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‘The remembrance whereof is pleasant’: A Note on Walter Pope’s Role in the Attempt to Abolish Academic Dress during the Commonwealth

by William Gibson

In Hargreaves-Mawdsley’s history of academic dress, there is a short paragraph on the attempt to abolish academic dress at Oxford during the Commonwealth in Britain. Hargreaves-Mawdsley noted that John Evelyn saw academic dress still in use in Oxford in 1654 but also indicated that, by 1658, there was a serious attempt by the Puritan authorities in the University to abolish academic robes. Hargreaves-Mawdsley mentioned that it was the proctor, Walter Pope, who averted the abolition. However he fails to give the account which lies behind the failed attempt at abolition.¹ The purpose of this brief article is to recount Walter Pope’s own colourful narrative of the resistance to the attempt to abolish academic dress at Oxford.

Walter Pope was born in Oxford in 1628 the son of Puritan parents. He matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1645, but migrated to Wadham College, Oxford, where his half-brother, John Wilkins, was warden. He graduated BA in 1649 and became a fellow of Wadham and an MA in 1651. In 1658 he was both sub-warden of Wadham and a proctor of the University. His later career was to take him to the Gresham Professorship of Astronomy, a fellowship of the Royal Society and, after he lost his sight in 1687, the post of registrar of Chester diocese, a sinecure he held in retirement until his death in 1714. In 1661 he received the degree of DM from Oxford.²

Pope’s account of his fight to save academic dress is contained in Chapter 6 of his life of his old friend, Seth Ward, bishop of Salisbury.³ Pope’s account of ‘the controversie concerning caps and hoods’ indicated his ability as a university politician but also a certain, and perhaps justified, self-regard. It also illustrated his

¹ W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *A History of Academical Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1963), p. 106.

² A. M. Clerke, rev. A. McConnell, ‘Walter Pope’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, OUP, 2004).

³ W. Pope, *The Life of the Right Reverend Father in God Seth, Lord Bishop of Salisbury, And Chancellor of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. With a Brief Account of Bishop Wilkins, Mr Lawrence Rooke, Dr Isaac Barrow, Dr Turberville and Others, Written by Dr Walter Pope, Fellow of the Royal Society* (London: Keblewhite, 1697).

hostility to the Puritan republicans who had taken over the University in the 1650s and whom he called those who ‘style them by the name they assumed themselves, the Godly party’. He regarded them with contempt and believed that they were simply causing confusion. To add to the confusion, Pope claimed, ‘they resolved to take away those decent distinctions of Degrees, Caps and Hoods, and they had done it by Law, had I not stood in the Gap’. Thinking back to the events of 1658, from his blindness in 1697, Pope wrote ‘memenisse juvat’—the remembrance whereof is pleasant—and ‘sumo superbiam quaestam meritis’—let no man rob me of my deserved honour.⁴

Pope’s account of the attempt to abolish caps and hoods began with an ironical observation that the Puritan party was always concerned to emphasize how persecuted they were, and how often they were attacked for knavery and hypocrisy (‘which was too true of a great number of them’, Pope observed). But they were the same party who sought to abolish academic caps and hoods, ‘crying out against them as reliques of popery and rags of the scarlet whore’. The first salvo in the attempt to abolish caps and hoods began with an approach to Pope, who, as proctor, would have to support such a measure. The Puritans believed that they had chosen an effective emissary in an old schoolfellow and friend of Pope’s—whom he dare not name. This emissary, though the son of a Royalist, was disappointed in his career and had gone over to the Puritan party. When his friend told him that he sought Pope’s support for a motion to abolish caps and hoods the exchange, as Pope gives it, went as follows:

He was a man of learning, and knew it, and very hot and zealous in his way; he, I say, came to my chamber and told me his message. Well, said I to him, what have you to say against caps and hoods? He made a long discourse, which I heard with patience; and when I perceiv’d he was silent, Ned, I said to him, prithee go back to thy chamber, and put in writing all that thou hast said and bring it to me. And what will you do with it then, said he? I will, I reply’d, blot out the words caps and hoods and in their places insert gowns; will not your arguments be every whit as strong against them, as against formalities? I confess they will, he answered, but we are not come thither yet. I replied, I’d make it my endeavour to keep you where you are, and so we parted.⁵

Pope’s response, to substitute ‘gowns’ for caps and hoods was an astute move, since many Puritans regarded the black gown as part of the inheritance of reformed Calvinist Protestantism from Geneva and therefore would not have been keen to abolish it. Indeed the ‘Geneva gown’ was part of the dress for a clergyman while preaching and was widely regarded as a sign of strong Puritanism.

⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 37–38. In this passage we learn the first name of the emissary, Ned, but no further identification.

Pope was clear that this visit from his school friend was only the opening of the battle. He was well-versed in the statutes of the University of Oxford, which laid down that no law of the University could be repealed (such as that ordering the use of academic dress) without the attestation of the vice-chancellor and proctors that it had been formally repealed in Convocation. So it was to Convocation that the focus of the Puritan pressure moved. The vice-chancellor, John Owen, was a tolerant Puritan but capable of inflexibility. He had, for example, sentenced two women Quakers to be whipped and was a firm supporter of the Puritan Westminster Confession of Faith. Owen called Convocation, having made sure that he had a majority for the abolition of caps and hoods among the heads of houses.

Pope was able to call the backwoodsmen to Convocation in his support. As he put it:

all the Antediluvian Cavaliers, I mean the fellows of colleges, who had good fortune to survive the flood of the [Puritan Parliamentary] visitation, and keep their places, and who had ever since that liv'd retir'd in their cells, never meddling with public affairs in the University, nor appearing in the Convocation, or Congregations, came now as it were in troops, *Velut Agmine facto*,⁶ habited in their formalities, to give their votes for the continuation, most of whose faces were unknown to the greatest part of the assembly...⁷

Pope estimated that he had a majority to prevent the abolition of caps and hoods, but he had not reckoned with the deviousness of his opponents. The vice-chancellor proclaimed that the Convocation had been called to consider the abolition of caps and hoods and put the matter to the vote. After the scrutiny, Owen declared that the vote had passed and seemed to be intending to proceed to other matters. Pope, astonished by his brazen behaviour and the compliance of his fellow proctor, 'took the boldness to tell the vice-chancellor, that the majority of the suffrages was to the contrary'. He also told the vice-chancellor that the right to declare the results of votes was entrusted to the proctors only, and that the vice-chancellor had no right to declare the results of votes. Owen, in fury, told Pope 'Mr Proctor hold your tongue.' At this insult to the proctor, the Masters of Arts 'in a tumultuous manner' rose from their seats and 'began to mutiny'; the disturbance was so great that the vice-chancellor had to dissolve Convocation.

During the Convocation meeting, Pope also knew that he had what he called 'a sheet anchor in reserve, which I would have cast out, rather than have lost my ship'. This was a University statute that required voters in Convocation to wear the habits of their degrees. This implies that as late as 1658 MAs wore Convocation habits. Since almost all of the vice-chancellor's supporters were Puritans, who

⁶ 'as if formed in columns' from the Latin translation of Aesop's fables and Virgil's Aeneid.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 42–43.

refused to wear their Convocation habits and hoods, Pope knew he could legally challenge and reject the votes of those in favour of the abolition of the use of caps and hoods. But it had not come to this extreme.

Nevertheless, Owen and the Puritans did not give up the contest. The day after the dissolution of Convocation, Pope was visited by a bedel, who told him that the vice-chancellor desired him to come to his lodging to sign an edict that the statute had been overturned in Convocation. Pope was 'wonderfully amazed by this message' and sent a reply to Owen asking whether he had mistaken him for a fool, a knave or a coward. With a rhetorical flourish, Pope included in his message to the vice-chancellor that he would 'sooner cut off my hand and send it to him as do what he required'. Pope noted that there was no reply from the vice-chancellor. It was Pope's good fortune that Owen was replaced as vice-chancellor by John Conant, who was more sympathetic to the wearing of academic dress, and the threat receded.

The consequence of the attack on caps and hoods was, as Pope noted with relish, that 'they who before car'd not whether they wore caps or hoods, or not, now immediately procured them; never had the makers and sellers thereof a better vent for their wares, as it appear'd the next Sunday, for there was then a greater number of scholars at St Mary's in their formalities than ever I saw before or since that time, and the use of them continued ...'⁸

Pope's account of the events of 1658 are perhaps a little exaggerated and emphasize his own 'heroic' role in the defence of 'formalities', but undoubtedly his determination to defend the use of caps and hoods demonstrated the deep commitment to them of Anglicans, and the effective means to which an academic politician had to resort to defend them.

⁸ Ibid., p. 45.