

Pym, Partners and Poems

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*Paper presented at the Annual General Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society
St. Hilda's College, Oxford, 4-6 September 2015*

I originally expressed some doubt about the title of the theme of this year's conference, as I feel that 'partners' has a particular connotation these days, usually denoting unmarried sexual couples, business and criminal associates (often the same thing!), and dancing, skating and other such pairs.

However, the Committee agreed that, for the purposes of this meeting, the term could be interpreted very widely, to include relatives, friends, lovers, even cats – anyone with whom Barbara had a significant relationship.

I am going to take advantage of this wider interpretation to speak, not of her fictional characters, but of four of Barbara's real-life 'partners' who may not be well known to some of the audience. Paradoxically, two of these were men she only knew very slightly, or whom she may never even have met, but for whom she nurtured an unrequited, if temporary, love. It was not in her novels that Barbara celebrated these 'partnerships' – but in unpublished verse.

As Hazel Holt tells us in *A Lot to Ask*, Barbara was disposed to fall in love with young men, with some of whom she might not have even been acquainted. One of these was a bank clerk and lay reader, perhaps her first crush, when she was only 17 and still at school. We are not sure whether she knew him and if so how well, but she certainly must have noticed him often in the Oswestry branch of the Midland Bank (now HSBC), and in St Oswald's church.

To him she dedicated two poems extolling his superiority, unacknowledged by his colleagues in the work place. The first, written between January and April 1931, is called, *MIDLAND BANK: a poem dedicated to JTLI with the author's fondest love (But without his permission)*; Hazel says his name was John Trevor Lloyd. I am not here to comment on the quality of Barbara's work, or how seriously she took herself, but surely this overwrought, overlong piece of verse, could only be excused by the poet's youth. To my ears, at least, it is just excruciatingly funny.

MIDLAND BANK

In the cool sanctity of Midland Bank
I watched the clerks, pale fishes in a tank,
Seeming to think of nothing – yet their eyes
Which looked at me with half-awake surprise
Gave a slight hint of fluttering souls within,
Faint germs of poetry and piety, which died
In uncongenial climes, stifled and killed
By the monotony of Midland Bank – which chilled
All warmth of feeling. Some were young
But in years only, for their minds were ageless,
Their faces too were pale and colourless,
And in their eyes I seemed to find it said
That they had lived their life long years ago.

Yet there was one who seemed to have a soul.
His eyes were blue, deep set, they looked beyond
The Bank and all its littleness – they gazed
Into that great unknown, which we poor men
Dare not attempt to probe – I think he saw

More than we see – perhaps his thoughts as well
Are as much higher than ours as are the thoughts
Of God above those of most men on earth.
Some say he realised his high pre-eminence;
I care not, for I only knew I saw
A bank clerk with a halo, not a fish
Passive and colourless behind the barriers
Of Midland Bank – and yet his fellow fishes
Gave one no hint that they were realising
The presence of this creature in their midst.

I saw him walking in the streets one day,
Cold and aloof, he seemed preoccupied
He did not smile – he had a sullen mouth
But no man could ignore his eyes: his glance
Turned neither to the right nor left – he contemplated
Only himself, and of his soul he thought
For he was very much in love with it.

So Sunday comes, a day of rest for all.
‘We will play Bridge or golf – have a good time’
His fellow fishes say. But he alone,
A saintly fish, spends Sunday piously.
He reads the lessons and adores himself.
How musical his voice – How calm his face,
How pallid too – how saintly smooth his hair!
Have ever eyes appeared more starry-blue?
His lovely hands, languid and smoothly-white
Turning the pages of the Holy Book,
Are they not worthy assets to the loveliness
Of any church, however beautiful?
And he himself – an ornament of joy?
‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever’
Keats wrote in lovely words th’immortal truth,
Beauty and joy this bank clerk brings to all
For whom this day is one of ecstasy.

Yet I have seen him with his fellow men
No longer cold and pious, though to some
He may be condescending. I have seen
His gaiety makes him the life and soul
Of any dance or party. Now he smiles,
No longer is he sullen – yet his eyes
Are still the windows of his loved soul.
Some call him fool, some say he loves himself
More than he should, but these are fools themselves
Who never try to look beneath the surface
Where they might find this thing of priceless joy.
But now I write no more: how can I show
The secret mysteries I do not know.

