GREEN LEAVES

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Report on the North American Conference, Cambridge, MA, March 17-19, 2023

From the blog of Dylan Jovino Pereira
as told to Betsy Hanson

Relatives have told me for years that I remind them of my Brazilian great-uncle, Senhor MacBride-Pereira. It's something about my smile, the way I gesture when I talk, and my habit of staring at people when I'm out in public. Apparently Great-Uncle MacB-P would linger behind the net curtains in his upstairs bedroom in a British suburb and watch the people passing below. 'The things I see!' he would say.

I have no net curtains to hide behind, but I *do* have the uniform of a caterer's assistant, the work I do to help cover my grad school expenses. Put on a white shirt, black pants, and bowtie, and stand by a buffet table, and you become invisible. So I was that March Friday night at the Church of the Advent in Boston, where I was hired to help with the dinner for the Barbara Pym Society.

Ah yes, the things I saw!

We'd set up the parish hall for fifty-five guests, wine on a table at the back and the buffet chafing dishes simmering at the front. I know what to expect the first night of a conference: quick glances at name tags, polite hellos, fetching of drinks, tapping of a wine glass to start the orderly filing through the buffet line, cordially murmured conversations during the meal.

But not this group! Well, I did see some name-tag glances, but the guests (who call themselves 'Pymmites,' I learned) greeted each other as if at a long-awaited family reunion – 'It's been four years!' I overheard several times. Conversation and laughter quickly filled the hall.

Tom Sopko, the emcee for the evening, rang a huge bell to signal that dinner was served; I was shocked when I lifted the cover off the cauliflower gratin and discovered a green caterpillar.

I was about to hurry to the kitchen to tell the chef when one of the guests brayed, 'A caterpillar in the

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Betsy Hanson reading 'Some Problems of Rhymed Couplets'
Photo: Jutta Schiller

cauliflower cheese!' Big laughs from the buffet line! Turns out the 'caterpillar' was several green grapes threaded onto a small skewer. (Nope, I didn't get an explanation of this in-joke.)

After the meal, the group headed for the church chapel for the reading of what Tom called 'winning stories.' The chef had asked me to carry some bags of trash to the bins outside, so I made a quick detour and peeked in to see what was up. Many a conference attendee, sated with wine and buffet dinner, will nod off during a post-meal presentation, but not this group. They listened to the three stories (by Betsy Hanson, Charles Hansmann, and Diane Alimena) with chuckles, ripples of laughter, and even guffaws. More in-jokes. . .

At the end of the evening, a group of women gathered to order Uber rides. A bit of confusion ensued about who was going with whom, but I was impressed that these 'women of a certain age' knew their way around an app.

The Sheraton Commander hired me to serve the group on Saturday and Sunday. I helped put out a breakfast spread (the fruit cups were popular) in the Independence Ballroom, where ninety-six attendees found seats under the six spangled chandeliers. Tom started the day's events by telling the twenty-one newbies attending the conference that 'You will know you are among your people.'

Among the tote bags, mugs, and books on the merch table were buttons that read 'Excellent Woman,' 'Unsuitable,' and most enigmatic, 'Only Want One Thing.' Invisible as I was, I couldn't ask for an explanation but hoped to have some clues by the end of the weekend.

The final talk that morning, 'From Deodar Grove to Packed Lunches on Exmoor,' segued appropriately to the 'packed lunches' offered in brown paper bags during the midday break. 'I don't trust that roast beef!' one guest said as she grabbed the bag with a turkey sandwich instead.

Mid-meal, a shrill call rang out that the hot-water urn was empty and the black tea bags almost gone! This was the first time, in my many gigs as a catering assistant, that I've seen the tea service depleted before the coffee. I sensed immediately that it was no small thing, however, and hurried to the kitchen to replenish the supply.

Saturday was sunny and even warm for mid-March in Cambridge, close to fifty degrees. Attendees returned from strolls around the nearby park and the Harvard campus and settled in for the afternoon's presentations. I slipped into the ballroom to replenish the ice-water urn and lingered to watch a black-and-white documentary about a poor London neighborhood in the 1950s. Even with the room darkened and everyone's 'packed lunch' digesting, I detected no post-meal nappers. The audience was rapt.

The dinner that evening featured even more conversation cacophony than the night before. And moving among the diners to serve drinks and the plated entrees, I sensed a warmth, comfort, and courtesy (many 'thank-yous' and smiles) that I have to say is rare among conference groups.

This impression was marred, however, when I discovered that two of the maybe-not-so-excellent women at a foursome table had skipped out without paying for their drinks. Tom assured the bar that the culprits would be found by the end of the conference on Sunday.

Sunday morning was clear and cold, with a brisk wind. Although I wasn't scheduled to work until the brunch at 12:30, I put on my uniform and got busy with the ice-water urn again as the talks began.

The attendees listened politely to all the presentations, leaning forward slightly in their chairs with appreciative smiles, only a handful peeking at their phones. So I was shocked when, at the mention of some British publisher (didn't quite catch the name, 'Tom Mash-something'), the group erupted into a loud hissing, as if a basket of snakes had been let loose in the room.

Sarah Saville Shaffer at the Merchandise Table
Photo: Jutta Schiller

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The final Sunday event was a dramatized reading by ten of the group, who performed with gusto. A few of the lines that made the audience laugh:

'The things women did to men!'

'But he's a celibate, of course. Anyone can see that. It sticks out a mile!'

'I'm not a great marmalade eater at the best of times.'

'...the essential rightness [of a cassocked clergyman] anywhere.'

Another in-joke, the mention of a 'jumble sale donkey drawing a cart,' caused a wave of hilarity.

The reading ended to vigorous applause. Tom then asked everyone to pull from their conference folders the lyrics to a song, 'Unsuitable Things.' Everyone joined in loudly, as if they had sung it many times before.

As he wrapped up the conference, Tom announced the news of the unpaid bar tab. After a flutter of discussion in the group – 'I'm sure I paid mine,' 'I didn't have any wine or

Dramatized reading with Charles Gilbert and others
Photo: Jutta Schiller

cocktails' – two women (one was the first-prize winner in the story contest!) stepped forward, saying they had waited and waited for the tab and decided the drinks must be included with the dinner. Hey, we were short-staffed, I was doing my best to keep up!

Maintaining my invisibility to the end, I watched the attendees give each other warm hugs of farewell or break off for outings, apparently to the Harvard museums. And yes, I had gathered some clues to the words on those buttons:

Anything to do with a publisher named Tom Mash-something seems 'unsuitable.'

An 'excellent woman' listens politely to presentations, says 'please' and 'thank you,' negotiates an Uber ride, and pays her bar tab.

And the 'only one thing' that Pymmites want is to gather as if at a family reunion, laughing at in-jokes, sharing meals and stories, and enjoying the comfort of being among their people.

Ah yes, the things I saw!

Tio-Avô MacBride-Pereira would be proud.

A Note from the Editor

by Jutta Schiller

Sometimes you need someone else to realize the richness in your life. In my case it was a former speaker at the conferences of the Barbara Pym Society. Just before the conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in March 2023 she got in contact with the Society to ask if we would be interested in reviewing a novel she wrote based on her experiences in the Bodleian Library while she was researching for her book *The World of Barbara Pym*, published in 1987 by Macmillan.

Janice Rossen has talked at various conferences both in the US (eg 2002) and in the UK. We have not heard from her for a long time, but Barbara Pym is still a part of her life, not only because of the novel published in 2023 but for the weekly readings of Barbara Pym's works with her friends in Delft, where she lives.

Janice called it 'magical' that Pym and her books have united people all over the world, and she praised the atmosphere at the conferences in Cambridge and Oxford, which she thought was special because of the kind of discussions there 'and the love that everyone had for reading'. She hasn't 'seen it anywhere else'.

Janice Rossen told us she is impressed that the 'Barbara Pym Society continues to thrive...'

Well, what else could I say after having attended another splendid conference of the Barbara Pym Society in Cambridge? One member of the Society once said, these conferences are just like annual family meetings but without the difficulties family events sometimes have. How true!

So thank you to everyone in the Society for making my (and I am sure others as well) life so rich. Bearing this in mind I have the answer now for a question quoted so often by Pym fans: '"But what does it [all this reading] lead to...?"' (Miss Lord to Dulcie Mainwaring in *No Fond Return of Love).*

My reply to that would be the same as Dulcie's: '"English Literature can give one a good deal of pleasure."' The one written by Barbara Pym much more so. (See above). And read yourself in this issue how much pleasure 'all this reading' brings to us on the various events of the Barbara Pym Society.

Janice Rossen, The Dashwood Papers *(Wings Press, June 2023, hardcover and ebook).*

Deb's Last Diary – Spring 2023

by Deb Fisher

Deb Fisher and David Parmenter. Photo: Jutta Schiller

16 March (Thursday)
The first time I came to Boston to attend the North American conference, I was only six months into my five-year tenure as Chair of the Barbara Pym Society. Now, arriving for the second time, I have only six months left. Post-COVID Cambridge, Massachusetts, seems to be full of turkeys – strutting around people's yards, attempting to cross busy Massachusetts Avenue, even making themselves at home around the Harvard University campus. Mrs Bone would find it alarming. Jutta Schiller is here before me, and we spend my first evening with Betty Zausner, a familiar face at both US and UK Pym conferences. Linda McDougall arrives, making the gathering feel complete.

18 March (Saturday)
Since my Bed & Breakfast doesn't actually serve any food, Saturday morning's stand-up continental breakfast – a traditional part of the North American conference – is particularly welcome, and I chat with some new members. There are 21 at this year's conference, quite an achievement. Indeed, the whole conference is a considerable achievement for Tom Sopko and the North American board, despite having to be held at the Sheraton Hotel because of the unavailability of our accustomed venue, Harvard Law School.

20 March (Monday)
All too soon it is over for another year, and by the time I board the plane home, I am already thinking about our Spring Meeting and wondering how I will navigate London when I have to be in York the following day!

23 April (Sunday)
With aching feet, I board a north-bound train at St Pancras and reflect on a very successful Spring Meeting. (At this point I don't realise I have left my camera in London!). Daisy Dunn has been a revelation – not only clever and talented but also beautiful, and such a nice person!

I hope that those present, especially the first-timers, will remember that wonderful talk.

Reflecting on my time as Chair of the Barbara Pym Society as I look out of the window of the train, I feel a certain amount of satisfaction. I believe we've been through some difficult times with considerable success – critical times, perhaps, since not all societies have survived lockdown. We've eliminated many of the problems that faced us at the start of my tenure, and I feel the next Chair will have a solid base on which to build. Let's pray for no more pandemics.

If I were forced to choose a few memories I particularly cherish, I would recall the 25th anniversary celebration of the Society with the wonderful Jilly Cooper. I would also think of the day my daughter addressed a Pym conference (something I never imagined would happen) in 2019; the success of our 2021 'comeback', with exciting new speakers such as Mayuko Akiyama and Paul Richards; drinking prosecco to celebrate Paula Byrne's biography of Barbara Pym; and of course those wonderful readings from Barbara's correspondence with Philip Larkin at last year's spring meeting, where for the first time in many years we had teenagers in the audience! I cannot imagine that there will be any achievements in my future to compete with my time as Chair of a society which has given me such enjoyment in the past thirty years. And this is as it should be.

To quote Britain's second most illustrious diarist, Samuel Pepys, 'and so to bed'...

