

Two English lady novelists: The ATS and the BPS

Hazel K. Bell

Two authors of our century, Angela Thirkell and Barbara Pym, are taken to write in the same genteel, satirical vein, and their novels often appeal to the same readers. Both wrote wittily of their own social class in their period, including the effects on English life of the Second World War. Both feature the Anglican clergy, with scholars, members of the professional classes, and many ladies in their cast. Both make much use of literary quotation and allusion, not always identified, greatly intriguing their readers (Thirkell draws particularly on Dickens; Pym on seventeenth-century poets). The novels of both, while most enjoyable narrations to read, may also be taken as social history of the 20th century, closely observing its clothes, food, behaviour and relationships. They each cast on the world around them the outsider's eye of a woman alone, lacking the support and social status of a husband-escort. Both have been called malicious, and compared, for their subject range and style, to Jane Austen.

There are, though, many differences between their lives and works, counterpointing the similarities.

Angela Thirkell lived 1890-1961, the cherished child of a distinguished family: granddaughter of the preRaphaelite painter, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and daughter of Dr John Mackail, a classical scholar who became Professor of Poetry at Oxford. J. M. Barrie was her godfather, bestowing her name on Peter Pan's Wendy Moira Angela Darling. She did not herself attend university, though, and suffered two broken marriages leading to bitter relationships with her elder two sons. After her return from Australia, scene from 1920-30 of her disastrous second period of married life, she became a solitary figure, isolated in London society, through her later years. She comments sardonically (in *High Rising*), 'A woman who can't bring a man with her is apt to be, if not unwelcome, at least the sort of person who doesn't head one's list of guests.'

Barbara Pym lived 1913-80, born in Oswestry, Shropshire, the child of a suburban solicitor. She graduated from Oxford in English Language and Literature, then followed a London career as an editor in a learned institution. She experienced a succession of unhappy love affairs, but never married. After retirement she spent her last years living with her sister in an Oxfordshire cottage.

Both writers' frustrations found outlet in their work. Thirkell railed derisively against university-educated women, career women, foreigners, the Labour government (the terrible 'Them') and its effects on postwar England, and dreary husbands 'removed by death with kindly care'. Sons in her novels grow up spoiled, sulky, condescending and hurtful to their parents. Her snobbishness in her later years grew bitter and extreme, and her portrayals of members of the working classes, particularly servants and evacuees, are sneering rather than satirical, making quite uncomfortable reading.

Pym, by contrast, shows what Philip Larkin called a 'rueful yet compassionate acceptance' of loneliness, lack of fulfilment of potentialities, lack of appreciation; the lowly status accorded by society to the unmarried woman. Her cast of 'excellent women', many of them 'typical English spinsters', accept the apparent emptiness of their lives without complaint or demand for more, devoting themselves to 'good works', pastoral duties and the clergy, suffused, like Letty in *Quartet in Autumn*, with

a 'mild general undemanding kindness to all'. Warned not to 'expect too much', Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent women* 'forebore to remark that women like me really expected very little—nothing, almost'. A. S. Byatt observes, 'Pym's novels are cosy and sad'.¹

Thirkell wrote 37 novels, nearly all in a single sequence set in 'Barssetshire', in succession to Anthony Trollope's. They appeared annually at least, her characters recurring constantly, ageing and intermarrying through a time span of nearly thirty years. She presents herself in her most-featured character, Laura Morland, a best-selling novelist, much-loved—indeed universally venerated—who nonchalantly dismisses her own work as 'good bad books; the same every year; you can't tell them apart'. Laura is the heroine of the first of the Barssetshire novels, *High Rising* (written when Thirkell was 43), appears in each of them, and celebrates her seventieth birthday in the last, *Three Score and Ten*. She is a widow who turns to novel-writing to pay for the private education of her four sons—as the Thirkell after her two broken marriages, providing alone for her three. Perhaps she sought thus to compensate herself in her fiction for the lack of social and critical success in her life. Laura explains to her publisher, 'It's not highbrow. I've just got to work. You see, my husband was nothing but an expense to me while he was alive, and naturally he is no help to me now he's dead, so I thought if I could write some rather good bad books, it would help with the boys' education'. Laura refuses many offers of marriage through the sequence, preferring (somewhat unconvincingly) her independent motherhood.

