ISSN 1360-9920

GREEN LEAVES

The Journal of the Barbara Pym Society Vol. 10, No. 2, November 2004

THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY CONFERENCE 2004

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The tenth annual conference of the Barbara Pym Society took place at St Hilda's College, Oxford, the weekend of 4-5 September. Both days were sunny and warm. We could easily imagine Barbara sitting beside the shady river that runs through the college grounds, listening to the peal of church bells and the rustle of swans' wings, while contemplating our greater English poets and her next outing with Lorenzo.

The theme of this year's conference was "**Mothers and Other Relatives**" in Pym's novels.

"Everyone has a mother"

On Saturday morning, following the Annual General Meeting, our first speaker was **Kathy Ackley**, a retired professor of English. Her talk, "Everyone Has a Mother", focused on the influence that mothers, both living and dead, have in the everyday lives of their adult children. Often Pym's mothers are meddlesome, and they "annoy, embarrass, and worry their children". Some are fairly harmless nuisances, while others take over their children's lives completely.

Among Pym's many categories of mothers are the invalids who rule their children's lives, such as Mrs Wyatt in the *Home Front Novel* and the much darker Mrs Beamish of *A Glass of Blessings*. The latter runs her obedient, self-sacrificing daughter, Mary, ragged even though she could well afford to pay for help. Wilmet imagines the old lady "crouching greedily over a great steak ... to give her strength to batten on her daughter with her tiresome demands".

Pym exploits the comic effect that springs from elderly parents (usually widowed mothers) who desire to control their devoted children. In this regard, Miss Jenner and Miss Prior are lucky: they run their own businesses and do not have to be in constant attendance on their mothers, allowing them the pleasures of flirting with salesmen or gossiping with and about their clients. Miss Spicer in *No Fond Return of Love* is not so fortunate, as her mother keeps falling out of bed and cannot be left alone. Here, Ackley noted, "one cannot help wondering about the fate" of the daughter.

Men too have to deal with controlling mothers. Mrs Killegrew of *Crampton Hodnet* treats her son Edward as though he were a child, prompting him to wonder whether it might not be rather pleasant to be without her. Martin Shrubsole of *A Few Green Leaves* has similar thoughts about his mother-in-law, even though Magdalene Raven isn't terribly troublesome and serves as an "unpaid nanny and baby-sitter". Ackley believes a thought similar to Shrubsole's might also have occurred to Mervyn Cantrell, who asks Ianthe if she will marry him if his mother dies.

Ackley noted that Mervyn brings to mind Wilf Bason of *A Glass of Blessings* and "that sizable group of rather fussy, middle-aged, unmarried men of uncertain sexuality who live with or have very close relationships with their mothers." Evidence of Mrs Bason's feminine touch can be found in the objects in his room at the vicarage. Keith of *A Glass of Blessings* has also been influenced by his mother, and has a "ready supply of helpful household hints".

Some of the homosexual men in the novels are strongly attached to their mothers – such as Coco Jeffreys of *An Academic*

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Question and, in *The Sweet Dove Died*, Colin's lover, Harold, whose mother joins him, Colin, and Meg on a theatre visit. We learn that the sexually ambivalent James in that novel was close to his mother, and at one point thinks of Leonora as "some familiar landmark, like one's mother, even". Meanwhile Ned writes to his mother twice a week and uses her purported illness as an excuse to break off his English relationships and return to America. We also learn something about Leonora's mother, who seems to have had a young Italian lover that Leonora had been judged too young to know about at the time. We may wonder if her mother's experience has contributed to Leonora's own reluctance to deal with sex.

Mothers can make their demands known even from the grave

Edward Lyall is not gay and lives with his mother, who is "devoted to his best interests," providing his admirers with details about his eating habits and the exhausting nature of his work. Other single men have mothers who are not dominant or demanding, but still manage to unsettle their children with their idiosyncrasies: Mrs Bone of *Excellent Women*, who carries on about Jesuits, wormwood, and birds; Mrs Beddoes of *Crampton Hodnet*, who dresses smartly but has an embarrassing habit of revealing her entire history to strangers; and Mrs Forbes in *No Fond Return of Love*, whose sons view her as something of a character, and who serves her few hotel guests inelegant meals and coffee boiled with used grounds. Ackley notes that the single men who remain close to their mothers have "troubled relationships" with other women. Some have no interest in women, while others expect a great deal from and have uneasy relationships with them. She believes the one great "strength" of these men is "a highly developed sense of their own self-importance".

Mothers can make their demands known even from the grave. In *Excellent Women*, Mildred Lathbury thinks of her mother's pursed lips on the subject of brandy and its use for medicinal purposes. In *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie Mainwaring, looking around her cheerless room at Tavistock, recalls her mother's horrified tone pronouncing "a damp bed", while in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Ianthe Broome is not surprised to see her mother's image before her when she is kissed in public by John Challow. Happily, their mothers no longer at hand, these three characters are able to enjoy their autonomy, and free to maketheir own decisions such as where to go to church, what to eat, and what to read. This theme affects even minor characters. In *Less Than Angels*, Catherine meets two ladies in a restaurant. One has just lost her mother and remarks that she can now go to the church of her choice. Catherine wonders how someone who looks as old as she could possibly have a mother recently living. Here again, Pym's characters are often children who have been called upon to forsake their own preferences in deference to those of their mothers.

Children don't like to disappoint their mothers, as when Emma Howick of *A Few Green Leaves* reflects that she has let her mother down by not becoming the mother of fine children. Prudence Bates of *Jane and Prudence* is reluctant to visit her mother because she will be asked why she isn't married yet. Even Digby Fox, seeing Catherine Oliphant with a mop in her hand in *Less Than Angels*, contemplates his mother's views on the appropriate time to do housekeeping.

Ackley notes that mothers usually want only what is best for their children, particularly when it comes to whom they date and marry. However, "they typically disapprove of their children's choices – and often express a wish that their children might have the happiness and success that they find missing in their own lives". Examples are Margaret Cleveland of *Crampton Hodnet*, who worries that her daughter will be hurt by Simon Beddoes and believes that some dull young man would be a better partner for her. Mrs Cleveland observes, as mothers have been observing throughout history, "Of course, it would never do to say anything; mothers nowadays knew nothing, absolutely nothing." Other mothers who appear to be looking out for their daughters' best interests are Mrs Williton in *No Fond Return of Love* and Sophia Ainger's mother in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, who thinks Sophia has married beneath her. Then there is Beatrice Howick in *A Few Green Leaves*, who simply wants Emma to marry anyone, and Jane Cleveland of *Jane and Prudence*, who wonders if she is failing in her duty by not having higher aspirations for Flora.

Clearly Pym believes that the role mothers play is an important one. This is particularly evident in the emphasis she places on mothers in *Quartet in Autumn*. The four main characters have all lost their mothers, and Pym provides details about what happened to each of them. She tells us quite a bit about Marcia's mother, making it reasonable to deduce that Marcia's mental instability may be linked with the loss of her mother. Marcia stopped cleaning her house in an effort to preserve it as it was when Mrs Ivory was alive – even leaving Snowy's old fur ball on her mother's bed.

Certain characters in the novels are mother-substitutes

Certain characters in the novels are mother-substitutes. Catherine Oliphant "mothers" Tom, Digby and Mark. Sisters such as Winifred Mallory, Daphne Dagnall, and Aunt Hermione act as mother-substitutes for their brothers. Ackley also noted the "striking lack of fathers" in the novels, and wondered whether their wives had "simply been too much for them"!

Clearly Pym provides exceptions to the negative and unflattering portrayal of mothers. Mabel Swan (*No Fond Return of Love*)is jolly and comforting, and seems to allow her children independence. Mrs Beltane's children also appear to have their freedom, perhaps because their mother tends to focus on Felix, the dog. Jane Cleveland (*Jane and Prudence*) gives Flora all the liberty she needs, and "one cannot imagine her turning into a Mrs Beamish". Perhaps the best example of mothering is Sybil Forsyth in *A Glass of Blessings*. She is not domineering or dependent, has strong commitments to her own causes, and is a good friend to her son and daughter-in-law. As Ackley notes, "it is to Sybil's credit" that she marries Professor Root and feels no guilt about turning Rodney and Wilmet out, or excluding them from the trip to Greece. Indeed, Sybil's marriage encourages Wilmet and Rodney to start behaving like husband and wife. And "with Sybil and Professor Root as models, they can hardly go wrong".

Mothers and others in Austen and Pym

Maggie Lane, our second speaker, concentrated on how and why the treatment of mothers differs in the novels of Jane Austen and Barbara Pym. Lane is the librarian of the Bristol Grammar School and a noted Jane Austen scholar.

Lane began by noting that Pym's characters are mostly middle-aged and often constrained by the presence of their mothers. Living or dead, these women are "felt to be disapproving and prescriptive". Austen, too, has plenty of embarrassing and inadequate mothers; however, if the children "are at all worthy of our sympathy", they manage to escape them both physically and emotionally. Lane believes there are two reasons for this,

though both novelists deal in family relationships and write in the comic mode.

First, Austen follows the conventions of the courtship novel, so her characters must be young in order for the books to close with the formation of new couples. Lane noted that "older people in such novels act as dire warnings or temporary embarrassments, not insurmountable obstacles to renewal". By contrast, from her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym shows an interest in those whom life has "left on the shelf". Her fascination with the marginalized and the disappointed is something that 20th-century readers could identify with. None of Austen's heroines is older than 27, and the last novel she was working on was about a twenty-year-old. Austen herself became a "middle-aged spinster of small and precarious means, living with an elderly mother", but the only character in her novels of this type is Miss Bates of *Emma*. However, Lane believes Austen would not have found Miss Bates a suitable focus for a novel: "It is as if it would be a discourtesy to her readers to expect them to enter seriously into such a person's tribulations". In Pym, on the other hand, "it is the Miss Bateses and Miss Lathburys of this world who constitute the real interest".

Lane considers Miss Bates "Austen's one truly Pymian character"

Another major difference between the two novelists when it comes to children and their mothers is that Austen's society is more patriarchal than Pym's. The real bullies in Austen's fiction are men (Sir Thomas Bertram, General Tilney, Sir Walter Elliot), and often the wives have died. In Pym's world, the men have died or faded away, leaving the widows to control their children. Also, in Austen's world, "money is frankly acknowledged to be the basis of all power, including that within families, and the money is almost always in male hands".

Clearly Austen's mothers must be absent or inadequate in some way, or there would be no story. Of her six heroines, two have lost their mothers and two are separated from them – all of these having an "unsatisfactory" mother-substitute. The remaining heroines have mothers, but they are more of a hindrance than help.

