

The Pleasure of Her Company: Remembering Barbara Willard

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I find it hard to believe that it is now almost thirty years since I first met Barbara Willard. It was 1970, and I had just started work as fiction editor for Longman Young Books (formerly Constable, then Kestrel, now Viking), one of the most exciting and innovative publishers for children. Barbara was an eminent and respected author and I was greatly in awe of her at first; but, as our acquaintance ripened into friendship, I found her to be convivial and amusing company, devoted to her dogs, her garden, the theatre and the Sussex countryside.

Unlike those of certain other well-known authors on the Longman Young Books list, Barbara's books presented few problems for her editor: each impeccably typed manuscript arriving well before the agreed deadline and requiring little or no editorial attention. I can remember only one occasion when a book of hers—*The Iron Lily*, I think—needed drastic restructuring. We were all rather apprehensive about her response to this request, but Barbara at once recognised the need for extreme surgery and produced an acceptable revised version without complaint. But, just as we had come to expect professional behaviour from Barbara, so she demanded it of us. She insisted, quite rightly, on being consulted on every aspect of her books, from the design of the typeface



and the selection of the dustjacket artist to the smallest detail of the jacket illustration itself. She also liked to write her own blurbs, so Willard completists should make sure that the copies in their collections bear the original dustjackets.

Although Barbara later claimed that she had always wanted to write for children, her first thirteen books were novels for adults. Before this, though, she had embarked on a different career altogether. She was born into a distinguished theatrical family—

her great-uncle was Edward Smith Willard, a popular actor-manager of the Edwardian period, and her father was the Shakespearean actor, Edmund Willard—and it was therefore inevitable that Barbara should follow her brothers and cousins on to the stage when she left school. It is surprising that she made such little use of the theatrical background in her novels, unlike other writers who were once actresses—Noel Streatfeild, for instance, and Pamela Brown. Although actors and actresses do occasionally occur as characters in her work, it was not until *Summer Season* (1981), my favourite of her non-Mantlemass novels, that she drew directly on her own stage experience of fifty years earlier. In this gloriously nostalgic evocation of a third-rate provincial theatre company in the 1930s, Barbara painted an authentic picture of the tawdry, romantic, exciting world she had experienced at first hand.

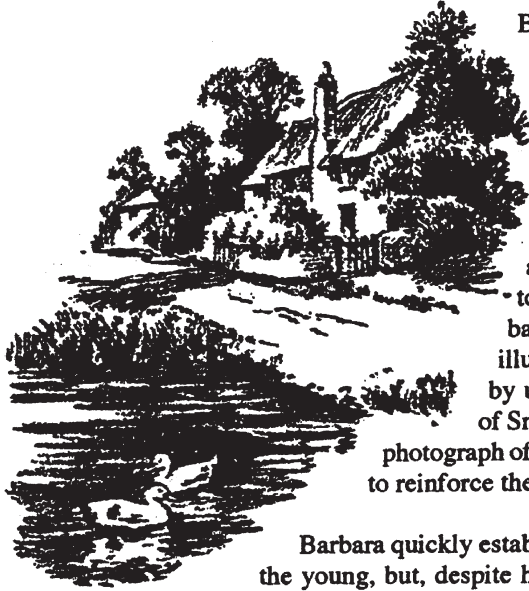
Barbara's stage career was not a success and she abandoned the theatre when she was in her early twenties—in despair, she explained, because she had become “terribly tall, terribly thin and terribly shy”. Instead, she turned to writing. Her first novel, a Jane Austen pastiche called *Love in Ambush* (1930), was written with Elizabeth Helen Devas and took the familiar form of an exchange of letters between two friends. Barbara earned a total of £19 from this but achieved greater financial and critical success with her first solo novel, *Ballerina* (1932), about a dancer whose passion for her art clashes with her relationship with her husband.

Over the next twenty-five years a succession of novels followed, published mainly by Nelson and then Macmillan, all of which earned respectful reviews if not spectacular sales. These novels are solemn, thoughtful and, to be honest, rather dull, but one or two are well worth reading even now, especially *As Far As In Me Lies* (1936), a perceptive study of the disintegration of a middle-class marriage, and *Celia Scarfe* (1951), the moving story of an unmarried schoolteacher who gives birth to a son after a holiday romance. This is her most readable and gripping novel but, amazingly, it was rejected by Macmillan.



As Barbara explained in a letter to me: “Macmillan turned down *Celia Scarfe* largely because C.P. Snow did an assessment of my work (which someone, kindly or unkindly, contrived to show me) in which his final dismissal was that my books were the products of a second-class intellect. Neat, wasn't it?” C.P. Snow was not only an eminent novelist and academic but also a director of Macmillan, and Barbara's confidence was so shaken by his criticism that she abandoned novels for adults altogether. Although *Celia Scarfe* was published with great success in the United States and later found a British home with Heinemann (who published it as *Home Tomorrow* under the pseudonym Selina Mary Edmunds, the name of Barbara's grandmother), the damage had been done.

It was, in fact, Heinemann who first encouraged



Barbara to write for children when they commissioned *He Fought for His Queen* (1954), a children's version of *Portrait of Philip* (1950), her adult novel about Sir Philip Sidney. Her first original children's book followed three years later. *Snail and the Pennithornes* (1957) is a pleasant if unremarkable holiday-adventure story but it is of special interest to Barbara Willard enthusiasts because she based the character of Snail on herself. The illustrator, Geoffrey Fletcher, emphasised this by using Barbara as a model for his pictures of Snail [see page 10], and there is a dustjacket photograph of Barbara with her car, caravan and poodles to reinforce the resemblance.

Barbara quickly established a reputation as a leading writer for the young, but, despite her considerable success, one sensed that she was never totally at ease in this rôle. Although she maintained that she had always wanted to write for children, I somehow felt that she would have preferred to remain an adult novelist. Yet despite her reluctance to be pigeon-holed as a writer for children, Barbara always belittled her early work—"How awful it is that once a thing is in print it remains somewhere or other, almost for ever," she wrote to me in 1988. "Those wretched novels I wrote are forever turning up in jumble sales and on second-hand book stalls—also in ships' libraries! One day, about twenty years ago, deciding that I was by then a failed novelist, I had a great book-burning in the garden. I included forty years of diary-recording—which I have since regretted." When, early in our friendship, I told her that I had started to collect her adult novels, she made me promise to destroy any that I came across—a promise that I steadfastly refused to keep.

Although we saw far less of each other once I left publishing, our friendship continued until her death. Whenever I think of Barbara now, I immediately recall the long golden summer afternoons that I spent in the magnificent garden of her ancient cottage beside Ashdown Forest, talking about the theatre and books and the countryside, exchanging gossip about authors and publishers, and simply enjoying the infinite pleasure of her company.

