

“Grey and pointed at both ends”:
The Genesis of *A Few Green Leaves* and Its Public Reception

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A Few Green Leaves was Barbara’s last novel, the first draft of which she completed early in 1979, recording in her diary: “This afternoon I finished my novel in its first very imperfect draft. May I be spared to retype and revise it, loading every rift with ore!”

Although the book was written over quite a short period (1977-79) after the publication of *Quartet in Autumn*, the germ of an idea of a ‘village’ novel was sown much earlier. After the great disappointment of the rejection of *An Unusual Attachment* in 1963 and the years that followed, Barbara was dispirited, and wrote “What can my notebooks contain except the usual bits and pieces that can never now be worked into fiction”. However, she was not entirely unnerved, and her notebooks do actually reveal that she was working hard on several ideas for a new novel. As she intimated, these notebooks demonstrate little continuity – evidently Barbara jotted down ideas as they came to her, without reference to earlier entries which sometimes contradict the later.

In her notebook covering 1963-8, Barbara envisaged several situations which might be used in her next novel, including a big house, a town woman who has retired to the country; an interregnum at the church – the old vicar had been a gentleman who rode to hounds, the new vicar has his mother with him; or the new vicar has a boyfriend with whom some people had seen him on holiday; hostility of the villagers to newcomers.

Barbara next considers characters: a young woman writer; her ‘lover’; her friend from London who comes down for weekends; the vicar of course, his mother/housekeeper/boyfriend; an elderly woman, her present husband; her former husband. Then more situations: the people at the big house; the people going over the house; a cottage on the estate of the big house; people going to the pub.

And it is in this notebook that *fox’s droppings* are first mentioned! Where Barbara found the phrase I have not ascertained, but clearly she was determined to use it at some time.

Barbara asked Robert Liddell’s advice on the plot. He suggested the following:

A man (or woman) going into the country to edit the literary remains of a son (or daughter) killed in the war. This plot has been rather often used, but it could certainly provide a pretext for coming into the country and it could then turn out that the woman discovers something about living people nearer at hand, eg the vicar who is a kind of relation to the people at the great house.

Barbara did of course use the theme of editing literary remains in *The Sweet Dove Died*.

Her next idea was this:

A man of early middle age, as yet unmarried, buys a house with a woman friend. He has another woman friend, but the two women have never met. [Perhaps he is an anthropologist and lunches with his old friend Rupert Stonebird at the R[oyal]C[ommonwealth]S[ociety]. He has lent furniture to both women. One woman ... lives in the country and has to make a special journey up to town to pay a secret visit to

the house – or rather to look at it from the outside. In the end the man marries a much younger girl.

And then this: “The man has been to Lisbon looking at manuscripts, and the woman has been working at the Embassy. They had walked in the Estufa Fria [where, as you will remember, Leonora and an admirer had once done]. They might know Piers Longridge.” You will also remember that Piers grew up in Portugal, and taught the language in London. It is interesting to note how Barbara keeps coming back to her earlier characters

Next she considers a few names for her characters – this is a little exercise she obviously enjoys, as it is something she always does this when planning her novels: Cecily, Abigail, Julian, Elinor, Rosamund, Dorothea, Leonora, Rose, Marian, Pansy.

After this Barbara starts on a more structured synopsis, drawing on her previous notes:

There is this man, an antique dealer, whom the country woman, Eleanor, has got to know because his mother (who knows about foxes’ droppings) lives in the same village and they have become quite close. He had a flat in town which the town woman Rosamund, packed up for him and put the furniture in storage. But he let Eleanor have some things for her cottage and she went up to the furniture depository in London to choose them, not knowing about the other woman until the man at the furniture repository casually mentions her. Then he [the so-far unnamed antique dealer] comes back from abroad and buys a house.... But in the meantime, he has met a young girl, perhaps through his old friend Rupert Stonebird and Rupert’s wife Penelope. He has been getting antiques for Rupert’s house in NW London.

She has married off Rupert to Penelope even before *An Unsuitable Attachment* was published!

