‘The Things I See!’
Suburbs and Sagas in *No Fond Return of Love*

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‘Going to the window, he had seen the lady from next door with the fish’s name — Miss Dace — being handed out of a taxi by a gentleman who had kissed her hand in the Continental fashion. ‘The things I see! he said to himself. With a young girl and a boy perhaps it is nothing or of little importance, but with a by-no-means beautiful woman getting on in years, who knows what it might not be!’ Senhor MacBride-Pereira, a retired Brazilian diplomat, is looking out of the window of his flat on the top floor of a house in a suburb of London, and speculating on the nature of what he sees and the motives of those he observes. In a previous Pym novel, *Less Than Angels*, the sisters Mabel Swan and Rhoda Wellcome had also spied on their neighbors from an upstairs window, ‘which commanded an excellent view of the next door back garden.’ As Mabel put it: ‘What was the point of living in a suburb if one couldn’t show a healthy curiosity about one’s neighbours?’ Both *No Fond Return of Love* and *Less Than Angels* were set in the southwest London suburb of Barnes, in the borough of Richmond, where Barbara Pym and her sister Hilary moved in 1949. They lived at 47 Nassau Road, in a self-contained flat on the upper floor of a house owned by a very ‘refined’ lady, like Senhor MacBride-Pereira’s landlady, Mrs Beltane. The river was at the top of the road, there was a congenial church, St. Michael’s and All Angels, nearby, and the number 9 bus provided access to central London.

47 Nassau Road, Barnes

At this point I should say something about the standard British intellectuals’ view of the suburbs. The isolation and perceived dreariness of this environment have often been reviled by novelists, poets, town planners, and song writers alike. There is a long-honored belief among British writers that suburbs in the UK are sloughs, as it were, of self-satisfied middle-class boredom and sameness, and that only through bold and imaginative effort can any semblance of life or interest be brought into them. At the end of the 1930s, one quarter of Britain’s population lived in suburbia. By 1951, one third of the country’s housing was in the suburbs. George Orwell wrote in *Coming Up for Air* of the ‘long, long rows of little semi-detached houses,’ with the ‘stucco front, the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front door,’ with names like ‘The Laurels and Mon Repos.’ Thomas Sharp, town planner and university lecturer, opined: ‘Suburbia is not a utility that can promote any proper measure of human fulfilment,’ and complained of ‘its social sterility, its aesthetic emptiness, its economic wastefulness.’ John Betjeman’s poem Slough, written in 1937, calls upon friendly bombs to wipe out what was then a desolate suburban wasteland, not fit for humans (and it hadn’t improved much by 2001, providing the setting for the BBC television comedy *The Office*). In his autobiography X-Ray, songwriter Ray Davies, lead

singer of The Kinks, contemporaries of the Beatles, who grew up in the north London suburb Muswell Hill, confessed that suburbia had always been a major influence on his writing. He recalled the evening rush hour in the sweaty underground train, with 'office workers going back to suburbs from the city. Back to homes, evening meals, cocoa, families, television.' And, to return to Pym, Dulcie Mainwaring, the heroine *of No Fond Return of Love*, observes a similar scene when she goes to the window at dusk and watches 'men coming home from the City, striding briskly along the road, looking forward to a drink and a meal.'

No Fond Return of Love is pervaded by the atmosphere of the suburbs, as is, to a lesser extent, *Less Than Angels*. Both are replete with negative comments about suburbia. Much is made of the distance from Dulcie's house to central London. When Dulcie's niece Laurel comes to live with her, she is overwhelmed by a wave of depression and disappointment, thinking that it was really not London at all. Dulcie's fellow researcher and indexer Viola Dace feels the same way: 'It had seemed such a very long way in the taxi, as she watched the fare mounting up on the clock and familiar landmarks were left behind. Olympia had seemed the last bulwark of civilization. And then, when they came to the suburban roads, with people doing things in gardens, she had wanted to tap on the glass and tell the driver to turn back.' When Dulcie and Viola run into Aylwin Forbes near his house in Quince Square, Viola announces that 'Miss Mainwaring has to catch a bus,' to which Dulcie rejoins: '"Yes, I live miles away beyond Hammersmith"...making a joke of it, as suburban dwellers sometimes must.' When Dulcie suggests they might ask Aylwin to come in one evening for a drink on his way home, Viola answers scornfully: 'On his way home? But this could hardly be on anybody's way home.' Laurel's friend Marian, who resides in a bedsitter in Quince Square, remarks: 'You're almost in the country here, aren't you. It seemed quite an adventure, coming all that way on the bus.' And Aylwin himself is confounded by the problem of using a bus to get to Dulcie's house.