TAME DONKEY, described by Barbara as a sequel to MIDLAND BANK, continues her theme of a superior being trapped among lower forms of life, and heroically overcoming adversity. *To JTLI – with the author’s deepest affection – is this poem dedicated.*

TAME DONKEY

'Tis hard to snare a phoenix in a net,
To catch rare birds and clip their brilliant wings.
Some animals are shy, and others fierce,
And when once caught, they must be watched with care.
So, foolish mortals, thinking that they knew
These closely-guarded secrets, try to catch
Some hapless creatures, who will be to them
As pets, or slaves of all their foolish whims.
So unicorns are snared by such as these
And kept, till in captivity they die.
Their eyes are filled with melancholy tears,
They stand dejected, lost and wondering
What cruel god has thus imprisoned them.
But some have bolder spirits – these break free.
On flaming wings they soar above the world
And joyfully they find new life to live.
So I would tell of such a one as these
Who conquered in the end, and showed the world
That he was no tame donkey, for a man
To keep for his amusement. He was one
Of rarest kind among the world of men:
Two sided, with such enigmatic eyes
They seemed to give the lie to all he said.
He was a bank clerk, yet he was estranged
From the pale fish-like creatures of his kind
For he was different and aloof from them.
He was not tied by any petty rules
But made his soul his own – although it seemed
That others had dominion over him.

So one day he was caught, not as fish
For fishes are of little use in life,
But as a donkey, tamed to be the slave
Of his exacting master, and to be
Amusing and of use to entertain.
He had been brought up in a pious way,
An excellent thing in donkeys – he was trained
To make himself of use inside the church
And so endeared himself to many hearts
Of those who loved him for his worthiness.
And he was perfect – his good qualities
Were used, to be a benefit for all.
His other side was merry, he could talk
And laugh in jovial vein, and well he danced.
His presence was desired everywhere.
His time was not his own – so was he plagued
By invitations from the dotting sex,
Who loved him for his playful silliness
Which mixed so sweetly with his piety.

Thus all went well, the ass was docile yet;
His master found him easily subdued.
He did what he was told, and even more;
He was forever in his proper place,

Behaving as the tamest donkey should.
 But all things must have end, and better things
 Are soonest over – so this cunning ass,
 Who had his master at his beck and call,
 Decided that the time had fully come
 When he should break away from his dull life
 And taste the pleasures that were rightly his.
 Little by little he estranged himself
 From those whose perfect donkey he had been.
 He broke away and treated them less oft
 To that supreme and glorious joy, his company.
 And so he came to lead a double life.
 Love entered – unskilled donkeys would have been
 Suddenly overwhelmed – but this one knew
 The art of gradual change. So few have power
 To turn from asses into unicorns
 Rampant and eager for the spoils of life.

Now the tame donkey has been changed by love
 Into a brilliant creature, sure of life
 And living every moment to the full,
 Not caring for tomorrow, only knowing
 That life is short and there is much to do.
 The church sees him but little, it is vain
 To come in hopes of hearing his sweet voice,
 And all are doomed to suffer bitter grief.
 Yet we have been much favoured, and the sun
 Has shined upon us once, we must not hope
 To have more than our share of such a joy.

A new day dawns – and now the long night ends,
 That night of wandering in uncertain ways
 Of stilted worthiness and piety.
 And now he looks back upon his fellow clerks,
 And smiles on them with pity in his eyes.
 Happy is he if on the downward path
 He can look up at such and realise
 That he is holding life in both his hands
 While they are toiling in the watery gloom.
 Fortunate donkey! Hold to love until
 Death comes along, and finds you dreaming still!

This was written in August 1931. A few weeks later Barbara was at Oxford and JTLI forgotten. She soon found another desirable subject for her devotion in one of the Moderators, i.e. the Dons who set and invigilated Pass Moderations, an examination which all undergraduates had to sit in their first term. Their names and affiliations were often not known to the students, who could only guess their identities, in Barbara's case by following them furtively to see which college they entered or emerged from. She set her sights on one she called her 'Fat Baby Face' – not, perhaps, the generally accepted ideal of masculine beauty. In December, after she heard that she had not passed Mods, declaring of one of the set books 'Tocqueville was my downfall', she wrote this poem, dedicated

TO LMF BEFORE I KNEW HIS NAME

There was a Lady loved a Moderator
 No man for such as I!
 He was her darling and her sweet

Indeed I know not why.

