

“The Things I See!” – Suburbs and Sagas in *No Fond Return of Love*

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*Paper presented at the Annual General Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society
St Hilda's College, Oxford, 2-3 September 2017*

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 London suburb, watching the passers-by and speculating on their actions. 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 is the point of living in a suburb if one couldn't show a healthy curiosity about one's neighbours?” Both *Less Than Angels*, published in 1955, and *No Fond Return of Love*, 1961, 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.

Hazel Holt, Barbara Pym's friend, colleague and literary executor, kindly read the first draft of this paper. In her memoir *A Lot to Ask*, Hazel noted that “once they had got used to the idea of living in the suburbs rather than in central London, they found many compensations. The river was at the top of the road and it was pleasant to walk along the towpath on summer evenings. Barbara also found a highly congenial church, St. Michael's, Barnes Bridge.” There was the added attraction of an upstairs sitting room, which provided a good view of the goings-on in the street. To quote Professor Charles Burkhart in his book *The Pleasure of Miss Pym*: “Surely, in no novels ever have so many windows been looked out of.”

Barbara and Hilary seemed to enjoy living in Barnes, in spite of the “visceral anti-suburbia bias of many progressive thinkers” noted by David Kynaston in his book *Austerity Britain*. Kynaston quotes George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*, which describes 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,” while town planner and university lecturer Thomas Sharp complained of suburbia's “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*).

No Fond Return of Love is pervaded by the atmosphere of the suburbs, and is replete with negative comments about suburbia. Much is made of the distance – actually only about five miles – 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. ... 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, Notting Hill, 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.” Laurel's friend Marian, who resides in a bed-sitter 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 Forbes' inability to find his way to Dulcie's house by public transport becomes a running joke. Distaste for the suburbs also crops up in Pym's last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*. The vicar's sister, Daphne Dagnall, who has moved from the village to a house in Birmingham near a “delightful wooded common” describes her new neighborhood: ““Yes, people are great gardeners, but it's not the same somehow. It's sort of ...” she hesitated, then said in a lower tone, ‘suburban, if you see what I mean.’”

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. She admits “I love finding out about people. I suppose it’s a sort of compensation for the dreariness of everyday life.” 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. When Viola asks if she might come to stay, Dulcie realizes that she is probably considered the last resort, 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.” 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 both her aunt and the suburbs as hopelessly out-of-touch and dreary, regarding 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, according to Pym’s notebook, was off Kensington Park Road in Notting Hill, London W11. Back in the 1960s, when I lived there, it was a slightly seedy area, the cheaper part of Kensington, but sufficiently urban to attract would-be sophisticates Laurel and Viola. This area was once famous as the subject of a crime film directed by Michael Winner. *West 11*, as it was entitled, was one of the early 1960s wave of working-class realism films and was filmed on location in Notting Hill in 1963. Of course, the area has since gone upscale. Hazel Holt commented in an e-mail to me that “the fashionable boundaries (and higher house prices) are gradually spreading, so that despised Acton is now almost part of Notting Hill and Harrods most certainly do deliver.”

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 seems to spend much of his time sitting at his window eating sugared almonds and indulging in flights of fancy about the passers-by. Seeing Laurel and Paul Beltane walking hand-in-hand, he imagines them as Orpheus and Eurydice, Paolo and Francesca, or Romeo and Juliet, wondering “what have I seen – an end or a beginning?” Another time, he is puzzled to see 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 insisted.” 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.

In spite of the humorous scenes (poor Miss Lord’s humiliation in the cafeteria, Dulcie crouching uncomfortably behind the screen in the hotel lounge, old Mrs. Forbes), *No Fond Return of Love* is pervaded by melancholy. In a letter to Barbara, Rachel Cecil (Lord David’s wife) noted 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 Tavistock 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.

Of course, the suburbs were not always as bad as Aylwin, Laurel, Viola, and the "progressive thinkers" claimed. David Kynaston quotes writer and broadcaster Godfrey Winn – also a Pym fan incidentally – who visited a family in Firgrove, a cul-de-sac off Malden Road in northwest London in 1951 and liked what he saw:

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.

