

Fashion in *A Glass of Blessings*

by Sandra Goldstein

Wilmet Forsyth, the central character in *A Glass of Blessings*, tells us: “I always take trouble with my clothes, and being tall and dark I usually manage to achieve some kind of distinction. Today I was in pale coffee brown with touches of black and coral jewellery.” Like Wilmet, the young Barbara Pym was tall and good-looking, and when she went up to Oxford in 1931 she indulged what her friend Hazel Holt called an “abiding passion” for clothes. Her diaries describe in minute detail the outfits she wore during her eventful college years. Here is Pym’s breathlessly enthusiastic description of an evening at a fashionable Oxford restaurant: “Went out to dinner at the George with Harry...I wore blue lace—with three real red roses pinned on to the front. Also my long crystal earrings and make-up to match the roses. Very nice!”

Pym’s interest in clothes did not diminish as she matured. In 1954, working at the African Institute, she wrote this shopping list for her spring/summer wardrobe:

- Peacock blue poplin dress
- Charcoal grey suit
- White blouse
- Yellow hat
- Tan gloves
- Black court shoes
- Black bag
- Lime and black cotton [to make a dress]
- Black gloves

The inclusion of the hat and gloves was essential for the well-dressed woman of the 1950s, and Barbara’s choice of clothes is reminiscent of Wilmet’s favorite outfit: a black or gray suit set off by a brightly-colored hat.

Barbara Pym’s “abiding passion” prevailed throughout her life. In the late 1960’s, accepting that there was no longer a market for her novels, Pym named sewing and choosing dress material as the “small pleasures” of retirement. In 1975 she wrote to Philip Larkin: “When I wake in the small hours I don’t think of death, I always try to switch my thoughts to something frivolous like clothes or planning a novel.” At the Booker Prize award dinner in 1977, she briefly described the appearance of all the finalists, ending with: “B.P. in her 65th year. Tall, short hair, long black pleated skirt, black blouse, Indian with painted flowers (C&A £4.90).” It is no surprise that Pym named Wilmet and Prudence, two of her best-dressed and most clothes-obsessed characters, as her favorite heroines.

Barbara Pym once remarked that she would have liked to know what Emma wore when she went to dinner at the Coles’. Unlike Jane Austen, Pym invariably tells us what her heroines wear. In fact her novels present a fascinating costume history ranging from the 1920s through the 1970s. Her first novel, *Young Men in Fancy Dress*, written when she was sixteen, unpublished and residing in the Bodleian Library’s Pym archive, reads like a series of fashion

plates. There is a confusing number of characters, who are defined largely by what they wear: For instance Gillian “wore a...frock of creamy chiffon...sprinkled with pale blue and yellow flowers. It was rather long and the skirt fell in points of varying lengths.” Celia had a “red helmet hat,” a “black costume...tight-fitting and rather short,” and “shoes of scarlet kid with high straight heels.” The 16-year-old Barbara was obviously reveling in her descriptions of the latest fashions.

Civil to Strangers, *Some Tame Gazelle*, and *Crampton Hodnet* conjure up the 1930s, a decade when well-dressed ladies wore elegant gowns of marocain, foulard, Macclesfield silk, crepe de chine or voile, and the not so well-dressed ones wore sagging stockinette jumper suits. People dressed appropriately for every occasion, donning their bridge coats for evening parties, and tweed suits and brogues for sensible everyday wear in the countryside. The short, posthumously published wartime stories, *Home Front Novel*, *So Very Secret*, and *Goodbye Balkan Capital*, written in the forties, feature, not surprisingly, Red Cross and ARP (Air Raid Precautions service) uniforms, and boiler suits.

In the novels of the 1950s, Pym described the elegant clothes worn by Wilmet Forsyth, and by Prudence Bates in *Jane and Prudence*, the casual chic of Catherine Oliphant in *Less Than Angels*, and the beginning of an American-influenced street style embodied by Keith in *A Glass of Blessings*. She featured the shaggy coats, chemise-style dresses and pointed-toe shoes of the sixties in *No Fond Return of Love*, the tartan trews worn by Penelope, the “pre-Raphaelite beatnik” with her heavily made-up eyes and pale lips, in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and the maxi-coats, caftans, frizzy hair-styles and Laura Ashley retro of the 1970s in *A Few Green Leaves* and *An Academic Question*. In *Quartet in Autumn*, published in 1977, Letty, like Pym herself, associates particular occasions with the clothes she had worn--”the New Look brought in by Dior in 1947, the comfortable elegance of the fifties and in the early sixties the horror of the mini-skirt, such a cruel fashion for those no longer young.”