Deirdre Swan, a young student of anthropology in *Less Than Angels* who lives at home with her mother and aunt, finds the suburban environment stifling. 'The houses seemed to her ugly and their well-kept gardens conventional and uninteresting. The wallflowers and tulips were the same every year and the lilacs and laburnums obviously could not grow in real country gardens.' In the same novel, the redoubtable Esther Clovis 'knew life in the suburbs even if only at secondhand; people were always talking over garden fences and borrowing things from each other,' and for the French student Jean-Pierre le Rossignol, Sunday in the English suburb is a suitable subject for an anthropological study.

An environment generally perceived as arid and sterile is an appropriate setting for Dulcie Mainwaring, who, after enduring 'several months of quiet misery' following her broken engagement to the shallow gallery owner Maurice Clive, finds solace in the lives of others. Living alone in a big house in the suburbs, Dulcie is not only physically isolated, but also misunderstood and unappreciated by those around her. Both Laurel and Viola are simply making use of her. Laurel's impression of her aunt is of someone who 'wore tweedy clothes and sensible shoes and didn't make the most of herself.' She sees the suburbs as hopelessly out-of-touch and dreary and regards Dulcie's house merely as a way-station. 'Laurel had her own idea of living in London — brightly lit streets, Soho restaurants, coffee bars and walks and talks with people of her own age,' and cannot wait to move into a bedsitter in Quince Square, which, as Pym's notebook records, was off Kensington Park Road in Notting Hill, London W11, a slightly seedy area, but sufficiently urban to attract would-be sophisticates Viola and Laurel.

When Viola asks if she might come to stay, Dulcie realizes that she is probably considered the last resort, but she is able to look at the situation with humor, imagining Viola telling people about the 'big house, plenty of room, but in the suburbs...a woman I met at the conference in August — rather dreary but a good-natured soul.'

Dulcie's neighbor Mrs Beltane adopts a patronizing, dismissive attitude to what she calls Dulcie's 'secretarial work.' Miss Lord, Dulcie's touchy domestic help, is baffled by all her reading and laughs derisively at 'all those cards and bits of paper spread out on the floor,' advising her to get a bouffant hair style and wear eye make-up, so that men will notice her. Traveling to the country to spend Christmas with her sister and her family, Dulcie feels she has been 'reduced in status to the spinster aunt, who had had an unfortunate love affair that had somehow 'gone wrong'.' Laurel's elegant, trendy friend Marian treats her like a fragile old lady: 'Dulcie realized that she was an aunt, old, finished, fit only for the Scouts and their little jumble cart.' Her aunt and uncle, though not unkind, are totally self-absorbed, and Neville Forbes sees her simply as a potential parish worker. Only Aylwin seems to appreciate her, although when he catches a fleeting glimpse of her in the tube, her 'fair pleasant face' is only vaguely familiar. Later he begins to think of her as 'that nice Miss Mainwaring,' but it is not until her outburst in Taviscombe that he sees her hidden depths.

