

Not always what they seem to be: Hilary's Life, Barbara's Books

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Interviewed by Penelope Lively on the 1984 publication of *A Very Private Eye*, Hilary Pym Walton said with relish, "Pym's are not always what they seem to be". She was mystified by her sister's image as a village spinster, perennially middle-aged, who scribbled tame stories about a thin slice of English society as it faded from view. This year's celebration of Barbara Pym's sister, honouring and illuminating Hilary's role in the creation and preservation of her sister's art, will undermine some misconceptions about "the Pym girls" because a very little twitching at their lace curtains proves that neither of them were "what they seem to be".

Hilary Pym was essential to her sister's life as an artist, and to Barbara Pym's legacy, not least the creation of the Barbara Pym Society. An exemplary sister, Hilary provided practical and emotional support throughout Barbara's successful and unsuccessful writing years, and further, provided inspiration for that writing. Hilary's life was gleefully plundered for Barbara's novels, and yet...Rome and umbrage were avoided; only death could bring their shared life to an end. As Hilary wrote,

It was never our particular intention, in spite of the prophetic circumstances of *Some Tame Gazelle*, which she had started in 1934, to live together, but it somehow turned out that from 1938 right up until the time of her death in 1980 we were never apart for more than a year or so at a time. In 1946, when I left my husband Sandy Walton, we started sharing a flat in London, then in 1961 we bought a house, and eventually, in 1972, a country cottage in Oxfordshire.

In typical Pym fashion, what Hilary has NOT said, in her story of their life together, is at least as important as what she has chosen to say, as we will see.

In the Pym family, Barbara was the elder, but Hilary was seen as the cleverer, more talented sister. Hilary was musical and out-going, and succeeded at her studies. When she and Barbara were sent to boarding school few girls had this privilege and fewer still went up to Oxford and took degrees. Their mother, Irena, was the driving force behind their excellent educations. She was clearly a bold character, unafraid to put her daughters on an unusual path. The Pym sisters also had a much-loved "spinster" aunt, Jane, Aunt Ack, who lived next door with another unmarried sister of Irena's. There was family precedent for Hilary and Barbara to make a life together.

As we know, Barbara read English literature at St Hilda's and yearned for Lorenzo (and a host of other young men), while Hilary read Classics at Lady Margaret Hall and yearned for Greece. So far, so different, and they *were* different, but they were also always fast friends, who as very young women, travelled abroad together, dressed with chic, smoked, painted varnish on their nails, and had big dreams that were not centred on marriage, or any traditional path for young women of their time.

Hilary did not say, in her story of how the sisters came to spend their lives together, that only she was employed by a company that paid a proper living wage to women in the 1930's: the BBC. When Hilary said "we started sharing a flat in London", she didn't say that flat was sourced by the BBC. When she said "we bought a house, and...cottage", she didn't say Barbara's genteel pittance from the Institute for African Studies hardly extended to home ownership. While Barbara was earning £5/week at the Institute, Hilary was earning a salary fit for a man.

In *A Very Private Eye*, Hilary admits that she "earned more money" than Barbara, but adds that "this never caused difficulties or came between us. As our salaries were the only money we had, it was there to be used." Money mattered to the Pym sisters. By the mid-1940's, their family home had been sold, their mother was dead, and their father remarried. There were no more dress allowances. They had what they earned, and Hilary's willingness to share gave Barbara what economic security she had, for most of her adult life. For perspective, without Hilary, Barbara would have struggled to support herself in any comfort at all. Letty's insecure life in retirement in *Quartet in Autumn* could be an imagined view of

what Barbara's life would have been, without Hilary's sustained financial generosity. It should be noted that this involved some sacrifice by Hilary; outside observers in the early 1970's considered the sisters poor.

In a revealing exchange during Barbara's appearance on Desert Island Discs, Roy Plomley observed that in the 1950's she had settled into a pattern of publishing a new novel only once every two years, and Barbara explains "I was working at my job and I could only write at weekends or in the evenings." He then asks "were you tempted to drop your job and become a full-time professional writer?" and she replies "Not seriously because I haven't got the temperament that can write if I haven't got any income coming in. I would be too anxious to create anything at all I think." Plomley, uninterested in the anxieties of a writer who needed to support herself on a woman's wages, moves swiftly on.

