

‘A Thankless Task’?

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Paper presented at the 13th North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 19-20 March 2011

Over the past few years, I have given several talks about the history of Barbara Pym’s novels, how their themes were developed, and their reception by the press, and by her readers, as evinced by her notes and drafts. My source material for these talks is Barbara’s papers deposited in the Bodleian library in 1981, and now, also, with some material, mainly reviews, from among her sister Hilary’s papers which were sent to the Bodleian in 2004. The Pym Archive is arranged in three main parts: literary papers and notebooks, diaries, and correspondence, and I have consulted all three categories for this paper.

Last year I spoke on *A Glass of Blessings*, and said that I was disappointed at the paucity of material available. Much the same is true of *No Fond Return of Love*. For both novels I found only incomplete drafts and sparse notes. I find there is much more material for the later novels; because of the constant rejection of *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, and the crossover between *The Sweet Dove Died*, *A Few Green Leaves*, and the attempted novel *Spring*, there are more drafts, failed attempts and revisions of them to work on.

Barbara’s novels are usually based on the world she knew and her own experience within it. When she deviated from this course, as in *An Academic Question*, she was less successful, and that novel is one of the least popular.

Before I come to an examination of the documents relating to *No Fond Return of Love*, I should like to suggest that one can immediately identify two influences in the novel, both coming from Barbara’s own life experience at the time, viz. her vicarious interest in her neighbours, and her attendance at a literary Summer School.

The notebooks I consulted for this paper are those which cover the years 1957–1959¹. Disappointingly, they contain only a few jottings about the characters and situations in the novel, with little further indication of how she thought them up. Much of these notebooks is taken up with a day-to-day-account of the doings of the people who live in a house opposite. There is much more about the neighbours than about the novel.

At this time, Barbara and Hilary were living in Barnes, south-west London, where the sitting room of their house was on the upper floor from where they had a very good view of the other side of the road, and therefore an excellent opportunity to watch the comings and goings of their neighbours. Ever since her Oxford days, Barbara had been in the habit of following, or putting herself in the way of (as with Henry in the Bodleian) any man she liked the look of. She now pursued this vicarious interest with help from Hilary, and encouragement from Hazel Holt and Bob Smith. The neighbours in whom the sisters now took an interest were two young men, one of whom remained more or less permanently in residence, while the other was replaced from time to time by another. In fact, she had already ‘used’ them in *A Glass of Blessings* — the elder as Mr. Coleman with the Hillman Husky, and the younger as Keith. For several months Barbara noted all their observed movements in these notebooks, and she and Hilary wove a fantasy around this mysterious pair. ‘A lovely saga’ says Hazel in *A Lot to Ask*², ‘which involved us in various investigations, not only to St. Lawrence’s ... but also to ... a cemetery [with] informative gravestones, and a private hotel in the West Country’. Obviously this last is where Barbara got the inspiration for the Eagle House Hotel, its proprietress, and the mystery of the Forbes family. All this prying and ‘stalking’ became a major theme in *No Fond Return of Love*.

In my talk last year, 'WHAT IS MY NEXT NOVEL TO BE', I showed how a recent experience — the incongruous sound of a telephone ringing in the vestry, and audible throughout the church during a lunch-time service — made such an impression on Barbara that she determined to make it a feature of *A Glass of Blessings* — and indeed it became the basis of her first chapter. In the case of *No Fond Return of Love* too, while she might not have yet known how it was all to pan out, Barbara had no doubts about her opening chapter. 'It could begin with a Swanwick-like conference' she says³.

Soon after Barbara had mailed the typescript of *A Glass of Blessings* to her publisher on 16th May 1957, she attended the Swanwick Writers' Summer School at the Hayes Conference Centre, once a 19th century gentleman's residence, more usually referred to merely as Swanwick [pronounced Swonick] after the village near Alfreton in Derbyshire where it is situated.

These annual Summer Schools had started in 1949. Barbara may have chosen this course because it included the writing of short stories and TV/radio dramas, which she had had a go at one time or another, without any great success. Perhaps she was thinking about trying these literary forms again, and was looking for guidance.