There was no beauty in his face
He was not even thin
And yet no one can rightly say
Where true love shall begin!

She did not even know his name
He might have been the one
Who showed her in decisive way
How badly she had done!

She made many new friends in her first term, and although she seemed to have spent a jolly Christmas vacation, mainly in London, she was very keen to return to the university. On 14 January 1932 she wrote,

I'm looking forward awfully to going back, but I simply must work hard... A new term in a new year – golden opportunities (and how!) to get a Moderator – a peer's heir – a worthy theological student – or even to change entirely!! But Oxford really is intoxicating.

On 16 January she continued: 'Saw a lot of my fat Baby Face MA – hurrying down Magdalen Street and again in Blackwell's. Too sweet in spite of other people's unfavourable opinions...' Two days later, 'Met Fat Baby Face, looking rather smart...I tried to shadow him but was too late', and two days later again 'Funny what a curious desire I have to see my Fat Baby Face. Somehow I'm sure he's Kenneth B. MacFarlane of Magdalen'. By 23 January she was still obsessed: 'In the afternoon I saw my pet Moderator and that seemed to be the main event of the day. Really, this is the queerest crush ever – I wonder if he has an inkling'. On 26th 'I saw my pet Moderator in the afternoon. Unfortunately I couldn't judge whether he'd come out of Queen's or Magdalen, so his name remains rather an uncertainty. Finally on 3 Feb: 'In the afternoon saw my Moderator in a car which stopped at Queen's ... he got out and went in ...I suppose he's Lindley M. Fraser.

So, identified at last, she dedicated this poem to Lindley MacNaghten Fraser:

Sweet Moderator! When these days are over
Let us seek out some metaphorical clover
And there walk hand in hand all the day long,
Passing the hours with a sweet silly song,
Forgetting in our bliss those creatures *qui*
nullum honorem ambiunt; we'll flee
From that sad limbo of decaying brains
Our University – from all the pains
Of dissipated Cupid's dreary darts –
Which never touched the best beloved hearts.
But I shall play alone. You'll pass your time
In your prosaic way, I in my rhyme
Shall taste those pleasures that could never be
If I were known to you and you to me.

[who pass without honours]

Lindley MacNaghten Fraser was a Scot, a Balliol scholar who took a first class degree in Classics, and received a doctorate in Economics from the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. in 1927. He returned to Oxford as a Fellow of The Queen's College and was there in Barbara's time, when he had been married for about two years. A photograph of him taken in 1948 shows a round-faced, double chinned man, rather jolly-looking and not entirely unattractive!



In April Barbara learned that she had passed Mods at the second attempt. After this, Moderators seem to have lost their appeal. She became interested in more accessible men.

Ross: he really is angelic and great fun. Harlorin's an amusing creature. Aidan: I think he's a bit too curious for my tastes. Wells: sweet, but too intellectual. Norman George Fisher, the green [jacketed] scholar from Teddy Hall: what a sweet face he has and what a provocative little nose. Geoffrey H.S., the other St Edmund Hall scholar: Looks heavenly in plus fours. Doing a Diploma in Theology.

Although they had never met, this last occupied Barbara's thoughts all that term and the next. 'Oh, Geoffrey, how I love you, and I suppose nothing will ever happen about it. And I'll just forget you when you go down.'

Barbara appeared not to be moved to celebrate in verse any other lovers until she met Julian Amery in December 1937. This was when she was on a visit to Oxford while she was still stunned by Henry's marriage to Elsie. She was having lunch with a friend (male, of course) who introduced her to Julian as Päävikki Olafsson, for Barbara was pretending to be a Finn. They went back to his rooms in Balliol, where Barbara dropped her Finnish accent, and they listened to records of European music. To her surprise he kissed her. 'It was the first time anyone so much younger than I was had done such a thing, for he was only eighteen and I was twenty-four'. More than a year later she confided to her diary 'Oh how absurd and delicious it is to be in love with somebody younger than yourself! Everybody should try it – no life can be complete without it'.