Catherine Oliphant in *Less Than Angels* was also "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 Aylwin's wife 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 was christened Violet, are named after plants, but 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."

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. But Barbara, like Dulcie Mainwaring, was always more interested in investigating the lives of ordinary people, which might well result in a saga. Hazel Holt explains in *A Lot To Ask*: that the subject of a saga "can be anyone at all – a famous person you don't actually know, a fictitious character, or even an animal – but it is most rewarding to weave a saga around someone you can actually observe."

Of course, you don't *have* to live in the suburbs to indulge in sagas, though in *No Fond Return of Love* they are two intertwined themes. Barbara had enjoyed the game of sagas from an early age wherever she happened to be living. 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.”

The saga 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, 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 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.

Dulcie’s interest in Aylwin begins when he faints while giving a lecture at the conference: “Why, he’s beautiful, [she] thought suddenly. Like a Greek marble, or something dug up in the garden of an Italian villa, the features a little blunted, with the charm of being not quite perfect.” As infatuated by Aylwin Forbes as Barbara was by Henry Harvey, Dulcie learns all she can about him and his family. Dulcie’s unhappiness 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 – think of *Some Tame Gazelle*’s Harriet Bede, unashamedly watching Agatha’s departure through her binoculars, or *Excellent Women*’s Mildred Lathbury sneaking a look at the new neighbors’ furniture – but she is the only one who actively investigates people. 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.” With the help of the telephone directory, *Who’s Who* and *Crockford’s Clerical Directory* she tracks down Aylwin’s clergyman brother Neville and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Williton. 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, and goes in, thereby meeting not only Mrs. Williton and her daughter Marjorie, but also Rhoda Wellcome from *Less Than Angels*. Though both are unaware of it, Dulcie and Rhoda have something in common – finding comfort in observing the lives of other people. “And how much more comfortable it sometimes was,” thought Rhoda, “to observe [life] from a distance, to look down from an upper window, as it were, as the anthropologists did.” As Dulcie thought to herself, “she had already received so much.” For a devotee of the saga, this was a very good day! Continuing her investigations by attending Evensong at Father Forbes’s church, Dulcie learns from his housekeeper 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.’” 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.

One of Barbara’s favorite authors, Rachel Ferguson, wrote the definitive chronicle of the saga in her novel *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, published in 1931. It tells the story of the Carne sisters, Deirdre, Katrine and Sheil. Deirdre, 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

pierrrot, and, eventually, 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.

While 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. As Hazel explained:

The sagas about our Anthropologists provided a blessed consolation for the dullness of our work at the Institute – especially that particularly dreary time between 2 and 4 when (like Miss Trapnell and Miss Clothier) we eagerly awaited the distant sound of tea being made. It helped, too, when reading a manuscript by a linguist (usually in Belgian French with many impossible examples in African languages full of clicks or worse) to imagine that particular Jesuit or White Father involved in some sort of Vatican intrigue.

They invented The Indigent Anthropologists’ Food and Wine Fund, which provided nourishing lunches for the young, poorer anthropologists, like Digby and Mark in *Less Than Angels*. (Rachel Ferguson’s version was The Browbeaten Barristers, and the Carnes invented other charities, like The Tabbies’ Protection Union with offices in Great Cream Street, and the Insolent Widows’ Aid with premises in Crape Yard, EC.) For one anthropologist Barbara and Hazel invented a splendid mother waiting for him with a hot milky drink, which is reminiscent of Dulcie’s belief that “life’s problems are often eased by hot milky drinks.” (Looking through Barbara’s papers in the Bodleian, I came across a brochure for the Lattendales Centre for Wellbeing in the Lake District, which “provides a sanctuary or retreat for those who feel in need of rest, whether spiritually, mentally or physically.” Interestingly, the food included “milky drink at night.”) According to Hazel, Barbara’s inventions were usually 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.”

