After creating so many delightful excellent women, why did Barbara Pym create the anti-excellent Leonora Eyre? Is Leonora redeemed, or even redeemable by the end of The Sweet Dove Died? On whom did Pym base the character of James, and what are some of the hidden codes that give us a clue to the characters’ true intentions?

More than a hundred Pymmites came to the Barbara Pym Society’s 20th annual North American Conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, braving the weather that was cold even for March. A recent storm that swept the Northeast brought brisk winds and left snow piled up along streets and sidewalks. Still, the turnout was good, with participants coming all the way from the UK, Israel, Paris, Ontario, and across the United States. The event was held again this year at the distinguished Austin Hall at Harvard Law School, where the auditorium seating was comfortable and the acoustics gave every speaker full voice.

The conference started off with the traditional Friday night soiree at the beautiful Church of the Advent on Beacon Hill, a perfect setting for the reception that had 73 friends new and familiar in attendance. The food, prepared for us once again by Jules Catering, would have satisfied even Leonora’s particular palate for both taste and presentation. Offerings included wild mushroom ravioli, avocado-encrusted salmon, loin of pork, cauliflower cheese with the obligatory green-grape ‘caterpillar’ garnish, a decadent chocolate bread pudding, and, of course, wine. We all sat down to tables bedecked with roses and flickering candles that lent the room a romantic Victorian atmosphere.

After dinner we headed up to the church to hear the three finalists in the Ellen Miller Memorial Short Story Competition read their winning entries against the backdrop of candles, incense, and the church’s Aeolian-Skinner Organ, a masterpiece of beauty and sound. Each story in its own way brought us a fresh look at one or more of Pym’s excellent women, putting them into unique and sometimes overwhelming situations.

First-place winner Carol Novis, who came from Israel to attend the conference, read ‘A Suitable Detachment’, about Sister Dew struggling to understand and possibly consider online dating. First runner-up Eliza Langhans’ ‘More to Love’ was about the Bede sisters pondering their daily lives as Harriet filled out an online dating profile. Second runner-up Betsy Hanson read ‘All of Me’, which transplanted Jessie Morrow and Miss Doggett to the US and forced Jessie to decide just how much of her Miss Doggett was entitled to.

The evening concluded with a singalong of ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ and ‘Jerusalem’ with waving Union Jack.

Saturday was filled with wonderful papers, food, fellowship, and the opportunity to buy Pym-themed paraphernalia. The morning started with a continental breakfast of bagels and coffee in the Austin Hall lobby, giving participants who hadn’t seen each other since last year a chance to catch up before adjourning to the auditorium, which was decorated with large, lavish bouquets of spring flowers.

Dr Kym Brindle, one of four first-time presenters, started the conference with a paper on the letters, impolite and otherwise, in TSDD and Leonora’s obsessive need to surround herself with perfection, both in objects and people. Dr Brindle admitted that Pym had been a ‘guilty secret’ for years because she didn’t know anyone else who’d read her. During the question and answer period, audience members asked whether Pym would use texting instead of letters if she were writing today. Dr Brindle pointed out that in Pym’s day there were rules of decorum to letter writing that reflected a person’s class, so it’s unlikely Pym would have resorted to texting.

Dr Julia Courtney, another first-time presenter, explored the role of Victorian flower books and how each flower held a particular palate for both taste and presentation. Offerings included wild mushroom ravioli, avocado-encrusted salmon, loin of pork, cauliflower cheese with the obligatory green-grape ‘caterpillar’ garnish, a decadent chocolate bread pudding, and, of course, wine. We all sat down to tables bedecked with roses and flickering candles that lent the room a romantic Victorian atmosphere.

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specific meaning. She explained ‘thing theory,’ the relation between people and things that is central to Leonora’s character. One audience member noted that when the novel was written Victoriana was re-emerging in popularity, and Leonora’s love of all things Victorian offers clues to her background, highlighting the way she views not only objects but beautiful people like James.

The conference broke up at 12:30 p.m. and we had the chance to browse and buy Pym-related items for sale, including mugs, dish towels and tote bags, all with Lloyd Miller’s beautiful original graphic design, before heading off to a lunch of sandwiches, chips and cookies at Wasserstein Hall. The walk was short but windy and some intrepid folks found their way through the tunnels that connect Austin to Wasserstein. Some came back to Austin in time to watch ‘Tea with Miss Pym’, a documentary from 1977 that has become a much anticipated staple of the conference.

After lunch, Sadhwi Srinivas, also new to the conference, explored the ways in which goodness and misfortune intersect in Leonora, comparing her with two of Pym’s outstanding excellent women, Mildred Lathbury and Belinda Bede. She posited the question of whether Leonora was, after all, redeemed after being rejected by James and in turn rejecting him. Attendees were undecided on whether heartbreak had left Leonora a more sympathetic character, hardened her, or left her unchanged.

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The Saturday afternoon coffee break was supposed to include brownies, but somehow we wound up with Rice Krispie Treats, definitely not what the conference organizers ordered. Still, it took some of us back to our childhood days and gave everyone something to chuckle about, and there was plenty of coffee.

On Sunday Ruth Pavans de Ceccatty, who came from Paris, France, to present for the first time, talked about the subversive power of love and the love of power. Attendees wanted to know whether Leonora hid her mother’s picture so she wouldn’t have to compete with her, or was she avoiding the fact that she herself had never been a mother, or were her grandparents simply more attractive?

The morning ended with the Mighty Pym Players’ dramatised reading of ‘Life in the Third Person’, and the traditional singing of ‘Unsuitable Things’. After the conference formally adjourned, the good times continued with a lavish brunch at the nearby Sheraton Commander Hotel, and a few diehard attendees met for dinner on Sunday evening after Solemn Evensong and Benediction. We all went away with promises to keep in touch and looking forward to next year’s conference to discuss Crampton Hodnet.

The Dove Before Larkin: MS Pym 27 and Pym’s Original Vision

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Larkin’s recommendation, agreeing that many of the characters should be ‘scrapped’. ‘With fewer characters & slower movement,’ Larkin correctly predicted, ‘it could be a strong, sad book.’ A look at MS Pym 27 (held in the Bodleian’s collection of her papers) gives an understanding of what Pym had set out to accomplish before her drastic narrowing of the novel’s focus, a view that, in retrospect, has applicability for the published novel. The much larger context into which Pym originally placed the attachment between Leonora and James indicates that she intended the relationship to carry not only a significance as regards the two characters, but to have a cultural import as well. To create this broader statement, Pym places the static relationship Leonora seeks with James alongside the lively environment of a country village. Primary among the villagers is Rose Culver. In both Leonora and Rose, Pym explores a detrimental impulse to idealize and so objectify some particular chapter from the past, whether of a cultural or personal narrative. Rose’s narrative, which accommodates change, provides a counter to Leonora’s psychology, which represents in miniature a cultural longing as well – a misplaced wish to retain an image of Britain frozen in a romanticised time.

