HarperCollins E-Books

The Woman of Substance

The Life and Work of Barbara Taylor Bradford

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Аннотация

For the first time ever, a fascinating look at the remarkable life of Barbara Taylor Bradford. From the cobbled streets of Yorkshire to the sweeping avenues of Manhattan, Barbara's own story is as dramatic a tale as any one of her bestsellers.Barbara Taylor Bradford's rise to fame and fortune was a difficult one. But from an early age her mother marked her out for glory – at any cost. The drive and ambition instilled in Barbara were to reap huge rewards. From humble beginnings in Yorkshire she took London's Fleet Street by storm. And then, with the creation of Emma Harte, the unforgettable heroine of her first novel A Woman of Substance, she inspired women the world over – and became one of the world's bestselling authors.This is the first time that Barbara Taylor Bradford has been involved in a memoir of any kind and this unique collaboration has produced an extraordinary story. For Emma Harte's rise from Edwardian kitchen maid, single and pregnant, to one of the richest women in the world uncannily mirrors Barbara's own family history – something which was as much of a shock to

Barbara as it will be to her millions of fans…An incredible story of suffering, loss and triumph over adversity, not to be missed.

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The Woman of Substance

THE SECRET LIFE THAT INSPIRED THE RENOWNED STORYTELLER

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Barbara Taylor Bradford was born and raised in England. She started her writing career on the Yorkshire Evening Post and later worked as a journalist in London. Her first novel, *A Woman of Substance*, became an enduring bestseller and was followed by twenty-five others, including the bestselling Harte series. Barbara's books have sold more than eighty-one million copies worldwide in more than ninety countries and forty languages, and ten mini-series and television movies have been made of her books. In October of 2007, Barbara was appointed an OBE by the Queen for her services to literature. She lives in New York City with her husband, television producer Robert Bradford.

Piers Dudgeon is the author of many works of nonfiction. He worked for ten years as an editor in London, before starting his own publishing company and producing books with authors as diverse as John Fowles, Catherine Cookson, Peter Ackroyd, Daphne du Maurier, Shirley Conran, Ted Hughes and Susan Hill. In 1993, he left London for the North York Moors, where he has written biographies of Sir John Tavener, Edward de Bono, Catherine Cookson, Josephine Cox, J M Barrie and Daphne du Maurier. He is currently working on a series of oral histories of post-industrial Britain and a book about the poet Ted Hughes's childhood.

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PREFACE

Exploring one of the world's most successful writers through the looking glass of her fiction is an idea particularly well suited in the case of Barbara Taylor Bradford, whose fictional heroines draw on their creator's character and chart the emotional contours of her own experience, and whose own history so often emerges from the shadowland between fact and fiction.

She turned out to be unstintingly generous with her time, advising me about real-life places, episodes and events in the novels, despite a hectic round of her own, which included the writing of two novels, the launch of her nineteenth novel, *Emma's Secret* (2003), a high-profile legal action in India against a TV film company suspected of purloining her books and films, a grand party celebrating a quarter of a century with publishers HarperCollins, and a schedule of charity events, which film producer, business manager and husband Robert Bradford arranged for her – oh, and a week or so's holiday.

Barbara's first novel, *A Woman of Substance*, is, according to *Publishers Weekly*, the eighth biggest-selling novel ever to be published. It has sold more than twenty-five million copies worldwide. In it, so reviewers will tell you, we have the classic Cinderella story. Emma Harte rises from maid to matriarch; the impoverished Edwardian kitchen maid comes, through her own efforts, to rule over a business empire that stretches from

Yorkshire to America and Australia.

What it took to escape the constraints of the Edwardian and later twentieth-century English class system is at the heart of Barbara's family's own story too. Her rise to bestselling novelist and icon for emancipated womanhood, currently valued at some $170 million, from a two-up two-down in Leeds is by any standard extraordinary. Her elevation coincided with the post-war drift from an Edwardian upstairs/downstairs class system (into which Barbara's mother Freda was born), reconstructed by socialism in the period of Barbara's own childhood, to one ultimately sensible to merit, a transformation which finds symbolic incidence in the year 1979, in which *A Woman of Substance* was first published and that champion of meritocracy, Margaret Thatcher, who had risen from the lower middle classes to become Britain's first female Prime Minister, arrived at No. 10 Downing Street.

Barbara's novels, which encourage women to believe they can conquer the world, whatever their class or background and despite the fact that they are operating in a man's domain, tapped into the aspirational energy of this era and served to expedite social change. Indeed, it might be said that Barbara Taylor Bradford would have invented Margaret Thatcher if she had not already existed. When they met, there was a memorable double take of where ambition had led them. 'I was invited to a reception at Number Ten,' Barbara recalls. 'I saw a picture of Churchill in the hall outside the reception room and slipped out to look at it. Mrs Thatcher followed me out and asked if I was all right. I just said: "I never thought a girl from Yorkshire like me would be standing here at the invitation of the Prime Minister looking at a portrait of Churchill inside ten Downing Street," and she whispered: "I know what you mean."'

More intriguingly, in the process of writing fiction, ideas arise which owe their genesis not to the culture of an era, but to the author's inner experience, and here, as any editor knows, lie the most compelling parts of a writer's work. Barbara is the first to agree: 'It's very hard when you've just finished a novel to define what you've really written about other than what seems to be the verity on paper. There's something else there underlying it subconsciously in the writer's mind, and that I might be able to give you later.' She promised this to journalist Billie Figg in the early 1980s, but never delivered, though the prospect is especially enticing, given that she can also say: 'My typewriter is my psychiatrist.'

There is no pearl without first there being grit in the oyster. The grit may lie in childhood experience, possibly only partly understood or deliberately blanked out, buried and unresolved by the defence mechanisms of the conscious mind. Unawares, the subconscious generates the ideas that claw at a writer's inner self and drive his or her best fiction.

Barbara shies away from such talk, denouncing inspiration – it is, she says, something that she has never 'had'. She admits that on occasion she finds herself strangely moved by a place and gets feelings of *déjà vu*, even of having been part of something that happened before she was born, but mostly she sees herself as a storyteller, a creator of stories, happy to draw on her own life, all of it perfectly conscious and practical. Later we will see how she works up a novel out of her characters, which is indeed a conscious process. But subconscious influences are by their very nature not known to the conscious mind, and we will also see that echoes of a past unknown do indeed inhabit her writing.

Barbara will tell you that it was her mother, Freda, who made her who she is today. Mother and daughter were so close, and Freda so determined an influence, that their relationship reads almost like a conspiracy in Barbara's future success. Freda was on a mission, 'a crusade', but it wasn't quite the selfless mission that Barbara supposed, for Freda had an agenda: she was driven to realise ambition in her daughter by a need to resolve the disastrous experiences of her own childhood, about which Barbara, and possibly even Freda's husband, knew nothing.

In fact, Barbara's story turns out to be an inextricable part of the story of not two but three women – herself, her mother Freda, and Freda's mother, Edith, whose own dream of rising in the world turned horribly sour when the man she loved failed her and reduced her family to penury. It left her eldest daughter Freda with enormous problems to resolve, and a sense of loss which, on account of her extraordinarily close relationship with Barbara, found its way into the novels. One might even say that in resolving it in the lives of her characters Barbara appeased Freda and, in her material success, actually realised Edith's dream.

Barbara told me very little about her mother and grandmother before I began writing this book, and as my own research progressed I had to assume that she did not know their incredible story. If she had known, surely she would have told me. If she had not wanted me to know, why set me loose on research geared to finding out? At the end, when I showed her the manuscript, her shock confirmed that she had not known, and she found it very difficult to accept that she had written about these things of which she had no conscious knowledge.

That the novels own something of which their creator is not master, to my mind adds to their magic, the subconscious process signifying Freda's power over Barbara, which Barbara would not deny. She may not have been aware of all that happened to Freda, but she was 'joined at the hip', as she put it, to one who was aware.

No one was closer to Barbara at the most impressionable moments of her life than Freda. They were inseparable, and the child's subconscious could not have failed to imbibe a sense of what assailed her mother. Even if Freda withheld the detail, or Barbara blanked it out, the adult Barbara allows an impression of 'a great sense of loss' in Freda, which is indeed the very feeling that so many of her fictional characters must overcome.

Freda's legacy of deprivation – her loss – became the grit around which the pearls of Barbara's success were layered. So closely woven were the threads of these three women's lives that Barbara's part in the plot – the end game, the novels – seems in a real sense predestined. In reality, everything in Freda's history, and that of Edith's, required Barbara to happen. In the garden of her fiction, they are one seed. None is strictly one character or another, although Barbara regards Freda as most closely Audra Kenton in *Act of Will*. Nevertheless, their preoccupations are what the novels are about.

Of secrets, she writes in *Everything to Gain*, 'there were so many in our family . . . I never wanted to face those secrets from my childhood. Better to forget them; better still to pretend they did not exist. But they did. My childhood was constructed on secrets layered one on top of the other.' In *Her Own Rules*, Meredith Stratton quantifies the challenge of the project: 'For years she had lived with half-truths, had hidden so much, that it was difficult to unearth it all now.'

Secrets produce rumour, which challenges the literary detective to run down the truth at the heart of the most fantastic storylines. Known facts act like an adhesive for the calcium layers of fictional storyline which make up the 'pearl' that is the author's work. These secrets empower Barbara's best fiction. They find expression in the desire for revenge, which Edith will have felt and which drives Emma Harte's rise in *A Woman of Substance*. They find expression in the unnatural force of Audra Kenton's determination in *Act of Will* that her daughter Christina will live a better life than she, and in the driving ambition of dispossessed Maximilian West in *The Women in His Life*.

My project is not, therefore, as simple as matching Barbara's character with the woman of substance she created in the novels, but I believe it takes us a lot closer to explaining why *A Woman of Substance* is the eighth biggest-selling novel in the history of the world than merely observing such a match or studying the marketing plan. That is not to belittle the marketing of this novel, which set new records in the industry; nor is it to underestimate the significance of the timing of the venture; nor to underrate the talents of the author in helping fashion Eighties' *Zeitgeist*.

It is just that these 'secrets', which come to us across a gulf of one hundred years, have exerted an impressive power in the lives of these women, and although we live in a time when the market rules, deep down we still reserve our highest regard for works not planned for the market but which come from just such an elemental drive of the author, especially when, as in the case of *A Woman of Substance*, that drive finds so universal a significance among its readers in the most pressing business of our times – that of rising in the world.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The Party

'The ambience in the dining room was decidedly romantic, had an almost fairytale quality . . . The flickering candlelight, the women beautiful in their elegant gowns and glittering jewels, the men handsome in their dinner jackets, the conversation brisk, sparkling, entertaining . . .'

Voice of the Heart

The Bradfords' elegant fourteen-room apartment occupies the sixth floor of a 1930s landmark building overlooking Manhattan's East River. The approach is via a grand ground-floor lobby, classical in style, replete with red-silk chaise longues, massive wall-recessed urns, and busy uniformed porters skating around black marbled floors.

A mahogany-lined lift delivers visitors to the front door, which, on the evening of the party, lay open, leaving arrivals naked to the all-at-once gaze of the already gathered. Fortunately I had been warned about the possibility of this and had balanced the rather outré effect of my gift – a jar of Yorkshire moorland honey (my bees, Barbara's moor) – by cutting what I hoped would be a rather sophisticated, shadowy, Jack-the-Ripper dash with a high-collared leather coat. If I was successful, no one was impolite enough to mention it.

One is met at the door by Mohammed, aptly named spiriter away of material effects – coats, hats, even, to my chagrin, gifts. Barbara arrives and we move swiftly from reception area, which I would later see spills into a bar, to the drawing room, positioned centrally between dining room and library, and occupying the riverside frontage of an apartment which must measure all of five thousand square feet.

The immediate impression is of classical splendour – spacious rooms, picture windows, high ceilings and crystal chandeliers. These three main rooms, an enfilade and open-doored to one another that night, arise from oak-wood floors bestrewn with antique carpets, elegant ground for silk-upholstered walls hung with Venetian mirrors, and, as readers of her novels would expect, a European mix of Biedermeier and Art Deco furniture, Impressionist paintings and silk-upholstered chairs.

This is not, as it happens, the apartment that she draws on in her fiction. The Bradfords have been here for ten years only. Between 1983 and 1995 they lived a few blocks away, many storeys higher up, with views of the East River and exclusive Sutton Place from almost every room. But it was here that Allison Pearson came to interview Barbara in 1999, and, swept up in the glamour, took the tack that from this similarly privileged vantage point it is 'easy to forget that there is a world down there, a world full of pain and ugliness', while at the same time wanting some of it: 'Any journalist going to see Barbara Taylor Bradford in New York,' she wrote, 'will find herself asking the question I asked myself as I stood in exclusive Sutton Place, craning my neck and staring up at the north face of the author's mighty apartment building. What has this one-time cub reporter on the *Yorkshire Evening Post* got that I haven't?' It was a good starting point, but Allison's answer: 'Well, about $600 million,' kept the burden of her question at bay.

Before long the river draws my gaze, a pleasure boat all lit up, a full moon and the clear night sky, and even if Queens is not exactly the Houses of Parliament there is great breadth that the Thames cannot match, and a touch of mystery from an illuminated ruin, a hospital or sometime asylum marooned on an island directly opposite. It is indeed a privileged view.

Champagne and cocktails are available. I opt for the former and remember my daughter's advice to drink no more than the top quarter of a glass. She, an American resident whose childhood slumbers were disturbed by rather more louche, deep-into-the-night London dinner parties, had been so afeared that I would disgrace myself that she had earlier sent me a copy of Toby Young's *How To Lose Friends & Alienate People*.

I find no need for it here. People know one another and are immediately, but not at all overbearingly, welcoming. In among it all, Barbara doesn't just Europeanise the scene, she colloquialises it. For me that night she had the timbre of home and the enduring excitement of the little girl barely out of her teens who had not only the guts but the *joie de vivre* to get up and discover the world when that was rarely done. She is fun. I would have thought so then, and do so now, and at once see that no one has any reason for being here except to enjoy this in her too.

It is a fluid scene. People swim in and out of view, and finding myself close to the library I slip away and find a woman alone on the far side of the room looking out across the street through a side window. Hers is the first name I will remember, though by then half a dozen have been put past me. I ask the lady what can possibly be absorbing her. I see only another apartment block, more severe, brick built, stark even. 'I used to live there,' she says. 'My neighbour was Greta Garbo . . . until she died.' This, then, was where the greatest of all screen goddesses found it possible finally to be alone, or might have done had it not been for my interlocutor.

‘Where do you live now?’ I venture.

She looks at me quizzically, as if I should know. ‘In Switzerland and the South of France. New York only for the winter months.’

Then I make the faux pas of the evening, thankful that only she and I will have heard it: ‘What on earth do you *do*?’

Barbara swoops to rescue me (or the lady) with an introduction. Garbo’s friend is Rex Harrison’s widow, Mercia. She does not *do*. Suddenly it seems that I have opened up the library; people are following Barbara in. I find myself being introduced to comedienne Joan Rivers and fashion designer Arnold Scaasi, whose history Barbara peppers with names such as Liz Taylor, Natalie Wood, Joan Crawford, Candice Bergen, Barbra Streisand, Joan Rivers of course, and, as of now, all the President’s women. Barbara and movie-producer husband Bob are regular visitors to the White House.