The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick

Phyllis Bayley, the then editor of *Vanity Fair*, spoke on women's magazines, Victor Menzies on writing for TV, Leslie Halward on radio drama; and others. There were also social events, including gramophone recitals and dancing (black tie preferred!)

Some of the talks were in the evening to give the participants a chance to go on afternoon visits to Haddon Hall, a manor house dating from the 12th century, and to the hugely impressive Chatsworth, home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire.

In her notebook for August 1957 to April 1958 Barbara wrote what I assume to be a factual account, as it is dated Sunday 18th August, during the Summer School:

Udenominational service in the chapel with the green leaves of huge rhododendron bushes outside the windows so that we might be in an aquarium or under water in the greenish light. We sing 'All things bright and beautiful' and an Indian lady plays the harmonium. But wouldn't she be a heathen, someone might ask anxiously? A rather intense woman with reddish hair cut in a fringe and dress with gathered skirt is older than one thinks.

At the end of the long tables the woman (or women) who happen to be sitting there serve out the soup and the portions of food. (Men very seldom do.) Often an unmarried woman does it, perhaps it satisfies some deep need, something finer than mere bossiness. At the end of the meal plates are

Her personal engagement diary⁴ noted briefly the talks and visits to surrounding beauty spots which were the chief events of the 6 day conference. I was fortunate enough to obtain from the archivist at Swanwick, not only confirmation that Barbara did actually attend, but also the complete programme, and some notes on the speakers. John Dickson Carr, a prolific American crime writer who lived for many years in England gave a talk 'The Novel — the specialist speaks'.

piled up and taken to the tables by the hatch, but it will do if one goes away carrying just a small thing like a jug of custard.

One sits in a basket chair in the vinery where the grapes hang already ripe. It could be an orangery or old conservatory. Splendid place for long sad conversations.⁵

Much of that went into Chapter 1.

In the same notebook Barbara introduces Dulcie, said to be the character most like Barbara herself, Viola, based on the 'intense woman' mentioned above, and Miss Foy on the woman serving the food.

There is only one draft of the novel⁶. This is in three parts — two hard-backed and one thin soft cover exercise books. The first book is a draft of Chapters 1–6 and part of 7, hand-written on the rectos only, with notes, presumably added later, on the versos opposite. Most of these notes are quite trivial, but about a third of the way through is an extensive annotation, showing that Barbara was still undecided about the character of her heroine, and how to depict her:

What sort of a person is Dulcie? What has her life been? She had loved somebody who jilted her and never really loved again, perhaps taking refuge in the cosiness of other people's lives — even letting her appearance go a little. She did not want to be hurt yet she could look on the hurts of others with a kind of detachment that sometimes shocked her. He had been called Clive, he had been a worthless person, really no good. She had been going to bolster him up, the thing all women like to do, so that pleasure as well as love had been taken away. Is it in any way more poignant to have loved somebody unworthy?

There is little else of note in this book. The draft of the six plus chapters appears on casual reading to be very like the finished version. The other hard-backed notebook contains a draft of Chapters 12–23, which again seem very like the final version. There is no draft for Chapters 9–11 and 24–25.

The thin exercise book, which includes a draft of the rest of Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, is rather more interesting as it also contains notes. These start with the selection of the characters' names. This is something Barbara does with all her novels.

Vanessa [but this is crossed out]. Viola (who had been christened Violet). A violet by a mossy stone. Her father had been enthusiastic, sentimental and confused — fond of mountains — a Wordsworthian scholar, well, perhaps not a scholar. The lover would call her Vi. Monica for the worrying one who is interested in the little protégée. Muriel, Elspeth, Sophie, Hester, Joan, Janet, Dulcie. [Dulcie double underlined] (the best).

So the names Dulcie and Viola are decided upon, and there is a hint of Laurel, 'the little protégée'. Next there is something about the characters of Dulcie and Viola.

Dulcie works at a sort of religious publishers, a lot of women, all poorly paid, rather noble and bad-tempered. She is engaged in some kind of literary quest, but it can't be after anyone too famous or the facts would be known. At least the quest can involve a St. Laurence-like church. Perhaps a quest for an old missionary who has written a book like this but in the course of it she falls in love with a young man half her age.