Emma Woodhouse of *Emma* and Anne Elliot of *Persuasion* have lost their mothers, both of whom had admirable qualities. Anne was very unhappy when her mother died, and misses the encouragement she offered her with her music. The mother's superior character explains why Anne is so different from her not at all admirable father and sisters. Lady Russell, Anne's mother substitute, is well meaning but once gave Anne bad advice, leading to years of regret. She calls Anne "your mother's own self in countenance and disposition". Likewise, Mr Knightley describes Emma Woodhouse's mother as being the only person able to cope with Emma, noting that the daughter has inherited her "mother's talents".

The departure from the house and marriage of Emma's mother-substitute – Miss Taylor, who becomes Mrs Weston – brought Lane to the parallels between *Emma* and *A Glass of Blessings*. Both Emma Woodhouse and Wilmet Forsyth are acutely aware of the image they present, care for elegance and niceness, and are blind to how other people's minds work, leading them into error. Both heroines make a succession of discoveries, "not all of which are made explicit to the reader, though the clues are there". Lane would love to know whether Pym had *Emma* in mind when she created *A Glass of Blessings*, which Lane views as Pym's most accomplished novel. She notes that it is "the detachment of the mother figure" that finally brings the heroine to full maturity: Wilmet and Rodney must grow up and make their own lives when Sybil marries, while Emma "is forced out of the emotional nest" by the birth of Mrs Weston's child. Emma realizes that "[the] child to be born at Randall's must be a tie there even dearer than herself; and Mrs Weston's heart and mind would be occupied by it". Lane notes that "it is time for Emma to form her own family unit with Mr Knightley, and initially with her elderly hypochondriac father as their child".

Lane considers Miss Bates "Austen's one truly Pymian character," with her concerns about old petticoats and the whereabouts of the preserving pan for boiling a ham – unusual details in Austen, who rarely describes food and clothes. Further parallels between *A Glass of Blessings* and *Emma* are how uncharitably Emma and Wilmet feel towards Jane Fairfax and Mary Beamish, whom the two heroines find irritatingly admirable.

Lane next turned to two of Austen's heroines who are away from their mothers: Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* and Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*.

Catherine goes on a visit to Bath, leaving behind a mother who is kind and commonsensical, but has nine other children to look after. Catherine's mother-substitute is Mrs Allen, who is "singularly deficient as a chaperone, being more interested in dress than anything else". She gives her charge no advice on proper conduct, preferring to say "Just as you please, my dear". Lane notes that by making Mrs Allen so "placidly ineffectual," Austen shows how an older woman can fail to fulfil her duties without meaning any harm, leading to suffering and mishaps for the heroine that may not be dramatic, but are still important from the standpoint of proper conduct. Mrs Morland is "too unimaginative" to grasp the dangers her daughter may have encountered in Bath, though she might have been able to offer better guidance than Mrs Allen did.

Fanny Price is separated for many years from her mother, who is not unkind, but has neither leisure nor affection to bestow on her eldest daughter. Fanny ultimately deems her mother ill judging and a poor manager, with "no talent, conversation, no affection toward her daughter". Lane points out that once Fanny marries, she is unlikely to have anything to do with her mother except out of charity. Unlike Pym's women, Austen's, having learned during the novel to distinguish between worthy and unworthy people, discard the unworthy and move on, freeing themselves of emotional baggage.

Mothers play important roles in the lives of their daughters in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Regarding the first, Lane believes Mrs Bennet is "perhaps literature's most

Kathy Ackley and Maggie Lane

embarrassing and unpleasant mother". Elizabeth is always outwardly polite to her mother, but has no respect for her and perceives that her father feels the same. Mrs Bennet is clearly unconcerned for her daughter's personal happiness, trying to coax her to marry the ridiculous Mr Collins and embarrassing her by making loud remarks at a dinner party about her expectations for her oldest daughter. Though she is a comic character, Mrs Bennet causes real pain to the two right-thinking of her five daughters. But *Pride and Prejudice* is a fairy tale of sorts, as both of these daughters do end up with rich and handsome husbands. Moreover, Austen lets us know that after Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy, Mrs Bennet does not accompany her husband on visits to Darcy's estate. Lane believes another of Elizabeth's rewards at the end of the book is "the almost total exclusion of her mother from her life".

To Lane, the most delightful mother in Austen might be Mrs Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, though "even she is not a perfect guide for her daughters, being over-romantic, impulsive, and even imprudent". Mrs Dashwood and her daughter Marianne have much in common, and encourage each other to give way to their feelings concerning the insensibility of relatives, the admiration of the handsome Willoughby, and Willoughby's ultimate defection. The older daughter, Elinor, is more moderate and well-judging, and offers her mother advice rather than the other way around; she herself is suffering because of the man she loves, Edward Ferrars, but she keeps her feelings in check.

Lane finds that Mrs Dashwood and Jane Cleveland share common traits, as both novels involve a role reversal between mother and daughter

Lane believes Mrs Dashwood is "almost like a heroine herself, and indeed her qualities make her a most attractive one, for she is unworldly, warm-hearted, and unselfish". Austen describes her as captivating, though she is not at all flirtatious or competitive with her daughters. Lane suggested, "The pity is that, although she is said to be 'barely forty'... there is no hint of a romance for her. No Professor Arnold Root on the horizon: though I have always thought Colonel Brandon much better suited to Mrs Dashwood than to Marianne." Lane finds that Mrs Dashwood and Jane Cleveland of *Jane and Prudence* share common traits, as both novels involve a role reversal between mother and daughter. "That the daughters must be old before their time is due to the deficiencies in the mother, delightful though each mother is."

On the subject of children, Lane noted that, unlike Pym's heroines, Austen's must demonstrate their ability to guide the next generation. Elizabeth, Emma, Anne, and Fanny all show that they can handle young children sensibly, in a sort of "trial motherhood". This does not exist in Pym, though Catherine Oliphant has motherly feelings and Dulcie is a reasonably good aunt. "Most of Pym's female protagonists are seen in terms of the help they might give to men, not to the younger generation."

Lane notes that the mothers of small children in *Sense and Sensibity* and *Persuasion* are portrayed as bad because "they are more concerned with the gratification of their own feelings than with the moral and social training of their children". Even Isabella Knightley in *Emma*, though a caring mother, has a weakness that Lane is sure Emma herself will avoid: a nervous tendency to fancy imaginary ills and to dose her children with unnecessary medicines.

Lane considered some other groups of mothers in Austen's and Pym's work. First, the boastful ones such as Mrs Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, who chiefly talks of her children, and Mrs Lyall in *Jane and Prudence*, whose son Edward is her chief topic of conversation. Then the bullying mothers. Pym has plenty of these, and Austen at least two, both rich widows: Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mrs Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*. Because Lady Catherine can easily dictate to her daughter, Anne, she has the false impression that she can meddle in the life of her motherless nephew, Darcy. But Lane notes that one of the most comic and satisfying passages in *Pride and Prejudice* comes when Elizabeth stands up to Lady Catherine and "without rudeness asserts her right to act in her own best interests". Ultimately, Lady Catherine's interference is worse than a failure for her, since it brings the couple together. In *Sense and Sensibility,* Mrs Ferrars wants Edward to marry a woman of wealth and consequence, and she makes her son miserable by her financial control over him. Nonetheless, she finally relents and accepts him back, even though he has taken orders and proposed to a woman of modest means, Elinor. Mrs Churchill of *Emma* is another bully, though she is not a mother but the aunt of Frank Churchill. She is selfish, wanting her own good rather than Frank's, though she is genuinely fond of him.

Jane Austen's goal is to show the importance of making correct moral choices in selecting a marriage partner and raising the next generation; Pym is more concerned with how to make a life if no suitable partner is available

As for men in Austen's novels, Lane noted that none of the male protagonists are of weak or dubious sexuality. None are even confirmed bachelors, let alone effeminate. Men who have reached a certain age and are not married have simply not been lucky in love. "No man in Austen shies away from the female sex, and if they shy away from commitment it is in order to do that very masculine thing, play the field".

Lane ended by noting that Jane Austen's goal is to show the importance of making correct moral choices in selecting a marriage partner and raising the next generation. Pym is more concerned with how to make a life if no suitable partner is available. Clearly, "in Pym, the single life is necessarily often lived with – or in the shadow of – mother".

Excellent women, worthy wives and mothers: female roles in the novels of Barbara Pym

Our third speaker, **Patricia McErlain**, is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at a university in Spain. Her paper explored Pym's humorous, yet tenderly ironic, portrayal of female characters, both single and married. She also discussed Pym's eye for detail, and noted that the minor themes and seeming lack of drama in the novels "provide a greater challenge to the writer's skill than more exciting subject matter".

For McErlain, the world of Pym brings two words to mind: "excellence", describing the worthiness and selfless dedication of Pym's female characters; and "irony" which is Pym's hallmark, situating her in a tradition of English writers dating back to Chaucer and more recently to Jane Austen.

McErlain spoke of various mothers in Pym's posthumously published novel, *An Academic Question*: a novel of transition in which, McErlain said, Pym was attempting to depict the contemporary scene, influenced by Margaret Drabble. Alan Grimstone's mother, Katherine, an uneducated, working-class woman, tends to worry about domestic issues concerning her son, who largely ignores her. She accepts and is proud of his status. His wife, the undomesticated Caroline, comments:

'Alan's mother took the whole thing calmly: she knew her son was clever and did not attempt to enter into those superior realms which she saw him as occupying' (chapter XI). Katherine Grimstone could relate to her daughter-in-law only in so far as her son's interests were concerned. Caroline comments, 'she kept on telling me all the things that Alan liked – potatoes and strong tea, bacon cut thick and some particular brand of sauce, most of which I had long since weaned him away from'. Sadly, Mrs Grimstone has failed to assimilate the change in social status that has taken him away from his working-class origins, indicated, as ever in Pym's novels, by the choice of food.

