

GREEN LEAVES

The Journal of the Barbara Pym Society

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The 1998 Conference - an American view



Kathy Ackley, Kate Charles and participants at the weekend

More than 80 Pym admirers and scholars from the U.K., America, and Italy gathered at Barbara Pym's college on a beautiful late summer weekend to attend the fifth Annual Meeting. The topic of the meeting was a single book, *Excellent Women*, which sparked outstanding presentations and spirited discussion.

Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting on Saturday morning marked the beginning of the formal programme. Elizabeth Proud, Chairman of the Society's Managing Committee, presided. Membership Secretary Eileen Roberts reported that there were now 288 members, 38 of whom were from North America, and that the Society's funds totalled 4,431 English pounds.

The official Barbara Pym Website developed and maintained by Claudia DiGeorgio was discussed and Ellen Miller reported on an active discussion group on the Website. A show of hands indicated a large number of members who had e-mail, but not all might have access to the Internet. Ellen will be a liaison to Claudia DiGeorgio and will provide information on behalf of the Society.

Among the topics discussed at the meeting were attempts to gain publicity for Pym books and the Society. The Edinburgh Book Festival was suggested as a choice venue next year; possibly a speaker on Barbara Pym could be included on the programme.

Ideas for future meetings were solicited and an in-depth study of one of the novels was suggested. (Later, *Quartet in Autumn* was chosen by the membership for next year's meeting.)

Elizabeth Proud regretfully resigned as Chairman; Kate Charles will serve out her term.

Women and Marriage in *Excellent Women*

After lunch, Kathy Ackley, Professor

of English at the University of Wisconsin, spoke on 'Proving One's Worth: Women and Marriage in *Excellent Women*.' Kathy's provocative speech pointed to Barbara Pym's distinctions between married and unmarried women. Her treatment of unmarried women reflected post-war Britain where women outnumbered men. Before Pym, 'spinsters' were rarely given such warm and sympathetic treatment in literature.

Kathy focused on the changes in Mildred throughout the book. Mildred, who has no first-hand knowledge of marriage, learns some of its dynamics from the Napiers. Allegra and Helena, by contrast, can't imagine life without marriage. To them, 'A full life is a married life,' and Mildred, believing this to be true, is left with feelings of inadequacy.

'There is another marriage described in *Excellent Women*,' Kathy observed. The audience fell silent, attempting to recall the other marriage, which turned out to be that of the president of the Learned Society and his wife, who knitted and fell asleep at the meetings!

The presentation ended with a general discussion of whether *Excellent Women* had a happy or tragic ending. One conclusion was that marriage, according to Barbara Pym, was a mixed blessing for women.

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1999 CALENDAR

**SPRING MEETING AT ST ALBAN'S, HOLBORN
SUNDAY 9 MAY**

Booking forms will be sent with the annual subscription renewals in
February

**ANNUAL MEETING AND CONFERENCE
SATURDAY & SUNDAY 4TH & 5TH SEPTEMBER**
Conference information & booking form with the next *Green Leaves*

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Is Rocky Shallow?

This provocative and burning question occupied much of the second

Solution to Society Crossword



afternoon session. Open to all participants and led by Louise Ross, the session was entitled, 'The Exploration of *Excellent Women*.' In addition to a lengthy debate about the shallowness of Rocky (fueled by one of the few males in the audience!), other topics included ecclesiastical content, enjoyable forays into some of the minor characters, and attempts to define just what is an 'excellent woman?' (According to Mildred, she's 'not for marrying.')

Annual Dinner

At the festive Annual Dinner, held in St. Hilda's dining hall, conversation was lively, the meal (a lamb entrée, and a delicious creamy strawberry dish for dessert) was tasty, and the wine flowed freely. Ellen Miller, Director of Publications at Harvard Law School and US representative to the Pym Society, spoke on 'The American Perspective on Barbara Pym', answering a question posed conversationally at previous Society meetings: 'Why are Americans interested in Barbara Pym?'. The predominantly English audience were surprised to learn that in the 1980s, American interest in Pym was stronger than in England. The news that Barbara Pym is taught at American colleges and universities also came as a surprise.

