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GREEN LEAVES

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THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY CONFERENCE 2002

Phil Bacon, Hilary Walton and Louise Ross

The 2002 Annual Conference of the Barbara Pym Society was held on 7-8 September, at St Hilda's College, Oxford, attended by 65 members, including some who had flown in specially from the US, Belgium, Germany and Vienna..

The first session was the Annual General Meeting, the full minutes of which appear on pages 2-3.

The conference theme, "Unexcellent Men", was considered with regard to all aspects of Pym's life and work. First, Bridget Guymer read Patricia Shaw's paper examining unexcellent men in Pym's fiction (from which our conference title was taken; reproduced in this issue of *Green Leaves*, pages 8-9). Maggie Parsons then considered four examples in further detail: Adam Marsh-Gibbon in *Civil to Strangers*, Fabian Driver in *Jane and Prudence,* Tom Mallow in *Less than Angels*, and Aylwin Forbes in *No Fond Return* of Love.

Nancy Ellen Talburt spoke on unexcellent men in Pym's personal life, with the title, 'Unsuitable for attachment'. The men she cited as having 'represented the highs and lows of romance' in Pym's life were Rupert Gleadow, Henry Harvey, Julian Amery, Gordon Glover and Richard Roberts: Harvey and Glover being designated 'love-rats', and Roberts 'a rat-friend'. Her paper was described by Hilary Walton as 'spot on'. She will repeat this presentation at the North American Conference in March, and it will subsequently appear in this journal. Unexcellent men in Pym's literary life were represented by the many letters of rejection of her work that Barbara Pym received from publishers. Yvonne Cocking had copied them all in the Bodleian Library archive, and they were read in a sequence interpolated with letters from Pym to publishers and to Philip Larkin, excerpts from her diary, and recorded comments from others, with Hazel Bell as narrator and the women, Tim Burnett as all the men.

Our after-dinner speaker was Triona Adams, on *excellent* men in general: she was to have taken examples from life, but, as she asked, "Where are they?" – nd had been led to answer, in fact, they are all in fiction! She had conducted a private survey, seeking recommendations of such men: top of the list had come Hamlet, Romeo, Jay Gatsby, Bertie Wooster, Heathcliff, and several detectives – Philip Marlowe, Lord Peter Wimsey, Moriarty; with, topping the list, Sherlock Holmes.

Top of the list for men who excelled in love came Heathcliff; for wit, Jane Austen's men, who were held to achieve romantic hero status. Mr Darcy, though, did not show well: 'his rudeness remains an unresolved issue', and he has fallen out of favour as a heart-throb. We know Austen's heroes far less well than such characters as Jane Eyre and David Copperfield.

Hazel Bell and Nancy Talburt

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As for Pym's depiction of men – Adams thought it was not mean-spirited, never blindly done, always with great sympathy. 'Pym whittles away at the little ivory tablet, deep in humour and humanity, recording the failure of men to live up to their image in fiction.'

The Sunday session began with a discussion of all we had heard of unexcellent men. It was suggested that there was a fourth genre to be considered: Pym's unworthy literary heroes. The prime example was John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, so frequently referred to in Pym's works as 'the dear earl', but described thus by Dr Samuel Johnson in his *Lives of the Poets* – surely an unparalleled example of unexcellence:

> ... in a course of drunken gaiety, and gross sensuality, with intervals of study perhaps yet more criminal, with an avowed contempt of all decency and order, total disregard to every moral, and a resolute denial of every religious obligation, he lived worthless and useless and blazed out his youth and his health in lavish voluptuousness; till, at the age of one and thirty, he had exhausted the fund of life, and reduced himself to a state of weakness and decay.

There was discussion of marriage in Pym, the expectations of men and of women. The criteria for excellence in women, in the eyes of men, seemed to be the ability to type; in men, to put up shelves. We could find no example in Pym's works of a really happily married couple. A vote for the least unexcellent man in Pym's fiction, between John Challow (of the 'unsuitable attachment' – the only title of a Pym novel levelling criticism, but in fact we could find little wrong with John!), Tom Dagnall, Rocky Napier and Everard Bone led to a win for Everard – with votes for John only from the men present.

Left to right; Jutta Schmidt, Elinor Biber, Barbara Schmoczer, Ellen Miller

Finally, Yvonne Cocking introduced, and Deirdre Bryan-Brown read Pym's unpublished short story, 'The Pilgrimage', with members taking the parts of the characters and reading their words. This was pronounced a most effective entertainment. Yvonne Cocking's introduction, and the story, appear later in this issue.

Hazel Bell

Notice Board

The Fifth Annual North American Pym Conference will be held 29-30 March 2003 at Harvard. Details will be posted in January at www.barbara-pym.org. If you have questions, please e-mail Ellen Miller at

ellen@ellenmiller.net.

"All This Reading": The Literary World of Barbara Pym, co-edited by Frauke Lenckos and Ellen Miller, will be published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press at the end of 2002 or early in 2003.

The book includes a foreword by Hilary Walton, a reminiscence by Hazel Holt, and original essays by Katherine Ackley, Orphia Jane Allen, John Bayley, Paul DeAngelis, Barbara Dunlap, Barbara Everett, Jan Fergus, Anthony Kaufman, Frauke Lenckos, Jane Nardin, Anne Pilgrim, Janice Rossen, Dale Salwak, Helen Clare Taylor, and Eleanor Wymard. Ronald Blythe has supplied a preface to Barbara Pym's essay, *A Year in West Oxfordshire*, which was no longer in print.

The book may be pre-ordered now on amazon.com, and further ordering information will appear in the next issue of *Green Leaves*.

The latest news from **Moyer Bell** is that their reprints of *The Sweet Dove Died* and *No Fond Return of Love* will be out in November, also available on amazon.com; possibly also on amazon.co.uk.

The index to Pym's works in booklet form (40 pages), based on UK editions of the books, includes lists of the opening page numbers of chapters, so that readers with other editions can trace the references.

The Pym-l discussion group referred lately to a site with some chapters from a book about Barbara Pym, ***Saggi italiani su Barbara Pym*** published by Marcos y Marcos:

http://web.tiscali.it/WebAcademy/PYM/barbara.htm

The A.G.M. of the Alliance of Literary Societies will be hosted by the Dylan Thomas Society in Swansea on Saturday, 26 April 2003, with further activities on Sunday 27th. This will also mark the thirtieth anniversary of the initiation of the A.L.S.

Catherine Heath, who followed Barbara Pym to read English at St Hilda's twelve years later, and likewise became a novelist offering social satire, now has her own page on the website of the Alliance of Literary Societies, at:
www.sndc.demon.co.uk

REPORT OF THE NINTH A.G.M. OF THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY HELD AT ST.HILDA'S COLLEGE, OXFORD, ON SATURDAY 7TH SEPTEMBER 2002 AT 11.30 a.m.

Committee members present were: Kate Charles (Chairman), Hilary Walton, Eileen Roberts (Membership Secretary), Hazel Bell (Editor - *Green Leaves*), Yvonne Cocking (Secretary), Deirdre Bryan-Brown, Bridget Guymer, Maggie Parsons, Rita Phillips and Ellen Miller (Chairman of the Barbara Pym Society in North America)

Before the meeting started, Eileen Roberts welcomed the Principal of St. Hilda's College. Lady English said how much she enjoys hosting the Crime and Mystery Weekend and the Barbara Pym Conference. She has read all Barbara Pym's books and possesses seven shelves of crime novels! She also called attention to a new Channel 4 series, starting the following day, based on the experiences of several St. Hilda's students throughout their time at the College. She herself would be speaking on "Woman's Hour" on 9th September about the few remaining all-women colleges in the UK.

1. Chairman's Opening Remarks

The Chairman, Kate Charles, extended a warm welcome to all members and referred to their wide geographic spread – from several European countries, and the United States, the furthest traveller being Janet Wilkins from Washington State. Looking back over the year, she recalled a very successful 'Pym Day' in Lincoln. Despite the atrocious weather, about a hundred people turned up. Nicholas and Caroline Bennett did a great job, and a vote of thanks to them was recorded. Thanks were also extended to Hilary Walton for donating her spare copies of Barbara's novels, which raised a good sum for the Society.

The North American Meeting last March was also a great success.

At the Spring Meeting at St. Alban's, Holborn, in June, Fr. Gabriel Myers had talked about Victorian hymns, with special reference to the Pym novels, with his piano accompaniment, and chorus provided by the members. (His paper follows in this issue of *Green Leaves*.)

Looking to the future, Kate said that the theme for next year's conference would be "Less than Angels", and the anthropological connection.

Hazel Bell's index to Pym's works has now been produced in booklet form and is available for purchase at £2 per copy.

With regard to the reprints of the Pym novels, Macmillan were still being evasive, so Hilary has put the matter in the hands of James Hale, Hazel Holt's agent, whom Kate thought was an excellent choice.

Hilary has heard that BBC Radio Bristol has commissioned a play by Jennifer Howarth entitled "The Resurrection of Miss Pym". Hilary is to meet Miss Howarth next week to discuss the matter.

Finally, Kate invited interested members to join her on Sunday morning to go to the service at St. Cross Church.

2. Apologies

Apologies for absence had been received from Hazel Holt and from Stephen and Jean Shell.

3. Minutes of Previous A.G.M

The minutes of the previous A.G.M. were accepted.

4. Matters Arising from the Minutes

Ellen Miller said that *"All This Reading": The Literary World of Barbara Pym*, which it is hoped will keep Barbara's name alive in academic circles, is now due for publication in December 2002 or January 2003

5. Financial and Membership Report

Eileen Roberts reported that at this time last year there was a balance of £3389.36 in the main account which now stands at £4205.76. giving a surplus of £816.40. Membership now numbers 400, of whom a little under half are in North America. The Directory of Members. distributed with the last issue of Green Leaves. cost £180.58 to produce. Those whose names did not appear in this Directory had not signed their agreement to being listed, necessary under the Data Protection Act. With the next membership renewal form there will be another opportunity to sign agreement to inclusion in the next Directory, and give email addresses and telephone numbers if these are to be included.