The furniture depository episode was partly based on fact; Bob Smith had lent furniture to Barbara without her knowing that he had also lent some to another woman. But in the true life case there was no suggestion of rivalry.

As I’m sure you will have noticed by now, these notes begin to sound like a preparation for *The Sweet Dove Died*, the original version of which was a hybrid between its final version and an early version of *A Few Green Leaves*.

In my paper on *The Sweet Dove Died* at Oxford two years ago I wrote about two drafts of a novel which Barbara called *Spring* – an unusually succinct title for her! This was another attempt at a village novel. Chapter One begins startlingly with Violet Couchman saying ‘No, Lionel, a fox’s droppings are grey and pointed at both ends.’

Lionel is her first husband, with whom, together with her second husband Hilary Couchman, she is visiting Phoebe, a newcomer to their village. Lionel lives in a hut at the bottom of the Couchmans’ garden, where he is more or less independent, though hot dinners are sent down from the house. Hilary, the second husband, wouldn’t mind him living in, but Lionel says “It might cause a scandal in the village – few of these good people are familiar with what one might call polyandry.” He prefers his garden shed, as he is a sociological researcher who ‘likes to keep all his data with him.’

When these visitors left, Phoebe “flopped down in an armchair. Her first experience of village social life had been exhausting...” Phoebe and her friend Rose Culver are among the main characters in this story, which is about as far as *Spring* goes. I am rather sorry that the ménage a trois never reappeared!

Elements of both *The Sweet Dove Died* and *A Few Green Leaves* are contained in these and further drafts, with additions to the cast of characters: an alcoholic ‘resting’ actor, a vicar previously involved in a sex scandal, a cleaning lady and her electrician son who is over-familiar with his lady customers, and an ex-Anglican priest turned married RC layman and novelist! So all human life was there! Humphrey, Leonora, James and Ned, however, only had small parts.

The final working, at this stage, was all very bland, I thought, a rambling plot, set both in town and in the country, with far too many sub-plots and characters, and no real focus. Eventually, with advice from Philip Larkin, Leonora, Humphrey, James and Ned took centre stage, Phoebe and a much reduced Rose were moved across, and *The Sweet Dove Died* was born in 1968. Barbara spent much time in the ensuing years trying to find a publisher for this novel, but at the same time she was writing notes about characters she would later use in *Quartet in Autumn*. Rejection never put her off trying again. The ‘village’ novel was put aside.

After Barbara’s rehabilitation, and the publication of *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, she turned her thoughts again to her ‘country’ novel. She had some new ideas now, gleaned from her actual experience of village people, for she had been living permanently in Finstock since 1974. “When I wrote *Some Tame Gazelle*”, she says, “I didn’t know nearly so much about village life as I do now.”

One event which was based on fact is that apparently on Palm Sunday the local people were allowed to go in to Wychwood Forest to collect wood. In the book the date is changed to Low Sunday, the Week after Easter. Barbara mentions in her diaries in two consecutive years going into the forest on the feast day, but according to the Forest’s website, Leafield villagers are now allowed to enter the forest every Tuesday to collect wood, but “only as much as one man can carry”. The great house may be loosely based on Cornford Park, Charlbury, a Royal hunting lodge in the 17th century, now an estate owned by a peer but much updated, offering office accommodation, rental properties, and hire of the house and gardens for private events, including a music festival.

Another is the coffee morning scene. In her diary Barbara reports going to a “Coffee morning in Minster Lovell in aid of the Women’s Institute. One man present. The woman who won the bottle of wine in the raffle of course said she never drank it but that she had nothing against those who did like it”.

A third is the umbrella swapping incident, based on this diary entry: “We went to [the BBC studio in] Bristol where I did a talk for Pamela Howe to be broadcast in *Woman’s Hour*. And in the end I got her umbrella and she got mine, not discovered until we were miles apart! This could well provide a ridiculous episode for a novel – Emma meeting Claudia and they got each other’s umbrella. How annoyed Claudia would be getting Emma’s inferior umbrella”.