It is November 2002 and talk turns naturally to Bob Woodward’s *Bush at War*, which I am told will help establish GB as the greatest president of all time. I am asked my opinion and once again my daughter’s voice comes like a distant echo – her second rule: no politics (she knows me too well). Barbara has already told me that she and Bob know the Bush family and I just caught sight of a photograph of them with the President on the campaign trail. They are Republicans. When I limit myself to saying that I can empathise with the shock and hurt of September 11, that I had a friend who died in the disaster, but war seems old-fashioned, so primitive a solution, Barbara takes my daughter's line and confesses that she herself makes it a rule not to talk politics with close friend Diahn McGrath, a lawyer and staunch Democrat, to whom she at once directs me.

Barbara is the perfect hostess, this pre-dinner hour the complete introduction that will allow me to relax at table, even to contribute a little. There's a former publishing executive, one Parker Ladd, with the demeanour of a Somerset Maugham, or possibly a Noel Coward (Barbara's champagne is good), who tells me he is a friend of Ralph Fields, the first person to give me rein in publishing, and who turns out – to my amazement – still to be alive.

So, even in the midst of this Manhattan scene I find myself comfortable anchorage not only in contact through Barbara with my home county of Yorkshire, but in fond memories of the publishing scene. It was not at all what I had expected to find. I am led in to dinner by a woman introduced to me as Edwina Kaplan, a sculptor and painter whose husband is an architect, but who talks heatedly (and at the time quite inexplicably) about tapes she has discovered of Winston Churchill's war-time speeches. Would people be interested? she wonders. Later I would see a couple of her works on Barbara's walls, but for some reason nobody thought it pertinent until the following day to explain that Edwina was Sir Winston's granddaughter, Edwina

Sandys. Churchill, of course, is one of Barbara's heroes; in her childhood she contributed to his wife Clementine's Aid to Russia fund and still has one of her letters, now framed in the library.

The table, set for fourteen, is exquisite, its furniture dancing to the light of a generously decked antique crystal chandelier. The theme is red, from the walls to the central floral display through floral napkin rings to what seems to be a china zoo occupying the few spaces left by the flower-bowls, crystal tableware and place settings. Beautifully crafted porcelain elephants and giraffes peek out from between silver water goblets and crystal glasses of every conceivable size and design.

There are named place-cards and I begin the hunt for my seat. I am last to find mine, and as soon as I sit, Barbara erupts with annoyance. She had specially chosen a white rose for my napkin ring – the White Rose of Yorkshire – which is lying on the plate of my neighbour to the right. Someone has switched my placement card! Immediately I wonder whether the culprit has made the switch to be near me or to get away, but as I settle, and the white rose is restored, my neighbour to the left leaves me in no doubt that I am particularly welcome. She tells me that she is a divorce lawyer, a role of no small importance in the marital chess games of the Manhattan wealthy. How many around this table might she have served? Was switching my place-card the first step in a strategy aimed at my own marriage?

I reach for the neat vodka in the smallest stem of my glass cluster and steady my nerves, turning our conversation to Bob and Barbara and soon realising that here, around this table, among their friends, are the answers to so many questions I have for my subject's Manhattan years. I set to work, both on my left and to my right, where I find Nancy Evans, Barbara's former publisher at the mighty Doubleday in the mid-1980s.

By this time we have progressed from the caviar and smoked salmon on to the couscous and lamb, and Barbara deems it time to widen our perspectives. It would be the first of two calls to order, on this occasion to introduce everyone to everyone, a party game rather than a necessity, I think, except in my case. Thumbnail sketches of each participant, edged devilishly with in-group barb, courted ripostes and laughter, but it was only when she came around the table and settled on me, mentioning the words 'guest of honour' that I realised for the first time that I was to be the star turn. I needn't have worried; there was at least one other special guest in Joan Rivers and she more than made up for my sadly unimaginative response.

Barbara tells me that Joan is very 'in' with Prince Charles: 'She greeted me with, "I've just come back from a painting trip . . . with Prince Charles." A friend of hers, Robert Higdon, runs the Prince's Trust. Joan is very involved with that, giving them money. So she was there with Charles and Camilla and the Forbses at some château somewhere. She always says, "Prince Charles likes me a lot; he always laughs at my jokes." But Joan is actually a very ladylike creature when she is off the stage, where she can be a bit edgy sometimes. In real life she is very sweet and she loves me and Bob.’

Joan is deftly egging Arnold Scaasi on as he heaps compliments on Barbara from the far end of the table. At the very height of his paean of praise, the comedienne rejoins that Arnold’s regard for his hostess is clearly so great that he will no doubt wish to make one of his new creations a *gift* to her. The designer’s face is a picture as he realises he has walked straight into a game at his expense, in which the very ethos of celebrity Manhattan is at stake. The table applauds his generosity, while Arnold begins an interminable descent into get-out: Alas, he does not have the multifarious talents of Joan to allow such generosity, he cannot *eat* publicity, etc., etc.

I felt I was being drawn in to Bob and Barbara’s private world. When we first met I had said to Barbara that I would need to be so, and she had begun the process that night. After cheese and dessert, coffee and liqueurs were served in the drawing room and one after another of her guests offered themselves for interview.

The evening reminded me of the glittering birthday party in the Bavarian ski resort of Konigsee in *Voice of the Heart*. The table setting was remarkably similar – the candlelight and bowls of flowers that ‘march down the centre of the table’, interspersed with ‘Meissen porcelain birds in the most radiant of colours’, the table itself ‘set with the finest china, crystal and silver . . . The flickering candlelight, the women beautiful in their elegant gowns and glittering jewels, the men handsome in their dinner jackets . . .’, and the conversation ‘brisk, sparkling, entertaining . . .’

In *Act of Will* the Manhattan apartment is added to the mix. As guests of Christina Newman and her husband Alex in their Sutton Place apartment, we, like Christina’s mother, Audra Crowther (née Kenton, and the fictional counterpart of Barbara’s mother, Freda Taylor), are stung by the beauty of ‘the priceless art on the walls, two Cézannes, a Gauguin . . . the English antiques with their dark glossy woods . . . bronze sculpture by Arp . . . the profusion of flowers in tall crystal vases . . . all illuminated by silk-shaded lamps of rare and ancient Chinese porcelains’.

Barbara’s passion for antique furniture and modern Impressionist paintings was born of her own upbringing in Upper Armley, Leeds. ‘My mother used to take me to stately homes because she loved furniture, she loved the patinas of wood. She often took me to Temple Newsam, just outside Leeds [where the gardens also found a way into the fiction – Emma Harte’s rhododendron walk in *A Woman of Substance* is Temple Newsam’s], and also to Harewood House, home of the Lascelles family . . . to Ripley Castle [Langley Castle in *Voice of the Heart*], and to Fountains Abbey and Fountains Hall at Studley Royal.’ These were Barbara’s childhood haunts, and it was Freda Taylor who first tuned her in to beautiful artefacts and styles of design, as if preparing her for the day when such things might be her daughter’s: ‘I always remember she used to say to me, “Barbara, keep your eyes open and then you will see all the beautiful things in the world.”’

In *A Woman of Substance* the optimum architecture is Georgian, and Emma Harte's soul mate Blackie O'Neill's dream is to have a house with Robert Adam fireplaces, Sheraton and Hepplewhite furniture, 'and maybe a little Chippendale'.

In *Angel*, Johnny dwells on the paintings and antiques in his living room – a Sisley landscape, a Rouault, a Cézanne, a couple of early Van Goghs, 'an antique Chinese coffee table of carved mahogany, French bergères from the Louis XV period, upholstered in striped cream silk . . . antique occasional tables . . . a long sofa table holding a small sculpture by Brancusi and a black basalt urn . . .' Costume designer Rose Madigan's attention is caught by a pair of dessert stands, 'each one composed of two puttis standing on a raised base on either side of a leopard, their plump young arms upstretched to support a silver bowl with a crystal liner', the silver made by master silversmith Paul Storr. There are George III candlesticks also by Storr dated 1815.

In *Everything to Gain*, Mallory Keswick feasts her eyes on a pair of elegant eighteenth-century French, bronze doré candlesticks, and her mother-in-law Diana buys antiques from the great houses of Europe, specialising in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French furniture, decorative objects, porcelain and paintings.

For a dozen or so years leading up to publication of her first novel, Barbara wrote a nationwide syndicated column in America three times a week, about design and interior decor. She also wrote a number of books on interior design, furniture and art for American publishers Doubleday, Simon & Schuster and Meredith, long before the first commissioned *A Woman of Substance*. So, this design thing is, if not bred in the bone, part and parcel of her being.

But these mother and daughter trips out into the countryside had a more fundamental effect: they introduced Barbara to the landscape and spirit of Yorkshire, in which her fiction is rooted. In *A Woman of Substance*, Barbara sets Fairley village, where teenager Emma Harte lives with her parents and brother, Frank, in the lee of the moors which rise above the River Aire as it finds its way down into Leeds. 'It was an isolated spot,' she wrote, 'desolate and uninviting, and only the pale lights that gleamed in some of the cottage windows gave credence to the idea that it was inhabited.'

Today she will say: 'Fairley village is Haworth, but not exactly; it is the Haworth of my imagination.' It could be anywhere in the area of the Brontës' Haworth, Keighley or Rombalds moors. Barbara knows the area well. It lies within the regular expeditionary curtilage of her childhood home in Leeds.

The hills that rise up in an undulating sweep to dominate Fairley village and the stretch of the Aire Valley below it are always dark and brooding in the most clement of weather. But when the winter sets in for its long and deadly siege the landscape is brushstroked in grisaille beneath ashen clouds and the moors take on a savage desolateness, the stark fells and bare hillsides drained of all colour and bereft of life. The rain and snow drive *down endlessly and the wind that blows in from the North Sea is fierce and raw. These gritstone hills, infinitely more sombre than the green moors of the nearby limestone dale country, sweep through vast silences broken only by the mournful wailing of the wind, for even the numerous little becks, those tumbling, dappled streams that relieve the monotony in spring and summer, are frozen and stilled.*

This great plateau of moorland stretches across countless untenanted miles towards Shipley and the vigorous industrial city of Leeds beyond. It is amazingly featureless, except for the occasional soaring crags, a few blackened trees, shrivelled thorns, and abandoned ruined cottages that barely punctuate its cold and empty spaces. Perpetual mists, pervasive and thick, float over the rugged landscape, obscuring the highest peaks and demolishing the foothills, so that land and sky merge in an endless mass of grey that is dank and enveloping, and everything is diffused, without motion, wrapped in unearthly solitude. There is little evidence here of humanity, little to invite man into this inhospitable land at this time of year, and few venture out into its stark and lonely reaches.

Near here, at Ramsden Ghyll (Brimham Rocks in the film), ‘a dell between two hills . . . an eerie place, filled with grotesque rock formations and blasted tree stumps’, Lord of the Manor Adam Fairley seduces Emma’s mother, Elizabeth. There, years later, Adam’s son Edwin Fairley makes love to teenage virgin Emma Harte, the Fairley Hall kitchen maid who conceives their illegitimate child, Edwina, this episode the impetus behind a succession of events that will realise Emma's destiny.

The heather and bracken brushed against her feet, the wind caught at her long skirts so that they billowed out like puffy clouds, and her hair was a stream of russet-brown silk ribbons flying behind her as she ran. The sky was as blue as speedwells and the larks wheeled and turned against the face of the sun. She could see Edwin quite clearly now, standing by the huge rocks just under the shadow of the Crags above Ramsden Ghyll. When he saw her he waved, and began to climb upwards towards the ledge where they always sat protected from the wind, surveying the world far below. He did not look back, but went on climbing.

'Edwin! Edwin! Wait for me,' she called, but her voice was blown away by the wind and he did not hear. When she reached Ramsden Crags she was out of breath and her usually pale face was flushed from exertion.

'I ran so hard I thought I would die,' she gasped as he helped her up on the ledge.

He smiled at her. 'You will never die, Emma. We are both going to live for ever and ever at the Top of the World.'

When Edwin abandons Emma she wreaks vengeance on the Fairleys, at length razing Fairley Hall to the ground. Meanwhile, the geography moves some miles to the north. Emma's centre in Yorkshire becomes Pennistone Royal, with its 'Renaissance and Jacobean architecture . . . crenellated towers . . . mullioned leaded windows' and 'clipped green lawns that rolled down to the lily pond far below the long flagged terrace'. The model is

Fountains Hall on the Studley Royal Estate, Ripon, gateway to the Yorkshire Dales and another of Barbara's childhood haunts, while Pennistone Royal village is neighbouring Studley Roger.

Why should an author who left North Yorkshire as soon as she could, found success and glamour in London as a journalist on Fleet Street, married a Hollywood film producer and moved lock, stock and barrel to a swish apartment in New York City, return to her homeland for the setting of her first novel, a novel that featured a character whose spirit seems at first sight more closely in tune with the go-getting ethos of Manhattan than the dour North Yorkshire moors? The answer to that is, broadly, the text of this book.

Barbara's novels are novels principally of character. The dominant traits are the emotional light and shade of the landscape of her birth. When she came to write the novels, she had no hesitation in anchoring them there, even though she was, by then, cast miles away in her Manhattan eyrie.

The county is blessed with large tracts of wide-open spaces – breathtaking views of varied character – so that even if you are brought up in one of the great industrial cities of the county, as Barbara was, you are but a walk away from natural beauty. There is a longing in her for the Yorkshire Dales which living in Manhattan keeps constantly on the boil. Like Mallory Keswick in *Everything to Gain*, 'I had grown to love this beautiful, sprawling county, the largest in England, with its bucolic green dales, vast empty moors, soaring fells, ancient cathedrals and dramatic ruins of mediaeval abbeys . . . Wensleydale and the Valley of the Ure was the area I knew best.'

The author's sense that landscape is more than topography may first have been awakened when Freda introduced Barbara to the wild workshop out of which Emily Brontë's Heathcliff was hewn. 'My mother took me to the Brontë parsonage at Haworth, and over the moors to Top Withens, the old ruined farm that was supposed to be the setting for *Wuthering Heights*. I loved the fact that this great work of literature was set right there. I loved the landscape: those endless, empty, windswept moors where the trees all bend one way. I loved Heathcliff.'

There are many allusions to *Wuthering Heights* in Barbara's novels. For example, *Voice of the Heart* tells of the making of a film of it. Shot in the late 1950s, the film stars heart-throb Terence Ogden as Heathcliff and dark-haired, volatile, manipulative Katharine Tempest as Catherine Earnshaw. *The Triumph of Katie Byrne* is about an actress whose first big break is to play Emily Brontë in a play-within-the-novel about life in Haworth parsonage. In *A Woman of Substance* the principal love story between Emma and Edwin Fairley, though Edwin is no Heathcliff, draws on Brontë's idea of Cathy's sublimation of her self in Heathcliff and in the spirit of the moor: 'My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath . . .' Brontë wrote. 'Nelly, I AM Heathcliff.' When Emma makes love with Edwin literally within 'the eternal rocks beneath' the moor – in a cave at Ramsden Ghyll – 'Emma thought she was slowly dissolving under Edwin, becoming part of him. Becoming him. They were one person now. She *was* Edwin.'