The suburban setting also underlines the isolation of Senhor MacBride-Pereira, who is and will always remain an outsider, a stranger in a strange land, who spends most of his time sitting at his window eating sugared almonds and wondering about the things he sees. He notices a lot, but can't manage to figure out what is actually happening. Watching Mrs Beltane watering her plants in the front garden, he glimpses Laurel, 'the young girl beloved by Paul Beltane,' strolling along with a 'middle-aged, good-looking man.' 'The things I see,' he thinks once more. A minor but important character, Senhor MacBride-Pereira pops up now and then like a one-man Greek chorus, commenting on the action. His passive interest in people provides a contrast to Dulcie's active investigations. When he reappears in *The Sweet Dove Died*, having afternoon tea in an elegant teashop in Wigmore Street, he alone notices the little drama involving Leonora and the last marron gâteau. 'Now what have I seen? he asked himself. Something or nothing? A beautiful woman disappointed over a cake, a mere triviality really, and yet who could tell?'

Dulcie's house is described as being 'in a pleasant part of London which, while it was undoubtedly a suburb, was "highly desirable" and, to continue the estate agent's words, "took the overflow from Kensington". "And Harrods *do* deliver", as her next-door neighbour Mrs Beltane so often repeated.' Mrs Beltane, with her blue-rinsed hair, her nasty poodle, and her 'slightly phoney' priest (who serves cocktails after the Sunday service), exemplifies everything artificial about the suburbs. She is seen 'sitting in a flowery dress in a flowery canvas chair from Harrods, watching her hose watering the lawn with its special spray attachment.' Flowers are replaced by flower prints, a wild meadow by a neat lawn, and even England's rainfall by a mechanical watering device.

No Fond Return of Love is pervaded by melancholy — Rachel Cecil (Lord David's wife) notes the 'little gleams of thoughtfulness and even sadness' in it. The book begins with the learned conference held in the gloomy confines of a girls' boarding school, which was based on the Hayes Conference Center in Swanwick, Derbyshire, where Pym had attended a writers' conference in 1957. Peggy Makins, better known as *Woman* magazine's agony aunt Evelyn Home, recalled the lack of air in the big lounge, and the sponge cake at tea that tasted like the sliced mutton at lunch. (A fan of Barbara Pym, Makins once wrote her: 'I still read your novels yearly, or more frequently if I'm ill!').

Against this dreary conference background, Pym introduces the three principal characters, all of them unhappy. Dulcie is making an effort to mend her broken heart by meeting new people, Aylwin is depressed by his failed marriage, and Viola is filled with dismay at being stuck there for a whole weekend and disappointed that her feelings for Aylwin are unrequited. In the gloom of the conference, Aylwin thinks of his mother-in-law's depressing house in suburban Deodar Grove, with Marjorie, his future wife, 'peeping through the net curtains that

her mother had put up at every window.' Net curtains, which stop people from looking in but enable those inside to look out, are a recurring image. In her initial wave of depression, Laurel observes a woman tying up chrysanthemum plants in a garden, and a face peering from behind net curtains. When Dulcie makes her expedition to Deodar Grove on a dull autumn afternoon, she notes the row of houses with windows 'heavily curtained in various kinds of nylon net.' On the same day, Aylwin also goes to Deodar Grove, and experiences 'the stultifying oppression of the suburbs with the darkness coming too quickly, and what light there had been scarcely able to filter its way through the layers of net curtains.' When Aylwin takes the train to the seaside town of Taviscombe he notices that even one of the beach huts has net curtains, indicating that the oppression and isolation of the suburbs may also be a state of mind.

However, as related in David Kynaston's *Austerity Britain*, in spite of the visceral anti-suburbia bias of many progressive thinkers, it was not always as bad as they thought. Writer and broadcaster Godfrey Winn — incidentally, also a Pym fan — found this out when he visited a family in Firgrove, a cul-de-sac off Malden Rd. in northwest London in 1951:

> I was in the very heart of suburbia, and isn't life there considered by some to be the cemetery of all youthful drama, the burying ground of all ambition...? So the modern school of psychiatrists are never tired of telling us, yet I can only truthfully state myself that my first reaction as I examined the two dozen houses neatly laid out in rows, each with its own well-mown patch of front lawn, its flowering lilacs and laburnums, was that I could think of far less pleasant places in which to be buried during one's lifetime.