Barbara’s heroine was at first to be “a young woman recovering from an illness, who had been lent a cottage in the grounds of the great house. She is a writer of historical novels, called Etty, Effie, Emily, or Emma. Had her mother (an English literature academic, possibly a contemporary of Jane Cleveland) named her after Jane Austen’s heroine?” But later Barbara says “My heroine, Emma, - her name suggests not only Jane Austen’s Emma, but Thomas Hardy’s first wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford.” She continues:

Emma had turned to the writing of historical novels because it was a way of getting published. She had made the novels more ‘romantic’ than her natural inclination.

Note that Barbara made her heroine do what she herself could not do – change her style to please the public. Later Barbara thought “Emma had better be an anthropologist living in the village.” She probably felt on safer ground with an anthropologist.

She used to live with a man in London? What was the man? Somebody who has been in Africa perhaps, now settled in a provincial university? Occasional appearance on TV as African ‘expert’. Perhaps the mother had this cottage.

Now the notes begin to sound like the outline of *A Few Green Leaves*. As Barbara said, “A microcosm of a village with very little plot”, and she continued to make notes on characters and situations:

Dr. William Gellibrand (Brother of Father G) [Originally Fr Gellibrand was to be an important character, but he simply got a mention in the novel as Harry Gellibrand, the doctor’s younger brother]. Dr. Martin Shrubsole and wife Gillian or Gabrielle, who have come from Islington [she became Avice, of course, a name never before suggested]

Clergyman Rev. Tim or Ben Dagnell or Doggett, a widower with remote children [he became Tom Dagnell, a childless widower]

His sister Chloe/Kate [renamed Daphne]

Emma Howick or Howard

Her mother Mrs Beatrix (not Trixy) Howick

...the doctor’s surgery is crowded but the vicar’s study is empty. And there could be a sort of rivalry between them when it comes to dealing with life’s difficulties – the vicar cannot write a prescription. In the village there is an elderly woman, weather-beaten by the suns of many years, whose thoughts are always on past Greek holidays – and now perhaps pre-occupied only with hedgehogs.

She [i.e. the heroine] comes to the village and this former lover appears and is rather troublesome. The Vicar’s sister leaves him, so perhaps they [i.e. Emma and the Vicar] could get together? He had better be quite attractive then?

They find an elderly woman wandering in the woods and here the rivalry between vicar and doctor comes out [whose help does she need most?]

Further jottings:

The Good Food Guide man; Daphne Dagnall leaving the Rectory; Emma’s debacle with the old lover; Tom discovers Emma in the church getting material for her novel - their first real encounter. Miss Lickerish can die. Mrs Dyer’s son, ‘antique dealer’, clearing houses for ‘deceased’s effects’, leaving his card at the door.

“I must have an organist in my next, being paid in bottles of sherry left at his door”, wrote Barbara”. And later “Paul Binding and a friend came to dinner, and they drank some of the apricot brandy left over from two years ago. Which leaves me to think”, says Barbara, “that the organist in my new novel might be presented with a bottle of apricot brandy”.

The book was finally assembled early in 1979. Between these notes and the final draft¹, I only found one partial draft² of *A Few Green Leaves*, typed on the back of old International African Institute carbon copies, much of it rather faint, which only goes up to the finding of Miss Scudamore (Miss Vereker) in the woods. Presumably other intermediate drafts were destroyed. By this time Barbara was very ill, and progress with the retyping took a long time. On 1st May 1979 she wrote: “Typing the new novel slowly – have only done 63 pages.

Hazel Holt wrote in *A Lot To Ask*: “Barbara sent the manuscript of *A Few Green Leaves* to Macmillan, not really satisfied with it, but knowing that she could now do no more. When I saw her just before Christmas she asked in her usual practical way, if I would see it through the press for her.”

After the success of *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, Macmillan were eager to publish this new novel, and on 16th July 1981 James Wright sent a telegram to Hilary: “The tree is in full leaf”.

If, as is likely, *The Times* was the first newspaper Hilary read on the day after *A Few Green Leaves* was published, she would have been rather disappointed, on Barbara’s behalf, with Elaine Feinstein’s review.

‘Sexual intercourse began in 1963
(which was rather too late for me)
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles’ first LP.’