Yet, supporting herself as a "full time professional writer" had been Barbara's goal since graduation, and her archive contains evidence of her multiple attempts to achieve this goal. Post Oxford, in hopes of immediate publication, she had written her first novels at home, seeking the income to fund a writer's life. Later, she calculated that selling four short stories per month would bring 100 guineas and allow her to quit her taxing day job. For the BBC she wrote a radio play and abridged another writer's novel for radio, keeping the payslips from the handsome fees she earned. Later still, Curtis Brown nearly tempted her away from Cape by touting their agents' superior ability to sell the overseas rights to her novels. But none of these efforts succeeded: only one story, one radio play and one abridgement were sold, and Cape only sold one book in America.

Interviewed in the TLS, late in her life, Barbara regretted the energy drained away by her "dogsbody" job. She described the alternative of marriage to a man "willing to support you", with the deal "All right, I do the housework, get your meals, that sort of thing, and write a novel." She didn't want that deal, and couldn't find a way to a reliable living from writing. So Hilary's excellent salary was essential to both of them. (It's sad to think about the novels we don't have, because Barbara didn't become a professional full-time writer, but that's another subject.)

Leaving Oxford, both Pym sisters were brimming with confidence and open to adventure. In contrast to Barbara, who endured the disappointment of her first manuscript's near miss with Cape, Hilary succeeded in her first efforts: in 1938, she secured a job at the BBC (she had to pass a secretarial course that was tacked on to her Oxford degree to get this job--more on that later today). Hilary's energy and early career success immediately began to help Barbara, who followed Hilary to lodgings in London, then Bristol, and back to London, as Hilary's BBC career grew.

Material support was only one of Hilary's contributions. From the beginning to the end, Hilary's life and personality were mined for Barbara's novels: the first, *Some Tame Gazelle*, famously features Hilary, "to the life"; the last, *A Few Green Leaves*, also features Hilary, I think, as foundation for the slightly impatient and briskly motherly Beatrix, who provides a cottage for her daughter. The abodes Hilary found or financed for them in Pimlico, Barnes, Queens Park, and Oxfordshire of course are mined for novels. Less well known is that even the Prehistoric Society comes straight out of Hilary's commitment to archaeology (she and her friends actually attended conferences of that Society). Barbara had great fun teasing Hilary about this scrabbling, and "decided I should have two children and call them Lynchet and Barbotine."

What may be more surprising, however, is the extent to which Hilary's life was mined for *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings*.

The Pym sisters knew that it was economically very risky not to pursue marriage, but neither rushed to marry. While Barbara turned down proposals she didn't want, Hilary made a wartime marriage. On paper, it looked like a good match. In its problematic reality, the match provided experience and insight for one of Barbara Pym's major literary themes.

There are myriad connections between Hilary's life and the events of *Excellent Women*, including the timing and troubles of her marriage, Hilary's status as a professional woman (like Helena Napier), Everard Bone's "we must get on" (lifted from an archaeologist friend of Hilary's), and even the controversially furnished cottage lair of the rejected husband Rocky.

The son of an army officer, Hilary's fiancé served in the RAF, read architecture at the "other place", and shared her passion for the classical world and for music. They planned a life in Greece after the war, and they enjoyed sunny Bohemian weekends at his bucolic country cottage, Wroughton, in Compton.

With Barbara as bridesmaid, on 26th August 1942, Hilary married Alexander Crawford Wellesley Walton (what a relief it must have been to call him Sandy), whose marriage certificate declares him resident at the Oatlands Rectory, Weybridge. In a 1942 letter to Henry Harvey, Barbara described what she would wear, "...a lovely romantic black hat with heart-shaped halo brim, which I bought yesterday in Bath" and the bridegroom, "fair and tallish and very musical".

All this omitted something important that she and even Hilary may not have known. At a time when homosexual acts were illegal, Sandy was part of a closeted social world. Extending the quotation makes one wonder if the Pym sisters knew or had inklings of Sandy's sexual preference. In the 1942 letter Barbara writes, "(Sandy) ... has been out in Greece doing an architectural survey... It's funny that he didn't meet Jock out there as he must have been there about the same time and probably knew some of the same people. Strangely enough he reminds me in some ways of Jock...."