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Conference Paper

From Deodar Grove to Packed Lunches on Exmoor: Landscapes in the Novels of Barbara Pym

By Amaret Johnson

Barbara Pym uses landscapes to add depth, humor, and sometimes cruel irony to her novels. We can divide these landscapes into personal spaces, public spaces, 'edge spaces,' and the spaces that exist off-stage but are important in the inner lives of the characters.

Pym's domestic landscapes reveal the personalities of their owners. We see this in *Some Tame Gazelle* where each of the main characters has a preferred garden style. These front gardens serve as a kind of shorthand for Pym, which she uses to give quick character sketches.

Pym also has fun satirizing the pretensions of her characters, as she does with Miss Doggett, whose parlor is darkened by the shade of an exotic monkey puzzle tree. The botanically named Violet in *No Fond Return of Love* restyles herself as the modern Viola, but marries the unromantically named Bill Sedge, sedge being a kind of marsh grass.

As Pym's characters interact in public settings, we see their inner preoccupations. In *A Glass of Blessings* Wilmet acts out her excitement over what she thinks will be a romantic encounter with Piers by enthusing over a bed of lupins in the park. By contrast, Leonora in *The Sweet Dove Died* likes public gardens that are contrived for effect, like the Isola Bella, where every inch is as highly groomed as Leonora herself. As Barbara Pym aged, she found herself increasingly disturbed by what she saw as the ugliness of much of modern culture. We see this in the ugly public spaces of the provincial university in *An Academic Question*.

Churchyards and cemeteries are perfect places for the juxtaposition of the sublime and the ordinary in Pym's work. Archdeacon Hoccleve wanders among the tombs in his churchyard, admiring the yews while the normally adoring Belinda thinks of tea.

The theme of being at the edge of things recurs throughout the novels. Beginning with Belinda Bede hiding behind a rhododendron bush, every novel has characters observing others from behind bushes, through windows, or over fences, hovering on the edge of engagement. The suburb itself is an in-between space, neither urban nor rural. Much is made in the novels of the distance traversed to get to these locales. In *NFR* Aylwin Forbes can't figure out how to get to Dulcie's house by bus and has to take a taxi there to declare his love.

While these suburban scenes portray a comforting sameness set against unfulfilled dreams, it is in the spaces where the characters reach the border between the human-built world and the natural world that their inner longings come into focus. Love, infatuation, and sexual activity flourish in these edge spaces. In *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet walks by the Thames with Piers in a glow of enchantment. The path by the river in *Less Than Angels* is an ordinary space by day, but in the evening it is a place for sexual experimentation.

In *No Fond Return of Love*, a decisive scene between Dulcie and Aylwin takes place between the road and the sea, and Aylwin is suddenly intrigued by her.

Off-stage lies the unseen 'beyond.' Many of these landscapes have mythology associated with them. This being Pym, they have their earthy or funny side as well. In *A Few Green Leaves*, scenes of Greece occupy Daphne's mind. This is where she will begin a new life. Alas, Daphne finds herself transplanted to a suburb of Birmingham instead. She thinks of returning to Tom's rectory, only to find that she is not wanted. The irony of life here is merciless, like some Greek tragedy. We might be sorrier, if it weren't so funny.

The wild beyond includes the moors, not the moors of the Brontës but of Pym. Exmoor is a place where Professor Root tramps through the rain and eats packed lunches in dreary company. Dartmoor is also a place of fierce weather and a place of myth, an unlikely spot for Mildred Lathbury of *Excellent Women* and her friend Dora, but there they are, gazing out of a hotel window at the rain. Mildred takes a decisive step towards marriage during her time away by sending a postcard to Everard Bone, showing 'A Dolmen on Dartmoor,' possibly the well-known 'Spinsters' Rock.' Everard Bone, with his interest in prehistory, gets the point.

Pym's characters move freely among these landscapes. This mobility is a modern phenomenon, and Pym makes full use of it in her writing to explore the psychological complexities of twentieth-century life while never losing her sense of fun or her sense of the intriguing possibilities the world offers.

Amaret Johnson has been an English teacher, social worker, homeschool tutor, saleswoman, and community volunteer. She currently gardens, drinks tea, reads good books, and contemplates the landscape on a homestead in southern New Hampshire.

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Conference Paper

'Proper Conduct' in Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love* and in *The Towers of Trebizond* by Rose Macaulay

by Celia Bland

Of all Barbara Pym's heroines, Dulcie Mainwaring in *No Fond Return of Love* is the one we could most assuredly call a 'very private eye.' Following in Pym's own footsteps, Dulcie's 'investigation' of Aylwin Forbes reveals a willingness to misrepresent her motives and intentions to gather clues about the man she loves. Tracking down leads, Dulcie seems most akin to the colorful and indefatigable detectives of mystery novels. Dulcie's investigations are something I discuss in my paper, but I frame them as a quest rather than a 'case.' Dulcie's quest for love and fulfillment – as represented by Aylwin – becomes a means for apprehending new definitions of 'proper conduct,' that is, how best to live a good and productive life.

For Dulcie's generation, proper conduct for women involved supporting men in their endeavors – to being a man's 'tower of strength' – and acting, as Pym often metaphorizes it, like a Martha rather than a Mary. For Laurie, a British woman touring Turkey in Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond,* proper conduct requires a woman to marry, attend church, and have children. Dulcie's and Laurie's 'quests' allow them to question and confront their understandings of proper conduct, and my paper examines the evidence of those conclusions.

The famous biographer of Dr. Johnson, James Boswell, wrote in a letter dated 1763: 'My great object is to attain a proper conduct in life. How sad will it be if I turn out no better than I am!' Quoting this letter in *The Towers of Trebizond*, Laurie comments: 'Once people used to talk about being good and being bad, they wrote about it in letters to their friends, and conversed about it freely; the Greeks did this, and the Romans, and then, after life took a Christian turn, people did it more than ever, and all through the Middle Ages they did it, and through the Renaissance, and drama was full of it, and heaven and hell seemed forever round the corner, with people struggling on the borderlines and never knowing which way it was going to turn out, and in which of these two states they would be spending their immortality. Nineteenth-century novels are full of such interesting conversations, and the Victorian agnostics wrote to one another about it continually, it was one of their favourite topics, for the weaker they got on religion the stronger they got on morals...'

Inspired, no doubt, by these examples, Laurie's narrative – comic and flighty as it often seems – seriously considers the consequences of free will and 'wrong' choices, and asks

whether there is any possibility of 'proper conduct' after one has chosen 'to turn out no better than I am.'

In contrast, we could say that for Dulcie, the discovery that she is 'no better than she is' might be an important act of self-discovery. She, like Laurie, learns to lead rather than to follow; and to adventure into new environments rather than stay home, as women of that generation were encouraged to do, waiting and watching.

One interesting quirk of Laurie's and Dulcie's quests is that multiple critics – Griffin Taylor, Barbara Everett – without ever connecting the two novels, refer to Dulcie (short for Dulcinea?) and her friend, Viola, and Laurie and Aunt Dot, as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza: the former, a visionary romantic and the other, a hearty pragmatist. Certainly, Dulcie and Laurie both do some tilting at windmills, as I illustrate in my paper.

Don Quixote may not only prove an inspiration for the protagonists' quests, but offer a stylistic connection between *Towers* and *NFR*. Both novels contain post-modern flourishes. Like Cervantes' 17th-century classic, these two books, published (Macaulay) in 1956 and (Pym) in 1961, repeatedly break the fourth wall, making the reader aware of the narratives as novels in process. As the plot of *NFR* progresses, Dulcie moves from being an observer of life to a participant. '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...Perhaps there was some kind of pattern to life after all. It might be like a well-thought-out novel, where every incident had its own particular significance and was essential to the plot.'

Celia Bland is the author of three collections of poetry and co-editor with Martha Collins of Jane Cooper: A Radiance of Attention *(University of Michigan, 2019). Her essay on the poetry of Maxine Kumin is upcoming in the* Denver Quarterly.

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Conference Paper

Austerity Britain in *No Fond Return of Love*

by Linda McDougall

On the last day of August 1961, aged just 19, I arrived at Southampton, England, after a 6-week, twelve-thousand-mile sea journey from my home in New Zealand in the southern Pacific Ocean. New Zealand's population sixty-two years ago was just under two million.

I had never been overseas before, but I had won a scholarship to study for three years at Drama School in London's Swiss Cottage.

I remember clearly my first impressions of England as I made the train journey into London's Victoria Station: It was filthy. Grime seemed to cover every surface, and most things were either completely broken or patched up to last another day.

Post-war austerity was at its peak. Life was tough for every British citizen. Barbara Pym was working as an editor at the International African Institute and earning around seven pounds a week. *No Fond Return of Love* was her sixth published novel.

Sixty years later I only need to open my copy of *NFR* and immediately I am back in 1961, the year it was published and I arrived in England. Pym's publisher was Jonathan Cape. *Excellent Women* was the readers' favourite – selling nearly seven thousand copies, something which would please any young writer today, but back in the 1950s was even more impressive. When *NFR* was published Barbara had every reason to believe that her delighted readers would go on enjoying and rereading about life in Pymland, so much loved and appreciated by all of us.

Just as the book came out, Barbara's first fan letter from poet and novelist Philip Larkin arrived, suggesting he might write an article praising her books.

As Larkin sent his letter, the 'Swinging Sixties' were swinging into action, and suddenly Barbara and her novels seemed destined for the scrap heap.

Her publisher, Jonathan Cape, was very successful and highly regarded. Sadly, Cape himself died just before *NFR* was published, and he was replaced by Tom Maschler, who very quickly became the bane of Barbara's life.

Maschler was enthusiastic for change and deeply misogynistic. He told Barbara that nobody wanted to read her books anymore, that books needed to make money and hers didn't. He sacked her forthwith, and all the new authors he commissioned were men. He included two books of John Lennon's sketches which sold very well, and Barbara and the world she had created were swept out to sea as the sixties tsunami of excitement hit Britain.

Larkin, always an acute observer, marked the moment with his famous poem 'Annus Mirabilis'. He made it a personal lament, but oh – how appropriate it was for what had happened to Barbara.

The key problem for women as the 1960s began was that men – however ghastly – ruled the world. Totally. Whether they were mixing with the characters in Pym's books, or the men in Barbara's own life – what they said, what they felt and what they wanted became the law of the land. Men were the official wage earners, and the heads of households. The revolution had begun but the promotion of women to equality was at least a couple of decades away.

Life at the beginning of the sixties was certainly austere. Everyone was short of cash. The homes and streets were grimy, broken and unfashionable after a long and bitter war. What Barbara sets up in the opening chapter of *NFR* is the bored loneliness of women of every social class living in that decade. The indexing conference that opens the novel is 'just the kind of thing that was recommended for women in her position', muses Dulcie – 'an opportunity to meet new people and to amuse herself by observing the lives of others, even if only for a week-end and under somewhat unusual circumstances.' She mentions several times over the course of the weekend how attractive and good-looking Dulcie finds Aylwin Forbes. 'Fit' men in that post-war period were so hard to come by that the idea of catching someone within your imagination and then building a story about it, so that the whole affair happens in your head, was the way to proceed. A way of filling in time.

Women who wanted real lovers had to prove they could provide everything a man might need. Viola put in a bid for Aylwin by offering to do his indexing for free. Dulcie – like her creator Barbara – believed she had reached the age when it was too late for real love. She was 'on the shelf' and her satisfaction in a relationship with a man was the pleasure she got from carefully researching the random threads from his life and weaving them together into a fantasy in her head. Reality could be safely abandoned in Pym-land.

NFR preserves perfectly forever the old order when times were tough for everyone and men still ruled the world and kept women firmly in their place.

