There have been many references in this journal to the novels of Barbara Pym, which feature several indexers; she may perhaps be regarded as our literary patroness. Now a volume of her diaries and letters has been posthumously published: A very private eye, edited by Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym (Macmillan, 1984). It is fitting that this should have a full and distinctive index, compiled by the writer’s sister.

The index is of 20 pages, to a 334-page text, and headed ‘Index/Glossary’. As the Note (oddly placed in the prelims) explains, ‘The index contains biographical information, with cross-references under Christian names and nicknames, identification of places and vocabulary definitions as well as references to Barbara Pym’s novels. Where the reference to an incident or a character is implied (i.e. where no actual reference to the title of the novel is made in the text) the page number is given in italics.’

The imprints page even specifies:

Barbara Pym’s text, The Early Life and Index © Hilary Walton 1984.

Some entries are indeed so fully expanded as to qualify as original writing. For instance:

Arkesden, Essex (picturesque village favoured by London commuters, home of Gordon Glover)

‘Cheesing’ (making pleasant conversation at parties)

Dunbabin, Tom (archaeologist who was to become a hero of Crete)

Eno’s (fruit salt: fizzy medicinal drink to cure indigestion)

Hartley, Lister and Rex (famous golfing brothers, members of the family jam-making firm)

Harvey, Henry Stanley

(nicknamed ‘Lorenzo’; b. 1911, but reached his fifties in 1934 when Barbara made him the chief male character in what was to be her first novel, Some Tame Gazelle. After Oxford, where they met, he was at the University of Helsingfors, and later with the British Council)

‘Jay’ (b. 1919; a romantic encounter in 1938, for which he had all the attributes, including a central European education and political ambitions)

‘Prog’ (verb, to discipline undergraduates, derived from ‘proctor’, of which there are two; see John Betjeman, An Oxford University Chest, John Miles, 1938, p. 17)

Turban (wartime fashion for women of wearing a scarf round the head)

‘Winter break’ (short weekend holiday, arranged with favourable terms by various hotels)

As the Note indicates, there is assiduous detective work in identifying references to the novels that are not specified as such in the text. For example, cited in the index under No Fond Return of Love (‘original title A Thankless Task’) is 128. This leads to a diary entry describing Barbara Pym’s embarrassment, on complaining about the cloakroom basin’s being filled with flowers, at being told by an ‘elderly censor’ that ‘she was taking them to an invalid’. Readers of that tale of romance among indexers will recognize the episode.

The entry for Pym, Barbara, occupies three columns, giving a fairly full summary of the book, with long, detailed subheadings:

she completes the draft of another novel about a provincial university, but has little faith in the future of her kind of writing, 267; ... has ideas for a novel about people in an office on the verge of retirement, 268-72;

But there is a strong tendency through most of the index to substitute a general gloss for breakdown into subheadings, and there are many strings of whole lines of undifferentiated page references: 14 such lines for Philip Larkin, 10 for Robert Liddell. The 9-line gloss for Henry Harvey quoted above is followed by 7 lines of page references. The indexer herself is, modestly, glossed merely as (b. 1916, sister), and has then 11 lines of undifferentiated page references.

However, an index of originality and charm, showing respect and devotion for its text; wholly appropriate for the author who gave us Mildred Lathbury and Dulcie Mainwaring, and wrote so warmly and wittily of our ‘thankless task’.

H.K.B.

We are grateful to Hilary Walton for permission to quote the above extracts.