It seems that at this time Julian was making the running. He wrote to Barbara during the winter vacation to tell her that he had met Hilary – 'She has your voice, so I tried to make her talk. The voice gave me such a serious attack of *Sehnsucht*. I am angry with you – you have been in my mind all day and stopped me concentrating on Louis XVI. I simply can't believe I've only seen you once for an hour and a half ... don't forget to tell me when you are coming down. *Mein schönes Fraülein, gute Nacht, Kuss mit Liebe, Julian*'.

Barbara returned to Oxford in late February 1938, and on 4th March she wrote in her diary 'I met Jay by the Ashmolean and we leaned up against it and stood looking up at the Randolph and the blue sky behind it. Then we parted, he to write an essay and I to write him a Betjeman poem'. She called it

**FRIVOLOUS LINES INSPIRED BY LOOKING UP AT THE RANDOLPH HOTEL, OXFORD,
WITH JULIAN AMERY IN A FINE SUNNY AFTERNOON,
IT BEING EARLY CLOSING DAY. 3 MARCH 1938**

Much sweeter than Atlee [*sic*] and Mosley
Is Julian Amery
But not as sweet as the Randolph Hotel
On early closing day.

For the sky is blue behind it,
And the little towers of stone
Of the Randolph Hotel will still be there
When this present day has flown.

When Julian has quite forgotten
That one early closing day
He leaned against the wall with me
And I would not go away.



And he bought me a bunch of violets,
And still I would not go.
I did not want him to write an essay
Because I loved him so.

And then I went back to my lodgings
And there did make a shrine
Of *Oxford Comment* and violets
And the bottle that once held wine.

And I took a glass I had used before,
And I filled it to the brim,
And I thought as I drank of the night before,
When I had been with him.

And the wine was sweet as kisses,
And when I came back that night
I looked up into Balliol
And saw the electric light.

And I thought, he is writing an essay,
And I stood for a moment still
And I blew three tender kisses,
But they stopped at the window sill.

And unless he thinks for a moment
That I may be standing there,
The kisses will never reach him
But will float on the midnight air.

And perhaps they will go to Eaton Square,
Or even out to Spain,
Or perhaps when he is dying
They will come to him again.

And he will remember the Randolph Hotel
On early closing day,
And how I stood beside him,
And would not go away.

But if he never remembers
The Randolph will not forget.
Oh, lovely noble building,
I see you are standing yet.

Thou shalt be a memorial
To Julian Amery
Who is sweeter far than Atlee [*sic*]
Or Sir Oswald Mosley.

Barbara was well aware that their romance could be but short-lived. A week later:

[At] five o'clock... he had to go and see his tutor. I knew it would have to be goodbye and perhaps not even *Auf Wiedersehen*. I was calm and sat down at the table to write something on a farewell card... Jay came up behind me and said '*Servus*'.

I was pleasantly sad on leaving his rooms...I walked out of the St. Giles gateway in a happy daze and then went into Elliston's for tea ... I was so happy.... I felt it was the perfect ending to what had been one of the happiest episodes of my life.

Hazel Holt said that they had spent only 20 hours together, but these provided 'twenty years of memories'. Although Barbara had done the noble thing, she could not easily forget Julian. Soon afterwards she wrote

LINES WRITTEN TO A DEAR YOUNG FRIEND ON HIS NINETEENTH BIRTHDAY

How like an Angel is my love to me,
Adorable as Bibliography.
Rarer than *Tilia platyphillos*,
Or Mistletoe that in its branches grows.
Lovelier [sic] than *Schola Magna Borealis*
Diviner than the poems of Novalis.
Jewel of Balliol and Eaton Square
United in him virtues all too rare,
Like Sunny Beams illuminate the air.
Infallible in things political,
And yet as simple as St. Edmund Hall.
Nicer than tea with any Senior Proctor,
As full of *Stimmung* as *Bernkastler Doktor*.
Mysterious as the Soul of Algebra,
Eyes like Astronomy, and yet no star
Reigns with such Brilliance in the Heavens as he,
Young, charming, handsome ... JULIAN AMERY.

Towards the end of that year she produced this:

**FRAGMENT INSPIRED BY TENNYSON.
OCT-NOV 1938**

Oh that 'twere possible
After long grief and pain,
To find the arms of the younger son of the Rt. Hon. L.S. Amery M.P.
Around me once again.

