GREEN LEAVES

ISSN (1360-9920) The Journal of the Barbara Pym Society Vol XXIX, Autumn/Winter 2023

AGM Conference Report 1–3 September 2023

by Keith Armstrong

The Barbara Pym Society Annual Conference is back. After the global Covid-19 pandemic and the difficulties which it brought in its wake, the 2023 Conference felt like a resumption of normal service in terms of the number of people attending. It was like opening the doors of the foyer of the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building to glorious technicolor: the talks were of the highest standard, all dietary requirements were met at mealtimes and even technology behaved itself on the whole. The theme of this year's Conference was 'Sisterhood' with the focus on Hilary Pym Walton – Barbara Pym's younger sister.

Barbara and Hilary Pym. Photo: The Barbara Pym Society

Registration in the South Foyer allowed attendees to see a display of photos and material from the early years of Barbara Pym and her sister, and a loop of photos collated by incoming Chair Devon Allison was shown both in the lodge and during Friday dinner in the Pavilion.

Publicity for Barbara Pym during the conference weekend was also provided by the Oxford bookshop Blackwell's, which had created a display to coincide with our Conference.

The traditional Friday afternoon optional activity was a historical walk around Oxford, followed by welcome drinks and nibbles in the South Foyer for those attending the Barbara Pym Society Annual Conference for the first time, coordinated by our Friendship Host, Sue Armstrong.

The drinks were followed by dinner, with the dining venue changed to the Pavilion for the two-course buffet. We then retired to the Senior Common Room for the pre-conference quiz, admirably hosted this year once again by Lorraine Mepham and Ros Cleal. I did wonder, however, if the title of one of the quiz sections, 'partners in crime', was an oblique reference to our two hosts, who provided us with a none too easy quiz by all accounts. It was perhaps to be expected that a team which had called itself 'Unashamed Readers' would win this year's quiz trophy.

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Saturday started with coffee at 10am in the foyer of the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building, followed by the Annual General Meeting. This is a year of change for the Society – a new Chair (Devon Allison), a new Treasurer (Anita Etheridge), a new Membership Secretary (Hermione Middleton), new Finance and Bookings subcommittees – and many thanks were given in committee members' reports to all helpers on both sides of the Atlantic. Particular thanks went to outgoing Chair Deb Fisher, who during her term had had to do something no other chair had previously done, namely, to steer the Society through the turbulence of a global pandemic. Deb received a bouquet of flowers from the Society as well as a hand-picked posy from the new Principal of St Hilda's, Professor Dame Sarah Springman, who had kindly popped in earlier to wish our Conference well.

A constitutional amendment was passed unopposed to allow for an *ex officio* Treasurer from St Hilda's, and it was also agreed to raise the donation to the St Hilda's Prize Fund from £500 to £1,000. This fund enables an internship for a student from St Hilda's for a few weeks' work experience with a literary agent and can help them decide their future. A worthy Pym cause!

During the Conference tea and coffee breaks we were able to purchase Pym merchandise from the stall, or a book from Paul Howard's second-hand book table, in addition to jars of home-made quince jelly (all money to Cancer Research UK), and try our luck and buy Pymbola tickets.

The first speaker after the break, Jutta Schiller, talked to us about a subject close to her heart – 'Sisters' – Jutta being one of three. Jutta gave us an absolutely fascinating insight into the lives of numerous literary sisters in history. This was followed by our special guest speaker, Dr Barbara Everett. As might be expected, Dr Everett's talk was brilliant, lyrical and riveting from beginning to end, leaving me wanting to learn more about the 'innocent egoism' of writers.

Devon Allison spoke to us after lunch about Hilary's life. Excellent research in the Bodleian provided us with a wealth of early photos including one of Ack (Barbara's and Hilary's aunt) and their other aunt, who shared a house next door to Barbara's family home – a precedent for two sisters living together that Barbara and Hilary would repeat in later life in Finstock. Devon took time to honour Hilary's role in preserving her sister's legacy and left us with the lovely image of Barbara as the 'golden-crested Wren' – as described by Phoebe David in a letter to Hilary on learning of Barbara's death.

Dr Kate Murphy, our fourth speaker, then gave us an eye-opening talk where we learned about how women at the BBC were treated post-war. Unlike many companies and organisations, the BBC did not have a marriage bar for women, and maternity leave and pay were introduced. At that time an 'exceptional woman' would be allowed to maintain her position if she could 'prove her worth' at a tribunal! It was fascinating to learn that Hilary's name comes up 46 times on *Radio Times* digitised listings before 1971.

Jennifer Howarth, Devon Allison, Sioned Wiliam. Photo: Jutta Schiller

Ruth Nissim, a friend of Hilary who now lives in Barn Cottage, Finstock, then revealed that it was Hilary who had played the top two hands on the live piano rendition of the children's radio programme *Listen with Mother*, Daphne Oxenford playing the bottom two hands.

This was followed by two speakers, Elizabeth Proud (our first BPS Chair) and Sioned Wiliam (our latest BPS committee member), who had worked together to produce adaptations of Barbara Pym for BBC Radio 4. They discussed the background to 'Creating Harriet/Hilary at the BBC' with the 1994 radio adaptation of *Some Tame Gazelle*, which featured our very own Miriam Margolyes. Elizabeth Proud highlighted the importance of 'respecting the authorial voice' when bringing a literary work to life, and we were treated to a brief snippet of the radio play.

Another revelation was provided in discussion when Rose Little informed us that the character of Edith Liversidge (*Some Tame Gazelle*) was in fact based on Honor Tracy, the journalist, and not on Honor Wyatt. A matter of Hono(u)r!

The Saturday banquet in the Dining Hall was preceded by drinks on the lawn, and dessert and coffee were followed by our annual Pymbola. The 'Fabulous Paul Howard' acted as 'master of ceremonies' once again and was accompanied by two 'glamorous assistants'. Thank you, Paul. At the end of the day, the Pymbola, together with the second-hand book sale, had raised over £500 for Cancer Research UK. An excellent result.

After the banquet most diners repaired to the Senior Common Room with their wine glasses to continue the conversation. The Principal, Professor Springman, also spent some time chatting with us before going home, only to return shortly afterwards with a quizzical Tealeaf – one of St Hilda's cats – in her arms.

Having opened the shutters to glorious sunshine on Sunday morning, and after a solid buffet breakfast in the Dining Hall, we had some leisure time to attend a church service, walk around the grounds or just relax in anticipation of the talks to come. The first – Kathy Ackley's 'Remembering Hilary' – was

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based on her exchange of letters with Hilary between 1988 and 2004. Kathy spoke of the founding and early years of the Barbara Pym Society and shared warm memories of her friendship with Hilary, leaving us with the endearing images of Hilary's 'cheerful exuberance' and Barbara's 'resilience'.

Devon Allison then chaired a panel with Jennifer Howarth and Sioned Wiliam on 'Bringing Barbara Pym's Novels to Film', where we learned that Barbara loved the 'flicks', and also why a film hasn't yet been made of a Barbara Pym novel. A lively discussion followed with suggestions from members of the audience as to suitable actors in a Pym film.

It was then time to award Certificates of Honorary Life Membership of the Barbara Pym Society to both Eileen Roberts and Yvonne Cocking, in recognition of their many years of service to the Society. Eileen's daughter, Alison, collected the certificate on her mother's behalf and read out a letter of thanks from Eileen. We were delighted to be able to give Yvonne her certificate in person. Our love and thanks to them both.

At the dinner table. Photo: Jutta Schiller

Those who had booked Sunday lunch were then treated to a buffet traditional Sunday roast in the Dining Hall. As usual, we couldn't linger too long, as our annual dramatised readings awaited. Given this year's theme 'Sisterhood', Yvonne naturally presented selections from *Some Tame Gazelle*, which the Pym Players performed admirably and to everyone's enjoyment.

After the Conference ended, a number of people chose to go to Choral Evensong at Christ Church Cathedral, and later a small group, many of whom were staying on the Sunday night, met for drinks and a meal at the Cape of Good Hope pub.

Now we must look forward to 2024, a special year for the Barbara Pym Society as it will be our 30th anniversary. The theme has yet to be decided, but I'm sure we can expect something suitably celebratory.

When the Principal of St Hilda's spoke briefly to us on Saturday morning about the new accommodation at the College and the move towards biodiverse gardens, she expressed the hope that Barbara Pym might think that St Hilda's was 'going in the right direction'. After a very successful Conference post-pandemic and during a period of change in the Society, let us all share that hope.

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society Saturday 2 September 2023, 10.30am

Committee members present: Deb Fisher (Chair), Devon Allison (Treasurer), Maggie Parsons (Secretary), Lorraine Mepham (Membership Secretary), Tom Sopko (North American Organizer), Jutta Schiller (Editor *Green Leaves*), Kathy Ackley, Keith Armstrong, Susan Armstrong, Martha Stewart, Ruth Taylor, Ronald Waites.

Apologies for absence: Lucia Costanzo, Abigail Bosanko, Moyra Forrest, Christopher Nankivell, Emily Stockard, Michael Wilson.

Welcome: Deb welcomed everyone and especially Professor Dame Sarah Springman, Principal of St Hilda's College, who in turn welcomed the Barbara Pym Society warmly and expressed her hope to do so again next year.

Deb thanked Paul Howard for organizing the Pymbola and for arranging the silent auction for the autographed copy of the Pym cookery book that Tom Sopko had brought over.

Minutes of 2022 AGM: The minutes had been printed in *Green Leaves* and copies were available at the meeting. The minutes were agreed as a true record.

Matters Arising: There were no matters arising from the minutes.

Chair's Report 2022–23: Deb Fisher looked back on her five years' term as Chair of the Society and its highlights, such as Jilly Cooper's visit for the Society's 25th Anniversary Conference in 2019. She spoke of the cooperation with St Hilda's, which had to weather one storm or the other. She reported on the Conference of the North American Chapter of the Society in March 2023, which she attended, and congratulated Tom Sopko and his team for organizing such a great event. Deb thanked Triona Adams and Alison Felstead for presenting Emily Stockard's paper 'The Finstock Years – Touring Oxfordshire with Barbara Pym' in Finstock in March 2023 [see *Green Leaves*, Spring/Summer 2023].

For the second year in a row the Spring Meeting was held at the University Women's Club in London. Special thanks were expressed to Triona Adams, whose experience of holding events there paved the way for the Barbara Pym Society. The speaker Daisy Dunn, not a specialist on Barbara Pym but in Classics, gave a magnificent talk.