There is scarcely any landscape description as such in *Wuthering Heights*, but Emily Brontë (1818–48) was the greatest of all geniuses when it comes to evocation of place. Charlotte, her sister, worried what primitive forces Emily had released from the bleak moorland around Haworth, 'Whether it be right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff, I do not know,' she wrote, 'I scarcely think it is.' She compared her sister's genius to a genius for statuary, Heathcliff hewn out of 'a granite block on a solitary moor', his head, 'savage, swart, sinister', elicited from the crag, 'a form moulded with at least one element of grandeur . . . power'. The mark of genius was the writer working an involuntary act – 'The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master – something that at times strangely wills and works for itself . . . With time and labour, the crag took human shape; and there it stands colossal, dark, and frowning . . . terrible and goblin-like . . .'

Readers of *A Woman of Substance* will know just how central this 'element of grandeur . . . power' is to the character of the woman of substance. Are we to understand that it is hewn from the same granite crag whence *Wuthering Heights* came? The natural assumption is that Barbara takes from the imagery of that 'nursling of the moors' and transports it to the boardrooms and salons of Manhattan, London and Paris. Certainly, wherever the settings of Barbara's novels take us, her values are Yorkshire based, but hers is a moral focus on the *history* of place, and the spirit of Yorkshire speaks to her through its history as much as through Nature's demeanour.

She owes to her mother Freda's expeditions the sense of drama she shares with mediaeval historian Paul Murray Kendall from 'this region of wild spaces and fierce loyalties and baronial "menies" of fighting men, with craggy castles and great abbeys scattered over the lonely moors . . . a breeding ground of violence and civil strife'. Freda saw to that; she took her to castles – Middleham and Ripley – and to ruined abbeys – Kirkstall Abbey in Leeds and Fountains Abbey on the Studley Royal Estate in Ripon.

Centuries before Emily trod the Brontë 'heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance', and created Heathcliff out of its darker aspects, a real-life personification of power came forth in Wensleydale, the most pastoral, gentle and green of all the Yorkshire Dales, and appealed to Barbara's imaginative sense that the spirit of place is the spirit of the past. For her, Yorkshire is a living ideological and architectural archive of the past, a palimpsest or manuscript on which each successive culture has written its own indelible, enduring text.

Wensleydale lies less than a half-hour's drive from Ripon, the tiny city north of Leeds where Freda was brought up. The dale has two centres of power, Middleham and Bolton castles, and it is the former that commanded her attentions. Middleham was the fifteenth-century stronghold of the Earl of Warwick, one of the most dynamic figures in English history. ‘The castle at Middleham is all blown-out walls and windows that no longer exist,’ Barbara told me, ‘but Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, who was raised there and lived there, was devastating as a young man, devastating in the sense that he was very driven and ambitious . . . and a great warrior.’ Within ‘the roofless halls and ghostly chambers’ of Middleham Castle, Freda introduced her daughter to the story of the Earl of Warwick, the ‘reach’ of his ambitions and many of the traits that would define her woman of substance. ‘She told me all about Richard Neville, the Kingmaker . . . He put Edward IV on the throne of England, and he was one of the last great magnates. He held a fascination for my mother.’

Warwick’s tireless constitution was rooted in the hard-bitten culture of the North. When Richard was a boy he lined up next to his father to repel attempts to wrest their lands away from them. At eighteen he won his spurs and was hardened further by action in skirmishes to avenge rustling and looting of villages within family territories. He was instinctively the Yorkshire man, but he was also someone who, like the woman of substance herself, was not bound to his home culture. The vitality of his character awakened him to recognise and seize his moment in the wider world when it occurred.

It was in the Wars of the Roses (1455–85), the struggle between the houses of York and Lancaster for the throne of England, that he really came to the fore. His role in changing the English monarchy in the fifteenth century affected England for two centuries afterwards, but his relevance is for all times, as his biographer Paul Murray Kendall records: 'The pilgrimage of mankind is, at bottom, a story of human energy, how it has been used and the ends it has sought to encompass . . . Warwick's prime meaning is the *reach* of human nature he exemplifies and – type of all human struggle – the combat he waged with the shape of things in his time.'

For Barbara the spirit is all, and in Warwick, as in Middleham Castle itself, it is powerfully northern. Born on 28th November 1428 to Richard, Earl of Salisbury, and his wife Alice, 'on his father's side he was sprung from a hardy northern tribe who had been rooted in their land for centuries . . . The North was in Richard's blood, and it nourished his first experiences with the turbulent society of his day,' Kendall writes in *Warwick the Kingmaker*. And yet Richard would hold sway over lands so far distant – more than fifty estates from South Wales across some twenty counties of England – that he, like Barbara, could never be said to have been anchored down by the northern culture in which he was raised.

Neither Kendall nor Barbara go along with the Warwick that Shakespeare gives us in the three parts of *Henry VI* – a 'bellicose baron of a turbulent time'. Kendall's Warwick is 'an amalgam of legend and deeds', a figure whose character and actions attracted heroic levels of adulation and gave him mythic status throughout the land, as he rode in triumph through his vast estates; a figure who, like Barbara herself and her charismatic heroines, seems to have been marked with a strong sense of destiny from the start. Warwick, writes Kendall, never doubted for one moment that he could achieve what he set out to do: 'He refused to admit there were disadvantages he could not overcome and defeats from which he could not recover, and he had the courage, and vanity, to press his game to the end. In other words, he is a Western European man, and in him lies concentrated the reason why that small corner of the earth, in the four centuries after his death, came to dominate all the rest.'

From an early age he gave the impression of a man awaiting his moment, of a 'depth of will' as yet untapped but equal to any challenge that truly merited his time. And when the moment came, when the dream promised to become the man, he recognised it, gave up his subordinate role without second thought, seized it and won it, not with sleight of hand, subterfuge or trickery, but with valour, the occasion the defeat of the King's troops in the city of St Albans in 1455.

His role had been as back-up to the dukes of York and Salisbury against forces raised by Somerset from a full quarter of the nobility of England. They had approached the city making clear their intention to rescue the King from the clutches of Margaret of Anjou, beautiful and feisty niece of Charles VII of France and now wife of King Henry and *the* divisive force in the land. When battle commenced in the narrow lanes that led up to Holywell, York and Salisbury found themselves in serious difficulties and it was then that Warwick took it upon himself to lead his men forward on the run, dashing across domestic gardens and through private houses to attack Somerset's men from the rear. From the moment his archers burst into St Peter's Street shouting 'A Warwick! A Warwick!' his reputation flew. With 'Somerset's host broken,' as Kendall describes, 'Warwick, York and Salisbury approached the peaked King, standing alone and bewildered in the doorway of a house, his neck bleeding from an arrow graze. Down on their knees they went, beseeching Henry the Sixth for his grace and swearing they never meant to harm him. Helplessly, he nodded his head. The battle was over.'

There is in Kendall's Warwick the same unifying robustness to which the nation rises when the England rugby team presses its game to the end, seizing the Webb Ellis trophy against a background of fans clad in the livery of St George. What Kendall is identifying is what attracts Barbara to Winston Churchill and Maggie Thatcher: the character that won us an Empire and coloured what is understood to be our very Englishness.

It is a spirit often given to excess, bigotry, even fanaticism, so that Barbara can say defensively and with evident contradiction: 'There was no bigotry in our family. The only thing my father said was, "Nobody listens to Enoch Powell."' But there is no hint of fanaticism in Barbara's ideals. It is not in her character to support it, and through husband Bob, a German Jew, dispossessed by the Nazis as a boy, Barbara is alert to the danger more than most. She would probably avoid politics altogether if she could, and draws any political sting in the novels by introducing a crucial element of compassion in her heroic notion of power.

In the young Warwick, Barbara found the epitome of the person of substance for whom integrity is all. In her novels, power is 'the most potent of weapons', and it only corrupts 'when those with power will do anything to hold on to that power. Sometimes,' she tells us in full agreement with the Warwick legend, 'it can even be ennobling.'

The character of Warwick that got through to Barbara encompassed more than soldier values. The fierce loyalties of those times were, in young Warwick's case, not forged in greed, nor were they all about holding on to, or wresting, power from an opponent for its own sake. Long before he fell out with his protégé Edward and, embittered, took sides against him; long before he 'sold what he was for what he thought he ought to be', as Kendall put it, his purpose really was to defend the values which true Englishmen held as good.

Freda made sure that Barbara picked up on this heroic aspect. As a child, her mother 'instilled in her a sense of honour, duty and purpose', the need for 'integrity in the face of incredible pressure and opposition' and 'not only an honesty with those people who occupied her life, but with herself'. These noble values arise in *Act of Will* and *A Woman of Substance*, but they first found impetus in Freda's expeditions into Wensleydale; they are what Barbara always understood to be the values of the landscape of her birth. The seed took root when Freda led her by the hand up the hill through Middleham into the old castle keep, even if she was unable to articulate and bring it to flower until she sat down many years later to write *A Woman of Substance*.

In the novel, Paul McGill recognises the woman of substance in Emma with reference to Henry VI – 'O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide'. The heroic values Barbara garnered in her childhood as a result of Freda's influence – the sense of honour, duty and purpose – ensures a strong moral code. 'Emma has such a lot of inner strength,' as Barbara says, 'physical and mental strength, but also an understanding heart. She is tough, but tough is not hard,' an allusion that brings us from Shakespeare to Ernest Hemingway, who once said, 'I love tough broads but I can't stand hard dames.'

Emma is tireless, obsessive, ruthlessly determined and dispassionate. She has a 'contained and regal' posture, there is an imperiousness about her, but she is also 'fastidious, honest, and quietly reserved'. She wears a characteristically inscrutable expression and cannot abide timidity where it indicates fear of failing, which she says has 'stopped more people achieving their goals than I care to think about.' She is physically strong and has a large capacity for hard work. 'Moderation is a vastly overrated virtue,' she believes, 'particularly when applied to work.' Emma is 'tough and resilient, an indomitable woman', with 'strength of will' and 'nerves of steel'. To her PA, Gaye Sloane, she is 'as indestructible as the coldest steel'.

To Blackie's wife, sweet Laura Spencer, with whom Emma lodges, ‘there was something frightening about her’, the feeling that ‘she might turn out to be ruthless and expedient, if that was necessary. And yet, in spite of their intrinsic difference, they shared several common traits – integrity, courage, and compassion.’ While ‘understanding of problems on a personal level, [she] was hard-headed and without sentiment when it came to business. Joe [Lowther, her husband] had once accused her of having ice water in her veins.’ But granddaughter Paula admires Emma’s ‘integrity in the face of incredible pressure and opposition’, and while she can be ‘austere and somewhat stern of eye’ and there is a ‘canny Yorkshire wariness’ about her, when her guard is down it is ‘a vulnerable face, open and fine and full of wisdom.’

References to Middleham are legion in the novels. In *Angel*, research for a film takes us there. In *Where You Belong* Barbara chooses it as the site for the restaurant, Pig on the Roof, and there’s a lovely Yorkshire Christmas there. In *Voice of the Heart*, Francesca Cunningham guides Jerry Massingham and his assistant Ginny to the castle in search of film locations. Key scenes in the film of *A Woman of Substance* were shot in the village, and when you climb up the main street towards the castle you will see to your right the iron-work canopied shop, which, though placed elsewhere in Barbara’s imagination, became the film location for Harte’s Emporium (Emma’s first shop in her empire).

When I visited Middleham with Barbara, an army of horses clattered down the road from the castle to meet us, descending from the gallops and tipping me straightaway into the pages of *Emma's Secret* and *Hold the Dream*, where Allington Hall is one of the greatest riding stables in all England. Barbara, however, was back in her childhood with Freda: 'We'd get the bus to Ripon and then my mother had various cousins who drove us from Ripon to Middleham . . .'

In *Hold the Dream*, past and present find a kind of poetic resolution in this place. Shane O'Neill believes that he is linked to its history through an ancestor on his mother's side. It is 'the one spot on earth where he felt he truly belonged', and at the end he and Emma's granddaughter Paula come together there. This sense of belonging plays an important role in the author's own imaginative life: 'I have very strange feelings there. I must have been about eight or nine when we first went. I thought, I know this place, as if I had lived there. I want to come back'

No matter whether it is Middleham Castle, Studley Royal or Temple Newsam, Barbara readily enters into an empathic relationship with Freda's favourite places, feeling herself into their history, and it is a strangely intense and markedly subjective relationship. Talking to me about Temple Newsam in Leeds, she said, 'I can't really explain this to you – how attracted I was to the place, my mother and I used to go a lot. It was a tram ride, you'd go on the tram to town and then take another tram . . . or was it a bus? I loved it there, I always loved to go and I felt very much *at home*, like I'd been there before. Yes, déjà vu. Completely.'

‘Can you think why that was?’ I asked her.

‘No. I have no idea.’

‘Did you say anything about it to your mother at the time?’

‘No, she just knew I loved to go.’

When I drove Barbara to Middleham Castle, we had a similar conversation while exploring what remains of the massive two-storey twelfth-century Keep with Great Chamber and Great Hall above, ‘the chief public space in the castle’, I read from a sign. ‘The Nevilles held court here. Walls were colourful with hangings and perhaps paintings. Clothes were colourful and included heraldic designs . . .’

Barbara interrupted me: ‘I have always been attracted to Middleham and I have always had an eerie feeling that I was here in another life, hundreds of years ago. I know it; why do I know it all? *How* do I know it all? Was I here? I know this *place*, and it is not known because I came in my childhood.’

From outside came the sound of children playing. We made our way gingerly up steps nearly one thousand years old, the blue sky our roof now, held in place by tall, howling, windowless walls that supported scattered clumps of epiphytic lichen and wild flowers. Barbara stood still in the Great Hall, taking it all in with almost religious reverence. Then, inevitably, the larking children burst in. She turned, her look silencing them before even she opened her mouth: ‘Now look, you’ve got to stop making a lot of noise. You’re disturbing other people. This is not a place for you to play!’ It was as if they had desecrated a church. We descended to areas which were once kitchens and inspected huge fireplaces at one time used as roasting hearths, and discovered two wells and a couple of circular stone pits, which a signpost guide suggested may have been fish tanks.

'It was much taller than this, it has lost a lot,' she sighed, and then asked, 'Would it have been crenellated?'

I said I thought that likely, adding, 'It is gothic, dark,' before my eyes returned to the wild flowers in search of a lighter tone. 'Look at the harebells,' I said, but Barbara was not to be deterred. She had come from New York to be there, she wanted me to grasp a point.

'I don't understand why I have this feeling. I don't understand why it is so meaningful to me.'

'There *is* a very strong sense of place here,' I agreed.

'For *me* there is.'

I felt a compulsion to test the subjectivity of Barbara's vision. 'I think *anyone* would find that there is a strong sense of place here,' I said.

