

“WHAT IS MY NEXT NOVEL TO BE?”

Yvonne Cocking

Barbara Pym's papers were deposited, after her death, in Oxford University's famed Bodleian Library, in the Department of Western Manuscripts. These papers are catalogued under four main headings: Literary papers and notebooks; Diaries; Correspondence; and Miscellaneous papers. I am going to talk this morning about how Barbara came to write *A Glass of Blessings*, and how it was received by critics and friends, using this Bodleian material as my main source.

On Sunday 10th October 1954 Barbara Pym wrote in her notebook “Today finished my fourth novel about the anthropologists.” This, of course, was *Less Than Angels*, published a few months later. Having had three well-reviewed novels published in the previous four years, Barbara embarked on her fifth with no misgivings about its acceptance by her publisher, but also with no clear idea of a subject. She must have thought about it for quite some time, for it was not until May the following year (1955) that she wrote in her notebook, in capital letters, WHAT IS MY NEXT NOVEL TO BE? She answers her own question thus: “It can begin with the shrilling of the telephone bell in Freddie Hood's church, and end with a flame springing up on Easter Saturday in the dark church ... But what about the middle?”

The Reverend Frederick Hood, a canon of St. Paul's, who had been the principal of Pusey House, the Anglican Centre in Oxford, from 1934 to 1951, was from 1954 to 1961 the charismatic priest in charge of St. Mary Aldermary in the City of London. There had been a church on this site for over 900 years, and it was patronised by a wealthy clientele (Barbara noted that “There were a good many mink coats to be seen among its Sunday congregation”), and also by ‘arty,’ people, among whom Canon Hood was said to be very comfortable. This church is not very far from Fleet Street, so within easy reach of Barbara's office in Fetter Lane.

In fact, Barbara heard the telephone in that church on 6th April 1955, and on 19th May she was there again on a cold and showery Ascension Day. “I went to Freddy Hood's church at 1.15. The smell of incense from the solemnly sung Holy Communion at 12.15 still hung in the air. ... Afterwards Freddy Hood stood genially in his cassock talking to a rather excellent woman.” The telephone call and the speculation on its nature – a hostess asking one of the priests to luncheon or a cocktail party, perhaps - made an arresting starting point for *A Glass of Blessings*.

Unlike other novels on whose backgrounds I have previously written, there is curiously little material on *A Glass of Blessings* – scanty notes, no complete drafts, few reviews for the first edition in 1958, and not many fan letters either. Reference is frequently made by speakers at these conferences to Barbara Pym's notebooks which are part diary and part notes which might be used in her writing. Anything which struck her as amusing or original found its way into these notebooks - overheard snatches of conversation, some scene observed from the top of a bus, any odd event like a ‘phone ringing in a church.

I was interested to read in Anthony Powell's memoir, *Messengers of Day*:

I have never developed the habit of making at all copious notes for use in potential books, but had already begun in 1927 to jot down occasional ideas, quotations, scraps of dialogue (invented or overheard), viable names for characters in a novel; all sorts of odds and ends of that kind.

And that is exactly what Barbara did too.

In the sub-section of the Pym Archive in the Bodleian entitled 'Papers relating to particular works', there is only one small notebook devoted to this novel. It is headed " 'The Lime Tree Bower' (afterwards called 'A Glass of Blessings'.") *This Lime Tree Bower my prison* is a poem by Coleridge. Why Barbara chose this as the original title is unclear – I can't see any connection between it and Barbara's novel. 'A glass of blessings' is a line from the poem *The Pulley*, by George Herbert, the first stanza of which appears on the title page.

Her notes are characteristically disjointed and rambling. One can imagine her pulling out her notebook to record some suitable item, possibly in a great hurry as she sat on a bus or in a cafe. She probably used many of these notes simply as aides-memoires, so didn't find it necessary to expand them, having no thought then that later others would be reading them. In this notebook she plunges straight in, without introduction, to a scene in a church.

"One of the servers, a young man like Reg". [Reg was one of the Barnes neighbours in whom Barbara and Hilary took some interest. He eventually becomes Bill Coleman, owner of the Hillman Husky]. "Trinity Sunday – the Athanasian Creed [Third creed, about 6th C, after the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed] sung in procession – the difficulty of writing a hymn about the Trinity – poor Father Faber's attempts – see 161 (?) in English Hymnal".