Deb drew special attention to the Barbara Pym Tutorial Fellowship, funded by Barbara's sister Hilary and currently held by Dr Malachi MacIntosh, whom she interviewed for the Barbara Pym Society YouTube channel [https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=ZOCbL5nWMQE]. She also gave

information about the Barbara Pym Literary Internship [see Xanthe Richardson's report in this issue]. She expressed her regrets for not being able to attend the Alliance of Literary Societies AGM in Winchester, which was organized by Clemence Schultze, one of her predecessors as Chair of the BPS, and encouraged members of the BPS to attend the ALS meetings, as they are entitled to do so. Deb thanked the committee members for the excellent work and cooperation during her time as Chair, and especially Tom Sopko, the North American Organizer, for his ongoing support, wise suggestions and always good advice. Finally Deb wished her successor, Devon Allison, all the best.

Financial Report 2022–23 The accounts were submitted by Devon Allison, Barbara Pym Society Treasurer, and showed cash on hand of £38,935.71 as at 31 July 2023. A report for 1 August 2022–31 July 2023 had been circulated. In summary, cash on hand is high because most 2023 conference income is included while most conference expense is not, and because, for the first time, cash held for the Society at St Hilda's is fully included. Devon thanked Eileen Roberts for all that she had done for the Barbara Pym Society over so many years, and for placing the Society in a good financial position. Noting that Eileen is irreplaceable, she commended Keith Armstrong, Hermione Middleton, and others for creating and managing the necessary new system for conference booking. This was the first year that volunteers administered all society events, and Devon thanked them for their work, which allowed the Society to avoid the significant loss (-£3,714.03) of last year's conference, when we relied heavily on Eventbrite. She further thanked Deb Fisher for her donation of books, and Sally Kurach for her donation of time, as auditor.

Membership Report 2022–23: Lorraine Mepham reported that UK membership currently stands at 204 (this counts joint members and family memberships as two; eight sets of joint or family members). This compares with 226 at this time last year. Plus: 20 non-UK members, from various European countries (one pair of joint members). Plus: 25 Honorary & Life Members. Total: 249.

Of the paying members, 180 (out of 224) are paid up to date (non-payers are allowed one year's grace).

There have been 29 new members over the last year (including two sets of joint members and six non-UK). Among those we welcome back three members who are rejoining us. This can be balanced against 65 members lost over the last year, 56 through non-payment of subscriptions, six resigned and three deceased. The non-payers include two years' worth, but this year's total of 41 lost is a high proportion in comparison with recent years.

Report of the North American Chapter of the Barbara Pym Society

Tom Sopko reported that The North American Chapter has 216 paid members as of 31 July 2023 and is carrying 137 members who paid dues in 2022 but had not yet renewed, for a total of 353. This is an overall decrease of 22 from one year ago; the number of paid-up members has increased by 84. They have gained 17 new members so far this year. The membership is distributed as follows: 293 individuals, 52 family members, six life members, and two students. Twenty-five members live in Canada, seven are from Australia, and one lives in New Zealand.

Photo: Jutta Schiller

Finances: Cash on hand was $23,608 as of 31 July 2023, a decrease of $540 from one year ago.

The 24th North American Conference, focusing on *No Fond Return of Love*, was their first in-person event for four years. Attendance was 96, a 20% drop from pre-Covid levels, but there were 21 first-time attendees. Summaries of the talks, a report on the conference weekend, and the top four short stories appeared in the spring issue of *Green Leaves*. As they were unable to return to the usual venue at Harvard Law School the Conference was held at a Harvard Square hotel. They increased the registration fee by 44%, but the actual cost per person more than doubled, resulting in a $3,000 shortfall. Fortunately, more than $2,000 in donations plus nearly $700 in merchandise sales left them almost breaking even, but $3,240 for conference speakers' honoraria and meals and the short story prizes had to be paid from their reserves. The focal novel next March [update: 15–17 March 2024] will be *Jane and Prudence*. The Call for Papers has been posted on the website.

The fifth annual Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition had thirteen entries. Kathy Ackley, Isabel Stanley, and Denise Marois-Wolf once again served as judges. Entries for next year must be received by 1 December 2023; complete rules are posted on the BPS website. Isabel Stanley and

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Sarah Saville Shaffer resigned from the North American Board. The Committee adopted a formal vote of thanks for their faithful service, and also confirmed the appointments of Lloyd Miller and Mary Person to fill the vacancies. Tom Sopko continued to rely on the capable assistance of Membership Secretary Judy Horn, Treasurer Jordan Bach, and Conference Registrar Donna Safreed to keep the North American Chapter and Conference running smoothly. He is extremely grateful to Lloyd Miller and Tom Croft for printing and mailing more than 300 copies of *Green Leaves* to members in the United States and abroad twice a year.

Report of the Editor of *Green Leaves*: Jutta Schiller looked back at another year of producing the newsletter of the Society and thanked the authors for their contributions and good cooperation. Her special thanks went to Christine Shuttleworth and Lloyd Miller, for their ongoing support and wonderful ideas.

Barbara Pym Literary Internship [see Chair's report above]: The Society has already donated £500. Deb Fisher proposed an additional £500. This was agreed by all those present by a show of hands.

Constitutional Amendment: The proposed changes to the Constitution had been sent to members prior to the AGM and were available at the meeting and were agreed by all those present by a show of hands. The *ex officio* treasurer from St Hilda's still needs the agreement of the principal and development office.

Elections: The election slate had been sent to members before the AGM. No further applicants had been added.

Election Slate: Chair: Devon Allison, Treasurer: Martha Stewart, Membership Secretary: Hermione Middleton, committee member replacing Abigail Bosanko: Sioned Wiliam, Editor *Green Leaves*: Jutta Schiller (term to be extended for a further two years).

The Committee recommended extending Jutta's term as Editor for a further two years and asked anyone who was interested in taking over the position in the future to let the Committee know.

All were elected by those present by a show of hands. [Update: Martha Stewart stepped down after the AGM and the Committee elected Anita Etheridge as Treasurer.]

Address of the new Chair: Devon Allison thanked Deb Fisher for her work as Chair. At the beginning of her time in this new position Devon Allison wanted to make the members aware of the aims of the Society and drew their attention to the Constitution. She thanked Lorraine Mepham for digitising Pym photographs and St Hilda's College Archivist Oliver Mahoney for managing the part of the Pym Archive and the exhibit for the Conference. Devon's specific aim during her time as Chair will be to encourage Pym publications and she asked all members to assist her in every possible way.

The aims of the Barbara Pym Society

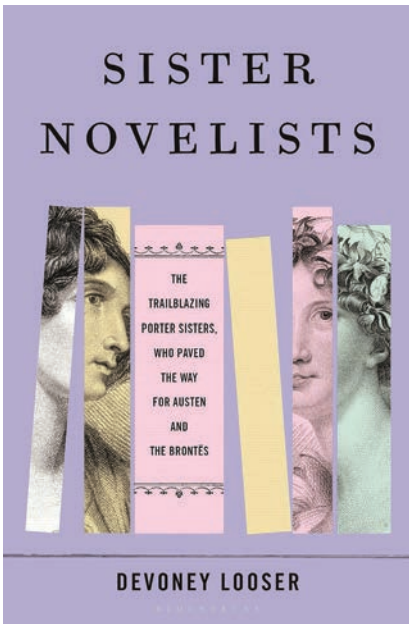
To foster the appreciation and wider knowledge of the life and works of Barbara Pym; to secure the preservation of the manuscripts, letters and memorabilia of Barbara Pym in conjunction with the Bodleian Library; to provide a programme of literary events and regular communications concerning the work of Barbara Pym; and to encourage and support publications and theses on Barbara Pym, her life and work.

A Note from the Editor

by Jutta Schiller

When I heard about the theme of this year's Conference of the Barbara Pym Society – 'Sisterhood' – I knew I had to throw my hat in the ring for a talk. I know all about sisters. I am one of three!

But little did I know about the famous sisters in English literature. There was so much to learn, for example about Jane and Anna Maria Porter, contemporaries of Jane Austen and much more famous than her in their time. Thank you, Betty Zausner, for giving me *Sister Novelists*, the biography of the Porter sisters, written by Devoney Looser, published in 2022. This book was a real treasure for my talk. Not a few members of the BPS were quite intrigued to learn that there was another literary sister duo besides the Austen and Brontë sisters. I had had no idea what Charlotte Brontë thought about Emily and Anne. And I was perplexed to read about the feelings Virginia Woolf had for her sister Vanessa.



But the main focus of this year's Conference was Hilary Pym Walton, Barbara's sister. I call myself lucky that I had met her in person quite a long time ago. I am not sure that I made a good impression on her, because I offered an interpretation of *Quartet in Autumn* no one before me ever had, when I compared Dr Strong's surgical knife to a male body part... I still have Hilary's outcry in my ear: 'What did she say? What did she say?'

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From the Chair

by Devon Allison

One day in 1999 I returned home from my umpteenth international business trip to find a letter from Hilary Pym Walton. She and Hazel Holt wanted me to chair the Barbara Pym Society. Hilary hadn't been able to reach me by telephone, and that showed the problem: half of my week was spent out of the UK, I had two very young daughters, and, in spite of the best will in the world to advocate for Barbara Pym, I couldn't cope with any more work. That necessary 'no' caused me great regret, because I was so honoured to be asked, and by Hilary and Hazel too.

All these years later, on the eve of our Society's 30th anniversary, it has given me immense happiness to finally say 'yes' to Hilary's request.

Imagine the extra pleasure provided when my first action as Chair was the presentation of Honorary Life Memberships to Eileen Roberts, represented by her daughter Alison, and Yvonne Cocking, accompanied by her daughter Nicky.

Eileen invited me to serve on the first Committee of our Society, and her warm welcome was unforgettable. I know that many other members over the decades share this experience of Eileen's extraordinary energy and kindness. Years ago, Yvonne guided me to my first Bodleian card, and this year, as I read Hilary's archive for my conference paper 'Hilary's Life, Barbara's Books', I thought often of Yvonne, and the riches she found in Barbara's archive and shared with us all.

These two precious people have been essential and treasured pillars of the Barbara Pym Society, and we have all benefited from their superb work. There could not have been a better way to start my term as Chair.

Such events evoke memories, and mine include vivid impressions of Hilary, who was a vital presence in the first years of our Society. She was my inspiration for the 2023 'Sisterhood' Conference, and research showed there is much more to be gleaned from her Bodleian archive, and from Barbara's. The past year has been good for our archives, with Hilary's photograph albums digitised and placed in the care of the St Hilda's archivist, and new avenues of research and understanding opened.

I love the photograph, published here, showing the clever, chic and confident Pym sisters with their intrepid mother, Irena. Although Hilary was in her late 70s when we met, I instantly recognised her personality in the young woman of this photo.

Hilary took enormous interest and pleasure in this Society and what it could achieve, and we Pym readers have many reasons to be grateful that she was an exemplar of sisterhood. Her legacy to us will be further explored in next year's conference, celebrating our first three decades.