"excellence" is the fate of the unmarried female, while elegance and good living are the reserve of the married lady

Caroline herself is not altogether of the ilk of the 'excellent women' of Pym's earlier novels. She is somewhat more self-indulgent and less 'worthy': as Hazel Holt points out in her introduction to *An Academic Question*, Caroline, despite having the upbringing of one of the excellent women, is attempting, uneasily, to find another role for herself. Although she loves her child, Kate, she feels inadequate as a mother and delegates repsonsibility to the Swedish au pair, while failing to find a fulfilling alternative role. She spends her days aimlessly, frequently running errands for her husband, such as representing him at a memorial service for the late scholar, Esther Clovis. In her failure to find a fulfilling role for herself and in her feelings for her husband Caroline is reminsicent of Wilmet Forsyth in *A Glass of Blessings*:

> I saw Alan as an adequate husband, an unenthusiastic lover, a dutiful father and a son who despised the family he had grown beyond. But he was said to be brilliant at his work and a great help to his students. Also, and even more important, I had once been in love with him and in a way I still was. (chapter IV)

Caroline's endeavour to be useful by visiting a home for retired gentlefolk is both sneered at by her husband as '... just the kind of thing your mother would approve of' and exploited for his own academic ends as he attempts to use the connection to get access to research material. (chapter II)

Caroline's friendship with Coco Jeffries parallels that of Wilmet Forsyth with Piers Longridge, bringing in another man of ambiguous sexuality, this one living with an adored mother, Kitty.

McErlain believes that "excellence" is the fate of the unmarried female, while elegance and good living are the reserve of the married lady. She finds the theme of excellence and spinsterhood versus the married state throughout Pym's writing. But like Austen, Pym is anti-romantic; she pokes fun at both the married state and the single woman's romantic view of it. Pym thus allows the reader "to glimpse the innate feminism of the Oxford graduate in English literature, familiar with the writings of Woolf and Wollstonecraft".

Both married and single women lead unfulfilled lives in the novels. Pym may be showing us that the few women who do devote themselves wholly to their career, at the expense of their emotional lives, are not necessarily any happier than the self-effacing wives and spinsters.

In Pym's world, marriage provides social status and, in most instances, increased material well-being. However, it is rarely presented as a state of unalloyed bliss for either partner. Pym's portrayal of marriage differs greatly from Jane Austen's ideal, "although Pym is a writer whose work, artistically, reflects the subtlety and economy of Austen's writing".

The other Wilmet: sisters and mothers in Charlotte M. Yonge

Clemence Schultze, a Roman historian and Lecturer in Classics, spoke about the role of mothers (and mother substitutes) in the novels of Charlotte M. Yonge, who lived from 1823 to 1901. Barbara Pym had great admiration for Yonge's work, and makes several references to it in her own writings.

Schultze began with some general remarks about Yonge's novels, which "present a vivid picture of life in large Victorian families in provincial or rural England". Yonge, a high Anglican, was "deeply committed to the idea of religious reserve". Thus her novels rarely deal overtly with issues of doubt or extravagant spiritual crises. Instead, she delicately reveals "the effects of observance and faith: religion as lived by a wide variety of characters".

For Schultze, four factors constitute the great charm of Yonge's work. First, the characters live within a "fully realized" world, with ordinary settings. Second, in dialogues and conversations, Yonge uses a variety of registers, making the different characters distinct and easy to recognize, even those in the same social class. Third, she manages to convey the passage of time "brilliantly," so readers are never bored despite their perception that a great deal of the "dailiness of life" has passed by. Fourth, situations are developed realistically. Upsetting, even dramatic, events occur, but they are not mere plot catastrophes. Instead, their effects are assimilated over time by the characters, who come to terms with loss, grief, good and bad fortune. Yonge's novels have no well defined villains and heroes. "It is a world of the good, the pretty good, and the indifferent, with the occasional horror".

Yonge's expectations of the obedience owed even to very unsatisfactory parents are high but not unlimited, and the boundary is set at the point where a parent's demands conflict with the requirements of the Church

With Yonge's focus on large families, mothers – as well as quasi-mothers such as eldest sisters and stepmothers – are well represented. Schultze described some more notable ones, beginning with Mrs May of *The Daisy Chain*. This admirable mother is "polished off in a carriage accident in Chapter 2". However, we have seen her at the heart of the family, handling a gospel reading in a way that shows she relates to the different levels of development of her many children, who range from a six-week-old baby to a twenty-one-year-old at Oxford. After Mrs May's death, a letter she had been writing to her sister is found, revealing further insights into her children's characters. Her doubts and worries about some of them prove true later in the novel. Mrs May leaves a husband who must learn proper parenting, and three elder daughters, each of whom undertakes aspects of the mothering role: Margaret, crippled in the accident, is the guide and confidante; Flora is the brilliant manager, in every sense, of home and social life; Ethel, as she grows to maturity in this book and its sequel, *The Trial*, succeeds in her own distinctive way at being both "practical manager and spiritual nurturer" for her father and younger siblings.

Another very good mother is Mrs Edmonstone of *The Heir of Redclyffe*. Schultze notes,"[what] is brilliantly done in it is the depiction of the bright homeliness of Hollywell, with Mrs Edmonstone's boudoir /sitting room at the heart of it". She acts as confidante, comforter, and arbiter, showing better judgment and more insight than her well-meaning but impulsive husband.

Still, Schultze finds her a bit annoying. "The best thing about her is her only son Charles, who is an invalid condemned to 'a sofa life'. He is clever, waspish, a bit of a stirrer, and the only person to see from the outset how infuriatingly priggish the self-righteous cousin Philip is".

Maybe the "learners" are more interesting than these two near-perfect mothers. One of the best is Albinia Kendal, the young stepmother in the novel of that name. She bravely undertakes the charge of three difficult children, and must not only learn to cope with them, but also direct her husband toward a proper parental role, a suitable social role within the town community, and, most important, full membership in the Church. "Thus she is fulfilling many of the duties of a mother to her own husband."

This is the original Wilmet: Wilmet Underwood. It is a very unusual name. We know that Barbara Pym was well acquainted with the works of Charlotte M. Yonge. Only to other Yonge fans would the delicious irony of the choice of name be apparent

She succeeds, but encounters failures too: the step-child who at first seemed the most engaging and lovable is the shallowest; the boy of the family has numerous setbacks, reflecting a deep-seated moral cowardice that Albinia's efforts have not overcome; while the least promising child grows into the finest character, though Albinia unintentionally encourages her to think a young man attracted to her – an error that marks the girl for life.

Yonge created a wide variety of indifferent-to-poor mothers. Mrs Fulmort in *Hopes and Fears* and Mrs Curtis (a widow) in *The Clever Woman of the Family* are bullied, one by an overbearing *nouveau riche* husband, the other by her daughters.

Other mothers receive less sympathy. In *The Castle Builders*, Lady Willoughby, a widow, remarries, and basically abandons her two daughters at their school. She is languid, graceful, and verbally affectionate: in other words, lazy, irresponsible, and a selfish manipulator. Yonge seems to be asking how much obedience daughters, virtually grown up, owe to a mother whose values and expectations are very different from their own? The novel's subtitle is significant – The deferred confirmation: the girls miss several opportunities to be confirmed. How far should they conform to their mother's wishes and where must they make a stand? Schultze notes, "Yonge's expectations of the obedience owed even to very unsatisfactory parents are high but not unlimited, and the boundary is set at the point where a parent's demands conflict with the requirements of the Church".

As an example of a horrendous mother in Yonge's novels, Schultze chose Mrs Charnock Poynsett of *The Three Brides* – a widow, an heiress in her own right, and (owing to a hunting accident) confined to her sofa. Three of her five sons marry at about the same time, so three brides arrive to live in or around the maternal home.

This novel "engages more directly than most of Yonge's work with the question of marriage, and of casting the balance of duties between wife and mother" – an issue that emerges most clearly in the marriage of the eldest son, Raymond, to his second cousin, Cecil. She seems to have married him more for the connection than for love, and "turns out to be a self-satisfied little prig, convinced that 'how we did it at Dunstone [her father's estate]' denotes perfection".

From the start, Mrs Charnock Poynsett doesn't help matters, and Yonge gradually evokes our sympathy for Cecil. Raymond sits talking to his mother all evening on their first return "as if [her sofa] were the very kernel of home and of repose", and asks his wife to make his mother her "first object".

Eventually we learn that Raymond had once been passionately in love with the worldly Camilla Vivian, now the widowed Lady Tyrrell, who has returned to her father's house nearby. It becomes clear that a strong link still exists between her and Raymond. Though Yonge appears to endorse Mrs Charnock Poynsett's view that Camilla is a siren, worldly, manipulative, and self-seeking, we learn that her engagement to Raymond had been broken off partly because he was too entirely dominated by his mother for a daughter-in-law to be happy. By then we've seen enough of Mrs Charnock Poynsett to feel that Camilla has a point, making us pity Cecil all the more.

In one of Yonge's most dramatic chapters, Raymond and Camilla both die of a fever that is raging in the district. When Camilla learns that Raymond is dead, she tells Julius, the clergyman brother, that she had loved Raymond; and though she had hoped his marriage to Celia would turn out well, it couldn't "with that mother there". She goes on, "You idolize her, like all the rest of you; but she chilled me and repelled me, and turned me to bitterness, when I was young and he might have led me. Her power and his idolatry made me jealous …".

In Yonge's scheme of values, the sort of idolatry that would lead someone to hand over his judgement to an inappropriate authority "is a grave moral error". Yet Camilla is not depicted as a right-thinking person. Schultze asks, "When she calls Raymond's relation to his mother idolatry, is she right or wrong?". Here she quoted Catherine Storr, the psychologist, in a paper on 'Parents' in *A Chaplet for Charlotte Yonge* (edited by G. Battiscombe and M. Laski: Cresset Press, 1965). Storr writes there of Mrs Charnock Poynsett, "Her illness was clearly hysterical; her hold over her sons abnormally strong, and her influence on her daughters-in-law catastrophic. It would surely be better to be the child of a real Baddy … than of such an outrageous Goody as this".

Schultze considered Yonge a writer whose world, though a century removed in time, is not far in spirit from that of Barbara Pym

Lastly, Schultze spoke of her "personal favourite" of the Yonge novels, *The Pillars of the House*. The "pillars" are the two eldest of the thirteen children in the Underwood family. They lose their clergyman father on the same day that twins are born, and their mother simultaneously suffers slight brain damage in a fall. Thus they are left "worse than orphans". The object of the two older children is to keep the family together so that they will not have to be split up among friends, foster-parents, orphanages, and boarding schools.

The eldest girl is thus thrust into a mother's role at the age of fifteen. She is beautiful, and a good homemaker, nurse, and cook (as Schultze noted, "she needs to be!"). She is also careful, economical, well educated enough to be a school-teacher, and kind and motherly. Nonetheless, Yonge is never unrealistic, so this girl is not perfect. She underestimates the seriousness of a family member's illness, she is perhaps over-strict, and she maintains rigid financial constraints when there is less need for them. Eventually she somewhat pathetically tells her fiancé that she has always had to be an authority and has never felt she came first with anyone.

At the end of his life, her brother Felix tells her that the family would have broken up had it not been for her. Schultze then revealed that Barbara Pym adopted the name of this mother-substitute and mainstay for a vastly different heroine.