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) born Anglican, went over to Rome with Newman. Perhaps this is why Barbara called him 'poor Fr, Faber', or perhaps she felt his Trinity hymn Have Mercy on us, God most high was poor. This hymn is actually no. 162 in my Hymns Ancient and Modern.]

"It could be a lunch time mass in a City church, a sparse congregation of office workers glad of the opportunity to fulfil their religious duties without too much inconvenience, and to hear, through the incense and the Sanctus bell the shrill whine of the telephone".

Then she attempts a plot:

"A fashionable church (which has lunch hour services) – a vicar and two curates living in a clergy house. All celibates. Then one gets married. His wife is 'unsuitable'.

One part is set on the Riviera where the vicar perhaps takes a party from his parish as he takes over the chaplaincy for some time. An elderly lady living there – in fact a ready-made 'flock - and [there is] some unpleasantness between them and the one the vicar brings with him. Part I – In London. Part II. On the Riviera. Part III. Back again." This idea of an exchange of vicars, and friction between the two congregations is, however, never developed.

Next she considers some characters.

"The narrator – a widow or perhaps even divorced, rejected [or has this been overdone?] 39 years old, has lost her husband in the war and now grown used to her state – but quotes Donne ...'these rags of heart'."

I searched high and low but could not find a quotation containing these words so I wonder if it was a slip of the pen, and she meant ‘...these rags of time...’, which is a line from Donne’s poem *The Sunne Rising*:

“Love all alike, no season knows, nor clime
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.”

Barbara continues: “She works for a firm of publishers and printers of learned books. Scholarly proofreading. Three of them in the department, 2 women, one man. Miss Enright who has never married; I, who had married but had not borne children, and Piers Longridge, ‘brilliant’ because he had a degree. He was a ‘lapsed Catholic’, Miss Enright a devout and practising one. RCs, I have found, are always described as ‘lapsed’ or ‘very devout’. Perhaps the narrator falls in love with Piers”.

Many of these notes of Barbara’s are so odd and disjointed that it would probably not be very helpful if I read them all out. It might be better to tell you how from these notes we see some of the characters developing.

Fr. Thames (at one time Father Neptune was an alternative name - I wonder if the watery connection has any significance?) may have been suggested by Canon Freddy Hood, though he lacks perhaps some of the latter’s extroversion. Robert Smith likens Fr Thames to ‘the redoubtable Fr. Twisaday’, the real-life vicar of All Saints Church, Notting Hill, which also has, Robert says ‘a somewhat evocative clergy-house’.

The new curate was at first to marry an ‘unsuitable’ wife, “quite negligible, with a pretty face”, who leaves him for somebody else. Later Barbara thought he should be “rather tiresome and unstable – wanting to go over to Rome, [or] to marry, [or] to enter a religious community. He might be seen coming out of Westminster Cathedral [London’s Roman Catholic Cathedral, at the other end of Victoria Street from Westminster Abbey], or Burns & Oates, [a long-established Roman Catholic publisher], with an R.C. priest.

“He might have to go over to Shepherd’s Bush to see some wise old priest”. Bob Smith was living in London about this time, and his local church was All Saints, Shepherd’s Bush in West London. I think that he had certain doubts, perhaps over the ‘South India question’, and possibly went to talk these over with ‘some wise old priest’, i.e. Fr. Twisaday, because Robert Liddell said in one of his letters “How is poor Robert, still carrying the cross? Or is he going back to Rome because of South India?”

[The church of South India came into being on independence as a union of Anglican and Protestant churches in South India. I imagine some of the more conservative Anglicans didn’t approve of this watering down of their ‘Catholicism’, and consequently ‘went over’]. Hazel Holt says that “He and Barbara Pym fell out over this”. Not too seriously, I imagine.

After an uncertain start as a widow or divorcée working as a proof reader with Piers and Miss Enright (later Miss Limpsett), Wilmet soon emerges as the Anglo-Catholic wife, with a “solid broad church” husband, an agnostic mother-in-law, and a comfortable and idle life style.

Piers was a proof reader from the start. The sight of him from the top of a bus entering a wine bar is based on an event noted by Barbara in April 1955. “From a bus in The Strand I see Christopher Marsden of Oxford days – old Farquarson’s Pliny lectures – he goes

into Yates's Wine Lodge. Then I seem to remember hearing that he had not done well, been a disappointment, perhaps even taken to drink..." Piers to a T! But there is no speculation on Piers's sexual orientation.