In 2023, our first volunteer-led Conference was a big success, with a large overseas contingent and many people attending for the first time. The conference booking team of

Hilary, 'Links' and Barbara Pym, 1940. 'The Pym Girls' with their mother Irena, known as 'Links' within the family. Photo: The Barbara Pym Society

Keith Armstrong and Hermione Middleton, supported brilliantly by Tom Sopko, made everything work, in the complex operation that is the Pym conference at Oxford. Sue Armstrong added a fresh and popular touch of hospitality, welcoming first-time delegates with a special event. Elizabeth Proud, our first Chair, and Deb Fisher, our retiring Chair, were joined at the Conference by former Chairs Dee Bryan-Brown, Clemence Schultze and Michael Wilson, so every era of our Society was represented. To the Committee we are welcoming Sioned Wiliam, like me a founder member, and Anita Etheridge, a new member, who has recently discovered the joys of Barbara Pym.

Next year's anniversary event should be a special celebration. If you have been thinking that some day you'd like to volunteer for the Pym Society, this is the time to roll up your sleeves. We would appreciate help to design and commission merchandise, develop the booklet we'll publish for our anniversary, encourage shops, the media and libraries to feature Barbara's books, and encourage people to join or re-join the Society, among many other things. If you've been thinking you'd like to contribute in some way, please get in touch with me.

As a junior member of the first Committee, I remember the creation of our Society's aims – see page 5. I look forward to my five-year term as Chair, and to pursuing these aims and all things Pym, including helping to build momentum for a film of her work, an important project discussed at our 2023 Conference. I'm sure the years will fly by, and I look forward to toasting our 30th anniversary with you next summer.

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Conference Paper

Remembering Hilary

by Kathy Ackley

I first met Barbara Pym's sister Hilary Walton in February, 1988, when I was on sabbatical leave and doing research at the Bodleian Library for my book, *The Novels of Barbara Pym*. Hilary had agreed to meet me, saying that she would call for me at the Bodleian. From the first, she was warm and friendly, with the kind of general cheerfulness and ready smile that she seemed always to have. She told me that I could ask her anything about Barbara, and she happily answered all my questions.

When we parted, she invited me to Finstock whenever I was back in the country, an offer that I accepted the following year. When I wrote Hilary that my husband and I would be in the UK in March, she replied by inviting us to lunch at Barn Cottage. That visit was quite memorable, with so many things associated with Barbara in the cottage. Hilary chatted easily and even fussed over my husband in the manner of Harriet Bede with her curates. She had me sit in Barbara's spot on the sofa, next to the fireplace, and she urged me to go upstairs and have a look around Barbara's bedroom. After lunch she showed us the garden.

That same year (1989) in August, I was back doing more research at the Bodleian, along with my daughter Heather. I wrote Hilary, and in reply, she invited us to lunch. After collecting us in her car at the hotel, she drove us to Upper Slaughter, Gloucestershire, to the impressive Lords of the Manor Hotel. It was a lovely afternoon, one that neither my daughter nor I have ever forgotten.

Whenever I was in the UK after that, we got together in Oxford, typically at the Chit Chat restaurant until it changed hands, and then we met at the Randolph Hotel. Her letters and cards seemed always to reflect her cheerful and exuberant personality, containing parenthetical asides and exclamation marks, as in this card dated 3 March 1993, arranging to meet for lunch:

> *It happens that I shall have a hair appointment (with Roland, practically next door in Debenham's) at 11:00 that morning, so shall arrive looking more soigné than usual!*

Hilary's cards and letters often contained fun bits of news, as in a letter dated 19 May 1991:

> *I've just had a fortnight partly in Wales & Somerset (on a canal in Wales, very enjoyable!)...All news when we meet, as they say!*

When we met in June, she told us all about the canal trip, which she described with such enthusiasm that I wanted to go on one myself.

Kathy Ackley with Hilary Walton, 1994.
Photo courtesy of Kathy Ackley

In her 1991 Christmas card, Hilary wrote:

> *I've just had a very busy week, as the BBC is making a TV film about Barbara, which is to be shown in the series* Bookmark *in February. Finstock was buzzing with camera team, actors, etc. I took part (as myself) and so did Henry Harvey, and Hazel [Holt] was being filmed in London later. It's all been very interesting and enjoyable!*

When we met for lunch in February 1992 shortly before the film was to be broadcast, she told us all about the experience.

My husband and I watched *Miss Pym's Day Out* in our flat in London, where we were staying with students for a study-abroad program. I tried ringing her and then sent her a note to say that we had enjoyed it. In reply, she sent a postcard, dated 2 March 1992:

> *Many thanks for your card and appreciation of the programme! Sorry you couldn't reach me, but I went to Athens for the weekend, with Chas. [Charles] Burkhart, to see our old friend Robert Liddell, also Robt [Robert] Smith who is there at the moment. Hence this card! [From the Benaki Museum in Athens]*

Hilary was very encouraging of my interest in Barbara Pym. It was she who told me about the Barbara Pym literary weekend in 1993. In her 1992 Christmas card, she wrote:

> *There is to be a BP weekend conference at St. Hilda's next August – any chance of your coming over?*

Then in a letter dated 10 February 1993, she included an article with details about the conference:

> *The enclosed article is from the St. Hilda's Chronicle. You will see that the BP Conference is on the 20, 21–22 August, so I'm hoping very much that you will come!*

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With all that encouragement, of course I went and enjoyed it immensely.

In her Christmas card that same year, 1993, Hilary wrote that the Barbara Pym Society was to be formed the following year, and she asked if I could make it to Oxford. I could, and I subsequently wrote to Eileen and in due course received a letter welcoming me as a founder member. Hilary sent me a report of the inaugural dinner in April, which I couldn't attend, but I was able to attend the first AGM in August 1994.

Kathy and Hilary at Barn Cottage.
Photo courtesy of Kathy Ackley

In January 1998 I received an email from Kate Charles saying that the Committee wanted to invite me to speak on some aspect of *Excellent Women*. I said yes, and in her 22 March letter, Hilary wrote:

> *I'm so glad you're going to talk about* Excellent Women!

Her Christmas card that year includes the note:

> *I was so pleased to see you in Sept. – have just received* Green Leaves *with Kathy on the cover.*

That was the first of several talks that I have given at St. Hilda's over the years, and I'm so glad that Hilary was there to hear it.

Hilary's encouragement and support of my connection with the Society as well as her friendship over the years certainly contributed to strengthening my commitment to it. So many other Pym friends from the early days also nurtured that connection, but having known Hilary was truly special.

Kathy Ackley, Professor Emerita of English, is the author of The Novels of Barbara Pym *and a founder member of the Barbara Pym Society. She serves as US representative on the Committee and is a North American board member. She has edited two collections of essays on literary subjects and has been writing college English textbooks for over 30 years.*

Hilary Pym Walton (1916–2004)

by Devon Allison

Like her elder sister, Barbara, Hilary Pym attended the Liverpool College for Girls and Oxford. After studying Classics and Classical Archaeology at Lady Margaret Hall, Hilary took a secretarial course in London and began work for the BBC in 1938.

In 1940, Hilary was transferred with the BBC to Bristol and was joined there by Barbara in 1941. They lived at The Coppice, with Honor Wyatt, Honor's children with Gordon Glover, and another family.

On 26 August 1942, Hilary married Alexander Crawford Wellesley Walton (known as Sandy), with Barbara as bridesmaid. Sandy, who read architecture at Cambridge, shared Hilary's interest in Greece, where they planned to live after the war.

In 1944, Hilary joined the BBC's Gramophone Department and lived in London while her husband was abroad with the RAF. In 1946, after Sandy had returned to England, the couple separated and officially divorced in 1949.

After separating from Sandy, Hilary lived in London with Barbara, sharing a succession of houses in various parts of London that all appear in the novels. She retired from the BBC in 1971 and bought Barn Cottage, in Finstock, a village near Oxford, where Barbara joined her. As before, this living situation provided inspiration for a novel, Barbara's last: *A Few Green Leaves*. After Barbara's death in 1980, Hilary became a dedicated keeper of her sister's legacy, working closely with Barbara Pym's literary executor Hazel Holt, and donating Barbara's papers to the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

In the mid-1980s the principal of St Hilda's College, Mary Moore, commissioned Jean Harker to discover whether Hilary and Hazel Holt would be comfortable with the College hosting a conference about Barbara Pym. Both were enthusiastic, and Hilary remained an active supporter for the rest of her life of what became the Barbara Pym Society.

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Conference Paper

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

by Devon Allison

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

Hilary Pym was essential to her sister’s life as an artist, and to Barbara Pym’s legacy, not least the creation of the Barbara Pym Society. Hilary provided practical and emotional support throughout Barbara’s successful and unsuccessful writing years, and further, provided inspiration for that writing. Her life was gleefully plundered for Barbara’s novels.

As Hilary wrote in *A Very Private Eye*, the autobiography of Barbara Pym in diaries and letters which Hilary edited with Hazel Holt (1984), ‘It was never our particular intention, in spite of the prophetic circumstances of *Some Tame Gazelle*, which she had started in 1934, to live together, but it somehow turned out that from 1938 right up until the time of her death in 1980 we were never apart for more than a year or so at a time. In 1946, when I left my husband Sandy Walton, we started sharing a flat in London, then in 1961 we bought a house, and eventually, in 1972, a country cottage in Oxfordshire.’

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

Hilary’s marriage, to a closeted gay man, provided experience and insight for one of Barbara Pym’s major literary themes.

There are myriad connections between Hilary’s life and the events of *Excellent Women*, including the timing and troubles of her marriage, Hilary’s status as a professional woman (like Helena Napier), Everard Bone’s ‘we must get on’ (lifted from an archaeologist friend of Hilary’s), and even the controversially furnished cottage lair of the rejected husband Rocky. Hilary’s marriage also provided material for Wilmet’s doomed-from-the-start romantic interest in a gay man in *A Glass of Blessings*. While Barbara knew many gay men, and one of her primary friendships was with Jock Liddell, this was not at all the same as falling in love with a gay man, as Hilary had done, and as Barbara didn’t do, until decades later.

Hilary provided financial and emotional support during Barbara’s roller-coaster writing career. Hilary was warmly present, sharing friends, faith, homes, and above all, the joke. Barbara was supremely lucky in having a sister who had the same zest for the high comedy of life. Hilary loved to laugh, as all of us lucky enough to meet her remember.