Via both Rose and Leonora, Pym explores the desire to preserve, as if behind glass, particular times, whether in a culture or in the life of a person. Pym parallels Leonora and Rose in a number of ways, most importantly in their wish to live in an idealised environment. Leonora carefully constructs hers, surrounding herself with Victoriana and plotting to bring James into that space. In moving to a country village Rose has brought with her a sentimental view of that life. But Pym has Rose identify her faulty expectations: ‘Why should [the villagers] be preserved like specimens in a museum just to fit in with a romanticized preconceived picture.’

With Rose’s long-time but now moribund attachment to a married man, Oliver Bathurst, Pym creates an analogy between the timeline of a relationship and of a culture, thus emphasising the change that necessarily occurs in both and must be recognised. Upon entering Oliver’s club, a time capsule frequent by ex-colonials and ‘paneled in various kinds of wood, coming from the countries which had once composed the Empire on which the sun had now set,’ Rose asks herself, ‘was there not a parallel to be drawn between the decline of the British Empire and the deterioration of her relationship with Oliver?’ Pym takes Rose through the process of severing this played-out attachment and setting down fresh roots among her new acquaintances in the village. By refusing to be an unchanging object in Oliver’s life, Rose comes to represent the possibility of change in the form of lively growth.

The intertwinment of Rose with the life of the village occurs gradually and haphazardly. By contrast, in the parallel narrative, Leonora carefully orchestrates her relationship with James in order to forestall change. Markedly distinct from the published version of *Sweet Dove*, in MS Pym 27, Leonora’s masterminding of events meets a degree of success, eased by the American Ned’s love for all things stereotypically British. So while Rose corrects the false sentimental view that she held of the county life, an American interloper’s similar view provides Leonora with the key to maintaining the status quo. At the novel’s conclusion, Leonora imagines that, with Ned happily tucked away in the country cottage, her relationship with James will retain its perfection, determined as she is that ‘she was going to take very good care of him’.

Very much in line with her previous novels, Pym originally sought to take a good-humoured look at the manners of the day. The foibles of Leonora, and those of Rose initially, can be seen as analogous to cultural foibles – the idealisation of the Victorian age and the sentimental view of an unchanging British countryside. By narrowing her original focus and ‘scraping’ many of the characters in MS Pym 27, Pym wrote a very different kind of novel, less social in its interest and much more psychological in its portraiture. We can appreciate the remarkable range Pym possessed as a novelist without knowledge of MS Pym 27, but her range seems all the more remarkable when we measure the difference between these two sweet doves.

**Emily Stockard** earned her PhD from the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and now lives in Fort Lauderdale, where she is Associate Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University, specializing in Renaissance literature, particularly Shakespeare. She has published on both poetry and drama of the period, and her fictional pieces have appeared in literary magazines. She has had the pleasure of presenting papers at two previous Pym Conferences, in Boston in 2015 and more recently at the 2017 AGM.

**Flower Books and Fruitwood Mirrors:**
**Commodifying Nature in Barbara Pym’s The Sweet Dove Died**

As this title and epigraph suggest, a major theme of *The Sweet Dove Died* is the confinement and commodification of natural things, and the sad consequences of the process: Keats’ sweet dove dies of grieving for its lost freedom, its confinement and its transformation from a wild creature to a domestic pet. In this novel flowers, plants, landscapes, and animals, including human ones, are emptied of their unruly natural qualities and subjected to the power of ownership and commerce in a world where artifice and elegance rule. Yet at the same time, Barbara Pym hints that the
emotional forces expended on objects can endow them with magical, talismanic properties. In a key sentence we are told, Leonora ‘had always cared as much for inanimate objects as for people’: I suggest that her doing so blurs the distinctions between the animate and the inanimate. Things are given personalities while people are viewed as things.

The purchase of the ‘dear little’ flower book at the beginning of the novel not only brings the three main characters together, but also establishes Leonora’s passion for the ownership of beautiful objects and opens the way for the imposition of a language of cultural meanings onto cultivated flowers: Leonora’s roses and carnations, Ned’s lilies of the valley, Humphrey’s peonies. Wild flowers are conspicuously absent and Leonora’s ideal scenery is the carefully landscaped Virginia Water. She is not alone in avoiding too much unadulterated nature; for Phoebe the country is oppressively green and James worries that leaves harbour unwanted insects. The buds of Vine Cottage are at a double remove from both Phoebe and James: she does not know how they should look, and he knows only through a literary quotation which he in turn has received only at second hand. The mise en abyme of Phoebe, James and the vine buds is carried further by the various inanimate objects (wallpapers, plates, a shirt, even a lavatory bowl) which bear representations of botanic elements such as trees or flowers, or are made from natural materials including fruitwood. The two fruitwood mirrors are of immense importance in The Sweet Dove Died. With a light hand, Barbara Pym exploits the rich literary resonances of mirrors and reflections; so much significance is invested in James’s mirror that it becomes magical, bestowing on Leonora the timeless beauty she craves, while the second, the substitute provided by Humphrey, cruelly reveals the ageing reality.

Animals are also fetishised and seen as commodities, if sometimes rare and valuable ones. They are reduced to fur or leather products and they are represented on, or as, decorative items, for example Humphrey’s Chinese quails. Like Keats’s dove, they are usually unhappy or dead. Liz’s wailing Siamese, with their jewelled eyes, together with the other cat show felines, are objects to be evaluated by the judge’s gaze, their reactions to captivity highlighting James’s feelings of imprisonment as he too feels like a pet or domestic animal.

Consistently associated with images of passivity and entrapment, James becomes something created by Leonora. But James himself plays with the distinction between living and inanimate things. He thinks that ‘it would be an amusing game to liken one’s friends and acquaintances to antiques’, characterising Phoebe as a cracked little china castle and Leonora as a flawless piece of Meissen. At other moments Leonora is seen less flatteringly as a cold and unfeeling fossil, or ‘some old fragile object that needed careful handling’ with hair made of ‘some brittle unreal substance’.

Barbara Pym’s knowledge of anthropology meant that she would have been familiar with Claude Levi-Strauss’s analysis of the relation between people, animals and things, and his recognition of the role of objects in social exchange. Levi-Strauss also documented myths which link mankind’s loss of immortality with the acquisition of material culture, and in this context, a closing reflection is that Leonora is unusual (although not unique) among Barbara Pym’s heroines in having no religious faith: she hopes only for an elegant death. Perhaps this spiritual dearth is consequent on the commodification of nature which Barbara Pym indicates in The Sweet Dove Died.

Julia Courtney is retired from the Open University where she held a Research Fellowship and tutored in the Post Graduate Literature programme. Her PhD was on the Victorian novelist Charlotte M Yonge. She contributed to the Barbara Pym issue of Women: A Cultural Review. Currently her research interests (besides Pym!) include Ivy Compton-Burnett and E M Delafeld.

‘A Difficult Letter’: Impolite Post in Barbara Pym’s The Sweet Dove Died

by Kym Brindle

As a keen correspondent Pym wrote skilful and amusing letters to a wide circle of friends reflecting the writing culture of the world she lived in. Her letters offer fascinating glimpses of her life, work, and relationships and, on occasion, highlight incidents that Pym thought potentially useful for her fiction. Letters in her novels have a different function from the amusing and playful private letters that she wrote in real life, however. Within fiction, scenes of writing and reading letters tend to illuminate fault lines in mismatched relationships. The actual art of letter writing may also highlight essential incompatibilities between potential lovers, as illustrated in Less Than Angels and Jane and Prudence, for example.