Note here again that Barbara is using locations and situations that she knows well — in this case the church in Queen's Park, and experience at the International African Institute. She continues

Viola is also very literary. (Don't make her too Prudence-like, Barbara warns herself).

What is the relationship between Dulcie and Viola? How do they come to live together? Viola has been turned out of her flat — the Rent Act is vaguely referred to — so comes to share Dulcie's

suburban house. The soft-hearted Dulcie has come across Viola weeping. This worries her, as she worries over ‘beggars and people wrongly imprisoned in mental homes’.

Then comes a scenario of the sort I like to find — some idea Barbara had toyed with and then rejected. This little scene, which demonstrates the different temperaments of Dulcie and Viola, takes place on holiday in France.

They were walking in the hot little French town, their heavier luggage left at the station, for the plane had been nearly two hours late and they had missed the bus they had meant to take to the small unfashionable Riviera resort where they were to spend a fortnight’s holiday in the villa of an English lady who took in paying guests.

Viola [scornfully]: It is typical of Dulcie, to notice a chicken’s head lying on the dusty road and seize upon that as a topic of conversation.

Dulcie: I always thought the French used everything in cooking. No waste at all.

Viola [dryly]: It is difficult to see how one could use a chicken’s head. She felt a headache coming on and longed, though she would not have admitted it, for a reviving cup of good English tea.

Dulcie: But surely simmered with the feet — well washed of course — and a *bouquet garni*, it would make stock, wouldn’t it?

Viola [aside, sighing]: Our contrasting personalities are shown in this situation. How unpromising it sounds!

Next, Barbara starts to outline her chapters.

Chapter 1: At the conference — Dulcie and Viola meet. Their characters revealed. The man Viola once loved. Dulcie’s quest. Dulcie inviting Viola to live in her house.

Chapter II. Dulcie in her house. Her daily woman, her neighbours. The Brazilian next door.

Several of the characters of the novel are here established. Nowhere, apart from the hint I mentioned above, does she introduce Laurel, nor Marjorie nor Mrs. Williton.

Then Barbara abandons the chapters and starts thinking about the plot again, and writes several paragraphs discussing with herself, as it were, further possibilities for characters and story.

It is about a woman who becomes interested in a man at a learned conference. She finds out more and more about him until at last his relations become more interesting to her than he is, and he eventually fades out of the picture altogether.

Viola is desperate to get married — perhaps in the end she might get Dulcie’s Clive [later to become Maurice Clive]. It would be better if Dulcie’s uncle and aunt lived somewhere nearer to Aylwin, as well as to his brother’s parish.

Viola, perhaps, hasn’t known Aylwin Forbes well — but on seeing her in the gardens in her red canvas shoes he remembers her as ‘that rather embarrassingly intense woman’ who had wanted to talk about his work.

Perhaps the clergyman is Aylwin’s cousin. His brother and mother run the hotel. Something disgraceful about the brother. ‘An interesting family’

In the next two notebooks covering April 1958 to October 1959⁷, Barbara writes down some thoughts which she did in part incorporate in the completed novel.

Walking across a common to the house with literary associations where, to her surprise, a woman is holding a small Bring and Buy Sale.

One of Aylwin Forbes’s relatives (? The one who keeps the Eagle House Private Hotel) is thought to be related distantly to the noble county family whose house is open to the public. There would be

memorials in the church. Piers and Keith going round the house. Wilmet?

In the suburban garden Senhor MacBride-Pereira is reading Eça de Queiroz [a realist Portuguese writer of the second half of the 19th century] and eating sugared almonds (he likes the mauve ones best), when he sees ...what? Some vital happening. Aylwin Forbes embracing Laurel in the garden.

Mrs Beltane waters her plants with a special little plastic watering can shaped like a swan, a curious lapse of taste one feels.

Aylwin Forbes's mother — rather stark and formidable old West Country woman rather living in the past. Enjoying discomfort. No fire in her bedroom. Wearing a tweed deerstalker and ankle-length old musquash coat. Walks in the moors. 'It looks bad.' How can the resident proprietress be supervising the 'cuisine' when she's doing this?

