

GREEN LEAVES

The Journal of the Barbara Pym Society

Vol. 9, No. 1, May 2003

THE NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE 2003

The fifth annual meeting of the Barbara Pym Society of North America took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the weekend of March 29-30, 2003, on the campus of Harvard College. About 25 of those attending gathered for the traditional Friday evening meal at Chang Sho restaurant, allowing us to get a jump-start on Pym topics before the conference's official opening. We were particularly delighted to find several members from England among us, including Yvonne Cocking. This was Yvonne's first trip to the US, and what a treat it was to have someone on hand who had worked at the African Institute when Barbara was there!

On Saturday morning, we arrived at Harvard Law School to find Ellen Miller and her helpers presiding over the registration table and tea table with good humour and efficiency. After greeting old friends and welcoming newcomers, we enjoyed one more cup and the conference started. Ellen began by noting the irony that in the midst of war, we had gathered together to talk about this quiet English writer and the world she created — a world in which the appearance of a caterpillar in one's cauliflower cheese was viewed with horror. She remarked that she hoped the balm of Barbara Pym would offer us respite amid so much fear and sadness.

At ease with ladies

The first speaker was **Kate Charles**, author of the well-known 'Book of



Kate Charles

Psalm's' mystery series as well as three suspense novels. Charles is American, but lives in England, where she is chair of the Barbara Pym Society. The title of her talk was inspired by lines in *NFRL* and *AFGL*, where Pym points out that Neville Forbes and Adam Prince, with their clerical backgrounds, are 'at ease with ladies' in situations such as parish functions. Charles considered Pym's clergy in relation to the women in their lives — including wives, sisters, and what Helen Napier refers to as 'holy fowl' — those parish women who take care of the clergy and even fall in love with them.

Charles began with curates, noting that they are almost always 'good looking', though inclined to be somewhat pompous and to take themselves too seriously. We have Mr. Donne, whom Harriet cherishes and feeds, though he

disappoints her by marrying. Then there is Mr Lattimer, who proposes to and is very sensibly turned down by Miss Morrow, and the startlingly handsome Marius Ransome, who proposes to, and is accepted by, dim mousy Mary Beamish. Charles also mentioned Bishop Grote, who before he grew to resemble a sheep, was one of the must 'sought-after curates in the history of the Church of England'. Luckily for the bishop, he runs into Connie Aspinall while stocking up on supplies before his return to Africa. Charles noted, 'I can just imagine him ticking the items off his list: mosquito netting, water sterilizing tablets, wife...' And suddenly there is Miss Aspinall. And let's not forget one other curate, Basil Branch, who appears in *AUA*, at ease with the now elderly Bede sisters, as he escorts them around Italy and recovers from ill health.

While 'the typical Pym curate is good-looking and self-centred,' Charles noted that the typical Pym vicar is a celibate Anglo-Catholic. And whereas marriage seems to be on the minds of the curates, the celibacy of the clergy is a major theme for the vicars — even the married ones. For instance, Mark Ainger's reflections that it might possibly be 'better not to marry' are prompted by Sophia's devotion to their cat, Faustina, whose hairs he found on the linen altar cloth at early Mass. Likewise, Nicholas Cleveland, noting that Jane has spoken out of turn at a parish meeting, reflects that she will 'never learn when not to speak', musing that there is 'something

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