Unsuitable liaisons are emphasised with letter writing in The Sweet Dove Died. This late work features possibly Pym’s most unsympathetic female protagonist as a woman out of time. Devoted to Victorian, an era she identifies with far more closely than with modern times, Leonora Eyre emulates an anachronistic femininity and enjoys the attention of Humphrey Boyce, who supports an illusion of delicate feminine weakness. Leonora strives for perfection in appearance and manner, yet epistolary dynamics reveal a level of impoliteness that is at odds with her carefully constructed masks of social decorum. Her infatuation with Humphrey’s nephew James leads her to engage in some epistolary subterfuge, and we see the modern reality of a woman aware of the ‘sad decay of one’s beauty’ scheming to ensure attention from the youthful object of her affections. Leonora collects James as another of her perfect things; she catches him hovering on the fringes of experience – timid and unsure – a little intimidated by modern young girls and preferring the undemanding company of an elegant older woman. The relationship fulfils mutual needs: Leonora seeks attention and adulation and appreciation of the aesthetic performance of her life, and James enjoys the undemanding attention of Leonora with ‘her dark beauty’ and the civilised niceties of her home.
Fearful of ageing and consoled by the distorted flattering view of herself in James’s fruitwood mirror, we see an alternative reflection as two faces consistently appear in her letter relations. My paper suggests that letters in this novel are exercises in power that expose moral and social hypocrisy as Leonora’s fatal flaw.

Leonora becomes disturbingly predator-like in her bid to keep James at her side, and she turns to letter writing to set her trap. She rationalises dishonesty and selfishness and letters reveal her hypocrisy. She manages to avoid any face-to-face unpleasantness and therefore preserves an unruffled, cool, and ostensibly polite exterior by virtue of epistolary distance. She manages to eliminate Miss Foxe as an unwelcome tenant in her home and also defeats James’s erstwhile girlfriend Phoebe Sharpe – both barriers to her desired goal of securing James in the top flat of her carefully presented home. However, dangerously manipulative Ned, with the ‘glitter of his personality’, proves more problematic as a rival. He and his engineered distancing of James from her life bring Leonora to a point of despair. And yet she uses letters to materialise her attractions when James is abroad with him; she gains an epistolary advantage with charmingly elegant letters that feed James’s desire for respite from the increasingly overpowering Ned. Leonora’s elegant letters further serve to contrast herself and her home with Phoebe, who has becomes something of a nuisance for James, and this is reflected in his studied lack of response to her letters.

The novel closes with Leonora appearing to put fantasies of a lost age behind her: the little Victorian flower book that started the whole ménage à trois is no longer on display when James once again calls. With James watching, Leonora ventures forward with Humphrey, comforted by the suitability of his gift of red peonies, unlike the faded images from the Victorian past. Leonora chooses to accept that real flowers (and by extension perhaps Humphrey) are ultimately more suitable than paper flowers as a relic from times long gone (and by extension perhaps Humphrey) are ultimately more suitable than paper flowers as a relic from times long gone. This is the pragmatic judgment of a shrewd letter writer making a more suitable choice.

Kym Brindle is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature at Edge Hill University in Lancashire, England. She has a PhD from Lancaster University for an Arts Council-funded study of Neo-Victorian fiction, and her book Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014.

The Power of Love: Subversive powerplays in The Sweet Dove Died
by Ruth Pavans de Ceccatty

In Barbara Pym’s The Sweet Dove Died, the plot is largely based on a series of powerplays that grow from implicit to explicit as the story progresses. In the opening scene, the author embeds the embryo of the complex power relations between the three main characters:

‘The sale room is no place for a woman,’ declared Humphrey Boyce, as he and his nephew James sat having lunch with the attractive stranger they had picked up at a Bond Street sale room …

This carefully constructed sentence also sows the first seeds of Leonora’s backstory. The term ‘picked up’ refers to a time before the narrative started: to the Continental public gardens of Leonora’s youth, where pick-ups by the upper echelons of European society apparently occurred regularly, if Leonora is to be believed …

Leonora had had romantic experiences in practically all the famous gardens of Europe … as a schoolgirl before the war, she had been picked up by a White Russian prince.

With high-status males not so readily to be found, the venue has sunken to a tawdry London saleroom. This setting offers Leonora an opportunity to submit to the gaze of men, including old-fashioned Humphrey and naive James, who have come to admire and evaluate objects of beauty. Leonora in effect presents herself as an ‘objet d’art et de vertu’. Delicate, middle-aged Leonora luxuriates in the attentions of two strange men who have literally picked her up as she was swooning, physically assisting her to a more suitable environment to recover from her ‘too overwhelming’ ‘first time’ which Pym relates in suggestively orgasmic terms — crying out, swaying and almost collapsing at her ‘moment of triumph’. In heroically and ‘naturally’ assisting Leonora, the two men have acquired her. Pym skilfully begins with this romantic literary convention of the weak heroine and her two chivalrous heroes, luring the reader in, only to turn it on its head. From the heteronormative beginning of two men vying for a woman, the narrative develops into an increasingly complex free-for-all pitting generations, genders and sexual orientations against each other in various configurations.

The first is the love triangle between Leonora, Humphrey and James. Leonora will try to use soft power to string Humphrey along while turning James into an unnatural blend of faux son, faux lover (in his reality he is neither). It is difficult to think of the various pairings as ‘love’. Each courtship is rather a roiling power struggle in its own way, filled with subterfuge. James is seemingly pliant to the point of submission to all; the little he attains in terms of personal freedom or power is through stealth rather than struggle. With Ned’s help, James will cut Kears’s metaphorical ‘thread’ to Leonora (as in the poem of the dove with its feet tied). Ned is the one character with whom Leonora cannot compete: he has his own forceful agenda.

The theme of love as a treacherous power play is heightened with the supporting characters’ awareness of the ensuing doomed struggle: Liz tries to warn Leonora to back off emotionally, ‘before it’s too late’. Humphrey’s point of view is made clear via his internal monologue: ‘How much more sensible it would be for her to admit defeat and give up’.

Leonora must also struggle with a generic character whose absence only adds to her dominance, the all-powerful Mother, arguably the novel’s most subversive power player. Poor James acts out of the lack of this guiding force. It is because his mother is dead that he succumbs to all sorts of substitute
forces. Leonora may dominate the narrative, but as a magnet, her power to attract is waning; it is in steady decline, whereas the mother is an unchanging ideal.

Finally, there are Leonora’s power relations with minor characters. Like Blanche DuBois, Leonora Eyre, past her prime, seems to be relying increasingly on the kindness of ‘sweet little men’ such as taxi drivers, park gate keepers and the foreman at the furniture depository. When used by Leonora, ‘sweet’, often paired with ‘little’, becomes a reductive category. With this falsely pleasant term she maintains her mental place on a pedestal by lowering other people linguistically. What Leonora really means by sweet is pliant, bending to her will.