Having worked in an editorial office with several other women, I can sympathize with the need to liven up one’s afternoons. Though by no means inventing such elaborate sagas as those of Barbara and the Carnes, we certainly made up stories about some of our stranger colleagues, like the gentleman with the heavy East European accent who ate only red meat and seemed unusually interested in blood. Naturally we decided he must be a vampire. We also invented Blue U Airlines, named after our ugly office building, for the simple reason that more frequently than seemed likely, two or three of us would come to work in almost identical outfits, making us imagine ourselves as flight attendants. After Hazel read my paper she wrote: “I greatly enjoyed it, especially since you have entered into the spirit of the saga and were sympathetic towards it. Not everyone understands!”

Barbara and Hilary’s most extensive saga began when they first noticed two young men and a dog who lived a few doors away in Barnes. They made up names for them – the big burly one was Bear, and the short slight one was Squirrel or Little Thing (Bear became Bill Coleman in *Excellent Women* and Squirrel was 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 Laurence the Martyr, in Queen’s Park. They continued to monitor their neighbors’ situation, noting various comings and goings 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, and which became the Eagle House Private Hotel in Taviscombe in *No Fond Return of Love*. In an e-mail to me, Hazel described the Barnes saga as

...the best of all and the most detailed. The two young men and their little dog impressed themselves on Barbara's mind from the first and the picture was built up bit by painstaking bit. I think one of the reasons for this was that almost every day when Barbara came into our room at the Institute she would give me the latest news of its progress and so I was drawn into it too. The extraordinary coincidence of Bear and Little Thing having connections with Minehead (where I went with my husband several times a year to stay with his relations who lived there) really intensified the investigation and I was able to contribute quite a bit of my own. Bob Smith (with his interest in churches) was also a keen audience for news of the latest developments.

Minehead also makes an appearance in *A Glass of Blessings*: Sybil tells Wilmet that Professor Root and his sister "have always stayed at a small private hotel in Minehead and gone for long walks over Exmoor ... [T]hey take a packed lunch every day, wet or fine. Arnold says he is rather tired of it." If the small hotel is Eagle House, who could blame Arnold for preferring to go to Portugal that year?

When Barbara and Hilary moved to Queen's Park in 1961, Bear became a friend, just as Toddy became the Carnes' friend. Meeting the subject of a saga is tricky, as described by Rachel Ferguson when Deirdre meets Lady Toddington: "The main trouble lay in the fact that I came to [her] aware: primed with a thousand delicate, secret knowledges and intuitions... I felt as though I was taking her friendship under false pretences." Barbara would say: "Are we supposed to *know* that?" or "Is it true or did we make it up?" When Dulcie returns to Neville Forbes's church after coming back from Taviscombe, she experiences the same confusion: "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."

Sagas certainly occupied a large part of Barbara's life, just as they did for the Carnes. 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.

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." 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, which, Hazel told me, is 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, speculating on what it all means, and imagining their stories.

Towards the end of the book Viola accepts Bill Sedge's proposal of marriage and prepares to move to 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* has for 50 years now revealed 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." I don't know if Neasden had this reputation when Pym was writing her novel, but it does seem 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," whose natural habitat is Neasden. 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, silver fringed stole, and "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. By the end of the book, Dulcie and Viola seem to have changed places. Dulcie, who modestly describes her work as doing "hum-drum 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. This changing of places gives the novel what E.M. Forster described as the shape of an hour-glass, though of course Forster was discussing Henry James' *The Ambassadors*, which was far more rigid in structure than Pym's novel.

And so the book ends with Dulcie's Aylwin saga promising 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, imagining him to be of noble birth, 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."

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. We may indeed wonder where they will live – would Aylwin move into Dulcie's large house in the suburbs and finally learn which bus to take? And this time 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 grew up in Warwickshire and graduated with a degree in German and Russian from Bedford College for Women, University of London. During her time at Bedford she lived in Notting Hill, one of the areas featured in *No Fond Return of Love*. After five years studying and working in Germany, and two summers working in Italy, she embarked on a career as translator and editor with the US Government. She has spent many hours studying the Pym notebooks, and treasures her memory of a visit to Hilary Walton in Finstock and her correspondence with Hazel Holt.

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