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Incurable Patient

It is said that as people grow older they become more like themselves. In the last years of Barbara Wootton's long life, the focus of her interest and activity, her philosophy of human action, was increasingly on that secular humanism which she had arrived at earlier in her life through a process of self-guided rationalist thought. In her view, reason and the principles of scientific enquiry teach one that this world, and the human beings in it, are all we know we have. It is on this basis that we have to build some system of morality which sets standards for human conduct. She was very clear about this, and about the fundamental principle of any such moral system: that of respect for human life – for the lives of all individual human beings, equally. Rationalism, humanism and socialism were the three 'isms' that she, who so much disliked all 'isms',¹ depended on for the passion that drove her many decades of engagement in the world of knowledge and public policy.

She believed above all in the power of human intelligence, released from the fetters of superstition, magic and religious idolatry. Interviewed for the humanist journal *The Freethinker* in her seventies, and asked which 'ism' she preferred – agnosticism or atheism – she said: 'I don't much mind ... I'm quite prepared to be called an atheist but I suppose that intellectually we *ought* to say agnostic since there is no proof either way as to the existence of the deity'.² Barbara had abandoned religion in her early twenties as the result of an 'intellectual transition'.³ She had been brought up in a 'normal, averagely Christian home': Adela and James Adam had taken their children to church, Barbara had gone through a period of 'considerable religiosity and devoutness' as an adolescent, and the church wedding to Jack Wootton when she was twenty had been at her own wish,⁴ although by then, as she saw the terrible cruelties of war around her, faith had begun to be replaced by doubt; and, when Jack was killed a few weeks later, doubt gained the upper hand. As an agnostic (or an atheist), she was more outspoken than many others who shared the same philosophy. It was important, she said at the annual dinner of the National Secular Society in 1967, that humanists in the public eye

should stick their necks out. Members of the House of Lords could not be sacked for what they said, so people like her and Lord Willis, another notable humanist, had nothing to lose by sticking their necks out, which is what they had done, and remarkably their heads were still attached to their bodies.⁵

Some of Barbara's debates about religion gave her opponents a hard time. In a Rediffusion Television programme 'Dialogue with Doubt' in 1967, she had confronted the radical clergyman Bruce Kenrick with the impossibility of proving the existence of God. He answered with the example of marriage: marriage was an act of faith; he could not prove he had met his wife and fallen in love with her. No, said Barbara, but you could bring your wife here, and I could see her, and if necessary I could ask her to produce her marriage certificate. 'But you can't bring Christ here and show him to me.' It was not for the individual believer to introduce Christ, responded Kenrick rather weakly; rather, it was for Christ to introduce himself. 'So why hasn't he approached Barbara Wootton?' inquired Peter Snow, who had been charged with the delicate task of arbitrating this debate. Christ is present in every man, tried Kenrick; in that case, said Barbara, 'He conceals himself very well in some men; I think you'd agree'. She was adamant: the Christian narrative is a cosy story people tell themselves and each other to help them with their struggle through life. Cosy stories are not about truthfulness and integrity, and it is these that matter above everything else.⁶

A humanist for Barbara Wootton was someone who does not think that there are any supernatural forces in life. The universe has to be accepted as a 'totally inexplicable mystery'.⁷ All we know for certain are those things we can perceive with our senses, those facts that are centred on the existence of human personalities. Thus, humanism greatly respects the sanctity and dignity of individual human life. But – and it is an immensely big but – humanism is not *amoral*: it has its own strong moral codes. An extraordinary feature of human beings, yet one we take for granted, is their innate capacity to experience a sense of moral obligation. While a secular society demands a secular morality, a secular morality also demands an act of faith. In Barbara's case, this involved the Benthamite principle that happiness is better than misery: the greatest happiness of the greatest number. There was no evidence for this, it was just something she had worried her way through to, something she chose to believe.⁸ The moral obligation to promote happiness and prevent misery, and a belief in the dignity and worth of human life and social equality were the main pointers that had given her life direction.⁹ Crucially, the requirement for social equality actually *derived* from the principle of respect for individual personality, as the latter must always imply 'hatred of the artificial distinction between one human being and another created by a class hierarchy'.¹⁰

There was, however, she acknowledged, a slight problem with the moral obligation to promote human happiness, one that had been pointed out to her by the political philosopher Bernard Williams: human happiness would sometimes be greatly promoted by assassinating certain people who stood in its path. This made the principle of 'the unique value of human life' even more important.¹¹ She found it very puzzling that Christians could oppose abortion and euthanasia but defend warfare: 'Either life is sacred, or it is not'.¹² It seemed to other people a paradox, but not to her, that humanism invokes what is actually a *higher* value for human life than the religious alternatives.

