The Anglican Clergy in the Novels of Barbara Pym

Isabel Ashe Bonnyman Stanley, University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Date of Award
12-1990

Degree Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy

Major
English

Major Professor
Norman J. Sanders

Committee Members
Richard Penner, B. J. Leggett, Martha L. Osborne

Abstract
Barbara Pym, a mid-twentieth-century British novelist of manners, peoples her twelve novels and shorter works with Anglican clergy and the "excellent women" of a certain age who are their parishioners. This study examines the development of clerical types in her novels, shows how these types are descended from earlier writers such as Jane Austen, the Brontës and Anthony Trollope and traces the fortunes of the mid-twentieth-century Anglican Church in her work.

My research was facilitated by having access to Barbara Pym's letters, journals and personal papers in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and by having the opportunity to interview her sister, Hilary Pym Walton, in Oxford.

In her earliest novels Pym depicts the Anglican clergy as ineffectual and humorous but central to community life. In her middle and later work she traces the decline of the Anglican Church and the rise of the Welfare State, which does not fill the void left by the Church. Pym examines the question, what creates a sense of community and purpose in the modern world? Pym's friend, the poet Philip Larkin, who looks at some of the same issues in his work, shared ideas with her over the years via a large collection of letters, which shed light on the methods both writers were employing.

Barbara Pym finds that the Anglican Church has lost much vigor but does still serve in a modest way as a state church and source of cohesion.

Recommended Citation
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/1503
with it. The first person narrator is Mildred Lathbury, the daughter of a clergyman, brought up in a country vicarage she is unmarried in her thirties (this is the 1950’s so that's fairly definitely spinsterish) she lives in a small flat with a shared bathroom close to the Anglican church that she regularly attends. Also living close by are Father Malory a high Anglican priest who it would appear doesn't believe in clergy marrying, which many people think a pity – that Mildred would have done very well for him. With Julian Mallory lives his sister Winifred. Julian and Winifred are Mildred’s closest friends.