She leapt back at me immediately: 'No, no, I *know* this, I have been here, not in this life.' Then, as suddenly, the spell was broken: 'And then you see, you can go down here . . . I had the feeling as a child, I thought I knew it. I had this really strong pull, and I don't know why. I feel I was here in that time, in the Wars of the Roses. I feel that I lived here in the time of Warwick.'

An ability to empathise with the spirit of place is a characteristic of all writers grouped together in the nineteenth-century Romantic movement, not least William Wordsworth, whose poem, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud . . .' was one of Freda's favourites and crops up time and again in Barbara's novels. The verses tell of an empathic moment in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park, near Ullswater in the Lake District, where the poet and his sister, Dorothy, come upon the most beautiful daffodils they have ever seen: 'Some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness and the rest tossed and peeled and danced and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew them over the lake . . . ever glancing, ever changing,' Dorothy recorded in her diary. But Barbara's déjà vu experiences are different in an important respect from those of the Romantics. For her, sympathetic identification with Middleham Castle or Temple Newsam or Studley Royal always carries with it a conviction not only that the past is contained in the present, but of *herself* as part of it. The Romantic notion of empathy is absolutely the opposite of this: it is the disappearance of self. Empathy between Keats and the nightingale was contingent on the poet *becoming* the immortal spirit of the bird. Barbara's feeling that she has been to a place before, in another life perhaps, comes from somewhere else. The 'experience' carries a sense of *belonging*. She seems on the verge of finding out more about herself by being there. It has something to do with identity.

Also inherent in what she terms déjà vu (literally 'already seen') is a feeling of *disassociation* with what is felt to have been experienced before; a sense of loss, a sense that there is a past which was hers and has been lost to her. Such a sense of loss can be a powerful inspiration for an author. For instance, Thomas Hardy's novels were inspired by the loss he felt deeply of the land-based, deep-truth culture into which he had been born at Bockhampton in Dorset in the nineteenth century, and we will see that only after Barbara made her return in imagination to the landscape of her birth, and drew on the values that she associated with it, could she write the novels that made her famous.

But unlike Hardy, Barbara was *not* born into the culture or spirit of the times that inspired these values, and there was nothing that she could give me about her past to suggest that something in her identity had been lost to the passing of the times of which Middleham, Temple Newsam or Studley Royal belonged. I was, however, strongly aware that these experiences occurred and had been repeated on many occasions in the company of her mother. The image came to mind of Freda standing hand-in-hand with her daughter in the Keep at Middleham. Everything seemed to lead back to Freda. Why had Freda thought it so important to take Barbara to these places? Was it a committed mother's desire to share their history, or can we see in the intensity of feeling that the trips engendered something more?

Interestingly, Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' poem is used in Barbara's novel *Her Own Rules* to demonstrate that Meredith Stratton has a problem of identity – a terrible feeling of loss, of being robbed, of being incomplete, which is resolved in the novel when she discovers who her mother is. Meredith hears the poem and thinks she has heard it before – but not here, not in this life. It is the first of many so-called déjà vu experiences linked to Meri's true identity, her secret past. '*Her Own Rules* is about a woman who doesn't know who she really is,' as Barbara confirmed.

Was this how it was for Freda? Was she, like Meredith Stratton, drawing something from the spirit of the place that answered questions about her own identity? Was she sublimating the sense of loss, which her daughter noticed in her but could never explain, in the noble spirit of places like Middleham, Temple Newsam, Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal? And did the intensity of the experience encourage her daughter Barbara, with whom she was 'joined at the hip', to identify with their history and experience this déjà vu?

Freda's very being was redolent of the sense of loss which permeates not only the narrative but also some of the best imagery of Barbara's novels, as when the winter sets in 'for its long and deadly siege' and the landscape is 'brush-stroked in grisaille' – a technique to which Barbara alludes not only in *A Woman of Substance* but also in *The Women in His Life* and *Act of Will* invariably to describe a beauty pained by loss.

Barbara, who knew no more about Freda's problems than I did at the time of our trip to Middleham, allowed only that her mother did definitely want her to have a fascination for the history of the places they visited. But she herself had connected these déjà vu experiences with Meredith Stratton's search for her roots of existence, and, as I mulled over our trip to Middleham, I remembered her appraisal that the fundamental theme of all her novels – including *A Woman of Substance* – is one of identity: 'to know who you are and what you are'.

It would be some time, however, before the burden of the theme could be laid at Freda's door.

CHAPTER TWO

Beginnings

'I was the kind of little girl who always looked ironed from top to toe, in ankle socks, patent leather shoes and starched dresses. My parents were well dressed, too.'

Barbara was born on 10th May 1933 to Freda and Winston Taylor of 38 Tower Lane, Upper Armley, on the west side of Leeds. 'Tower Lane was my first home,' Barbara agreed, 'but I was born in St Mary's Hospital in the area called Hill Top. My mother, being a nurse, probably thought it was safer.'

Hill Top crests the main road a short walk from Tower Lane. St Mary's Hospital is set back from the road and today more or less hidden behind trees within its own large site. A map dated the year of Barbara's birth still carries the hospital's original name, 'Bramley Union Workhouse' (Bramley is the next 'village' to the west of Armley). The Local Government Act of 1929 had empowered all local authorities to convert workhouse infirmaries to general hospitals, and by the time Barbara was born, it was probably already admitting patients from all social classes.

As the crow flies, Armley is little more than a mile and a half west of the centre of Leeds, which is the capital of the North of England, second only to London in finance, the law, and for theatre – the Yorkshire Playhouse being known as the National Theatre of the North. More than 50,000 students of its two universities and arts colleges also ensure that it is today one of the great nights out in the British Isles. Straddling the River Aire, which, with the Aire & Calder Navigation (the Leeds canal), helped sustain its once great manufacturing past, Leeds is positioned at the north end of the M1, Britain's first motorway, almost equidistant between London and Edinburgh.

Armley, now a western suburb of the city, sits between the A647 Stanningley Road, which connects Leeds to Bradford, and Tong Road a mile to the south, where the father of playwright Alan Bennett, a contemporary of Barbara's at school, had his butcher's shop.

Armley's name holds the secret of its beginnings, its second syllable meaning 'open place in a wood' and indicating that once it was but a clearing in forest land. Barbara will appreciate this. Oft heard celebrating the 'bucolic' nature of the Armley of old (it is one of her favourite adjectives both in the novels and in life), she recalls: 'In the 1930s this was the edge of Leeds. There were a lot of open spaces . . . little moors – so called – fields, playing fields for football, as well as parks, such as Gott's Park and Armley Park.' There is still a fair today on Armley Moor, close to where Barbara first went to school: 'Every September the fair or “feast” came, with carousels, stalls, candy floss, etc. We all went there when we were children.’

The Manor of Armley and, on the south side of Tong Road, that of Wortley, appear in the *Domesday Book* of 1086 as Ermelai and Ristone respectively. Together they were valued at ten shillings, which was half what they had been worth before the Normans had devastated the North in 1069. In King William’s great survey of England, Armley is described as comprising six carucates of taxable land for ploughing, six acres of meadow and a wood roughly one mile by three-quarters of a mile in area.

Not until the eighteenth century did the village come into its own, thanks to one Benjamin Gott, who was *the* outstanding figure among the Leeds woollen manufacturers of the industrial revolution. He was born in Woodall, near Calverley, a few miles west of the town, in 1762. At eighteen, he was apprenticed to the leading Leeds cloth merchant, Wormald and Fountaine. By 1800 the Fountaines had bowed out and in 1816 the Wormald family sold up too. Just how far all this was down to manoeuvring on the part of the acquisitive Gott does not come down to us. What is clear is that long before the firm was renamed Benjamin Gott and Sons it was his energy that made it the most successful woollen firm in England.

Gott’s mills – Bean Ing on the bank of the Aire, and a second one in Armley – brought railway terminals, factories and rows of terraced houses for workers, so that Armley was already part of Leeds by the mid-nineteenth century and the whole area was covered in a pall of smoke. So bad was the pollution that as early as 1823 Gott was taken to court. At his trial, the judge concluded that ‘in such a place as Leeds, which flourishes in consequence of these nuisances, some inconveniences are to be expected.’

Such attitudes made Gott a rich man. He bought Armley lock, stock and smoky barrel, built himself a big house there and hung it with his European art collection. Like many Victorian entrepreneurs, he was a philanthropist – he built a school and almshouses, organised worker pensions and gave to the Church’s pastoral work in the area. After he died in 1840, two sons carried on the business, made some improvements to the mill, but refused to compromise the quality of their high-grade cloths and take advantage of the ready-made clothing industry, which burgeoned after 1850, preferring to exercise their main interest as art and rare-book collectors. Inevitably their markets shrank. When one of the next generation went into the Church, parts of Bean Ing were let out, and by 1897 one tenant had a lease on the entire building.

William Ewart Gott, the third-generation son who stayed in Armley, is lambasted by David Kallinski in *A Woman of Substance* for having built statues and fountains rather than helping the poor, although in fact he provided the land for the foundation – in 1872 – of Christ Church, Armley, where Barbara was christened, received her first Communion and attended service every Sunday, going to Sunday School there as well. He gave towards the building of it and appointed its first vicar, the Reverend J. Thompson, who served a longer term (thirteen years) than any vicar since.

Barbara likes to say that she was 'born in 1933 to ordinary parents in an ordinary part of Leeds and had a similarly ordinary childhood,' but there was nothing unexceptional in the times into which she was born. The industrial revolution had finally ground to a halt. Two years before she was born, in the General Election of 1931, the Conservatives had romped home with some twelve million votes, the party having been elected to stem the economic crisis. It was the last year they would enjoy anything like that tally for some time to come.

The steps leading up to economic crisis and the Tory majority in 1931 led also to Adolf Hitler becoming German Chancellor two years later, and, seemingly inexorably, to war six years after that. Those who lived through it will tell you that the slump started in 1928 in the North of England, but it became world news in October 1929 with the Wall Street crash. Between 1930 and 1933, following President Hoover's decision to raise tariff barriers, world trade fell by two-thirds. Unemployment in America rose to twelve million (it had been but two million in 1920); in 1931 nearly six million were out of work in Germany. In Britain, in the January of the year of Barbara's birth – 1933 – the same year that Walter Greenwood's classic novel of life in a northern town during the slump, *Love on the Dole*, was published – it reached an all-time peak of 2,979,000. The Depression was on. Barbara was born at the height of it.

There is no doubt that there was great suffering in areas of the northwest and northeast of England. Figures of the unemployed seeking ‘relief’ in the workhouses in these regions confirm it, but for some there was a less drastic and emotive story. Barbara’s family seem not to have suffered too badly, even though her father was unemployed ‘for most of my childhood’, and was once reduced to shovelling snow, getting paid sixpence for his work and later telling his daughter: ‘At that time, Barbara, there was a blight on the land.’ The memory went into *Act of Will*, the ‘blight on the land’ line causing Barbara some grief when her American editor cut it out.

So how did the Taylors make ends meet? ‘My mother worked. She worked at nursing and she did all sorts of things. She was a housekeeper for a woman for a while. Do you remember that part of *Act of Will* when Christina gives her mother Audra a party? I remember that party, and I remember having those strawberries. My editor in England, Patricia Parkin, said nothing in the book summed up the Depression better than the strawberries. I cried when I wrote it because I remembered it so clearly – when I say, “their eyes shone and they smiled at each other . . .” I mean, I still choke up now!’

‘It’s time for the strawberries, Mam, I’ll serve,’ Christina cried, jumping down off her chair. ‘And you get to get the most, ’cos it’s your birthday.’

‘Don’t be so silly,’ Audra demurred, ‘we’ll all have exactly the same amount, it’s share and share alike in this family.’

'No, you have to have the most,' Christina insisted as she carefully spooned the fruit into the small glass dishes she had brought from the sideboard. They had not had strawberries for a long time because they were so expensive and such a special treat. And so none of them spoke as they ate them slowly, savouring every bite, but their eyes shone and they smiled at each other with their eyes. And when they had finished they all three agreed that these were the best strawberries they had ever eaten . . .

The dole, or unemployment benefit, was £1 a week in 1930, thirty shillings for man, woman and child. Barbara's father may also have received some sort of disability allowance, for he had lost a leg. A day's work might bring Freda in five shillings, say eighteen shillings a week, cash in hand. That's only 90p in the British decimalised economy, an old shilling being the current 5p piece, but its value was many times greater. In 1930, best butter cost a shilling a pound, bacon threepence for flank, fourpence-halfpenny for side, fivepence or sixpence for ham, two dozen eggs (small) were a shilling, margarine was fourpence a pound, and one pound of steak and rabbit was a shilling. It was quite possible to live on the Taylor income.

Indeed, there was money over to maintain Barbara's 'ironed look from top to toe, in ankle socks, patent leather shoes and starched dresses'. Her parents, she tells us, were well dressed, too. Of course, it was easier to be well dressed in those days. Men wore suits to work whether they were working class or middle class, and few changes of clothing were actually required;

women for their part were adept at making do. There is no doubt also that there was the usual Yorkshire care with money in the Taylor household, which Barbara will tell you she has to this day. Certainly, when she was a child there was money left over for her father's beer, a flutter on the horses and even for summer holidays, taken at the east coast resort of Bridlington, the seaside holiday being a pastime whose popularity was on the increase, while foreign travel remained an elite pursuit for the very rich.

Another apparent anachronism of the depressed 1930s is that it was also the decade of the mass communication and leisure revolution, which facilitated industries that would be Barbara's playground as an adult. British cinema began as a working-class pastime, films offering escapism, excitement and a new focus for hero worship more palatable than the aristocracy, as well as a warm, dark haven for courting couples. The first talkie arrived in Britain in 1929. By 1934 there was an average weekly cinema attendance of 18.5 million (more than a third of the population), and more than 20 million people had a radio in the home.

Sales of newspapers also burgeoned, with door-to-door salesmen offering free gifts for those who registered as readers – it was rumoured that a family could be clothed from head to foot for the price of reading the *Daily Express* for eight weeks. In 1937 the typical popular daily employed five times as many canvassers as editorial staff. It is interesting that Barbara is wont to say in interview, 'I'd read the whole of Dickens by the time I was twelve,' because complete sets of Dickens were a typical ‘attraction’ offered to prospective readers – perhaps to *Daily Mirror* readers in particular, for ‘When I was a child,’ Barbara once said, ‘we had the *Mirror* in our house and I have always been fond of it.’

Literacy increased throughout the country at this time, partly due to the expansion of the popular press, the sterling work of libraries and the coming of the paperback book. Allen Lane founded the Penguin Press in 1936 and Victor Gollancz set up the Left Book Club in the same year. Literature, as well as books not classifiable as such, was now available to the masses: 85.7 million books were loaned by libraries in 1924, but in 1939 the figure had risen to 247.3 million.

Freda took full advantage. ‘She was a great reader and force-fed books to me. I went to the library as a child. My mother used to take me and plonk me down somewhere while she got her books.’