"This, dear Pym readers, is the original Wilmet: Wilmet Underwood. It is a very unusual name. We know that Barbara Pym was well acquainted with the works of Charlotte M. Yonge. Only to other Yonge fans would the delicious irony of the choice of name be apparent!"

Schultze considered Yonge a writer whose world, though a century removed in time, is not far in spirit from that of Barbara Pym.

Barbara Pym's Oxford

After dinner on Saturday evening, **Triona Adams** entertained us by talking about "Barbara Pym's Oxford." Adams graduated from St Hilda's in 1996, is a member of the Barbara Pym Society, and now a West End actors' agent.

Adams noted that when it was founded in 1893, St Hilda's was a very "domestic establishment", with the principal acting as an overt mother-figure. When Pym read English there in 1931-34, St Hilda's still had the "air of a rather large domestic house, gifted with many daughters ... There was no porter's lodge until 1941, and a maid would answer the door and inquire within as to whether the Fellow or undergraduate was 'at home'."

Adams reminded us that in *A Very Private Eye*, Barbara describes a tutorial with one of her professors, who had a great cauldron of marmalade boiling on the gas ring. Entries in Barbara's diaries point to her favourite activities at the time – among them, updating her wardrobe, stalking young men, and giving herself steam beauty baths. While at Oxford, Pym does not appear to have been "a woman's woman" and seemed not to be interested in women's social, political or academic advancement.

To Adams, "Barbara's true story, as an Oxford undergraduate, was not about *Beowulf*, it was about people". She believes Pym's years at Oxford were vital in terms of her becoming a writer, "honing her observational skills and the witty one-liner that could pierce the heart". Adams ended her talk by noting that the Oxford experience cannot be repeated, reading from Pym's diary (November 1935): "I am reading *Gaudy Night* by D. L. Sayers and enjoying it very much. Pleasure and pain in an agreeable mixture. That's what I feel when I think of Oxford and of my days at St Hilda's."

Closing Activities: open discussion of "Mothers and Other Relatives"; dramatized reading of "Mothers and Fathers"

Following church, sightseeing, and relaxing in the Senior Common Room on Sunday morning, Michael Wilson led an open discussion on topics that had come up during the presentations. Among these was the role of Barbara's own mother, Irena Spenser Pym ('Links'), in her life and stories (it was indeed sad to think that we could no longer ask Hilary for her comments). We learn from *A Very Private Eye* that in 1945, because of her mother's illness, Barbara had to leave Naples, where she had been posted in the WRNS in 1944, and was so much enjoying the experience. The delightful Jane Cleveland of *Jane and Prudence* is reputed to be based on the character of Irena Pym.

The favourite mother in all of the novels was found to be Sybil Forsyth of *A Glass of Blessings*. There was a lively discussion concerning academic writing about Pym.

We were pleased during this session to greet Dale Salwak, bibliographer of Pym and editor of a book of essays on her work. He was in England to attend the press launch at the British Library of his latest work, *Living with a Writer*, published by Palgrave Macmillan.

The conference ended with a delightful dramatized reading of "Mothers and Fathers," a story that Yvonne Cocking had found in the Pym archives at the Bodleian, and directed for the conference reading. Pym worked on it right after she finished the first draft of *Some Tame Gazelle*, and, as in that novel, used her Oxford friends as characters. It was written in the style of Ivy Compton Burnett – a technique that Barbara and Robert Liddell delighted in using, first in their letters to each other, and later in unpublished stories like this one.

After another round of tea and biscuits, we said our goodbyes, with hopes of seeing each other at next year's conference. Meanwhile, we went away with new ways to think about the role of mothers and others in Pym's novels, and perhaps in our own lives as well.

Conference report by Beverly Bell

photographs by Yvonne Cocking and Ellen Miller

Notice Board

A **Requiem Mass for Barbara Pym** will be held at St Alban's Centre, Holborn, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of her death, on Saturday 15 January, 2005, at 2 p.m. The preacher will be Colin Oxenforth, and music the Faure Requiem, performed by the choir of St Paul's Church, Bedford.

The next Barbara Pym Society **North American conference** will be held at Harvard, Saturday-Sunday 2-3 April, 2005. Eleonore Biber, Tim Burnett, Yvonne Cocking and Barbara Dunlap will be among the speakers.

A joint meeting of the Barbara Pym Society and the **Philip Larkin Society** is planned for Saturday 9 April, 2005, in Oxford.

The Annual General Meeting of the **Alliance of Literary Societies** will be held on Saturday 14 May, 2005 at the Swedenborg Hall, 20-21 Bloomsbury Way, London, hosted by the Charles Lamb Society.

The Barbara Pym Society **Spring Meeting** will be held on 5th or 12th June, at St Alban's Centre, Holborn. Booking forms for that and for the Pym/Larkin meeting will go out with the Membership renewal form and the new directory early in 2005.

The Barbara Pym Society **Annual Meeting** will be held in Oxford, Saturday-Sunday 3-4 September, 2005, with the theme of Barbara Pym's novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*.

REPORT OF THE ELEVENTH A.G.M. OF THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY HELD AT ST HILDA'S COLLEGE, OXFORD, ON SATURDAY 4TH SEPTEMBER 2004 AT 11.30 a.m.

Committee members present were: Kate Charles (Chairman), Christine Ward (Secretary), Eileen Roberts (Membership Secretary), Hazel Bell (Editor – *Green Leaves*), Yvonne Cocking (Archivist), Deirdre Bryan-Brown (Web Site Coordinator), Phil Bacon, Maggie Parsons, Maureen Woolley, and Ellen Miller (U. S. Organizer).

1. Chairman's Opening Remarks

Kate Charles gave a warm welcome to delegates, especially those from abroad and new members. She expressed her deep sadness and regret at the passing of Hilary Walton. The order of service for her funeral on 14 February was on show. It had been a lovely service on a sunny day and she felt that all had been done as Hilary would have wished. We will all miss her enormously. Kate also took this opportunity to record our sadness at the deaths of Hilda Kees and Michael Egan and our gratitude for their contribution to conferences. We send our condolences to their families.

It is delightful, on the tenth anniversary of the BPS, to be able to say that the society is still flourishing. It was Hilary's dying wish that the Finstock Day should go on, and it proved to be a triumph. The weather was glorious, the Bishop's address was superb and the highlight of the day was seeing the cottage as it was when Barbara and Hilary lived there. It would never be like it again as it would be changing ownership. Photos from the day were on display.

Everyone was encouraged to buy *No Soft Incense*, which is an outstanding publication. The delegates showed their gratitude to Hazel Bell for her work with enthusiastic applause.

Finally, Kate invited everyone to a service of remembrance for Barbara in January at St. Alban's Church in Holborn, London, as it will be the 25th anniversary of her death.

There was a problem with the date of the joint Pym/Larkin society meeting; a definite date and venue would be announced in *Green Leaves*. The Spring Meeting would be held as usual in London.

2. Apologies

Apologies for absence had been received from Moyra Forrest, Hazel Holt, Stephen and Jean Shell, and Michael Wilson.

3. Minutes of Previous A.G.M.

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

4. Matters arising from the Minutes

Pan Macmillan's new issues of *An Unsuitable Attachment, The Sweet Dove Died* and *A Quartet in Autumn* are now in the shops. Virago is hoping to publish *Excellent Women* next year.

Ellen Miller reported that the membership of BPS in the United States was growing. They had a very successful conference at Harvard in March. The next North American one would be held on 2 and 3 April 2005, and Ellen hoped to welcome some of the delegates from this conference at Oxford to the American one.

The Boston Center for Adult Education is running a new course in BP's work, under BPS member Diane Thompson, and it is to be hoped that this will encourage the publishers to re-publish more of her work.

5. Financial and Membership Report

The Pym Society Account as of 2 July 2004 stands at £2250. At the last A.G.M. the balance was £4466.15. The difference is due to the publication of a thousand copies of *No Soft Incense*, which cost £2438.00. At a cover price of £7.50 we needed to sell 326 to break even but we had only sold 100 so far. Members were urged to both buy and publicize the book.

Other expenses included production of two issues of the newsletter, costing £1400, mugs, £230, plus sundries such as postage.

Canadian and American membership stood at 250; UK and the rest of the world at 255.

Booking forms for the Larkin meeting and the Spring Meeting would be enclosed with *Green Leaves*.

6. Editor's Report

The next issue of *Green Leaves* would include an account of the Finstock Day and the Autumn Conference. We have a backlog of articles but cannot include them all as the Society has been so socially active of late.

Eileen praised Hazel's outstanding work as editor of *Green Leaves*, which the conference endorsed with applause.

7. Elections

Only two names had been received for the two committee vacancies. Maggie Parsons agreed to serve for a second term and Michael Wilson had been previously co-opted to fill the place left by Chris Ward when she became Secretary. In the absence of other nominations these were elected.

Kate had come to the end of her five-year term as Chairman and was not eligible for re-election. She emphasized that it had been a great privilege for her to serve as Chairman, but she was happy to hand it on. Deirdre Bryan-Brown was nominated by Yvonne Cocking, seconded by Hazel Bell and warmly welcomed as new Chairman by the members. Kate expressed her thanks to all the committee for their help and support. Hilary Tudor proposed a vote of thanks to Kate which conference endorsed with spirited applause. Kate would remain on the committee for a further year ex officio.

8. Any Other Business

Mary Newby asked about archives for students of Pym. Yvonne is reviewing the archives and Eileen keeps some material, including tape recordings of early meetings. Yvonne has a stock of newspaper articles on Pym and is organizing these, but it will take time.

Audiobook versions of many of Pym's novels are available from Sterling Audio in the UK.

Eleonore Biber offered to donate the bibliography of her PhD thesis on Anglo-Catholicism in the novels of Barbara Pym and A. N. Wilson; the thesis consists of 450 pages in German, with the bibliography in English.

Blue Plaques: there is no plaque for Barbara at St Hilda's, but Eileen pointed out that two of the rooms in the new Christina Barratt building are named after Hilary and Barbara. There is also a Barbara Pym fellowship at St Hilda's. Yvonne will follow up suggestions that blue plaques might be put up in London in Brooksville Avenue, Queen's Park and Eccleston Square.

The next BPS Annual Conference will be based on *An Unsuitable Attachment* and will be held on 3 and 4 September 2005.

There being no other business, the meeting ended at 12.30pm.