Leonora re-categories James himself into the ‘sweet’ category at the story’s close, as a means of self-preservation, to avoid the possibility of emotional pain again. Her last words to James, ‘Goodbye James, it was sweet of you to come’ are also her last words to us. She simultaneously thanks us and warns us off, returning to the cold linguistic solitude of ‘one’ in the novel’s final passage:

Yet, when one came to think of it, the only flowers that were really perfect were those … having been presented to oneself.

The plots are over. Leonora is obliged to come to terms with relinquishing power. As Pym drily puts it, ‘so much for the power of love, or lust’. It is up to the reader to decide if the heroine has arrived at a new-found state of grace in accepting a reduced vision of herself or is simply in cold denial.

For more Pavans on Pym: my Master’s thesis is available online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311455811_Barbara_Pym’s_Excellent_Spinsters_A_study_of_ambivalence

Ruth Pavans de Ceccatty attended the Pym Society’s meeting in London 2016 as part of her research for her Master’s thesis, Barbara Pym’s excellent spinsters: when marginal characters take center stage, subtitled ‘a study of ambivalence.’ She holds a Bachelor’s degree in English from Hunter College, City University of New York, and was awarded a Masters degree in Études Anglophones from La Sorbonne in September 2016. She is currently working as an English teacher in the French national education system at a middle school in Burgundy.

How goodness and misfortune correlate in Barbara Pym’s novels

by Sadhwi Srinivas

The proposal addressed here is that in Barbara Pym’s stories, the extent of moral goodness in a character is closely correlated with the misfortunes or tragedies that they happened to endure in their life. I will try to argue in support of the observation that none of her characters who is perceived as having any ‘depth’ has any pervers, or even so much as obvious, joy in their life. Before we can consider any evidence to verify whether such a claim might be true, i.e., that there is indeed some correlative relationship in Pymmian settings between morality and an experience of misfortune, we must first consider what goodness means in her novels, and what exactly counts as misfortune.

First: what does goodness mean in Barbara Pym’s stories? I think this question is best answered by considering a couple of her characters who I think we can all agree upon as being ‘uncontroversially good’ – namely Belinda Bede (STG), Mildred Lathbury (EW), and Letty Crowe (QA). An attempt at considering what attributes are common to them leaves us with the following desiderata for goodness as per Pym: having acceptance, showing humility, not being above daily trivialities, being a little wronged, being moderate or not given to unchecked impulses.

Now that we have a somewhat concrete characterization of goodness in Pymian characters, we can move on to doing the same with the concept of ‘misfortune’. Given that her stories are themselves quite moderate, misfortune often simply takes the form of a lack of fortune. Unreturned love, not being able to find likeminded company, things not having quite worked out in a conventional way, being misunderstood or pushed aside by other members of the community, being subject to some general unkindnesses – these seem characteristic of ‘misfortune’ in Pym’s novels. We can ask whether this kind of misfortune really does exist in the lives of the representative heroines that we have been considering so far – Belinda, Mildred and Letty, and I will say yes. None of them has what is considered a conventionally full life – they are sometimes objects of pity even though they reject being so. All in all, in spite of having rich inner lives and deep philosophical musings, they do not feel equal to articulating them and are often, or always, in danger of being misunderstood. It seems that it is true that the women in whom we find ‘goodness’ are also those who have had their share of misfortune.

Given this background, the main question this article contends with is this: along the course of TSDD, as the story and the characters in it develop, do we see Leonora’s ‘goodness’ and the amount of misfortune she experiences grow in the same direction? I would say yes. The more Leonora is thwarted in her love for James, the meeker she becomes and the more readily she seems to accept her lot. Leonora is introduced to us as a very well-sorted-out character who lives alone in a nice little house. Her thoughts at the beginning of the book are quite unlike the ones that our excellent women might have. For one, Leonora is not at all diffident. She comes across in fact as having a superiority complex, someone who looks down even on people she calls her ‘friends’. At this point, it doesn’t seem that Leonora has had a lot of misfortune in her life – at least none is revealed to us. She has always had ‘kindness from people’ and ‘was used to receiving compliments gracefully’, suggesting an abundance of compliments in her life. So far, we have Leonora feeling pretty good about herself and behaving quite insensitively to the people around her.

The crux of my claim here is that this changes as the book...
develops. Leonora does grow more sensitive, and this happens as she realizes more and more that she is fallible, not immune to loss. The first time we really glimpse Leonora’s exhaustion is when she feels that James is concealing something from her – that he is seeing Phoebe. But this is fleeting, and the darkness only sets in more lastingly when James returns from his foreign travel with his lover Ned. Ned proves to be a formidable opponent to Leonora, and in the midst of thoughts reflecting grave unhappiness we see the presence of charitability. As Leonora is thwarted in love, is made to feel inferior to Ned, is mocked, is ‘wronged’ – all hallmark Pymian misfortunes – we see the more charitable qualities emerge, primarily those of acceptance and diffidence.

Sadhwi Srinivas is a graduate student pursuing a PhD in linguistics at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD. She is originally from India, and her family still lives there. She moved to the United States in August 2011 as a student. She discovered Barbara Pym three years ago while living and working in Boston, and since then has collected and read almost all her novels.

‘To R’: Barbara Pym and Richard Roberts

Most of the subjects of Barbara Pym’s novels largely reflect her own personal experiences. So how did Barbara get to know anything about the world of antiques, as depicted in The Sweet Dove Died? The answer is through Richard Roberts, the ‘R’ to whom she dedicated the novel.

One of Barbara’s closest friends from the early 1950s was Robert Smith, a civil servant, who, on his posting back to England, was introduced to her by Robert Liddell, who had met him in Egypt during the war. Bob and Barbara had many interests in common and corresponded throughout Barbara’s life. After her death Bob gave his letters from Barbara to the Bodleian. This is the only example in the Archives of sustained two-way communication.

Bob Smith brought Richard Roberts into her life in the summer of 1962, and it is from Bob and Barbara’s letters that we learn much of what we know of Barbara’s relationship with Richard, which flourished from 1962–1965, but continued almost until her death.

Richard Roberts was a descendant of one of the first white settlers in the Bahamas. Over the centuries the Roberts family had prospered, and Richard’s father, George William Kelly Roberts, a businessman, became a Member, and later President, of the Executive Council of the British Colony, and was knighted in 1958. Richard always went back to his home in the winter.

What was Richard’s attraction for Barbara? He was tall, very good-looking, a charming, amusing and friendly person, and had the novelty and mystery of a foreigner while still being very British. For his part he was impressed by the fact that Barbara was a published novelist – he liked successful people. But he was born to affluent and influential parents, and in spite of a good education seemed neither to need nor desire a positive career plan. However, in 1963 Richard opened an antiques shop, L’Atelier, in Sloane Street.

On 24 June 1964 Richard’s father unexpectedly died while he and his mother were in England. Barbara must have written Richard a consoling letter, for he replied with great warmth and affection that must have misled Barbara as to his feelings for her.

