static – the scene at the end is the same as at the beginning, though individuals may have moved their positions.

This seems well exemplified by her portrayal of Emma Howick in *A Few Green Leaves*. Emma, an LSE Social Anthropologist graduate in the early '70s, returns to her village to write up a report on her field study in London. She feels an urge to record village life – she methodically lists all the residents, describes a coffee morning, but apparently cannot conceive any process of change, any problem in the village; she does not become involved in its activities except passively. In the end she decides to write a novel; I think that her LSE tutors would have been most disappointed in her lack of imagination.

Barbara Pym continually alludes to the contrast between rich imagination displayed in the novel and the turgidity of academic anthropological writing. But we are all following conventions. Commentators compare Pym with Jane Austen. The career path of the professional social anthropologist demands a doctoral thesis and academic publications, the style of both being pre-ordained. Few have had time or energy to go further in their writing, but it is possible. (My own Oxford supervisor, Paul Bohannon, and his wife Laura, herself a trained social anthropologist, in the course of a decade wrote reports for government, articles for *Africa* and two IAI monographs, an Ethnographic Survey volume, a literary essay on telling the story of *Hamlet* to Tiv elders and a fictional autobiography of fieldwork! Whilst not writing for *Africa*, I was in the mid '50s contributing popular articles to the weekly *West Africa*.) In their everyday conversation,

with their tales from the field, social anthropologists can be scintillating company; they need not be boring or unintelligible.

Pym calls for more imagination from the anthropologist. Little can be expected from the ethnographer supplying data for the check lists enshrined in *Notes and Queries*. But the social anthropologist is giving us, though this is realised more now than in the '50s, an interpretation of the society studied; as some of us now assert, the academic monograph tells us as much about the author as about the people and societies described.

In some further ways, *Less Than Angels* is like an anthropological study. The good social anthropologist clearly distinguishes his own analysis from the views held by the subjects of study; similarly, Barbara Pym expresses through some of her characters a conventional view of anthropology which differs from her own experience. But whilst she, I feel, grapples with this difference, her commentators ignore it – becoming like the bad social anthropologist who confuses his own perceptions and those of his subjects.

In *Less Than Angels*, and indeed in several other novels, Barbara Pym presents a view of anthropology, and anthropologists too (not classified by type as I have done) conventionally held by the English middle classes – who at that time had very little acquaintance with the discipline. As Minnie Foresight remarked in justifying her bequest to Father Gemini rather than to Professor Mainwaring, she couldn't see the difference. Presumably this was the view held by Pym, too, before she joined the Institute.

I would term this view of anthropology as 'all sex and savagery'. The novels are full of illustrations, almost all originating with the excellent women or the older generation of ethnographers. Mainwaring describes his colleagues hacking their way through the Congo forests. Deirdre's aunt assumes Tom to have been killed by violent natives with poisoned war spears; strange diseases are rampant; people eat everything except hyaenas. The accoutrements of anthropology are the exotic masks. Anthropologists are forever reading professional articles on sexual practices, steatopygia. So it goes on. Exotic though anthropology certainly is, it is also futile – endless classification of artefacts and traits, searches for the origins of vernacular words.

Such an image demeans the anthropologists themselves. They become weird, adopting native customs (Tom is imagined by Deirdre's aunt wearing native dress), often unable to recognise the norms of their own society (Alaric Lydgate beats his carpets on the lawn in the evening). They are not only anti-social but un-social; Graham Pettifer bores his pub companions with his stories; much talk is about sex and so unsuitable for female company. Consequently anthropology is of low social status – both Professor Mainwaring and Tom disappoint their families, the former in not entering an expected diplomatic career. In short, anthropology is unsuitable.

But anthropology in the early '50s was not like this – at least not at the institute which Daryll Forde was transforming into a most highly respected academic centre, focus of the new social anthropology.

I have noted the titles of over fifty articles which appeared in *Africa* in 1952 and 1953 – all edited presumably by Barbara Pym. Only one refers to masks and initiation rites, one to puberty rituals, one to an obscure linguistic issue. Many are straightforward descriptions of social structure; many deal with contemporary problems of chieftancy, law or land tenure. There are articles on migration, urbanisation, investment and economic development. Tom's own interests, noted above, fall within this spectrum of *Africa* articles – for most were written by the likes of him and his peers. The contrast is exemplified too in Professor Mainwaring's comment to his students that they will hear the roar of lions in Africa, to which Mark replies that the only roar that he is likely to hear is that of 'the high powered car of one of the urbanised anthropologists'.

In *Less Than Angels* it is the ethnographers who are exotic – Alaric Lydgate, handsome like an Easter Island carving, inappropriately wearing his African masks – or figures of fun – Father Gemini bundled into, or unbundling himself from, his clerical garb. But these in fact lived in Africa within European enclaves – the government and mission stations. In contrast the young social anthropologists are so ordinary, in spite of their close sojourn with the indigenous peoples. Catherine surmises that, being trained to observe norms of behaviour, they are self-consciously well behaved; though it is only the Frenchman, Jean-Pierre le Rossignol, who overtly adapts to the norms of his hosts. In Pym's descriptions they are most ordinarily dressed (as impecunious students); they are often shy (Rupert Stonebird) and so unlike the charismatic image of the big-game hunter, colonial overlord. Even their social origins are ordinary – Tom comes from an upper-middle class country estate in a small Shropshire town, not too unlike Pym's own family home. Training in social anthropology is but a veneer; Digby succeeds to Tom's grant (and also eventually marries Deirdre and becomes a professor); but Mark, after graduation, goes into his future father-in-law's financial firm in the City. And finally, of course, Tom died by accident, a chance shot fired in a local political fracas.