Christine Ward

The Barbara Pym Society 2004-5

Chairman Deirdre Bryan-Brown
Membership Secretary Eileen Roberts
Secretary Chris Ward
Editor Hazel Bell

Committee
Phil Bacon; Bridget Guymer; Maggie Parsons; Michael Wilson; Maureen Woolley
co-opted: Yvonne Cocking (**Archivist**)
ex officio: Kate Charles
US Organizer and **Website Coordinator**: Ellen Miller
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Honorary life members:
Mrs Hazel Holt; Professor John Bayley; The Revd Prebendary Gerard Irvine; Baroness James of Holland Park, OBE (P. D. James); Professor Peter Lloyd; Miss Muriel Maby; James Runcie; Professor Robert Smith

Pym **website address**:
www.barbara-pym.org

Barbara Pym: a day of celebration

in aid of Finstock with Fawler Parish Church

Before she died, Barbara's sister Hilary Walton was working with others in Finstock on fundraising with the aim of reinstating the original Victorian gallery of Holy Trinity parish church and converting it into an area where children could be with their parents during services. The addition of toilet facilities would also make the church more user-friendly to visitors and congregation alike. Hilary made it clear in the days before her death in January this year that the day should go ahead without her if necessary.

So it was that many of the local congregation and residents of the Finstock area were joined by members of the Barbara Pym Society on 13 June, a perfect June Sunday, some travelling from the United States and Austria, around thirty on a bus starting from St Hilda's college in Oxford, the rest chancing the English train and road systems (which like the weather always provide travellers to any event with topics for conversation, as Barbara Pym knew well). On arrival at the Village Hall visitors were given a detailed map of Finstock, and throughout the day the new owners of Barbara and Hilary's home and possessions kindly allowed people to tour the tiny rooms of Barn Cottage, full of Pym and Walton memorabilia, tirelessly answering questions and pointing out small treasures. We very much appreciated being able to examine the books in the two bedrooms, noting the subtle differences between Hilary's and Barbara's collections. It was delightful to see the beautiful old furniture and patchwork bedspreads and to wander into the neat little garden. There were also reminders of the cats so much loved by both sisters, and family photographs, some familiar to us and some to be discovered. As well as close friends of Hilary's, it was good that so many people were able to meet Jane Crampton, one of the sisters' few relatives, whose surname is of course embodied in one of the Pym novels.

More than sixty people enjoyed a buffet lunch at the hall, with a great buzz of chatter as the visitors met the locals and heard stories of Hilary's involvement in village affairs. We were able to browse and to purchase the newly-published volume, *No Soft Incense: Barbara Pym and the Church*, back-numbers of *Green Leaves*, Pym mugs and the comprehensive index, and pick up other Society information and enrolment forms.Two enthusiastic members brought a large collection of the out-of-print novels to sell, enabling them to donate the money raised to Oxfam and the Society.

Well before 3.30 p.m the church was full for the Choral Evensong in celebration of the life and work of Barbara Pym, which was also a poignant reminder of the death of her sister Hilary, whose funeral so many of those present had attended in January. The service was conducted by the parish priest, the Reverend Jane Knowles, with the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend Richard Harries, who demonstrated a great familiarity with the novels of Barbara Pym in his address, which he has kindly allowed to be reproduced in this edition of *Green Leaves*. The readings were from a bible resting on the wooden lectern given in memory of Barbara Pym, and nearby on the wall was the simple oval plaque which commemorates her. The first lesson, from the book of Genesis, was read by the Chairman of the Society, Kate Charles, and the second, from the gospel of John, by Hilary Walton's great friend Michael Collard, both of whom had been part of the group who arranged the service. Hilary herself had been particularly involved with the music which the choir sang, with impressive arrangements of the Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis and the Miserere. The congregation, which numbered around 140, sang some favourite Anglican hymns, including "King of Glory, King of Peace" and "Let All the World in Every Corner Sing".

There was a retiring collection in aid of the Church Appeal. Many members of the Barbara Pym Society had already been able to contribute by mail, enabling St Hilda's to forward over £530 to the funds.

After the service people strolled around the graveyard, admiring the flowers and looking at the newly-engraved headstone which is being prepared for its permanent place in due course over the grave which Barbara and Hilary now share. Tea was served in the village hall, more visitors had the opportunity to visit Barn Cottage, thanks were offered to the many people who have been involved in the church fundraising efforts, and everyone was invited to come back for the Finstock Festival the following month. In return, the Barbara Pym Society members hoped that some of the Finstock residents would come to our future events.

Deirdre Bryan-Brown

Choral evensong celebrating the life and work of Barbara Pym

Sermon preached by the Rt Revd Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, at Finstock, Sunday 13 June 2004

In *Quartet in Autumn,* Norman goes to visit his brother-in-law Ken in hospital. Barbara Pym wrote:

> Now that his sister was dead there was no direct link between him and Ken, and Norman felt pleasantly virtuous at going to see him. He has no one, he thought, for the only child of the marriage had emigrated to New Zealand. In fact Ken did have somebody, a woman friend whom he expected to marry, but she did not visit on the same day as Norman. "Let him come on his own" they had said to one another, "Well after all he has no-one and the visit will be a bit of company for him".

Both Norman and Ken think that they are doing good to the other. This is encouraging. It is a ground of hope that there are millions of people in the world like Norman and Ken who want to be of use to other people. There are many such people in Barbara Pym's novels: novels which are Barbara Pym's legacy to us and for which we give thanks. But as she makes clear, there is much else going on besides this. What the reader is conscious of above all is the need of Norman, Edwin, Marcia and Letty, the quartet of the title in question, a need they hardly dare recognise in themselves, let alone admit to others. So they don't exactly stand on their dignity, but they preserve their dignity by seeking to do good to others and resisting any good which others might wish to do to them.

Letty had long planned to spend her retirement with the friend with whom she went on holiday every year, Marjorie,

who has a cottage in the country. Then, quite unexpectedly, shockingly, Marjorie became engaged to the local vicar. Letty has to make other arrangements for her imminent retirement. Letty wonders whether Marjorie will enjoy being a vicar's wife

> "Oh, I shall enjoy it. To be able to *help* somebody, don't you think that's the main purpose to life, what everybody ..." Marjorie hesitated and Letty realised that she did not like to go further, to emphasise the contrast between her own enviable position, that of being a helpmate to a man, and Letty's state of useless retirement. "I sometimes think I ought to get another job" Letty said, "part-time perhaps". "Oh, don't be in too much of a hurry to do that", said Marjorie quickly, unwilling to give up the luxury of having a friend less useful than herself.

This psychological defence mechanism is not confined to the quartet. A social worker called Janice tries, with great difficulty, to visit Marcia Ivory. But Marcia had terminal cancer and died. After the funeral a neighbour whispers to Janice:

> "I'm glad I was able to come, neighbours and all that – and to give you moral support." Janice was not sure that she liked the way Priscilla put it, as if she needed moral support, but probably she had just meant for the service at the crematorium which wasn't an everyday thing. For there was no question of Janice needing moral support in any other way.

It's not just the quartet, or the social worker, it's all of us who have needs which we are hesitant to acknowledge, which we often seek to cover up in different ways. I remember once as a young curate going out after lunch to do some parish visiting, which one always did in those days, and as I walked down the hill I thought to myself "What am I doing? Am I going out to find someone more miserable than myself to comfort?"

Letty, who all her life has been at other people's beck and call, who has been subservient, marginalized, now has the dignity of a choice which affects other people

The quartet of Norman, Edwin, Marcia and Letty eke out disappointed and disappointing lives. They work together in an office, for work which hardly needs doing. Indeed, when Letty and Marcia retire they are not replaced. They hardly relate to one another and have very little in their lives outside the office. They have no real interest, except Edwin who likes to search out high church services in the area. They are lonely, sad people, yet in the novel they live and are not without dignity. They too are part of God's good creation.

Our first lesson was the famous Chapter One of *Genesis*. God created the world, and everything within it, and God saw that what he had brought into existence was good. Most people go through periods when they feel not just pained by life but resentful about it. Sometimes we want to face the sky and roar in anger or despair, even though we can hardly imagine Norman, Edwin, Marcia or Letty being so emotionally bold as to do that. But when we do, in W. H. Auden's words –

> The sky can only reiterate
> its singular command
> "Bless what there is for being"

Towards the end of *Quartet in Autumn* there is a change in the fortune of two of the characters. Unexpectedly, Marcia leaves Norman her house. It is he, not anyone else, who has the freedom to decide what to do with it. The vicar who was going to marry Letty's friend Marjorie suddenly decides to marry someone else instead. Marjorie is now on her own and takes it for granted that the original plan for Letty and her to retire together will gladly be reinstated. But Letty is now quite settled in her new north London digs, watching television every night with her landlady, Mrs Pope. She is not quite so sure as she once was that country life will suit her.

> "But I thought you loved the country" said Edwin, dismay in his tone, for surely all middle-aged or elderly women loved, ought to love the country? "I don't think I love it exactly" said Letty, thinking of the dead birds and mangled rabbits and the cruel-tongued village people, "It was just that it seemed a suitable arrangement when we made it. Now I feel that I have a choice." She took a long draught of the sweet sherry and experienced a most agreeable sensation, almost a feeling of power. She felt as Norman had felt when he discovered he could influence the lives of other people by deciding whether to live in Marcia's house or not. Letty now realised that both Marjorie and Mrs Pope would be waiting to know what she had decided to do.

Letty, who all her life has been at other people's beck and call, who has been subservient, marginalised, now has the dignity of a choice which affects other people. We welcome it for her. One of the world's little ones has come into their own. The future is more open than it once seemed. Marjorie tries to entice Letty to retire to the country with her:

> "Those two friends of yours, the men you worked with in that office, Edwin and Norman", Marjorie had said, lingering over the names, "Wouldn't it be rather nice to invite them down for a day?" Any new interests that might take Marjorie's mind off her disappointment was to be encouraged, Letty felt, though it was difficult to think of Edwin and Norman as objects of romantic speculation, and two less country-loving people could hardly be imagined But at least it made one realise that life still held infinite possibilities for change.

On that sentence, the novel ends: "Life still held infinite possibilities for change". From a Christian point of view those possibilities for change are indeed infinite, for made as we are in the image of God, we are on this earth in order to grow into his likeness, by sharing in his love. There is no life that is so disappointed and disappointing that there is not that possibility before it.

This is a communion in which we respect and give to one another true freedom of choice, trying to avoid all subservience, or relationships which demean others or make them feel small or powerless

In the first letter of John, we read these words:

> We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have communion with us — and our communion is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ.