They apparently saw a lot of each other that summer. Hilary went to Greece for three months so was not there to warn Barbara against getting too fond of Richard. For her part, despite the difference in their ages – he was 17 years her junior – and the assumption that Richard was homosexual, she recklessly allowed her feelings to override her good sense.

But as he continued to worry about his future he paid less attention to Barbara. He did, however, take her to a sale at Sotheby’s, which she found enjoyable and enriching. Hazel Holt suggests that, by introducing Barbara to the world of antiques and auctions, he was trying to put their relationship on a satisfying but less personal footing. Early in 1966 Richard had taken up with a man who worked at the BBC. From this time on Barbara and Richard’s friendship began to wane.

She confided to Bob that she thought Richard was avoiding her, and later that he had definitely ‘offloaded’ her. She said that they were friendly, but no longer ‘en rapport’. By December Barbara told Bob that she feared it was all over between them.

Hazel Holt thought that Barbara was content to love without expecting any return, but I feel that she did, unrealistically, expect much more. But what, given the circumstances, could she expect?

After six years silence, on publication of Quartet in Autumn in 1977, Richard surfaced again. He praised the book, which in his opinion was her masterpiece. In his penultimate letter he also praised The Sweet Dove Died, but did not comment on how he might have had a part in its conception.
Yvonne Cocking is a founding member of the Barbara Pym Society, was formerly its secretary, and now serves as its archivist and historian. A retired librarian, she worked for more than two years in the early 1960s at the International African Institute in London, with Barbara Pym and Hazel Holt. She is the author of Barbara in the Bodleian: Revelations from the Pym Archives (2013).

Africa journal: then and now by Lucia Costanzo

Even readers of Barbara Pym will be aware that – unlike many novelists – she held a full-time job for much of her working life. After her demobilisation from the Wrens in 1946 she joined the staff of the International African Institute to help edit publications. According to Hazel Holt in her biography of Pym, Barbara fell into this role through the personal recommendation of her friend Frances Kendrick, whose aunt, Beatrice Wyatt, was looking for an extra pair of hands. So at a princely salary of £5 a week, Barbara began a career that was to last until 1974 when she retired following a stroke.

Barbara performed a number of tasks at the Institute: liaising with the academic authors, editing, correcting proofs and indexing. She was clearly considered up to the job because she was asked early on to work on a major project, a mammoth ethnographic and linguistic survey of Africa.

It was 12 years later that her big opportunity came. In 1958 Beatrice retired and Barbara became assistant editor of Africa journal, working under the academic editor Daryll Forde. Africa is one of the oldest academic publications in the UK and has been published continuously by the Institute since January 1928.

Barbara is first credited in the contents page for volume 28 no 1 of the journal. This issue contained four detailed articles: Nyoro Marriage and Affinity; Anuak Village Headmen; Notes on Nilotic, Nilo-Hamitic and Hamito-Semitic (possibly languages); and Native and Trade Currencies in Southern Nigeria. There were also several pages of shorter articles and reviews of books.

Sixteen years later, Barbara’s last issue as assistant editor was published. In vol 44 no 2, the editorial format was unchanged. Again there were a number of lengthy articles including: Big Houses in Kano Emirate; Fighting of Bulls as Symbolic Expressions of Divisions in the Hima Camp; and Pastors and Prophets in Winneba Ghana. There was also an article in French on aggression and mediation in Senegal.

These titles give us a glimpse of the arcane world that Barbara inhabited for so many years: it is easy to see how Barbara was inspired to use the academics she worked with as characters in her novels – most memorably in Less than Angels.

What about Africa now? The International African Institute still exists – albeit subsumed within the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. Since 2011 Africa has been published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Institute. The most recent issue contains articles whose titles would have struck a chord with Barbara: Intergenerational Land Conflict in Northern Uganda: Children, Customary Law and Return Migration; and The Past of Dreams: gender, memory and Tuareg oneric inspiration.

But now the journal is more focused on “the work of local African thinkers and writers, emerging social and cultural trends “on the ground”, and links between local and national levels of society.’ Many of the articles are submitted by African academics and thinkers rather than the British anthropologists that Barbara knew and parodied. And no assistant editor is credited, just the academic editors. Perhaps an aspiring novelist in Cambridge corrects the proofs and compiles the indexes for Africa?

Will the real Edith Liversidge please stand up?
An Introduction to Honor Tracy, Journalist and Novelist (1913-1989) by Rose Little

In Robert Liddell’s correspondence with Barbara Pym about Some Tame Gazelle, he remarks he would like to read more about Honor Tracy, who became Edith Liversidge. Pym toned her down from the feisty ‘Hester Carey’ of Edith’s original incarnation in her first draft. In search of this flamboyant woman who wrote over 20 novels and travel books, I began with Men at Work: high jinks and japes and impossible dreams. She was the leading satirical humorist of her day and this was her fifth novel.

Honor Tracy, friend of Pym and Liddell in 1930s Oxford, started her career as a journalist after the war, at The Irish Digest and The Bell in Dublin. In 1947 she went to France and East Europe for the Observer and in 1948 to Japan, writing her first book, Kakemono. Tracy, a brilliant linguist, became foreign correspondent and columnist for the Observer, the Sunday Times, the Daily Telegraph and the BBC.

She made her home in Co. Mayo and wrote other travel books such as Spanish Leaves (1964, dedicated to Liddell) featuring the Luddite housekeeper, who prefers her traditional methods of fire-lighting, and the quirky postman who won’t deliver mail without a tip. In her novels she is inventive, funny, even rowdy! Liddell, a fellow Catholic convert, obviously admired her fiction as he used an extract from Mind You, I’ve Said Nothing with his English Literature students in Athens. Liddell thought her A Number of Things ‘both satirical and laugh out loud funny’ and in 1966 he reports to Pym that Men at Work, is ‘very funny indeed’. As he mentions her to
Pym in letters across many years it would seem he is in touch with her beyond when they were all friends together at Oxford.

Honor Tracy

With her fourth book, The Straight and Narrow Path (1956), reviewers decided she had ‘arrived’. A contemporary issue of Encounter says her vigorous racy tone is refreshing. She often has Ireland as her setting, colourful characters leaping off the page with their canniness and charm. They never get anything done, causing hilarious situations, while others blow up their causeway (The Quiet End of Evening). Tracy scorns her characters yet feels affection for them; she lampoons false pretensions, snobbery and intellectual muddles. Although she mocks the Irish, in The Prospects are Pleasing she has an Irish ‘patriot’ stand up for them:

Our empire is spiritual and intellectual and extends all over the world. It existed already when you fellows were running about painted blue. Yours was a little tinpot affair of guns and Bibles and trade.

Not only are Tracy’s books a romp, but her personal life seems equally rambunctious: in one of his early letters to Pym, the fastidious Liddell is anxious to avoid having her stay with him in Oxford. Reflecting later, Liddell wrote: ‘No one, I think, can ever have disliked Barbara or Elizabeth [Taylor] … Many people have disliked Honor and Ivy [Compton-Burnett] and me’, perhaps because of their keen perception of character and witty sarcastic tongues. Liddell obviously thought highly of Tracy as he dedicated his novel An Object for a Walk to her in 1966.