As is known, Robert Liddell (usually called Jock by Barbara Pym) was gay, and letters show that he and Sandy shared a social world, and well into the 1970's Jock updated Hilary on Sandy's life. Hilary may have intended to have a "lavender marriage", the term for marriages in which one or both partners were gay and not in a sexual relationship with each other, but the photographs make this hypothesis seem unlikely: they show a happy Hilary, looking like a conventionally contented bride--showing off her ring, looking intimate with her new husband. At the time, it was not unusual for a man in Sandy's position to try to sustain a conventional life, and perhaps he hoped to make his marriage work in a conventional way. The recently published full diaries of Henry "Chips" Channon, covering the years 1918-1957, illuminate the way gay men married but pursued happiness with other men, mainly avoiding publicity and sanction. Their lives were open secrets to many men, though not always to the women to whom they proposed; these wives were expected to put up and shut up. At our spring meeting, Daisy Dunn told the story of Elizabeth Longford's decline of a proposal from a closeted gay don, basing the rejection on instinct, not on any information about her suitor's sexual preference. (Funnily enough, Julian Amery [Barbara's Oxford fling from the late '30s] and his father, appear in Channon's diaries because of a political affinity with Channon, but that's a different story.)

In 1944, Hilary joined the BBC's Gramophone Department and lived in London while Sandy was abroad with the RAF. In 1946, after Sandy returned to England, the couple separated and officially divorced in 1949, with Hilary as respondent, a wife who had "deserted the Petitioner without cause for a period of at least three years". In a 1946 letter to Henry Harvey, Barbara again described the situation: "Hilary and her husband have separated... (she) is happier without her husband—who was nice but much too cold and intellectual and logical to live with." Again, there is much omitted from Barbara's description of the situation. Hilary herself wrote of leaving her husband (not separating), briefly resumed using her maiden name, and did not greet him when they attended the same concert in 1950; her divorce was not painless.

In an extraordinary letter to Hilary in 1984, Francis King, the author, Booker Prize judge, and a publicly gay man, reacted to Barbara's judgement on Sandy, which had recently been published. He wrote, in part,

Dear Mrs Walton...

Sandy Walton was a great friend of mine. I found it astonishing that your sister should describe him as 'too cold and intellectual and logical to live with'! He always struck me as the opposite of all those things—passionate, intuitive and illogical. I used to visit him at Wroughton Cottage, often finding that, half way through the weekend, he had retreated to his room and the bottle, no doubt unable to endure my company any longer. It was I who found him his first job in Salonika and who, on the death of a friend of mine in Athens, recommended that he should step into the dead man's shoes. His end was terribly sad, as you probably know. He became virtually unemployable, he had almost no money, and he became increasingly suspicious of old friends. He had such a multitude of talents – too many at constant war with each other...

While King addresses Hilary as "Mrs Walton" he proceeds to describe her former husband to her without making any further reference to her marriage and why it failed.

King himself had a long and well-documented gay life at a time when that life remained illegal in most places. His sex life entertained the notorious Anne Cumming in Greece long before he officially came out of the closet in the 1970s, and there are multiple intersections between him and others in the Pym sisters' world, as shown by more of the text of the letter.

Dear Mrs Walton...

I have been so much moved by *A Very Private Eye* that I feel I must send you a letter... It is awful to think of someone so ardent and high-spirited suffering such a sequence of disappointments. But perhaps, just as (she herself makes this comment) men find her novels more depressing than women, so men will feel the same about the life. 'Drearily splendid' – that phase of hers haunts me. Yet, at the same time, as in the novels, there is so much humour and fun.

Henry Harvey was a colleague of mine in the British Council in Athens. I was mystified that both women and men should so often have found him irresistible. Robert Liddell must have been in love with him, and he was clearly the great love of your sister's life... I met your sister only once, at a Booker dinner. The book has made me regret that I never used our mutual friendship with Robert to get to know her better. Curiously, as I read the book, I was constantly reminded of Nancy Mitford. There was a physical resemblance; both had the same knack of falling for the wrong sort of man; and both had the courage to be able to make others laugh and to laugh themselves at what might otherwise have been intolerably sad.

With best wishes

Francis King

All of this is important because Barbara's work responds to her sister's complicated marital experience. Hilary's marriage provided material for the Napiers in *Excellent Women* and also for Wilmet's doomed-from-the-start romantic interest in a gay man in *A Glass of Blessings*. While Barbara knew many gay men, and one of her primary friendships was with Jock Liddell, this was not at all the same as falling in love with a gay man, as Hilary had done, and as Barbara didn't do, until decades later. The archive shows that Barbara was in touch with Sandy during the years when Hilary could not be, visiting the cottage and even meeting him at the Café Royal. (He wrote an outrageous letter to her on the publication of *Some Tame Gazelle*, but that's another story.)