Barbara's reputation is secure now, and we can enjoy looking back at the way things were before 1963 in her excellent and accurate portrayal of what life was like for women in austerity Britain.

Linda McDougall is a writer and TV producer/director. She has given talks at several previous Pym conferences in the US and UK, and produced the documentary 'We Knew Barbara' for the Pym centenary in 2013. She is the author of Westminster Women *(Vintage, 1998) and* Cherie: The Perfect Life of Mrs Blair *(Politicos, 2001).*

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Conference Paper

'This Opening One's House to Strangers.' Post-War Housing and Imaginative Migrations in *No Fond Return of Love*

by Terri Nickel

Barbara Pym's novels often feature heroines making the best of less-than-ideal housing.

An acute shortage of housing serves as the background to *Excellent Women*, for example, where Mildred Lathbury deals with the problems of sharing a bathroom and cleaning up after her not-so-excellent housemates.

In *No Fond Return of Love*, Pym's heroine enjoys the luxury of her own ample house, one she willingly opens to both her niece Laurel and to Viola Dace, after the latter confesses that she is struggling with the effects of the Rent Act of 1957. This particular novel moves beyond concerns about the shortage of housing immediately after the Second World War to explore how increasing prosperity and commercialization affect the concept of home itself, both as lived space and as national symbol.

NFR begins with the premise that getting away from home can be a good thing, and the book views such wandering, both physical and mental, as productive – in effect a spur to narrative. In particular, the spaces of the country home, the bed-sitting room, and the private hotel foster Dulcie's imagination as she moves through an increasingly modern world.

Toward the end of the novel, as Viola Dace and Dulcie Mainwaring are riding a bus to take a tour of the castle in Taviscombe, Viola declares: "'Mrs Forbes didn't seem to want us to go to the castle – I suppose it must seem rather shocking to the older people – this opening one's house to strangers.'" Viola directs her sympathy to the gentry and aristocracy after the First and Second World Wars who found themselves seeking ways to make the family estates profitable by opening them to a paying public. As Dulcie and Viola tour the castle and encounter Wilmet Forsyth, Keith, and Piers from *A Glass of Blessings*, they take on the role of tourists, relying on the guidebooks for sale in the foyer, for information about the house's treasures. Their perspective as consumers – of the house as local attraction – displaces more traditional admiration of such homes' historic treasures and helps transform the house into a commercial venture.

Dulcie and her neighbor Mrs. Beltane both open rooms in their homes to others, although the latter's interests are more commercial. For Laurel (and her mother), such spaces are part of a broader fantasy of independent life in a bed-sitting room, one that Laurel achieves only after moving to

a shared space closer to the center of London. Dulcie entertains the idea of letting rooms with gas-cookers to young girls and 'students from Africa.' These points in the novel remind the reader of other contemporary narratives, like Lynne Reid Banks' *The L-Shaped Room* or Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, which feature protagonists struggling to negotiate their way through a city full of strangers. Pym seems well aware of a cultural shift that will soon be defined by girls in Swinging London and immigrants in Notting Hill, Bayswater, and Pimlico.

The visit to Taviscombe draws Dulcie into another kind of liminal housing space as she investigates the Eagle House Private Hotel, a space she idealizes as the 'birthplace' of Aylwin Forbes. Yet hotels blur the distinction between public and private, home and away. The very idea of the hotel piques Dulcie's imagination even before she visits Taviscombe as she muses on the illustrated tariff notice. Once at the resort, she visits three hotels, finding stimulus for imaginative reverie at each. (It's no coincidence that Pym makes an appearance as an unnamed novelist at the Anchorage Hotel in this section of the book).

If *NFR* starts with the premise that getting away from ordinary life helps one overcome failed romance, how does it resolve the plot after exposing a given romantic trajectory as misguided? Must the heroine return home?

After her time in Taviscombe, Dulcie goes back to the same house, this time alone. Viola's own romance has disappointed Dulcie who, having felt that she created Viola, cannot imagine her in Finchley Road, much less Neasden.

In the world of upended marriages, far-flung suburbs, and semi-transient housing, Dulcie and Aylwin must remain suspended at the threshold in a rapidly modernizing and commercial world. The novel can end only with a tentative opening of the door and wonderment on Dulcie's part as Aylwin approaches with flowers. Dulcie's hesitation on the doorstep is telling. She will open it to one who is no longer a stranger, but Pym leaves much to the imagination as the reader wonders where Dulcie's creative capacities will take her.

Terri Nickel, a member of the Barbara Pym Society since 2018, studied 18th-century literature in the 1980s in California and has taught at The University of Tulsa, The University of Southern Maine, Bates College, and Bowdoin College. She lives in Bath, Maine, where she makes jam, reads novels, and tries to grow dahlias.

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Conference Paper

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

by Sandra Goldstein

Suburbs and sagas are intertwined themes in *No Fond Return of Love*. My paper traces parallels between Barbara Pym's life in a London suburb and that of Dulcie Mainwaring, and describes the sagas woven by Barbara and Dulcie, and by the Carne family, in Rachel Ferguson's novel *The Brontës Went to Woolworth's*.

The novel's setting is the London suburb of Barnes, where Barbara Pym and her sister Hilary moved in 1949. Like Dulcie's neighbor Senhor MacBride-Pereira, and Mabel Swan and Rhoda Wellcome from *Less Than Angels*, Barbara and Hilary enjoyed watching their neighbors from an upstairs window. 'The things I see!' thinks Senhor MacBride-Pereira, when he espies an interesting passer-by. As Mabel in *LTA* says: 'What is the point of living in a suburb if one couldn't show a healthy curiosity about one's neighbours?'

The suburbs are traditionally portrayed as isolated and dreary, and *No Fond Return of Love* is replete with such negative comments. Dulcie's house is so far from central London that her niece Laurel is depressed, thinking that it is really not London at all. 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 ...'

Barbara and Hilary enjoyed 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 town planner Thomas Sharp, who complained of suburbia's 'social sterility, its aesthetic emptiness, its economic wastefulness.' An arid, sterile environment is an appropriate setting for Dulcie Mainwaring, who is still unhappy about her broken engagement. Living alone in a big house in the suburbs, Dulcie is unappreciated by those around her, especially by her temporary housemates, Laurel and Viola. Laurel is eager to move out and rent a bedsitter in Quince Square, which, according to Pym's notes, was off Kensington Park Road in Notting Hill. And Viola, as Dulcie is quite aware, merely regards her as a last resort until she can find a new flat in the city.

Like Barbara herself, who had enjoyed the game of 'sagas' from an early age, Dulcie loves finding out about people, finding solace in the lives of others. In her memoir *A Lot to Ask*, Hazel Holt explains that the subject of a saga 'can be anyone, a famous person alive or dead, an animal, or an ordinary person whom you can observe.' Barbara's mother Irena Pym advised: 'Find out what you can without asking.' In 1932, smitten with fellow Oxford student Henry Harvey, Barbara diligently recorded sightings of 'Lorenzo' in her diary. On January 25, 1933, she wrote: 'This diary seems to be

going to turn into the Saga of Lorenzo.' Similarly infatuated by Aylwin Forbes, Dulcie determines to learn as much as possible about him.

At the International African Institute, Barbara and Hazel enjoyed making up mini-sagas around the anthropologists. According to Hazel, Barbara usually got it right. On receiving a card from one of their subjects, she wrote to Hazel: 'How nice of him to write to me and so typical of the character we have invented for him.'

Watching passers-by from their window, Barbara and Hilary were particularly interested in two young men who lived nearby whom they called 'Bear' and 'Squirrel.' They built a saga around them, with timetables of 'sightings,' and various expeditions, including a trip to the west country. Hazel told me that this saga was '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.'

One of Barbara's favorite authors, Rachel Ferguson, wrote the definitive chronicle of the saga in her novel *The Brontës Went to Woolworth's*, published in 1931. Deirdre Carne, the novel's narrator, explains that she and her sisters 'learn everything there is to learn about people we love.' The Carnes' most elaborate saga is built around a judge, Sir Herbert Toddington. Meeting the subject of a saga is tricky, as when Deirdre meets Lady Toddington, who asks how long she has known her husband. Hazel relates that Barbara would say: 'Are we supposed to *know* that?' or 'Is it true or did we make it up?' Dulcie experiences the same confusion on returning to Neville Forbes's church after her trip to Taviscombe: '"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.'

At the end of the book, Dulcie's Aylwin saga promises to become reality, when Aylwin realizes that he loves Dulcie, not Laurel. Nothing is definite, but the novel ends with the possibility of a marriage.

Sandra Goldstein studied German and Russian at Bedford College, University of London. During her time at Bedford she lived in Notting Hill, one of the areas featured in No Fond Return of Love. *She embarked on a career as translator and editor with the US Government. Now retired, she and her husband live in Virginia. A member of the Barbara Pym Society since 2004, she has presented several papers at the conferences of the North American chapter of the BPS in Cambridge as well as at the AGM in Oxford.*

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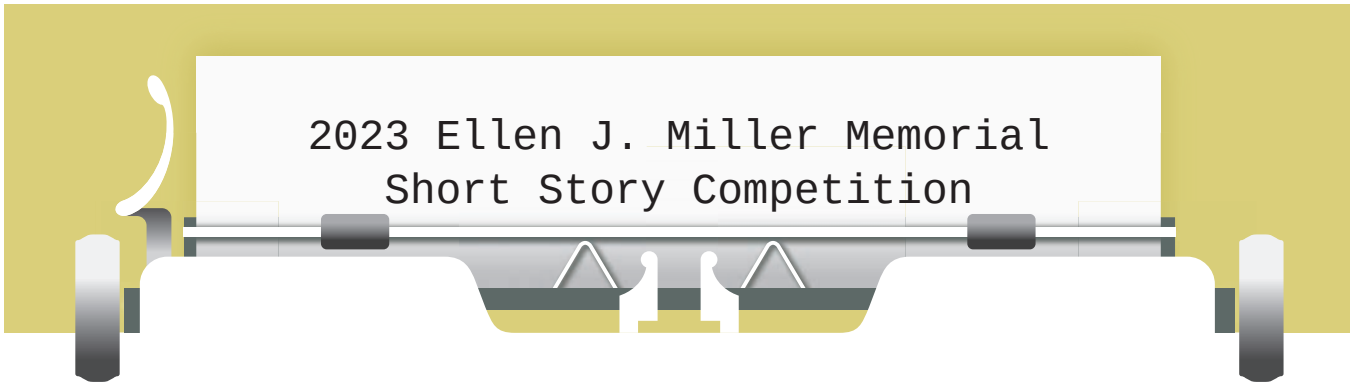

Below are the top four entries from the 2023 Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition, starting with the first-prize winner. Visit the Barbara Pym Society website for information on how to enter the 2024 contest.

Some Problems of Rhymed Couplets

by Betsy Hanson

Oh, those gaudy red and yellow November leaves! The wind storm the previous evening had deposited a wet mass of them on the sidewalk in front of the church. As Dulcie Mainwaring hurried to the poetry workshop, she slipped and landed on that anatomical part known colloquially as the 'derriere.'

Surprised and embarrassed but not injured, she stood up and looked around, as one does, to see if anyone had witnessed her pratfall.

A tall man, his leonine head of blond hair glowing in a shaft of autumnal sunshine, called out.

'I say, are you all right? Why, if it isn't – er –'

Dulcie felt her face flame with a blush as she waved feebly at Aylwin Forbes.

'Dulcie Mainwaring.' She spoke loudly and slowly, as if to a foreigner –surely he had not forgotten her name? 'And I'm fine.'