6. Editor's Report

Hazel apologised for the poor printing quality of the last edition of *Green Leaves*. Eileen explained that the fault was entirely due to the printers, but that there had not been time to have the whole thing done again. Kate thanked Hazel for her excellent editorship.

7. Elections

Rita Phillips and Deirdre Bryan-Brown have completed their terms of office and are therefore standing down. Phil Bacon and Maureen Woolley have agreed to stand as candidates, and there being no others they were duly elected, and welcomed to the Committee. Kate thanked Rita and Deirdre for their fine work on the Committee, and said that Deirdre is to be co-opted to coordinate work which is needed to be done on the web site.

8. Any Other Business

Deirdre said that she would welcome assistance from any members with experience in web site management, and Kate asked any member with expertise in anthropology for help with next year's conference.

Maeve Brennan suggested a joint meeting of the Barbara Pym and the Philip Larkin Societies. This was greeted with enthusiasm. and will now be considered by both committees.

Eileen mentioned that the bar in Hall Building would be open between 6 and 7 pm, and after dinner.

Ellen spoke of the Pym discussion group at www.yahoogroups.com (Pym-l). *No Fond Return of Love* had just finished being discussed there, and the next topic would be *An Unsuitable Attachment.* Volunteers take a chapter or two of the books each and initiate a discussion.

Kate reminded the audience that the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Society would fall in 2004, and the 25th anniversary of Barbara's death in 2005. She asked for ideas for celebrating the events.

There was no other business, so the meeting ended at about 12.15.

Yvonne Cocking

The Barbara Pym Society 2001-2

Chairman Kate Charles
Membership Secretary Eileen Roberts
Secretary Yvonne Cocking
Editor Hazel Bell

Committee
Phil Bacon; Bridget Guymer; Gabrielle Page; Maggie Parsons;
Chris Ward; Maureen Woolley;
co-opted: Deirdre Bryan-Brown;
US Organizer Ellen Miller
email: ellen@ellenmiller.net

Society correspondence and queries to:
The Barbara Pym Society
The Development & Alumnae Office
St Hilda's College,
Oxford OX4 1DY
tel. 01865 276867
fax 01865 276820
email:
eileen.roberts@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk

Editorial correspondence to:
Hazel Bell
139 The Ryde
Hatfield, Herts AL9 5DP
tel. 01707 265201
fax 01707 273601
email hkbell@dial.pipex.com

Pym **website address**:
www.spore.it/pym/home_english.htm

North American Pym website:
www.barbara-pym.org

Honorary life members:
Mrs Hilary Walton; Mrs Hazel Holt; Professor John Bayley; The Revd Prebendary Gerard Irvine; Professor Peter Lloyd; Miss Muriel Maby; James Runcie; Professor Robert Smith

"The Pilgrimage" – Introduction

It is generally known that Barbara Pym was "mostly uncomfortable" with the short story form. It may be less well known that in spite of this she attempted about thirty short stories, some never finished, and some in various versions.

Apart from the two that this Society has recently reproduced in *Green Leaves*, only a few have ever been published, and even fewer in her lifetime. So I was surprised to find that a short story, "The White Elephant", was her first published work, appearing in *Woman and Beauty* in 1949, shortly before the publication of *Some Tame Gazelle*.

In her chapter *The Pym Papers*, in Dale Salwak's *Life and Work of Barbara Pym* (Macmillan 1987), Janice Rossen writes:

> Pym's unpublished fiction is augmented by 27 short stories, most of which were submitted for publication but rejected. They survive largely as fair copies in neatly typed drafts. Though less complex and well-rounded than her novels, the stories contain several clever passages. They incorporate many of the themes she uses later: regret, nostalgia, middle age, timidity, spinsterhood and life's occasional absurdity...In their delicacy and wry wit the stories offer a delightful counterpoint to the author's novels.

I was rather disappointed not to find any direct reference to the preparation of *The Pilgrimage* in Barbara's literary notebooks. Ideas for several of her short stories as well as her novels are recorded in ten little notebooks covering the years 1948-1954. There is just one little hint in her earliest notebook:

> A woman comes to a village to make a pilgrimage to a famous woman writer

but how she amended and developed this theme does not appear to be recorded.

The Pilgrimage must have been written in 1951, because Barbara sent it in January 1952 to the magazine that had published *The White Elephant*:

> I am sending you a short story – *The Pilgrimage* – which I have just written, in the hope that you might like it. I think it is nearly two years since I last submitted anything to *Woman and Beauty* so perhaps I may remind you that Mrs Ross accepted one of my stories in 1949...

The editor replied:

> Dear Miss Pym
>
> Thank you very much for your letter enclosing your story *The Pilgrimage*. I do most certainly remember you and had wondered what had become of you, but guessed you were deep in another novel. I have read your story but I am afraid I must tell you that it is not suitable for *Woman and Beauty*. We are at the moment rather well stocked and only looking for the more sophisticated type of love story, which I know you don't like writing. I shall be interested to read your novel when it comes out ...

Later that year, on 16th December, Wren Howard at Cape, who by that time had published *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Excellent Women*, wrote in his customary prolix way:

> Dear Miss Pym
>
> I was having a considerable talk yesterday with the Hultons Press Fiction Editor, who is desperately searching for good, new short stories by some of the newer writers ... for *Housewife*, a copy of which I can send you ... It seems to me of better quality than the usual run of these things. They pay very well and it occurred to me to wonder whether you might not happen to have by you a short story or two that might be suitable ... Do let me know if you can help because I think there might be quite a useful bit of extra revenue to be picked up in this way.

There was another letter from him dated 19th December:

> I am much interested in your letter of 18th about short story possibilities and am glad to hear that you may in due course have something available to try upon *Housewife*. I will willingly submit anything ... to the Fiction Editor on your behalf ...

I must digress here for a moment while I point out that these three letters were written and despatched in as many days! Some of us here today, especially Hilary, who have tried numerous times to contact Macmillan about the promised reprints of Barbara's books, and have received no reply whatsoever, can only wring our hands while regretting the passing of those good old days when politeness was paramount – even when conveying bad news.

Anyway, whatever it was she sent was rejected by *Housewife*, in spite of Wren Howard's encouragement.

In November 1953 Barbara received a letter from Dorothy Daly, who was acting as her agent.

> Graham Watson has handed me your three short stories and I have read them with a great deal of interest. I think *The Pilgrimage* and *The Day the Music Came* are both stories one might reasonably expect to sell to one of the better monthlies. One thing might disqualify *The Pilgrimage* and this is its concern with the private life of an author, for curiously enough stories about authors are not terribly popular at the present moment; editors tend to argue that readers of novels and short stories are better not to know the mechanics behind the writing. However, there is a very pleasant side to this story as well, and this may weigh the scales in its favour. I hope it will...

But when Dorothy Daly got back to Barbara ten months later, it was with the now familiar litany of rejection:

> *The Pilgrimage* ... has been seen and declined by *Woman and Beauty, Weldon's Weekly, Woman's Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*.

"Too thin and uneventful" was the verdict – a foreshadowing of the fate of the novels ten years later.

There is little evidence in her papers that Barbara made any further attempt to sell her short stories until her reputation was re-established, and *The New Yorker* took "Across a Crowded Room" in 1979. After her death, *Woman's Own* published *The Day the Music Came* (under the title *Dreams a la Carte*) in its issue of 22 February 1987, and Hazel Holt included four more in *Civil to Strangers*.

When I told Hazel that we were thinking of using *The Pilgrimage* in our dramatised readings slot this year, she replied

> What a good idea – I particularly like the idea of members taking part. I just wish that I could be there to hear it!

Only a handful of people – Hilary and Hazel, the publishers who rejected it, and a few readers in the Bodleian – will have heard this story before, so it is with great pleasure that we present the first public reading of *The Pilgrimage*.

Yvonne Cocking

The Pilgrimage

Barbara Pym

Catherine had found it difficult to decide what to wear on that September day. The weather was still warm and as she was going into the country she did not want to appear too dressed-up. On the other hand it was such a very special occasion that it could not be allowed to pass without considerable thought. In the end she had rejected her new gaberdine suit and decided on the grey shantung dress she had just made, with her coral-coloured jacket in case it should be cold coming back.

Not that he would notice what she wore. Gabriel Langbaine seldom described his heroines' clothes, though they tended to look a little like Catherine herself, tall and slim with grey eyes and dark hair cropped short. His characters were memorable for their wonderful conversations and thoughts and for the intensity of their relationships with each other; he wrote about women's feelings so subtly, it was almost uncanny that a man could have such perception, Catherine thought. Hurrying out of the underground at Victoria, she had to remind herself that she wasn't dreaming, and when she had settled herself into the train she took out his letter again just to convince herself that it was true.

'I feel we really must meet,' he had written. 'I have so much appreciated your letters about my books and we have got to know each other so well. . .' Yes, she had felt that too, but she had never dared to hope that he would suggest a meeting. 'We live quite near the station' he went on, and had been most practical about trains and dates. We . . . of course Catherine had known that he was married, though she knew nothing about his wife. He could hardly have asked her to come and see him, unless some other woman, his mother or sister, had been there, of course.

'It's all going to be perfectly proper,' she had told Geoffrey, the young man with whom she usually spent her Saturday afternoons. 'We shall talk about his books.'

'Oh, his books! Not my cup of tea at all,' Geoffrey had said, laughing in rather an irritating way. Indeed, his whole attitude had been rather irritating; Catherine wished she could have gone without telling him, but she was too honest to invent a convincing lie. He hadn't seemed to mind as much as she had thought he would; there was a cricket match he would like to see, so perhaps they could have dinner together when she got back? She had been a little vague about this, for she was not at all sure what time she would be able to meet him. It would be something of an anti-climax to come soberly home to dinner with Geoffrey after a wonderful afternoon with Gabriel Langbaine.

What would they talk about? she wondered, as the train rushed through Clapham Junction and Wimbledon. She had told him a little about herself in her letters, her job in a City office, her bed-sitting-room in Bayswater, her interest in books and music. But her life was so ordinary, she hoped they would talk about more interesting things than that. After a while she stopped thinking ahead and looked out of the window, exhilarated by the speed of the train, almost as fast as a boat train, which ignored the suburban travellers waiting on the green platforms.