In fact, Barbara's novels published in the 1950's reflect a modern and very subversive view of gay men, that is still frequently missed or misinterpreted. In Barbara's novels, gay men are vividly portrayed, with empathy, and with no clutching of pearls. *A Glass of Blessings* is particularly subversive, in its portrayals of gay men open to warm friendship with women, but emphatically not to lavender marriage. The book was far ahead of its time. Published in 1958, four years after the notorious trial of Lord Montagu, it contains no shock at the (then) illegal actions of the gay men who star in the story; the shock is entirely at Wilmet's Emma-like obtuseness. At the time, only the *Daily Telegraph's* reviewer Peter Green responded, grudgingly, to the theme:

I don't normally raise much enthusiasm for spry little domestic novels sprayed with the incense of upper-middle-class Anglo-Catholicism, and with male characters called Piers or Rodney. But Barbara Pym's *A Glass of Blessings* caught me up short: her naïve heroine, all unawares, falls in love with an obvious homosexual (though this is never explicitly stated) and the queer goings-on of male housekeepers and so on are described with catty accuracy.

He doesn't respond to her empathy and acceptance of people so often abused and marginalised, even today.

We've seen that Hilary provided essential material support, and material for Barbara's novels, but also, and crucially, she provided emotional support during Barbara's roller coaster writing career. Through those decades, for better or for worse, Hilary was warmly present, eagerly awaiting reviews, reading manuscripts, and sharing friends, faith, homes, and above all, the joke. Barbara was supremely lucky in having a sister who shared her zest for the high comedy of life. Hilary loved to laugh, as all of us lucky enough to meet her remember, and what price shared laughter? (I am so tempted to describe how Hilary won bottles of champagne with funny stories—but there is no time!)

Hilary's letters to Barbara from Greece, starting in May 1950, when reviews of Barbara's first published novel were anticipated, show the depth of their shared joys. Updates on pets (cats, of course) and friends share space with gossip and

anecdotes that will have given joy to Barbara. Much more extrovert than Barbara, Hilary's intrepid solo trips to Greece involved many encounters with friendly (and overly friendly) men ("a personable young man of the village" always seems ready to buy her coffees). She reveals the perfect place to drink ouzo alone in the morning, describes what it's like to get bitten by bedbugs, and speculates about interesting or merely odd people seen or met. Here is a flavour, from 1964:

Oh, one funny thing, as I was walking towards Odos Lampsakon from my weekend, with suitcase, looking rather unkempt, I saw just ahead of me, Mark Ogilvie-Grand and an elegant woman going into one of the flats in the main street. She was elegant in dark pink, but he looked a positive dandy, in a grey and white striped cotton jacket and very tight coffee-coloured linen trousers and white shoes! I was dazzled.

I had a very pleasant evening with Robert, who had had your letter. Jane Rabnott and the Byzantinist Prof. Hussey (female) were there for drinks, but he and I went and had a meal in the Plaka on our own...

Robert is still obsessed with 'What to do with Rabnott'—I suggested that she might do some work for an author, perhaps an index, and he thought it was a very good idea as long as it wasn't for him. Apparently she threatens to pursue him to Delphi with people who want to meet him!

We also talked further about Mr D'Arcy. Robert and Honor had been questioning his aristocratic background—did you think he was quite genuine? Honor thinks he is a lady novelist in disguise, someone who turns out about six books a year for the tripe-readers! I couldn't quite place his accent—is it that of the Suffolk landed gentry? He is a great mystery, it seems. I wonder if I shall meet him again. (*Letter to Barbara from Greece, 11 June 1964*)

Later that month (28 June 1964), Hilary wrote:

My clothes are surviving quite well and I've just had a big wash and iron yesterday. The only casualty has been that nice bluey-green linen dress, which shrank so much when I washed it that it was quite unwearable! But, I wasn't going to be daunted by that, so I cut off the too-tight skirt, let out the darts in the bodice, took the zip out of the back (I'd broken it anyway, by ironing it too hot!) and made it into a very successful blouse.