The tablecloths were always put on the tables in the Dining Room on Palm Sunday — ready for the Easter visitors. It was easier to have that kind of routine when you have a clergyman son — going with the church's year, as it were. Though these new plastic ones could really be left on all the year round. At the same time the big stuffed eagle in the hall — from which the hotel took its name Eagle House Private Hotel — was given its annual cleaning with one of the Hoover tools.

The Residents' lounge must also be refurbished, 'a corner of the Residents' lounge' picture on the brochure gave little idea of its true 'flavour'.

Eventually Barbara must have sorted out these thoughts until she arrived at a workable plot — exactly how we really can't tell. The novel, still entitled *A Thankless Task*, was completed and sent to the publisher in July 1960, but Daniel George, the Executive at Cape with whom Barbara usually dealt, wrote to her,

Dear Barbara,

Some of us here are not very happy about the title of your new novel. It is of the kind that is perceived to be exquisitely appropriate once the book has been read but until then, and from a selling point of view, is not very enticing.

Can you think of something different?⁸

When Barbara came up with 'No Fond Return of Love', which she may have found in a poem in Quiller Couch's edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* (as I did), Daniel George replied

As I thought, the poem is by Fanny Greville — and you have misquoted it: the word should be KIND, not FOND,

I ask no kind return of love,
No tempting charm to please;
Far from the heart those gifts remove,
That sighs for peace and ease.

The syntax is odd. That in line 4 must refer to the heart, not the gifts. But I think we shall stick to the title unless you come up with something more appealing.⁸

Then Barbara thought she would prefer simply *No Return of Love*, but that too met with disapproval.⁸

Your preference for 'No Return of Love' as a title, without either the 'Kind' or the 'Fond', has, I am afraid, caused some dismay to our publicity and advertising people. They are very anxious that the 'Fond' be retained (despite that fact that the original verse has 'Kind') as they feel that 'No Return of Love' is too flat and is no better than the original 'Thankless Task'.

So, under this pressure, Barbara agreed to *No Fond Return of Love*. It was published in February 1961.

Robert Liddell wrote from Athens on 27th February,

Dearest Barbara

Thank you for your letter, and for the delightful novel — I loved the private hotel, and all the

search. But I do not like your heroine carrying on with a divorced man. One sees, of course, that it comes of being not a good churchwoman ... I like the Sedges very much too, and all the settings are admirably done. Of course there is never enough incense for me, but I daresay you are right to economise with it. I read it more or less at a sitting, on a grey Sunday, and am delighted to have another Pym to re-read. I was pleased to see Wilmet and Keith again, though for so brief a glimpse — I wished for a bit more of Miss Spicer.⁹

This letter seems to me a little lukewarm. I don't think *No Fond Return of Love* was one of Liddell's favourites. In *A Mind at Ease*¹⁰ he sums up the novel thus:

There are perhaps too many subjective cameras clicking away; they produce a great richness of detail, but there is not a strong enough central interest to give it sufficient coherence.

After Bob Smith, now in Nigeria, had read the book, and declared his enjoyment of it, Barbara wrote to him:

Dearest Bob

I'm so glad the book arrived safely and that you have enjoyed it. You are one of the few who know how truly B. Pym it is — but really Dulcie had an easy time of it compared with us searching for Bill's church, didn't she? I am not pleased myself with the book really, but have begun to think it a little better since people seem to have liked it so much and I have had some very good reviews — the TLS most kind, and Tatler most rapturous! But I think AGOB is better, though it was not nearly so well reviewed.¹¹

British Books, a monthly publication enjoying a sneak preview of books before publication, wrote in its January 1961 issue

Miss Pym's Austenish sense of wit and her sugar-coated satire are superbly displayed in this novel of a group of research workers and the complexities of their relationships — in particular of one, Dulcie Mainwaring, who discovers that in her neighbours in suburbia there is abounding grist for any researcher's mill. A brilliant, sparkling book.

John Davenport's was the first newspaper review, in the *Observer*, 5 Feb 1961:

Miss Pym is a clever writer, but *No Fond Return of Love* tends rather to doodle along in a Jane Austenish manner without that great lady's method. The evocation of the north London suburb, of the west-country town — these are admirable. The feeling of Ovaltine, of deep apricot pie, of pink plastic apostle spoons, of little Anglican aptnesses and ineptitudes — all these are beautifully here, but Dulcie Mainwaring somehow eludes one; and so does Aylwin Forbes, a mysterious figure in a mysterious world, the literary-academic.