Alas that the *Annus Mirabilis* Larkin records so ruefully must also have been responsible, at least in part, for the wilderness to which Barbara Pym was relegated for 16 years, and from which, indeed, she only emerged for a brief span of recognition before her death this year. For the passions that spin her plots are smaller, meaner, and in many ways *nastier*, than the jaunty sexuality of that now almost forgotten decade...I confess to coming to Miss Pym’s novels late; and my favourite among them is *The Sweet Dove Died*, where the chaste intimacy between a middle-aged woman and a much younger man is analysed with a subtle awareness of all the jealous possessiveness that can lie even in friendships with no apparent sexual base. *A Few Green Leaves* charts altogether more familiar territory, and is unquestionably damaged by doing so; the English Village over which Barbara Pym directs her snide and beady gaze, has been populated by flower-arranging fanatics, cardiganed ladies dreaming of Greece, and hearty GPs, as far back as Agatha Christie; and Barbara Pym’s peculiarly saddened vision of humanity is overlaid by a lavender-polished patina we never break through for long...

Miss Feinstein admits that there are marvelous moments of comedy, such as “Daphne’s eager announcement ‘Did you know that a fox’s dung is grey and pointed at both ends?’ Of which Miss Pym remarks ‘Nobody did know, and it seemed difficult to follow such a stunning piece of information’ ”.

But this is not sufficient for her to avoid the conclusion that

For the sake of Miss Pym’s posthumous reputation new readers should decidedly start with the early novels.

As is the case with most books, the reviews of *A Few Green Leaves* were mixed, the reviewers taking contradictory stances; many of them were not at all complimentary, and some were disappointed that the book did not come up to the standard of earlier works.

On 31st July Alan Kersey, of *The Cambridge Evening News*, said: “Sadly the late Barbara Pym did not do anything for her reputation with *A Few Green Leaves* – a big let-down after the practically faultless *The Sweet Dove Died*.”

And on 2nd August Allan Massie of *The Scotsman* wrote almost the same thing: “It should be said at once that *A Few Green Leaves* does nothing to support [her] reputation. It is slow and slight, certainly inferior to *The Sweet Dove Died*, its immediate predecessor.”

However, a reviewer in a New Zealand publication took the opposite view: “Her last book further enhances her reputation – devotees of Barbara Pym will not be disappointed in her last novel.”

Rachel Billington in *The Financial Times*, on 2nd August, thought: “Perhaps because there is lassitude at the centre, *A Few Green Leaves* is sadly not such a rich book as earlier works. There is a lack of vitality which in the end cannot be compensated for by any amount of careful analysis.”

And Nicholas Shrimpton, in *The New Statesman*, 15 August “Slightness is all, at least for the Barbara Pym enthusiast, and her final novel has it in abundance.”

Of the United States reviewers, Ann Clark heads her piece in the *Los Angeles Times* on 12th October ‘Posthumous disappointment from Pym’, and ends her review with “Sadly this book is unlikely to enhance the reputation of Barbara Pym.”

And Deborah Ovedoff in *The Bulletin* on 16th November thought that “Despite the author’s affection for her people, they emerge as plastic, flat cutouts, difficult to believe in and really rather dull...”

Michele Slung, in *The Washington Post*, 12th October, sighed: “One could wish that the last Pym had more of the sparkle of the first books”.

And from *Kirkus Reviews*, 15th July: “With neither the smiling, sharp edges of the early work nor the perfectly controlled pathos of *Quartet in Autumn*, this is minor Pym – really just a neutral-toned catchall of her acute angles on loneliness and the ravages of time-marching-on...”

I should perhaps mention here that *A Few Green Leaves* was only the fifth novel to be published in the US at that time.

Now that Barbara had passed away, one of her reviewers was more open in his criticism of her work than he had previously been. Francis King wrote a review headed ‘Fairly Excellent Women’ in *The Spectator* on 19th July which started by saying that while he has always admired Barbara Pym, he disputes some comments that have been made about her.