Less Than Angels also presents a less grim impression of the suburbs. Catherine Oliphant was 'delighted with the tranquil beauty of the Sunday afternoon scene, the tree-lined road, the neat colourful front gardens...Through it all came the pleasant sounds of children, dogs, birds, lawnmowers and hedge clippers. "I suppose this is what you call suburbia," said Tom. "It seems rather pleasant."'

Of all the characters in *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie alone is able to see natural beauty in the suburbs. During the weekend conference she thinks of her big house and garden, and the 'pre-Raphaelite perfection of colour and detail' of the pear tree, and all the fruit to be bottled, thus mixing the high with the low, the fine arts with the useful. Later, learning that Marjorie has gone off with a man she met on the train, Dulcie thinks: 'The evening air was sweet with the scent of wallflowers and laburnums, and it seemed sad to think of Mrs Williton, such a true suburban dweller, sitting alone in her house facing the common.' Mrs Williton's house and the Beltane household are in fact dreary, but Dulcie is conscious of beauty in her own house and garden. Again we see Dulcie's simultaneous delight in reality and her imagination, cognizant of the potential in the real world around her. It is interesting that Laurel and Viola, who are named after plants, feel oppressed by the suburbs, with their lawns, trees and flowers, preferring the city with its cafés, streets, and buses. Dreaming of having her own bedsitter in Quince Square, Laurel tends to exoticize nature as long as it's in the city. She 'saw again the dark trees — some of them really were quinces, Marian had said — and felt the nearness of London through them.'

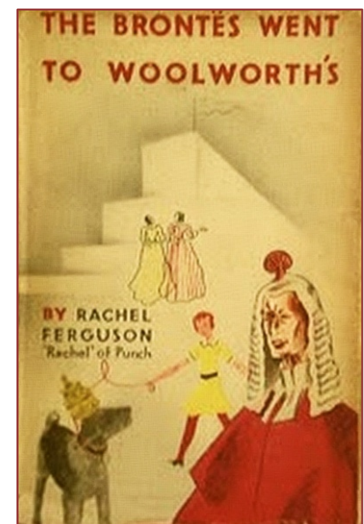
Dulcie's suburb is not identified as Barnes in *No Fond Return of Love*, but we are told that Viola's parents live in Sydenham, in the southeast London borough of Lewisham, and that she had grown up in Herne Hill, also in the southeast, as did the artist whose paintings are exhibited in Maurice's gallery. After her marriage to Bill Sedge, Viola is to live in Neasden, a suburb in northwest London. Neasden has the unfortunate distinction of being tied with Slough as London's most reviled outlier. The satirical magazine *Private Eye*, for example, has for 50 years now retailed the sad history of this depressing suburb's depressing though fictional football club,

Neasden United, which never wins a match and whose only two fans are Sid and Doris Bonkers. Neasden also appeared in the 1973 documentary film *Metro-land*, about suburban life in the area around the Metropolitan Railway. The film was written and narrated by then-Poet Laureate John Betjeman, who described Neasden as 'home of the gnome and the average citizen.' It is quite ironic that this is to be the home of Viola Dace, who had aspired to being an urban intellectual. She turns out indeed to be an 'average citizen.' At first Dulcie thought Viola seemed to be an interesting person, 'in spite of her rather hostile manner.' She certainly looked interesting, with her long dark hair, her black dress and black and silver fringed stole, and Dulcie stared in fascination as she 'savagely' applied coral lipstick. Laurel sums up Viola more realistically, seeing a 'tall, untidy-looking woman in a rather dirty red coat,' and thinks to herself that Miss Dace's life might improve if she 'were to send the coat to the cleaner and get herself a new hair style.' Dulcie eventually realizes that Viola is a disappointment. 'In a sense, Dulcie felt as if she had created her and that she had not come up to expectations, like a character in a book who had failed to come alive. Viola was just a rather dull woman, wanting only to be loved.' By the end of the book, it seems that Dulcie and Viola have changed places. Dulcie, who modestly describes her work as doing humdrum thankless tasks for people more brilliant than herself, has won the love of brilliant, handsome Aylwin Forbes, whereas Viola, who had thought of herself as a budding novelist, settles for marriage to a conventional man and life in a dull suburb.