'Of course! Dulcie! Fancy running into you! Although as my mother would say, "There is no such thing as a coincidence."'

Dulcie hoped that he winked because of a bit of debris blown into his eye.

'Excuse me, I'm late for a poetry workshop.' Dulcie started up the walk to the church entrance.

'Another coincidence! Virgil Blankenship's workshop, is it? A former English colleague. He asked me to join the group.'

And so Dulcie found herself seated at a table in the meeting hall behind the sanctuary with a handful of other poetry lovers, Aylwin taking the seat beside her. Oh, the unwelcome frisson of sitting next to Aylwin! Only months ago this man had asked her to help him with his work and then had shifted to a tepid style of seduction.

Good on me for turning him down, Dulcie reminded herself, since it seemed I was to be his consolation prize after Laurel's rejection.

But still, that frisson...

To distract herself, she focused on Dr. Virgil Blankenship, a stout bald fellow in a black turtleneck sweater.

'Today we will review the poetic forms used in English,' he explained. 'At the end of this session, I will randomly assign a form to each of you, along with a prompt word. Next Saturday you will read your work aloud. You may grumble at being *told* what sort of poem to write, but it is well known that parameters are a stimulus to creativity.'

He then asked each of them to share why they had chosen the class; the two spotty undergrad lads mumbled about wanting to improve their marks in English, a beatnik-type fellow with dark curls resting on the collar of his leather jacket said the world needed to be described as it really is, and a pensioner with celery peeping from her string bag said she wanted to write poems for her grandchildren.

'I want to put my English degree to creative use,' Dulcie said. 'And submit some poems to magazines.'

She was surprised to hear herself boldly declare this ambition, particularly with Aylwin sitting there beside her. Well, he needs to know that there is more to me than indexing! she thought.

Aylwin said Blankenship had invited him with the hope of adding professional expertise.

'And as for parameters, I agree with Dr. Blankenship. Edmund Lydden, the subject of my own research, used the sonnet form to brilliant effect.'

And yet weren't many of those sonnets *unfinished?* Dulcie was tempted to add. Somewhat like my feelings for you, unfortunately. Why, oh why, do I have to feel this buzz of attraction for a person who 'has not been what I deserve,' as a glossy woman's magazine would suggest?

Dr. Blankenship started with pantoums and moved on to the sestina, villanelle, ballad, and haiku. Before the class ended at 3pm, he distributed the poetic forms and themes.

'Free verse is mine,' Aylwin said as he followed Dulcie out of the church. 'Theme of "beasts."'

'Pity you didn't get the sonnet, your speciality,' Dulcie said with what she hoped was a slightly sarcastic tone. 'Mine is rhymed couplets, about "life."'

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'Doubt you can get a rhymed poem published,' he said. 'Free verse, that's the thing. But to quote my mother again, "Someone has to be chosen, so why can't it be you?"'

Surely you are not suggesting that *I* could be *your* chosen one? Dulcie thought.

'And might I interest you in a drink? We could discuss the wonders of the pantoum and villanelle?'

But Dulcie was in no mood for more unwanted frisson so said she was ready for an early night. She watched for slippery leaves as she hurried to her bus stop.

In the newly darkened evening, streetlamps lit up gusts of leaves and pedestrians turned up their coat collars.

I shall compose a poem about November, Dulcie thought, which is certainly a part of life. And what better month to inspire deep poetry? The fecund harvests, over; the daylight crimped into a mere eight hours or less; wet winds flicking the last leaves off the trees; and those leaves clumping on the pavement, causing those in a hurry to fall on their 'derrieres...'

And not to forget the poor people in their shabby coats, shaking tin cups on street corners, their hands and cheeks chapped from the cold...

'Pity you didn't get the sonnet, your speciality,' Dulcie said with what she hoped was a slightly sarcastic tone. 'Mine is rhymed couplets, about "life."'

Sitting by the fire with a wedge of Stilton and the heel of a wholemeal loaf, Dulcie wrote possible November rhymes in a notebook. 'Leaves' and 'grieves,' 'chill' and 'pill,' 'dark' and 'lark,' 'loss' and 'moss?' 'Beggar,' 'poverty,' 'hopelessness' – did any words rhyme with these sad images?

Well, not to worry. She had a whole week to draft and refine a poem. She could get a good start on Sunday.

But on Sunday other tasks beckoned: a thorough scrubbing of the bathtub, tidying the pantry, wiping down the kitchen walls, sorting through a stack of old Christmas cards and making a list of addressees. By evening she was ready to start writing but found that a new BBC radio drama demanded her attention.

And so it went for the rest of the week. A new indexing project kept her busy, as did the usual shopping, cooking, and cleaning. And one did need to rest in the evening! Not to mention that working with other people's words all day leached the energy for using *her* words for poetry.

On Friday morning she spoke sternly to herself about 'buckling down' and writing as soon as she arrived home. If only she had been given free verse! It would be easy to string words together in that poem-y way, stacking up disparate descriptions. In truth such poems left her feeling stupid for not quite understanding the meaning, but surely it was easier to do a poem that didn't rhyme.

At eight o'clock, as Dulcie sat with a still mostly empty notebook page in front of her, there was a knock on the door.

'Hello, dear, I'm sorry to disturb you at this late hour, but I wanted to give you these.' Dulcie's neighbor, Mrs. Beltane, wafting a floral scent even in her quilted dressing gown, handed over a bulging paper bag. 'Pippin windfalls from a friend's garden. One hates to see them go to waste. All those little ones in Asia, you know.'

'Oh, well, I suppose.' It took Dulcie a moment to understand that Mrs. Beltane was referring to the proverbial starving children in China, though it wasn't clear what foraged windfalls could do to help them.

'I know you'll put them to good use. Bottled up for winter, or maybe even some apple brandy?' Mrs. Beltane chuckled. 'If I may say, you don't seem quite the brandy type, my dear. But what do I know?'

When she had thanked Mrs. Beltane and said good night, Dulcie dumped the apples on the kitchen table. They exuded an overly fruity odor; many were rotten, best to be sorted right away.

Oh, dash rhymed couplets! She wasn't going to finish a poem by the next afternoon, that was clear! So she wouldn't show up. No one would care, not even Aylwin. And why should she care if he did? Silly of her to spend good money on such a workshop.

And does anyone ever really want to hear amateur poetry, if it comes to that?

She threw out the rotten apples and peeled and sliced the good ones. With some leftover pastry dough, sugar, and cinnamon she put together two apple pies.

It was almost midnight when the tarts were finished baking. Dulcie set them on a rack to cool and went to bed, relieved to have made a decision to skip the workshop but also vaguely unsettled. She had always been a person to finish what she started.

When she woke the next morning, still dark at seven, a string of rhymed couplets bounced in her head. Oh, never mind, I'm not going to the workshop today, she told herself. But she made a cup of tea and started writing.

So what if this isn't a poem full of heavy thoughts about the meaning of life? she thought. I like it. It's mine. And, surprised but pleased by a sudden flash of confidence, she decided she *would* read it at the workshop and wouldn't care what anyone thought of it. Not even Aylwin.

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Dulcie hoped she would read first, to get it over with, but Dr. Blankenship ordered the readings by the participants' surnames. 'Mainwaring' was last, right after 'Forbes,' the others' names clustered around the early part of the alphabet.

Aylwin, accustomed to speaking in front of groups, recited his poem in a voice too loud for the small room:

Form: *Free Verse* Theme: *Beasts*

The lion, prowling, silent, shrewd,
Loping through the jungle, the silent shrewd jungle
With its cloaking vines, the weltering birds
The lion, keen on his prey, his paws padding the sodden floor
And he springs! The wildebeest clambers, writhes
The lioness hears the victor's roar
Welcomes him, the lion king, the hunter king.

He bowed, smiling, as the beatnik lad started a round of applause.

The pensioner raised her hand.

'That nature program on the BBC showed the female lions doing the hunting? And it wasn't any jungle? More like a big meadow, brown and dried up, it was.'

Exactly what I was thinking, Dulcie thought, remembering what she had learned as a child from an encyclopedia about animals.

Aylwin smiled stiffly. 'Those of us who have made poetry our life study understand artistic license.'

Blankenship turned to Dulcie. 'And now, for our final recitation.'

Dulcie's voice trembled as she began, but after the first stanza her voice was stronger, and she stood up straighter:

Form: *Rhymed Couplet.* Theme: *Life*

When November's chill crisps up the skies
It's time to bake some windfall pies

I sort through the fallen and forgotten
Throw away all the bruised and rotten

Examine the rest, to determine
Which fruit's flesh might have a worm in

Carve them to an even slice
Bake with pastry, sugar and spice

Next the pies must cool and settle –
This is the step that tests my mettle

(Recommended it is not
To eat a pie when steamy hot)

Ready, November's windfall pies!
Autumn apples in new disguise.

Dulcie sat down.

Silence.

She folded the poem and stashed it in her bag.

'I liked that one, I did,' said the pensioner, starting to applaud. 'Says something like it is, not words that don't make sense together, and all that.'

The rest of the class joined the applause but stopped when Blankenship invited the class to adjourn to the tea cart at the back of the room.

Aylwin made no comment about Dulcie's poem and led the others to the urn.

I should have skipped the class after all! Dulcie scolded herself. Why did I think a pie could be the subject of a poem?

Close to tears, she pulled on her coat and headed for the door.

'Miss Mainwaring!'

Was that Aylwin?

No, Blankenship.

'Your charming poem!' he said. 'Referencing the Biblical apple while noting the inevitable fading away of all life.'

'It was about making a pie with the pippins from Mrs. Beltane,' Dulcie said. Blankenship didn't seem to hear her.

'I would like permission to publish your poem in the literary journal that I edit.'

Just then Aylwin walked up, munching a ginger biscuit.

'You're welcome to mine as well, Virge,' he said. 'I'll give you first crack before I submit elsewhere.'

'Indeed.' Blankenship handed Dulcie the address of the journal.

Dulcie nearly danced from the church. Her poem, published! Just like that!

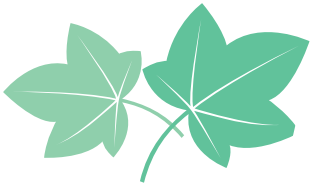
Aylwin called after her, 'A drink to celebrate our success?'

Our success? Ha! *Mine!*

Frisson gone, confidence gained, she called back, 'Not tonight, sorry!' and escaped to her bus stop.

At home she settled with a piece of windfall tart and a cup of Assam, then stood up and read her rhymed couplets in a strong, happy voice.

What will it lead to, writing poems? she wondered. Is a poem more worthy than a pie? Maybe, maybe not. But on this November night, 'dark without a lark,' I have both.



Betsy Hanson, a member of the Barbara Pym Society, lives in Seattle, Washington, where she discovered, in 1980, the work of Barbara Pym via Jane and Prudence *– while reading the novel on a bus, she had her first laugh-out-loud-in-public moment. Her novel,* Always Gardenia, *created in homage to Pym, was featured on the TV program of Nancy Pearl, 'America's Librarian,' and has found readers in Europe, Australia, the UK, many US states, and India. Her story 'All of Me' won third prize in the 2018 Ellen J. Miller Short Story Competition.*

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Much More Must Flow

by Charles Hansmann

Outside the window of the Clevelands' drawing room, the view was unmistakably that of a late afternoon in December. For though the trees had been bare for more than a month, a few of the doors that lined Banbury Road had wreaths, and the wreaths were still green.