Armley Library in Town Street was purpose-built in 1902 at a cost of £5,121.14s. It is five minutes’ walk from the family’s first house in Tower Lane and even less from Greenock Terrace, to which the Taylors repaired during the war. Libraries in the North of England are often supreme examples of Victorian architecture, like other corporation buildings an excuse to shout about the industrial wealth of a city. Though Armley’s is relatively small, there is something celebratory about its trim, and the steps leading up to the original entrance give, in miniature, the feeling of grandeur you find in Leeds or Manchester libraries, for example. What's more, the architect, one Percy F. Robinson, incorporated a patented water-cooled air-conditioning system in the design. 'It was a beautiful building,' Barbara agreed when I told her that I was having difficulty getting access to local archives because it was now closed. 'Don't tell me they are destroying it!' she exclaimed in alarm. It was closed in fact for renovation, and today there is a pricey-looking plaque commemorating Barbara's reopening of it in November 2003.

'My mother exposed me to a lot of things,' Barbara continued. 'She once said, "I want you to have a better life than I've had." She showed me – she *taught* me to look, she taught me to read when I was very young. She felt education was very important. She would take me to the Theatre Royal in Leeds to see, yes, the pantomime, but also anything she thought might be suitable. For instance, I remember her taking me to see Sadlers Wells when it came to the Grand Theatre in Leeds. I remember it very well because Svetlana Beriosova was the dancer and I was a young girl, fifteen maybe. I loved the theatre and I would have probably been an actress if not a writer. I remember all the plays I was in, the Sunday School plays: I was a fairy – I have a photograph of myself! – and a witch! And then I was in the Leeds Amateur Dramatics Society, but only ever as a walk-on maid. We did a lot of open-air plays at Temple Newsam, mostly Shakespeare. I have a picture somewhere of me in an Elizabethan gown as one of the maids of honour.' The involvement of Barbara and some of her school-friends in these plays was organised by Arthur Cox, a head teacher in the Leeds education system, whose wife was a teacher at Northcote School, which Barbara attended from 1945. A friend at the time, June Exelby, remembers: 'We used to go and be extras in things like *Midsummer Night's Dream* – as fairies and things like that. Barbara used to particularly enjoy it. I can't remember whether she was any good at it.'

Affluence in Armley seemed to rise and fall with the topography of the place. Going west from Town Street at Wingate Junction, which was where the Leeds tram turned around in Barbara's day, up Hill Top Road and over the other side to St Mary's Hospital and St Bede's Church, where Barbara went to dances as a girl, the houses were bigger and owner-occupied by the wealthier professional classes: 'It was considered to be the posh end of Armley,' she recalled.

Tower Lane, where Barbara lived with Freda and Winston, is a pretty, leafy little enclave of modest but characterful, indigenous-stone cottages. It is set below Hill Top but hidden away from the redbrick industrial terraces off Town Street to the east, in which most of the working-class community lived. It must have seemed a magical resort to Barbara in the first ten years of her life, and certainly she remembered Armley with a fairytale glow when she came to write about it in *A Woman of Substance* and *Act of Will*, Emma Harte and Audra Kenton both coming upon it first in the snow.

Audra saw at once that the village of Upper Armley was picturesque and that it had a quaint Victorian charm. And *despite the darkly-mottled sky, sombre and presaging snow, and a landscape bereft of greenery, it was easy to see how pretty it must be in the summer weather.*

In *A Woman of Substance*, it is 'especially pretty in summer when the trees and flowers are blooming,' and in winter the snow-laden houses remind Emma explicitly of a scene from a fairytale:

Magically, the snow and ice had turned the mundane little dwellings into quaint gingerbread houses. The fences and the gates and the bare black trees were also encrusted with frozen snowflakes that, to Emma, resembled the silvery decorations on top of a magnificent Christmas cake. Paraffin lamps and firelight glowed through the windows and eddying whiffs of smoke drifted out of the chimneys, but these were the only signs of life on Town Street.

It is a little girl's dream. Although the description is unrecognisable of Armley today, and its 'mundanity' is again deliberately discarded when Barbara selects Town Street as the spot where Emma Harte leases a shop and learns the art of retail, setting herself on the road to making millions, we accept it because it was plausible to the imaginative little girl who lived and grew up there: 'There are a number of good shops in Town Street catering to the Quality trade,' Blackie tells Emma when she first arrives:

They passed the fishmonger's, the haberdasher's, the chemist's, and the grand ladies' dress establishment, and Emma recognised that this was indeed a fine shopping area. She was enormously *intrigued and an idea was germinating. It will be easier to get a shop here. Rents will be cheaper than in Leeds, she reasoned logically. Maybe I can open my first shop in Armley, after the baby comes. And it would be a start. She was so enthusiastic about this idea that by the time they reached the street where Laura Spencer lived she already had the shop and was envisioning its diverse merchandise.*

Today, beyond Town Street's maze of subsidiary terraces, where Barbara's father Winston's family once lived, stand Sixties tower blocks and back-to-back housing with more transient tenants not featured in Barbara's fiction. And at the end of the line stands Armley Prison, its architectural purpose clearly to strike terror into the would-be inmates. This does register in *A Woman of Substance* – future architect Blackie O'Neill calls it a 'horrible dungeon of a place'. Nearly a century later, multiple murderer Peter Sutcliffe – 'the Yorkshire Ripper' – added to its reputation.

Now, twenty-five per cent of Armley's inhabitants are from ethnic minorities where English is a second language. The great change began as Barbara left for London in the 1950s. As a result, the culture of Armley village today is unlike anything she remembers, even though, according to local headmistress Judy Blanchland, inhabitants still feel part of a tradition with sturdy roots in the past, and have pride in the place. Certainly there is continuity in generations of the same families attending Christ Church School. The school, and the church opposite, remain very much the heart of the local community, with around 100 attending church on Sunday, seventy adults and some thirty children. There always has been a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between the two, even if changing the name of Armley National School, as it was in Barbara's day, to Christ Church School did cause something of a stir.

Barbara enrolled there on 31st August 1937, along with eleven other infants. Her school number was 364 until she was elevated to Junior status in 1941, when it became 891. Alan Bennett, born on 9th May 1934, one year after Barbara, joined on 5th September 1938, from his home at 12 Halliday Place. The families didn't know one another. 'My mother used to send me miles to a butcher that she decided she liked better [than Bennett's shop on Tong Road]. It was all the way down the hill, almost on Stanningley Road.' After leaving the school, the two forgot they had known one another until the day, fifty years later, when they were both honoured by Leeds University with a Doctor of Letters *Honoris Causa* degree.

Bennett became a household name in England from the moment in 1960 that he starred in and coauthored the satirical review *Beyond the Fringe* with Dudley Moore, Peter Cooke and Jonathan Miller at the world-famous Edinburgh Arts Festival. Later the show played to packed audiences in London's West End and New York. He was on a fast-track even at Christ Church School, passing out a year early, bound for West Leeds High School, according to the school log. From there the butcher's son won a place at Oxford University.

Barbara and I walked the area together in the summer of 2003, mourning the fact that generally little seems to have been done to retain the nineteenth-century stone buildings of her birthplace. Even many of the brick-built worker terraces, which have their own period-appeal, have been daubed with red masonry paint in a makeshift attempt to maintain them. There was, however, enough left to remind Barbara of her childhood there.

We drove up Town Street towards Tower Lane, where she lived until she was about ten. At Town Street's west end, you can filter right into Tower Lane or left into Whingate, site of the old tram terminal and the West Leeds High School, now an apartment block. (See 1933 map in the first picture section.) The small triangular green between Town Street and Whingate which appears at this point must have been a talking point for Barbara and her mother from earliest times, if only on account of its name – Charley Cake Park – mentioned in both *A Woman of Substance* and *Act of Will*. 'Laura told me that years ago a man called Charley hawked cakes there,' says Blackie. Emma believes him, but only because no-one could invent such a name for an otherwise totally insignificant strip of grass.

As we wind our way towards Barbara's first home, she has a mental picture of 'me at the age of three, sitting under a parasol outside 38 Tower Lane, near a rose bush. It *is* a lane, you know,' she emphasises, 'and it was a tiny little cottage where we lived. Do you think it is still there? We got off the tram here . . . Whingate

Junction . . . then we walked across the road and up Tower Lane, and there was a very tall wall, and behind that wall were . . . sort of mansions; they were called The Towers.'

At the mouth of the lane she points to a cluster of streets called the Moorfields: 'That used to be where the doctor I went to practised – Doctor Stalker was his name. One of those streets went down to the shop where I got the vinegar. Did I tell you about the vinegar? Boyes, a corner shop, that's where I used to get it. I wonder if that's still there?'

The vinegar turns my mind to Barbara's penchant for fish and chips. I had heard that when she comes to Yorkshire she likes nothing better than to go for a slap-up meal of fish and chips, mushy peas, and lashings of vinegar. That very night I would find myself eating fish and chips with her in Harrogate. Nothing odd, you might say, about a Yorkshire woman eating a traditional Yorkshire meal, only Barbara has her posh cosmopolitan heroes and heroines do it in the novels too, and has herself been known to request, and get, a bottle of Sarson's served at table in the Dorchester Grill.

What is Emma Harte, the woman of substance's favourite dish? Fish and chips, preceded by a bowl of vegetable soup, served in Royal Worcester china of course, the only concession to Emma's transformation. Again there is this feeling of fairytale about it all, except that one knows that the writer has herself made the same journey as Emma Harte, and that she does in fact order fish and chips too. The desire seems to pass down the generations, so that Emma's grandson, the immensely wealthy Philip McGill Amory, insists on eating fish and chips with his wife Madelena – what matter if she is wearing a Pauline Trigère evening gown?

'My mother used to send me to get the household vinegar from Mr Boyes,' Barbara continues, 'and she sent me with a bottle because it was distilled from a keg, and when I returned with it she'd always look at the bottle and say, "Look at this, he's cheating me!" Until one day she went in herself with the bottle and she said to Mr Boyes, "You're cheating me. I *never* get a full bottle," and apparently Mr Boyes replied, "Eeh, ah knows. Tha' Barbara's drinking it." He was very broad Yorkshire, and it's true, I did drink a bit of it on the way home. Even today I like vinegar on many things, but especially on cabbage . . .

'There's Gisburne's Garage!' I slow down as we pass the garage on our right at the mouth of the lane, and she points out an old house, pebble-dashed since she was a girl. 'This was where Mrs Gisburne lived and it had a beautiful garden in the back. But where this is green there used to be a pavement, surely . . . but maybe it wasn't, perhaps I am seeing . . .'

This is the first time that Barbara has set foot in the place for fifty years. What will turn out to be real of her childhood memories? What part of imagination? Childhood memories play tricks on us. She looks for the 'tall wall' that she remembers should be on our left, containing the mansions known as The Towers. There is a wall, but it is not tall, nor have the original blackened stones been touched since the four- or five-foot construction was built all those years ago.

‘That wall used to seem so *high* when I was a child,’ she says in amazement. ‘Anyway, these are called The Towers and this is where Emma had a house and they were considered to be very posh. It was all trees here.’

The Towers stretched many floors above us and must have seemed to a child’s eye to reach into the sky. Their castellated construction of blackened West Riding stone gives them a powerful, gothic feel, and it was the majesty of the site that captured Barbara’s wonder when she was growing up here. Her eyes must have fallen upon the building virtually every day during her most impressionable years, whenever she emerged from the garden of her house opposite:

The Towers stood in a private and secluded little park in Upper Armley that was surrounded by high walls and fronted by great iron gates. A circular driveway led up to the eight fine mansions situated within the park’s precincts, each one self-contained, encircled by low walls and boasting a lavish garden. The moment Emma had walked into the house on that cold December day she had wanted it, marvelling at its grandness and delighted with its charming outlook over the garden and the park itself.

A Woman of Substance

But where was No. 38 Tower Lane, supposedly opposite the tall wall of The Towers? There is No. 42 and 44 . . . but no label indicating No. 38. ‘We *were* thirty-eight,’ Barbara insists as she alights from the car to get a better look. We move through a gate into a front garden, and, set back from the lane, we see what might have once been a row of three tiny, terraced stone cottages, all that was left of the courtyard where they lived, ‘the small cul-de-sac of cottages,’ as she wrote in *A Woman of Substance*, describing the neighbourhood of Emma’s childhood home.

‘This seems very narrow,’ she says as we make our way gingerly down the flagged path like trespassers in time. ‘They’ve knocked it all down, I think, and turned it into this. All right, well, I’ll find it! There was a house across the bottom,’ she muses for her own benefit. ‘This, the first of the line [of cottages] was number thirty-eight. You went down some steps. Here it was a sort of garden bit, and where the trees are . . . There were three cottages along here and then a house at the bottom, which has gone. Wait a minute, are there three cottages or only two? Have they torn our house down? Well, this is the site of it anyway.’ Her voice breaks as she says this. ‘There *were* three houses there. There was our cottage, the people in the corner and the lady at the bottom. There *were* three houses.’ She then shows me the site of their air-raid shelter, where she and Freda would sit when the sirens sounded during the early years of the war. In the whole of the war only a handful of bombs actually fell on Leeds, but the preparations were thorough, the windows of trams and shops covered with netting to prevent glass shattering all over the place from bomb blast, entrances to precincts and markets sandbagged against explosions.

'I went to school with a gas mask, I remember,' said Barbara. 'We all had them in a canvas bag on our shoulders and there used to be a funny picture of me with these thin little legs – I've got thin legs even today – thin little legs with the stockings twisted and a coat and the gas mask and a fringe. My mother was cutting her rose bushes and I was playing with my dolls' pram that day in 1940 when a doodlebug, a flying bomb, came over, and she just dropped everything and dragged me into the air-raid shelter. I vaguely remember her saying to my father later – he was out somewhere – "Oh, I never thought I'd see that happen over England."'

No. 38 Tower Lane had two rooms downstairs and two bedrooms on the upper floor. That is all: a sweet, flat-fronted cottage; a tiny, humble abode. The house at the bottom of the garden is long gone. Its absence offers by way of recompense a spectacular view across the top of Leeds, although Barbara's interest, as we walk the area, is only in how things were, and how they are no more.

Being an only child had various repercussions. Her parents will have been able to feed and clothe Barbara to a better standard than most working-class children, which we know to have been the case. But it would have set Barbara apart for other reasons, too – single-child families were unusual in those days before family planning, and in the single-child home the emphasis was on child-parent relationships rather than sibling friendships and rivalries, which can affect a child's ability to relate to other boys and girls at school; although when things are going well between child and parents it can make the relationship extra-special. 'There were plenty of times,' she says, 'when I just knew that we were special, the three of us. I always thought that we were special and they were special. I think when you are an only child you are a unit more. I always adored them. Yes, rather like Christina does in *Act of Will*.'

The closeness and reliance of Barbara on the family unit was never more clearly shown than in the only time she spent away from home during her early childhood, as an evacuee. The school log reads: '*1st September 1939, the school was evacuated to Lincoln this morning. Time of assembly 8.30, departure from school, 9, to Wortley Station, departure of train, 9.43*.'