There were two middle-aged women in the compartment, having their own kind of conversation. One of them had a big paper carrier, the other an enormous bulging bag from which she took out a hat, a typical 'matron's'autumn style trimmed with feathers, velvet and veiling.

'It'll be nice for Sundays,' she said. 'Just what I wanted, really'.

'Yes, the colour's nice. It'll go with your blue coat, won't it ?'asked her friend a little doubtfully.

'Oh, yes. It's not *quite* the same shade, but I think it'll go'

'Oh, yes, it'll go. Difficult to carry the shade in your head, isn't it. More of a light navy, the hat is.'

'The girl in the shop said it was royal...'

Their conversation was at once soothing and irritating. Catherine let it flow over her, though she could not help listening to it at the same time. She wished she had been alone in the carriage, for very soon now the train would be stopping at *his* station and she was anxious to put the finishing touches to her appearance in the square mirror, flanked by pictures of Weymouth and Eastbourne. Still, perhaps they would be getting out before she did; it was unlikely that all three of them would be going to Fallowfield. The train stopped. Riversmead. A sleepy little. place with michaelmas daisies making a fine show in the station-master's garden. Catherine peered anxiously out of the window.

'Fallowfield next,' said the woman who had bought the hat. 'Was that the station you wanted?'

'Oh, yes, thank you.' Catherine sat on the edge of the seat, putting on her gloves.

'That's where we're getting out too.'

'Oh, is it'?' She could hardly think what to say, for a terrible idea had come into her mind. Perhaps *they* were going to see Gabriel Langbaine too? But no, she reassured herself, they couldn't be; obviously they lived at Fallowfield and had just been up to London for a morning's shopping.

The train stopped and the three of them got out of the carriage. Catherine would have liked to hurry out of the station ahead of the two women but she was not sure which direction she ought to take.

'A lovely afternoon,' she ventured.

'Yes, it is nice. Is this your first visit here?'

'Oh, yes. I wonder if you could tell me where Mulberry Cottage is, please?' she asked, the words coming in a rush.

'Mulberry Cottage? Yes, certainly – you go straight along this lane ahead of you and then you'll come to the church. Turn left by the church and it's the first house you'll come to. You'll see the mulberry tree in the garden.'

'Thank you so much.' Catherine hung back a little uncertainly, thinking it rude to hurry away, but the women turned away and walked up to the garden gate of a cottage nearby.

'We live here,' said one of them, 'very convenient for the station.'

'Oh, yes.' Catherine laughed nervously. 'Good-bye!'

She walked slowly now, for her arrival in the village had been a little spoilt by her meeting with the two women and she wanted to take in the atmosphere of the place where Gabriel Langbaine lived. Also, it would not do to arrive at Mulberry Cottage *too* punctually and perhaps interrupt him in the middle of his work. She passed several attractive-looking houses and eventually came to the church. It was set in a forest of ancient leaning tombstones and dark yew trees, and a group of women holding bunches of autumn flowers and baskets of vegetables was

standing in the porch. Catherine averted her eyes as she passed them; the sight of other people reminded her that he might have invited others to come and see him this afternoon. She almost began to wish that she hadn't come, especially as she had now turned left by the church and come to a clipped box hedge over which she could see the top of what she supposed must be a mulberry tree. This was the house – there could be no turning back now.

Catherine approached the gate and looked over. She saw, as if in a picture, Gabriel Langbaine sitting on the lawn with a small table covered with papers at his side and a herbaceous border, gay with dahlias and michaelmas daisies, at his back. There was nobody else in sight.

She stood for a moment, just gazing. Then, as suddenly as the picture had come before her eyes, it broke up. He came hurrying towards her, holding out his hand, 'Ah, Miss Tillett, how nice to see you!'

'Oh, how do you do?' Catherine couldn't think what else to say, for she was too busy looking at him. There was the tall slim figure, the long nose, the hair touched with grey at the temples, but the eyes were hazel – she had always imagined them blue. He looked so very much like his photographs and only a very little older than the latest one.

'It was so nice of you to come,' he said. 'I've wanted to meet you so much after reading your letters – one can't help wondering what people will be like when one knows them so well on paper, as it were. Don't you find that?'

Catherine could only agree that she did, though she found herself wishing that all the intelligent conversation she had planned had not suddenly deserted her.

'You are just as I imagined you would be,' she said shyly.

He smiled, a rather sad, what some novelists might call a 'wry', smile.

His face had a rather worn look, like some beautiful image on an old coin, Catherine thought. Perhaps he was tired – it was quite likely that he had been up until the small hours working on his new book.

They were now sitting in deckchairs on the lawn and she was telling him 'about herself' as he had asked her to. She spoke haltingly, conscious of the dullness of her life compared with his, but as she spoke she was aware of his eyes upon her. They were looking her up and down in a curious way and it was some time before she realised that he was taking in the details of her appearance, lingering, or so it seemed , on her homemade dress and that bit where there was a little mistake at the shoulder which she had thought hidden by the collar. At first she was disconcerted and a little embarrassed, but suddenly a phrase out of one of his novels came into her mind, 'There was something curiously appealing about her in her home-made dress...' and she leaned back in her chair, relaxed and smiling.

'How very wonderful it is to be sitting here talking to you,' she said quickly. 'Your books...'

'Oh, excuse me...' he jumped up, 'here is my wife with the tea.' He swept some papers off the little table, as a pleasant-looking middle-aged women in a wellcut striped silk dress came towards them and put down a teatray.

'Heather, my dear, this is Miss Tillett – I'm sure she won't mind if we call her Catherine, will you Catherine?'

'No, of course not.'

'I'm sure you're ready for tea,' said Heather Langbaine.'You must have had a long, hot journey.'

'Oh, but I'm so glad to be here,' Catherine murmured. Mrs. Langbaine seemed to be a very nice person but she wished she hadn't come with the tea *quite* so soon. It might be difficult now to talk to Gabriel about his books, to say all the things she really wanted to. All the same, she was thirsty and a cup of tea was very welcome. It was delicious china tea and the cups were of fine porcelain with a design of pink and gold. There were tomato and cucumber sandwiches, scones and apple jelly, an iced mocha cake, a fruit cake and some chocolate biscuits. Catherine had been too excited to eat any lunch and now realised that she was hungry. Gabriel Langbaine seemed to be enjoying his tea also, but at last there was a suitable pause in the eating and Catherine plunged boldly into conversation.

'I think I like your third book best of all,' she said. 'The title is a quotation from Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, isn't it?'

'Yes, people like that kind of title, I find.'

'The relationship between Adrian and Caroline is so wonderfully described, I feel, that bit where they go to Hampton Court and they feel there's something wrong ...'

'Something wrong! Oh, the trouble I had over that book. You will hardly believe it when I tell you.'

'Oh, do tell me!' Catherine leaned forward, her hands clasped and her expression eager in anticipation of the secrets of authorship which were to be revealed to her.

'My publishers brought it out in August Bank Holiday week! Can you imagine how I felt?'

Catherine could not, indeed she did not really see why it was so very dreadful, but apparently it was a question of sales.

'... only ten thousand in the first month.'

'I suppose you must have sold a great many copies of your last book,' she said shyly. 'I thought It was wonderful.'

'Yes, the sales were very satisfactory. But do you know how many I sold in the United Sales.?'

Of course Catherine did not know, but Gabriel Langbaine told her. After ten minutes she knew a great deal about the iniquities of British and American publishers, the scandalous behaviour of certain literary agents, the unreasonable whims of reviewers.

Mrs. Langbaine took no part in the conversation, but refilled cups and passed plates. Gabriel was doing all the talking and after a while Catherine found that she had lost the thread of what he was saying. It almost seemed as if he were talking about income tax, but this seemed so unlikely that she could only think that she must have misunderstood him. She lay back in her chair, just listening to his voice. It was a pleasant voice but it did rather tend to go on and on. There was even rather a booming quality about it ... she hardly liked to admit it to herself but it made her feel almost sleepy. . .

Catherine sat bolt upright in her chair. How dreadful it would be if she were to drop off to sleep!

'I wonder if you would like to see Gabriel's study,' said Mrs. Langbaine.

'Oh, yes, I should like to very much, please.'

'Then we'll leave Gabriel to his income tax papers. He gets quite absorbed in them, you know.'

They went into the house and Mrs. Langbaine opened the door of a room at the back which looked out on to the vegetable garden. It was a simple, bare room, a little disappointing, really. It contained a large table, a chair, a typewriter, a bookcase and a filing cabinet. There was a large clock on the mantlepiece.

'Oh, is this where he *writes*?' Catherine asked.

'Yes. He writes here every morning from half past nine until lunchtime.'

'That sounds awfully businesslike,' said Catherine sadly. 'I always imagined him working late at night.'

Mrs Langbaine laughed. 'Oh, goodness me, Gabriel never works in the evenings. He'd fall asleep over it.'

'I wonder ... ' Catherine began shyly, 'would it be possible for me to see one of

his *manuscripts*?'

'Certainly, my dear.' Mrs Langbaine opened a drawer in the table and took out a neat pile of typewritten sheets. 'Here's the book he's working on now.'

'Oh, but this is typed. Isn't there a copy in his own hand-writing?"

'No, I'm afraid Gabriel always writes straight on to the typewriter,' said Mrs Langbaine. She smiled. 'Authors are rather disappointing people, really, so much like ordinary men.'

This was what Catherine was beginning to feel herself. 'I imagined him *writing* it all in his own hand,' she said rather helplessly.

After she had been upstairs, washed her hands and tidied her self in the Langbaines' very unremarkable double bedroom, it was time for her to go.

Gabriel was waiting by the gate with a bunch of dahlias. 'I thought you might like some flowers to take back with you,' he said.

'Oh, thank you very much. I *have* enjoyed this afternoon.'

Catherine left them standing together by the gate, smiling after her. She did not see them turn and walk back towards the house, smiling at each other. Her feelings were as yet too confused to analyse. They had both been so sweet, it had been a wonderful afternoon and yet somehow disappointing. All that talk about publishers and agents and income tax . . . he had not said anything really *memorable*, that was the strange thing.

As she approached the station she saw the two women who had travelled down with her in the train. They were standing in their front garden, tying up some chrysanthemums.