'Isn't it a bit early?' Margaret said as she placed the tea and the Ovaltine in front of Francis. He had lately taken to drinking them both together, instead of saving the comfort of warm malted milk until bedtime.

After sixty years of marriage, a husband was entitled to his eccentricities, even if they seemed to be increasing with almost alarming frequency. We are old, Margaret thought, in our dotage, though of course she wouldn't say this to Francis. It seemed better somehow to keep these notions to herself; and better yet, she decided, to dismiss them altogether.

She said again, 'Isn't it a bit early, don't you think?'

Francis had been warming his hands over the steam that rose from the two cups. He looked at her with that peevish expression she had never quite managed to grow fond of. 'I don't know why you always say that,' he said. 'Can't I have my Ovaltine whenever I want?'

Margaret had meant the wreaths. Advent had hardly begun, and while these few green wreaths were certainly welcome, the great risk was that the yew and holly, so beautifully entwined, would already be turning brown by Boxing Day.

Francis sipped his tea and Ovaltine by turns. The steam had subsided but he could still feel the warmth rising into the air as he brought the liquid to his lips. He tried but failed to see his reflection in his cups. That phrase – 'in his cups' – made him smile.

'Did you think of something funny?' Margaret asked.

'Didn't *you* think it funny?'

'But you didn't say anything.'

This was happening more and more – Francis merely thinking something and believing it carried the same weight as if he had said it. But dons have always had their privilege, and husbands too. Perhaps his years of expounding on Donne and Milton and Marvell had convinced Francis that the outer world conformed to his thoughts, whether he spoke them or not.

'Not so near the edge, dear,' Margaret said when Francis put his cup back on the table, 'we don't want to spill.'

Margaret was the same plump wife she had been in her fifties, and 'plump' made Francis think of plums. The thought of plums reminded him that he had come to resent the stewed prunes Margaret now insisted on serving with every meal. What had happened to the healthy digestion of the tall distinguished Oxford don in his handsome fifties, whose adoring female students had delighted in his lectures on the poets of the seventeenth century?

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow...

Francis could not remember the lines that came before those words nor the lines that came after them. He suspected that it might be more in keeping with his mood to forget the context altogether, for although the quote had a rousing quality, it seemed to come from Donne's 'Holy Sonnets' and not his 'Erotic Elegies.'

Francis repeated the quote, but again only mentally. As he listened to the words in his mind he could allow then whatever special meaning he desired, for Margaret would be none the wiser. This silence was a kind of safety. He would soon be eighty-six; he kept his thoughts to himself because he knew he could not trust them.

We are old, Margaret thought, in our dotage, though of course she wouldn't say this to Francis. It seemed better somehow to keep these notions to herself; and better yet, she decided, to dismiss them altogether.

Francis could accept his age, and he could also accept that Margaret, who had always been two years older than him – some things never change – would soon be eighty-eight. What he couldn't accept was that Barbara Bird would soon be fifty-four, the very age that Margaret had been when twenty-year-old Barbara had entered his life.

So much water under the Magdalen Bridge! So much flow since Francis first heard Barbara's footsteps on the stairs to his study. But how could he have heard them? The stairs were at the other end of the hall and the steps were carpeted. Perhaps Barbara had mysteriously engaged those steps to signal her approach, some skill derived from the metaphysical poetry she was studying. Perhaps, presciently, Francis had listened with extra attention, seeing her name next on the list of students he was consulting that day. Despite the carpet he had heard her. Of course, the carpet was worn and really quite thin, so perhaps it was only that.

...one little room an everywhere!

She had read that line with such monotony and utter lack of feeling that it had startled him into a thrilled recognition, his first inkling of the passion that must lie deep within her, which she had to struggle to suppress in his presence. She seemed to want to tend to him, which of course Margaret had always been quite good at. But Margaret was motherly, and he didn't want to be made to feel like a little boy. What he wanted was to be made to feel young, and that's what Barbara had done.

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The problem this evening was that Francis had seen her again.

Barbara Bird had given up her academic ambitions in favor of writing novels. She had extraordinary output. Each year a new book was published on the same date in late summer, as if she were commemorating a significant anniversary of some sort. Francis had long ago erased that disastrous date from his mind, but now it had reappeared, like a pencil impression in a mystery novel, visible again when the paper is held to the light.

'What a funny room.'

Those had been Barbara's last words to him at the Druid Hotel in Dover before she ran off while he was in the bath. Their entire flirtation now felt to him as if it were, like the line from Donne's poem,

One short sleep past...

And indeed the long years since then had been a kind of slumber. But the sight of her this afternoon awakened him. Three writers had been scheduled to discuss the 'revelatory moment' that set them on the path of their careers. The event was held in a kind of cafeteria, such an unlikely venue for a literary talk, and far too spacious for the number of people who attended.

One writer was a middle-aged poet, introduced as 'still famous for his beauty.' Another was a tall and rather ungainly female author whom Francis took to be some kind of nature writer, for she was introduced as having spent 'years in the wilderness.'

The third speaker was Barbara Bird, and to Francis's great disappointment, she had aged. Her smoldering eyes were now more smoke-squinted than soulful, and the demure tones of her voice had a cigarette harshness, her words punctuated by the semicolon of a hacking cough. It sounded like the bark of a fox, and indeed she was wearing an orangish fur cape that looked as if a pack of hounds might have consummated a long chase by sinking their teeth into it.

'Escape,' Barbara said at some point during her talk, 'I knew I had to get out of there, and when I left the hotel I felt free. I had always been at heart rather prudish, and it was then that I knew I would never marry. I would be like a nun, except that my devotion would be to literature. I have a man to thank for that, though it was not his intention to help me in quite this way.' A murmur of humorous appreciation – laughter, actually – passed through the audience with this comment, and Francis felt himself redden.

During the question-and-answer period, Francis fumbled about in his mind for something to ask Miss Bird – for that's how he would address her – something that would lay claim to his role in her development. But she seemed to be rather hard of hearing, for each person who asked her a question was told, rather rudely, to speak more loudly, and Francis was afraid that he might not be able to replicate the careful wry phrasing of his question if he had to say it twice.

As the discussion was coming to a close, there was no activity of food or drink advancing from the cafeteria's service station. The crowd had hesitated, but once it was obvious that there would be no refreshments, everyone made their way to the door. Francis, as was now his habit, had held back so as not to be trampled. But Barbara pushed forward rather aggressively to the head of the group, and Francis thought it might have been her elbow that brushed against his own as she walked past him. The cane he carried so that people would not crowd him did not seem to have any effect on her.

On the sidewalk he watched Barbara get into a taxi; a lonely figure, one might have thought, except that somehow she seemed quite content in the company of her solitude. Somehow, in the years since he had known her, she seemed to have become some *other* Barbara Bird, and he wasn't quite sure how that had happened.

The third speaker was Barbara Bird, and to Francis's great disappointment, she had aged. Her smoldering eyes were now more smoke-squinted than soulful, and the demure tones of her voice had a cigarette harshness, her words punctuated by the semicolon of a hacking cough.

When Francis came home, Margaret was mending his socks. She had picked them up again after serving him his tea and Ovaltine, and now that he had finished both drinks she set her mending down and handed him his cane. Apparently it was time for the evening walk.

'You'll want your scarf,' Margaret said as Francis stood by the door and let himself be swaddled in it. When he stepped through the door he held out his hand and hoped to feel rain. Margaret would not risk pneumonia; it would take only a few drops to send them back inside.

Francis reached out further, but his hand remained dry. Margaret, mistaking his gesture, took his extended hand in hers, and Francis saw her blush with delight. A gallantry overtook him, and he held up his elbow so that they might walk arm-in-arm.

In the dim light, as the evening closed in, the wreaths on the doors looked ghostly, as if they were just the aura of something that had happened long ago. The house in front of them once belonged to Aidan Linkhorn, Francis's postgraduate mentor. How often he had handled that tarnished brass knocker!

And how patiently Professor Linkhorn had awaited progress on Francis's stalled thesis! His distant ancestor, John Cleveland, was only a minor poet, even in his own century, the seventeenth, and Francis had found it hard to sustain any

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enthusiasm for his project. He felt his own pedigree to be somewhat diminished by the patrilineage. Professor Linkhorn had come up to Oxford in '77, eighteen-seventy-seven, and that was now a hundred years ago! He had known Tennyson, who had known Wordsworth, though of course *they* were both Cambridge men. But then again, so were Milton and that rascal Marlowe.

As Francis and Margaret walked on, they saw more wreaths than they had seen from the limited view of their window. But they saw only the shapes of the wreaths; the spritely green color had disappeared in the dark.

'They're early,' Margaret said, 'but I do delight in seeing them.'

'But do they make any difference?' Francis asked.

'About what?'

Francis seemed subdued and spoke quietly. 'With or without wreaths we are old.'

Margaret looked up at him. His face, always lean, was now gaunt. He seemed to be waiting for something. Margaret said, 'Yes, but we are walking. I'd rather be old with wreaths than old without them.'

She thought of those exciting days when they were both undergraduates and spent happy hours reading Donne to each other. They had held a kind of disbelief back then that time would ever pass so monumentally as to make Donne's lines on mortality one day apply to themselves. Now seeing some urgent need in Francis's face, a quote came back to her:

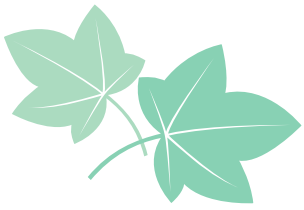
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

These words were not exactly what either of them would find consoling at the moment, and Margaret didn't quote the line aloud. Instead she waited patiently for her mind to develop another thought. When it came she was certain it would be one she could share with Francis.

But it was Francis who spoke first.

'Much more must flow,' he quoted, with a mix of hope and doubt.

Though he walked somewhat haltingly, Francis kept their pace steady, and the pressure on their linked arms remained the same. There was no discernable squeeze at the elbow to reassure her, but Margaret felt encouraged.



Charles Hansmann, a retired New York attorney, lives with his wife in rural Wisconsin and coastal Florida. He was a speaker at the conference of the North American chapter of the Barbara Pym Society in 2008 (together with his wife and Ann and Dan DiPietro) and in 2009. He has won several poetry awards, is the author of five poetry chapbooks, and his work has appeared in several anthologies, including The Best Small Fictions *(2016).*

How Will You Weather an Eternal Night?

by Diane Alimena

Harriet smacked her egg spoon on the top of her first boiled egg. 'Mark my words, Belinda, when Henry and Agatha get back from this Edward Young Festival we are in for a series of the most depressing sermons ever. As nice as it will be to have them away for a few days, it may not be worth the aftermath.' Harriet liberally salted and peppered her egg and attacked it with her first toast soldier.

'Yes,' agreed Belinda, '*Night Thoughts* are very sobering. Perhaps he'll pick up some new insights. That would be a nice change.' It was almost impossible for Belinda to criticize the Archdeacon. 'And maybe a few days away together will be refreshing for them both. Though the bus trip to Welwyn will be tiring.'

Emily had entered with the morning post and spoke up. 'No, Miss. Mrs. Hoccleve isn't going after all. She tripped this morning and sprained her ankle. Just the Archdeacon is going now. The postman told me.'

And indeed, just across the way, Agatha was hobbling with a cane and hurrying the Archdeacon toward the waiting cab.

'Agatha, this is most inconvenient. I was counting on your help to take notes and manage the luggage. You really should have been more careful,' complained Henry.