The school stayed closed until 15th January 1940: '*Reopened this morning, three temporary teachers have been appointed to replace my staff, which are still scattered in the evacuation areas. Miss Laithwaite is at Sawbey, Miss Maitland at Ripon, Miss Musgrave at Lincoln and Miss Bolton is assisting at Meanwood Road. The cellars have been converted into air-raid shelters for the Infants. Accommodation in the shelters, 100. Only children over 6 can be admitted for the present.*'

'I went to Lincoln,' remembers Barbara, 'but I only stayed three weeks. It was so stupid to send us to Lincolnshire. I remember having a label on me, a luggage label, and my mother weeping as the school put us on a train. I was little. I wasn't very happy, that I know, I missed my parents terribly. I was very spoiled, I was a very adored child. My mother sent me some Wellington boots, so it must have been in winter. She'd managed to get some oranges and she'd put them in a boot with some other things, but the woman had never looked inside. So, when my father came to get me the oranges were still there and had gone bad. My mother was furious about that.

'Daddy came to get me. He'd gone to the house and they said, "She'll be coming home from school any moment." He said, "Which way is it? I'll go to meet her." And I saw him coming down the road and I was with the little girl who was at the house also. I remember it very well because I started to run – he was there on the road with his stick, walking towards me . . . and I'm screaming, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" He said, "Come on, our Barbara, we're going home." We stood all the way on the train to Leeds. I was so happy because I missed my parents so much it was terrible. I was crying all the time – not all the time, but I cried a lot, I didn't like it. I didn't like being away from them. I loved them so much.'

I lead us back out of the gate and we return to the present with more sadness than joy. Walking further up the lane, which has a dogleg that leads eventually out onto Hill Top Road, we explore a steep track down the hill to the right, which Barbara calls 'the ginnel'. Later I discover from Doreen Armitage, who also grew up in the area and let us into the church, that this is an ancient weaver's track: 'They would bring up the wool to the looms from the barges on the canal there.' And, sure enough, I see on today's map that it is marked as a quarter-mile cut-through to the canal across Stanningley Road. Barbara was lost once more in her own memories – the fun she had as a little girl skipping down the ginnel – before again being arrested by the intrusive present: the gardens behind Gisburne's Garage, once so lovely, have been built upon and obscured.

Despondently we make our way back up the ginnel towards the moor where she would often play after school. Past the main gate of The Towers we emerge from a tunnel of trees into a wide-open space, flanked on our left by an estate of modern houses, which has replaced the 'lovely old stone houses' of her youth. Off to the right, we come to what was always referred to as 'the moor', but is no more than half an acre of open ground, where now a few strongly built cart-horses are feeding. On the far side of it is a wall and some trees. Barbara at once exclaims: 'That's the wall! When you climbed over *that* wall, you were in something called the Baptist Field – I don't know why it was called that, but . . . we used to play in that field, some other children and I, we used to make little villages, little fairylands in the roots of the trees, which were all gnarled, with bits of moss and stones and bits of broken glass, garnered from that field, and flowers.'

Memories of the Baptist Field had been magical enough to earn it, too, a place in *A Woman of Substance* all of forty years later. In the novel, the field promises entry to Ramsden Crags and the Top of the World, symbol of the spirit of Yorkshire.

Barbara's fictional recipe may involve real places, but it is the feelings recalled from her youth that are especially true in the novels, and overlooking the Baptist's Field I felt in at the very source of a little girl's teeming imagination. As with Emma Harte, the years peeled away on her feelings as a child and 'she had a sudden longing to go up to the moors, to climb that familiar path through the Baptist Field that led to Ramsden Crags and the Top of the World, where the air was cool and bracing and filled with pale lavender tints and misty pinks and greys . . . Innumerable memories assailed her, dragging her back into the past.' (*A Woman of Substance*)

'My father used to walk up here sometimes and go for a drink at the Traveller's Rest,' Barbara says, breaking the silence. I had already noted the pub on Hill Top Road. Walking as far as we could up Tower Lane would bring us round to it. Later, Doreen Armitage would recall sitting up there 'with me father and me Uncle Fred; we used to sit there on a Sunday morning.' Barbara said she used to sit there with Winston: 'We were probably waiting for the pub to open, I should think! I used to come here with my father, and we would sit outside and my mother would have a shandy. He liked to go out for his pint, you know, and have his bet . . . Ripon, York, Doncaster races. He bred in me a love of horses and racing.'

Barbara's father, Winston Taylor, was born on 13th June 1900 at 6 Wilton Place, Armley, the first child of Alfred and Esther Taylor. 'Daddy was called after Winston Churchill, who had just escaped from the Boer War.' On Barbara's admission, Winston is Vincent Crowther in *Act of Will*, the firstborn of Alfred and Eliza Crowther. He is also Emma Harte's brother, Winston, in *A Woman of Substance*. 'The fictional Winston Harte looked like him, thought like him, and had many of his characteristics,' Barbara told me.

I also learn that she based Emma Harte's father, 'Big Jack Harte', who, as a Seaforth Highlander, fought the Boers in 1900 and 'could kill a man with one blow from his massive fist', on Winston's father, big Alfred Taylor, 'because a certain ingredient of physical strength was required in the character of Emma', the woman of substance she was concocting.

'I loved my grandfather. He was in my mind when I created Jack Harte. He had a moustache, all lovely and furry white, and white hair. Big man, big moustache. He used to hold me on his knee, give me peppermints and tell me stories about when he was a Sergeant Major in the Seaforth Highlanders. He loved me and I loved him.'

Grandpa Alfred Crowther in *Act of Will* also serves as a Sergeant Major in the Seaforth Highlanders, and in *A Woman of Substance* Emma's first husband, Joe Lowther, and Blackie O'Neill join the regiment in the First World War.

The real-life Alfred Taylor, who occasioned these many references in Barbara's fiction, is described as a forgeman on his son Winston's birth certificate and as a cartman on Winston and Freda's marriage certificate. Barbara remembers him as the latter, as the Co-op drayman – the man who looked after the horses and drove the cart carrying stores for the Armley link in Britain's first supermarket chain.

The senior Taylors lived five minutes away from Tower Lane in Edinburgh Grove, off Town Street. 'The house was a Victorian terraced house with a series of front steps, but also a set of side steps leading down to the cellar kitchen. It was a through-house, not a back-to-back, but I can't remember if there were doors on both sides. They then moved to 5 St Ives Mount, two streets closer. This was also a Victorian terraced house with front steps down to the cellar kitchen, where you'd always see my grandmother baking. Both were tall houses as I recall.

'I also liked my grandmother, Esther Taylor. Her maiden name was Spence. She was very sweet and not quite Alfred Crowther's wife in *Act of Will*. Eliza Crowther is always the voice of doom, saying, "Happiness, that's for them that can afford it." My real grandmother was full of other sayings like, "A stitch in time saves nine", "You'd better watch your p's and q's", though I do remember her baking like Mrs Crowther – bacon-and-egg pies (we'd call them quiche Lorraine today), also apple pie, and sheep'shead broth and lamb stews. On Saturday morning I used to go for her to the Co-op, but we didn't call it the Co-op, it was called the *Cworp* – Armley dialect, I suppose. You could buy everything at the Cworp. It had a meat department, vegetables, groceries, cleaning products . . . She loved me. I think I was her favourite.'

All was as Barbara remembered of her grandparents' houses, and she went on to tell me about the rest of the Taylor brood. 'Winston had a sister called Laura, who lived in Farsley, was married and had a child. She was my favourite aunt. She died of lung cancer during the war, when I was about seven; she died at home and it was a horrible death. I remember going to see her. She was a very heavy smoker. After Laura died, her husband went to live with his family with their little boy, but died not long after. Laura Spencer in *A Woman of Substance* was based on my Aunt Laura, except our family were not Catholic. She was sweet and gentle and so good.

'Then there was Olive, married to Harry Ogle. He had a motorbike and sidecar. He was in the RAF during the war. They never had children. And Aunt Margery, always called Madge . . . she was beautiful.'

Aunt Margery, I was to learn, had the 'uncommon widow's peak above the proud brow' that was Emma Harte's and granddaughter Paula's in *A Woman of Substance*, and Vincent's in *Act of Will*. It did not belong to Barbara, as I had imagined.

'Madge lived in Lower Wortley. She was married, but didn't have children either. I remember I was her bridesmaid when I was six. Olive was another favourite aunt. Everybody loved Olive. She managed a confectioner's shop, Jowett's at Hyde Park Corner – in Leeds, not London! – and I used to go and see her there. She used to let me serve a customer now and then. She lived in this house at twenty-one Cecil Grove, just the other side of the

Stanningley Road, by Armley Park.

‘We would go on picnics together. She always took her knitting. On one occasion, so the story goes, I nearly drowned. Olive suddenly looked up and said to Uncle Harry, “Where’s Barbara?” They couldn’t see me. Then, far out in the river, they saw my dress caught on a dead branch, they saw me actually bob up and go under the water again and I was flailing around because I couldn’t swim. But the branch had hooked into my dress and was holding me up. Today I have a terrible fear of the sea where I can’t put my feet on the bottom. I panic, which I think must go back to that. They got me out in the end, soaked and crying, and dried the dress in the sun, but you know the English sun! They took me home to their house and Auntie Olive ironed the dress and got me back home looking like the starched child that I was.

‘So, Daddy had three sisters, and they spoiled me to death, of course, because two of them didn’t have children. Their brothers were Winston – my father – Jack, Bill, and Don, the youngest, who sadly died just recently. He and his wife, Jean, my one surviving aunt, had a daughter, Vivienne, my only cousin.

‘Jack and Bill Taylor lived at home with my grandmother and never married. I didn’t know them very well. Jack was in the army during the war, I think, and Bill was in minesweepers off the coast of Russia and places like that. Afterwards they came home and lived with my grandma, and then when she died they continued to live in that house – two bachelors, very straight, but very *dour*. I used to go and see my grandmother, and they would be sitting in their chairs and nobody spoke. I hated it. I wasn't scared of them, I paid not a blind bit of notice because my focus was somewhere else.

Barbara says she owes her good looks to her father, and that 'he was very good-looking, dark-haired, green-eyed. My father in particular was always very well dressed and very well groomed, and even today I can't stand ungroomed men. Any man that I ever went out with before I knew my husband was always good-looking, always well dressed and well groomed. I loved my father. He would have charmed you.' In *Act of Will*, Vincent, Winston's fictional persona, boasts an almost feminine beauty, though 'there never was any question about his virility'. Barbara describes him in fact and fiction as a natural star, charismatic, one who drew others (especially women) to him by force of personality, dashing looks and more than his fair share of beguiling charm . . . plus he had 'the gift of the gab'.

Family legend boosted his reputation further with the adventurous story that at fourteen he ran away to sea and signed up in the Royal Navy, forging his father's signature on the application form. Barbara gives the story to Emma Harte's brother Winston in *A Woman of Substance*. It is not too far from the truth. The real Winston did join the Navy, but not until shortly before his sixteenth birthday. His naval record shows that he signed on as Boy (Class II) on 20th May 1916 in Leeds, that he had previously worked as a factory lad, and that he was at this stage quite small – height 5 ft 1 in, chest 31.5 ins. His first attachment was to *HMS Ganges*, a second-rate, 2284 ton, 84-gun ship with a ship's company of 800, built of teak in 1816 at the Bombay Dockyard under master shipbuilder Jamsetjee Bomanjee Wadia. By the time Winston joined it, *Ganges* was a shore-bound training establishment for boys at Shotley Gate. He remained in the Navy until 16th July 1924, when he was invalided out with a serious condition, which could have led to septicaemia and may have been the reason why he subsequently had one leg amputated.

They took him to what was then a naval hospital, Chapel Allerton in Leeds. Today there is still a specialist limb unit there. Barbara recalls that when he was lying in hospital, 'He said to his mother, "I don't want to have it off because I won't be able to dance." His mother said, "Winston, forget dancing. If you don't have the leg off, you won't live." Gangrene was travelling so rapidly that it had got to the knee. That was why it was taken off very high up. And so he couldn't dance, but he did go swimming. You can swim with one leg and two arms. He went swimming in Armley Baths.'

One can only speculate on the impact the loss would have had on one so sociable, though Barbara marks him out as pragmatic: 'I think I take after my father in that way. He didn't really give a damn what people thought, it was take it or leave me.' Yet, however brave Winston was, losing a leg would have been a huge thing; it would have taken tremendous determination to lead a normal life. Barbara agreed: 'He had to prove himself constantly, I think. I didn’t know that when I was growing up.’

The artificial leg he was given was the best available and made of holed aluminium, which according to the specialist at Chapel Allerton would have been light and possibly easy enough to manoeuvre to allow Winston to engage in his favourite pastime, though perhaps not the jitterbug, which was sweeping the country in the years leading up to the war. Some years before rock ’n’ roll, the jitterbug involved the disgraceful practice of leaving hold of your partner and improvising fairly frantic steps on your own. In *Act of Will*, when Audra meets Vincent at a dance, it is the less demanding waltz that brings them together:

Audra had almost given up hope that he would make an appearance again when he came barrelling through the door, looking slightly flushed and out of breath, and stood at the far side of the hall, glancing about. At the exact moment that the band leader announced the last waltz he spotted her. His eyes lit up, and he walked directly across the floor to her and, with a faint smile, he asked her if she would care to dance.

Gripped by a sudden internal shaking, unable to speak, Audra nodded and rose.

He was taller than she had realised, at least five feet nine, perhaps six feet, with long legs; lean and slenderly built though he was, he had broad shoulders. There was an easy, natural way about him that communicated itself to her instantly, and he moved with great confidence and panache. He led her on to the floor, took her in his arms masterfully, and swept her away as the band *struck up 'The Blue Danube'.*

During the course of the dance he made several casual remarks, but Audra, tongue-tied, remained mute, knowing she was unable to respond coherently. He said, at one moment, 'What's up then, cat got your tongue?'

She managed to whisper, 'No.'

Barbara's parents married on 14th August 1929. Winston was living at 26 Webster Row, Wortley, at the time, and described himself on their marriage certificate as a general labourer, while Freda, of 1 Winker Green, Armley, described herself as a domestic servant even though she had been working as a nurse. 'I don't actually know where they met,' admitted Barbara. 'Probably at a dance. If my father couldn't really dance any more because of the leg, perhaps he went just to listen to the music. I actually do think he met her at a dance; they used to have church dances and church-hall dances.'

Although Barbara adored her father, when she was a child there was little openly expressed of the love they shared. 'He didn't verbalise it perhaps in the way that Mummy did,' but the depth of it was expressed in a touching scene one day, which had to do with his artificial leg, symbol of the man's vulnerability.

It had been snowing and Barbara was walking with her father in Tower Lane when he fell and couldn't get up because of the slippery snow. 'He was down on his back, and there was nobody around, and he told me what to do. He said, "Go and find some stones and pile them up in the snow, near my foot." He was able to wedge his artificial leg against the stones in order to lever himself up. I got him sitting up, I couldn't lift him. I was six or seven years old. But he managed to heave himself to his feet eventually.'

But at least she had helped him, as she had always longed to do, and now he realised what a practical, efficient *doer* of a little girl he had fathered. The leg brought him close to her again when he died in 1981. 'My mother said, "Your father wanted his leg taken back to the hospital." So my Uncle Don drove me there with it, and three spare legs, and when I handed them over I just broke down in floods of tears. It was like giving away part of him and myself. I was very close to Mummy, but I was close to my father in a different way.'