From this time, I feel that Barbara's poems were improving considerably. They were constructed more formally, and the sentiments expressed a little more restrained. By now she probably simply enjoyed the exercise of writing verse. Here is another:

**A FRAGMENT INSPIRED BY A WALK IN EATON SQUARE
KNOWING THAT HE WAS FAR AWAY IN OXFORD. OCT 1938**

'Tis Winter now in Eaton Square [site of Julian's London home]
With Julian Amery not there.
Bereft of Light the houses stand
As ruins in Sudetenland.
And one who loves him walks and sighs,
And wipes the teardrops from her eyes,
And gazes at that noble pile,
Where Julian sojourned for a while
In hopes that she may see his ghost
Taking a letter to the post...

Next, a sonnet:

**SONNET WRITTEN TO A DEAR FRIEND ON THE THIRD DAY OF DECEMBER 1938,
IT BEING THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF OUR MEETING.**

My melancholy disembodied Fingers
Caress the Letters and the Faded Flowers
My Gothick Spirit obstinately lingers
In long-forgotten places, Haunts of ours,
Where we, who loved in a proctorial way,
Did twine our Hands and for a Moment stay.
We were those lovers parted in the Spring
Who never met upon this earth again,
Yet on the Last Day when the Dead shall rise
And Bones be clothed with Flesh, this dusty Thing,
Our love that in so long a Sleep has lain,
Shall spring to Life in our new-fashioned Eyes.
Then shall Belgravia and North Oxford see
The Decorous Kiss of Immortality.

On 3rd April 1940, Barbara wrote in her diary:

This morning I polished up an old box I found upstairs. It is of walnut with black and yellow inlay and a brass crest on the lid. It makes a beautiful box for relics – so in went all the letters, pressed flowers, Niersteiner corks, handkerchiefs, Tilia platyphyllos etc. It will still hold a few more letters, though it is quite nicely filled. I wonder what will happen to it. If I were to die tomorrow I should either have it sent back to him or buried with me (probably the latter) – but as it does not seem very likely that I shall, I daresay it may be in my possession for years and years, until one day it becomes junk again and the box returns to the place where I found it – perhaps with the relics still in it...

Well, here is the box. Most of you will have seen it before. Sometime in the 70s Barbara gave it (without its contents) to Kay Phelps, a writer herself, wife of the author and broadcaster Gilbert Phelps, fellow residents of Finstock. Kay passed it to the Society when she talked to us after the conference dinner in 2007. To accompany it, Barbara composed an



ELEGY ON THE RELIQUES OF LOVE SHUT UP IN A BOX

Dearest, within this Walnut Bed
Lie Reliques of a Love long dead.
Dear Objects you once gave to me
In Wien in eighteen eighty three.
The Flowers are press'd, the Ink is dry,
Contented and at peace they lie.
Their Life was over long ago –
They are content it should be so.
How different is the Restless Heart,
That feeling and remembering Part
Which will not leave to You and Me
Our dusty Immortality,
But broods and pines with vain Desires
And to the Pyramids aspires,
And trails through Egypt's Desert Sands
To seek its love in Foreign Lands.
So faithful, so affectionate

So Gothick and so out of date,
For love has folded up his Wings,
No Phoenix in Belgravia springs.
You are not as you used to be
In Wien in eighteen eighty three.
And yet the Reliques in their Grave
Remember Twenty Hours you gave
And lie in Sweet Complacency –
An Epitaph for You and Me.

I haven't found any evidence that these poems were ever given or sent to Julian. Maybe if they had he might have been a little kinder to her memory.

I am going to end this talk with the final verse from Barbara's pen that I have yet found, to her last love, Richard Roberts. Consistent to the end, Barbara chose another unsuitable and unattainable man on whom to lavish her affection, and again be doomed to disappointment. I'm not sure in which year she wrote this, but the date 14th February is significant.

O, Sweet Bahamian, cruel Fate
Has sent you to me much too late
Tormenting me with many a Scene
Of Happiness that might have been...
Yet I must love you, Dearest Boy –
My Jewel, my Treasure and my Joy –
For though you never can be mine,
At least you'll be MY VALENTINE!