But can anything be done to make your life interesting if you're forced to spend it in the suburbs? Well, yes. P.G. Wodehouse's Uncle Fred certainly created excitement, if not havoc, when he flitted by Mitching Hill, a 'foul hole' actually based on Croydon, and Noël Coward and David Lean injected romance into that unlikeliest of locations, the Milford Junction railway station and refreshment room, in the film *Brief Encounter*. Likewise, Barbara Pym and her sister Hilary livened up their life in Barnes by observing the goings-on in Nassau Road.

Like Senhor MacBride-Pereira and Mabel and Rhoda, Barbara and Hilary enjoyed watching people from their upstairs sitting room. Some of the neighbors in Nassau Road were rather exotic, like the Thai diplomats next door who were once visited by two Buddhist monks in saffron robes. At one time Paul Raymond, owner of Raymond's Revuebar, a strip club in Soho, lived next door to Barbara and Hilary. But Barbara, like Dulcie Mainwaring, was always more interested in the lives of ordinary people. She and Hilary took a special interest in two young men and a dog who lived a few doors away. They made up names for them — the big burly one was Bear, the short slight one was Squirrel, also known as Little Thing, Little Treasure, or Tresh, and their dog was Tweetie. (Bear and Squirrel reappeared as Bill Coleman in *Excellent Women* and Keith in *A Glass of Blessings*). On Sundays Bear, wearing a cassock, would drive off in a Hillman Husky, the same car as Bill Coleman's. Barbara and Hilary once followed Bear in a car they had hired for their holiday, and were delighted to discover that he was the organist at the church of St Lawrence the Martyr, in Queen's Park. They went into the church and sat at the back, afterwards having tea in the church hall just like Dulcie and Viola when they visited Neville Forbes's church. Barbara and Hilary continued to monitor their neighbors' situation, noting that when another young man, Paul, moved in, Little Thing left, then came back with Tony; then Paul left. The whole thing developed into a wonderful saga — for that is what it was — with timetables of 'sightings,' and various expeditions, including a trip to Minehead in Somerset, to investigate the Carlton Hotel, with which two of the saga subjects had connections. In *No Fond Return of Love* this became the Eagle House Hotel in Taviscombe. Barbara's friends Bob Smith and Hazel Holt also became involved in the saga, waiting with bated breath for the next installment. 'STOP PRESS,' Barbara wrote to Hazel, her colleague and eventual literary executor: 'Hilary saw Tony at lunchtime today going into the staff entrance at Heal's. What about going there for our office lampshades!'

Of course, you don't have to live in the suburbs to indulge in sagas; Barbara had enjoyed them from an early age wherever she happened to be living. In her memoir of Barbara, *A Lot to Ask*, Hazel Holt explains, for those 'who have never invented and maintained' a saga, that the subject 'can be anyone, a famous person alive or dead, an animal, or an ordinary person whom you can observe.' Barbara's mother Irena Pym, the inspiration for imaginative, impractical Jane Cleveland in *Jane and Prudence*, enjoyed observing people, speculating on their eccentricities, and making up stories about them, a habit that Barbara evidently adopted, taking to heart her mother's admonition: 'Find out what you can without asking.' When she went up to Oxford in 1932, Barbara seemed to devote as much time to her investigations of glamorous fellow student Henry Harvey as she did to her study of English literature. She had noticed him at lectures and in the Bodleian Library and was immediately smitten. Months went by before she actually spoke to him, but she found out his name and tracked his comings and goings, diligently recording the sightings of 'Lorenzo' in her diary. On January 18, 1933, she wrote: 'This diary seems to be going to turn into the Saga of Lorenzo.' Later in life, sharing an office at the International African Institute, Barbara and Hazel relieved their boredom by making up mini-sagas around the anthropologists, whom they found to be more interesting than either anthropology or Africa. For one anthropologist they made up a splendid mother, always waiting up with a hot milky drink, for another they invented an elegant social life, and for a third, a Belgian Jesuit linguist, they imagined a web of Vatican intrigue. According to Hazel, Barbara usually got it right. Several years later, on receiving a card from John Beattie, one of the subjects of their sagas, she wrote to Hazel: 'How nice of him to write to me and so typical of the character we have invented for him.' I am grateful to Hazel for clarifying to me the distinction between research, unearthing facts about a person of interest such as Henry Harvey, and elaboration or invention of detail, dreaming up stories about that person or animal (or even a doll — more on this later). A saga can consist of either research or fantasy alone, or a combination of the two.