'You found Mulberry Cottage all right?" asked one of them.

'Oh, yes, thank you.. I've got this lovely bunch of dahlias.'

'Roses, it might have been,' said the other woman, 'or daffodils, depending on the season, you know.'

'Do many people come to see Mr. Langbaine?' asked Catherine.

'Oh yes. I often say to my friend they ought to ask them in twos or threes instead of always by themselves – it would be company for the journey.'

Company for the journey . . . Catherine pondered over these words as she sat alone in the train. Not in a flash, but gradually as it sometimes does, the truth came to her. Gabriel Langbaine naturally had a great many young women admirers and he asked them all down to see him. And his nice wife gave them a good tea and showed them his study, while Gabriel himself waited at the gate with a bunch of flowers, daffodils, roses, dahlias, according to the season ...

As the train drew into Victoria Catherine realised that she would be in time to have dinner with Geoffrey after all.

At first they did not have much to say to eaeh other. Geoffrey had ordered a bottle of wine which was unusual and a little embarrassing, especially as Catherine felt that he could ill afford it.

'Must live up to these famous novelists,' he explained.

'But we didn't drink *wine*, it was tea-time.'

'I hope he appreciated you in that lovely dress.'

'Lovely dress?' Catherine smiled. 'Do you like it? As a matter of fact there's something a bit wrong with the collar.'

He looked at it with earnest puzzled eyes. '*I* don't see anything wrong.'

'*He* did . . .' Catherine began to laugh.

And gradually it all came out. The boring conversation, the booming voice going on and on, the admirers making their pilgrimage . . .

'You'd think they could hire a coach,' Geoffrey suggested.

'He was so carefully *arranged* under the tree,' said Catherine thoughtfully. 'And yet the papers on the table were all about income tax. And why was his conversation so boring? It was almost as if he was doing it on purpose ...'

'Perhaps he wants to discourage his admirers, or perhaps he's just naturally boring.'

'But his books and his letters . . .'

'His wife might help him. One never knows. Look, we haven't finished the wine yet.' Geoffrey refilled Catherine's glass.

What a lovely dinner I'm having, she thought, really nicer than my tea.

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The cast of "The Pilgrimage" reading: left to right – Maureen Lenk and Rita Brewer as Women on Train; Michael Macke as Geoffrey; Barbara Schmoczer as Catherine Tillett; Deirdre Bryan-Brown as Narrator; Yvonne Cocking introducing the reading; Rita Phillips as Heather Langbaine; Tim Burnett as Gabriel Langbaine.

Unexcellent men in Barbara Pym's fiction

Patricia Shaw

In Barbara Pym's fiction, no very rhapsodic view of mankind emerges ... none of them great heroes, and, really, no great "catches"! Indeed, Barbara Pym's irony and humour is at its most delicately mordant when dealing with such "unexcellent men". In her novels there are few Grandisonian portraits: possibly the two married vicars, the husbands of Jane and Sophia come out a little better than most of the other male characters, although they too have their little pettinesses; it is, perhaps, significant that the only foreign male characters to figure in the canon are all sympathetically drawn: Count Ricardo Bianco, in *Some Tame Gazelle,* and in *No Fond Return of Love,* the Austrian Bill Sedge and a "Brazilian gentleman", Mr. MacBride Pereira.

The vices which Barbara Pym most chastises by her mordant wit in the persons of her male characters, are similar to those emphasized by Jane Austen: selfishness, vanity, shallowness, self-complacency, self-pity, self-indulgence, snobbery, pedantry and negativism. Like Jane Austen, or, indeed, Jane Austen's great mentor, Henry Fielding, she holds up these petty, everyday vices to ridicule, that by laughing at them, and recognising them, we may learn a lesson from them. Perhaps one of her most effective portraits in this sense, is that of Archdeacon Hoceleve in her early novel, *Some Tame Gazelle,* who seems to have most of these defects, yet who, in spite of all, is calmly idealised by Belinda Bede, and efficiently supported by his admirable and intellectually superior wife. Indeed, there is much, not only of Jane Austen, but also of Anthony Trollope, in the composition of Archdeacon Hoccleve, who was, in any case, foreshadowed by Francis Cleveland, the "unexcellent" Oxford don, in Barbara Pym's earliest work, *Crampton Hodnet.* A pedant, inordinately fond of his own voice, above all when quoting seventeenth-century divines, the Archdeacon preaches unintelligible sermons, and is jealous of the success of other clergymen whose plain, understandable sermons he considers "very poor". He is, in fact, even jealous of his wife's knowledge of Middle English literature:

> Now, Agatha, Belinda does not wish to be forced to admire you ... academic research is not everything.

This, however, does not prevent *him* from "affectedly" reciting Gray's *Elegy* whenever he is obliged to visit the sick or the poor, people, adds the author, who "were much too frightened of their vicar to regard him as being of any possible comfort".

In fact, that vicars are no more perfect than the next man is driven home several times in Barbara Pym's novels ... Father Gellibrand, in *Quartet in Autumn,* on hearing that Letty is a "retired person", seemed "to draw away".

> He did not much care for the aged, the elderly, or just "old people" whatever you liked to call them.

The penultimate chapter of this same novel opens with a Jane Austen-like affirmation:

> Letty had an old-fashioned respect for the clergy which seemed outmoded in the seventies, when it was continually being brought home to her that in many ways they were just like other men, or even more so.

Indeed, Mr. Latimer, the curate, in *Crampton Hodnet,* tries to get out of performing a disagreeable moral duty, by protesting "I'm no better than any other man". Certainly Barbara Pym's clergymen are no less selfish than other men: even the unworldly Nicholas, in *Jane and Prudence,* on seeing his teetotal wife pour herself a full glass of sherry, says anxiously "I shouldn't have it if you don't like it ... It seems a pity to waste it". Indeed, alcohol brings out the worst in more than one Pym man: thus, William, in *Excellent Women,* inviting Mildred out to lunch, "... lifted the bottle, judged the amount left in it and refilled his own glass but not [hers]". Another relatively unworldly vicar, Tom, in *A Few Green Leaves,* whose long-suffering sister has eventually given up keeping house for him, reacts to a visit from her in the following way:

> His first thought on her arrival was not so much pleasure at seeing his sister again as relief that she would be able to make the coffee which was usually provided on these occasions.

Indeed, it is a characteristic of Barbara Pym's men that they should take their womenfolk totally for granted: thus, of Tom again, she writes:

> As for Daphne, Tom had long ceased to regard his sister as a woman whose clothes might be worthy of notice, sometimes he hardly even thought of her as a human being.

Although his new parishioner, Emma, does not attend Evensong, it occurs to Tom that she might be helpful in other ways: "She might be a good typist".

This taking of women for granted is especially distinguished, though, in the person of Fabian Driver, an eligible widower, in *Jane and Prudence*, of whom we are told:

> When his wife had been alive he had hardly noticed Jessie Morrow; indeed, if possible, he had noticed her even less than he noticed his wife.

and his attitude to his wife's death is of a piece with his general behaviour; she had been older than him, and:

> had brought him a comfortable amount of money as well as a great deal of love. He had been unprepared for her death, and outraged by it, for it had happened suddenly without a long illness to prepare him, when he had been deeply involved in one of the little romantic affairs which he seemed to need, either to bolster up his self-respect or for some more obvious reason.

It is self-deprecating, sensitive and sensible Jessica Morrow (translated from *Crampton Hodnet* to *Jane and Prudence*), who gets this particular "catch", but then, the world of Barbara Pym's novels is full of "unexcellent" men being supported by "excellent" women; as intuitive Jane puts it:

> Oh, but it was splendid the things women were doing for men all the time ... Making them feel ... that they were loved and admired and desired when they were worthy of none of these things – enabling them to preen themselves and puff out their plumage like birds and bask in the sunshine of love, real or imagined, it didn't matter which.

It is this kind of vanity and self-complacency that informs the proposals of marriage, which point out the vanity, self-

ishness and self-complacency of the proposer, casting a disparaging light on men who, be they clergymen or not, are essentially self-centred, self-indulgent and self-complacent, and what, perhaps, is worse, lacking in any authentic feeling for the ladies they are thus singling out for their attention. Thus, Mr. Latimer, the thirty-five year old curate in *Crampton Hodnet,* after having decided, as he unromantically puts it to himself, that he could do worse than marry Miss Morrow (whose Christian name he has not even bothered to ascertain!) makes her what she describes to herself as "a very half-hearted proposal":

> "I respect and esteem you very much", he went on in the same angry tone. "I think we might be very happy together".
>
> "But do you *love* me?" asked Miss Morrow quietly.
>
> "Love you?" he said indignantly. "But of course I do. Haven't I just told you so?"
>
> "You have said that you respect and esteem me very much", said Miss Morrow without elaboration. ...
>
> "You don't seem to realise that one can learn to care", said Mr. Latimer pompously.
>
> "No, I don't", said Miss Morrow firmly. "Learning to care always seems to me to be one of the most difficult lessons that can be imagined. How does one set about it? ..."
>
> "Now, Jessica, you're just being frivolous. I have asked you to marry me and you have refused. Is that it?"
>
> "Yes" said Miss Morrow in a low voice. "We don't love each other, and I'm sure you could do better ..."

Of a similarly prosaic nature is Mervyn Cantrell's approach to Ianthe Broome in *An Unsuitable Attachment:* over dinner in a South Kensington restaurant he raises the question in the following terms:

> "If *my* mother died, we should *both* be alone", Mervyn declared.
>
> "Yes, I suppose we would be", said Ianthe ... "Supposing we were to join forces", said Mervyn almost eagerly. "It would be silly keeping on two houses".
>
> "Do you mean we should live together?" she asked, thinking that she must have misunderstood him.
>
> "Well, not in sin – I wasn't suggesting that". He giggled. "Get married – that's what I meant, of course". ...
>
> "We get on well together", Mervyn continued, "and we've many interests in common, after all ... And we both like nice furniture".
>
> "Whose house would we live in?" asked Ianthe.
>
> "Oh, yours", he answered without hesitation. "Ours isn't at all nice and besides it's only leasehold".