Hilary’s letters to Barbara from Greece, starting in May 1950, when reviews of Barbara’s first published novel were anticipated, show the depth of their shared joys: updates on pets (cats, of course) and gossip and anecdotes about friends. Much more extrovert than Barbara, Hilary’s intrepid solo trips to Greece involved many encounters with friendly men (‘a personable young man of the village’ always seems ready to buy her coffee). She reveals the perfect place to drink ouzo alone in the morning, describes what it’s like to get bitten by bedbugs, and speculates about interesting or merely odd people seen or met.

Hilary was the first to laugh, even when she was being sent up in her sister’s novels. Her letters contain no hint that she minded seeing her life and personality used so comprehensively in Barbara’s books. Instead, from the start she revels in Barbara’s success: in a letter dated 19 May 1950, Hilary writes: ‘What a lovely review of *STG* by Lionel Hale. I do feel proud of my clever schworster.’

Barbara’s jokes about the Prehistoric Society aside (her sister was a member), Hilary had an active and powerful mind, and was loyal and warm. On her Greek holidays, when Jock Liddell was infirm and unable to see, she wrote letters for him. No wonder he testified that Barbara had the perfect sister.

Hilary took on the task of protecting her sister’s legacy. Even during Barbara’s first run of success as a novelist, she suffered from underestimation and misinterpretation. When a friend’s sole comment on a novel was ‘You know, Barbara, you can get very nice underwear at Marks & Spencers’, Barbara’s astonishment was mixed with amusement.

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

While Hilary’s effort to provide a truer picture of Barbara was not successful, her work to preserve Barbara’s legacy emphatically was. She would be overjoyed that the novels have attained classic status and remain in print all over the world.

Working among London’s ‘young men in Advertising’ (a subject spurned by Barbara Pym), Devon Allison learned about plans to celebrate this inimitable writer, became a founder member of the Society and has served in various roles ever since. In the happy tradition of unlikely Pym fans, Devon has an MBA in finance, served as lead governor for Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Hospital Trust. She first read Barbara Pym as a teenager in Bloomington, Indiana, US.

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Conference Paper

A BBC Woman: Hilary's Excellent Career

by Dr Kate Murphy

Little is known about Hilary Pym's BBC career, so for my talk at the 2023 Conference of the Barbara Pym Society I coupled together the few snippets of information I had about her with my broader understanding of the history of women in the early BBC. What I knew of Hilary was: she did a secretarial course between graduating from the University of Oxford and joining the BBC Schools Department in 1938; she earned £200 a year in October 1941; she moved to the Gramophone Department in 1944 where, in the staff directory for 1946, she was listed as an assistant; she suggested – and possibly performed – the theme tune for *Listen with Mother*.

The BBC Hilary joined in 1938 was different from other organisations. Founded in 1922, it didn't have the entrenched discriminatory practices that women faced in longer-established professions. Women teachers and civil servants, for example, faced unequal pay and also marriage bars; women had to resign on marriage. Because of the pioneering nature of broadcasting, jobs evolved, and several women made their own careers, for instance, Kathleen Lines, who started as a secretary, began gathering together images and photos necessary for promotion and ended up as head of picture publicity. Also, Florence Milnes, an assistant who set up a small reference book section and became BBC Librarian. Three women reached director-level posts before the Second World War: Hilda Matheson as Director of Talks in 1927; Mary Somerville as Director of School Broadcasting in 1931 and Isa Benzie as Foreign Director in 1933. All three women were, like Hilary, Oxford graduates.

Because so many roles were newly invented, the title 'assistant' was widely used. It applied to men and women and also straddled waged and salaried jobs, a commonplace distinction at this time. Waged staff at the BBC were paid in pounds and shillings and queued for their pay packet at the end of each week. Salaried staff had a monthly cheque, in pounds, paid into a bank account. As well as much larger pay increments, salaried staff had other perks such as better holiday provision and separate cloakrooms – definitely something to aspire to! Waged women were shorthand typists, secretaries, telephonists and duplicating operators, and there were also waged assistants. There was, however, a fluidity between the waged and salaried: you could rise through the ranks. This was unusual at a time when there was real concern about most women being in dead-end jobs.

The BBC was also progressive in its attitude towards married women. When it started, there was no marriage bar and although a bar was introduced in 1932, it wasn't a complete bar. The BBC didn't want to lose its 'excellent' women, so the idea of the 'exceptional' woman was introduced. If you could prove you were exceptional, which took place at the Marriage Tribunal, you could keep your job.

Hilary was fortunate because when she married in 1942, the marriage bar had been suspended for the duration of the war, and it was not reinstated afterwards.

We don't know how Hilary arrived at the BBC, but it was possibly through a personal connection. Isa Benzie, for example, was the daughter of an old friend of John Reith's, the Director General. She joined in a secretarial capacity and worked her way up. Anna Instone, who would be Hilary's boss in the Gramophone Department, was also known to Reith. Both Isa Benzie and Anna Instone started as waged, which was almost certainly how Hilary began. The fact that Hilary earned £200 in October 1941 suggests her starting pay would have been around the £3 mark, reasonably good recompense for the times. On arrival at the BBC, Hilary would have been issued with the 'Instructions to Women Clerical Staff', a 40-page manual of vital information including how to format letters the BBC way, how to change typewriter ribbons correctly, and the use of paper clips – which was not encouraged.

Hilary started in the Schools Department, where she possibly dealt with contributors and their scripts, making sure everything was ready for broadcast. If she was a secretary, she may have worked for a particular Schools Assistant, perhaps one of the four women who worked in the department at this time. She might have worked for Rhoda Power, the most brilliant of radio producers, or even for Mary Somerville.

With the start of the Second World War in 1939, many BBC departments were relocated out of London, including Schools, which moved to Bristol. Here Hilary lived with Honor Wyatt, then married to Gordon Glover (though soon to be divorced). Apparently, Gordon was having an affair with Anna Instone! He also then had a brief affair with Barbara Pym when she joined the household in 1941. Perhaps it was the connection with Anna Instone that took Hilary to the Gramophone Department in 1944. Hilary remained there until her retirement in 1971 and it is possible

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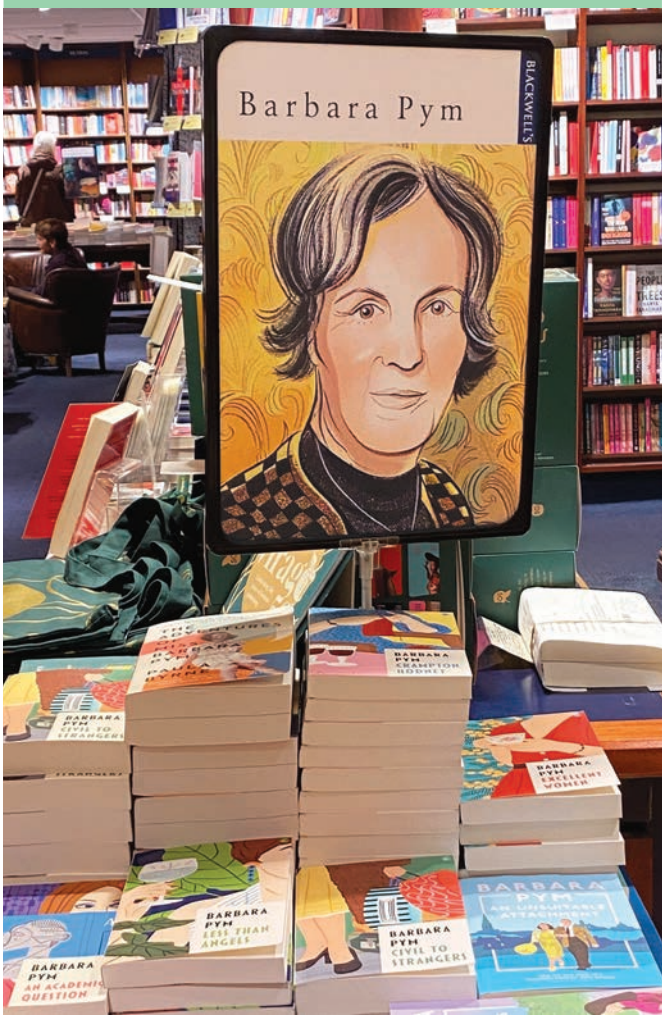
to get glimpses of her fascinating work through the BBC Programme Explorer: https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/search/0/20?order=first&q=hilary+pym

A story that it was Hilary who suggested, and played, the theme tune for *Listen with Mother* was confirmed at the Barbara Pym Conference, revealing a little extra about a BBC career that is still so under-researched.

Dr Kate Murphy is a Visiting Fellow at Bournemouth University. Prior to her academic career, she worked at the BBC for 24 years, primarily as a producer of the radio programme Woman's Hour. *She began her research into the history of women at the BBC in 2002 and has published widely on the subject. Her books include* Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC *(2016) and* Hilda Matheson: A Life of Secrets and Broadcasts *(2023), co-authored with Michael Carney.*

Pym's Work on Display at Blackwell's

Photo: Jutta Schiller



Conference Paper

Sisters – Rivals or Best Friends? From Jane and Cassandra to Barbara and Hilary

by Jutta Schiller

When the British poet Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) wrote in her poem 'Goblin Market' that 'there is no friend like a sister' she was referring to the close relationship she had with her sister Maria Francesca (1827–1876). There are several sisters in the history of English literature who share that feeling, but there are also some who don't.

The future of **Jane Austen** (1775–1817) and her elder sister **Cassandra** (1773–1845) was predicted by their father at Jane's birth when he wrote that she was 'a present plaything for Cassy and a future companion'. The girls were inseparable; they only spent times apart when they were visiting friends or relatives, but kept in close touch by writing countless letters to each other. Cassandra, who was Jane's confidante and shining example, always supported Jane's literary ambitions. Jane Austen was one of the first novelists to write about sisters, and she may have portrayed herself and her sister in her novels' heroines. Jane's death nearly broke Cassandra's heart, as she wrote in a letter afterwards: 'I have lost a treasure, such a sister...She was the sun of my life.'

The bright and beautiful **Porter** sisters – **Jane** (1775–1850) and **Anna Maria** (1778–1832) – were keen readers and ambitious writers, and created the modern historical novel, in that they set up historical figures, thoroughly researched, with characters of their imagination. Their published works include 26 books, numerous essays and poems. It wasn't always fame the sisters were after; they were often forced to seek publication of their works for financial reasons. The family – their mother and three brothers – relied on their income. In particular, the brothers needed their sisters' money to clear their debts – a lifelong obligation for Jane and Maria.

The sisters encouraged and admired each other. Maria was not yet 15 years old when her first book was published in 1793: *Artless Tales*. Jane published her first novel *The Spirit of the Elbe: A Romance*, in 1799. Her historical novel *Thaddeus of Warsaw* became the novel of the year 1803.

In 1826 the sisters decided to publish a book together for the first time, with stories separately written: *Tales Round a Winter Hearth*.