Wilfred Bason was first conceived as Edward Herbert Gossage, a male cook-housekeeper 'of gentle birth', but Barbara crossed out this name, and evidently ditched the 'gentle birth' as well. But the idea of him as a petty thief occurred to her quite early. "Father Thames has something stolen by the male housekeeper. So petty, this kind of larceny – a little Fabergé trifle". When Barbara was holidaying in Cornwall in August 1956, she wrote of "the grey-bearded man waiting in the Antiques tea room at St. Ives. A job for Mr. Bason?" she asks herself.

Some characters are changed little from their first introduction, like Keith who in these notes is described as "a friend of Piers who shares his flat – crew cut and windcheater. He is a model". And Mary Beamish, "a splendid little woman on committees, blood donor, church warden. Perhaps with an elderly mother who dies, then she is liberated".

It was often the case that actual incidents in Barbara's life became embedded in her plots. One in this novel was the giving of blood. Her blood group was Rhesus Negative – 'this precious blood' as Miss Daunt proclaimed loudly, and, as we learn from Barbara's diaries, she gave it regularly – every 3-4 months from 1955-58 at least. On 4th May 1955 she writes, "I give blood at the crypt of St. Martins-in-the-Field... I can imagine (for a novel) a little frail laden woman saying 'Oh, I have given blood' and putting the others to shame".

Another was the Portuguese lessons. On the 19th August 1954 Barbara left on the SS Alcantara from Southampton, presumably disembarking at Lisbon. [Interesting to note how people travelled in those pre-mass tourism days]. She does not mention having any companion with her, but she spent some weeks travelling around the country. On 7th October 1955, more than a year later, she writes "First Portuguese class at Kings' College". She may have been learning the language merely as a tourist, but she may also have thought it would be useful in her work – for there were articles in the journal *Africa* from the Portuguese colonies, Angola and Mozambique particularly. She continued going to classes regularly up to at least March 1958.

Miss Prideaux's mauve cardigan that Wilmet had sent to a jumble sale can be compared with the following notebook entry. "At the Women's University Settlement I see Miss Casson wearing a dress that I sent to the jumble sale some time ago – and very nice it looks". Barbara's experience in this Settlement was also used in the novel.

After many changes of name, the main characters of the novel are established, and there are extensive notes on Wilmet's visit to Rowena and Harry. The notebook ends with Father Ransome going to lodge with the Beamishes. There are no notes about later developments in the book. Barbara must surely have written more notes, or several drafts, but they have not survived. Because of the difficulty she had with the later novels, which she kept revising in the hope of attracting a publisher, many drafts and versions remain, but we know that Barbara felt justifiably confident that this novel would be accepted, so perhaps she felt it not necessary to keep her drafts. By 1957 she had already begun gathering material for *No Fond Return of Love*.

On 15th May 1957, Barbara wrote to Daniel George at Cape. “Dear Daniel, I am hoping to post today or tomorrow the MS of the novel I have just finished, called *A Glass of Blessings*. I don’t know whether to say much about it— it is probably better to leave you to read it first, but I may as well warn you that the heroine is not very nice and that the whole book is rather (too?) churchy. I have now reached the stage when it is impossible to look at it with any detachment...”

Robert Liddell, with whom Barbara kept up a regular correspondence, wrote from Greece on Ascension Day 1957:

“I am delighted that *A Glass of Blessings* (a charming title) has been sent to dear Mr. Cape but I had already (in one of his rare but sweet letters) heard that he had received it. He didn’t actually say that he had read it, but he said that he would certainly offer to publish it. He expressed his pleasure in Miss Pym’s work”.

Jonathan Cape himself wrote to her two weeks later.

“I have enjoyed *A Glass of Blessings* and would like to publish it ... *Jane & Prudence* didn’t do so well as *Excellent Women*, but *Less Than Angels* sold pretty well. I think you have a secure public now, and I hope we will do well with *A Glass of Blessings*. So much depends upon the public, who are rather fickle these days...”

Barbara had hoped that the book would appear in November, in time for Christmas sales, and indeed it was entered on the publishers’ Autumn List. However, Cape told her that a manuscript submitted after 1st May was usually too late for Christmas, and that their sales people found it difficult to sell fiction ‘during the lean early months of the year before stocktaking’, so publication was delayed until April 1958.

The delay between the announcement of the book in Autumn 1957 and its publication in April 1958 may have contributed to the lessening of its impact. Michael Howard wrote to Barbara “I’m sorry its press has not been more spectacular, but perhaps we can boost the sales along a bit during the [1958] autumn and Christmas season”.