Sunday and Barbara Everett

Sunday morning was free time for church-going, sightseeing, Barbara Pym videos in the Senior Common Room, or sleeping in. After 11 o'clock coffee, the participants were privileged to hear Dr Barbara Everett, Senior Research Fellow at Somerville College, speak on 'Excellent Women and Afterward.' Dr Everett's speech was rich with insights on Barbara Pym, the writer (she spoke of her 'social grace') and her world - a seamless place in which it's difficult to distinguish which character is from which novel.

Dr Everett admitted that while *Excellent Women* is the novel she enjoys the least, it is the most popular and 'most competent' of Pym's early novels. *Some Tame Gazelle* is more entertaining, cosier; *Jane and Prudence* is more solid, with richer characters; *No Fond Return of Love* portrays London's urban scene but *Quartet in Autumn* is 'a major work of art, rare in any period.' In fact, she terms *QIA* as 'Excellent Women rewritten,' 'more like a prose poem than a story.' It represents the development of the novelist.



Barbara Everett

As for Mildred, Dr Everett calls her 'an observer of life' and says that her virtue lies in being used and knowing it. At the end of the book, Mildred has the power of choice, the author having denied the Cinderella ending which leads only to marriage.

Finally, Dr Everett referred to 'the small, delicate purity of [Barbara Pym's] work,' an eloquent phrase that pinpoints the appeal of her novels.

Joseph Conrad and Women

And just how did Joseph Conrad enter the world of 'Excellent Women?' Through Susan Jones, the new Barbara Pym Fellow in English at St. Hilda's College, who spoke briefly about her research. Susan's field is nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and her work centres on Joseph Conrad, the male-oriented author of the sea, and women. In 1923, Conrad decided he didn't want to be remembered only as a writer of sea stories and proceeded to write *Chance*, a serialized novel designed to attract women readers. Susan's research also focuses on Conrad's wife Jessie, who authored cookbooks and in 1926 wrote, *Joseph Conrad as I Knew Him*.

A Tragic Ending?

The final programme found the audience discussing whether *Excellent Women* has a tragic ending. Various viewpoints were expressed on many aspects of the novel, but there was general agreement that 'tragic' is far too strong a word for the fate of Mildred. We know, of course, that she does marry Everard, but we also know that she exercises her power of choice throughout the book. The ending is neither happy nor tragic, much like life.

The ending of the Annual Meeting left participants happy with the delightful and informative weekend, with new friends and colleagues made, and promises of 'see you at the next meeting' echoed throughout the hallways where Barbara Pym once walked.

Ellen Miller

US MEETING HARVARD LAW SCHOOL 9TH & 10TH APRIL 1999

Barbara Everett will be the lead speaker at this conference. All non-US members are also very welcome. For information please contact Ellen at:
145 Indian Hill Road,
Carlisle, MA 01741.
Tel: (617) 496 2859
email: miller@law.harvard.edu

AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN JONES

From Ballet Soloist to the Barbara Pym Fellow in English



Susan Jones and her husband, Dan Carey

We all have made choices but few have made so many, so soon and with such success as Dr. Susan Jones, ballet soloist, St. Hilda's English student, lecturer and now Barbara Pym English Fellow.

At the age of 16, with A levels looming, Sue Jones had to make the choice between school and dance. Already a Successful dance student she seized upon the chance to attend the prestigious Rambert Ballet School in London. Soon after graduation she was accepted into the Scottish Ballet Company where, lacking the height required for a principal dancer, she became a character soloist, combining her acting skills with her dance talent. Personally preferring contemporary dance, those years of touring in traditional ballet rep. have left their mark; asked to name a favourite ballet the agonised answer is "Anything but Swan Lake!".

Sue first came to Pym when a dancer and found an inspiring attitude to life and work in the books that fuelled her own ambitions; "it was her dedication to life, her form of discipline in life, frustrations and acceptance". It was an outlook that was to stand Sue in good stead sooner than she could tell.

More than any other stage career, dance is fraught with the insecurity imposed by long hours, immense physical stress and little remuneration. When Sue broke her leg on-stage during a performance of Romeo and

Juliet (a portent?) she knew it was time to look ahead.

After 5 more years on stage she decided to take the plunge and, aided by the Dancers Resettlement fund, came to Oxford and completed her A levels in 2 years. The long hours spent devouring novels in dance rehearsal rooms around the country were beginning to pay off. Urged to apply to the University by her tutors Sue investigated St.

Hilda's and was impressed by Carina Williamson and by the college's attitude towards mature students. Thus it was that in 1990 she began life as an undergraduate.