It was probably the constant strain of financial worries that led to the death of Anna Maria Porter in 1832. Her sister Jane continued to publish fiction and non-fiction and only gained financial security at the end of her life. She died in 1850.

continued next page

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Jutta Schiller. Photo: Lloyd Miller

The Brontës – **Charlotte** (1816–1855), **Emily** (1818–1848) and **Anne** (1820–1849) – seemed to form a unity, but there were many differences between them. Charlotte was and behaved like the older sister to whom the younger sisters looked up, but the bond was stronger between Emily and Anne; a friend described them as just 'like twins, inseparable companions, and in the very closed sympathy which never had any interruption'. While the sisters' path in life moved almost along the same lines, Charlotte was deeply impressed when she discovered Emily's poems. She persuaded her to publish them as a group project: *Poems* (1846) by Charlotte, Emily and Anne. All the sisters then went on to publishing novels.

Although Charlotte always said that she had loved her sisters dearly, she did not hold back her criticism. She said of Emily in 1850 that 'she had no worldly wisdom; her powers were unadapted to the practical business of life'. And she denounced Anne's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as an 'entire mistake'.

Recent biographers have cast new light on the sisters' relationship, suggesting that sibling tension might have been a motive for Charlotte's derisive remarks, and that Emily had baffled yet fascinated Charlotte since childhood.

The sisters **Vanessa Bell** (1879–1961) and **Virginia Woolf** (1882–1941) had a lifelong complementary relationship. They moved in the same circles; they were creative, each in her own way. They offered each other emotional and financial support, artistic inspiration and love, but competitiveness about their artistic achievements was a constant strain for them. Virginia considered painting as inferior to literature. Vanessa on the other hand questioned the creative substance of Virginia's work.

Virginia was constantly aware of the emotional imbalance in the sisters' relationship. She wrote in her diary on 20 June 1928: '[Vanessa] is a necessity to me – as I am not to her.' This feeling seemed to have continued throughout their lives. Vanessa loved her sister, but not in the same way, and she couldn't tell Virginia how much. Nevertheless, it was Virginia whose support helped Vanessa to get through the worst time in her life, when she lost her son Julian. She confessed to Virginia's former lover Vita Sackville-West in a letter in 1937: 'I cannot ever say how Virginia has helped me. Perhaps some day, not now, you will be able to tell her it's true.' And Vita did, as she told Vanessa in a letter after Virginia had committed suicide in 1941:

'I should like you to know that...I did tell [Virginia] what you had said about the comfort she had been to you over Julian, and I have never seen her look more pleased and also surprised. I know that your message gave her the keenest pleasure.'

Sometimes it is the parents' influence that determines their children's relationship. This is obviously true for the family of **Antonia Susan Byatt** (1936) and **Margaret Drabble** (1939). Their mother transferred all her academic ambitions on to her daughters, and Antonia could not cope with the pressure. She said, 'I always felt as though somebody were sort of breathing on my heels and whatever I did was not quite good enough.' She felt trapped in the situation of the unloved older daughter. Margaret Drabble knew that she was her mother's favourite, and she thinks that she profited from her high expectations.

A S Byatt's frustration about their mother's behaviour gave her reason enough to keep her little sister away. The foundation for their lifelong rivalry was laid; and it didn't help that both of them went to Cambridge and graduated with excellent marks in English literature. Both became famous writers of their generation, sometimes writing about the same topics at nearly the same time. They both wrote about their family – the other sister was never pleased.
[Dame Antonia Susan Byatt DBE died on 16 November 2023.]

Hilary Pym Walton (1916–2004) said in the chapter 'The Early Life' in *A Very Private Eye* that her elder sister **Barbara** (1913–1980) 'had a very protective attitude towards' her. It might have become the other way round in later years – Hilary protecting Barbara, for example from unsuitable relationships, or supporting Barbara, as Hilary was financially better off. With the novel *Some Tame Gazelle* in mind, in which Barbara portrayed herself and her sister as Belinda and Harriet, Hilary continued that 'the shared life of "Belinda and Harriet"...started well and ran a good course.' The Pym sisters knew: 'there is no friend like a sister'.

Jutta Schiller lives in Berlin, Germany, and has been a member of the Barbara Pym Society since 1998. She recently retired from her work at the public broadcasting station of Berlin-Brandenburg. In autumn 2018 she took over the editorship of Green Leaves, *the newsletter of the Barbara Pym Society.*

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Conference Paper

Barbara Pym in the Media

by Sioned Wiliam

I was fortunate to be able to take part in two panels this year, one discussing memories of adapting Barbara Pym's work for BBC Radio in the 90s, and the other looking ahead to how a new film or TV adaptation might come about.

In the first panel I reminisced with dramatist Elizabeth Proud about the many books we had worked on together for BBC Radio 4. *A Glass of Blessings* with Joanna David as Wilmet was the first. We then moved on to *Jane and Prudence* and *Crampton Hodnet*, with Samantha Bond as Miss Morrow and Elizabeth Spriggs as Miss Doggett, and featuring fine performances from Penelope Wilton and the much missed Stephen Moore. But the main conversation was about *Some Tame Gazelle* – Barbara's fantasy of how Hilary and she might have lived together as older women. It was her first book, written in 1935 and finally published in 1950. Philip Larkin adored this novel and said it was Pym's *Pride and Prejudice,* and it was an important book for us to dramatise, being so much the essence of Barbara and Hilary. In 1995 Elizabeth adapted it for Radio 4, with a dream cast including Miriam Margolyes as Harriet and Hannah Gordon as Belinda, Peter Jeffrey as Archdeacon Hoccleve and Elizabeth herself as Belinda's nemesis Agatha Hoccleve.

Elizabeth Proud

I had originally heard Elizabeth's sublime adaptation of Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* and contacted her to see if she might be interested in adapting Pym for the radio. I was surprised to find that we lived near each other, and indeed near to Queen's Park, where Barbara and Hilary had made their last home in London. We became firm friends and were privileged also to take Hilary back to the house in Queen's Park to share her memories of living there with Barbara. Hilary also came to the studio to watch the recordings. We remembered a significant moment for Hilary (during the recording of *Jane and Prudence*) when Julian Glover was playing the part of Fabian Driver, a character that had been based on his father, Gordon Glover. When Hilary arrived

Sioned Wiliam

in the studio she couldn't actually see Julian, as he was performing in the 'dead room' (a soundproofed studio in which background sound effects can be easily added), which was out of vision, around the corner from the production cubicle. So when she heard his voice booming out through the speakers, she was visibly moved and said, 'oh goodness, it's Gordon.' We were both struck at the vividness of her memory and how it resonated so powerfully for her so many years later.

I was very privileged to work with Elizabeth. She taught me so much about radio and about acting, and gave me a new perspective on Pym and the subtleties of her comedy, as well as the sadness lurking beneath the surface. Much of her skill in radio came from the fact that she was so steeped in the medium – she told me that she was 'a child of radio', and had grown up delighting in the pictures conjured up by the box in the corner. Elizabeth confessed that she hadn't read Pym before I contacted her, but it didn't take her long to devour the entire canon. She understood the Pym-ness of Pym instinctively, knew how to underplay the comedy, keeping the drama both real and heartfelt, and she had no trouble finding the subtle irony in the work. Elizabeth understood also the importance of the authorial voice – that the inner thoughts of her narrator were often the key to understanding the subtext of a scene. She developed, along with our wonderful studio manager, Carol McShane, ways of expressing this on radio – using different mic sounds for inner thoughts and normal conversation. Elizabeth also paid tribute to the wonderfully comic and expressive Pym dialogue, which she was always happy to use.

We both agreed that the casting of the adaptations had been vitally important, and that we had been extremely fortunate to work with great actors such as Miriam and Hannah, who had understood the need for utterly believable emotions in their performances to underpin the humour. It's easy to exaggerate and broaden out the comedy of Pym, whereas in fact it demands a much more realistic tone, giving emotional depth to the comedy. All the actors we worked with understood this, throughout our adapations. These ended with the short story 'So Very Secret' with Miriam again and Amanda Root, the quintessential Pym heroine and star of probably the best film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* ever made.

Which leads me to the second panel of the weekend, which the new Chair of the Barbara Pym Society, Devon Allison, moderated, and in which I was joined by Jennie Howarth, the producer of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (directed by the late Terence Davies) and *Blame It on the Bellboy* with Dudley Moore. Jennie gave us a frank account of the difficulties of making any film, the problems of securing

funding from a range of sources and the importance of a strong script. We also discussed the importance of casting, and of attaching talent to any putative film project.

This led to a spirited discussion, involving the audience, about possible dream casting for Pym heroines, and Carey Mulligan, Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Olivia Colman were popular choices. Jennie emphasised that having names of this quality attached would make the development of any future project much easier.

For decades, there have been enquiries about film rights, and attempts to bring one of Pym's novels to film, which will be an important way to bring Barbara Pym and her books to new and broader audiences. We know that Pym herself loved the 'flicks', as she called them. During the war she loved *Goodbye, Mr Chips,* laughed at Deanna Durbin movies and said with great pride that she didn't cry over Bette Davis' film *Dark Victory*. In 1951 Associated British Picture Corporation Ltd, based at Elstree Studios, wrote to her, resulting in a lunch date at the Café Royal a few weeks later. It must have seemed impossibly glamorous for her, although nothing came of it, or indeed of a farcical evening with the representative from 20th Century Fox.

Jennie outlined some of the things that need to happen for a film to get a green light – primarily casting, a strong script and a director with real passion and commitment. Roger Michell's *Persuasion* more than did justice to Austen's novel; it also reinvented it as a modern and bitingly satirical work. We discussed directors out there who might similarly reinvent Pym and who would 'get' the subtlety of her work, including Oliver Parker, Emerald Fennell and Simon Stone, the director of the recent film *The Dig.*

We also talked about the need to express the authorial voice in filmic terms – so crucial in Pym novels, whether in the narration or in the voice of the lead heroine.

Talking to Elizabeth the day before, we saw that radio did this very easily – the irony was always easy to express in an internal 'thought voice' but any film director would have to solve the problem of how to do this visually too. And we all agreed that, as in Elizabeth's adaptations, there was a strong case for keeping most of Pym's subtle and nuanced dialogue.

Devon ended the session by asking what the Society could do to create momentum for a film of a Pym novel, noting the importance of setting the right tone for Pym – in particular avoiding the temptation to reduce her comedy to a kind of cosy and broadly drawn farce. It was concluded that the Society will do all it can in the next few years to help bring *Excellent Women* to screens.