There is some good sharp spinsterish laughter, and laughter of any kind is a thing to be grateful for; but I found myself caught in a yawn. A reasonably civil, Sundayish one, I hope.

The *Evening Standard* on 7th February said:

Suburban life under the microscope, with the minutiae sharply focused and detailed with affection: gentle, dowdy young woman, retired domestic help, handsome vicar etc. Unrevolutionary, but well done.

Hilary Seton of the *Sunday Times* wrote on 19th February:

A social comedy of people on the edge of life, refined to emotional anaemia. Aridity, intellectual pretensions and loneliness as youthful hopes collapse — Miss Pym draws her group of characters with her customary acuteness, honesty and surface humour — talk about the smile on the face of the tiger!

Siriol Hugh-Jones's 'rapturous review', as Barbara termed it, was in *The Tatler* on 15 Feb 1961:

No Fond Return of Love, by Barbara Pym, is a delicious book, refreshing as mint tea, funny and sad, bitchy and tender-hearted, about what it is like to be a fading lady in her early thirties living in North London and trying to soothe the niggling pangs of disappointed love with hot milky drinks and sensible thinking. Dulcie Mainwaring has a broken engagement, a large dowdy house, a teenage niece and a cross friend called Viola Dace who hopelessly loves the glamorous literary figure Aylwin Forbes. The background is suburban literary-fringe life, parish churches, weird seaside hotels, and the polite impingement of people who do not much like each other but share a common loneliness ...

I love and admire Miss Pym's pussycat wit and profoundly unsoppy kindness, and we may leave the deeply peculiar, face-saving, gently tormented English middle classes safely in her hands.

The *Church Times*, which reviewed most, if not all of Barbara's novels, described it as 'Sensitivity without sentiment':

Barbara Pym's novels are not everyone's cup of tea. She pitches her narrative in a deliberately minor key, and occupies herself chiefly with the cool, detached observation of undistinguished men and women, putting their motives and their foibles under the microscope of her exact inquisition.

Her new novel *No Fond Return of Love* falls precisely into this category. It is a clever but sometimes rather tedious examination of the social behaviour of a likeable spinster who fears that a broken engagement has put her on the shelf for good, and of a conceited, intellectual snob who edits a literary journal. His marriage is on the rocks, and Dulcie Mainwaring, by a persistent curiosity about him and his affairs, ends up by so involving herself in his life that her strictly academic interest turns into something like love.

Students of the niceties of middle-class social quirks and mannerisms will derive quiet pleasure from Miss Pym's delicate and almost feline appreciation of her chosen metier. She has a sense of humour and fun, never too obvious, which compensates for the dreariness and futility of most of her characters. And her writing has style, something rare enough in contemporary novels to make the reader truly thankful for at least one small mercy.

The Daily Telegraph on 24 Feb 61:

Dulcie Mainwaring, thirtyish, unsophisticated, unmarried and middle-class, devotes her considerable leisure to prying into the reasons which caused the marriage of a handsome male acquaintance to go on the rocks. Characters and situation acutely, but not too cynically, handled.

The *Glasgow Herald*, however, was scathing:

No Fond Return of Love by Barbara Pym is unusual in being set in the vague dusty world of libraries, catalogues, and research. A silly love story — or stories — is much bedevilled with trivia, and perhaps ought to have been published for the deck chair season, when the fact of there not being enough cauliflower au gratin for two might achieve importance.

Many 'fans' were inspired to write to Barbara. Some of these were her friends, or destined to become friends, but others were total strangers. Rachel Cecil, the wife of Lord David Cecil, wrote from Cranborne, Dorset, on 31 Oct 1961. Her husband later became one of her champions.

Dear Miss Pym

I have just finished reading *No Fond Return of Love*, and feel I must tell you what enormous pleasure it gave. It was sheer enjoyment from the delightful beginning — whetting one's appetite at the Conference — to the surprising and satisfying end with Senhor MacBride-Pereira sucking his mauve sugared almond.