A Glass of Blessings appeared on 14th April. Barbara wrote in her notebook, “Only three reviews up to 29th April, none wholly good. [They say] my humour deserts me when dealing with romance, that I am tone-deaf to dialogue, that I am *moderately* amusing. [Are these] reviewers all women? Young women?”

Yes, they were all women, whatever their age. First out on 23rd was Brigid Brophy writing in the now defunct *News Chronicle* .

“*A Glass of Blessings* is a curio: an eccentric light novel. It is told in the first person feminine by Wilmet, pretty, bored, rich and preoccupied with Anglo-Catholicism. With none of the religious person’s intense fantasy-life, Wilmet simply has a foible for ‘Fathers’ and incense.

Husband and two potential flirtations interest her less than the Clergy House, a nest of celibacy. The story which results is milder than Trollope, and all the characters disintegrate when they speak, because their author is tone-deaf to dialogue; yet she describes them acutely, and her view is no less original than odd.”

Next, Jocasta Innes in the *Evening Standard* on 27th:

“What happens when an attractive sophisticated woman finds after ten years of marriage that her husband is a bore? Wilmet Forsyth takes up church activities on the one hand and her best friend’s dissolute brother on the other. Unfortunately the humour which Miss Pym brings to the minutiae of parochial life deserts her when dealing with romance.”

And lastly Patricia Hodgart in the *Manchester Guardian* on 29th

“An Anglo-Catholic frolic garnished with a froth of Kensington conversation and a flutter of Fathers, *A Glass of Blessings* is catty, feminine and moderately amusing”.

The *Daily Telegraph*’s Peter Green liked it, and was the only one to note the homosexual element.

“I don’t normally raise much enthusiasm for spry little domestic novels sprayed with the incense of upper-middle-class Anglo-Catholicism, and with male characters called Piers or Rodney. But Barbara Pym’s *A Glass of Blessings* caught me up short: her naive heroine, all unawares, falls in love with an obvious homosexual (though this is never explicitly stated) and the queer goings-on of male housekeepers and so on are described with catty accuracy.”

There were longer reviews in *The Bookman*, April 1958, where Richard Church writes

“It is a relief to escape, occasionally, from the contemporary school of violent writing, which so often conceals hysteria and sentimentality. Readers who share this feeling will enjoy *A Glass of Blessings*.

And by Austin Lee in *Now and Then*, Spring 1958:

“*A Glass of Blessings* is the first book I have read by Barbara Pym. I once saw a favourable review of a book of hers in a Church weekly, and it put me off. I cannot help a feeling of mistrust when I see a favourable review in an ecclesiastical paper, possibly because the only book of mine ever reviewed by one of them was described as ‘blasphemous and boring’. I took exception to the ‘boring’.

I enjoyed *A Glass of Blessings*. Although set in present day London, it is remote from the too urgent problems of our time and the world of the Angry Young Men, but this is part of its charm. Nothing earth-shaking happens, but once you begin, with the telephone ringing in the vestry at the back of the church into which the narrator, Wilmet Forsyth, has popped for a lunch-hour service, you find it hard to put the book down...”

On this occasion, however, the ecclesiastical paper, the *Church Times*, was not impressed:

“Barbara Pym’s new novel *A Glass of Blessings* is small beer. Her story ambles gently along, without offence but without excitement either. It is certainly not without merit as a mildly amusing social commentary, but the reader is likely to be disappointed by the author’s failure to engage a really lively interest. This is the fault chiefly of the central character Wilmet Forsyth, a wealthy and dissatisfied young woman with a comfortable home in the West End, bored with her plodding civil-servant husband, and inclined to the mildest of mild flirtations to amuse herself. She professes interest in a neighbouring Anglo-Catholic church, whose clergy flit unconvincingly across the novels’ course.

But the religious aspect of the story never succeeds in penetrating beneath the surface of a slightly precious and unworthy ecclesiasticism. As a novel deliberately set in a minor key, *A Glass of Blessings* has its points. But the tinkle of teacups is no substitute for the ringing of tocsins.”

A reviewer for the *Oswestry and Border Counties Advertiser*, writing about a one-time resident, was eager to give her a good write-up:

“*A Glass of Blessings* is, to my mind, the best she had written in her cool, crisp style with its little touches of gently sardonic humour. Behind the novel one pictures a novelist with the outlook of a Jane Austen, and I hope that Barbara Pym is appreciated by connoisseurs of good writing as much as she deserves ... The clergy and the various church supporters and the family circle of the principal character are sketched with delicacy but clarity, and I heartily recommend this book for quiet relaxation to any lover of first-class writing.”