In that sentence the Greek word *koinonia* is repeated twice. It refers to the fellowship or communion Christians have with one another and into which they invite new believers. At the same time this is a communion which we have with God. So the Church is not a group of people who happen to be interested in religion, it's not a club of like-minded people. It is composed of very different people, with very different interests. But in and through Christ it is a communion — a communion which shares in the life of the Godhead which has been shared with us in Jesus. In this communion each one of us has our own proper place, with our own proper dignity as a human being made in the image of God.

Barbara Pym worshipped regularly in this church. When she walked up the steps to receive Holy Communion at the

altar rail she was in communion not just with God but with her fellow parishioners, Christian people throughout space and time and those who rejoice with us upon another shore and in a greater life. And it is good to think of Hilary and Barbara in that communion now.

In and through this communion we seek to do good to others, yes. But it is also a communion in which we can be vulnerable to one another, in which we can admit our needs and receive from one another. There need be no barriers. If we are lonely, we can say we are lonely. If we are depressed, we can acknowledge we are down in the dumps. If we feel our lives are disappointed and disappointing, within the communion of Christ we can acknowledge our dependence upon one another. For God didn't just come to do us good, he made himself vulnerable to us, put himself in our hands, first as a babe, utterly dependent on his mother Mary, and then on the friendship and support of his intimate friends.

Just down the road, in the church at North Leigh, there is a triptych by Nicholas Mynheer. In the centre there is the risen Christ. On one side Mary cradles the infant Christ in her arms. On the other side Mary cradles the body of the dead Christ, in the scene traditionally known as the *pietà*. God shares his life with us to the extent of making himself dependent on us. In the communion of the body of Christ there is a mutual inter-dependence, a mutual giving and receiving that draws on the depths of the giving and receiving within the life of the Godhead.

This is a communion in which we respect and give to one another true freedom of choice, trying to avoid all subservience, or relationships which demean others or make them feel small or powerless. And because this is a communion in which we can be vulnerable to one another, in which we acknowledge and respect one another's dignity, it is a communion in which there are infinite possibilities for change, above all that change which Paul described as from glory to glory, as we are transfigured into the likeness of God himself. To whom, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be all glory now and forever, *Amen*.

The Finstock Festival, 4-10 July 2004

In 1974 the Oxfordshire village of Finstock held a festival in which Hilary and Barbara played an active part. Thirty years later a second festival was envisaged, at Hilary's instigation, and she made a significant contribution to its planning. Unhappily, she did not live to see it.

Among the many and varied activities reflecting the life of the village, there was a session on the Wednesday evening entitled *Finstock Writers Past and Present*.

In the first half of the programme, Hilary's friend Ruth Nissim introduced nine residents who displayed, and talked about, their literary work.

Mary Castell, a sheep breeder, writes articles regularly for the magazine *Country Smallholding*. Pamela McDowell read passages from her memoir *Epaminondas*, recalling her wartime service in the Land Army. Jane Ann Wise read four of her delightful, short poems. Next, Frank Schofield talked about his record of the recent war, *The Falkland Watcher*, from which Michael Collard read extracts. Then Rosemary Wise, illustrator for the Oxford Botanical Gardens, discussed her attractive book *Fragile Eden*, a profusely illustrated account of the flora of the Seychelles, the result of sixteen visits there.

David Campbell, an American clinical psychologist now at the Tavistock Clinic, told us of his work solving problems encountered in team work, followed by Peter Bramley, an organizational psychologist, formerly in the army, who advised an oil company in Sarawak on its new management structure. Godfrey Hodgson, the well known journalist, who was Washington Correspondent for the *Sunday Times* during the Kennedy assassination, talked about his book and television series, *The People's Century*. Finally, Barbara Penson read two of her poems, one written just after Barbara Pym's death.

No novelists, but a formidable array of writers talented in other fields!

The second part of the evening, introduced by Michael Collard, was devoted to writers of the past – T.S. Eliot, Gilbert Phelps and Barbara Pym. Eliot was not a resident of Finstock, but on entering the Anglican Church he was baptised in Finstock Church. Michael read excerpts from Peter Ackroyd's biography of Eliot.

Gilbert Phelps, who died in 1993, author of *A Short Guide to the Novel*, was a literary historian, novelist, critic, poet, and broadcaster. He engaged in the life of the village and was a church warden. Gilbert and his wife Kay were friends of Barbara and Hilary. Michael read from *Fellow Writers in a Village*.

After a short discussion of Pym's work, Barbara Penson read selections from *A Few Green Leaves*, the novel whose background was clearly influenced by Barbara's knowledge of Oxfordshire villages. She read, beautifully, the pieces where the party visited the Manor House, the preparation for the festival (most apt!), and the meeting of the Local History Society.

At last came the highlight (for Pym fans, at least) of the evening – a performance of *The Magic Diamond: a Musical Play in Two Acts*. As Hazel Holt recorded in *A Lot to Ask*, Barbara wrote this in 1922, when she was only nine years old, probably influenced by the fact that her parents were active members of the Oswestry Operatic Society. It was performed at home, the 'Morda Lodge Operatic Society' consisting of Barbara, Hilary and their four Selway cousins. This performance was "interfered with and concluded by Simon Butteriss in 2004", and set to music by John Owen Edwards, who has lived in Finstock since 1993, and is at present conducting *Die Fledermaus* for Opera Holland Park. From 1992-2003 he was Music Director for D'Oyly Carte Opera, and before that he was involved in many West End musicals.

The cast of seven were all professional singers, most of whom had performed with large opera companies, and were currently at Opera Holland Park with John. No need to say that their singing and acting was superb. So great was the applause that the finale was repeated . A video recordist was present. I managed to talk to Mr Edwards, telling him that I represented the Barbara Pym Society, and he very kindly gave me a copy of the score, which I shall of course deposit in the small archive of the BPS. I said that I hoped we could have a copy of the videotape, and I am waiting to be told that it has yet been processed.

A truly wonderful evening, one that I almost missed because of dreadfully stormy weather. I am so glad I made the effort to brave the elements. I wouldn't have missed it for worlds!

Yvonne Cocking

What do Pym's educated women do?

Orna Raz

Focuses on the different choices of the educated women in the novels of Barbara Pym, the types of work they do, and their class-specific social activities, also taking into consideration the issue of falling in love and getting married, as, in Pym's view, an option rather than an end in itself.

Between 1949 and 1960 Barbara Pym wrote five novels dealing with women's life in post-war Britain. The main characters of *Excellent Women* (*EW*), *Jane and Prudence* (*J&P*), *Less Than Angels* (*LTA*), *A Glass of Blessings* (*GB*) and *No Fond Return of Love* (*NFRL*) are all educated women. Some have a secondary education and are the product of boarding schools; others are university graduates or students working towards a degree. The term "educated women" will here refer both to women who have a formal higher education and to those who have had a privileged middle-class upbringing. Pym examines the relevance of education to the women's lives and presents a realistic picture of the possibilities and the opportunities available to them in England in the 1950s. Pym's educated women are defined not only by their education but also by their occupations.

As to what the educated women in Pym's novels actually do – they engage in the same professions as many of the British female population of the time. Yet their leisure activities are different: the fact that Pym's heroines have the time to pursue hobbies and interests, to read, do voluntary work, and take vacations reflects the life-style of a specific social class. At a time when Britain is reconstructing its economy after a long war and building a new society, Pym's heroines are not involved in these activities and have plenty of time on their hands. The modern sense of commotion is foreign to these women, whose rhythm belongs to the old world and whose leisure reflects their unique position as members of the middle class.

Although the position of women in society and in the family gradually changed in the course of the 20th century, in most families in the 1950s the man was the chief bread-winner while the woman was the homemaker. A large percentage of working educated women at that time were engaged in teaching. However, in Pym's novels this profession is under-represented. In the five novels, only two young women are teachers. One of them is Mildred Lathbury's school friend Dora Caldicote (*EW*), who mentions another friend; Dora views school teaching as a major disappointment:

> "Evelyn Brandon is still teaching Classics at St Mark's Felixstowe" Dora read in a satisfied tone. "And she was so brilliant. All those prizes she won at Girton – everyone thought she would go far." (*EW* Chapter 12)

Since Evelyn's early promises were not fulfilled, she became a teacher. Teaching is regarded as a sad compromise and not as a chosen vocation. In a conversation between Mildred and Dora's brother William, Dora's obscure conflicts with other members of the staff are summarized as "unpleasantness" (*EW* Chap. 8). Dora herself gives an account of the endless arguments that play a major role in her life, and Mildred comments on the uselessness of these disputes:

> I wondered that she should waste so much energy fighting over a little matter like wearing hats in chapel, but then I told myself that, after all, life was like that for most of us – the small unpleasantness rather than the great tragedies; the little useless longings rather than the great renunciations and dramatic love affairs of history or fiction (*EW* Chap. 11).

Teaching, like other professions, compels a woman to engage in petty issues, often despite herself. For example, the office-mates of Prudence Bates are involved in endless trivial discussions about tea, coffee and breaks. (J&P Chap. 4). For Pym, triviality is the inevitable side-effect of any work situation or group activity, not only of teaching.

Another career choice available for educated women at the time was office work. In 1951, over a fifth of the women held clerical jobs, constituting 65% of the clerical personnel (Myrdal and Klein 56). This profession was then regarded as a sensible career choice for the young generation, and the trend is reflected in Pym's novels. Dulcie's niece, Laurel, comes to London after graduating from high school to take a secretarial course (NFRL). A conversation between Dulcie, Laurel, and Marian from the secretaries' course highlights the contrast between the young and the older generations:

> "Marian has a lovely flatlet in Quince Square", said Laurel a little nervously, "I think I told you about it, didn't I?"
>
> "Yes, with a cooker concealed in a cupboard," said Dulcie. "In a house full of young or old women? I suppose career women would be the right description."
>
> "That's rather an old fashioned way of putting it, isn't it?" suggested Marian. "One takes it for granted nowadays that women have careers." (Chap. 12)

Marian is part of a new order where every woman may be expected to have a career, a world to which Dulcie, only ten years her senior, does not belong. Their conversation reflects social developments: in the 1950s only about 30% of British women had full- or part-time jobs (Hubback 1957: 46); the statistics would change in the next decade. Among Pym's heroines only Prudence Bates has a full-time job. Catherine Oliphant (LTA), Dulcie Mainwaring and Viola Dace (*NFRL*) work part-time, and it is unclear whether the money they earn is sufficient for their living expenses. Often single women who work part-time or voluntarily have independent means.