After Barbara was born in 1933, however, relations between Winston and Freda were not all they might be. I knew that Barbara's mother Freda didn't always see eye to eye with Grandma Taylor. In *Act of Will* tension between wife and mother-in-law is created by Vincent being the favourite son – Grandma Crowther is forever undermining her daughter-in-law's position. In reality as in the fiction, Winston, I learned, was Esther Taylor's favourite, and Barbara recalls her father going 'maybe every day to see his mother. Why do I think my mother always used to say, "I know where you've been, you've been to . . ."?'

'Did it used to annoy Freda, his going to see his mother every day?' I asked.

'Probably. I should imagine it would. Don't you think it would?’

I thought it would be perfectly natural, particularly given the proximity of the houses. Extended families were supposed to be the great boon of working-class life, and Freda with her small child would surely have warmed to such support. Wortley, Farsley and Armley – Freda was surrounded by the entire Taylor family and she had been otherwise alone, having been brought up in Ripon.

Barbara’s mother was not by nature big on company however, so perhaps she didn’t find it easy to ‘fit in’ to this extended family scene, which at first must have seemed quite overpowering. She was ‘a very sweet, rather retiring, quiet woman’ in Barbara’s words, ‘rather reserved, shy, but with an iron will’. Freda told Barbara little about her past, only that her parents had brought her up in Ripon and that her father had died. ‘Her mother Edith then married a man called Simpson. There were three daughters, Freda, Edith and Mary, and two sons, Frederick and Norman. I don’t know, to tell you the honest truth, but as far as I remember there was only one Simpson, Norman Simpson.’

I would discover that Freda always had a particularly strong desire to return to the tiny city where she was brought up: ‘My mother *always* wanted to be in Ripon,’ Barbara recalled. ‘All the time.’

‘You mean, some time after you were born, when you were eight, nine or ten?’ I asked.

‘No, much younger, I went back as a baby.’ Freda took

Barbara back to Ripon from when she was a baby and constantly throughout her childhood. Was this a kind of escape? I wondered. Was marriage into the Taylor family so difficult an adjustment? It seemed unlikely, given that Barbara made Winston out to be such a catch and Freda as a woman who, in spite of her reserve, could fight her own corner with Esther.

In the novels we are given a number of reasons for a marriage hitting hard times. In *Act of Will* Audra is criticised by her mother-in-law for failing to see that her desire to go out to work is flouting the working man's code, which says that if a wife works, her husband loses his dignity. This is odd, as the mills of Armley and Leeds were filled with working wives, and pretty soon we discover that the real problem is that Audra comes from a better class background. She has fallen on hard times, but – she the lady, he the working man – it can never work, the mother-in-law says.

There may have been similar strife for Freda and Winston. There is speculation that Freda had come, or may have had the impression that she had come, from better stock than Winston. We know that mother-in-law Esther Taylor sounded warnings to Freda that giving Barbara ideas above her station would lead only to trouble. Her counterpart in *Act of Will* does the same. In the North of England there was a nasty word for girls with big ideas – 'upstart'. Barbara notes in the novel, 'the lower classes are just as bad as the aristocracy when it comes to that sort of thing. Snobs, too, in their own way.'

In *Everything to Gain*, on the other hand, the cause of strife is laid firmly at the husband's door. Mallory Keswick's father is 'very much a woman's man, not a man's man . . . He adores women, admires them, respects them . . . he has that knack, that ability to make a woman feel her best – attractive, feminine and desirable. [He] can make a woman believe she's special, *wanted*, when he's around her, even if he's not particularly interested in her for himself.'

In *Act of Will* we sense the same about Vincent. There are arguments not only about Audra's highfalutin ideas, but about Vincent's drinking and a 'fancy woman', and fears that he will leave home and never come back. '"Go back to your fancy woman," I heard that,' said Barbara. 'That happened when I was little, I remembered it and I did ask Grandma, "What's a fancy woman?" And I know that my mother rejected Winston constantly. No, she didn't talk about it, but I knew about it somehow when I was in my teens. How do children know things?'

Recently, as guest on BBC Radio Four's *Desert Island Discs*, Barbara admitted that she hadn't been able to write *Act of Will* until after her parents had died, 'because I really wrote in a sense about this very tumultuous marriage that they had. They were either in each other's arms or at each other's throats. He was very good-looking and he had an eye for the girls at times.' Later, she said to me, 'But that's life. I think Winston had a bit of an eye for the ladies, but that doesn't mean that he did much about it. Listen, the more I write, the more I read of other people's lives, the more I realise how terribly flawed we all are.'

In the novels this is the message about fathers in general. In *Everything to Gain*, Mallory Keswick says: 'He was a human being after all, not a God, even if he had seemed like one to me when I was growing up. He had been all golden and shining and beautiful, the most handsome, the most dashing, the most brilliant man in the world. And the most perfect . . . Yes, he had been all those things to me as a child.'

In *Act of Will*, although Vincent's family all dote on him, Grandpa Alfred has 'no illusions about him'. Vincent has 'temperament, stubbornness and a good measure of vanity', and is easily sidetracked from his purpose. His daughter gets her strength of purpose from elsewhere, from her mother's 'iron will', like Barbara.

Despite what Barbara said, that 'when you are an only child you are a unit more', one can imagine that this difference in character between mother and father was fertile ground for disagreement, and it is not uncommon for Barbara's fictional heroines to recall a childhood trauma of expecting the father to up and leave the family home. In *Everything to Gain*, Mallory is suddenly shaken one day 'not only by the memory but by the sudden knowledge that all the years I was growing up I had been terrified my father would leave us for ever, my mother and I, terrified that one day he would never come back.'

Mal and her mother discuss Edward, her archaeologist father, in this vein. Mal cannot understand 'why Dad was always away when I was a child growing up. Or why we didn't go with him.'

Her mother talks about his not wanting either of them along 'on his digs'. Mallory is no fool, however. She remembers 'that fourth of July weekend so long ago, when I had been a little girl of five . . . that awful scene in the kitchen . . . their terrible quarrel [which] had stayed with me all these years.'

In the electoral records of Upper Armley, there is a period when Winston is not included as an inhabitant of the family home. Freda is the sole occupant of electoral age when they are living at Greenock Terrace in 1945, the first record available after the war years (when none were kept), and Barbara considers that 'the trauma [of expecting the father to leave] must spring from the war years. [In Tower Lane] we had an air-raid shelter at the end of the garden. My mother and I would go in with a torch and I'd worry about where my father was.'

'Your father was very often not there?'

'No, he was out having a drink. That was Daddy.'

Besides the Traveller's Rest on a Sunday, his favourite watering holes were 'the White Horse, and the other was the Commercial in Town Street. He'd have to walk home, and during the war I thought he was going to be killed,' said Barbara.

'So the picture I have is of you and your mother sitting in the shelter. Were you there alone or were the neighbours in there too?'

'No, it was ours. There were three in a row, but they were awful. There were seats to sit on, but no radio because you couldn't plug it in, could you? Yes, you put bottles of water and some things in there and a Thermos flask Mummy would fill. A woman wrote a very chastising letter about six months ago saying, “I don’t know who did your research for the Anderson shelters, but they weren’t like you made it out in *The Women in His Life*. I belong to the Society of Anderson Shelters People,” or whatever . . . she will have been all of eighty!’

‘It must have been strange to be in the dark with nothing to look at or do, in a makeshift shelter and in the knowledge that bombs could rain down on you at any time.’

‘Well,’ Barbara remembered, ‘we had candles and my mother always took a book, because she was a reader. She didn’t knit like my Auntie Olive.’

‘Did you take a book as well?’

‘I can’t remember, but I know that I listened for that unique, very particular step. It was like a missed step – because of the artificial leg, his was not an even step. There was a *lot* of worry about my father. I used to worry about my father, it’s funny, isn’t it?’

‘Children do worry about their parents,’ I say.

‘Why? A fear of losing them?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘I used to worry about him being out when the sirens began to shrill. He always went out, not every night, but some nights a week he’d go down to the local for a pint. Usually he was down at the pub, locked in during the raid, and then later we’d hear his step down the garden. And I’d be so relieved I thought I would cry.'

What we have here is the classic 'only child' situation, touching in the extreme. You want to reach back in time and wipe the worry from the busy mind of this girl who took the responsibility for family relations upon herself. In reality, as in *Act of Will*, the only child was doing a balancing act between mother and father, which can't have been easy. Barbara would have had to stand alone under the burden of any unhappiness in her parents' marriage, and it was not done to complain about this. She would have had nobody to understand her worries and grief, and, clearly, the situation between Freda and Winston did become sadly polarised.

One day Barbara said to me about Freda, 'She neglected my father,' and, later, that Freda 'shut the bedroom door' on Winston. In *Everything to Gain*, Mal's parents, like Vincent and Audra in *Act of Will*, sleep in separate bedrooms, and this is deemed by Mal 'with a sinking feeling' to have been the reason why eventually her father must have romanced other women. And it comes out that, yes, her father was having affairs. The hindsight conclusion reached is that the Keswicks were 'a dysfunctional family', and the uncertainty of her parents' marriage made Mal want 'to have the perfect family when I got married. I wanted to be the perfect wife to Andrew, the perfect mother to Jamie and Lissa. I wanted it all to be . . . to be . . . *right* . . .'

We see this in Barbara also, when, after her marriage to Robert Bradford in 1963, she wrote a trio of manuals for the

American publisher Simon & Schuster about being the perfect wife – *How to be the Perfect Wife: Etiquette to Please Him, Entertaining to Please Him* and *Fashions that Please Him.* When a journalist discovered these in the 1980s, the cry went up: Can this be the same woman who created Emma Harte? No journalist had an inkling of the fear out of which Barbara's desire for an even-keel marriage came.

However, it is also clear in both *Act of Will* and in reality that Winston, even if he was a bit flighty, was not the crucial factor. What led to separate bedrooms was the mother switching her attention away from the husband to the child – to Barbara – and that happened for reasons that went deeper than sex. One event that conspired to sharpen Freda's focus on Barbara at the expense of Winston was the tragic death of their firstborn, a boy called Vivian. 'He died from meningitis six months after he was born and some time before I was born,' Barbara told me. In a confusing and quite extraordinary and upsetting coincidence, Alfred and Esther Taylor also had a late son called Vivian, who died. 'She [Esther] would never lock the door at night and her youngest son, Don, who was probably still living at home in those days, said, "Mam, you've got to lock your door at night; it's not safe." And she'd say, "No, I can't in case Vivian wants to get in." He was her last child, I think, and he died as a baby, as a little boy. Then my parents had a son before me, who is Alfie in *Act of Will*, which is why I had Alfie also die of meningitis. Our Vivian Taylor was six or eight months old when he died, not even a year. It certainly affected my mother's relationship to me, because she focused every bit of love and attention on me. If there was a purpose in my mother's life it was *me*. That's rather sad actually.'

But there was more to it than Vivian. 'My mother didn't want any more children because she wasn't going to let anything stop her from giving me a better life than she had had,' Barbara told me. In *Act of Will*, Audra is fired by her need to *redeem her own lost opportunity*. No sacrifice is too great to enable her daughter, Christina, to realise the opportunities that were denied her in childhood. There is an obsessive quality about it from the moment Christina is born and her mother announces, 'I am going to give her the world.'

Barbara remembers well how this was expressed for real in her relationship with Freda: 'We were very close. I was very close to Mummy. She totally and completely believed in me. There wasn't a day of her life that if she spoke to me, even after I'd gone to live in London and then America, when she didn't say, "I love you." There wasn't a time when she didn't tell me that I was the most beautiful and the cleverest and the most talented and the most charming and the most wonderful person and of course that's not true, we all know that we have faults. But what it did . . . it gave me tremendous self-confidence and a self-assurance that I had even when I was fifteen and sixteen. And she instilled in me a desire to excel. Her message was: "There's nothing you can't have if you try hard enough, work hard enough and strive towards a goal. And never, never limit yourself."'

Barbara took away from their relationship an absolute conviction that she was capable of anything to which she set her mind. Inadequacy was not a concept ever entertained. Her friend Billie Figg noted this as her defining characteristic in her early twenties: 'What she had was enormously high expectations of herself and a lot of assurance.'

In *Act of Will*, Vincent fears that Audra's motivation to do the same for Christina is tinged with obsession. He notes a possessiveness about his wife's relationship with their daughter, which seems to exclude him, and comes to frighten him. 'There was a cold implacability in the set of the mouth and the thrust of the jaw, a terrible relentlessness in those extraordinary cornflower-blue eyes . . .' And Vincent fears, 'She's going to make it a crusade.'

Audra announces her intention to give her daughter the world in the hospital, shortly after she is born. Both Audra's husband, Vincent, and his doctor friend, Mike Lesley, bridle at her naked aggression, not seen before.

When it is all over in the novel, and Audra's daughter, Christina, is the success she has made her, the girl says: 'I'll never be able to thank you enough, or repay you for everything you've done for me, Mummy. You've been the best, the most wonderful mother in the world.' But, as Emma's brother Winston says of his sister towards the end of *A Woman of Substance*, her success is attributable to '*Abnormal* ambition. *Abnormal* drive.'

In *Act of Will*, Vincent, convinced that his wife is victim to irrational forces, shows his mettle in his response to her. He is tender and loving. He masterminds a surprise birthday party for her. There is no hint of violence towards his wife, even when she brings him to his wits' end with her obsession. Moreover, he gives his wife one hundred per cent support over her sense of loss of status. He could have gained the whip hand in the class turmoil of their relationship – that she always believed she came from a better class than he – but nowhere does he use it as a weapon against her.

Knowing now what happened to Freda in her childhood, and the loss she suffered, knowing what it was that made her so determined that Barbara should have the opportunities that were denied herself, it is safe to say that Winston's response to Freda (if it is reflected in Vincent's) was the very best that could have been made. There was in Freda something running deeper even than the loss of her first child, something which possibly no project of success – not even Barbara – could ever quite resolve. Maybe Freda's mother-in-law, Esther, sensed it was never going to be resolved by her son Winston either – however good he was to her. Reason enough for her unsettled relationship with Freda.

The novels first tipped my research in Freda's direction, and it was the novels that gave me a sense of the deepest roots of dysfunction I would find. Turning again to *Everything to Gain*, Mal searches for the reason for her mother's unhappiness: 'Perhaps [she] had experienced humiliation and despair and more heartache than I ever realised. But I would never get the real truth from her. She never talked about the past, never confided in me. It was as if she wanted to bury those years, forget them, perhaps even pretend they never happened.'

In *Act of Will*, Audra's in-laws are all around her. She loves Vincent, but there is something getting in the way, a feeling of apartness certainly. Is it class, as in the novel? Is the belligerent 'outsider' in her really being outed by her better birth? Or is it, as in *Everything to Gain*, something in her childhood, some loss she suffered?

We never get to the heart of the matter in the fiction (because Barbara didn't know), but, like Mallory Keswick, we cannot but suspect there is something we are not being told; indeed we only accept Audra's strangely aggressive love for her daughter in *Act of Will* because we entertain such a suspicion.

In reality, I was to discover, there was every reason for Freda to behave so. Her story provides the crucial dysfunctional and motivational forces that led to her unique relationship with her daughter and Barbara's extraordinary will to succeed. Much of it remained hidden during Freda's lifetime, for Barbara's childhood 'was constructed on secrets layered one on top of the other,' as she wrote in *Everything to Gain*.