"It was mind-blowing; incredibly strenuous, sometimes despairing". All feelings of trepidation regarding the younger students were soon dispelled by the sight of them wandering around at 3am in socks and despairing expressions. "There was a huge amount of camaraderie, the essay crisis is extremely levelling". And indeed undergraduate life proves to have more similarities with that of the dancer than we might suppose; "in both you are a woman in a man's world and in both you have to be a professional... ballet had made me used the idea of having to negotiate lack of time, and research and put on a performance, whether it was your best or not. In fact the main difference was going from a highly regimented life/work timetable to getting down to it on your own.

Life at St. Hilda's had its share of rewards, however, not least that of meeting her future husband (Dan Carey, in my time held by general consensus to be the most gorgeous male in the English Faculty) at a St. Valentines bop in the MCR; a serendipity that would Surely have captured Pym's own heart!

All distractions and difficulties aside, Sue gained a first at Schools, whereupon she began her D. Phil., which she gained in 1995 and was

immediately offered a College lectureship. From her first undergraduate year she had been "dying to specialise" and took the optional thesis in which she started her groundbreaking work on Joseph Conrad, which is now nearing publication. Going beyond the "misogynistic man of the sea" image, Sue had found a huge amount of myth ripe for explosion both in Conrad's life and work. The marginalisation of "Conrad's women" she has already demonstrated to be a construct of writers and publishers and even Conrad himself, that has gone unchallenged until now. Speaking about her work at the Pym weekend, the audience was swiftly captivated by the plight of Jessie Conrad, a loving and supportive wife as well as literary woman who wrote her husband's biography (and, as Elizabeth Proud was swift to point out, an excellent cookbook) but whom popular academic opinion has relegated to the role of hausfrau "too undeveloped ever to be able to give Conrad the proper companionship". Sue has also drawn attention to the late and early novels, often ignored by the canon, that highlight many female characters. We all look forward to the publication of her work by the OUP next year and to her edition (CUP) of *Chance*, a late novel first published in 1912 where Conrad addresses the contemporary issue of femalesuffrage.

Although still teaching at the National University of Ireland in Galway, where her husband continues as head of department, Sue returns to take up her post in Hilary 1999. She looks forward to teaching 19th and 20th century literature to Hilda's undergraduates again and will encourage them to read Pym "not only as literature and fascinating social document but as part of their heritage, as Hilda's undergraduates and as women". Visiting the Pym weekend she was happy to settle down into the immense sofas of the SCR with the comment that it was good to be back among the excellent women.

Triona Adams

REPORT OF THE FIFTH A.G.M. OF THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY HELD AT ST HILDA'S COLLEGE, OXFORD, ON SATURDAY 5TH SEPTEMBER 1998.

1. Chairman's Opening Remarks

The Chairman, Elizabeth Proud, opened the meeting by welcoming the members. She reminded them that the Society belongs to its members, and pressed them to express their views on its conduct and programmes. She then announced that she had reluctantly to resign after four years as Chairman, owing to ill health. Kate Charles had agreed to act as Chairman for Elizabeth's final year of office.

Committee members present were: Miss Elizabeth Proud (Chairman), Mrs Hilary Walton, Mrs Eileen Roberts (Membership Secretary), Mrs Jean Harker (Editor), Mrs Yvonne Cocking (Secretary), Ms Devon Allison, Ms Kate Charles, Ms Rita Phillips, Mrs Louise Ross, and Mr Michael Wilson.

2. Apologies

Apologies for absence had been received from Rita Brewer, Rowena Dutton, Hazel Holt, Amy & Jim Myers, Edith Schoellhammer and Committee Member Deirdre Bryan-Brown, who hoped to attend the Conference Dinner.

3. Minutes of Previous A.G.M

The minutes of the previous A.G.M. were accepted and signed by the Chairman

4. Matters Arising from the Minutes

(i) Para 4(ii): on a show of hands, about half the membership present have access to email, and nearly as many to the Internet and therefore to the website set up in Italy by Claudia di Georgio, who is pleased that this should be the official site. Ellen Miller has set up a Pym website in the US, and offered to act as liaison between Eileen and Claudia.

(ii) AOB, para 1: The Working Party (Chairman: Deirdre Bryan-Brown), convened to consider the proposal for a Barbara Pym literary prize, submitted its report in April 1998. After careful consideration the Committee unanimously agreed that the setting up of such a prize was not feasible at this time. The membership concurred with this decision.