Sioned Wiliam comes from Barry, Wales. She began her television and radio career at the BBC, and along with Elizabeth Proud produced several adaptations of the work of Barbara Pym for BBC Radio 4. She then became an independent television producer and her credits include Tonight *with Jonathan Ross,* Game On, Big Train *and* Yonderland. *She broadcasts frequently on BBC Radio Cymru and BBC Radio London.*

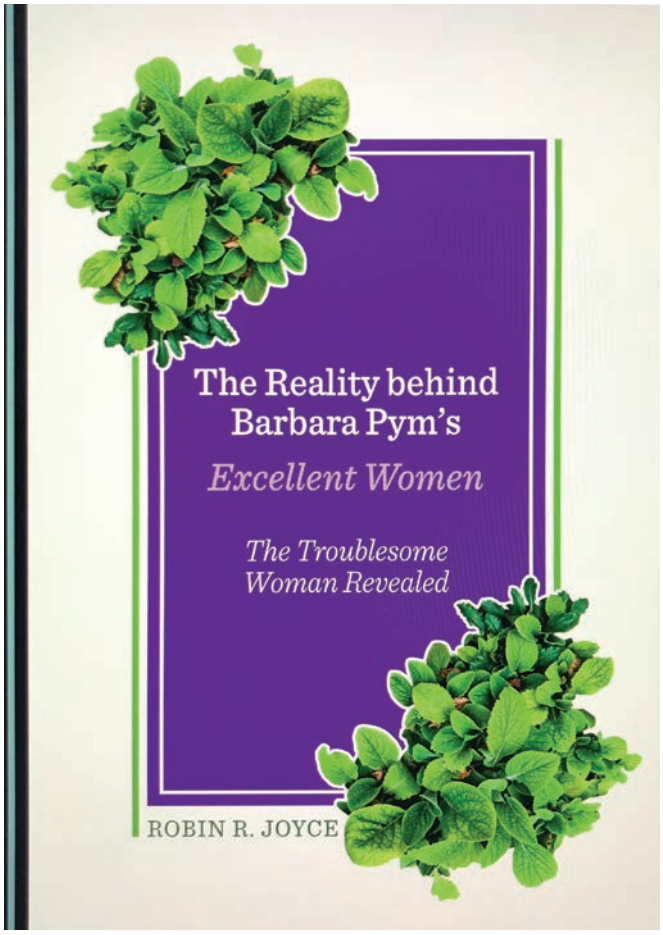
Review: *The Reality behind Barbara Pym's* Excellent Women: *The Troublesome Woman Revealed* by Robin R. Joyce

by Maryam Loos

Whether or not Barbara Pym's writing is feminist has already been the subject of some debate. *The Reality behind Barbara Pym's* Excellent Women: *The Troublesome Woman Revealed* by Robin R. Joyce offers new insights into the life and work of Barbara Pym from a feminist angle.

What sets Joyce's book apart is the fact that it is an explicit feminist reading of Pym's body of work. Joyce's analytical approach does not question the feminism that is implicit in Pym's writing; instead she asserts that Pym's writing is fully, unwaveringly feminist.

By already positing Pym's feminism as a given instead of one of several possible readings of her works, Joyce invites us to (re-)examine Pym's life and work by viewing it through a new radical lens. Central to Joyce's argument and analysis is the concept of the 'troublesome woman'. This motif includes Pym's very own 'excellent woman', the busy, amiable, self-effacing spinster, but is also inclusive of married women;



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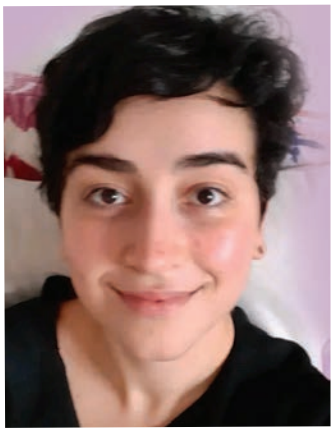
inclusive in fact of all female characters, who question, subvert, or defy gender roles in some way, who are, in short, 'troublesome'. Joyce asserts that this trope is the common thread that connects all of Pym's writing and is, in fact, also an element in Pym's biography.



Maryam Loos

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter strives to contextualise Pym's writings within her biography. Joyce has utilised a selection of primary sources to give us a clearer picture of the author, and to show how Pym's life has inspired her writing. The chapter establishes Pym's admiration for authors such as Elizabeth Taylor and Margaret Drabble and describes their influence on Pym.

Robin Joyce then proceeds to 'reveal the troublesome woman' across Pym's body of work. She frequently draws on the explicitly feminist works of authors such as Fay Weldon and Zoë Fairbairns and compares them to (1950s) Pym who – according to Joyce – turns out to be their predecessor. This is remarkable of course, as Pym lacked the cultural and theoretical framework of 1970s feminism, yet still managed to imbue her 1950s writing with a timeless feminist flavour.

Joyce repeatedly brings up the term 'binary feminism' – the assumption that an action or a concept is either patriarchal and oppressive to women, or not – as the framework along which both Weldon and Fairbairns structured their social criticism. Pym, she argues, anticipates this concept through her signature 'comedy and irony'.

As carefully researched and crafted as the main body of the book is, some statements are difficult to comprehend, such as the assertion that 'Pym's work is romantic in the way she draws upon the unromantic heroine. In doing so, Pym adopts Austen's portrayal of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, which established a sympathetic pattern for this figure'. Joyce does not elaborate on her line for this argument.

Robin Joyce views spinsterhood in Pym's novels as an overall positive, empowering experience for the characters. She claims that 'Prudence has remained happily single', that 'Mildred affects no sorrow', and perhaps most surprisingly, that 'Pym separates spinsters from a desire to marry so that they are immune from being seen as the other in a world in which marriage is considered the norm'.

This argument does not take into consideration that Prudence Bates and Mildred Lathbury are sensitive about their marital status; they do desire marriage, or at least the social perks that come with it. In fact, I would call Pym's ability to deconstruct and challenge the institution of marriage, identifying it as aspirational because it elevates a woman's social status, and not because it grants happiness (it never does in her books), her most radical and repeated feminist act.

In contradicting Joyce I would nevertheless agree that *The Reality behind Barbara Pym's* Excellent Women*: The Troublesome Woman Revealed* uncovers the feminist elements in Pym's works. Joyce demonstrates how the 'troublesome woman' is present in and central to all of Barbara Pym's novels. The naming and identifying of this motif, which effectively condenses the feminist essence of a Pym heroine regardless of her marital status, will undoubtedly propel the realm of Pym scholarship forward, carrying all the markers of a mainstay critical concept, which I predict will be extensively drawn upon by others in the future.

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

Maryam Loos is an MA student of English literature and culture at the University of Bremen in northwest Germany. Her research focuses mainly on women authors and filmmakers. She spoke at the online conference of the Barbara Pym Society in March 2022 on 'Attempting Adultery in A Glass of Blessings'.

New book out:
Emily Stockard

The Testing of Barbara Pym: London, the Wilderness Years, and the Rewards of Age

Palgrave, Macmillan 2023

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Gleanings

compiled by Yvonne Cocking

The Guardian ran a feature on 11 February where authors revealed the novels 'which stole their hearts and made them laugh'. Rebecca Wait said:

> 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 that 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.

In *The Sunday Times* of 2 March India Knight, reviewing *Murder Before Evensong*, thought

> ...that Britain's favourite vicar [The Reverend Richard Coles] might be hanging up the dog collar...but he proves to be the unlikely heir to Barbara Pym...[He] rivals Barbara Pym in his ability to make supremely low-stake conflict gripping.

In a review of re-issues of two of Mary Renault's novels, Miranda Carter wrote on 13 April in the *London Review of Books*:

> When Mary Renault met the British novelists, Robert Liddell, Elizabeth Taylor, and Barbara Pym, in Athens in 1961, she fled to town as soon as she could, muttering that she wasn't made for this kind of thing. She seems to have cut a formidable figure. As Barbara wrote in her diary: 'Mary Renault arriving all in gold lamé. Miss Pym (a failure) in her simple black.'

In a leading article, entitled 'A Desert of Letters', in *The Daily Telegraph* on 11 May, the writer quoted from Barbara Pym's novel *A Glass of Blessings*:

> 'When I came downstairs, I saw that there was a letter on the hall table. It looked almost beautiful – a blue rectangle against the polished mahogany.' This is becoming a rare pleasure when areas of the country have become postal 'deserts' with one delivery a fortnight if they're lucky.

Rose Wild wrote in *The Times* on 17 June:

> The book reviews in the Saturday Review are always an entertainment and education in their own right, but I have to admit that the Rereading series, since it started a few years ago, has probably given me even more inspiration for what to pick up and read right now. I don't know how I missed Barbara Pym's *Crampton Hodnet* the first time round, but I'm ever grateful for its re-reading appearance a couple of years ago...

Yvonne Cocking and Lloyd Miller. Photo: Nicky Foy

Joyce Carol Oates reviewed selected novellas of Rachel Ingalls (*TLS*, 4 August): 'Suburban life meets the fantastic in Rachel Ingalls' fiction':

> Like Barbara Pym and Jean Rhys before her, Ingalls was a well-regarded but little-known woman writer, plucked suddenly from obscurity.

In a piece on Richard Osman in *The Guardian* on 9 September, Charlotte Edwards said:

> Osman always loved crime. He grew up reading Christie and adored Patricia Highsmith, creator of Tom Ripley. He also likes the peculiar Britishness of the worlds created by Barbara Pym and Muriel Spark.

A regular feature in the *i* on Fridays is 'One Minute With...' in which writers are asked such questions as 'Who is your favourite author?' On 15 September Rebecca May Johnson answered:

> A writer I return to when I want to feel comforted and entertained is Barbara Pym, especially for her descriptions of food, which are deliciously expressive of characters and social dynamics.

continued next page

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Flora Watkins reviewed *Jobs for the Girls: How We Set Out to Work in the Typewriter Age* by Ysenda Maxtone Graham in *The Spectator*, 30 September:

> Among the jaw-dropping iniquities there is light relief in the absurdities that Maxtone Graham is so good at drawing out of her confidantes. We have Ted Heath falling asleep during an interview, the BBC secretary who ordered 666,666 bulldog clips when a typewriter key got stuck, and the author herself being promised a turkey at Christmas to compensate for the tiny salary of her first job at Christie's in the 1980s. (Men weren't offered one: 'They were on a different pathway from day one', she discovered.)
>
> But if the spirit of Barbara Pym – whose sense of high comedy the author shares – is present, it is the late Pym of *Quartet in Autumn*, shot through with sadness, poignancy and regret for lives lived in the slipstream of men. 'Why did I even become a secretary?' asks one Oxford graduate – the lot, Maxtone Graham argues, of a generation 'drip-fed with a sense of their own lack of usefulness'.