Unpaid jobs, charity and church work are class-specific activities. Working-class women do not have the time or leisure to work for free; middle-class educated women have both. Mildred is employed part-time at the Society for the Care of Aged Gentlewomen (*EW* Chap. 12). Her portrayal of her charges provides an accurate description of where she situates herself: "They are gentlepeople, of course, but more like us, daughters of clergymen or professional people, who may have been comfortably off but never really wealthy" (*EW* Chap. 8). Mildred's choice to work without pay is viewed by Dora as only slightly better than teaching. While reading the school magazine, she comments:

> 'M. Lathbury is still working part-time at the Society for the Care of Aged

Gentlewomen'...'That doesn't sound much better than Evelyn Brandon' (Chap. 12).

Charity work is also done by other educated women in the novels: Sybil Forsyth and Mary Beamish work in the Settlement (*GB* Chap. 1), where their work helping the poor is viewed as the duty of the privileged.

Work without pay is a serious commitment, constituting part of the woman's identity. In these novels the church plays a central role in the life of the characters. Working for the church and the parish provides occupational opportunities for educated women. Mildred and Mary help with different church activities, volunteering for the jumble sales and church decoration. The women who take an active part in the life of the church do not regard it as a leisure activity. Rather, it is a duty that they willingly undertake as part of their commitments to the congregation.

The educated women of 1950s Britain are the first generation of middle-class women who do not have full-time domestic help. Women who graduated from the university in the 1930s had servants; consequently it was easier for them to combine career and family than it was for women who graduated later in the century. There are practically no servants in the novels of Barbara Pym; only the older Sybil Forsyth has full-time help. Mildred's part-time domestic help, Mrs Morris, Dulcie's Mrs Lord, and Jane's Mrs Glaze are not old-fashioned servants but busy working-class women who have sharp tongues and make astute observations, enlightening the educated women about earthly matters.

Single educated women do some work around the house, but they have abundant free time to pursue their own interests. They enjoy reading books and newspapers: Mildred reads the biography of Cardinal Newman (*EW* Chap.16); Jane and Prudence read novels and poetry (*J&P* Chaps. 1, 4); Catherine loves poetry and reads serious literature such as Marcel Proust and her favorite English poets, Hardy and Matthew Arnold (*LTA* Chaps. 9, 13). Wilmet reads *The Church Times* and the parish magazine (*GB*: Chap. 1).

The choice of reading is seen as a commentary on characters and their views and interests. Thus Mildred's reading of the life of Cardinal Newman reflects the then current interest in Anglo-Catholicism; Jane's preoccupation with Donne, Marvell and the more obscure 17th-century poets testifies to her intellectual and spiritual needs. Prudence's choice of the Victorian religious poet Coventry Patmore is intriguing: it may hint at her discontent with her position as an independent woman in a modern society and her romantic longing for simpler times. Catherine's combination of the later Victorian poets with Marcel Proust, an icon of modern French literature and philosophy, hints at the complexity of her character. In addition, this choice places Catherine in a group of privileged intellectuals with a traditional humanistic education who regard themselves as sophisticated and cosmopolitan and are fascinated with foreign culture.

The newspapers and magazines that the women read likewise reveal their positions and tendencies. Wilmet reads *The Church Times*, a conservative, religious weekly, whereas Primrose probably reads the *Manchester Guardian*, a secular, left-wing daily paper (*LTA* Chap. 18). The women's magazines that Rowena and Wilmet read at the hairdresser's (*GB* Chap. 13) are signs of the abundant availability of mass culture products in England in the 1950s.

Pym's educated women know that society outside their circumscribed world is undergoing significant changes.

The free time available to Pym's educated women allows them the leisure to develop different interests and hobbies. Jane's research into obscure 17th-century poets is regarded as a hobby, as it is neither commissioned nor integrated into any course of studies (*J&P*), and Sybil has been interested in archaeology ever since she was young. Pym treats hobbies and areas of amateur interest with the same seriousness as professional pursuits. In fact, it seems that Pym prefers amateurs, such as Jane and Sybil, to professionals, such as Helena and Primrose. Jane and Sybil are both gentlewomen with a well-rounded education that includes special fields of interest, and they are passionate about these fields, yet as amateur scholars, in contrast to professional researchers whose scope (in Pym's novels) tends to be narrow, they can pursue additional goals. Sybil, for example, does voluntary work, runs a house, develops friendships and takes a language course. Hazel Holt, Pym's fellow worker on the *Africa* journal and her biographer, terms this serious yet relaxed pursuit of knowledge "accomplished amateurism" (1990: 143). Pym's attitude towards accomplished amateurism is positive. In her novels she promotes the old-fashioned pursuit of scholarship and knowledge while being suspicious of new specialized professionalism.

Educated women have other recreational activities such as collecting wine lists (*LTA*) and taking adult education classes (*GB*). However, accomplished amateurism peaks in Dulcie and Viola's research into the life of Aylwin Forbes. Dulcie and Viola conduct their exploration in their free time, as an amateur enterprise. Dulcie and Viola actually work as researchers, so they are able to employ professional tools of observation, notation, and deduction in order to conduct their independent investigation. Like Helena Napier, the academic anthropologist who researches kinship in African tribes, Dulcie and Viola's first independent project involves kinship: they delve into the life and relationships of Aylwin Forbes and his clan. Yet while Helena's findings remain abstract and irrelevant (*EW* Chap. 10), the results of a real-life investigation are useful. In this project Dulcie is the self-appointed leader; she initiates the plan, suggests strategies, and calls the shots. She selects Aylwin Forbes as the topic of her investigation during a conference (*NFRL* Chap. 1), and begins the project by collecting data on her own. At first she works on the scheme only sporadically, while looking for information for her paid commissions, and tries making it an integral part of her regular life. At the beginning, Dulcie even doubts whether her natural talent of observation is useful:

> "What is the use of noticing such details?" Dulcie asked herself. "It isn't as if I were a novelist or a private detective" (Chap. 7).

However, she gradually becomes a motivated investigator, and the research takes over her life. Viola's moving into Dulcie's house (Chap. 7) expedites the venture: once Viola is by her side, Dulcie becomes more daring and inventive. From this point on the investigation becomes *NFRL*'s exclusive concern.

Pym seems to be more sympathetic to such an investigation than to the tracking of kinships among African tribes. If a professional anthropologist takes a scientific interest in the life and relationships of the African people, an amateur anthropologist may have a valid interest in the life of other people without necessarily turning into the proverbial busybody. When asked about her interests, Dulcie answers:

> "I love finding out about people. I suppose it's a sort of compensation for the dreariness of everyday life" (Chap. 1).

Dulcie does not claim just that her own life is dreary, but that knowing exciting details about other people enriches life in general. She also comes to think that "it was much safer and more comfortable to live in the lives of other people" (Chap. 12). Being immersed in somebody else's life can serve as a short-term escape.

Dulcie does not succeed in keeping a scientific detachment regarding the object of her investigation. Her findings lead her to intervene in Aylwin's life.

> 'It's time you made a sensible marriage,' said Dulcie boldly. 'You should choose quite a different kind of wife – somebody who can appreciate your work and help you with it – an older woman perhaps.' (Chap. 22)

Dulcie does not regard herself as a candidate, and her conclusions are academic, almost disinterested, yet the ultimate result of the investigation's being an offer of marriage is no accident. It seems that research must have a meaningful purpose, even if it is a delayed one. In this case, amateur anthropology eventually brings together two lonely people; the observations and the data collected support the appropriateness of the match, which is as inevitable as the union of Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park* (Chap. 25).

Although the women in her novels are almost constantly in love, Pym presents marriage only as an additional option available for educated women. Love does not necessarily lead to marriage: "Marriage is not presented as a goal to be sought in Pym's novels" (Kennard 1993: 49). However, Pym and her characters seem aware that in 1950s England most women aspire to marriage. Mildred notes: "It was the ring on the left hand that people at the Old Girls' Reunion looked for" (*EW* 112).

In the conclusion to the comprehensive survey *Exploring English Character* (1955), Geoffrey Gorer states that what English men most value in their wives is "the possession of appropriate feminine skills" (125). In these skills he includes, in order of importance: good housekeeping (29%), personal qualities (26%), understanding (23%), love (22%), faithfulness (21%), and being a good cook 21% (125-26). The quality that Dulcie's character highlights, defined by Gorer as "shar[ing] husband's interest," appears only in 14th place (8). Gorer's findings reflect the priorities of men in English society at that time and might explain why so many educated women in Pym's books remain single. Gorer's findings also demonstrate that what women value most is understanding (33%), thoughtfulness (28%), sense of humor (24%), moral qualities (24%), and faithfulness (21%). While these qualities would be important to educated women as well, additional traits that would be appreciated by them are secondary for the rest of the women population. The ability to treat the wife "as a person" appears in 14th place (11%), intelligence in 16th (8%), and shared interests are altogether missing in this list (126). These, however, are the qualities that are of major importance for Pym's women protagonists.

Most of Pym's educated women are content with their lives: they are used to being on their own, value their independence, and do not welcome changes. They do not intend to conform to the ideal of a perfect housewife or to acquire skills in work that used to be done by domestic help. It seems that the more educated a woman is, the less is her need to compromise. For example, Mildred does not consider marrying the outwardly suitable yet pedantic William Caldicote, and Prudence would not marry the dull Geoffrey Manifold. Love enriches their existence, so Pym's women are continually seeking love, yet it is a bonus rather than a necessity. Love is seen as separate from the institution of marriage. The latter can prove to be unsatisfactory: Mrs Williton, reflecting on the failure of her daughter Marjorie's marriage to Aylwin Forbes, wonders

> "... why anybody married anybody. It only brought trouble to themselves and their relations" (*NFRL* Chap. 14)

Courtship and being in love are far more interesting to Pym than weddings. Prudence's relationships with men (*J&P*), and Deirdre's love affair with Tom (*LTA*) are described at great length, whereas most marriages are either briefly reported, as in the case of Sybil and Arthur (*GB*) and Viola Dace and Bill Sedge (*NFRL*), or take place off-stage, as in the case of Mildred and Everard (*EW*), Deirdre and Digby (*LTA*), Mary Beamish and Marius Ransome (*GB*), and Dulcie and Aylwin (*NFRL*). Pym's unromantic, "no-nonsense" approach to marriage is indirectly commented on by Aylwin's reaction to Dulcie's suggestion that he should find a suitable wife: "That doesn't sound very attractive, if I may say so." Dulcie agrees with him: "No, probably not" (Chap. 22).

Educated women of the kind presented in the novels of Barbara Pym constitute a small minority in British society as a whole. Their overall activities do not reflect the activities and concerns of the greater English female population of the time. They are single and have independent means, and, accordingly, they enjoy a greater degree of freedom than other women who have family obligations or need to make a living. They do not work hard and have no real responsibilities; they are accountable to no one, and have sufficient leisure to pursue their interests. They are not part of the materialistic pursuits of the time; they have no great needs, do not accumulate property, and have no desire to take advantage of new, modern amenities.