'I would think you could just be grateful to me for having booked you... I mean us... for this. A night reading of *Night Thoughts* standing by Edward Young's grave at St. Mary's cemetery. What could be a nicer way for you to honor your favorite poet on the 250th anniversary of his birth? I am sorry to have to miss it.' Agatha countered.

Henry settled into the taxi and waved goodbye with an exaggerated gesture. 'Hmph,' he thought, 'I will have to make the best of it... or perhaps the most of it,' as he realized he would be free from his admirable helpmeet for two days.

Agatha hobbled back to the house. When she shut the door her cane joined the umbrellas in the stand and she strode to her large armchair by the fire. Settling in she put her feet up on the hassock and called for Florrie to bring her a tray of coffee. Then picking up her knitting bag she pulled out a hidden box of chocolates and Agatha Christie's latest mystery, *Peril at End House*, and smiled.

Henry arrived at the bus station and managed to find a bench where he parked his suitcase. Then, spying a tobacconist and off-license a few doors down, he strolled over. It was an unseasonably cold June and he knew that Agatha would have been fussing about his health so he would take care. The bell tinkled pleasantly as he entered and sounded even more delightful to him as he left with a pint of brandy and half a dozen cigars.

continued next page

The bus arrived and Henry chose a window seat, first lifting his case to the rack above, then piling his coat and hat on the aisle seat to discourage any fellow passenger from disturbing him. He settled back and took out a cigar, rolled it between his palms, and lit it. 'Ahh,' he thought, 'Agatha will never know. How disagreeable some women can be about the aromatic fragrance of tobacco.' And, as if they read his thoughts, the women in the seat in front of him turned to him and glared. Then the woman by the window raised it with a bang and let the cold, damp air blow in his face. Henry countered by exhaling the smoke a bit more forcefully than necessary in her direction.

When the bus arrived in Welwyn, Henry was delighted to find the White Hart Inn was close to the church and very comfortable looking. 'Reservation for the Archdeacon and Mrs. Hoccleve,' he announced to the clerk. 'However, Mrs. Hoccleve was unable to come so it will just be one in the room.' 'Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Would you prefer a single then?' asked the young man. Henry considered and replied, 'No, no, I'll keep the double,' delighting in the fact that he could sleep in the comfort of a large bed by himself. The room turned out to be beautifully furnished, large, and the central heating made it feel as though it were really summer. It was wonderfully warm.

There was time for a preliminary visit to the church cemetery, so Henry donned his coat and hat and walked over. 'This is remarkably fine,' he thought, 'I will have to be careful to remember each of my impressions. How my sermons on death will come to life,' he chortled sardonically. But at St. Mary's churchyard he was dismayed to find he was not the only person there. The ghastly women from the bus were reverently standing at a gravesite. There was nothing to do but beat a hasty retreat back to the inn.

Henry entered the bar area where a roaring fire invited him to sit. A distinguished-looking man his own age was perusing the pamphlet on the Edward Young Festival. 'Aylwin Forbes,' the man said, extending his hand to Henry. 'Are you here for the night of doom?' 'Archdeacon Hoccleve,' Henry replied. 'Well, certainly here to pay homage to one of our greatest poets. I quote from him extensively in my sermons.' Henry opened his jacket where the remaining cigars were pocketed, but as he removed one, Aylwin's stared at them in a manner that forced Henry to offer one to his new companion. 'Marvelous cigar,' Aylwin said. 'Let me get us something to drink.' Thus Henry felt his generosity was amply rewarded. However, an hour later he was still having to listen to a treatise on an obscure contemporary of Young. 'I have never heard of this Edmund Lydden,' he objected. 'Are you sure these fragments are not a hoax?' Henry blustered. 'It takes a big man to admit to ignorance. I assure you my research has been extensive. Let me tell you about Lydden's winter sonnet,' replied Aylwin.

An hour later Henry retreated to his room to change for the evening. 'Pompous ass,' he mumbled. 'Why would anyone want to listen to him drone on and on like that?' He looked for a glass so that he could fortify himself with a bit of brandy. Deciding against the bathroom glass, he swigged from the bottle. His mood lightened and he almost felt as though he was back in his university days at Oxford.

So began the evening. Twenty or so people gathered around the buffet in St. Mary's parish hall. The food was adequate if uninspired. He was amused to see Aylwin cornered by the ghastly women. Evidently they knew him. 'Serves them right,' he thought. 'Now they can be bored by the fragments.' Steering clear he sought out the Vicar and the president of the Edward Young Society. They fell into easy conversation mostly made up of quotations. It almost became a game where one would begin a sentence only to have the others finish it.

He settled back and took out a cigar, rolled it between his palms, and lit it. 'Ahh,' he thought, 'Agatha will never know. How disagreeable some women can be about the aromatic fragrance of tobacco.'

It was 10pm when the main event was to begin. The June day was light until then and *Night Thoughts* had to be read in the dark. Everyone walked solemnly to the grave and gathered about and Aylwin Forbes began to read. The two ghastly women were standing close to Aylwin listening with rapt attention. Henry was forced to admit the man had a good reading voice but it was hard for him to concentrate on the words when he knew he would be doing a much better job himself. He began to picture himself as narrator, carefully enunciating and dramatically bringing the piece to life. He pictured Agatha and Belinda looking at him, listening with respect, really hanging on his every word. Then the cold and damp began to penetrate his coat. The discomfort brought him back to the present and as he listened again to the familiar words he froze with horror. 'Oh, no,' he thought, 'it's still the first night!' How could everyone else seem so interested and intent when his feet were turning to blocks of ice. The wind picked up and though it did not rain the air was heavy and damp. It was misery, misery. 'How will I weather this eternal night?' he thought, paraphrasing

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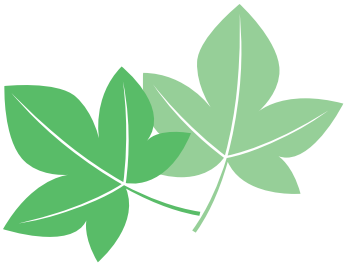
one of his favorite lines. And the misery went on and on as the words went on and on, and his mind turned to Dante and he felt he was in a new level of hell.

It was midnight before the ordeal ended. The applause broke out and cheerful voices congratulated Aylwin. 'Thank you, Dulcie. Thank you, Viola,' said Aylwin, as he acknowledged the praise of the ghastly women. But Henry was already halfway back to the White Hart. He mumbled to the night clerk that he needed breakfast in his room the next morning at 10. Then Henry stumbled up the stairs. From his suitcase he pulled out a hot water bottle, filled it at the tap, shivered into his pajamas, took another swig of brandy and fell into bed.

He woke up at 9:50 slowly coming to a conscious state, first thinking, 'I am warm.' The sun was pouring in at the window and it filled the room with light and heat. There was a gentle rap on the door and a waiter entered with a tray with wonderful hot coffee, cream, and a full English breakfast. Henry had the presence of mind to pour a large swig of brandy into his coffee. He had had a bad chill the night before. He relished the bacon and sausage, the eggs and mushrooms. It was a delight. Delight, light, illumination and epiphany. Sunshine flooded his soul as he lit an after-breakfast cigar and he thought, 'I hope I never hear that poem again.'

On Sunday Henry's congregation took their usual places in the pews. There was no need to guess at the sermon topic. They were so used to hearing about Lorenzo in *Night Thoughts*, they almost thought there was a book in the Apocrypha of that name. The Archdeacon rose and gazed down at his flock.

'Today my text is from Psalm 30.' Henry began, '"Weeping may endure for a night,"' and the congregation sighed collectively. But then the pages of the open prayer books ruffled with an unexpected breeze. The breeze caused by the collective intake of breath from the gasping congregation as the Archdeacon beamed and shouted, '"But Joy cometh in the morning!"'



Diane Alimena, a member of the Barbara Pym Society, is a retired New Jersey Adult Services librarian. She first read Barbara Pym after seeing the 1978 New York Times *review of* Excellent Women. *In 2018 she visited Finstock. She always tries to observe the world through Pym-tinted glasses. She lives with her husband Jim and expat British cat Rose.*

Fast Falls the Eventide

by Charlie Stanbridge

Clergy House, St Luke's

Dear Mrs Greenhill,

A quick note, as promised, to let you know how things are back here at the clergy house. We kept the Candlemas vigil last night so you can imagine that I am feeling a bit part-worn.

Father Thames gave an excellent address – what a pity that the congregation was so small. It was, of course, a mid-week service and I understand that something dreadful was predicted on 'The Archers' so neither of us was surprised. The candles looked lovely. Simeon Brill, the fishmonger, managed to turn up. 'My special day,' he calls it, bless him. But he did confide that he is finding Mr Bason a little demanding. Whereas Thames and I were quite content with your plain steamed cod, especially on days of Obligation, Bason is, apparently, trying to order *vongole*, samphire and monkfish – whatever they are. He'll be giving us octopus next!

But seriously, he seems a good chap and 'Bason' sounds a propitious name for a cook. Your cosy rooms are now even cosier. He showed me his new curtains and some cushions made specially by a chum of his. It is all looking a bit 'Liberty's' in the attic now.

Thank goodness he has his own bathroom. He does seem to keep house adequately – I did have my doubts.

I was surprised that you weren't with your sister in Bexhill.

Must close; early start tomorrow.

I do miss our late-night cocoa – but life goes on.

Kindest regards,
Bode

Rome

Dear Bode,

Thank you so much for the update from the clergy house. I can't pretend that I'm not missing it but when St Basil's organised yet another outing to Rome I really could not resist. You see – and you don't know this – my dear Papa came from near Rome. I've no end of family here and spent my early years with them. Now that Papa has gone before and my brothers have taken over the ice-cream business (they don't need me interfering, much as we love one another), I thought 'now or never'.

The party from St B's has returned but I will be staying on. I don't know for how long. I will let you know.

I can't get samphire here but the choice of fish on the market puts Mr Brill in the shade. Our cod, of course, is generally dried and takes so much more preparation than just steaming that I rarely bother.

continued next page

I too, miss our evening cocoa, upstairs by the gas-ring.
And I cannot find Ovaltine anywhere in the shops here.
But early days.
Do keep in touch.

Yours truly,
Annie Greenhill

Clergy House, St L's

Dear Annie,

Thank you so much for the letter. Things are getting busy here with Easter falling so early. Goodness knows what Bason will be serving up before Lent – crêpes Suzette I wouldn't wonder! But your steamed cod always sustained us and that is all we should ask.

I am surprised that you are staying so long in Italy – although I shouldn't be, now that I know you have family there. I must say again that I too still miss our late-night milky drinks and I felt dispirited when my own feeble and lonely attempt failed. The milk boiled over. Bason seems to scorn cocoa but perhaps you and I know better! He will be preparing 'suitable Lenten dishes' but has promised us 'something special' for Good Friday – the evening, of course, after Devotion.

But enough. I wonder how long you will be staying on. St Basil's party has been back some time. Still, it was apparently such a success that they plan another visit. Who knows?

Dear Father Thames has mislaid one of his 'objets', as he calls them. I dare say it will turn up. I couldn't be doing with all those bits everywhere to be honest!

You are still in Rome? Of course, there is a considerable Italian diaspora here in Clerkenwell – but so near and yet so far. Perhaps we should reach out to our *sorelle e fratelli*!

Shrove Tuesday looms and then all that fuss about the Imposition. I hope that I can find the left-over palms from last year – if pussy hasn't had them!

Do take care.

All good wishes,
your Bode

Bassiano

Dear Bode,

It is all right to address you as 'Bode', isn't it? It does sound so comfortable… a safe abode, it bodes well, abide with me… but take no notice… I had a father of my own; you probably enjoyed his ice-cream. So always saying 'Father' feels a little odd. The palm crosses from last year are in the old shoe box on top of your wardrobe.