One reads that she was ‘an important novelist’, that *A Glass of Blessings* and *Excellent Women* were ‘the finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past 75 years’ and that she had ‘the wit and style of a 20th century Jane Austen’. In fact, none of these claims can really be substantiated. As a novelist Barbara Pym has about the same importance as E.H. Young, Elizabeth Taylor or Angela Thirkell – to all of whom she bears resemblances; from Saki or Noel Coward there have been many finer examples of high comedy than hers in the last 75 years; and to say that she had the style and wit of a 20th century Jane Austen is about as accurate as to say that Dodie Smith had the wit and style of a 20th century Congreve. Barbara Pym was a good novelist – which, God knows, is rare; but she was not an outstanding one. The book is beautifully shaped; every character is distinct; and there is not a page that is not irradiated with wit and fun. Here, for some of our more self-important novelists, is an object-lesson in the advantage of knowing one’s limitations and never for a moment attempting to exceed them.”

The comparison with Jane Austen was also refuted by Nina Bawden in the *Daily Telegraph* on 17th July: “I would have admired *A Few Green Leaves* more if Miss Pym’s admirers had not likened her to Jane Austen, a comparison that seemed to me a case of overkill.”

And by Allan Massie in *The Scotsman* on 2nd August: “What is important is the quality of the prose, and in *A Few Green Leaves* it is disastrous: self-conscious, whimsical, coy; anything further removed from the defining precision of Jane Austen it would be hard to imagine.”

Nicholas Shrimpton agreed: “[her] strict social and geographical limitation has at times prompted comparisons with Jane Austen ... [but] where Austen was a Romantic miniaturist, Pym is a 20th century minimalist.”

Eve Auchinloss, *New York Times Book Review*, 01.02.81: “Hearing one more English woman novelist compared to Jane Austen, the reader may feel like reaching for his gun. Barbara Pym often suffered from this light-minded comparison...”

But Nina King, *Newsday*, 8.2.81, reviewing together *A Few Green Leaves* and *Less Than Angels*, says

An English writer of middle class social comedies who names one character after Emma Woodhouse and likens another to the heroine of *Persuasion* invites comparison with Jane Austen. In the case of Barbara Pym, the invitation may be accepted with pleasure. Like Austen, Pym is a meticulous worker in miniature, depicting the everyday concerns of a small group of people ... the two writers share, as well, an implicit sense of limitations, an awareness that most people rarely approach either the transcendental heights or the existential abyss.

The comparison with Agatha Christie was noted also by Nina Bawden:

Although *A Few Green Leaves* is funny, the humour is too often arch or coy instead of deadly, and the way the characters are sketched as types and not developed reminded me more of Agatha Christie. Indeed, as my attention wandered sometimes, it occurred to me that this pleasant rambling tale could have done with a Miss Marple. Murder would have given a sharper focus than lazy Emma’s sociological study.

The comparison with Angela Thirkell made by Francis King was echoed by Allan Massie: “This book suggests where Miss Pym really belonged: with novelists like Angela Thirkell, someone to read while you are eating muffins. Of course, that may be how Mr. Larkin and Lord David liked to read novels.”

Several reviewers commented on the lack of action in the novel. Allan Massie again: “The action is minimal ... but that could be all right. Incident itself is not necessarily important in a novel. What is important is the quality of the prose, and here it is disastrous...”

Auberon Waugh, a novelist in his own right, and a bit of a show-off, - James Wright thought him ‘a very silly man’ - wrote in the *Evening Standard*: “Very little happens in Miss Pym’s village, and those who are not already captivated by her pointless dialogue and aimless plot construction may find this last novel rather heavy going.”

Ann Clark wrote:

There is no reason at all why a novel with so slight a story line should not succeed, and indeed many purists would consider this absence of adventure a positive merit. But such a novel has to depend particularly heavily on characterisation. Here, unfortunately, Pym fails ...”

And Nicholas Shrimpton again: “Plot itself is pared to the bone. What happens in *A Few Green Leaves*? Well, almost nothing...”