One of Barbara's favorite authors, Rachel Ferguson, wrote the definitive chronicle of the saga in her novel *The Brontës Went to Woolworth's*, published in 1931. It tells the story of the Carne sisters, Deirdre, Katrine and Sheil. Deirdre, the eldest, a journalist and the novel's narrator, explains:

> All three of us learn everything there is to learn about people we love. We get their papers, and follow their careers, and pick up gossip, and memorise anecdotes, and study paragraphs, and follow their moves about the country, and, as usually happens if you really mean business, often get into personal touch with friends or business associates, all with some fresh item or atom of knowledge to add to the heap.

The Carne sisters, encouraged by their mother, are obsessive about their sagas, creating elaborate back-stories, inventing family members, and making up names. Their subjects include a doll called Ironface, Crellie their dog, a seaside Pierrot,

and Charlotte and Emily Brontë. The sagas are so numerous and so all-consuming that Deirdre sometimes resents them. 'It takes it out of one so,' she complained. And Katrine was once heard to ask: 'Why has one got to do it?'

The Carnes wove their most elaborate saga around a judge called Sir Herbert Toddington, who happened to preside over the court on the day that Mrs. Carne was called for jury duty. As Deirdre wrote: 'Toddington swept in and occupied the Bench. From that moment, I think, he owned, occupied and paid taxes on our imagination.' Toddy, as they called him affectionately, became the subject of a saga that lasted several years. The girls looked him up in *Who's Who*, learned that his wife's name was Mildred, walked past his house and peered in the windows, hunted up photos and frequently went to court to see what he was wearing: 'His outfit keeps us in perennial suspense. Judges have the most amazing trousseau.' Deirdre finally meets Lady Toddington, who, taken aback by how much she seems to know about Sir Herbert, asks: 'My dear girl, how long have you known my husband?' After the initial confusion, the saga develops into a real friendship between the Carnes and the Toddingtons, and Mildred even enters into the world of the saga when she tells the girls that she has seen Charlotte and Emily Brontë in Woolworth's.

Sagas certainly occupied a large part of Barbara's life too. Hazel recalls that one Sunday when she and her husband were going to take Barbara and Hilary out for the day to Cambridge, they were held up for quite a while because Barbara wanted to see if Bear was wearing his special cassock when he left for church. The extensive saga about Bear and Squirrel also ended in friendship when Barbara and Hilary moved to Queens Park in 1961. They became parishioners at St. Lawrence's Church, where they met Bear and his new companion, Paul. At first they had to be careful not to reveal details of the saga. Barbara would sometimes say: 'Are we supposed to know that?' or 'Is it true or did we make it up?'

In her autobiography, Rachel Ferguson wrote that the 'saga is one of the most dependably amusing games in life.' It provided the theme for *No Fond Return of Love*, whose heroine, Dulcie Mainwaring, explains that her interest in Aylwin Forbes and his family is a kind of game. 'It seemed so much safer and more comfortable to live in the lives of other people — to observe their joys and sorrows with detachment as if one were watching a film or a play.' Like Barbara Pym herself, Dulcie has a lively imagination and keen powers of observation. However, Dulcie's observations are an end in themselves, whereas Pym not only delighted in the whims of others, but wrote them down in her notebooks and used them in her novels. At one point, when Dulcie observes a woman 'with a dog on a lead,' who was dressed in 'a grey tweed coat and transparent pink nylon gloves, and carried two books from the public library in a contraption of rubber straps,' she asks herself: 'What is the use of noticing such details? It isn't as if I were a novelist or a private detective.' The only person who is aware of Dulcie's research into the lives of others is Viola, and she does not share in the excitement. She accompanies Dulcie to Taviscombe because she thinks the sea air might be good for her health, not because of any fascination with the Forbes family.

