

Academic Dress: Personal Reminiscences

by Arthur B. Casey

My first contact with an academic hood was when, at eight years of age, I joined a local parish church choir. I can still vividly remember the choir lining up in the vestry ready to process into the church and our vicar, a Keble man, holding his Burgon-shape MA hood in front of him by the neckband and, with great style, swinging it over his head. Most of the clergy who came to preach at our church at that time seemed to have the same hood; these were the days when most of those entering the Church seemed to be Oxford men. How things have changed over the years in the Anglican Church!

Being a member of a choir gave me two other lifelong interests. One is a love of English cathedral music, mainly the Victorian and Edwardian period, although I also have a great fondness for the music of Herbert Howells. My other interest is in organ building. While I was a member of the choir, our Norman & Beard organ was dismantled for cleaning. Seeing all the different pipes placed in the side aisles fascinated me so much that I decided that I would be an organ builder when I left school. And I did in fact work for an organ-building firm for two years.

I can clearly remember a Deanery Service, at which our choir was to sing, where one of the clergy attending was wearing what to me looked like a very unusual hood: it was lined with fur and had black spots on it. Of course, a few years later I found out that this was a Lampeter BA hood, but the next time I actually saw one of these was at a Burgon Society garden party at St George's College, Weybridge, a few years ago.

When I was about thirteen years old, my brother, who worked in the Mining Department at Birmingham University, used to tell me when degree congregations were taking place. I would go to the entrance of the Great Hall and watch the Chancellor's procession. The Chancellor was Sir Anthony Eden at that time and the organ was played by the University Organist, Dr George Thalben-Ball. I used to get great enjoyment from watching all the professors and doctors in their Tudor bonnets in the procession. In those far-off days, of all the robes I loved to see the green ones worn by Leeds doctors were my favourites.

After watching the Chancellor's procession, I would go round to the Students' Union building, where all the graduands collected their hired academic robes. I used to pester the people who had come from Ede & Ravenscroft and ask them to show me the different hoods and gowns being delivered in wickerwork hampers.

In his book *Academical Dress from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (p. 206) Dr Charles Franklyn states that the Birmingham University MA hood is one of the most beautiful in the world. From Dr Franklyn this is praise indeed—considering he had not designed it!

It was not until I was in my late twenties that my interest in academic dress really began to flower. I had often wondered if anyone had written a book on this unusual subject. I soon found out that there were a number of them. Looking through a large book on the history of English costume in Birmingham Central Reference Library, I found a reference to academic dress and its origins; best of all there was a long bibliography at the back, which gave a very comprehensive list of publications on the subject. The books listed were by authors such as Haycraft, Hargreaves-Mawdsley, Franklyn and Shaw. Little did I know at this time that I would eventually get to know the last three of these authors personally!

The first books I purchased about academic dress were the very early ones written in 1875 and 1882 by the Revd T. W. Wood. One day I was browsing in an antiquarian bookshop in Birmingham, the sort that no longer exists, very dusty and full of cobwebs. As I looked along the shelves I just couldn't believe my luck: there were three books by Wood and I bought them for just a few shillings.

Within the next few years I was able to locate three editions of *Degrees and Hoods of the World's Universities and Colleges* by Frank W. Haycraft. In fact, my fourth edition is a dedication copy for Alwyn Surplice, organist of Winchester Cathedral, signed by the editor, E. W. Scobie Stringer. Having managed to obtain three of the editions, I was now particularly keen to find the first, published in 1923, and the fifth, published in 1972. I later discovered that the fifth was published by Dr Franklyn, in collaboration with three other authors, in a limited edition of 500 copies.

I managed to trace Dr Franklyn's address, in Hassocks, Sussex, and so I wrote my first letter to him, asking if he had any copies of the fifth edition of Haycraft left. He wrote back, but I found his handwriting most difficult to read—he was a medical man after all! When I did finally decipher his letter, I saw that the book had sold out. But this was to be the first of many contacts with Dr Franklyn. I had so much difficulty reading his writing that I thought it better to go down to Hassocks and meet him. I arranged a date, drove down and found the house, and approached with some trepidation. To the side of the front door was fixed a brass plate with his name and degrees; it had been polished so much that some of the letters were nearly worn away. I rang the doorbell and was invited in. It was obvious that he was a cat-lover; there were one or two cats wandering about the house. At our first meeting I got to know very little about academic dress. Instead I had a lecture on the dangers of salt in our diet. He informed me that even his cats were fed on a salt-free diet. During our conversation I mentioned the teaching

profession; Dr Franklyn was quite emphatic that there were only two groups of people that had a profession and they were in medicine and law.

On another visit I tried to get him to tell me what he thought were the origins of the cream damask robes that Doctors of Music wore at Oxford and Cambridge. I didn't get very far with this enquiry. In fact, he asked me who I thought was the greatest composer. I said that it had to be either Bach or Beethoven. Once again he was quite emphatic: there was only one great composer and that was Haydn. I did not dare argue the point with him!

Later, when I was visiting Sussex again, I called at Dr Franklyn's house but got no reply. A next-door neighbour told me he had been moved to a nursing home in Sackville Gardens, Hove, because he was no longer able to look after himself. I visited him there and it was sad to see him in those circumstances; but the owners had allowed him to keep just one of his cats. We corresponded a few times after that, but then I received a reply to one of my letters not from Dr Franklyn but from a member of the staff informing me that he had died on 15 November 1982.