Thirkell's last novel, unfinished at her death, was completed by C. A. Lejeune and published posthumously. She achieved high popularity, but not true critical esteem; after her death her books fell out of print. Some are now being republished in paperback.

Pym wrote twelve novels, portraying the scenes with which she was familiar—middle-class village life, parish churches, London offices, scholarly institutions—in minute detail. Cups of tea are provided to meet all crises. She too reintroduces characters in subsequent novels, but less obviously; they make only minor appearances, sometimes unnamed, simply for the *cognoscenti* to appreciate. Philip Larkin cautioned her (in a letter) against overdoing this: 'My feeling is that Angela Thirkell ... vitiated her later books by mentioning everyone in every one'. Her first six novels met with popular success; then she suffered sixteen bleak years of rejection and obscurity. Acclaim for her work by both Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil led to her rediscovery, repute, and a nomination for the Booker Prize (for *Quartet in Autumn*). She too appears in her own novels, always as an unobtrusive, observant figure. For example, in *No Fond Return of Love*:

"It was at this point that somebody came to the unoccupied table, but as she was a woman of about forty, ordinary-looking and unaccompanied, nobody took much notice of her. As it happened, she was a novelist; indeed, some of the occupants of the tables had read and enjoyed her books; but it would never have occurred to them to connect her name ... with that of the author they admired."

Pym's humble fictional acceptance of her position contrasts poignantly with Thirkell's triumphant but scattily endearing

Laura Morland. Dying (of cancer) at 67, Pym never fully enjoyed the cult status and acclaim that have since been accorded her. How she would have loved to know that she had achieved an entry in *The Oxford companion to English literature!* ('Her novels . . . are satirical tragi-comedies of middle-class life: many of the relationships described consist of a kind of celibate flirtation.'). All her works are now available in paperback, and even in translation in other languages. Several of her unfinished stories have been edited and published since her death by her friend and editorial colleague, Hazel Holt, as have too her letters and diaries (*A very private eye*); there has been a spate of posthumous publications, including a book of recipes drawn from her novels, *A la Pym*.

Each writer now has her own appreciation society. These too somewhat resemble each other, seeking to publicise and celebrate their author and her works (and both being members of the Alliance of Literary Societies). The Angela Thirkell Society was founded in 1980, with her third son, Lance, as its President. It has now produced 16 annual journals, and has a membership of nearly 400, in the UK, Ireland and North America. Activities include visits to sites in Thirkell's life and to her grave, to places of events in the novels; hearing talks; and 'Barchester teas' in members' homes. They also search for second-hand copies of her out-of-print works.

The Barbara Pym Society was inaugurated in 1993 at St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she lived as a student from 1931-34. Its President is Barbara's sister Hilary. A weekend conference has been held at St Hilda's each year since, with talks and demonstrations of a particular theme in her works: clothes,

the church, and next year, food. It has also visited Pym sites in London, particularly churches. Future plans include an in-depth look at single Pym works, study of her own reading and literary influences, and of her influence on other writers. It has 236 members, and produces an occasional newsletter, *Green Leaves*.

Both writers, quintessentially English as they are, find particular appreciation in the US, where their works are studied at universities, and criticism continues to appear. Each has had one of her earliest novels dramatised on BBC Radio (Thirkell's *Wild Strawberries*, Pym's *Some Tame Gazelle*). Moreover, that Thirkell novel, dramatised for the BBC World Service in 1992, had previously been abridged and read on BBC 'Storytime' in 1982 by Elizabeth Proud, she who had also dramatised the Pym novel for radio, and is the Chairman of the Pym Society!

Membership of the two societies in some cases overlaps; perhaps more of each should try the works of the other author. Both find that, agonize over themes for meetings as their committees may, simple reading aloud of the texts fills the halls with laughter. The predominant characteristic of both novelists is their sparkling wit.

Reference

1. Byatt, A. S. 'Barbara Pym' in *Passions of the mind*. Chatto & Windus, 1991.

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