A Glass of Blessings was published in 1958, but we know from Pym’s diary that she was already planning it three years before. On 15 May 1955, she wrote: “WHAT IS MY NEXT NOVEL TO BE? It can begin with the shrilling of the telephone in...church.” The names Wilmet, Piers and Father Bode appear in diary entries for 1956, as well as a description of Harrods Furniture Depository, which Wilmet and Piers saw when they walked along the river. So we can place the book in the mid-fifties, a time of new beginnings and affluence after the austerity of the immediate post-war years. The decade opened with the Festival of Britain in 1951, and the coronation in 1953. In 1954 most food rationing ended, and in 1957 Prime Minister Harold Macmillan made the claim: “Let us be frank about it: most of our people have never had it so good.” Conspicuous consumption rather than necessity now motivated clothes purchases. We know that Wilmet is an extravagant shopper. She admits that “I bought as many clothes as I wanted in all the most becoming styles and colours.” She had bought a lavender-colored cardigan on a whim, because “*Vogue* or *Harper’s* had urged us to make it a lavender spring this

year.” She had soon taken a dislike to it and given it to the church jumble sale, shortly thereafter recognizing it worn by the distressed gentlewoman Miss Prideaux.

The greatest influence on how fashionable women dressed throughout the 1950s dates from 1947, when Paris designer Christian Dior created his “ligne Corolle,” dubbed the “New Look” by *Life* magazine.

In the early to mid forties, women’s clothes had boxy silhouettes, mannish square shoulders and practical short skirts. In England, clothes were rationed; the motto of the day was “Make Do and Mend.” The Board of Trade’s Utility Clothing Scheme was introduced in 1941 (hence the CC41 symbol) in order to control production, distribution and cost of clothing. British couturiers such as Hardy Amies, Edward Molyneux and Digby Morton were invited to prepare a range of patterns for utility clothes. The prototypes, using a restricted amount of cloth, were simple but stylish garments.



Dior’s design presented a revolutionary change. *Vogue*’s fashion editor summed up the new silhouette in the autumn of 1947: “Take last season’s round hipline, small shoulder, pulled-in waist, longer skirt, and emphasize each...The skirt may be full -- petal-shaped or spreading with unpressed pleats. It may be straight. But either way it descends to anything from fourteen to eight inches from the floor.”



The New Look was criticized for symbolizing opulence and wealth. It seemed irresponsible to use 25 yards of fabric to make one skirt, raising the cost of clothing at a time when basic foods were still rationed. Labour Member of Parliament Bessie Braddock described the new style as “the ridiculous whim of idle people.” However, women were tired of utilitarian clothes and in spite of vocal opposition the New Look caught on. The fact that the new silhouette required women to wear corsets to achieve the prescribed small waist was also accepted, despite the discomfort and inconvenience. British designers made their own version of the New Look, and Dior began to sell the licenses for his designs, making fashionable clothes available on the high street and thus affordable to all.

In *A Glass of Blessings* we are treated to a spectrum of 1950s fashion from Wilmet’s sophistication to Keith’s street style. Wilmet, always immaculately dressed, exemplifies the elegance and glamour that returned to fashion after the long years of

wartime austerity. The fashionable shoes of the time had high stiletto heels. No wonder Wilmet “found the rough path difficult going” when walking with Piers along the river. When she re-appears in *No Fond Return of Love*, published in 1961, Dulcie and Viola see Wilmet as “a tall, elegantly-dressed woman of about thirty-five, with a fur stole draped casually over her dark grey suit and a frivolous little pink velvet hat.” She is still wearing “ridiculously high heels.”