Bernard Levin in the *Sunday Times* on 17th July – to whom I shall be returning later – was of a similar opinion:

“... it is not a lack of interesting events that I am complaining about, for another book I reviewed recently suffered from a similar shortage of drama, yet retained its interest throughout. The additional and dismaying shortage in this book is of any interest in the feelings, attitudes and personalities of the characters and the relationships between them.”

The portrayal of Emma also received some criticism. Ann Clark thought she was unconvincing, the Kirkus reviewer called her “a half-sketched heroine”, and Michael Lodico writing in the *Greensboro NC Daily Record* on 17th May 1981 thought

Emma herself is the weakest thing in the novel. The most liberated of Pym’s women, she is also her dullest ... she never really seems to come alive, but remains in the background of the book, rather drab and dim.

Perhaps the most controversial of the reviews was that by Bernard Levin in the *Sunday Times*. Levin was a suave, sophisticated, urban type, and one wonders why he chose, or was chosen, to review a book so far out of his usual orbit; maybe he just wanted to go on one of the ego trips for which he was famed:

The Barbara Pym story is a strange one. Having written in the 1960s half a dozen novels that appear to have caused no stir, she then disappeared from literary view until the late ‘70s, when she published two more, and almost overnight became a kind of cult object, compared to Jane Austen. This book is now posthumously published. It is the first of her novels I have read, and unless it is very untypical of her work, I cannot for the life of me understand what all the fuss was about. *A Few Green Leaves* seems to me thin, dull and very nearly pointless.

He goes on to admit a few good points about the book – freedom from clichés, gentle irony, dry wit – but with this faint praise he seems only to damn the book more. Next he describes the characters, asserting that

The real trouble is that these characters cannot think of anything to do. It is not just a question of plot, though as a matter of fact Miss Pym cannot think of anything for them to do either... Moreover there is a kind of nervous underlining in Miss Pym’s style that has a rapidly anaesthetic effect; she is rarely content to let the dog see the rabbit, but is constantly clutching the beast by the collar and drawing its attention to the prey...

A Few Green Leaves is nowhere actively bad, boring or offensive. Nor, however, is it anywhere near strong enough, vivid enough or demanding enough to make any difference to anybody. For some it may well succeed in portraying the Heart of England; for me, I fear, it did little but reinforce my long-held belief that the best thing we could do with the countryside is to cover it with an even layer of asphalt.”

Preposterous man! Betty Harvey, Henry’s sister, was furious when she wrote to Hilary a few days after the review: “What a brute Bernard Levin is! I was shocked to read his stupid review in *The*

Sunday Times. Why should he choose to review it at length when he has read none of her other books. I suppose he just wanted to show off.”

We have to agree there.

But not all the reviews were so negative. Even most of the critics I have already mentioned had nice things to say too. Nina Bawden, although objecting to the comparison with Jane Austen, was of the opinion that

A posthumous novel by Barbara Pym is obviously to be welcomed. She writes agreeably, in nice clear prose, and even if the people she writes about are fictionally conventional, she observes them with a careful, mannered irony...An easy read and I enjoyed it.

And, despite her reservations, Rachel Billington in *The Financial Times*, 2 Aug, thought that “her sense of humour is as strong as ever and this goes a long way to diverting attention from any inadequacies.”

The Kirkus reviewer admitted that “Readers with the appropriate expectations will find it quietly exact, gently amusing, and (except for that dubious happy ending) genteelly heartbreaking.”

Michele Slung, who thought the book lacked sparkle, makes the interesting point that

Emma Howick is the first of the major Pym female characters to be an intellectual, though some of the secondary ones – notably Helena Napier and Sybil Forsyth – in previous books had careers in anthropology and archaeology. Up to Emma, Pym’s central women have each emphasized their own lack of seriousness ... Somehow Emma is an amalgam of all Pym’s heroines, the place at which they all meet. Not as sleek as Wilmet, she is not as depressing as *Quartet’s* Marcia either. Self-absorbed, but without Leonora’s solipsism...One of Pym’s talents, it seems, is for revealing her characters on two levels – how they see themselves and how they are seen by others ...

Eve Auchinloss: “she surprises comedy and sadness from the most banal and cozy moments without every managing to be dull.”