I wrote a letter of condolence and sent it to the home asking for it to be forwarded to his next of kin. In it I asked whether, when they had sorted out his estate, they would let me know if there were any books they would like to sell on the subject of academic dress. To my surprise, I had a very rude letter by return of post from a man who accused me of harassing his wife. I wrote back immediately saying that my intentions had been completely misunderstood. I soon had a letter from their solicitor threatening action if I did not stop writing to them. And so that was the sad end of my association with Dr Franklyn.

At about this time I got in touch with the secondhand bookshop of *Heraldry Today*, in Knightsbridge, and had them put me on their wants list for any books on academic dress. After some time, they informed me that they had a nice copy of the fifth edition of Haycraft. This of course was the edition published by Dr Franklyn. The frontispiece shows four colour photographs of hoods designed by Dr Franklyn himself, and each worn by him, standing in his back garden. The caption reads—in a phrase now often repeated in Burgon Society circles—'four of the most beautiful and dignified hoods in the world'!

Another book that I particularly wanted was *A History of Academical Dress in Europe* by W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley. I asked our city centre bookshop if they could order me a copy but was told that the title was out of print. And so I wrote to Oxford University Press and they told me that there were no copies left in stock but that they would pass my letter on to the author, who they thought might have a few. I had a reply from Dr Hargreaves-Mawdsley to say that he did in fact have some copies left, but they were all in Canada.

At this time Dr Hargreaves-Mawdsley was Professor of History at Brandon University, Manitoba. I went down to Oxford to see him and he promised that

when he and his wife went back to Canada he would send me a copy of his book. This was the only time I met him; the next communication I had was from his wife some time later to tell me that her husband had died very suddenly at Brandon University. She said that when she had sorted out her husband's estate in Canada she would be coming back to the family home in Oxford.

When Mrs Hargreaves-Mawdsley had settled down in Lathbury Road, in North Oxford, she invited me to tea and on this visit gave me a copy of her late husband's book. I mentioned to her that I visited Brandon quite often because I had relatives who lived in the city. I was astonished to find that their apartment had been in the same street. I always made a point of visiting Mrs Hargreaves-Mawdsley whenever I was in Oxford, but then in April 1984 I heard that she had died.

About ten months after Mrs Hargreaves-Mawdsley's death I had a letter from *Heraldry Today's* bookshop, informing that they had just acquired a copy of Dr Franklyn's *Academical Dress from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*. Needless to say I snapped it up as this book is so rare. When it arrived and I unwrapped it, I discovered on the first page that this was the copy presented to Dr Hargreaves-Mawdsley—what a lovely surprise!

I must mention two other coincidences.

One happened while I was on a Bach tour in East Germany. One member of our group, the Revd Walter Donald Baker, overheard me talking about academic robes. It turned out that he was also interested in academic dress and asked me if I knew about an occasional newsletter called *Hoodata* and thought I would find it interesting. Naturally, when I got home from Germany I sent off for all the back issues.

The other goes back even further. Many years ago I asked Ede & Ravenscroft if they would supply me with a swatch of all the Birmingham University faculty silks. They informed me that this would be no problem but they would need a letter of authorization from the Vice-Chancellor's office. I obtained a letter and sent it off to the robemakers and they sent me a beautifully presented set of the faculty colours. About six or seven years ago a friend of mine, knowing of my (unusual) interest in academic dress sent me details of the Burgon Society on the Web, which he had come across. Needless to say I joined without delay. And so I attended a Burgon Society meeting at Ede & Ravenscroft's warehouse in Waterbeach, near Cambridge. During tea I was having a conversation with Ron Brookes, the Executive Ceremonies Co-ordinator. I mentioned that the company had supplied me with swatches of all the Birmingham colours and, to my surprise, he told me that one of his first jobs when he joined the firm had been to make up that package of silks for me.

The late Dr George W. Shaw was still teaching at Lancing College when I corresponded with him and he sent me a signed copy of his 1966 book, *Academical Dress of British Universities*. Again, it was through the Burgon Society that I eventually met him, at the study day held at Girton College, Cambridge. In conversation we had a chuckle about our various experiences of Dr Franklyn.

Arthur Casey was admitted as a Fellow of the Burgon Society honoris causa in October 2007 in recognition of his life-long and indefatigable research into academical dress and authors who have written about it.

Burgon Society On-line Bibliography

www.burgon.org.uk/society/library/biblio.html

- The aim is to build up a comprehensive resource for those researching the design, history and practice of academical dress.
- The *Introduction* is a brief survey of the key materials on academical dress that are either in print or available in the larger public and university libraries.
- The *Alphabetical list* that follows is intended to cover what has been published on the subject since the beginning of the nineteenth century; earlier items are listed if they include engravings that provide important evidence of robes of the period.
- Suggestions for additions (or corrections) are welcome. Please e-mail webmaster@burgon.org.uk

Forthcoming

Volume 9 of *Transactions of the Burgon Society* will be a North American issue with Stephen Wolgast as Guest Co-Editor. Articles will include:

Peculiar Habits: Academic Costumes at Princeton University
by Donald L. Drakeman

King's Crowns: The History of Academic Dress at King's College and Columbia University'
by Stephen L. Wolgast

Many Coloured Coats: The Systems of Academical Dress in Nova Scotian Universities
and
The 'Canadian Tradition' of Academical Costume in Nova Scotia: The Dalhousie University Model
by John N. Grant

On the Making of an American Doctoral Gown
by Kenneth Crawford

Volume 10, which we hope to publish in time for the Society's tenth anniversary in the autumn of 2010, will include, among other contributions:

Academic Dress in Canterbury
by Michael Brewer

The Academic Dress of the University of Hull 1954 to the Present Day, and Including the Hull York Medical School from 2003
by Richard Baker

The Academic Robes of Graduates of the University of Cambridge from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day
by Nicholas Groves and John Horton

'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