One cannot imagine Wilmet ever dressing casually, like Catherine Oliphant, who liked “flat-heeled shoes and loose jackets,” or *Excellent Women’s* Helena Napier, “gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey,” (although Helena could also be “very elegant in black”), or having a “lapse” like *Excellent Women’s* Mildred Lathbury, who was “hatless and stockingless in an old cotton dress and a cardigan” when Everard Bone unexpectedly invited her to dinner.

At her friend Rowena’s cocktail party, Wilmet wears a mole-coloured velvet dress. Incidentally, Pym’s notebook in the Bodleian containing manuscript notes for *A Glass of Blessings* contains the words “mole-coloured velveteen,” so the fabric must have held a special fascination for her. Wilmet’s soft brown cocktail dress stands out against the black dresses most of the other women are wearing. In 1954, Christian Dior enthused: “You can wear black at any time. You can wear it at any age. You may wear it on almost any occasion; a ‘little black frock’ is essential to a woman’s wardrobe.” As Rowena explains: “We all wear it here for parties -- like a kind of uniform, just with different jewellery and little touches.”

Costume jewelry became important again in the mid-fifties as war time restrictions were lifted and crystal diamante from Austria was available again. Floral brooches and novelty figural brooches were popular, but Wilmet finds modern jewelry vulgar and prefers her “Victorian garnet necklace and earrings,” She is delighted with Professor Root’s Christmas gift -- a



“charming early Victorian mourning brooch, a lock of auburn hair delicately framed in gold.”

At the other end of the spectrum, Keith, dressed in “black jeans and a blue tartan shirt,” an outfit Wilmet found “absurd,” his hair “cropped very short in the fashionable style of the moment,” represents the emergence of a fashion cult for young people, influenced by American style icons like Marlon Brando and James Dean. This style would come into its own in the sixties.



But in *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym shows us that even in 1950s England, not everyone had the money or the inclination to be a fashion plate. Mrs Spooner, the verger at St. Luke’s, always wears a “peacock blue hat which had a large paste replica of the bird pinned to the front of it.” At Father Ransome’s induction, “[A] beaming woman, wearing pince-nez and a rather unusual hat trimmed with fur animals’ tails,” serves tea, (obviously an excellent woman). We are reminded here of Miss Doggett’s “terrifying new hat trimmed with a whole covey of cyclamen-coloured birds” in *Crampton Hodnet*.

But Pym describes clothes not only as amusing vignettes, but as keys to character and personality. Wilf Bason’s transformed appearance in his antique teashop underlines his innate silliness.: “He had grown a beard -- egg-shaped, I suppose one might have called it, to match his face -- and was wearing a loose blue smock, corduroy trousers and sandals.” Miss Prideaux still dresses in the style of a bygone age, for she lives in the past, remembering her life as a governess to minor European royals. Wilmet tells us she “was of the generation which wears a hat in the house for luncheon and tea, and she now came forward to greet us wearing a little black toque to which a bunch of artificial Parma violets had been pinned at a rather rakish angle.” Miss Prideaux is a comical but poignant figure, who has evidently missed out on 1950s affluence. Wilmet’s sensible mother-in-law Sybil, a “dumpy, square-faced woman of sixty-nine,” is more interested in archaeology than fashion. Her “clothes always looked the same -- of no particular style or even colour, though quite neat except when she dropped cigarette ash on them.” The splendid but self-effacing Mary Beamish is “very much immersed in good work...small and dowdily dressed, presumably because she had neither the wish nor the ability to make the most of herself.” Mary’s sister-in-law Cynthia, “swathed in silver fox furs,” appears vulgar and



materialistic when she persists in talking about taking possession of her late mother-in-law's "summer ermine cape" on the very day of her funeral.