Para 2. It was asked if Blackwells would be providing a book stall this year, but Jean explained that the shop had phoned only this morning to say that staff shortage prevented their coming.

5. Elections

Committee members Louise Ross and Michael Wilson had reached the end of their terms but were eligible for re-election for a further three years. There being no other nominations, Kate proposed and Elizabeth seconded Louise who was duly elected, as was Michael who was proposed by Elizabeth and seconded by Hazel Bell.

6. Financial and Membership Report

Eileen Roberts reported that there were now 288 members, of whom 37 are in the US, where Ellen Miller collects the subscriptions thereby avoiding currency exchange charges. The current balance was \$494 in the US account and £4431.54 in the main account. Income for the year was £2056.38 and expenditure £1892.30.

7. Editor's Report

Jean Harker appealed for contributions to the newsletter, *Green Leaves*, including letters and snippets of all kinds, not only articles, and for a sub-committee or working party to help. Bridget Guymer offered herself in this capacity. It was hoped that the next issue would appear in November, with copy due by mid-October, and another issue in June. Deborah Fisher (whose personal view of the 1997 Conference appeared in the March 1998 issue of *Green Leaves*) wondered if someone else, an American for example, might like to write an account of the current meeting. Ellen said that as she was taking notes for the Web page, she would use that as a basis for such an account.

8. Any Other Business

Fred Holman asked whether membership by covenant would be possible in the near future. Eileen replied that she hoped that it would be in force for the next renewals now that the College had a new accountant. Kate Charles said that she had available a few copies of her new book *Unruly Passions* (Little, Brown & Co, October 1998) which she offered first to overseas members who might have difficulty obtaining it at home. She also said that she was booked to give an evening end of term lecture on Barbara Pym to the St. Alban's Christian Study Centre, Herts, on 6th July 1999 and hoped that some members might be able to attend. She will advertise the Society there and give details of the lecture in the forthcoming newsletter.

Sally Nicholls suggested a Pym

'presence' at the Edinburgh Book Fair, a bookstall perhaps, or a lecture, possibly by one of the speakers at past Society meetings. Sally offered to act as link person, and two Edinburgh members agreed to help. Louise said that she would look into something similar for the Cheltenham Festival. Bridget Guymer said that there had been a display of books in Woking library entitled *Forgotten Gems* which included Barbara Pym's. Eileen said she would send a copy of *Green Leaves* to be displayed there.

Elizabeth then outlined the changes to the original programme. She had been unable to arrange dramatised readings as none of the usual readers was available. A debate had been proposed in its place, though this could not be formal as there had been insufficient time for preparation. It was decided that instead, Barbara Everett's talk should be extended to lunch time. After lunch there would be a general debate/discussion on the proposition that *Excellent Women* has a tragic ending, followed by the talk by Susan Jones, the new Barbara Pym fellow. Elizabeth also mentioned that Louise would like to have questions for the open session given to her in advance.

Devon Allison had collected magazine articles and pictures which had a bearing on the background to Barbara's earlier novels; these were on display in the Canada Room with apt and witty comments linking the pictures to the novels. The display included a first edition of *Excellent Women*. Unfortunately College had been unable to provide cases for the display so the room would be kept locked while conference sessions were in progress.

Mary Postgate asked in view of this if a permanent display case might be presented to St.Hilda's, primarily for the Society's use. Eileen said she thought that this had been a temporary problem and that the display cases would be located.

Although there would be no book stall, other souvenirs (mugs, cook books, etc.) of the Society and the College would be on sale.

The Committee felt that it needed one of its members to act as programme organiser/coordinator. Louise offered to do this, hopefully with some additional help from the membership at large.

Kate proposed a vote of thanks to Elizabeth for her excellent work as Chairman, and the meeting ended at 12.35 p.m..

Yvonne Cocking

Catherine Heath - Another novelist from St Hilda's

Barbara Pym is not the only satirical and literary novelist to have emerged from St Hilda's College. Catherine Heath born Catherine Hirsch in Hendon in 1934, the year of Pym's graduation, followed her there to read English likewise.