A small handful of reviewers had nothing but praise for *A Few Green Leaves*. Geoffrey Trease, in the December issue of *British Book News*, thought that “Though this posthumous book is most regrettably her last, its quality can be rated emphatically Pym’s No. 1.”

And the Otago *Daily Times*, Dunedin, NZ, reviewer on 22.04.81 proudly asserted “It may here be remarked that long before Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil told the British reading public that Barbara Pym’s was an undeservedly neglected talent, the staff of the Dunedin Public Library in the late 50s and early 60s recognised and relished each new Pym as it appeared.”

Maureen T. Reddy in the *Minnesota Daily*, 21st October, was enthusiastic:

“She excels at uncovering many levels of unexpected meaning in the quiet lives she writes about and clearly takes great pleasure in what she finds. *A Few Green Leaves* may well be Pym’s finest work...”

Gloria Whelan for the *Detroit Free Press* on 16/11/80

Ever since Cranford there has been a fascination for novels about the goings-on in small English villages ... but none approaches Pym's observations of man's funny and pathetically brave efforts to live up to the ill-founded rumour that he is a social animal.

Barbara's long time admirer, A.N. Wilson, writing in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 18th July, said

In tone and setting, *A Few Green Leaves* goes back to the comic atmosphere of *Some Tame Gazelle*, but the realism is sharper, the underlying poignancy more carefully implied. Reading it, one gets the best of both the early and the late Pym manner; a full and distinctive taste of what her novels are like.

And Paul Bailey, in *The Observer*, 27th July.

Although Barbara Pym completed *A Few Green Leaves* some months before her death earlier this year, the novel shows no signs of having been written against the clock. It is notable, rather, for the quiet confidence of its unhurried narrative, which accommodated a dozen or so sharply differentiated characters in a beguiling manner...Emma, like her creator, is a meticulous chronicler of bring-and-buy sales, church fetes, parish council meetings. For Barbara Pym's art thrives on just such non epoch-making events.

A very perceptive review by Peter Kemp in *The Listener* on 17th July emphasises Pym's near obsession with death and its trappings.

The book is packed with calmly contemplated intimations of mortality. A village graveyard and a family mausoleum figure prominently in the narrative. A widowed vicar, interested in local history, keenly rummages through 17th century edicts about 'burying in woollen', elderly female parishioners cheerily frequent the churchyard, studying gravestones and deciphering epitaphs. There is casual joking about an old-age pensioner who dies during a charabanc sing-song. One of the novel's older ladies is teasingly brought to the point of what seems to be her death, and then reprieved; while the death of another is sprung upon the reader with sudden cold effectiveness: 'the cat left her and sought the warmth of his basket, Miss Lickerish's lap having become strangely chilled'. ... The book's attitude to death is cheerfully down-to-earth. It's response to life is one of slightly melancholy irony. Keeping going on substitutes and second-bests, the majority of its characters have been disappointed but are not dispirited. The ability to find consolations for emotional lack always fascinates Miss Pym ... This is the third excellent novel to appear since Barbara Pym's Indian summer as a novelist began in 1977. Filled with symptoms of change and decay, it also includes heartening instances of end-of-season blooming ... Emma finally turns out to be one of Barbara Pym's late-flowering spinsters: after an old relationship has shown itself incapable of sprouting into much, a new one buds promisingly - as this novel stocked with seasonal imagery ends.

The other category of critical material on which I have drawn in previous papers like this, are congratulatory letters from friends and fans, but of course, since Barbara had died before publication, there are very few of these; I found just three letters from 'fans' who were not aware that Barbara had died, and none referred to the book in question.

If the selection I have made from the many reviews Barbara received for this book from distinguished writers in national newspapers, and lesser luminaries on local papers, are representative of

the general opinion, I have to conclude reluctantly that Barbara's literary life ended with a whimper, rather than a bang. But as Barbara herself admitted, when she was laboriously retyping her novel in 1979, "Some people may be disappointed in this – others will like it."

NOTES

¹ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MSPym 39

² Bodleian Library, Oxford, MSPym 36