Pym's educated women know that society outside their circumscribed world is undergoing significant changes. As the French anthropologist Jean-Pierre observes, "[t]here has been quite a social revolution in England. . . . The dynamics of culture change" (*LTA* Chap. 7). Pym's heroines attempt to deflect this "social revolution" and keep their world intact; but they are aware that this world is gradually disappearing. Pym's portrayal of educated women suggests that they are resigned to that "culture change", yet suspect that women like themselves may not find their place in the new society.

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Reviews

Women Writing Modern Fiction: A Passion for Ideas by Janice Rossen. Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003. x, 193 pp. 22 cm. Index. £45.00 ISBN 0-333-61420-8 hbk.

Alone! Alone! Lives of Some Outsider Women by Rosemary Dinnage. New York Review Books Collections, 2004. xvi, 296 pp. 21 cm. Index. £16.99. ISBN 15907-0695 hbk.

Rossen, author of *The World of Barbara Pym* (St Martin's Press, 1987) here traces the effect, on her chosen group of 20th-century women writers, of several factors: their predecessors of the previous century, literary modernism, feminism, women's admission to university, the experience of two world wars and 'the unfolding discipline of psychology'. She claims that they are 'rewriting the Victorian novel in stylish modern dress', illustrating her ideas chiefly from the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, A. S. Byatt, Olivia Manning, Iris Murdoch and Dorothy Sayers.

The authors are categorized in three parts: first, 'Darkness in the mind', covering 'The world gone mad in wartime', 'Gothic and fabulist tales' and 'Grieving and madness'; then 'Passion', divided into 'Romance' and 'Betrayal'; and 'Wit and reason', which comprises 'Academic and detective novels' and 'The higher common sense.'

Three of Barbara Pym's novels are featured in the book: *Excellent Women* in the section on romance; *Jane and Prudence* illustrating betrayal, as 'the less sympathetic woman [Jessie Morrow] triumphs over her competitor [poor Prudence]'; and *No Fond Return of Love*, giving an example of an ironical ending dependent on the resonance of Austen's endings.

All authors and novels cited, *and* the concepts of the text, are traceable through the excellent index (by Janey Fisher). In recognition of Pym's own practice of the profession of indexing, and believing that the content and quality of a text may well be judged by its index, (if a good one), I will illustrate this book's detailed and complex analysis of topics by quoting some of the index headings:

academic background
  of authors
  of fictional characters
  see also academic fiction; academic life; universities
fictional characters
  as archetypes
  comic
  emotions of *see* passion
  femmes fatales
  as husbands; *see also* Pringle, Guy
  idealized
  thought processes
  see also individual characters
irony (use of)
  inherent
  ironic detachment
  in novel-endings
  in plots
  see also satire
passion
  and humor
  romantic *see under* romance
  sexual *see* sexual passion
  within marriage

I feel sure that Pym would have approved the book and its index.

*

The second book reviewed here, *Alone! Alone!* has a similar scope and structure, considering the lives of some thirty women 'who, especially acutely, felt alone'. They are divided into Sections headed: Solitaries (for example, Gwen John); Partners and Muses (Clementine Churchill); Seers (Madame Blavatsky); Exotics (Marie Stopes); Reinventors (Rebecca West); and Trapped (Katherine Mansfield).

Barbara Pym is allotted eight pages as the third 'Solitary', headed 'Vicarage Passions'. Dinnage weighs Pym's written words of 1966, 'My own story judiciously edited from these notebooks would be subtler and more amusing', against the extracts from her diaries and letters published in A Very Private Eye, concluding:

> We have to glimpse the life sometimes across gaps and between lines.

She outlines the sad succession of Pym's unrequited love affairs, and finds her overlapping Stevie Smith, seven years younger, in 'something peculiarly English: the stiff upper lip, pain borne with a nod to the ridiculous'. Dinnage decides at last, 'Perhaps [Pym's story] was amusing because, at the least, she never ceased to be an entertainer; and subtle, because she was a subtle person'; and as her final conclusion to the theme of the book, writes:

> ... it is best, if aloneness is to be borne, to have an inner world as orderly as that of an old-fashioned doll's house: everything in its proper place and everyone pleased and contented ... a safe and solid world somewhere ... Loneliness might be said to be lack of human nourishment in the ordinary world; aloneness the lack of even the safe, inner doll's house with its tiny population.

This book's index is competently compiled, but is of names only except for three entries (*match-girls' strike, prostitutes* and *witches*); thus useful only, not pleasure-giving as the one quoted above.

Hazel K. Bell

Publications noted

Pan Macmillan have reissued three Pym novels as 'Pan Classics for a new generation': *An Unsuitable Attachment, Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died.* They cost £7.99 each: the first includes a six-page foreword by Philip Larkin. These are the synopses that appear on Amazon for the last two books:

> *Quartet in Autumn* is the story of four people in late middle-age who work in the same office and who all suffer from loneliness. Poignantly and with humour, Pym takes us through their small lives and the façades they erect to defend themselves against the outside world.

> Between the amorous antique dealer Humphrey and his good-looking nephew James glides the magnificent Leonora, delicate as porcelain, cool as ice. Can she keep James in her thrall? Or will he be taken from her by a lover, like Phoebe - or Ned, the wicked American?

Obituary

HILDA KEES 1943 - 2004

Friends at this year's St Hilda's Mystery and Crime Writers' meeting, as well as the Barbara Pym Society weekend, were shocked and saddened to hear of the death of Hilda Kees, a founder member of both gatherings. Born in a small village in Flemish Belgium during the war, Hilda lived in the beautiful city of Antwerp which offered her many of the cultural experiences she loved. Latterly her work in Brussels involved research into working conditions in primary health care. It brought her into contact with like-minded colleagues who enjoyed her distinctive personality and skills as well as her company. A fluent reader in French, German and English as well as her native Flemish, Hilda discovered that the growing movement of literary societies in England devoted to individual writers suited her taste for reading and discussing her favourite authors. Sitting with her meant enjoying a flow of lively and often witty comments on authors and speakers which indicated her wide reading of both Pym and the detective genre that few could match, and her outgoing disposition enabled her to chat with everyone she met.

Hilda was diagnosed with cancer this May and bravely endured draconian surgery and treatments until her death, supported by some of her many close friends and relatives, three months later. At her funeral in her native village of Hamont a large gathering of relations, colleagues and friends included two who had often joined her at St Hilda's, Annie Vermeirsch and Marianne Grispen. Hilda's great love of England and most particularly of Oxford were mentioned during the service.

It has been suggested that anyone who wishes might make a donation to a cancer research charity of their own choice in appreciation of the life of Hilda Kees.

Deirdre Bryan-Brown

Pym gleanings

In books

** In *Dumping Billy* by Olivia Goldsmith (Time Warner, 2004), we find this dialogue between a couple breaking up:

> "Who else do you have to talk about every detail of your emotional seismograph and Barbara Pym too?"
>
> Kate smiled. ... Barbara Pym, a British author they both reread frequently, was one of her secret addictions. Kate found her novels soothing because almost nothing happened in them; no one's feelings were hurt, and very little changed. A big event was a visit from the vicar, and most chapters ended with someone having a hot, milky drink.

** The crime novel *The Dogfather* (published by Berkley Prime Crime NY, 2004 in paperback) by Susan Conant, in chapter 7, observes:

"The books weren't the volumes of poetry I'd have expected, but they weren't a surprise either: novels by Mameve Medwed, Stephen McCauley, and Elinor Lipman, all of whom are, I think, literary descendants of Jane Austen by way of Barbara Pym, and somehow deeply Cambridge ..."

In the press

** In *The Oldie*, 25 August 2004, appeared 'An Odd Source of Comfort', by Harriet Sergeant (a review of *The Assassin's Cloak: an anthology of the world's greatest diarists*, ed. Irene & Alan Taylor. Canongate, 2000) quoted in *Slightly Foxed*, No. 2, Summer 2004.

> ...Here is humanity at its most rich and compelling. So I revel in the small pleasures of Barbara Pym as she buys a peach-coloured vest in Marks & Spencer in 1934 and 'trollies to match with insertions of lace. Disgraceful I know but I can't help choosing my underwear with a view to being seen.'

This was followed, in *The Oldie*, September 2004, by "Lingering over a girl's trollies" by Diarmaid O Muirithe (in the regular feature 'Words') :

> "The Lancashire word for knickers, trolleys, sent a charm of female *Oldie* readers scurrying to their escritoires, and I am grateful to [two readers] for telling me about Barbara Pym's trolleys. This idiosyncratic author (1913-1980), a Shropshire lass, recorded in her diary on 8th January 1934: 'at Marks & Spencer's I bought a peach-coloured vest and trollies to match...[continued as above]'."

** Caryn James, reviewing the translations of two French novels by Jean Echenoz, *Piano* (The New Press) and *Chopin's Move* (Dalkay Archive Press), in *The New York Times Book Review*, April 25, 2004, writes:

> His new novel, *Piano*, is an ambitious departure, while *Chopin's Move* was first published in 1989. Appearing together, they may give Echenoz, in his mid-50s, the kind of break-through usually associated with older British ladies like Barbara Pym or Penelope Fitzgerald: a writer is discovered and readers can indulge in a long, satisfying backlist.

** Alexander McCall Smith, interviewed in Toronto's *Globe and Mail* (22 May 2003) describes the detective heroine of his fiction series about the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency as:

> ... somebody who would fit nicely into a bucolic Barbara Pym novel in which ostensibly nothing happens – except as the reader knows full well, everything has changed in a most satisfactory way by the novel's end.

– While in *The Scotsman* of 12 June 2004 McCall Smith writes in his regular column, "44 Scotland Street", "a daily novel", of the reflections of his heroine, first upon the herb, basil:

> There were some who lived entirely without basil; some who had never heard of it; she smiled at the thought, absurd, like a line from the pen of Barbara Pym.

– then she thinks, standing on her front steps:

> These steps, although irregular, were still beautiful. And why were they beautiful? Because they had character. Steps with soul. Barbara Pym again. She would have to be careful.

** From a Personal Advertisement in the *London Review of Books,* 8 July 2004:

> Heaven knows, I'm miserable now. Emotional wreck, club-footed, anxious M, living a half-life in a garret in London, seeks solace in the brawny arms of a charming man, 30-40. I'm afraid I loathe opera, but love Morrissey, dodgy Brit sci-fi, Barbara Pym's novels. Lower those expectations at Box no. ...