We know from the first chapter of *A Glass of Blessings* that Wilmet, like Pym, has a passion for clothes, for she basks in Piers' compliment on her flattering outfit. Wilmet is a naïve and self-centered woman who, though intensely aware of appearance, fails to see what is going on around her. Thus her preoccupation with clothes can be seen both as a cause of her general cluelessness and as a literary device symbolizing it. When she visits her friend Rowena for a weekend in the country, Wilmet describes the scene of their meeting as if she is watching a movie: "I thought we must have made a pleasing picture -- two tall tweedy young Englishwomen embracing on a Surrey roadside." She appears to take just as much pleasure in the spectacle of the occasion as in the occasion itself. At this instant her self-satisfaction is somewhat annoying. Rowena admires her friend's style: "I'm longing to see what you've brought to wear," she says. "Your clothes are always so elegant." Wilmet's self-satisfaction is momentarily tempered by a feeling of guilt about having smooth hands while Rowena's are "stained and rough, the nails uncared for, hardly even clean." Rowena is a mother who does housework, cooks and spends the evening smocking a dress for her daughter, and Wilmet feels that Rowena's hands have done "so many more worth while things" than her own.

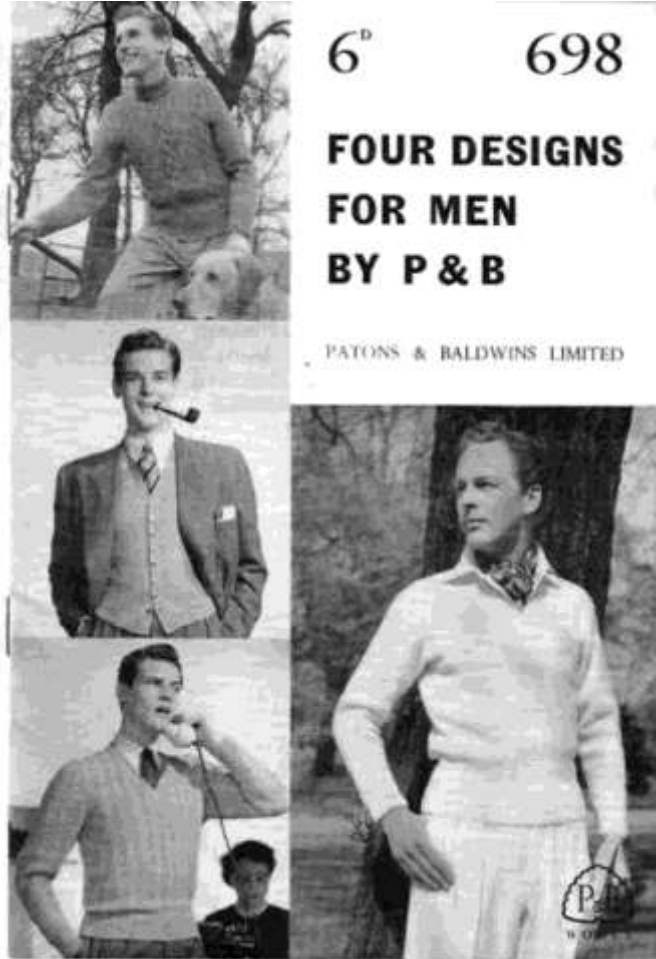
Wilmet is so preoccupied with her own appearance and critical of how other people dress, that she is oblivious to much else. She fancies that Father Ransome is attracted to her, but in the end he marries the badly-dressed Mary Beamish. Before meeting Piers for lunch, Wilmet carefully considers what to wear: "In my mind I went over all my clothes, allowing for every possible kind of weather...In the end I decided on a new dark grey suit with my marten stole and a little turquoise velvet hat." She is a little irritated when Piers arrives late and wearing a duffle coat, "a garment I do not approve of for grown men's London wear." How like Wilmet to focus on appearance --she has no inkling that Piers is gay, even though it may well be apparent to everyone else. It is presumably why her more worldly-wise mother-in-law has no objection to Wilmet's going out to lunch with him.

One of Wilmet's favorite pastimes is shopping, so she willingly agrees to help Mary Beamish choose "a sort of wool dress suitable for parish evening occasions," a description Wilmet finds depressing. Hearing that Mary usually shops at the sales, Wilmet realizes that, "it was...people like her who bought the trying electric blue or dingy olive green dress which had been reduced because nobody could wear it. And she probably gave the money she saved to the church or some charitable organization." Wilmet persuades Mary to buy a simple black dress with a full pleated skirt, instead of the usual drab green or blue wool. "And you could always dress up the neckline with pearls," she tells Mary, "two or three strings at least -- perhaps pink ones, they would give you a kind of glow." We can imagine a transformed Mary, perhaps resembling the girl Wilmet notices when she lunches with Rowena: "The girl was not beautiful, but there was a kind of glow about her. She wore a black dress and round her wrist she had twined a string of pearls, rose-coloured and translucent like some delicious sweet." This girl

obviously has a flair for fashion and natural chic which Mary will never have. At the end of the book, at Marius' induction, she is "looking already like a vicar's wife in her grey coat and rather too sensible hat," a contrast to Wilmet, who is wearing a frivolous emerald green feather cap with her black suit.