The much-cited game of "Rome, death or umbrage" was played with Hilary. Of course it was. Hilary was the first to laugh, even when she was being sent up in her sister's novels. Her letters contain no hint that she minded seeing her life and personality used so comprehensively in Barbara's books. Instead, from the start she revels in Barbara's success: in a letter dated 19th May 1950, Hilary writes "What a lovely review of STG by Lionel Hale. I do feel proud of my clever schworster." ("If this novel comes scratching at your front door, let the playful little thing come in... For this novel is in a sturdy English tradition of comedy. Its wit is so gentle that the reader scarcely notices the claws.")

As we know, Barbara's decade as a published and deeply appreciated novelist were followed by hard years as a "former" writer. Photographs give a taste of the pain involved. Barbara lost the future she had been planning, a precious part of her identity, and of course important income. Hilary shared Barbara's life through these very difficult years. Her emotional and intellectual support was as important as everything else she provided to Barbara.

Jokes about the prehistoric society aside, Hilary had an active and powerful mind. Sadly, the archive did not reveal whether, in 1974, she accepted a proposal to catalogue 2000 volumes for Oxford's Modern Greek departmental library for the handsome fee of £250; I think it likely that she was able to resist the honorarium offered, but she kept the letter, and it is evidence of her expertise. These clever sisters also shared a love for the domestic tasks of their shared life: Hilary sets aside her book for cross stitch; they both describe dress making, wardrobe planning, endless food, and the flowers they both adored.

Hilary was also loyal and warm. On her later Greek holidays, when Jock Liddell was infirm and unable to see, she wrote letters for him. No wonder he testified that Barbara had the perfect sister.

One of the condolence letters Hilary put in the archive reads:

Dear Mrs Walton—Hilary.

I was sad to read about Ba. I have such vivid memories of her in the Wrens at Beaulieu. She made me laugh so. I can see her now being the crystal gazer, & producing the most wonderful dreams.

I hope she didn't have too long a struggle, & I hope that life was fulfilling. The Golden Crested Wren.
It will be horrid for you & lonely without her. Widows get sympathy—yet your emptiness will be equal.
I wish—I wish—but that is a waste of time.

You will have so many letters—there is no need to answer a stranger. Just accept that I think of you—
& feel glad that I knew Ba.

Yours, Phoebe David.

After Barbara's death, Hilary took on the task of protecting her sister's legacy. No one knew better how suddenly and utterly literary success could disappear. Even during her first run of success as a novelist, Barbara suffered from underestimation and misinterpretation, sometimes comically but also dangerously. When a friend's sole comment on a novel was "You know, Barbara, you can get very nice underwear at Marks & Spencers", Barbara's astonishment was mixed with amusement—but isn't it odd that a friend so missed the point? More ominously, her publisher, Jonathan Cape, could be infuriatingly casual about her books. Barbara's scrapbook contains a clipping of Cape's blurb promoting *Less Than Angels*, with exasperated underlining (of "ornithologists" where it should say anthropologists). It is a terribly revealing mistake, for no one can read the book with genuine appreciation and make such an error. (Are people still reading any of the other books featured in the blurb? How do publishers decide which books to bother with? But this is yet another story.)

Knowing the dangers, Hilary set about correcting some of the misconceptions about her sister, but this proved very heavy lifting; Hilary herself was compared to the Queen Mother by an American newspaper, and Barbara continues to be seen as a daughter of the village vicarage...with dreary knickers. The world WILL have its misconceptions.

Hilary's task of protecting her sister's legacy was no small one, and she needed her sense of humour. While her effort to provide a truer picture of Barbara was not successful, her work to preserve Barbara's legacy emphatically was. She would be overjoyed that the novels have attained classic status, and remain in print all over the world.

Carefully placed into Hilary's archive, Barbara's scrapbooks begin with favourite reviews, retyped and pasted in the front of the first scrapbook. They show that from the beginning, Barbara Pym's novels were understood and placed in the pantheon by discerning reviewers, who were not consulted when Cape wrote silly promotional blurbs, and then slammed the door on her writing career in 1963. By the time I met Hilary in the 1990's Macmillan was beginning to slide down the same route as Cape, letting books fall out of print, and she asked me to help get their attention. Characteristically, Hilary was irritated but undaunted, sharp but always cheerful.

There is so much more to say about Hilary and Barbara, and more *will* be said, next year, when we celebrate our 30th anniversary as a society. Hilary Pym took enormous interest and pleasure in this society and what it could achieve, and we Pym readers have many reasons to be grateful that Hilary was an exemplar of sisterhood. Further, we have a lot in common with her: we love to laugh, we love Barbara's art, and we don't give up easily either.