I am sorry for the delay in replying. The sad news is that my Aunt Pia has died. I have been nursing her these past weeks. She lived less than an hour from Rome. There were few others to help as she was also one of the childless ones and I was glad to do what I could. Not that she thought much of my housekeeping, especially as I refused to scurry about draped in black like all the *nonne* of a certain age. But and this will interest you, she has gifted me her house! So here I will stay; I shall pick up again from my Italian childhood in this ancient village (without every modern convenience).

You will be so welcome to pop in if you join St B's next parish party to Rome.

No, none of this is what I expected but it is more interesting than Bexhill.

Keep me up to date with the clergy house news.

I must close; the *pescivendolo* will be arriving at the town gate, in his van and I must hurry to catch him. It gets so very warm here.

All the best,
Annie

PS. New address:
Annunziata Monteverdi
Via Aldo Manuzio
Bassiano, Latina
Italia

Clergy House

Dear Annie,

Perhaps I may even address you as *Annunziata*?!

How sad and at the same time how exciting for you. Your dear aunt – your *zia Pia*, must have been a good person.

But Annie! Bason is driving me up the wall! My little icons – the ones I keep tucked away in the drawer – have twice gone AWOL – only to reappear a week or so later. It is a puzzle… or is it? Thames seems to take it all in his stride. I find myself questioning if I am on a path which is true to myself. The clergy house does feel rather a cocoon at times and not one from which I will emerge in glittering vestments.

But let me look on the bright side. I am joining St Basil's next outing – or pilgrimage as they call it! It leaves for Rome just before Whitsun. Father T will just have to manage – that Teddy Lemon seems a capable MC and he gets on rather well with Bason too. 'Objets' don't seem to go missing when he is around.

Perhaps, Annie, we could meet when I am in Rome? Is your husband with you?

Do let me know.

Yours affectionately,
Bode

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Bassiano

Dear Bode,

What a delight that would be. I shall be in Rome on the Friday before *domenica di Pentecoste*. And my husband! Dear Bode, the 'Mrs' was only ever a courtesy title. All housekeepers are 'Mrs' regardless of status. I must confess that I have had my chances but I soon realised that men only want one thing and I have always looked for rather more than that. And how could I have kept house for you and Father T with a husband lurking in Clerkenwell? On my days and afternoons off I rarely went further than Gamages and Lyons Corner House. You are the limit, you dear man!

We have plenty of time for arrangements but I would suggest meeting at the foot of the Spanish Steps (see postcard enclosed).

At least we can get a decent cup of tea in the nearby teashop.

Do let me know the details of your visit... and perhaps see you soon.

Be strong – old Father Thames won't be running the clergy house forever.

Yours,
Annunziata

Clergy House

Dear Annunziata (even prettier than Annie!),

But do forgive me such a salutation. Our aeroplane arrives at Leonardo da Vinci on Thursday evening.

Yes, let us attempt to meet at the Spanish Steps on Friday. I shall be ready for a decent cup by then. I have some rather, shall I say, eccentric travelling companions. And you, it appears, have no ties that bind. We are both free spirits – although that hadn't occurred to me before, despite all our hours with late-night milky drinks in the attic rooms and me worrying about the creaking on that fourth tread on the stairs.

Looking forward so very much to meeting up. I shall sit on the steps waiting for you. Three o'clock should be a very suitable time.

Yours in anticipation,
Bode

Bassiano

My dear Bode,

See you there! But please don't sit on the steps. I know that it is nearly Whitsun but the nights are still cold and there could be danger. You had that trouble before.

Just stand against the azaleas – I shan't miss you. Bring a couple of tins of Ovaltine if you can fit them in your suitcase.

A x

'Why... oh, Annie!' Bode found, to his surprise, that he was embracing Annunziata at the foot of the Spanish Steps. She reciprocated.

'Well, Bode, here we both are. A long evening ahead of us to squeeze in as much as possible. Perhaps even enough time to see my new home – a simple old village house but with adequate facilities. I have a gas stove and I have managed to track down some cocoa powder in the English Tea Room.'

'Oh yes, but we must go and have a nice cup of tea first please,' Bode insisted.

Later they made their way, arm in arm, to the Roma Termini for the train to Latina.

'Just think, Bode, that when dear old Father T steps down you can claim the holidays due a senior priest... if you are elevated. And I can't imagine that Bason is a fixture. I see him running some fancy tearoom with 'objets' for sale on the side – pretty china that is really just a dust-trap, Duchess sets, little stone animals... oh, you know the sort of tiresome thing.'

They were approaching the *biglietteria*, Bode suspiciously thumbing through the grubby lira notes in his wallet and expecting to have to extract several thousand.

'Oh, do stop wittering on!' Annie was amused but decidedly in control. 'The trains in Italy always run on time... and we both have time.'

'Now, how do I request a return ticket?' ventured Bode hesitantly.

'Well, ask for a *biglietto ritorno*... or perhaps just a *biglietto unico*...'

Bode stammered. 'Only you can decide, Annie.' He held her arm a little closer.

'Yes Bode, hold close and firm. It is the evening, dusk is falling and these Roman pavements are so uneven, so treacherous. Why, only this afternoon I saw a nun fall.'

Bode stirred as the sunlight filtered through the shutters.

'Annie? – oh, early morning tea!'

'Of course, Bode,' confirmed Annunziata complacently, placing a tray carefully on the crumpled sheets, 'we aren't in the clergy house now and after such richness last night we need our tea.'

Charlie Stanbridge, a member of the Barbara Pym Society, lives to the north of London and about half an hour from Cambridge. He first found Barbara Pym's work in a local public library many years ago. He enjoys reading, a little writing, cooking and occasional visits to exhibitions and the theatre.

Gleanings

compiled by Yvonne Cocking

The first item we noted, in *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 October 2022, with a Pym association was 'Britain's 20 golden villages', which have held their value over the past 20 years. These included Finstock in Oxon, where the average house price was £572,257, a house price growth of 299%: 'Its heritage is agricultural, but it has literary connections too – T S Eliot was baptised at the village church in 1927 and the novelist Barbara Pym is buried there.'

A *Radio Times* (29 October–4 November) reader regretted that the daily serial had been axed: 'I certainly would not have later read Barbara Pym, H E Bates, Howard Spring...without hearing them here first.'

The books that changed India Knight's life (*Good Housekeeping*, November 2022) included all of Barbara Pym's books which 'got me through a difficult time'.

Henry Oliver described himself in *The Oldie*, November 2022, as 'once a young fogey'. He had seen A N Wilson, a notable example of the species originally described in *The Spectator*, in 1984, as 'a scholar of Evelyn Waugh': 'In my early twenties, I was a Young Fogey. I hated modern buildings...was never seen outside brogues or Oxfords, I wore suits all summer, ties at weekends...For a while, I had a treasured 1980s double-breasted suit. I had a Barbara Pym phase, drank whisky and used a typewriter.'

In *The Daily Mail*, 11 November 2022, Sally Morris recommended three 'Retros': Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, P G Wodehouse's *The Pothunters* and Barbara Pym's *An Unsuitable Attachment*. 'It may not be the best of Pym's books but her scalpel-like dissection of middle-class mores, her dry wit and Austen-like observations are, as ever, worth the ride.'

There was an amusing item in *The New York Times Book Review* on 8 January 2023, about *Eckstein's Cat People Sketchbook*, in which Bob Eckstein and Nava Atlas wrote about several authors and their cats, with cartoon-like illustrations. Barbara's showed her holding a cat, with the following explanation: 'Barbara Pym became known for her novels about the small comforts of mid-20th century English women's daily lives. In her real life she apparently found comfort in a cat.'

Photo: Linda McDougall

Ysenda Maxtone Graham was rereading *Quartet in Autumn* in her article in *The Times,* on 11 January 2023: 'This story of four greying, lonely colleagues has the dark wit of Philip Larkin...Barbara Pym is the great chronicler of the hidden lives of the unsuccessful...This is my favourite Barbara Pym novel because it is not cluttered with unrequited love, or indeed any love at all.'

Writers chose their favourite books for Valentine's Day (*The Guardian*, 16 February 2023) and Rebecca Wait chose *Excellent Women*: 'I got into Barbara Pym as a teenager, after finding a selection of her novels on my grandmother's shelf. Because the books were so old and battered, I thought for a while I was one of Pym's only surviving readers...but I needn't have worried. Pym's wry humour brings her new fans with every generation...she gives us...a brilliant, funny, poignant novel about the expectations placed on women in post-war England and the minute absurdities of everyday life.'

Not for the first time was Barbara Pym the subject of a quiz question and once again, no-one knew the answer. The last question on University Challenge, broadcast on BBC2 on 20 February 2023, was 'Who wrote *Quartet in Autumn*?' No answer was given before the final bell.

Finally, Philip Hensher, in the Books section of *The Observer*, 9 April 2023, wrote: 'Nobody who reads one of Robert Liddell's entrancing, elegant, observant and deeply painful novels can understand why he is now so little read. He was much rated by his contemporaries, an intimate of Ivy Compton-Burnett, a giant of the time, and also of Elizabeth Taylor and Barbara Pym, whose reputations have grown steadily.'

Thanks to contributors: Paul Howard, Sheila Kane, Norma Munson, Iona Roberts, Christine Shuttleworth, Michael Wilson.

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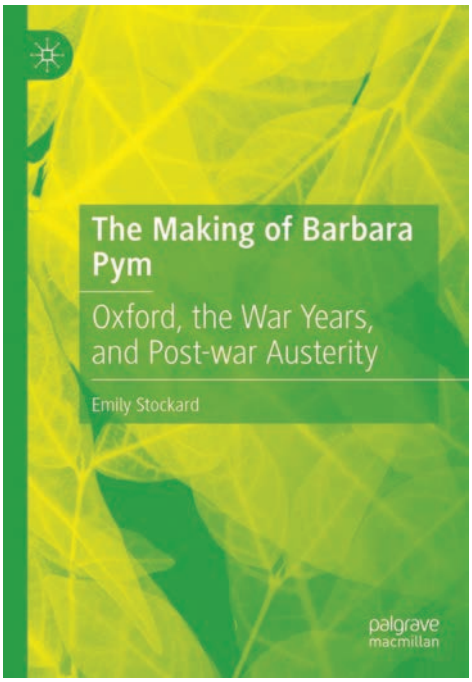
Review: *The Making of Barbara Pym – Oxford, the War Years, and Post-war Austerity* by Emily Stockard

by Rose Little

Emily Stockard has given us a very readable and insightful book about Barbara Pym. In a close reading she analyses the novels *Crampton Hodnet*, *Some Tame Gazelle*, *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence* and relates them to Pym's personal life and also to the contemporary British scene in a way not done before.

The book is organised into sections which relate to the times and the novel of that time, for example, '*Some Tame Gazelle*: Continuity and Contentment', references the aftermath of World War II. Quoting from the diaries and letters in the Pym archive in the Bodleian Library, as well as using Holt's biographies and other academic writings on Pym, Stockard gives us a fully rounded and perceptive analysis of Pym's life and thought up to 1953. (It is hoped a second volume will follow.)



'The strength of her writing lies in the tenacity with which she held on to familiar patterns,' Stockard tells us, 'and [Pym] also insisted that one must move forward and not be mired in a nostalgic or sentimentalized view of the past.' Her theme was 'Change through Continuity', as can readily be shown in *Crampton Hodnet,* the first novel addressed by Stockard. The students who come to tea in North Oxford are different students, but the pattern continues.