The characters are all so well drawn, and so amusing. I love Mrs Forbes — Aylwin — Miss Lord — Father Bengier — one is kept amused all the way through — and with such subtle comedy — yet one does take Dulcie seriously and her inner comments on life. It is so well written too.

I can imagine the suburb so well, and the gardens, and Taviscombe. The whole novel builds up so well — that it becomes a real picture of life — and one really cares about what happens to Dulcie. Although most of it is splendid comedy, I like the little gleams of thoughtfulness, and even sadness. I must thank you for giving us so much enjoyment. I haven't enjoyed a present-day novel so much for years.¹²

Barbara's old friend Honor Wyatt, wrote:

Dearest Barbara

Delicious! First I read it, then Prue [her daughter] read it and we have so much enjoyed saying "Isn't it lovely where..." to each other...I thoroughly enjoyed the conference — it reminds me so much of gathering at a place near Devizes where I lecture sometimes. You ought to go on a course at Denman College some time, the Women's Institute's 'Countrywoman's College'. All ladies thrilling to male lecturers, you'd find it an absolute feast...¹³

Peggy Makins was better known as Evelyn Home, the agony aunt on the weekly magazine *Woman*. Barbara had corresponded with her for years, and Peggy had done her best to try to get Barbara's short stories published.

Dear Barbara,

Now I am very early through *No Fond Return of Love* for the 2nd time, I am beginning to believe that it may prove one of my favourites, as *Jane & Prudence* is becoming also. Not yet being again at the end, I recall it as rather a surprise — I just didn't expect Dulcie to want such close acquaintance with Aylwin really. I very much enjoyed the conference at the beginning, especially because I've been to Swanwick and remember the incredible lack of air in the big lounge.

You didn't mention the curious oneness of the taste of the food there. I remember thinking that the sponge cake at tea tasted precisely the same as the sliced mutton at lunch, except for the texture and temperature of the two foods...¹⁴

And from Isobel Anslow, Richmond, Surrey, 1 Apr 1962:

Dear Barbara,

I bought a copy of *No Fond Return of Love* about a couple of months ago. I want you to know how much I have enjoyed reading it. All the little incidences you relate, e.g. the arrival at the Eagle House Hotel; the meal on the train; the Vicar's invitation for Dulcie to live in Miss Spicer's flat and all its implications. Dulcie Mainwaring's reactions to her circumstances remind me so much of myself. Next to *Excellent Women* I like it best...¹⁵

Readers unknown to Barbara were also eager to express their delight at her latest novel. This is from a reader in Hampstead:

I write, feeling a little silly for so doing, to say how much I have enjoyed your book *No Fond Return of Love*. I am in the middle of a spell of feeling particularly overworked and under-appreciated and didn't feel to have a laugh left in me, when, on Saturday night I started to read your book in bed!

Sunday was cluttered with visitors all day and I kept longing to sneak away and revive myself with another chapter. In bed once more I snatched it up with the intention of finishing it before going to sleep — but then I thought I must spin the pleasure out a bit. So, I finished it this morning before embarking on wash day and all the time it has made me laugh out loud. Thank you for lifting me out of my mild depression and drawing my attention once more to the endless fun of life.

I have been your devoted reader ever since *Some Tame Gazelle*. I am 50 and have a married daughter, a Hungarian son-in-law, an alarming 'sixth-former' daughter and an Inspector of Taxes for a husband — all delightful, but I love to escape from time to time into your world, so don't ever stop writing — there must be thousands of others who feel the same.¹⁶

A Margaret Hillsden from Surrey wrote more succinctly:

Dear Madam

What a joy it was to read your latest book *No Fond Return of Love*. All the characters appear real. True to life, with the combined interest of London. Many thanks for producing such an excellent book.¹⁷

And from Hornsby, New South Wales, Lucy wrote:

I have just finished your book *No Fond Return of Love* and I want to tell you how much I enjoyed it. The faint ridiculousness, the wistfulness of London suburbs in Autumn, the clear visual pictures of it all, have pleased me very much.¹⁸

This next letter is not an appreciation of the book, which she [I take it to be a woman] hasn't yet read, but rather a personal, and despite the writer's own estimation, somewhat trite comment:

Dear Madam

As an ordinary reader I hope to read your novel *No Fond Return of Love* recently published.