Wilmet suffers a crushing blow when she finally meets Piers' "colleague," Keith. She sets out in an elated mood on a sunny day in May: "I wore a dress of deep coral-coloured poplin, very simple, with a pair of coral and silver earrings, and a bracelet to match. I always like myself in deep clear colours, and I felt at my best now and wondered if people were looking at me as I passed them." Wilmet is so taken with herself that she pities "a drab-looking woman in a tweed suit and crumpled pink blouse" eating a sandwich in the park and wonders sadly what the future holds for her. Arriving in Piers' neighborhood, she observes "cheap garish looking dress shops, their windows crammed with blouses and skirts in crude colours," so unlike her usual milieu in Bayswater. Her mood changes abruptly when she meets Keith and realizes it is he, in his "absurd" jeans and tartan shirt, who is the object of Piers' affection. At this moment she is forced to face reality. For a while her mood is subdued and she finds comfort in the company of Mary Beamish and enjoys helping her to choose summer dresses suitable for her new job at the retreat house. Wilmet even confides to Mary that "[P]erhaps it's one's demeanour rather than one's dress that matters," a novel viewpoint for her. However, she soon recovers her equanimity and, finding it impossible to dislike Keith, in spite of her shock at his very existence, compounded by the horror of finding out that he is a knitwear model, she invites him to tea: "I had arranged a bowl of sweet peas on the table in the window, and the dress I wore, a romantically blurred wild silk print, seemed to harmonize with their colour s...His clean white shirt and black velvet jacket showed that he, too, had been anxious to look his best." They are obviously birds of a feather, in spite of the difference in social class and age, and destined to become friends.

But there are more shocks to come -- Sybil is to marry Professor Root, and Mary is engaged to Marius Ransome. Wilmet is totally confused: "Sybil and Professor Root, Piers and



Keith, Marius and Mary...all doing things without, as it were, consulting me.” The final blow comes when Rodney confesses that he has taken Prudence Bates out to dinner a couple of times. Wilmet realizes that the fact that Rodney could look at another woman “ought to teach me something about myself, even if I was not yet quite sure what it was.” Wilmet has not really changed, but she has gained self-knowledge.

In Pym’s view, clothes do oft proclaim the woman. The more elegantly dressed characters are more confident and attractive to men than the dowdy ones--think of all the contrasting pairs: Belinda and Harriet, Jane and Prudence, Mildred and Helena, Leonora and Meg, Wilmet and Mary. Clothes are more than style. To Barbara Pym they also reflected character and personality, they conveyed a way of life, and with the right clothes one’s life could go right too. But Barbara Pym’s characters’ lives, like her own, are not as two-dimensional as a fashion photograph in *Vogue*. Dowdy Mary Beamish, who has not found it necessary to change her appearance, sums it up when she tells Wilmet: “[L]ife is perfect now! I’ve everything I want. I keep thinking it’s like a glass of blessings.”

Sandra Goldstein, a native of Solihull in the West Midlands of England and a graduate of Bedford College for Women, University of London, where she studied German and Russian, came late to an acquaintance with the works of Barbara Pym, but has since made up for it and has succeeded in passing on her enthusiasm to her twin daughters, though sadly not to her husband (yet). She treasures her memory of a visit to Hilary Walton in Finstock and her opportunity, with Yvonne Cocking’s gracious assistance, to read Barbara Pym’s notebooks in the Bodleian. Recently retired from a position in the US Government, Sandra plans to forget about white papers and concentrate on green leaves and her other interests, which, besides Barbara Pym and Jane Austen, include fashions and films of the Art Deco era.