Barbara Pym's comic view of such episodes was already to the fore in her first published novel, *Some Tame Gazelle,* in the two scenes in which Harriet and Belinda are proposed to, respectively, by Mr. Mold the librarian and the missionary bishop, Theodore Grote, or Mbawawa, as he likes to call himself. Although as has been seen, Harriet has already decided in advance to reject such an offer, she cannot but note that when it does come, it is both "prosaic and casual", and very different in this respect from the proposals she receives regularly from a charming and cultivated Italian Count. Belinda, on the contrary, is taken completely unawares by the Bishop, but has the dignity to firmly refuse a proposal which comes hedged in by phrases such as "... one hardly looks for beauty at our time of life", "Perhaps you are not accustomed to receiving such offers?", and "We need not speak of love – one would hardly expect that now".

The same kind of complacency characterises the eligible vicar, David Lyddell, in *Quartet in Autumn,* who is looking out for the highest bidder for his favours: clear-sighted Letty imagines him going "all round the village sampling the cooking of the unattended women before deciding which one to settle with". Vanity and self-complacency likewise predominate in the speech which another unattached vicar, Julian Malory, in *Excellent Women,* makes to Mildred Lathbury to inform her of his recent engagement:

> "It's so splendid of you to understand like this. I know it must have been a shock to you, though I dare say you weren't entirely unprepared. Still, it must have been a shock, a blow almost, I might say", he laboured on, heavy and humourless, not at all like his usual self ... "I was never in love with you, if that's what you mean", I said, thinking it was time to be blunt.

It is satisfying for men to feel themselves thus adored, though for ruthless Ned, the American academic in *The Sweet Dove Died,* it can have its drawbacks:

> There had been quite a number [of women] in his life, from his mother to older women and young girls who had been foolish enough to expect more than he was prepared to give. He had seen with distaste many a red face working and blotched with tears ... Older women especially were most unwise to cry, it was ruination to their appearance.

This passage, incidentally, offers a good example of the way Barbara Pym handles reported thought to the detriment of her male characters!

Because most of Barbara Pym's men are self-indulgent as well as self-centred, it is not surprising that many should believe that they are overworked: "Nobody can possibly know how much I have to do", complains Archdeacon Hoccleve, although his wife has to remind him that he was in his bath at eleven a.m.! In *An Academic Question* we read:

> Some of Alan's colleagues were already eating, refuelling at the trough, to enable them the better to support what most of them regarded as a "crushing teaching load" which could amount to as much as eight or ten hours a week.

Widower Fabian Driver talks pathetically to Jane, in *Jane and Prudence,* of "managing" as regards his food, making her see visions of him eternally eating bread and cheese, only to learn, a few minutes later, that he actually has a cook. In the same novel, there is a superb scene in which most of the protagonists are gathered for tea on Fabian's lawn, and the men vie with each other as regards their degrees of exhaustion: the local M. P. needs "to relax", Fabian is "exhausted" by "the bustle of City life" and the vicar finds "Life ... certainly tiring these days"!

A negative attitude to life may well be classified as a form of self-indulgence, since it generally consists in inflicting on others one's own attitude, and thus spoiling their pleasure or satisfaction. Negativism of this kind is superbly exemplified in the person of Mervyn Cantrell, the mother-ridden librarian in *An Unsuitable Attachment,* and of Norman, in *Quartet in Autumn,* who both cast their wet-blanket opinions over any initiative. Thus, when Ianthe Broome talks of going to Rome with the parish excursion, Mervyn does all he can to disillusion her:

> "Rome – you're welcome to it as far as I'm concerned" said Mervyn spitefully, the day before Ianthe was due to leave with the party from St. Basil's.

Similarly, gloomy Norman makes the worst of any conversation held in the office and, when Letty moves into new lodgings with an elderly landlady, is quick to point out the disadvantages.

The 28-page essay by the late Patricia Shaw, 'Barbara Pym: The Jane Austen of our day', was published in the series Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses of the Universidad de la Laguna in November 1988 and reviewed in *Green Leaves*, November 2000 issue. The extracts above were read at the conference of the Barbara Pym Society, 7 Sept. 2002, by Bridget Guymer (with the permission of Professor Shaw's husband, Professor Urdiales).

"Someone from *The Guardian* is coming on Sept. 1st"

Lesley Grant-Adamson

Barbara Pym sidled into my life at a time when she was seriously and chronically pegless. What is a peg? A peg is the excuse a journalist has to have to write something in a newspaper.

It would have been no good Philip Larkin or David Cecil saying to *The Times Literary Supplement* during Pym's "wilderness years" that they fancied writing a piece about a novelist called Barbara Pym. The editor of the section would have replied with the inevitable question, "What is the peg?" Unless an author has a new book out—or has signed a lucrative film deal or a less lucrative television one, or has died, or has won a prize or other accolade—then, sorry, no peg. No chance of getting your piece published. For a journalist, and for a feature writer in particular, the shortage of pegs is the bane of one's working life. No matter how enthusiastic you are about an idea or a person you wish to interview, unless you can flourish a bit of information that makes the subject topical, no editor wants to listen.

I was on the London staff of *The Guardian* for most of the Seventies. I had a wonderful brief which was to write about anything which interested me. That turned out to mean anything and everything, but with emphasis on environmental issues (back in the days when it was all terribly new and I had to keep explaining what they were) and also arts coverage. I did a great many author interviews. This meant that I received a great many begging letters and phone calls urging me to do yet more author interviews. Publishers took me to lunch and flattered me, that sort of thing. As a seasoned professional I was adept at kindly turning all this aside – except, maybe, lunch. But then, one day, came a letter from a friend of mine in Warwickshire, Irene Dancyger. Irene was a journalist and short-story writer whose work appeared in women's magazines. She used to write me long letters, staving off, I think the moment when she had to launch into her next six-part tale of passion for *Woman's Own*. Buried deep among the pages of her latest epic – I mean the letter to me, not the six-part serial – she mentioned her friend The Librarian.

The Librarian—somewhere in the Midlands, could it have been Solihul? –

was seeking an introduction before she wrote to me about a badly neglected writer for whom she wanted me to Do Something. Irene sketched it in nicely, as a writer of passionate tales would. In my mind rose up The Librarian, a worthy woman with a quest and a heap of battered library books. What did she want? New books. Why did she want them? Because her readers were tearing the old ones apart in their frenzy to enjoy their gentle tales. Why didn't she just buy them? Couldn't be done.

I telephoned Irene, to save her another six-part serial in guise of a letter, and some weeks later a bundle arrived on my desk. The books were indeed weary-looking and the letter with them was cajoling. These *Portway Series* Editions, which were on the point of collapse, were all that remained in print of Barbara Pym. "Whenever I recommend one to a new reader they always come back for more," wailed the librarian. "There is always a waiting list for them. As soon as the rest are returned, I will send them to you."

By the way, I'm not reducing her to The Librarian for comic purposes; I should explain that I have lost her name. Her identity is safe among my papers but not within my reach. By that I don't mean my papers are kept at an American university—or even a British one—although negotiations have been entered into from time to time. My papers are in my own house but out of reach for all that. Any of you who share my horror of spiders and the thought of crawling into a low attic in pursuit of boxes of papers will understand the problem precisely. So, The Librarian our heroine must remain, at least until I move house when I shall prevail on somebody else to crawl in among the spiders and my history. Anyway, I took The Librarian's hint and began to read quickly, feeling the impatient faces of the foiled library borrowers over my shoulder.

I was, of course, beguiled. I found the Pym novels were hilarious, comic writing of a high order and with a subtlety that few humorous writers achieve. Luckily, I was able to begin at the beginning, with the Misses Bede more or less comfortably at home in *Some Tame Gazelle*. But *Excellent Women* was still being enjoyed by readers in the Midlands and didn't come my way for some time. Over the months and out of sequence I read all six. And it was during this time that *The Times Literary Supplement* published its life-changing list of the under-rated. Philip Larkin and David Cecil had seized the chance to air their views about the Pym *oeuvre*, *The Times Literary Supplement* list having provided the peg that Larkin, in particular, had been looking for.

But was it any help to me? No, because *The Guardian* took the usual newspaper view that you don't promote your rivals. If the accolade had come from any other quarter, then it would have been a good peg, but as it was the direct result of *The Times Literary Supplement* effort of January 1977, It Would Not Do. However, as we all now know, Macmillan bought the recently finished *Quartet in Autumn*. A new book to be published? Hey, that's what we call a peg! And so it wasn't until the run up to publication, September 1, 1977, that I drove to Finstock to take tea with Miss Pym. As I wrote later:

> I found a tiny stone cottage with creeper and a cat. A village where the church is not an old and lovely one, neither was it high enough for her taste.

The tea, I may say, was prepared by her sister, Hilary, whose gingerbread I highly recommend. On a shelf in the bathroom – a visit to the bathroom always seemed to be an essential part of my preparation for an interview—I spotted Ovid and Virgil.

I had had so much pleasure from reading Barbara's novels, I have to say that I went with mixed feelings, because *Quartet in Autumn* had come as a mild shock. I was well used to Pym characters being doomed, but in *Quartet in Autumn* they

are doomed not merely to disappointment or embarrassment but to serious humiliations. There is the painful business of Marcia's mental decline and self-destruction, and also the collapse of Letty's life: too late for plans, new friendships, other beginnings. The humour is familiar, of course, but it is the dark side of what Barbara had given us before. Comforting platitudes are spoken, brave words, but we are not fooled and neither, most of the time, are they. I read the book twenty-two years ago. A novel of old age, dismal old age with shutters falling. Rereading it this summer what struck me most is that Letty and Marcia are only sixty. Old age? Twenty-two years on now, I don't know whether the change is in me or in old age!

Barbara, of course, was anything but old and dismal when I called for tea. This was her wonderful month. As well as *Quartet in Autumn* being published, there were plans to bring out *The Sweet Dove Died*; Cape was reissuing *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings*; and *Excellent Women* was to be read on Radio 4. And as she wrote to Philip Larkin: "Someone from *The Guardian* is coming on Sept. 1st" (letter of 21 August 1977 quoted in *A Very Private Eye*). So, journalists had found their pegs and Barbara was giving interviews. Or, in the happy phrase I wrote at the time:

> Against a glow of red faces in the publishing world she is rehearsing a story that dwells on her own great good fortune rather than anyone else's stupidity. 'It's such a nice thing to happen in my old age,' she told me. 'Of course if it had happened sooner ...' But the sentence ended with a shrug and a wry smile.