Robert Liddell was sent a complimentary copy, and on 23rd April he wrote

“Thank you very much indeed for your delightful book, big with blessings. I read it at a long happy sitting and look forward to taking it frequently to bed. A charming book, and I think your best – allowing for my predilection for *Some Tame Gazelle*. Such high church! ... Wilmet is a lovely name for a heroine and I adore Mr. Bason and all the arrangements at the Clergy House. And (do tell me) do Anglo-Catholics now conform to R.C. fasting rules? I suppose they must, as Fr. Thames has something after midnight mass, and must have to celebrate again ... I would have liked to know more of Miss Dove and Mrs Pollard, but I daresay we shall one day. It is nice to hear of Prudence again, and of poor Catherine. How does poor Robert (dear Bob) like it? Keith is absolutely sweet, and would have been so nice and efficient as a thurifer – perhaps, in a future work, he will see the light, and replace Eddie from the garage – but no, St. Thomas’s Shepherd’s Bush would be nearer for him. I like Sibyl and Arnold very much too ... Thank you again – and I hope you have excellent reviews”.

And some weeks later he wrote again: “Dear Elizabeth[Taylor] enjoyed *A Glass of Blessings* and drained it eagerly ... she liked little Keith, of course. I told Penelope Gilliat [she wrote for *Vogue*] in April how good you were and I hope she will remember”. [She didn’t – at least I could find no review by her.] Dear Olivia [Manning] was very angry with a reviewer who thought you had a deficient sense of humour – and how right she was.”

Barbara received a few more letters from friends and fans, mostly women, but again, fewer than for other novels. It would appear that because *A Glass of Blessings* was not widely reviewed it escaped the notice of many of her readers.

The first letter she received, on 15th April, was from her friend Peggy Makins, better known, perhaps, as Evelyn Home, Agony Aunt for *Woman*.

“Dear Barbara

Thank you so very much for *A Glass of Blessings* which I have gulped down and enjoyed extravagantly. A friend here at the office ... has been reading it ... and we agreed that your work is exactly like drinking some cool-tasting, innocent-looking beverage, which turned out in the end to be tipsy-making. In fact, without punning, just like a Pimms No.1 ... Why, by the way, was he Father *Bode*. Was he a relation of Belinda and Harriet? ...

I don't know that I quite swallowed Wilmet ... I think perhaps that I don't believe in her because she doesn't sound quite warm enough to have made any impression on Harry or Piers. She was inquisitive about both, but not really stirred, I felt. But to be puzzled by a character pleases me...

It didn't seem to me that Anglicanism really played much part in the novel. Wilmet didn't seem to believe anything very much, although she loved the look of various ceremonies and was awfully curious about the lives of the clergy ...”

On 9th May, Janet Ashbee wrote

“Dear Madam

I am venturing to send you the crit of an old friend of mine, a great reader and severe critic, and to tell you how *enormously* I have enjoyed *A Glass of Blessings* ... it is such a relief to find a novel witty and clever, and minus adultery...Anyway I am most grateful for your beautiful easy writing, so clear and yet subtle...

This is her friend's 'crit':

“I have been very amused by *A Glass of Blessings* and, what one must call the 'goings-on' of that group of beings with the church for its centre ... I felt it had an unusual success in a novel in that Barbara Pym does not lay down a plot or plan. There are her people, living and moving and talking – but it is left to the reader to think out what is left unsaid and to imagine the feelings left undescribed. In the end one has said and felt and, as it were, constructed the story. It is not often than an author takes one so into partnership.”

Molly Hargreaves had met Barbara once, and wrote

“...thank you for *A Glass of Blessings*... I am ashamed to admit that I swallowed your glassful at one gulp, and no-one had a crumb to eat until it was finished ...A certain phrasing in both your work and Elizabeth Taylor's had reminded me of Ivy Compton-Burnett...

A Miss Joan Simpson, from Wimbledon wrote.

Dear Madam, I have very much enjoyed your new novel *A Glass of Blessings*, especially the subtle ecclesiastical background. However, the remark which you ascribe to Mr. Coleman at the top of p.55 is curiously out of character. There are always four Sundays in Advent (variation only occurs in the number after the Epiphany or Trinity) ... Please forgive me if you have already been overwhelmed by letters on this blemish, and accept my congratulations on a delightful story...