As infatuated by Aylwin Forbes as Barbara was by Henry Harvey, Dulcie determines to learn as much as possible about him and his family. There is little emphasis on Dulcie's unhappiness, but it should not be taken lightly, since it explains in part her predilection for sagas, which for her are not so much a game as a refuge. Dulcie is by no means the only inquisitive heroine in a Pym novel, but she is the only one who actively investigates. Searching for information in the Public Record Office or the public library is a treat for her: 'For this was the kind of research Dulcie enjoyed most of all, investigation — some might have said prying — into the lives of other people, the kind of work that involved poring over reference books, and street and telephone directories.' Dulcie investigates Aylwin Forbes just as avidly as Barbara and Hilary watched Bear and Squirrel,

and the Carne sisters concocted their saga about Toddy. One wonders how ingeniously Dulcie would have used today's social networking tools like Facebook.

Dulcie starts by looking up Aylwin in the telephone directory and *Who's Who*. She consults *Crockford's Clerical Directory* for information on his clergyman brother Neville, and plans a visit to his church. She finds the address of Aylwin's mother-in-law, Mrs Williton, in the telephone directory. Going to Deodar Grove to take a look at Mrs Williton's house, she has the good luck to find a jumble sale in progress, enters the house and meets not only Mrs Williton and her daughter Marjorie, Aylwin's wife, but also Rhoda Wellcome *from Less Than Angels.* She buys a raffle ticket (the prize is a hand-embroidered duchesse set) and gives a false name, 'surprised at her own fluency in deceit.' On her way out, she 'lingered for a moment, hoping to see something 'interesting'...It was greedy of her to expect any more when she had already received so much.' For a devotee of the saga, this was a very good day! When Dulcie continues her investigations by attending evensong at Father Forbes's church, the housekeeper informs them that he has gone to visit his mother: '"She has a hotel in Taviscombe, you know." "A hotel? In Taviscombe?" Dulcie tried to keep the excitement out of her voice. "No, I didn't know that."' The brochure for the Gothic-style Eagle House Hotel inspires even more rapture: 'Oh, do you think Lord Berners ever stayed there?' she wonders. Dulcie's research culminates in an expedition to Taviscombe, where her efforts are rewarded — she not only meets Aylwin's strange mother and his brother Neville, but finds his father's gravestone and even overhears Aylwin's conversation with Marjorie and her mother about his plans for a divorce. When Dulcie returns to Neville Forbes's church after coming back from Taviscombe, she experiences the same confusion that Barbara felt when she finally met Bear, and Deirdre's confusion on meeting Lady Toddington: 'You never told me you knew Father Forbes,' Neville's housekeeper says accusingly. ''I didn't know him then,' said Dulcie...hardly able to remember whether she did or not.' She had previously tried to explain to Viola her initial reluctance to book rooms at the Eagle House Hotel: 'One goes on with one's research, avidly and without shame. Then suddenly a curious feeling of delicacy comes over one. One sees one's subjects — or perhaps victims is a better word — as being somehow degraded by one's probings.' Similarly, Deirdre felt shame and confusion when she actually met Lady Toddington: 'I felt at once at an everlasting disadvantage and as though I was taking her friendship under false pretences. A sort of Judas at the keyhole.'

When the book was published, Barbara wrote to Bob Smith: 'You are one of the few who know how truly B. Pym it is — but really Dulcie had an easy time of it compared with us searching for Bear's church, didn't she?' Smith replied: 'It's not, I think, your easiest book, but somehow the most purely Barbara Pym, her art at its quintessence.' Certainly, Dulcie is a lot like her creator, as Hazel Holt pointed out in an article she wrote for *The Indexer*, the Journal of the Society of Indexers, in 1987. Barbara enjoyed indexing, she wrote, 'in particular the peaceful, enclosed space an indexer inhabits...it is no coincidence that Mildred and Dulcie (especially the latter) are the heroines who are most like their creator.' The difference, of course, is that unlike Pym, who enjoyed sagas with family and friends, Dulcie's sagas are a solitary pursuit. It is significant that *No Fond Return of Love* is the novel in which Barbara Pym herself makes an appearance, walking into the dining room of the Anchorage, the hotel with the 'bright Christian atmosphere':