These secrets provided Barbara with many of the narrative possibilities of her best novels, and one reason why they have been so successful is that Barbara is not simply writing good ideas, but ideas that are her inheritance. The novels are the means by which she shares in the experience of her past, her mother's past, and that of her mother's own mother. More strangely still, she does so without knowing anything about Freda's history or that of her maternal grandmother, the extraordinary and beguiling Edith Walker.

CHAPTER THREE

Edith

'I think we ought to go to Ripon. We've quite a lot of things to review, and to discuss . . .'

Meredith Stratton in *Her Own Rules*

Edith Walker, Freda's mother, was the daughter of John and Mary Walker (née Scaife). John Walker was a slater's apprentice when Edith was born on 4th September 1880, the youngest of six children. The occupation seems odd in that John was thirty-seven at the time, which is late to consider being an apprentice in anything. The family lived at Primrose Hill, Skipton Road (the Ripon side of Harrogate), close to what is now a roundabout by a pub called The Little Wonder.

It seems that Edith never knew her mother, for John Walker was registered in the 1881 census as a widower. Perhaps Mary Walker died in childbirth. Living in the Primrose Hill house with John and Edith in that year were his other children: Thomas (sixteen), Elizabeth Ann (twelve), John William (ten), Minnie (five), and Joseph (three).

One cannot help but wonder how her arrival on the scene was received by the rest of the family. Was she regarded as the final drain on the meagre resources available to a family of eight, in which the breadwinner was on apprenticeship wages? Was she rejected for being the cause of their mother's death? Or was her advent greeted with great love and pity for the poor little mite, and was she spoiled and fussed over by her elder sister, Elizabeth Ann, and, indeed, doted on by her father, John, who may even have caught glimpses of his lost wife in her?

Being motherless, even with the care of others in the family, Edith may have suffered from maternal deprivation, a condition believed to be as harmful as poor nourishment. It can have a child yearning throughout its life for the kind of unconditional love that only a mother can give, and which no substitute can hope to assuage. Edith may also have suffered physically, for feeding infants was mainly by mother's breast in those days.

The family does seem to have been a close one. It was largely still intact ten years later, and some members of it remained close for a considerable time into the future. It is indeed tempting to surmise that Edith was the apple of her father's eye. If so, it is all the more tragic that he was unable or, for some reason beyond resolution, unwilling to save Edith from the abyss into which she was to fall.

Typically for a working man of the period, John Walker stayed in one area for his entire lifetime. He was born in 1844 in Burton Leonard, a tiny village midway between Harrogate and Ripon, his parents having moved there from Pateley Bridge, ten miles to the west, where his elder sister Mary was born in 1839. After marrying, he went with his wife to live in Scotton, a village three miles to the south of Burton Leonard. Their first son, Thomas, was born there in 1865. The family then moved to Ripon in or around 1869, where siblings Elizabeth Ann, John William and Minnie were born. Then, around 1877, came the move to the outskirts of Harrogate, where first Joseph and then Edith (Barbara's grandmother) were born. By 1891 the family had moved back to Ripon.

The city, twenty miles or so north of Leeds, lies just west of the Vale of York, which runs north–south between the North York Moors to the east and the softer Dales to the west. To anyone who doesn't know Yorkshire, the names of these two great land masses may be misleading, because there are plenty of dales in the North York Moors and plenty of moors in the Dales. Dales are valleys; moors are high, largely unsettled tracts of wilderness, naturally enough separated by dales. Indeed, as we have seen, perhaps the most famous moor in all England – Haworth Moor – is not in the North York Moors at all, but way to the southwest, near Leeds.

In the immediate vicinity of Ripon there is some of the most beautiful countryside in all England. It was built at the confluence of three rivers. From Middleham to the north, a sense of Warwick's struggles washes down east of the city through Wensleydale on the Ure, the river's Celtic name – Isura – meaning physical and spiritual power. There it is met by the Skell, which is itself met southwest of the city by the River Laver.

In *Act of Will*, Audra refers to Ripon as 'a sleepy old backwater' compared to 'a great big metropolis like Leeds', but the description belies the tiny city's unique and many-faceted appeal. Its population was a mere 7500 at the time of the Walker family's incursion. Today it is little more than double that size, and retains the feel of a small, busy, rural community with tremendous reserves of history at its fingertips. There is a twelfth-century cathedral or minster, a seventeenth-century House of Correction, a nineteenth-century workhouse and debtor's prison, old inns bent and worn by time, and, nearby, twelfth-century monastic ruins – Fountains Abbey at Studley Royal.

Bronze-age earthworks and henges to the northeast suggest human habitation thousands of years BC, but Ripon itself can be said to have first drawn breath in AD 634 with the birth of the city's patron saint, Wilfrid, in Allhallowgate, Ripon's oldest street, just north of what was then a newly established Celtic Christian monastery.

The monks sent Wilfrid, an unusually able boy, to be educated in Lindisfarne (Holy Island) off the Northumberland coast, where St Aidan had founded a monastery in 635. Later, Wilfrid championed Catholicism over Celtic Christianity as the faith of the Church in England, and was appointed Abbot of the Ripon monastery, then Archbishop of York. The church he built in Ripon became a 'matrix' church of the See of York, and his work inspired the building of Ripon Minster in 1175 and the foundation of various hospital chapels, which established the city's definitive role in providing food and shelter for the poor and sick.

St Mary Magdalen's hospital and chapel were built in the twelfth century on the approach to the city from the north, and had a special brief to care for lepers and blind priests. St John the Baptist's chapel, mission room and almshouses lie at the southeast Bondgate and New Bridge approach to the city over the River Skell, which also offers a view of seventeenth-century Thorpe Prebend House, situated off High St Agnesgate in a peaceful precinct with another hospital chapel, St Anne's, already a ruin in Edith's time, but founded by the Nevilles of Middleham Castle. Thorpe Prebend was one of seven houses used by the prebendaries (canons) of the minster, and a house with a special place in Barbara's memory.

When Freda brought Barbara to Ripon as baby and child, they would invariably stay at Thorpe Prebend with a family by name of Wray, who were caretakers of the house. Joe Wray was married to Freda's cousin, Lillie, and Barbara became firm friends with Joe's niece, Margery Clarke (née Knowles). 'I spent a lot of weekends with Margery when I was a young girl,' Barbara recalls, and later as teenagers they would go to dances together at the Lawrence Café in the Market Place. The Lawrence had a first-floor ballroom famous because the dance floor was sprung: 'We used to go, she and I, to the Saturday night dance there at fifteen, sixteen . . . When I reminded her and I recalled that we stood waiting to be asked to dance, her swift retort was, "But not for long!" Apparently we were very popular.'

Margery still lives in Ripon today and took me to the spot beside Thorpe Prebend House where Freda and Margery's father, who went to school together, used to play on stepping-stones across the Skell. Later I learned from Barbara of the celebrated occasion when, according to Freda, he pushed her in. 'She was wearing a dress her mother Edith had dyed duck-egg blue and she dripped duck-egg blue all the way home on her white pinafore!'

Jim Gott, no obvious relation of the acquisitive Gott of Armley, but a working-class lad born seven years before Freda at 43 Allhallowgate, recalled in his memoir that playing on these stones was a popular pastime. What comes across in Jim Gott's book, *Bits & Blots of T'Owd Spot*, is the fun he had as a child and the empathy he and his contemporaries enjoyed with the spirit of Ripon – past and present fusing in its ancient architecture and traditions, and the daily round. These were the riches of a life that in other ways was hard, and Freda, despite the particular difficulties attached to her childhood, would have shared in them too, and, as an adult, looked back with similar wonder.

The spirit of the place, matured over time, was celebrated on a weekly basis at the twelfth-century Market Place, with its covered stalls, self-styled entertainers and livestock pens. It features in Barbara's novel, *Voice of the Heart*. Every Thursday, long before the market bell sounded at 11 a.m. to declare trade open, folk poured in from the surrounding moors and dales, and Ripon awoke to the clatter of vehicles laden with fresh produce and squawking hens, and the drovers' fretting sheep and lowing cattle as flocks and herds made their way through the city's narrow lanes to the colourful square on the final leg of what was often a two- or three-day journey. All came to an end at 9 p.m., as Gott recorded, when the Wakeman Hornblower announced the night watch, a tradition that survives in Ripon to this day.

Home for Edith and her family in 1891 was a small stone cottage just two minutes' walk south of the Market Place at No. 8 Water Skellgate, a whisper from where Barbara and Margery would dance the night away half a century later. (The 1909 map in the second picture section charts the area clearly.)

By this time Edith's father, John, was forty-seven and had married again, his second wife, Elizabeth, being four years his junior. Edith herself was ten, going on eleven, and very likely a pupil at the nearby Minster Girls Primary School. The only other alternative would have been the Industrial School, reserved for the very poor and substitute for the Workhouse School, which had closed its doors for the last time a few years earlier.

Siblings Elizabeth Ann, John William and Joseph (twenty-two, twenty and thirteen respectively) were still at home, but there is no sign of eldest brother Thomas or of Minnie, who, if she was alive, would have been fifteen, old enough to be living out as a maid. Also sharing the house is a lodger, John Judson, and a 'grandson' (possibly Elizabeth's or even Minnie's child) by name of Gabriel Barker. It must have been a tight squeeze.

John had quite possibly made the move back to Ripon to avail himself of the wealth of job opportunities. The city's position on the western fringe of the Vale of York – good sheep-rearing country – had made it the centre of the mediaeval wool trade, its three rivers diverted into a millrace or water course, which flowed from High Cleugh, southwest of the city, through Water Skellgate, to Bondgate Green in the southeast, serving three mills in the process. Ripon's pre-eminence in this had continued into the late fifteenth century, but then steadily declined and various other industries had come to the fore. In the seventeenth century, Ripon rowels (spurs) had gained a worldwide reputation, so that Ben Jonson could write in his play *The Staple of News* (1626):

Why, there's an angel, if my spurs
Be not right Rippon.

The city was also renowned for its saddletrees, frames of saddles worked from local ash, elm and beech – horse racing has been part of Ripon's life since 1664, and fourteen days of flat racing are still staged between April and August at Yorkshire's Garden Racecourse. Button-making made another important economic contribution and, a century later, out of the French Revolution came a gift of an industry from a band of Ripon-bound French refugees, who were befriended by a French-speaking Yorkshireman called Daniel Williamson. In return for his welcome the immigrants handed Williamson the secret details of a varnish-making process, and the lucky man set up the first varnish-making business in England, becoming so successful that today Ripon manufacturers are still doing business in every major country of the world.

Besides these, an iron foundry made a significant contribution from the nineteenth century, and the city also supported a hive of little industries, such as bone-and rope-millers, tanners, fell-mongers, coachbuilders and chandlers. Finally, as many as nineteen per cent of those in employment in the city at this time were able to find work as unskilled labourers.

Upon arrival, Edith's brother, Joseph, found work as 'a rope twister', while his father, John, took up as a lamplighter. 'One of my earliest memories is of kneeling on a chair by a window waiting for the lamplighter,' wrote one J. Hilsdon, a Ripon citizen of those days. 'He was a tall figure, who carried a pole with a light on the end. The street lamps were gaslights and he tipped the arm to release the gas and lit the mantle. Presumably he made a second round to extinguish them.'

When one soaks up the history of Ripon in late Victorian and Edwardian times, the chief impression is of the huge divergence of lifestyle between rich and poor, who nevertheless lived on top of one another in so small a place as this. When Beryl Thompson arrived in 1956 she was spellbound by the accessibility of the city's history, and has spent her life looking into the plight of the poorest citizens ever since. 'I have done this over a period of about thirty or forty years,' she told me, 'and some of the places that children lived in Ripon at this time – if you read the medical inspectors' reports – were not fit to be in. They were no better than pigsties down St Marygate or Priest Lane [this is the oldest part of the city, site of the original Celtic monastery]. If you look at the early maps you will find a lot of courts all over the city – there's Foxton's Court and Thomson's Court and Florentine's Court and so on. I think there were a lot of hovels in these courts and they probably shared lavatories or there'd be a cesspool outside or a midden. They were trying to clean it up at the turn of the century, but the reports still comment on this.'

These courts were a throwback to mediaeval times and a common sight in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not only in Ripon. The imagination of Charles Dickens, as a boy alone in London, his parents incarcerated in the Marshalsea debtors' prison, was set alight by 'wild visions' as he lurked around their entries and looked down into their inky depths. In Ripon, the city centre retained its mediaeval street plan right into the twentieth century, and the labouring poor were consigned to cottages in just such dark and dismal courts or yards, set behind the narrow streets. Very often at the top of them you'd find workshops – a blacksmith, bakery or slaughterhouse.

There was tremendous movement by the poor within them. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Edith's brother Joseph (Barbara's great uncle) moved at least four times in the space of four years through one maze of them. In 1907 he could be found at 2 York Yard, Skellgarths (a continuation to the east of Water Skellgate), having just moved there from 3 Millgate Yard. By 1910 he had moved to 1 York Yard, then to 4 York Yard. In 1911 he took up residence at 3 Johnson's Court, between 14 and 16 Low Skellgate (continuation to the west of the street), settling there and getting wed. Sadly, he was then almost certainly killed in the First War, for when records resumed in 1918 the sole occupant of 3 Johnson's Court was his widow, Ruth Matilda Walker. Within a year she remarried, her second husband a man called James Draper. And life went on.

These yards were private, often close-knit communities, safe from outsiders because few dared venture into them unless they had business to perform, but Beryl was right that conditions were grim. In 1902, a Ripon sanitary inspector reported: 'The really antiquated and disgusting sanitary arrangements now existing in the poorer quarters – where it is not unusual to find numbers of homes crowded round a common midden, which is constructed to hold several months' deposit of closet and vegetable matter, ashes and every sort of household refuse imaginable, and which remains in a festering and decaying condition, poisoning what pure air may reach the narrow courts . . .'

A Ripon Council report, dated seven years before Freda was born, records one domicile 'where ten human beings have been herded together in a space scarcely adequate for a self-respecting litter of pigs,' and it is recorded in *A Ripon Record 1887–1986* that in 1906, when Freda was two, increasing numbers of children were turning up at school without shoes.

The awful conditions in which unskilled working-class people lived in Edwardian England was so widely appreciated that in the hard winter of 1903, the New York *Independent* could find no more deserving case than England to cover: ‘The workhouses have no space left in which to pack the starving crowds who are craving every day and night at their doors for food and shelter. All the charitable institutions have exhausted their means in trying to raise supplies of food for the famishing residents of the garrets and cellars of London lanes and alleys.’

As in London, so in Ripon. These horrors were to be found ‘within a stone’s throw of our cathedrals and palaces’, as William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, noted in his book, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890). George R. Sims, a respected journalist writing a year earlier, had conjured up a picture that would not have seemed out of place in Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, of ‘underground cellars where the vilest outcasts hide from the light of day . . . [where] it is dangerous to breathe for some hours at a stretch an atmosphere charged with infection and poisoned with indescribable effluvia.’

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