Robert Liddell in *A Mind at Ease*, also commented on the conversation, which Wilmet overheard, in a note at the end of his essay on *A Glass of Blessings*, which reads:

“There is one passage which may puzzle readers. ‘Wouldn't believe the trouble we had over them’, Mr. Bason was saying. ‘It's really simpler when you haven't got any,’ said Mr. Coleman. ‘There were only four Sundays in Advent last year, I remember, so it can be a bit of a problem when to use them.’

They are the rose-coloured vestments worn at Mid-Advent and Mid-Lent, as a change from the violet of the season, to encourage the Faithful. There is really no problem...as the fixed days are Gaudete Sunday, third in Advent, and

Laetare Sunday, fourth in Lent...There are seldom more than four Sundays in Advent, so it more often than not has no middle..."

It seems as though Miss Simpson was right - I couldn't find any evidence for there ever being five Sundays in Advent.

On 29 September 1962, Barbara wrote to Wren Howard "In the royalty statement which I received today I see that *A Glass of Blessings* is not mentioned, nor was it on the last statement. Does that mean that it has gone out of print?" And he replied confirming that this was the case. She was very disappointed that she had not been informed, and that there was not even a file copy remaining. But of course, by 1962, the management at Cape was greatly changed.

A Glass of Blessings was reprinted in 1977, after Barbara's return to favour. Two English critics remarked that Wilmet was not an 'excellent woman'. In the TLS, 30.09.77, in a review entitled *Brave are the lonely*, Anne Duchene wrote

"Wilmet Forsyth is rich and married, as well as elegant and attractive; so that although Wilmet is subject to 'useless little longings' – the whirls and eddies in the silent mind, at which Miss Pym excels – one cannot help feeling that Wilmet does not wholly qualify as a Pym heroine.: her life does not require her to be brave so much as merely lucid."

Elizabeth Harvey (Henry's sister) in the Birmingham Post on 23.09.77.

"*A Glass of Blessings* [has] its sidelong humour and familiarity with high Anglican church matters ... Wilmet, rather frivolous and vain, is more worldly than most Pym characters."

It does seem that *A Glass of Blessings* did not receive the level of attention of other of Barbara's novels, and that some of the critics were a little half-hearted. But there was one friend who consistently praised it – Philip Larkin. His correspondence with her began early in 1961, so he made no comment on it when it was first published, though in some undated and unattributed piece I found he wrote,

"*A Glass of Blessings*, like all her books, is dryly whimsical, Anglican, sharply observed, with autumnal currents moving under the surface. Wilmet Forsyth is almost my favourite Pym heroine".

When he wrote to her in March 1961 about *No Fond Return of Love* he said

"...it was nice to meet Wilmet and Keith again. There is something very special about these two: They are memorable not only in themselves, but in their relation, as if Wilmet's reward for her 'sins' is this ridiculous unwanted incubus, or do I mean familiar, endlessly chattering of lovely homes and boiling things in Tide. There is a dreadful kind of justice about it. One feels she will never get rid of him".

And a few days later, in a letter to Maeve Brennan, he expresses similar sentiments:

"Yes, a Glass of Bs is my favourite BP, and Wilmet my favourite BP heroine. I think it had the strongest story line too, the way everyone but her seems to find love of some kind – even Rodney – and all she gets (as punishment, one feels, for her assignations with Piers) is the extraordinary Keith, whom one guesses she will never get rid of".

Barbara sent him a specially bound copy of *A Glass of Blessings* – “a bibliographical curiosity, if nothing else”, she told him, “and it is the only such copy in existence”.

“How very kind of you to send me such a unique and valuable ‘item’, as we librarians call these things. Really, I am most grateful. In many ways, it is my favourite among your books, and it means a great deal to me to have a ‘personal’ copy”.

Larkin’s unqualified approval would certainly have compensated for any perceived lack of warmth from others.

Yvonne Cocking is a founding member of the Barbara Pym Society, was formerly its secretary and now serves as its archivist and historian. A retired librarian, she worked for more than two years in the early 1960s at the International African Institute, where she made the acquaintance of Barbara Pym and Hazel Holt. She is co-author of a social history of colonial Africa, The British in Africa by Roy Lewis and Yvonne Foy (1971), published in the U.S. under the title Painting Africa White: The Human Side of British Colonialism. She lives in Oxfordshire and spends countless hours sifting through the richness of the Pym archives at the Bodleian Library.