> It was at this point that somebody came to the unoccupied table, but as she was a woman of about forty, ordinary-looking and unaccompanied, nobody took much notice of her. As it happened, she was a novelist; indeed, some of the occupants of the tables had read and enjoyed her books, but it would never have occurred to them to connect her name, even had they ascertained it from the hotel register, with that of the author they admired.

Like Dulcie, Barbara quietly but penetratingly observed those around her, while Viola, who pretended to be writing a novel, was too self-absorbed to notice other people.

Barbara Pym gave a talk in Barnes in the 1950s on 'The Novelist's Use of Every-Day Life,' in which she said that 'reading novels is like looking through a window.' Conversely, looking through windows or otherwise observing other people provides interesting images which may turn into sagas, or even novels. Dulcie peers through the dining-room window of a big hotel in Taviscombe, presumably based on the Hotel Metropole in Minehead, where 'a middle-aged couple, looking like people in an advertisement — she in pearls and a silver fox cape over a black dress, he in a dark suit — sat at a table in the window. A waiter bent over them — 'deferentially', Dulcie supposed, helping them to some fish — turbot, surely? Its white flesh was exposed before them. How near to the heart of things it seemed!' Dulcie is able to create a small drama out of an everyday situation. In the same way, Senhor MacBride-Pereira, from his solitary vantage-point, watches his fellow suburban dwellers go to and fro and speculates on what it all means.

At the end of the book, Dulcie's Aylwin saga promises to become reality, when Aylwin realizes that it is she, not Laurel, whom he loves; there is the prospect of a marriage which may or may not be happy. Dulcie may see him as a beautiful, if slightly blunted Greek marble, and a 'rare person,' but her fellow indexer Miss Randall sums him up rather more accurately as 'a rather good-looking man who had made a mess of his marriage.' Aylwin takes a taxi because 'he had still not worked out how to get to Dulcie's suburb by public transport.' This mundane detail makes Aylwin look a little silly, as does his hurriedly thought-out analogy with Edmund Bertram, who, at the end of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, falls out of love with Mary Crawford and transfers his affection to Fanny Price.

And so we see that three similar but different types of saga played their roles in Barbara Pym's life and literary work: those she invented from her own experiences, which enhanced her enjoyment of life and provided raw material for her novels; the sagas described in Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworth's*, which created a complicated fantasy life for the Carne family, and which may have helped inspire Pym's use of the saga in *No Fond Return of Love*; and finally the sagas devised by Barbara Pym's own characters, as much a refuge for Dulcie as a game for Senhor MacBride-Pereira. The open ending of *No Fond Return of Love* is typical of Barbara Pym. The novel ends with a promise of something new, Dulcie's possible marriage to Aylwin Forbes, but nothing is clear-cut, not even the question of whether they'll settle in the suburbs or London proper. And as always Senhor MacBride-Pereira is left in the dark: '...watching in his window, [he] had heard the taxi, but was not quick enough to see who got out. He took a mauve sugared almond out of a bag, and sucked it thoughtfully, wondering what, if anything, he had missed.'

Sandra Goldstein, *a native of Solihull, in the West Midlands of England and a graduate of Bedford College for Women, University of London, where she studied German and Russian, came late to the works of Barbara Pym, but has since made up for it and has succeeded in passing on her enthusiasm to her twin daughters, though sadly not to her husband (yet). She treasures her memory of a visit to Hilary Pym Walton in Finstock and her opportunity, with Yvonne Cocking's gracious assistance, to read Barbara Pym's notebooks in the Bodleian. Recently retired from a position in the US Government, Sandra enjoys having more time for reading and travel. She lived in Notting Hill, probably quite near Quince Square, in the early 1960s, but was never invited in for drinks by Aylwin Forbes.*