Tracy’s lover, Seán Ó’Faoláin, the writer and journalist, says his first impression of her was of a plain, red-headed, buxom woman. She quickly became ‘handsome’, with a ‘splendid figure’. He loved her ‘self honesty … plus her sardonic sense of humour.’ The adulterous relationship gave them both religious qualms and he left her in Venice and ‘fled’ by train to Paris. Ó’Faoláin’s daughter, Julia, remembers her as fat, with a thrilling laugh, a musical voice and an astounding candour.

Did the real Honor Tracy have anything much in common with Edith Liversidge? Pym describes Edith as having broad hips, in effect, ‘looking like a lighthouse!’ She has a ‘rough mannish voice’ and at the garden party appears ‘more dishevelled than usual’. Liddell tells Pym in 1936 that Tracy has become ‘large and Rabelaisian’ and her conversation has become ‘coarse’. Perhaps we hear an echo of the real person when Edith is described as being brusquely efficient and likely to inspire fear and respect rather than love, though Pym’s John Akenside had been in love with her, just as his alter ego the real John Barnicot was in the 1930s. In 1934 Pym confides to her journal that Tracy is ‘awfully nice’ and ‘on her side’ and advises her not to get involved in an affair with Henry Harvey, while in her early draft of Some Tame Gazelle, Belinda appreciates ‘Hester’: ‘whatever she said was always so delightfully spontaneous, and one wouldn’t have such a dear friend any different.’

As newspaper correspondent, Tracy worked in every corner of Europe. She used her knowledge of journalism to comic effect in at least three novels, for example, in A Number of Things (the book in which one of her characters is named ‘Pym’):

He had thought a correspondent’s life was to collect the facts from people … Now he had to learn about different kinds of lying, that of the official, that of the Press Relations Officer, the lies of men with grievances or axes to grind or something to conceal, or who simply preferred lying to the truth.

As well as journalism, she uses her personal experience of litigation (when she had courageously and successfully counter-sued the Sunday Times) in The Straight and Narrow Path, featuring Cat’s Eye O’Keefe and Corney O’Malley. This novel illustrated her real-life Sunday Times article arguing that there were too many priests in Ireland supported by poor parishioners.

In an interview with Harold H Watts in 1972, Tracy remarked, ‘If something interests, pleases or amuses me, I imagine it may do the same for other people and I try to pass it on. Also, I have an orderly mind, and writing is a sort of tidying up and clarifying of life.’

Pym in Translation
Part 1 – in Germany

by Jutta Schiller

he publication of Barbara Pym novels in German started with Excellent Women in 1988 (further editions in 1990, 1991, 1998) by Piper, a well-known publishing house in Munich. They chose the direct translation of Excellent Women for the German title. Crampton Hodnet, the second publication in Germany, became ‘Tea and Blue Velvet’ (1990, 1992, 1994), The Sweet Dove Died was translated into ‘Little Dove’ (1994), A Glass of Blessings remained the same (1995) as well as Quartet in Autumn (1991, 1995). Very far from the original An Academic Question has the German title ‘The Professor’s Wife’ (1991, 2001). Some of the books were produced as hardcovers first – EW, QA, CH – and as paperbacks afterwards. But SDD, GB and AQ were published in paperbacks only.

Dora Winkler translated all the novels but AQ, which was translated by Karin Lauer. Reading the novels in German was
a disappointment to me. The translations do not catch the fine humour and miss the subtlety of Barbara Pym’s style. In addition, there are a number of terms that have been mistranslated and I had to look up quite a lot of words and phrases I had never heard of. When you read the texts, you know they have been translated from another language and are not the original voice of the author. Furthermore, Pym’s novels have not only been translated poorly but were corrected poorly, too, as one can see on the back of the hardcover edition of Excellent Women and in the little brochure that advertised the publisher’s new books for spring 1988. The publishing company cited ‘Lord Cecil Lee’ as advocate for Barbara Pym. I think they meant Lord David Cecil ...

These may be the reasons why the books did not sell too well in Germany, and why the publishers stopped the production of Pym’s novels for good. In general Germans like English crime novels and they love Rosamund Pilcher, but the world of Barbara Pym is a very different one which hardly finds an equivalent in Germany. At that time women’s literature dealt with questions of equality, and the cosiness of the Barbara Pym novels was probably not part of the Zeitgeist. Besides, in the 1990s Germany found itself in a completely different historical situation. After the Berlin Wall came down not only did we ‘discover’ new literature from the other part of the country, but also a completely new literature evolved that dealt with the end of the GDR and its aftermath.

Nevertheless, there must be Germans nowadays who read Barbara Pym, but they read her in the original language. Just before Christmas 2015 I found a recommendation of Excellent Women in a German magazine. You can see this in the autumn/winter issue of GL 2016.

Pym in Translation: Adam et Cassandra
Part 2 – in France

by Keith Armstrong

Il avid readers of Barbara Pym face the same predicament – namely, what to do when there are no more Pyms to read? One solution with a twist is to read them all again ... but in a foreign language. This is at least possible for those of us with a fair knowledge of French, since virtually all of Pym’s novels and short stories were translated into French in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Hip hip hip hourra! as our neighbours across the Channel might say.

For some time now, I have been wondering whether Pym would translate well into French, starting from the premise that it probably would, given a gallic fondness for gentle satire, tea rooms and our shared lexical heritage – according to Wikipedia, approximately 29% of modern English words are of French origin. To test my theory, I decided to read the translation of Civil to Strangers – Adam et Cassandra – published by the French publisher Rivages.

The translator has rightly chosen to leave names alone, except where comic effect required translation, as with Canon Coffin – ‘Chanoine Cercueil’. But some cultural differences are not cleared up. For instance, the translation for Sunday school, ‘école du dimanche’ means little to a French reader, who would have even less idea as to the abbreviation ‘GFS’, which really requires a brief explanatory footnote. A notable omission in the text comes when we are told in French that Mr Tilos has suddenly fallen in love with Cassandra, but no mention is made in the translation that he is ‘susceptible’ to such behaviour. Mention is important for a fuller understanding of how Mr Tilos is able to woo Cassandra and flirt with Angela Gay despite having a fiancée back in Budapest, whom he eventually marries. The translator also errs by addition when Mr Tilos brings Cassandra flowers after her dinner party and he is translated as ‘s’inclinant pour un baise-main’ when the original text has him only ‘bowing’, but not necessarily to kiss her hand, however pleasant that might seem to a French reader.

The genteel ladies of Up Callow also seemed to have a more marked penchant for drink in translation. When talking of the bridge party’s ‘light’ or ‘nice refreshments’, Miss Gay, Cassandra and Mrs Gower refer simply to ‘boire un verre’ or ‘quelque chose à boire’, suggesting perhaps something alcoholic, with the result that the comic impact of refreshments turning out to include a case of Hungarian wine is partially lost. Later, however, the translator does decide to opt for the more appropriate ‘rafraîchissements’. Perhaps all that drink is to blame, too, for Angela suddenly ageing five years in the French text, when her age, thirty, is mistranslated as ‘trente-cinq’ – a glaring error which should have been picked up during proofreading.