I therefore see in *Less Than Angels*, and in the other novels too, though less overtly so, the contradiction which Barbara Pym experienced between the conventional image of anthropology which she had shared, enhanced perhaps by an unfulfilled wish for the exotic – for more Alarics – and the very prosaic presence of us social anthropologists who visited her in her Institute office. Yes, we did have our professional jargon and kinship diagrams, but the mother's brother (subject of Tom's thesis) is but an uncle; and what are the Pym novels about but aunts (if not uncles)? As many of her social anthropologist characters observe, the customs of the English are no less quaint than those of the African. This dichotomy between the conventional and the experienced view of social anthropology does not occur in the other novels – the descriptions of events in the world of church and excellent women are not contrasted with an outsider's expectations.

Here Barbara Pym had a problem. Social anthropologists live with those whom they study. By preference, she rigidly segregated her home and office life; none of her close personal friends was an anthropologist. It would have been, in

any case, impossible for her to enter into the world of social anthropology. She had no access to student departments, observing us in seminars and coffee bars (though in her early years in the Institute she did attend, for one term, one of Daryll Forde's courses of lectures at University College); we are given to understand that Tom and Deirdre spent much time together – but we are not privy to their conversations. Most of the time we were in Africa; she never visited Africa, let alone shadowed an anthropologist there. It is not even clear where Tom did his fieldwork; there are hints of an urban location, yet he lives in a 'hut'. We were shadowy and transient figures. Barbara Pym and Hazel Holt used to invent families and backgrounds for some of their visitors – and then could not remember which was fact and which fiction! It is almost as if one were to base one's novels about priests and excellent women on observations and interviews in the local supermarket, because one had no access to the church and its parochial activity.

Thus *Less Than Angels* deals, perforce, with anthropologists in a very particular manner. It sees them on the fringes of typical Pym territory. The novel focuses on the relationships between Tom and the three women in his life and between the several sets of anthropologists – between the students themselves, between students and academic hierarchy. But the focal location of the novel is Deirdre's house; it is next door to Alaric Lydgate's (whose sister works in Mainwaring's centre); it is here that parties are held; it is here that Catherine retreats after Tom's death. We have no clear picture of Catherine's flat, and only the briefest sight of Tom's digs with Mark and Digby.

The anthropologists are marginal – between the assumed exotic world of their discipline and the 'normal' local community. Observers may see their movement between these two worlds as problematic; how can one live for over a year in the most primitive of conditions, far from any European contact, and then, after a day's flight, merge back into one's former environment as if one had never been away? Perhaps only those who have done it know how easy it is. Cultural relativism enables the social anthropologist to feel at home in any society. Thus the ethnographer Alaric is 'saved' by Catherine and restored to respectability, but we have no explicit statement of the social anthropologists' own view of their lives. Tom wonders, quite reasonably, how different his life would have been had he not taken up anthropology but assumed his expected role in the family business. But he is clearly a very able and successful scholar; he completes his thesis in remarkable time. He seems well organised – having written all his Christmas cards before his death. His highest career aspirations are met with an award enabling him to return to Africa where he hopes that his research will benefit his subjects. To describe him, as commentators have done, as confused, a tribeless wanderer in pursuit of triviality, seems a crass misinterpretation.

Furthermore, *Less Than Angels* is seen as falling into the typical Pym pattern with strong women, but weak men. Tom is clearly attractive to women and retains the love of his three consecutive paramours, but none of these is an obviously suitable wife. Elaine lives in the conventional past, interested in dogs and without a shred of understanding of

social anthropology; the mothering Catherine seems to have little interest in the discipline; Deirdre is the starry-eyed adolescent – Tom is not averse to her charms but is quickly bored with her company. Catherine's retort that Tom is returning to Africa because he cannot cope with his relationships with these women, 'Your people wait for you. How soothing it will be to get away from all this complexity of personal relationships to the simplicity of a primitive tribe', seems a particularly bitchy remark, though appropriate to a jilted woman. This cannot be Pym's own view of Tom. It is in examples such as this that we must be careful in distinguishing between the belief and sentiments attributed to individual characters and the author's own intentions and viewpoint.

So, to conclude: what would Tom have made of the novel? As in the other novels, Barbara Pym's characterisations seem brilliant; she gives us caricatures which are immediately recognisable – whether in individuals, in professional gatherings or organisations, even when they reflect no exact likeness. Tom would have been happy with the image of himself presented in the novel – at least, as he interpreted it.

As an anthropological exercise, one of the prime merits of the novel is the delineation of the several types of anthropologist and of the conflicts between some of these. Time and again little incidents reflect these tensions, which, however, passed unnoticed by those not immersed in the discipline.

This leaves us all with an enigma. Barbara Pym knew so much about the anthropological world and its practitioners; but she remained distanced from it. She excluded it from her 'private' life; I suspect that she did not really understand the theoretical basis of social anthropology; she had had no formal training in the social sciences. The 'fly on the wall' cannot really comprehend what is going on (or so a social anthropologist would hold). *Less Than Angels* is about anthropologists, for such are most of its principal characters; but mostly it is about the discordance between a popular image of anthropology of the early 1950s and the reality of a new social science discipline. Barbara Pym herself was caught between a romantic yearning for the past and an obvious, and certainly appreciated, affection for her younger authors – the Tom Mallows of this world.

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