I have noticed that none of her stories ends with a proper ending. Her characters exist in their little worlds long before we meet them and they are still there after we've left. We tend to run across them playing bit parts in later books, which is how we learn (in *Less Than Angels*) that Mildred Lathbury does marry Everard Bone, and that Wilmet Forsyth will never be free of the homosexual youth Piers whose acquaintance she had sought for amusement in *A Glass of Blessings*. In conversation with Barbara I admitted to having most enjoyed *Some Tame Gazelle*, although it was more fashionable to prefer *Excellent Women*. I wasn't sure whether this was because it was the novel which introduced me to her work. She said she was especially fond of it too, and I believe this was because she had lived with the book for so long and had such a battle to get it into print.

Even in those days, before I had written a line of fiction myself, I was aware that writers become equivocal about their first novels. They feel an affection for the book that started their career but they also come to feel that it is a beginners' book and they have moved on and honed their skills. I remember, for instance, Leslie Thomas telling me about his frustration in forever being known as the author of that hastily written runaway best seller, *The Virgin Soldiers*, when everything of his that followed was far more accomplished. In a way, Barbara's position was the opposite because *Some Tame Gazelle* was the novel that she rewrote and polished most, working on it from 1935 until 1950, fifteen years.

I confessed to laughing out loud in public at her comic scenes, particularly the one in *Less Than Angels* when Mark and Digby take Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate to lunch. I was on a train and got funny looks. Much later William Boyd did a version of the disgusting food joke in *Stars and Bars*. Which isn't to hint at plagiarism, only to say that a good joke is always a good joke and Barbara was a woman who knew a good joke when she saw one. Barbara and I talked, naturally, about her long years in the wilderness. I wonder whether she, who had so many literary quotations to hand, knew this one by Samuel Johnson which I ran across recently?

> There is nothing more dreadful to an author than neglect, compared to which reproach, hatred and opposition are names of happiness.

Well, we talked about all that, the disappointments and the coping.

What else did we talk about? Oswestry which I knew a little, having stayed once at the Wynnstay Arms. Barbara's father lived at the Wynnstay after the death of her mother. We talked about the part of London we both knew. She was not a writer who gave us a strong sense of place but she gave us a strong sense of people. I hadn't, for the most part, felt I was in London in her novels, so I was surprised to discover she was using Holborn and Fleet Street, for instance, which I knew well. But it appears that we both worked in the area at the same time, we both shopped at *Gamages* department store, and once *Gamages* was demolished we both looked down into the hole.

We talked about Emma Tennant because Barbara had borrowed a copy of Emma's novel *Hotel de Dream* from the library. I had interviewed Emma when the novel was published. Barbara asked whether I thought she would enjoy the book. I said no, I didn't, because Emma was committed to the idea that the only kind of fiction worth writing or reading was fantasy, whereas every line Barbara ever wrote was anchored in reality. They seemed to me such very different writers. I wish I could remember whether my guess proved right or not, but I'm afraid that after my strong opinion on the point Barbara will have opened *Hotel de Dream* with less hope than when she plucked it off the library shelf.

What we didn't talk about was my own fiction or experiences as a novelist, because all that lay in the future.* Curiously, the first time my name appeared on a book cover, it was on a Barbara Pym paperback. Until then, although the publishers of authors I had interviewed occasionally used my words as a cover line, I was reduced to *The Guardian* – much as I have here reduced another woman to The Librarian. After the interview Barbara wrote to thank me and there was a little flurry of post cards and letters. In one she told me she was nervous about meeting Iris Murdoch at an event in Oxford. She invited me to call at Barn Cottage again and I fully intended to go, one day when my work took me in the Oxford direction. But the visit didn't happen. One day I heard on the news, not privately, that she had died. Like so many things, I had left it too late.

Let me not end on a sad note, though. My own copies of the novels are now as well-thumbed and battered as those once posted to me by The Librarian. Like her, I also find that when you lend one you end up lending them all. Barbara Pym was adept at the comedy of manners, which is why her books and her characters and her jokes live on. Where two or three fans are gathered together, talk soon turns to those hilarious moments. But which are the funniest, the favourites? It's time someone compiled a Top Ten, I think. And I'll be very upset if that lunch scene with Digby and Mark and Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate doesn't make it onto the list.

* Lesley Grant-Adamson has written many thrillers, including *Patterns in the Dust, Lipstick and Lies*, and *Undertow*.

Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society, St. Hilda's College, Oxford University, 4 September, 1999

Miss Pym and the Victorian Hymn

Fr Gabriel Myers, OSB

> "I love Evensong," said Jane. "There's something sad and essentially English about it.... We have the old hymns here. Ancient and Modern. *Sun of my soul, thou Saviour dear*...the congregation love it and Nicholas wouldn't change it for the world" (JP, 174).

I share Jane Cleveland's preference for the sad, old-fashioned hymn, as I believe Barbara did herself. This enthusiasm was a genuine part of Barbara's devotional life, and yet she was able to use it to comic effect, as Mildred Lathbury shows when trapped into an impromptu date by Everard Bone. To break the awkwardness, Mildred (whose string bag holds a biography of Cardinal Newman) recalls a memory from school days:

> We were sometimes allowed to choose hymns, but Miss Ridout would never let us have *Lead, Kindly Light* – she thought it was morbid and unsuitable for schoolgirls. Of course we loved it (EW, 142).

The hymn's uncertainty and anguish at being far from home are similar to another Pym favorite, "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold, used by Rupert to describe Sophia's loneliness ("I feel she knows about life"). When Catherine Oliphant quotes it during Tom's crisis of faith, she explains, "That isn't a comfortable poem [and] isn't meant to be. People have so many wrong ideas about the Victorians." The complexity of the Victorian mind is shown by the surprising popularity of *Lead, Kindly Light* with its considerable ambiguity, doubt, and intellectual struggle. Their faith was not the simple opiate which we tend to patronize or envy.

Newman felt his poem too personal and melancholy for corporate singing. He was remarkably forbearing when hymnal editors tampered with his words to christianize and improve them: "Lead, Savior, Lead" was one of the more harmless versions. But it was not the song he called for when dying. Many of his contemporaries held it in higher esteem than he did. It captured the 19th-century imagination to a great degree *because* of its ambiguity and wistful longing for certainty. Queen Victoria recited the final stanza to her dying son the Duke of Albany, and requested it to be read in her own final hours. It was often used at seances; and at a World Parliament of Religions in 1895 the only two things on which all delegates could agree were the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the singing of *Lead, Kindly Light*. In January 1928 it was the one congregational hymn at the Westminster Abbey funeral service for the novelist and poet Thomas Hardy.

While living at the Coppice in 1943, Barbara read Cardinal Newman's autobiography and found its theology difficult. But, according to her diary, she:

> liked the account of how *Lead, Kindly Light* came to be written. It was in 1833, when Newman was 32 [twelve years before his conversion to Rome. Like one of Harriet Bede's curates Newman had a fragile constitution.] ... After a tour of Italy, during which he was ill of a fever, he waited for a ship home at Palermo for three weeks. At last [he] got off in an orange boat bound for Marseilles. [It was] becalmed a whole week in the Straits of Bonifacio. There it was that [he] wrote the lines Lead, Kindly Light (VPE, 116).

In later years Newman claimed that the hymn's popularity was due to the romantic tune by Dr Dykes, and that he had forgotten what was meant by the enigmatic reference to "angel faces loved and lost". I suspect the saintly Cardinal was fibbing naughtily. The kindly light refers to the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness. Whether the angel faces are departed relatives, old loves, outgrown certainties, or lost innocence remains unclear. But it is easy to see how text and tune fit Barbara's melancholy nostalgic mood after the end of her relationship with Gordon Glover. In that difficult time, she seems to have found comfort in using the phrase "One step enough for me" almost like a mantra. Thirty years later (in 1971) she wrote rather frostily, "It amuses me that Malcolm Muggeridge describes *Lead, Kindly Light* as 'exquisite.' *Not* quite the word" (VPE, 261). However, the shamelessly romantic tune by Dr Dykes, the quintessential Victorian hymn composer, *might* be called exquisite.

[Here the audience, who had been provided by Father Gabriel with illustrated hymn sheets, rose and sang *Lead Kindly Light*, to his accompaniment on the piano.]

Instead of detailing the abundance of hymn-references in Barbara's novels, I should like to focus on two more great Victorian hymnwriters, whose personalities seem to have appealed to other aspects of Barbara's imagination, for neither was as melancholy as Newman. In the marvelous 1997 book *Abide with Me: The World of Victorian Hymns*, Ian Bradley writes:

> It is tempting to categorize Victorian women hymnwriters into two distinct types: the sickly spinster who pours her frustration into highly charged verse of an intensely emotional hue, and the robust and active wife and mother who writes with more objectivity and control (91).

I think this sentence would have amused Barbara, so we will have one hymnwriter of each type. They are almost the sort of characters who might show up in a BP novel: Connie Aspinall the emotional spinster who plays the harp (astonishing the villagers), and the bossy and formidable clergy-wife Agatha Hoccleve.

First the sickly maiden-lady, Frances Ridley Havergal, daughter of a clergyman (1836-79). I find no explicit reference to her in the novels, but there are two significant ones in Barbara's diaries. In 1958 she describes a visit to her old friend from the Coppice, Honor Wyatt:

> By my bed Honor has put *Memorials of Frances Ridley Havergal*. How almost enviable were the lives of those Victorian lady hymnwriters – the leisurely travel abroad, faith and purpose in life [note the contrast with Newman's uncertainty]. In her study [was] her American typewriter, her harp-piano at which she composed hymns. Somebody had given her 'A Journal of Mercies' in which every day she noted down the particular mercy she received (VPE, 199).

Twenty-one years later there is a fascinating and heartbreaking diary entry written during Barbara's final illness. It explores the idea for a novel that was never to be written. (There is a photograph of this notebook page in *A Lot To Ask*.)