But when all is said and done, the French text flows very well, a formality of style is maintained and the humour does come across well. In short, it was a good read. Now only twelve more Pym novels and two collections of short stories in French to go.

Sources: Adam et Cassandra, B. Pym (translation by François Dupuirenet Desroussilles), Rivages, 2006. Civil to Strangers, B. Pym, Virago Modern Classics, 2011.
A Year in West Oxfordshire
by Barbara Pym

[In the last year of her life, Barbara was asked by Ronald Blythe to contribute to his book, Places: An Anthology of Britain, ed. Ronald Blythe (OUP 1981), and Barbara generously sent him the following notes. Continued from the last issue of Green Leaves.]

July
This year (1979) summer at last! Garden full of honeysuckle, syringa, roses (June is hardly ever the month of roses in this garden). Later in this month the almost overwhelming scent of elder-flowers. Sitting in front of the cottage in the early evening, looking at the light on a creamy-grey stone barn opposite, seeing down the hill from Wilcote a hay cart (motorized now, of course!) approaching – huge rolls of hay are the fashion now – said to be easier, more convenient for the cows to eat. As the hot weather goes on, especially with this year’s wet spring and early summer, the countryside becomes ‘luxuriant’ – luscious grass and uncut hedgerows with the scabious coming out, and many weeds in the garden, almost a plague of self-seeded violets. Excursion to Rousham, a Jacobean house, redecorated mid-eighteenth century by William Kent who also designed the landscape and the gardens – temples, follies, terraces, grottoes, and sculptures, and a view down the river. On a summer Saturday you might be the only people there, with the pigeons (Norwich Croppers) in the seventeenth-century dovecote, and bantams with feathered legs.

August

Ditchley Park, Photo by Jeff Jarvis

This month Ditchley Park is open to the public. The poet John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, was born here in 1647. His poems are hymns – to girls.

My light thou art – without thy glorious sight
My eyes are darken’d with eternal night.
My Love, thou art my way, my life, my light.
Thou art my way; I wander if thou fly.
Thou art my light; if hid, how blind am I!
Thou art my life; if thou withdraw’st I die.

According to John Evelyn, it was in Rochester’s day ‘a low timber house with a pretty bowling green’, but now it is larger and more imposing, turned into a conference centre. Churchill used to stay here during the war when it was owned by the late Ronald Tree. He was an American who bought the house from Lord Dillon in 1933. Tree described his first view of it in his book When the Moon was High (p.37, Macmillan, 1975)

I remember the hedges on either side of the road being full of wild roses and honeysuckle, and the smell of the new-mown hay. A few minutes later we came out of the lane and before us was the great double avenue of beech trees leading up to the lodge gate. I remember that first sight of it: we marvelled at it. Once through the gates we found ourselves in a heavily wooded park where the deer, many of them white, were grazing or lying in the bracken, their little heads turning enquiringly towards the car as we passed. Ahead, another avenue of elm trees, and then the house itself appeared, stark grey against the blue sky, its two lead statues of Loyalty and Fame looking far out over the trees towards the Churchill Palace at Blenheim, its neighbour to the east.

The poet Rochester and his family are buried in the vaults of Spelsbury church, but there is no tablet to record his memory. The beautiful monument you will see in this church is to the third Earl of Lichfield (1776) who also lived at Ditchley. In the churchyard outside is the large square-oblong tomb where the Cary family are said to be buried, but the top is broken and there is a scattering of bones (can they be human bones?), dry and grey-white. The grass in the churchyard bleached creamy-white and a distant view of what look like downs (though they can’t be).

[To be concluded in the next issue of Green Leaves.]

Introduction of a New Character
by Sandra Margolies

We are of course pleased that Barbara Pym’s books continue to appear under the imprints of a range of publishers – and we all have our favourite new covers. But modern methods of scanning printed material to produce a new edition can result in unexpected errors: unwanted hyphens, page numbers in the middle of a page, paragraphs broken in half. I found a typical example when reading the 2013 Bello edition of An Unsuitable Attachment. On p. 57, ‘the vicarage party went to the theatre that night and asked Ian the Broome [] to join them.’ Proofreading is, alas, a cost too far for many modern publishers.

Tanya van Hasselt, our Short Story winner from 2014, has just brought out her second book, Of Human Telling. Tanya revisits the quintessentially English town of Wharton in a romantic and funny novel.
Readers Recommend

Bramton Wick, by Elizabeth Fair, published by Furrowed Middlebrow

had intended to recommend the Lindchester trilogy by contemporary author Catherine Fox, but on re-reading them I decided that despite the author being the wife of the current Bishop of Sheffield, the books being set largely in a cathedral close, set around the church year and being very funny, the amount of bad language and allusions to gay sex might make them rather strong stuff for some readers. So instead I’m recommending Bramton Wick by Elizabeth Fair, first published in 1952 and now re-issued.

I wouldn’t usually recommend an author when I’ve only read one book, but I’m making an exception because this seems a good opportunity to recommend an author I’ve stumbled upon and really enjoyed. Elizabeth Fair was a near-contemporary of Barbara Pym’s, and although she long outlived her (her dates are 1908 – 1997) she published only six novels, between 1952 and 1960. Bramton Wick is the story of a small number of households in a small English village – and where have we heard that before? Her characters include a mother and daughters in straitened circumstances, a lesbian couple, a rich incomer, and an aristocratic family. There are few men, and many dogs; there is a tennis party, umbrage is taken, and there are romantic entanglements. It is beautifully observed, funny in a mild, gentle way, and rather reminds me of Angela Thirkell. Elizabeth Fair is no Barbara Pym, I discerned no distinctive ‘voice’ (I have only read one after all), but I would urge readers to try her.

Gleanings
compiled by Yvonne Cocking

The publication in England of Laura Shapiro’s What She Ate had wide publicity in English newspapers. The Times, Sunday Times, Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph did her proud – long, thoughtful, illustrated articles, much more than gleanings. They all seemed to agree that the chapter on Barbara was the happiest. Only the Guardian was less enthusiastic.

Jacob’s Room is Full of Books (Susan Hill) and The Book of Forgotten Authors (Christopher Fowler) caught the notice of several readers. In the former, a follow-up of Howards End is on the Landing, Hill devoted some pages to Pym’s Quartet in Autumn, ‘a perceptive and touching novel ... Pym is clear-eyed about ageing, loneliness, narrowing lives’.

In Forgotten Authors, Fowler’s passage on Barbara Pym briefly surveyed her life and work, but a reviewer thought that the book would have been ‘far more coherent had it excised a third of the entrants, several of whom [BP included] may be undervalued but surely can’t be classified as forgotten’. However, The Lady made the valid point that Barbara Pym’s reissued fiction ‘has attracted a new generation of readers’.

The Japanese writer Hanya Yanagihara told us in the Guardian that ‘much of my early reading was informed by my father and his tastes: together we read Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner [and others]’.

Of 24 Funniest Books Ever Written, by Will Hersey in Esquire, only two were women, but the novelist Jonathan Coe included Barbara Pym among his choice of candidates for inclusion in such a work.