The child of Dutch *émigré* Lutheran-Jewish parents, Catherine Hirsch was brought up in southern England with their strictly religious principles, and grew passionately attached to the Christian Liberal values in which she believed. She married Denis Heath in 1948, and had one son, one daughter. She was Assistant lecturer in English at the University of Wales from 1948-1950; Lecturer at Carshalton College of Further Education, 1964-70; Senior Lecturer there, 1970-87. She and Denis were divorced in 1980. She died of cancer in Sutton in 1991.

Heath wrote five novels: *Stone walls* (1973); *The vulture* (1974); *Joseph and the Goths* (1975); *Lady on the burning deck* (1978); and *Behaving badly* (1984). The last is about a deserted wife who returns to join her former husband and his replacement, young wife in their home, and was made into a very funny television series starring Judi Dench.

Like Pym, Heath could be taken as a social historian as well as writer of thoroughly enjoyable, witty reading. She is concerned overall with the changing values of the society in which she was brought up, and that of the 1960s and 70s. In England those were times of turbulent change, even in predominating morality. Catherine Heath's heroines, like herself, are 'trapped, wise, and desperate', looking back longingly to a recent past, a safe world. 'It would be helpful, Jenny says, if one could still assume, as the old puzzles tell one, that Greeks always tell the truth and Cretans always lie. Such certainties we once lived among. Her satirical targets include the 1970s penchant for spiritual food and yoga; popular music ('I thought you had to have a name like Zak and be C-stream secondary modern and come from Bootle to be able to play what people want to hear today. And be on pot as

well'); religious education ('the children no longer sing hymns. Instead they have sad stories about the third world read to them... what can an eleven-year-old do about famine in Ethiopia?').

Gerard van Werson, Heath's friend and obituarist, described her fiction as 'charged with a dislike of pretension and hypocrisy, 'regulated hatred'. It portrays with sly merciless affection the English middle class during the unsettled decades from the mid-Sixties to the mid-Eighties.'

My favourite, Frances in *Ladies on the burning deck*, attempts, with her two close friends, at once to abide by their deep-seated, long-cherished principles, and to champion their six children of the times. These have become variously a subway guitarist, a squatter, a nude model, a hippy drop-out, member of a *ménage à trois*, and a campaigning homosexual. (The mother of the last tells him, 'There are times when you remind me of your great-uncle who used to preach teetotalism in every Nonconformist chapel from Leeds to Manchester'.)

Because it would be unthinkable for any of them to disown or appear ashamed of their children, two of the parents display their daughter's 'peekaboo' photographs in their living room, where photographs have not appeared before. It is well-paid work: 'She is at least, as Jenny remarks at frequent intervals, earning a good living. We do not pause on the word 'good'. ' Heath's work introduces a note of ethical philosophy into satirical fiction.

Frances and her friends share the

contemporary perplexities of Pym's Letty Crowe - all of them 'excellent women' twenty years on. 'Whatever the disasters of life do to us, Jenny and Ruth and I remain pre-eminently copers. The word dates us. We are post-Girl Guide, pre-Existentialist. The golden mean, the norm.' Frances wryly describes herself preaching her traditional principles: 'Cliché after cliché rolls from me. Toads from the mouth of an elderly princess.' Moral dilemmas abound as the good ladies strive to adapt to the changing times. 'The whirlpools of moral paradox confuse me, swirl me round, engulf me. Drown me.' 'You may decide ... according to your moral viewpoint, if you are lucky enough still to have one.' Confronting the leader of her son's highly-organised squat, Frances reflects, 'Causes, not people, are the source of happiness these days, I see, or if not happiness, at least some way of surviving ... Nora has learned early not to trust affection. I cannot adapt'.

Heath gives us a truly Pym-like image, apparently trivial, in fact charged with significance, when Frances tells us 'A woman in one of the council flats flutters a yellow duster from her window, and I feel for her as if she were a sister, for I have often thought I must own the last yellow duster in England'.

Barbara Pym famously suffered a period of her work's being out of print and neglected; then it came to enjoy cult status and multi-paperback publication. I do hope the same, most well merited, fate will befall the wonderful work of Catherine Heath.

Hazel Bell

May I use this space to wish you all a very happy Christmas and a very good 1999. I'm writing this on 2nd December, just before I leave for the US and I feel very bad because I haven't had time to write any Christmas cards. So many of you have sent me cards in the past and I really love getting them, so please excuse me this year and also for using this space in the newsletter

Eileen

MERRY CHRISTMAS