> In this new novel there will be two women ... One from a privileged background, the other from a more ordinary one (but not working class) ... The great house where one lives becomes a hotel

for conferences ... A hymnwriter in the family, a woman like Frances Ridley Havergal or Charlotte Elliott [who wrote *Just As I Am*, the invitation hymn at Billy Graham crusades]. When she comes to stay with her friend she hopes to 'get to know her husband better — with unexpected results (VPE, 329).

There were no such frivolous romantic elements in the real life of Miss Havergal. The daughter of a clergyman, she packed a very full life into forty-three years. Rumors of her invalidism are somewhat exaggerated: swimming, backpacking in the Lake District, and mountain-climbing in Switzerland suggest that she would have made a good companion hiking with packed lunches over Exmoor. Frances was something of a child prodigy. My *Hymnal Companion* (to the *Service Book and Hymnal*, 451) lists the following accomplishments:

> She learned to read at age three; she read the Bible at age four; committed to memory the Psalms, Isaiah, the minor Prophets, and the entire New Testament; had a lovely voice and excellent keyboard skills; could play from memory all of Handel and much of Mendelssohn and Beethoven.

She grew up to be an ardent lay-evangelist. Well had she been named for Nicholas Ridley, the Reformation bishop burned at the stake by Mary Tudor. Here is an entry from Miss Havergal's diary:

> I went for a visit of five days to Arely House in Worcestershire. There were ten persons in the house, some unconverted and long prayed-for, some converted but not rejoicing Christians. I prayed, 'Lord, give me all in this house.' And he just did. Before I left the house everyone had got a blessing. The last night of my visit I was too happy to sleep, and little couplets composed themselves, chiming in my heart" (Companion, 288).

The great hymnologist Erik Routley concludes:

> Not all of us are sure that she might not have proved a somewhat overwhelming houseguest, but one must admire—even while keeping a safe distance—her zeal and sincerity. She was a facile writer, and sometimes she wrote doggerel" (*Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, 116).

However, Frances herself was modest about her literary gifts, attributing any success to its divine inspiration.

> Writing is praying with me, for I never write even a line by myself. I write like a little child who looks up at each sentence to ask, 'And what shall I say next?' That is just what I do" (*Baptist Hymnal Companion*, 169).

Her hymns of personal devotion (*Take My Life and Let It Be*) are "permeated with the fragrance of her passionate love of Jesus," according to Victorian hymnologist John Julian. But those chiming couplets may not be to our taste for group singing. So let us try a rousing mission hymn, although it would not quite fit the liturgical style of St Alban's Holborn, which Barbara preferred. It could be sung to the tune Hermas composed by Frances for *Golden Harps are Sounding*—she herself sang that tune and those words on her deathbed. But I prefer a twentieth-century Welsh tune popularized by the Salvation Army (Rachie), the comforting sort of tune Anthea Cleveland may have heard from Simon's sofa on a rainy romantic Sunday after tea!

[Again, the audience rose and sang the hymn, *Who is on the Lord's Side?*.]

Finally, we come to the gallant, cheerful clergy-wife, so admired by Jane Cleveland: Cecil Frances Alexander, known to her friends as Fanny. The daughter of an English military officer who socialized with the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, Fanny Humphreys achieved a significant literary reputation before she married at age 32. *Her Hymns for Little Children* was a bestseller, with a preface by the scholarly John Keble and needing no less than one hundred editions in the second half of the 19th century. The Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson admitted to being envious of her long poem "The Burial of Moses." She spent her literary proceeds for good works, such as founding a school for the deaf, and walked miles each day ministering to "the sick, the poor, and the hungry, regardless of creed."

She was 32 when she wed The Reverend William Alexander, who seemed destined for an unpromising career. His Oxford days had been debt-ridden and academically disastrous, so he must have realized that (like John Challow) he needed an older and steadier woman to take him in hand (Vincent Lenti, *The Hymn* July 99). The excellence of his wife was undoubtedly a factor in his appointment as a bishop in 1867. It is sad that Fanny did not live to see him made Primate Archbishop of All Ireland in 1896. She died just three days before their 45th wedding anniversary.

Fanny is without peer as "the Queen of Children's Hymnody," although appreciation of her best hymns is not limited to the Sunday School. Ian Bradley writes:

> While other women wrote to ... express in deeply personal and subjective terms their own relationship with God, Mrs Alexander sought simply to teach. Although her personal sympathies probably lay with moderate Anglo-Catholicism [at a time when divisions within the Anglican Church were keenly felt], there is no particular party feel to her hymns. They are for the most part a model of theological objectivity and simplicity in expounding the essential points of Christianity (95).

She is unfairly criticized for the text of "Within the churchyard, side by side, Are many long low graves," which Mr Spears recalls when trying to avoid the cutting of the churchyard grass:

> Not one they ever sang now; 'morbid'... Tom couldn't remember whether it was included in the English Hymnal, probably not; it had some questionable lines (FGL 142).

This was actually written with a practical didactic purpose in mind. Bradley explains:

> Death was a much more common experience for Victorian children than it is for young people today.... [The graphic focus on death in Victorian hymnody, even in children's hymns] sprang from a sincere desire to make some sort of pastoral and theological sense out of a profoundly upsetting process which took so many children away from their siblings and parents (113-14).

Mrs Alexander said that "a namby-pamby, childish style is most unpleasing to children, especially to boys; it is surprising how soon they can understand and follow poetry of a high order" (Baptist Companion, 131). This is no doubt the secret of the enduring excellence of her greatest works, which include *Once in Royal David's City* and *There is a Green Hill Far Away*.

But her most famous hymn is undoubtedly the one sung at the undenominational service following the lecture at which Aylwin Forbes faints and Dulcie falls in love.

> A youngish woman, looking grimly determined, sat pedalling at the harmonium. Dulcie sang in a loud indignant voice, waiting for the lines 'the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate...' but they never came.
>
> Then she saw that the verse had been left out. She sat down, feeling cheated of her indignation. The lay reader then gave an address showing how all work can be done to the Glory of God, even making an index ... (NFR, 20).

As in any well-planned service, the

theme of the hymn relates to that of the address, which speaks of the Glory of God. It is my opinion that God does not mind sharing his Glory with the creative artist, who "gives us eyes to see" things and has "the lips that tell." We are here today with the conviction that Barbara Pym is such an artist. We give thanks for her bright and beautiful world, all the truer for its bittersweet threads, and acknowledge that she "has done all things well"!

And so in her honor, perhaps we can stand to sing Mrs Alexander's fine hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

[And so, at St Alban's, we did.]

While visiting the UK in June 2002, Father Gabriel was delighted to discover "The Hymn Makers" series of CDs/cassettes produced by Kingsway Music. Mrs Alexander and Miss Havergal are featured on one volume; another, devoted to the hymns of Arthur Sullivan, includes a setting of *Lead, Kindly Light.*

Father Gabriel's email address is Gabriel-STA@aol.com. He would welcome correspondence on the subject of Victorian hymns.

Paper delivered at the 2000 North American Conference, Harvard, 1 April 2000, and at the Spring Meeting, Holborn, 9 June 2002, of the Barbara Pym Society.

Flashback: The Making of a Pym Video

Ellen J. Miller

June 2, 1983 – Barbara Pym's 70th birthday. I was in Finstock to produce a video for Americans who were, at that time, largely unacquainted with her. This was the culmination of a two-year transatlantic mission to learn more about Barbara's life.

Pure serendipity had led me to *Quartet in Autumn* on the shelf of my town's library in January 1980. I had never heard of Barbara Pym, and little did I know that this book would change my life. I began to read all the Pym novels then in print and tried to do some research on the author. But in that pre-Internet age, information was sparse and limited to American book reviews. I remember my sorrow when I learned that Barbara had died in the very month I had discovered her.

For reasons that still puzzle me, I was gripped with a compulsion to find out more about Barbara Pym. I had pictured her as a quiet spinster whose uneventful life was punctuated by jumble sales and tea with pale curates. I never imagined Lorenzo or Naples or the Institute—or "the Wilderness." Having had some small success as a free-lance author, I decided to write an article telling American readers about this unique and gifted writer.

I went to New York to meet with Paul De Angelis, Barbara's editor at E.P. Dutton, who was incredibly kind and helpful. When he learned that I directed media services at Harvard Law School, he suggested that I produce a video about Barbara rather than a magazine article. I then gathered up my courage and wrote to Hilary Walton about a possible video and my half-baked plans to travel to England. She too was wonderfully supportive of my quest, and my video project was underway. In the summer of 1982, I spent a month in London scouring libraries for information on Barbara and speaking with Hilary by phone.

The following summer I was back, and on a brilliant summer day I drove to Finstock with Steven Bernstein, an American cameraman living in London, to interview Hilary and Hazel Holt for my video. Following are excerpts from an article I wrote for *British Heritage* magazine about that day.

*

Finstock is described by Hilary as a "grotty little village." She is right. Although it missed out on British quaintness and charm, it is the setting for *A Few Green Leaves*, the final novel. It is a quite ordinary village of 800 residents, whose stone houses, farms and church are the color of English digestive biscuits. Barbara's and Hilary's cottage is on the main road, at the foot of a hill . . . Just across the road lies a tumble-down farm whose thatched roof has unraveled like a moth-eaten sweater. A resident donkey and some geese offer up barnyard sounds ... Barbara's room, sunny and airy, opens onto a deck overlooking a small garden ...

Built in the 16th century, the cottage is tiny, but with all modern conveniences. Books line an entire wall; Ivy Compton-Burnett and John Donne share space with Pym first editions. Dozens of cards, pictures and mementos from Pym friends and admirers are propped up against the books, along with photos of much-loved cats. Upstairs the two bedrooms are starkly modern. Barbara's room, sunny and airy, opens onto a deck overlooking a small garden. Her cat, Mother, is curled up on her bed. I lightly touch Barbara's

Hilary Walton in the doorway of Barn Cottage

desk.

A car pulls up outside and Hazel Holt arrives from London. She has been hard at work writing the "glue" that will hold together the excerpts of Barbara's letters, diaries and journals [*A Very Private Eye,* 1984]. After coffee and biscuits, Steven and I set up our equipment, Hilary and Hazel settle down on the sofa, and we begin shooting . . .