Thanks to contributors Scott Herrick, Paul Howard, Lorraine Mepham, Iona Roberts, Christine Shuttleworth, and Michael Wilson.
Items may be sent to Yvonne at yvcocking@gmail.com.

Two Excellent Women Rewarded

by Deb Fisher

A couple of years ago, the Barbara Pym Society Committee began discussing what could be done to recognise the contributions of founder members Eileen Roberts and Yvonne Cocking to the work of the Society over many years. While others have come and gone, these two have stuck firmly to their respective tasks with maximum effort and minimal complaint. No wonder they are universally loved and respected.

When we suggested some kind of special award for our truly excellent women Yvonne replied much as expected: 'Oh no dear, I don't want any special recognition. I suppose, maybe, some time, if you felt like it, some kind of life membership or something might be all right – I wouldn't object to that.'

Life membership was something offered for sale by the Barbara Pym Society in its very early days. It was set at such a bargain price that there were several takers. However, in the realisation that it was not economically viable, the offer was soon terminated. Since then, the only type of life membership available has been honorary life membership, which has been awarded to celebrity supporters, including Jilly Cooper and Miriam Margolyes, but so far not to 'ordinary' people. Eileen and Yvonne are *not* ordinary people – they are quite extraordinary, not only in their devotion to Pym but in their ability to bring others into the fold.

So we decided to present Eileen and Yvonne with Honorary Life Membership and to mark the award with the presentation of a special certificate, kindly designed for us by Lloyd Miller – who also, of course, produces the graphics that adorn *Green Leaves*.

Eileen's health did not allow her to attend this year's AGM and therefore we approached her daughter Alison, a curator at the Ashmolean Museum who has often hosted us there, to ask if she would attend to receive the award on her mother's behalf. Yvonne, of course, was still in the dark; knowing her as we do, we feared that she would hide herself away if she knew it was coming. Her daughter Nicky was in on the secret.

Devon Allison, right, presenting Eileen Roberts' Honorary Life Membership certificate to her daughter Alison. Photo: Jutta Schiller

The presentation took place on conference Sunday. It was not only Yvonne Cocking who was moved to tears when she received the certificate for the Honorary Life Membership but many members of the Barbara Pym Society, who showed their respect and esteem for two truly excellent women with loud cheers and applause. Eileen's daughter Alison read out a message Eileen had dictated:

> *Dear friends,*
> *...I am very pleased to receive this certificate. It means a lot to me and will have pride of place on my wall. The Barbara Pym Society has given me enormous pleasure since the beginning and I consider all the Pym Society members to be my friends...I hope to be able to see you all again in person in the future. Thank you all...*
> *Eileen*

Yvonne also sent a personal message of thanks 'for the honour of being made a life member'. An honour both of them thoroughly deserve.

Deb Fisher was Chair of the Barbara Pym Society from 2018 up to summer 2023.

Barbara Pym Literary Internship

Xanthe Richardson. Photo courtesy of Xanthe Richardson

The Barbara Pym Society has donated £500 to St Hilda's for establishing an internship programme for undergraduates who are at the end of their second year of an English Literature course. The internship is aimed at students who are interested in a career in the publishing industry, and it provides the candidate with an introduction to the many aspects of publishing. The student will be given the opportunity to support Felicity Bryan Associates, a literary agency based in Oxford, in their annual preparations for the Frankfurt International Book Fair, to screen submissions and to lead a small self-contained project that will support the agency's operations.

Read next the report by Xanthe Richardson, the first recipient of the award.

https://www.st-hildas.ox.ac.uk/content/barbara-pym-literary-internship-2023

This past September, I was lucky enough to be given the chance to undertake a two-week internship at Felicity Bryan Associates, a programme supported and spearheaded by the Barbara Pym Society and St Hilda's College.

My main project at the agency was to work on the catalogue for the Frankfurt Book Fair, the world's largest trade fair for books, which takes place in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in October every year. I collected book jackets and reviews, researched authors for biographies, and wrote and edited synopses for the featured books. It was really interesting work – my to-read list grew longer after every day! – and it felt rewarding to be so involved in producing something tangible that the agency could use.

Though I had been interested in publishing and the book world for a long time (as many English students are), there were so many things I was surprised by – the sheer volume and range of unsolicited manuscripts and proposals that agents receive, for one, each being read and appraised by the office in reader reports. It felt so exciting, seeing 'behind the curtain' on books that might not be published for years, or at all, and being introduced to so many new worlds and fresh ideas each day. From what I learnt sitting in on meetings between agents and publishers or literary scouts, I was also surprised by how much came down to chance in the industry. Pitched in the wrong way, or even on the wrong day, a book could so easily lose its chance to be published.

Considering how intense this all sounds, the best surprise was how genuinely lovely and supportive everyone in the office was. The agents kindly organised meetings with me throughout the two weeks to chat to me about their experiences of publishing, their specialisms, how excited they were about their authors and projects, and to advise me on my own plans and aspirations. Thanks to them, the world of publishing which had felt so intimidating was demystified, making me more confident in my abilities and encouraging me to pursue my interest in the book trade. I have learnt so much and I am so very grateful to the Barbara Pym Society for enabling me to gain this experience.

Xanthe Richardson

Congratulations to Linda McDougall,
member of the Barbara Pym Society,
on the publication of her book

Marcia Williams: The Life and Times of Baroness Falkender

Biteback Publishing, October 2023

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How I Discovered Barbara Pym

by Hazel Bell

After Cape reissued *No Fond Return of Love*, in 1979, Cecilia Gordon, a keen Pym fan and the wife of the Secretary of the Society of Indexers, submitted a long review of the book and Pym's career to the Society's journal, *The Indexer,* of which I was editor. It appeared in volume 12, in October 1980, opening: 'Since indexes to novels are rare indeed...some of you may like to read a novel which starts by describing an indexers' conference and subsequently revolves round the relationships there.'*

I had never heard of Barbara Pym, but as a regular attendant at the Society of Indexers' conferences, I was fascinated by this account of the novel. I got it, read it, loved it, and then got, read and loved all her others.

When the Society of Indexers received an invitation to a conference held at St Hilda's in July 1986, 'Barbara Pym: Her Life and Work', I attended it, and reported it in *The Indexer* under the heading 'A Pymian Occasion', thus:

> 'It's an unusual idea having a conference of people like us,' said Dulcie, the indexer in Barbara Pym's affectionately witty novel, *No Fond Return of Love*. It seemed even stranger to have a conference on the life and work of Barbara Pym; but the first such was held in Oxford, 4–5 July 1986, giving its participants a sense not so much of *déjà vu* as of fulfilling a fantasy – a wryly self-deprecating one.

The conference was attended by over 50 devotees, some from Sweden and the US, and including several of Barbara Pym's Oxford contemporaries – some familiar from her published diaries and letters. Memorabilia were displayed, memories rehearsed, insight into the novels and their characters was given in two splendid literary addresses, and a former colleague from the International African Institute (IAI) spoke of Pym's 28 years of editorial work there. Her responsibilities included indexing; and he estimated that she had proofread 1,000,000 words of anthropological publications.

It is given to few of our trade to have conferences held in their honour; but this one was as truly deserved as it was thoroughly enjoyed – despite the pervasive sense of being most drily observed from above.

I joined the Barbara Pym Society and continued to feature in *The Indexer* Barbara Pym as indexer and the many indexers appearing in her novels. By 1995 the entry for Pym in the cumulative index to *The Indexer* shows:

An Academic Question (quoted) **15** 66; appreciation **15** 236–7; biography reviewed **15** 254; conference on her life and work **15** 66; diaries and letters, index **14** 189; *Excellent Women*, indexers in **13** 197; *Jane and Prudence* **14** 277 (indexers in **13** 197–8); *Less Than Angels*, indexers in **13** 198; Literary Weekend **19** 36; *No Fond Return of Love* **12** 222 (indexer in **12** 26, 109), (indexers in **13** 26); *No Fond Return of Love* (quoted) **19** 242; *No Fond Return of Love* (reviewed) **12** 108–9; *Quartet in Autumn* **14** 277; *An Unsuitable Attachment*, indexers in **13** 198; Pym, Hilary and Hazel Holt, eds, *A Very Private Eye*, index **14** 189

(Page references are represented by volume number [in bold] followed by page number.)

Photo courtesy of Hazel Bell

The subheading, 'appreciation', refers to Hazel Holt's article, 'No thankless task: Barbara Pym as indexer' which originally appeared in *The Indexer* in October 1987. It was then reprinted in *Green Leaves* in 1999; parts were quoted in the journal *Learned Publishing* in an account of the development of journal indexing, in 2001,** and the whole appeared again in 2008 as 'Barbara Pym: anthropological indexer' in my book, *From Flock Beds to Professionalism: a history of index-makers.****

Much promotion for Pym and her works to derive from the reissue of *No Fond Return of Love*!

* *Cecilia Gordon, Review in* The Indexer 15 (4), *pp236–7.*
** *Hazel K Bell, 'From herbals to Hotbot: the development of journal indexing' in* Learned Publishing 14 *(April 2001), pp123–30.*
*** *Hazel K Bell,* From Flock Beds to Professionalism: a history of index-makers *(Oak Knoll Press and HKB Press, 2008), pp137–40.*

Hazel Bell is an indexer, editor and writer. She has twice been awarded the Wheatley Medal of the Society of Indexers for an outstanding index, in 2005 and 2006. She has indexed Green Leaves *up to 2021.*