Libby Purves, reviewing Our History of the 20th Century, edited by Travis Elborough, and writing of the ‘high-handed snobberies of the elite on every other page’, said ‘the coming of the 60s clearly upset a lot of those established in public esteem before them. Barbara Pym can hardly bear “the horror, the cold stuffiness” of the Golden Egg fast food cafe’.

In Kate Charles’s latest, False Tongues, Charlie, a student, speaking to his mother Jane ‘launched into [an] account of the sighting of one of his lecturers, “that dry old stick”... having tea with a pretty undergraduate. Honestly, Mum, you should have seen the way he was looking at her. It was exactly like something out of a Barbara Pym novel’. “Oh, really?” Jane wasn’t a huge fan of Barbara Pym’s novels – she always found them uncomfortably close to her own life – but for some reason Charlie adored them’.

My own local cultural magazine Oxlite ran a feature on the Randolph Hotel’s history, mentioning writers with

Louise Smith

Linda MacDougall

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connections to the hotel [pre-Morse!] – including, of course, Barbara’s lunch with Philip Larkin in 1975, their first meeting.

Thanks to Sandra Goldstein, Diana Guillard, Peter Lloyd, Jo Peters, Iona Roberts, Christine Shuttleworth and Michael Wilson.

Members’ Corner

Which Pym character would you most like to have tea with? Members are invited to write to the Editor. Meanwhile, these are the characters favoured by the US speakers and competition winners this year.

Kym Brindle: I would love to have tea with Dulcie Mainwaring (NFRL) to talk about her research methods – Dulcie would have loved Google!

Julia Courtney: I would most like to have tea with Beatrix Howick (AFGL) as we would share an enthusiasm for the works of Charlotte M Yonge, and I suspect that Beatrix’s college is based on Bedford College, London, where I did my first degree.

Ruth Pavans de Cecatty: I would like to observe Leonora and Ned (TSDD) having tea, but would like to have tea with Phoebe Sharpe, to be able to discuss all the others and hear her perspective.

Sadhwi Srinivas: I would most like to have tea or a drink with Mildred Lathbury (EW). She is the only one of Pym’s heroines that I actually want to be friends with – and I also feel like she would understand if I cancelled plans at the last minute to stay home, because she might be prone to do the same.

Emily Stockard: I would like to have tea with Henry Hoccleve (STG) so that I could see for myself the intriguing combination of insufferability and casual charm.

Carol Novis: I would like to have a drink with Rocky Napier (EW) – I have a crush on him too!

Eliza Langhans: I would like to meet Catherine Oliphant (LTA) because I love her wry, funny observations about life. Also, I’m sure Catherine would be a wonderful host.

Betsy Hanson: I would like to have tea with Jane Cleveland (J&P), for who could resist spending time with a woman prone to such hilarious utterances as ‘my husband can’t take toad’?
We all enjoy the irony of the two sisters living happily together in Some Tame Gazelle foreshadowing what really happened later in the lives of Barbara and Hilary Pym, but it struck me when reading through the Pym archives the other day that perhaps we are in danger of imagining that the characters depicted in the novel are true portraits of the living people.

Barbara writes to Robert Liddell from Oswestry in January 1936, ‘I think I shan’t make Harriet improve her mind, as my knowledge of the Classics is so limited.’ This implies that the fictional Harriet, doting on curates and flirting, is very different from the living Hilary, who though certainly very sociable, was also a graduate of Oxford University (Classics) and held a diploma in Archaeology.

‘Hilary was formidable,’ the researcher who met the sisters near the end of Barbara’s life, Joy Vines, told me. She was ‘an intellectual and a headmistress type. Barbara was not an intellectual but was gentle, caring’. Francis (who with his partner bought Brooksville Avenue from the Pym sisters and became their friend) remarked to me that ‘Hilary was academic and clever, she was the one’ – you could connect with perhaps, Barbara being reserved and dreamy. (She was probably thinking of how she could put them into a novel!) The landlord at their pub in Finstock remembers Hilary well and I understand she was a local ‘treasure’.

Belinda and Harriet are Barbara and Hilary ‘forty years on’, says Robert Liddell, but could the actual fun-loving Barbara of the journals ever turn into the timid Belinda in real life? We remember Barbara completely in charge and at ease at her editorial desk at the International African Institute in the photograph we have of her, and we imagine Barbara as Hazel Holt describes her, laughing and joking, spinning sagas about the anthropologists. We also keep in mind the responsible church worker side of her character in Barnes, Queens Park and Finstock, as well as the darker, more thoughtful side as shown in The Sweet Dove Died or Quartet in Autumn. These glimpses seem far from diffident, lovelorn Belinda. Similarly, the talented and musical Hilary, in charge of music programmes for children at the BBC, could surely manage the later variations of ‘The Harmonious Blacksmith’.

Chairman’s Chat

If I were able to travel back in time, one of my adventures would be to explore the UK by train in the 1930s. Imagine how different our towns would have been before the bombers of World War II, the town planners of the post-war years, and the motor-car, had done their worst. The countryside too would have looked very different back when farms and fields were smaller and shirehorses did the work of tractors.

I don’t suppose Barbara ever realised she grew up in the golden age of the train, when there was still a railway station in Oswestry and even the remotest corners of the country were accessible by rail.

As someone who has never quite lost his boyhood passion for trains I enjoy the references to rail travel in the novels and short stories and in Pym’s diaries. Travelling to Rochester to begin her training as a Wren she noted the bright green electric train, so very different from the steam engines and chocolate and cream carriages of the Great Western Railway.

En route to the Cotswolds Leonora Eyre almost gets picked up by a clergyman in the buffet car: if only he had been travelling first class too. Travelling by train from Oxford to Paddington was as easy then as now for academics and students, and is frequently mentioned. The Oxford Tube coaches which bring perhaps the majority of members to the St Hilda’s Conferences by road are comparatively new. And then there was the Varsity Line, linking Oxford with Cambridge, a line that may be restored at some time in the future.

This will be my last Chairman’s Chat. By the time the next Green Leaves appears the Society will have a new Chairman. I wonder if they too will wonder, ‘What on earth can I write about this time?’
Call for Papers
North American Conference, 22-24 March 2019

Crampton Hodnet

The organizing committee is seeking speakers for the 21st annual North American conference, to be held at Harvard Law School on 22-24 March 2019. Preference will be given to proposals on the featured novel, Crampton Hodnet, but proposals on any topic relevant to Pym studies will be considered, and proposals dealing with themes that span multiple novels are encouraged.

Speakers receive an honorarium of $500, a waiver of the conference registration fee, and complimentary conference meals.

Please send an abstract of 150-250 words, accompanied by brief biographical details, by Monday 12 November 2018 to Tom Sopko, North American Organizer, at barbarapymsociety@gmail.com with the subject heading ‘2019 Conference Proposal’.

For more information about the Barbara Pym Society, go to www.barbara-pym.org. To read papers from past conferences, click the link Pym Conference Monographs.
Many thanks to Lloyd Miller and Donna Safreed for most of the photographs in this issue.