"Anthropology was a lovely bonus for Barbara," says Hazel, "because as a writer she could not write in a vacuum. There she was, one of these terribly observant people, able to observe the observers." Hazel remembers Barbara's popularity with the young anthropologists at the International African Institute. "In fact," she says with a laugh, "we started the Indigent Anthropologists Food and Wine Fund and would take them to lunch, just as Miss Clovis did with Digby and Deirdre in *Less Than Angels.*"

After a lunch of ham and cheese sandwiches and draught ale at the pub across the road, Hilary and Hazel talk about Barbara's long years in "the Wilderness." "She was terribly disappointed," Hilary says. "There she was, at the age of 40, with the most important career of her life – writing novels – denied her. This went on for a long time." After all the publishers' rejections of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Barbara was "discouraged but determined to go on writing," says Hazel. "She was a very professional writer and never really stopped writing." She pauses for a moment. "It was a terrible blow, so undermining to her self-confidence. She didn't realize, none of us did, that it was the literary climate that was against her."

Toward the end of the interview, Hazel answers one of the questions everybody asks: which of Barbara's heroines most resembles her? "If I had to answer," she says thoughtfully, "I would say Dulcie from *No Fond Return of Love.* Mainly, it's because of her research into the lives of ordinary people ... People didn't know that Barbara had this detective quality about her, taking everything in." Her voice softens. "And vulnerability – Dulcie was the most vulnerable of all her heroines. Barbara, until the end of her life, had the eyes of a young girl who could be hurt very badly. In spite of all the years of experience and perhaps the wry and sardonic observations of life, the heart was there and the humour was never cruel. It was an important part of her comic gift."

*

I spent the next eight months back home in Massachusetts, editing the tape, purchasing some footage of Barbara from the BBC's "Tea with Miss Pym" (three minutes were all I could afford!), and always wishing I could have done more. But air fares, hotels, and production costs had depleted my savings. I finished the video in February 1984, titled it "Barbara Pym: Out of the Wilderness," and distributed it to libraries, schools and universities, and individual Pym admirers whose names I had collected. Many years later, it turned a tiny profit, but that had never been my goal.

Now, almost twenty years later, we have a Barbara Pym Society and a newsletter. Her archives are in the Bodleian and there are Pym conferences, Web sites and mugs. Books have been written about her, she is taught in schools and universities, and most importantly, her novels are in print. And I seem to continue telling people, in one way or another, about this unique and gifted writer.

Pym gleanings

In books –

P. D. James wrote in *A Certain Justice* (Ballantine Publishing Group, 1977):

> Here was one of Miss Barbara Pym's excellent women, a dying breed no doubt, even in country parishes, but once as much a part of the Church of England as sung evensong, an occasional irritant to the vicar's wife, but an indispensable prop to the parish; Sunday-school superintendent, arranger of flowers, polisher of brass, scourge of choirboys and comforter of favoured curates.

In *Penfriends from Porlock* (Ballantine Books, 1988), "Sketches for Portraits", A. N. Wilson writes of Philip Larkin:

> ... he reveals that he keeps a diary. I would not be surprised if readers in a hundred years' time enjoy him as we enjoy A. C. Benson. One of the best autobiographical pieces, 'Early Days at Leicester', has the flavour of Barbara Pym.

and:

> He likes Anthony Powell's early novels better than *A Dance to the Music of Time*. He likes A. E. Housman, of course, and Stevie Smith, whose poems 'speak with the authority of sadness'. He has a perhaps surprising taste for Montherlant. And he is at his best as a critic when describing the genius of John Betjeman and of Barbara Pym.

Wilson writes there also, in "Two Talks on Satire":

> ... the mainstream of great novels is that great tradition which takes as its subject 'this world which is the world of all of us', and the human condition within it: the tradition, moreover, which uses this strange portmanteau, this extraordinary accident in the history of literature which we call the novel as a vehicle for concentrating on human character; the great tradition ... which embraces Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Turgenev and Dosteovsky. These are the mountains in which the Trollopes, the Arnold Bennetts, the Barbara Pyms and the Jane Austens are the foothills."

– and on their covers

Unattributed comments by reviewers quoted on the back covers of published volumes include:

On Mary Wesley's *An Imaginative Experience* (Penguin), "Mary Wesley writes like Barbara Pym in high heels ..." – *Vanity Fair.*

On Salley Vickers' *Instances of the Number Three*, referring to her first novel, *Miss Garnet's Angel*, John Bayley writes, 'It is decorous, very kind, very funny ... Barbara Pym fans please note!'

On the cover of Elizabeth Taylor's book of short stories, *A Dedicated Man* (Virago edn. 1993), Anne Tyler is quoted:

> Like Jane Austen, like Barbara Pym, like Elizabeth Bowen – soul-sisters all – Elizabeth Taylor made it her business to explore the quirky underside of so-called civilisation.

In the press

Derek Walcott, in an essay on Philip Larkin in the *New York Review*, 6 Jan. 1989, comments:

> To reinforce his craft he chose models whose subjects were first of all ordinary, banal: Betjeman, the novelist Barbara

Pym, Stevie Smith.

In 'Stop the clock on violence' in *The Observer*, 21 March 1993, Anthony Burgess explained why he now believes that art can be dangerous. His article ended:

> The bland novels of Jane Austen, or of Barbara Pym, depend on civilised opposition which can be resolved through reason; it requires immense artistic integrity to contrive a plot in which opposition sizzles without a blow being struck. Physical violence is the monopoly, at least in our own age, of the inferior artist.

In the *New York Times*, January 18, 1998, William H. Pritchard reviewed *Starting Out in the Evening* by Brian Morton (Crown Publishers), observing:

> Schiller ... thinks of how, because of some editor's passion, writers like William Kennedy, Barbara Pym, Daniel Fuchs and Henry Roth were "discovered" late.

Jacqueline Carey, reviewing *The Faithful Narrative of a Pastor's Disappearance* by Benjamin Anastas (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) in *The New York Times*, 20 May, 2001, wrote:

> The United States has no form like England's deceptively light vicarage novel. Barbara Pym, its foremost practitioner, could break hearts in two with the gentlest of ironic touches because she knew just where the fault lines lay. ... The closest thing Americans have to Pym's fiction is the underappreciated work of James Wilcox. ... he and Anastas are similarly graceful and slyly comic.

The Pym discussion group online, on 31 May 2002, included the observation, "I noticed that Barbara Pym made it into the *New York Times* crossword today, with the clue 'Barbara who wrote *Quartet in Autumn*'."

The Times, 26 June 2002, included a review by John Bayley of Anita Brookner's novel, *The Next Big Thing*. He observes:

> In atmosphere and protagonist it comes closest to her last but one ... Philip Larkin and Barbara Pym are both somewhere in the background. If you are feeling really low, few things are more comfortably bracing than a dip into a poem of the one or a novel of the other, and the same is true of Brookner. True art consoles; and hers transfigures in admirable detail the monotony but also the unique complexity of a life on the wane.

In a list of the books various celebrities had chosen to take on holiday with them, in *The Observer Review* of 7 July 2002, the contribution of novelist Mavis Cheek ran:

> I'm in Greece at the moment and rereading *Jane and Prudence* by Barbara Pym. I love her quiet satire – astonishingly advanced for the Fifties, and very funny about men, the sweet things. [She was also reading Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*.]

Chicago Tribune ran a story in July 2002 about a private investigator who calls his agency "A Very Private Eye".

The first paragraph of an obituary of Norman O. Brown, the philosopher, in *The Times*, 8 October 2002, ran:

> In 1977 a symposium in the *Times Literary Supplement* canvassed views as to the most overrated and underrated books. It was notable for reviving the fortunes of Barbara Pym and for Bob Dylan's nomination of the Bible in both categories.

On the Internet

On an email list for authors, editors and publishers, EDline
(.electriceditors.net/edline)

in July 2002, this thread appeared.

First, a US subscriber enquired:

> While we're on the topic of underwear, in a Barbara Pym novel someone says, "It was a pity his 'combinations' showed." I finally figured out that it probably means what we call "long underwear," but I've never been entirely sure. Help on this one, please.

A reply duly explained:

> Think Long Johns. It's a knitted and snug-fitting one-piece garment that *combines* upper and lower underwear - a long-sleeved, high-necked vest (in the UK sense) and long-legged drawers. It usually had a buttoned fly and, sometimes, a buttoned flap at the rear, so that you didn't have to take it/them off.
>
> "Coms" are a favourite in the wardrobe departments of British sitcoms, where they seem to be standard for grandfathers, old Irish priests and similar stock characters.

Then, at last, a message giving the proper attribution:

> In the B. Pym novel (*Some Tame Gazelle*) it's the curate who wears them, "tucked carelessly into his socks".

Letters to the Editor

A Chance Discovery

This was the first year at the conference for two university friends of mine and myself. We have all been avid Pym readers ever since university in the early '90s, but the story of how I came to hear of the society would I am sure have amused Miss Pym herself!

It was early summer 1995 and I was visiting a friend of mine, Father Richard, who was the vicar of the thriving inner-city parish of Holy Trinity Birchfield in Birmingham. The church was a redbrick Victorian structure and the worship suitably Anglo-Catholic for its High-Victorian setting.

I am sure Barbara Pym would have approved of Father Richard. He kept a cellar of fine wines and oversaw a congregation of 'Prayer-Book Catholics', most of whom were of West Indian descent. I remember seeing a group of elderly West Indian ladies behind a trestle table at the summer bazaar, suitably qualified to number amongst Miss Pym's 'excellent women'.

The Victorian church came complete with a sprawling vicarage set within a large garden in which lupins and hollyhocks grew in abundance. The vicarage was a rare breed; most of these structures have been demolished and replaced by 60s and 70s boxes, but Holy Trinity's vicarage stood as a monument to a bygone era – including its Victorian sanitary arrangements.

It was whilst using the downstairs facilities that I noticed the fine terracotta mosaic floor, in the corner of which was a pile of Oxford alumni magazines. I flicked through the first copy I found and there was a picture of Miss Pym herself; I scanned down the page and there appeared news of the Society. The rest as they say, is history!

David Christian, London