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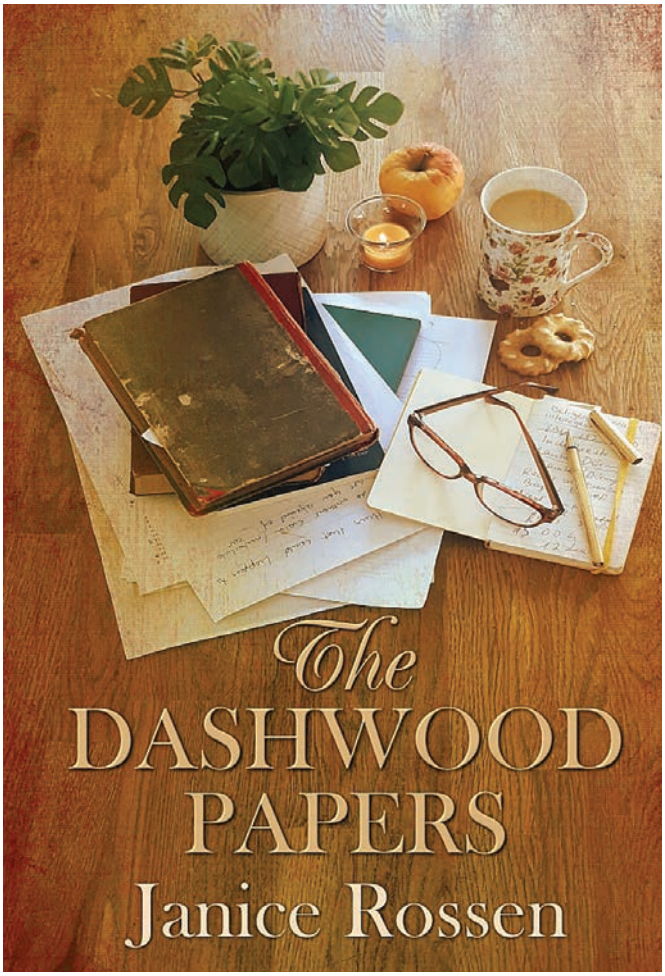
Review: *The Dashwood Papers* by Janice Rossen

by Isabel Stanley



Many members of the Barbara Pym Society will remember the interesting papers which Janice Rossen has given at meetings of the Society at St. Hilda's, Oxford, and in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They may also have read her two books on Pym, *Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym* (St. Martin's Press, 1988) and *The World of Barbara Pym* (Macmillan, 1987). Now Rossen has published a novel, *The Dashwood Papers*, which is partially based on her experience working on the Pym papers in the manuscript collection of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

The book opens with Miranda, a thirtyish editor of romance novels, resolving to finish her PhD dissertation on the minor British novelist, Rosalind Galliard. She abandoned the dissertation some years earlier because Galliard's literary executor, Adrian Dashwood, would not allow her access to Galliard's papers in the Bodleian. Miranda is determined to see those papers and manages to get Dashwood's permission this time around. Meanwhile, a cache of Galliard letters – some of them scandalous – have turned up and various people are trying to purloin any letters that they may have sent to Galliard or she may have sent to them.

There is a fairly lengthy flashback to Adrian Dashwood's affair and subsequent continuing friendship with Galliard until her untimely death in an avalanche. Has Dashwood hidden early drafts of her work or some of her letters? Can he be trusted? Can any of the flamboyant Gaillard's equally flamboyant former friends be trusted?

Miranda stumbles into this quagmire of old acquaintances of Rosalind Gaillard and immediately begins to suspect the worst of many of them, spurred on by the overactive imagination she has acquired from reading so many romance novels over the years. She also meets a dashing young man, Nigel, who turns into a new romantic partner, but not before alarms and excursions concerning the mysterious letters and the possibility of a new Galliard manuscript that might or might not be lurking in the Bodleian.

Lovers of Oxford will enjoy Rossen's descriptions of well-remembered places in that beautiful city. She also includes many literary allusions and descriptions of gourmet meals and drink, as well as designer clothing, which some readers may enjoy. Miranda and her adventures do not remind the reader of Barbara Pym's novels, but they do reflect Janice Rossen's own take on literary friendships and rivalries and the consequences of the strategies they employ to win a prominent spot in the world of writers.

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

Isabel Stanley is a Professor Emerita of English at East Tennessee State University, US. She has served on the board of the North American Chapter of the Barbara Pym Society and has given papers at the Society meetings in Oxford and in Cambridge, MA.

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The Blessings of an Excellent Sister

by K. Blanton Brenner

I don't know what inspired my younger sister Kathryn to suggest that we three sisters re-read Barbara Pym novels in chronological order. Perhaps it was because our older sister, Gwenny, was diagnosed with cancer, the illness that claimed Barbara Pym's life.

Whatever the inspiration, Kathryn's idea was brilliant and an excellent way for us to check up on Gwenny during our Zoom book club. We were all Barbara Pym fans and serious anglophiles. When we were young women, we lived together for two years in England. Gwen was a 25-year-old widow with a three-year-old son, Kathy was 15 and I was 19 when our sister scooped us up and fled Texas for the UK. It was 1967, London was swinging and we were in love with the Beatles and fascinated by Mary Quant fashion.

But we didn't land in London, we landed on a pig farm in the Cotswolds. Gwenny rented a Wuthering Heights-type farmhouse in the middle of fields of Brussels sprouts, cabbages and pigs. Not so much swinging as odiferous. We didn't know it then, but we were living only 25 miles from Barbara Pym's home. I like to imagine that we may have passed Ms. Pym on the High Street in Chipping Campden or perhaps shared a tearoom with her in Evesham.

The sisters in Chicago: Kathy, Karen (K. Blanton), Gwenny. Photo courtesy of K. Blanton Brenner

When we finished reading all of Pym's novels, her juvenilia and unfinished works, we were at a bit of a loss. We enjoyed so much finding the recurring characters in her books and laughing together at a pithy remark from one of her marvelous, eccentric characters. She inspired us to notice the small things, to find the humor in dark times and to appreciate that even the most humdrum life is filled with moments of joy and pathos.

To commemorate our shared time with Barbara Pym I wrote a short story in which I imagined that we met her when we were young women. The story was partly true. It was based on an incident with Gwen's son Patrick. In my story, 'A Few Green Peas', Patrick starts a food fight with the author. The flying peas are witnessed by Miss Doggett and Jessie Morrow. Kathy encouraged me to send the story to the 2022 Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition.

I rang Gwenny up to tell her the astonishing news that my story won first place! At first Gwenny was as incredulous as I had been. And then she said, 'Didn't we have the most wonderful time with Barbara Pym? I wish we could have really met her.' Gwenny died in her blue study surrounded by her beloved books. Sometimes I wonder if Gwen has met Barbara Pym in some quiet corner of a heavenly tearoom where they, perhaps, ordered the Beano.

K. Blanton Brenner, a member of the Barbara Pym Society and first-prize winner of the 2022 Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition, was a Montessori teacher. She has published two novels, Appaloosa Sky *(2019) and* The Trinity Rivers Trilogy *(2022). K. Blanton Brenner lives in Chicago.*

25th North American Conference
15–17 March 2024

The Sheraton Commander Hotel
Harvard Square, Cambridge, MA

The program and online booking will be available on the website in December.
barbara-pym.org

Jane and Prudence

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Saying a Word

by Ruth Taylor

> 'I hope you were able to say a word, Mildred,' said Julian, fixing me with what I privately called his "burning" look. 'We shall rely on you to do something there.' (*Excellent Women*)

This year, as every year, I regretfully had to leave the Conference of the Barbara Pym Society in Oxford before the end of the dramatized reading organized by Yvonne Cocking. The coach to Heathrow had been late, compounded by a man at Heathrow Central Station who debated the price of the ticket to Terminal 5 with the already harassed driver. 'When will you be leaving?' 'As soon as you take your seat,' came the reply through gritted teeth.

The flight was full, so all passengers with carry-on bags were asked to put them in the hold; we were loaded on first as we had to hand over our cases at the foot of the stairs. As I made my way to seat 9F, a flight attendant was leaning over the back of the seats in row 10. 'I like your bag,' he commented. When I told him it came from Foyles on the South Bank, he told me he worked in an Oxfam bookshop on his days off.

'So, were you over in London for the weekend?' 'No, I had gone to Oxford for the Barbara Pym Society weekend.' 'Barbara Pym?' His eyes lit up; he knew her name, because her books came into his bookshop, and they knew she had had a resurgence after the biography written by Paula Byrne. Of course, I asked if he had read any – he hadn't, but asked which he should read first. I recommended *Excellent Women,* and my beloved *Some Tame Gazelle*. Just then a lot of passengers came down the aisle and the attendant smiled and moved on.

And that was that, I thought. I made a mental note to text my Pym friends to report that I had done some 'missionary work' – a phrase I first heard used in relation to BP by Ros Cleal, another member of the Barbara Pym Society (Ros always keeps several charity shop copies of BP novels to hand, in case she gets the opportunity to spread the word).

Soon the curtains of business class were drawn at row 7, and savoury smells drifted back towards us in economy, with our tiny bags of a dozen pretzels and our mini bottles of water. I got stuck into my paperback (the final Morse, to prolong the Oxford vibe). The man beside me fell asleep.

'Ma'am.'

I looked up to see my attendant holding out a glass of champagne.

'For Barbara,' he smiled.

He disappeared again behind the curtains. And I was so touched. Wouldn't BP be pleased, I thought, that she had created such a serendipitous moment, a connection between strangers?

As we filed off the plane, the attendants were lined up to say goodbye. I had my glass ready to hand back. Luckily I had bought a couple of Pym pens that day and was able to hand one over with my glass as I thanked him, 'From the Pym Society.'

Barbara Pym on the Air

Jennifer Howarth took part in a discussion with Sioned Wiliam and Devon Allison on the chances of a new film or TV adaptation of Barbara Pym's novels (see Sioned's article 'Barbara Pym in the Media' on page 13).

Jennifer Howarth discovered the joys of Barbara Pym as a teacher, but after training at the National Film and Television School she found her metier in film, producing Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, which won the International Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988. Her other productions include an adaptation of Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill*, and Dudley Moore's last film, *Blame It on the Bellboy*. Later on she began writing for BBC Radio 4. She has over twenty plays and adaptations to her credit, including Barbara Pym's *Jane and Prudence* and *An Unsuitable Attachment* and an original play called *The Resurrection of Miss Pym*, based on the correspondence between Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin. The play is available here: https://archive.org/details/the-resurrection-of-miss-pym

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More Conference Photos

Clockwise from above: Rita Phillips and Paul Howard during the Pymbola. After-dinner party with the Principal of St Hilda's, Professor Springman. Tim Burnett and Betty Zausner. Tom Sopko, Triona Adams and Martha Stewart in the dramatized reading. Christine Shuttleworth and Kathy Ackley. All photos by Jutta Schiller

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In the name of the Society: Lorraine Mepham and Triona Adams present flowers to the outgoing Chair Deb Fisher. Photo: Jutta Schiller

Ode to Deb

by Ruth Taylor

We here do thank our most esteemèd Chair,
Who's served her term with diligence and care.

As faithful steward of the Pymmite flame,
She's burnished Barbara's reverèd name.

Through worldwide plague and forcèd separation
She steered our BP ship to virtual celebration.

And when we could return to Hilda's walks,
She managed both the live and online talks.

So we now thank, in person, page and web
The great, the good, the wholly glorious DEB!

September 2023

Ruth Taylor teaches English in Northern Ireland. She was third-prize winner of the 2022 Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition.

The Barbara Pym Society 2023–2024

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Coming Events

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

2024 North American Conference
15–17 March 2024
Sheraton Commander Hotel, Harvard Square
Cambridge, MA
Jane and Prudence

2024 Spring Meeting
Date and theme to be announced later.

2024 AGM & Conference
30 August–1 September 2024
St Hilda's College, Oxford, UK
(30th Anniversary of the Society)

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