May I please take the liberty of making a comment on the subject of marriage, which novelists sometimes write about? That is to say that some of the most satisfactory I know of were contracted when both the partners were middle-aged or even elderly. (I know of three such cases just in my own vicinity.) I think that this fact is interesting and, perhaps, shows the value of age and experience in these matters. (Not, of course, that I am implying that people should deliberately wait until they are middle-aged to marry as a matter of policy.) With apologies for writing you...¹⁹

Finally a male fan, a naval Commander, from Cirencester:

...I must write to thank you for the pleasure you have given me in reading *No Fond Return of Love* — the delightful way in which you have drawn the various characters...if you are in London between July 1-7 come and have a drink at the Travellers Club with yours gratefully, Francis Cadogan.²⁰

No Fond Return of Love appears to be the novel which has most often been dramatised, and, I believe, the only one performed live before a public audience. Firstly in October 1965 it was dramatised for BBC Radio by Elizabeth Proud, who also played Mrs Williton and Miss Lord.

The programme of the Barbara Pym Literary Weekend at St. Hilda's College, Oxford, in August 1993 included scenes from *No Fond Return of Love* adapted by Georgia Powell, grand-daughter of the famous writer Anthony Powell, and directed by Georgia's father Tristram, a radio producer/director. All the parts were played by four actors, three of whom were professional, who had all recently worked with Tristram Powell.

After this Weekend, Elizabeth Proud was among a number who suggested the formation of a Barbara Pym Society, and she became its first Chairman. For the next few years she brought actors to Oxford to read adaptations appropriate to the conference themes. When we lost this influential Committee member we had to fall back on our own resources and make our own adaptations.

In 1988 the Vicar of All Saints' Church in Whetstone, North London, prepared and directed an adaptation of *No Fond Return of Love* which had three performances at the All Saints' Arts Centre. In 1994 it was presented

at The Man in the Moon Theatre in Chelsea, where it ran for three weeks, and, according to Hazel Bell, it was also done in Australia in 1994. A more elaborately staged version was performed back at the All Saints' Arts Centre in November 1997. Hazel Bell, long-time member of the Pym Society, and a former editor of *Green Leaves*, went to see it, and wrote about it in March 1998:

I attended the performance of *No Fond Return of Love* on 29th November 1997 in Whetstone, and found a truly Pymian occasion. A wet night: we arrived in the church hall to find a small audience including two nuns, their habits glistening with raindrops. Chocolate biscuits and various, mostly soft, drinks were being sold at a table — no, not sold, but giving opportunity for donations, because of the parish licensing system. We felt the appropriate Pymian spirit pervading not only the stage, but the entire hall.²¹

No Fond Return of Love was the last novel for which Barbara did not have a fear of rejection. After this, her writing career took a down turn, and it was many years before it rose again. It was therefore, all the more gratifying to read in Ian Jack's column in *The Guardian* as recently as 1st January this year [2011]:

On Boxing Day I finished Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love*, as greedily as I used to polish off my gift box of Liquorice Allsorts. I shouldn't have been reading it at all — I bought it for my daughter — but there is no stopping with a Pym novel after the first accidentally read page. After this book appeared in 1961 her publishers decided they wanted no more. What fools they were.

References

¹ MSPym 50-52

² Holt, Hazel. *A Lot to Ask*. London: Macmillan, 1990, p. 179

³ MSPym 18

⁴ MSPym 123

⁵ MSPym 50

⁶ MSPym 18

⁷ MSPym 51

⁸ MSPym 164

⁹ MSPym 157

¹⁰ Liddell, Robert. *A Mind at Ease*. London: Peter Owen, 1989, p. 88

¹¹ MSPym 162/1

¹² MSPym 168

¹³ MSPym 168

¹⁴ MSPym 168

¹⁵ MSPym 168

¹⁶ MSPym 168

¹⁷ MSPym 168

¹⁸ MSPym 168

¹⁹ MSPym 168

²⁰ MSPym 168

²¹ *Green Leaves*, 4(1) 1998, p. 7

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 in London, 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.