Pym's Oxford years played a significant part in her life. Stockard warns that Pym's cultural and intellectual life is often ignored, giving way instead to the examination of her relationships with men, as that presents a convenient narrative arc. Pym enjoyed the cultural opportunities offered to her in Oxford, such as classical music concerts and the Ashmolean Museum. She joined the Bach choir for a short time. Her diaries are full of the music she has been listening to. Nevertheless, Stockard also gives us a full picture of the men in Pym's life and how sometimes their characters are used in her fiction, eg her Oxford circle of Henry Harvey, Robert Liddell and John Barnicot. She not only kept in contact with them throughout her life, but also bound them to her by writing a story about them when she came down from Oxford in 1934 and circulating it: her early version of *Some Tame Gazelle*.

Taking on a persona is something Barbara Pym did when she first came up to Oxford, and in this time of change, when she wanted to move forward, she became 'Sandra'. Stockard analyses this (later Barbara Pym was 'Paavikki Olafsson' and later still 'Wren Pym') and shows how she uses it in *Excellent Women,* where Mildred has a role thrust upon her by the people who know her.

Stockard shows how Pym's presenting herself as 'Sandra' (the woman with the red shirt and black skirt) when she came up to Oxford, leads to her being misunderstood and being seen as 'fast', and how destructive this persona could have been in her relationships with men. However, in the case of Rupert Gleadow – another admirer of Pym in Oxford – a deeper understanding and friendship was reached. In quotations from his letters, we see that the sensitive Gleadow realised the 'Sandra' part of her was not her whole personality: how her love of romance precluded her desire for an intense physical relationship.

It is clear from her diaries that Pym loved and nurtured her own memories, but in her fiction she maintained the view that one cannot yearn for the past, for instance, for pre-war Britain. When Belinda in *STG* fantasises about the Archdeacon being a widower, she realises she could not return to her old feelings for him. The message is clearly that to wish for the past is to pine for the unattainable and so fail to appreciate life as it is.

Stockard finishes with '*Jane and Prudence:* The End of Austerity'. One of the main points is how people can misunderstand one another's characters and yet have an abiding interest in one another. Both Jessie's impending marriage to Fabian Driver and the news of Mildred's marriage to Everard Bone provide a comic closure. These closures can be seen as marking the end of Britain's period of austerity and Pym's fictional portrayal of it. That end is figured in the marriages of spinsters who up to then had lived a life of emotional austerity.

The book was published by Macmillan in 2021 and has 234 pages, including an index and a useful timeline. Priced at £89.99 in Waterstones, this excellent book might not easily reach the audience it deserves to reach. It can also be read online in the Bodleian Library.

Emily Stockard, The Making of Barbara Pym – Oxford, the War Years, and Post-war Austerity *(Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).*

Rose Little has been a member of the Barbara Pym Society for many years and has given talks on various aspects of Barbara Pym and her novels on several conferences of the BPS. She is an independent researcher and has edited the letters of Elizabeth Taylor to Barbara Pym.

The Barbara Pym Society in Finstock: Presentation of Emily Stockard's Paper 'The Finstock Years – Touring Oxfordshire with Barbara Pym'

by Paul Howard

Friday 17 March 2023 – St Patrick's Day but also the evening for the meeting of the Finstock Local History Society. Yes, Finstock!

Members of the Barbara Pym Society and friends travelled to Finstock, meeting at The Plough (Barbara's 'local') before the big event in the Village Hall. A full car – Triona Adams, Elizabeth Knowles, Sara Andersen and me – crept along the unlit streets and soon we realised that we were passing Barn Cottage with its Blue Plaque... we knew we were close to The Plough.

What a pleasant place – 'Friday night busy' and a landlord who twice did the rounds to see that his customers were happy. We were. Alison Felstead and Paul Nash joined us and soon it was time to set off for the Village Hall.

We made our way confidently up the road that we hoped led to the Hall when a glimmering torch approached from our left, carried by Ruth Nissim, the Chair of the Local History Society: We were in the right place.

Why were we gathering? The History Society's evening was a presentation of 'The Finstock Years – Touring Oxfordshire with Barbara Pym' – a paper written by Emily Stockard, a member of the Barbara Pym Society – and the author of *The Making of Barbara Pym: Oxford, the War Years, and Post-war Austerity* [see review in this issue] – and presented on the AGM in Oxford 2023. But the 'stars' of the evening were to be Alison Felstead and Triona Adams, presenting a slightly 'localised version' of the paper.

Six Pymsters swelled the audience to enjoy the excellent 'double act' by Alison and Triona, speaking, reading and managing the Powerpoint.

Many of the audience were familiar with so many of the places shown and were pleased to hear about them in a focused Pym context. The presentation went down very well, and when it came to questions we found out that two of the audience had actually known Barbara Pym and her sister Hilary Walton quite well. They had both appeared in the film 'Miss Pym's Day Out', where locals had been invited to participate!

Above: Left to right, Paul Howard, Alison Felstead, Ruth Nissim, Triona Adams, Sara Andersen, Elizabeth Knowles Photo: Paul Nash

Michael Collard appeared in the church scenes, and his friend was the driver for Henry Harvey, Barbara Pym's lifelong friend. It is an 'old' [1991] film but worth watching for views of Finstock – and for fans of Patricia Routledge, who plays Barbara Pym: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mi8Zezov9RQ&t=36s

The History Society will be planning more 'BP themed' meetings to maintain the awareness of Barbara Pym in Finstock. Thanks to Alison and Triona.

Such richness!

New Books

Reviews to follow

Robin R. Joyce, *The Reality behind Barbara Pym's* Excellent Women (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023).

Janice Rossen, *The Dashwood Papers* (Wings Press, 2023, hardcover and ebook).

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‘Eccentrics, Scholars and Tea at Ellistons: Academic Oxford in the Age of Pym’– Spring Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society

by Hermione Middleton

Daisy Dunn (left) and Triona Adams
Photo: Hermione Middleton

Although it was a rainy, grey day, a wonderful time was had by members of the Barbara Pym Society and other guests at the University Women’s Club, South Audley Street, London, a characterful venue with a rich history, founded in 1833 for educated women where they could socialize and spend time with other women in a friendly environment. Guests have previously included Virginia Woolf, Vera Brittain and Gertrude Bell.

We were treated to an informative and entertaining talk by the highly regarded classicist and author Daisy Dunn – herself an alumna of St Hilda’s.

We also heard about other novelists such as Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby (who both studied at Somerville College and became lifelong friends). We learnt about the impact of the First World War, and the effect this had on the students.

Daisy told us how she discovered Pym, as well as of her high regard for her as an author (after a female relative who owned all her novels allowed her to borrow them). Pym’s love of life came through vividly, particularly when Daisy quoted from Pym’s diaries.

After the talk we enjoyed a delicious afternoon tea in the dining room of the UWC, which had plenty of striking original features, including moldings, murals and a beautiful chandelier.

Daisy Dunn is an award-winning author and an eminent classicist. Her latest book, published in 2022, is Not Far from Brideshead: Oxford between the Wars – a classicist’s portrait of the University City. *Daisy’s 2019 dual biography of the two Plinys has been given numerous awards and was chosen as book of the year by* The New York Times. *Find out more about Daisy Dunn on http://www.daisydunn.co.uk/about-daisy-dunn/*

How I Discovered Barbara Pym

by Jaap Dirkse van den Heuvel

On Easter Sunday 1980, I was reading a novel in a Penguin edition, though I forgot its author. When I finished it I read some of the recommendations for further reading at the back of the book, and among these were two titles by a certain Barbara Pym: *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings*. I had never heard of this novelist before, but what I gathered from the synopses immediately struck me as the kind of novels that were totally ‘up my street’: comedies of manners with nothing much happening in them, and chronicling the everyday lives of ordinary men and women in 20th century England.

I ordered both books as soon as I could and I was not disappointed, on the contrary: they were just what I had imagined them to be! When I found out that more Pym titles were to be published in paperback by Granada later in 1980 and ‘81, there was no stopping me, and I bought them all unseen!

During the eighties I was studying English language and literature for the Dutch equivalent of an MA degree and (it will not surprise you!) decided to write my literary thesis about one of Barbara’s works. It was called: ‘Barbara Pym’s *Quartet In Autumn*: A Study in Loneliness’. I passed my MA exams with very good marks for my thesis. Perhaps I was also lucky to have chosen a writer that in The Netherlands was virtually an unknown quantity then. At the moment this situation has improved a little, I am glad to say. Some books have been translated or are being translated now. Moreover, the odd article appears about her and her works from time to time and... of course, I keep promoting these wonderful, entertaining and insightful books by a novelist who, I happened to discover, shared her date of birth as well as her date of death with Thomas Hardy, 2 June and 11 January, respectively. And what, I wonder, would Barbara herself have made of this, could she have known?

Jaap Dirkse van den Heuvel, a member of the Barbara Pym Society, was born in Utrecht and has been living in Zutphen, in the east of The Netherlands, since 1979 with his partner Dick. Until his retirement he taught English and later on also Dutch as a foreign language, mainly at adult education schools and centres.

More Conference Photos

From the top: Tom Sopko - North American Organizer, Barbara Boles and Donna Safreed welcoming the conference attendees, North American Membership Secretary Judy Horn and husband Joel Horn. All photos: Jutta Schiller

The Barbara Pym Society 2023

Website: https://barbara-pym.org
E-mail: barbarapymsociety@gmail.com
On Facebook: search for 'Barbara Pym Society'

In the United Kingdom
Chair: Deb Fisher chair@barbara-pym.org
Secretary and ALS Representative: Maggie Parsons: margaretanneparsons56@gmail.com
Treasurer: Devon Allison: devon.a.allison@gmail.com
Membership Secretary: Lorraine Mepham: l.mepham@lineone.net
Friendship Host (interim): Susan Armstrong
Editor *Green Leaves:* Jutta Schiller: juttaschiller19@gmx.de
Assistant Editor *Green Leaves:* Christine Shuttleworth
Design and Layout *Green Leaves:* Lloyd Miller
Committee: Kathy Ackley (NA Representative), Triona Adams, Devon Allison, Keith Armstrong, Susan Armstrong, Abigail Bosanko, Lucia Costanzo, Eileen Roberts, Tom Sopko (NA Organizer), Ron Wates
Ex-officio:
St Hilda's Liaison: To be announced.
Archivist Emerita: Yvonne Cocking yvcocking@gmail.com
Merchandise: mildredlathbury69@gmail.com
Honorary Life Members: Jilly Cooper, The Rt Rev Richard Harries, Tom Holt, Professor Peter Lloyd, Alexander McCall Smith, Georgia Powell, Tristram Powell, Eileen Roberts
Official address:
The Barbara Pym Society
St Hilda's College
Oxford, OX4 1DY
Tel: 01865 373753 (Outside the UK) +44 1865 373753

In North America
North American Organizer: Tom Sopko
Conference Registrar: Donna Safreed
Treasurer: Jordan Bach
Membership Secretary: Judy Horn
Board: Kathy Ackley, Barbara Boles, Denise Marois-Wolf, Lloyd Miller, Mary Person

Coming Events

Please visit https://barbara-pym.org for details

2023 AGM & Conference, St Hilda's College, Oxford, UK
Friday 1-Sunday 3 September
'Sisterhood'
Booking closes Friday 18 August

2024 North American Conference
Date to be announced
Jane and Prudence

The 2024 Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition
Entries must be submitted by 1 December 2023

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