In 1980, at the age of eighty-three, Barbara Wootton stuck her neck out again when the Council for Secular Humanism, based in the USA, issued a Secular Humanist Declaration, a five-page document calling for science and reason, and moral standards derived from logic and empirical experience, rather than religion, to solve the problems of human society. This declaration had a long list of sixty-one distinguished signatories, including Isaac Asimov, Francis Crick, Milovan Djilas, Albert Ellis, Dora Russell, B.F. Skinner and Barbara Wootton. It was essentially a response to the rise of religious fundamentalism in its various forms: literalist and doctrinaire Christianity; uncompromising Moslem clericalism in the Middle East and Asia; the reassertion of orthodox authority by the Roman Catholic papal hierarchy; nationalist religious Judaism; and the reversion to obscurantist religions in Asia. Its strident and timely statement made the front page of *The New York Times* and got much media coverage worldwide.¹³

Barbara Wootton's century, the twentieth century, was the one that saw the liberalization of many legal restraints on people's rights to choose and control the manner of their lives. In the West, women were, by the time she died in 1988, if not exactly liberated, then at least allowed their personhood in relation to the suffrage, work in the non-domestic world, ownership of property and of their own bodies, and the right to request equality in personal relationships and duties of care to others. None of these had been the case in the 1890s when she was born. Although the devastations of war continued throughout and beyond the twentieth century, in Britain capital punishment was abolished; suicide lost its status as a crime; adult homosexuality became a personal matter rather than a criminal offence; the restrictions on legal abortion were relaxed; contraception became available outside marriage; and discrimination on grounds of race or sex entered the statute book as unjustifiable actions. In many of these important revolutions Barbara's own rational intelligence played a leading role, but the result fell a long way short of the society she would like to have seen created. Poverty and inequality still existed, and human beings persisted in devoting an

inordinate amount of time to idiotically expensive and irrational plans. She would like to resign from the human race, but had not found a way of doing so.¹⁴ Since resignation was not possible, the work had to go on. Perhaps she was increasingly in default mode – after all, what else was there to do *apart* from work? From her late seventies until her death at ninety-one, her mind increasingly followed her body in dwelling on the fact and implications of human illness and mortality; nonetheless, there she was, still working, and still making a difference.

In 1976, the seventy-eight-year-old Baroness Wootton introduced a Private Member's Bill, the Incurable Patients Bill, into the House of Lords. Its main purpose was to protect people with incurable illnesses from avoidable suffering by allowing them to receive whatever quantity of drugs was necessary to relieve their pain and physical distress. Any such patients who brought about their own death by drug overdoses or other intentional actions were to be regarded as having died by 'misadventure'. Barbara defended her Bill not as 'a euthanasia bill', rather as simply providing people with the right to ask for pain-killing drugs even if these caused unconsciousness; the right to refuse intensive care treatment; and the ability to spell out procedures and safeguards for advance declarations of such wishes.¹⁵ The fact that, eleven years into the twenty-first century, we are still debating the moral and legal proprieties of what is now called 'assisted suicide' or, better, 'assisted dying',¹⁶ is one indication of the radical nature of Barbara's last major attempt to have an impact on law-making. Her own chosen term for assisting dying was 'self-deliverance'. In her speech moving that the Bill be read for a second time, Barbara said she was well aware that the unfortunate press publicity accused her of taking the first step towards euthanasia. But rational human beings, having taken one step, consider whether they should take another; if this were not so, every glass of wine taken with their Lordships' lunch would set them on the path to alcoholism.¹⁷ Having outlined for them the Bill's main clauses, she referred to the remarks of one correspondent who had suggested that the origins of the Bill lay in her own emotional reaction to personal and therefore atypical experiences. 'That is not the case,' she answered resolutely. 'Had I been speaking purely from my own personal experience, I should have introduced this Bill at least ten years ago.'¹⁸ During the previous fifteen years, nine of her relatives, friends or former colleagues had all died of various forms of cancer. In seven of these cases certainly, and in all probably, full relief from pain and distress was not obtained. Moreover, in the two cases in which she was most involved (the deaths of George Wright and Barbara Kyle, though of course she did not tell their Lordships this), her encounters with two private nursing homes, six NHS hospitals, four consultants and one dedicated GP informed her that there was enormous variation between

different medical practitioners and institutions in the care of the terminally ill. Her Bill would attempt to even out this variation, to give everyone the same right to ensure in advance that in certain circumstances he or she would not be kept alive just because modern medical technology offers that possibility.¹⁹

'Euthanasia' from the Greek 'eu' and 'thanatos' means 'good death'. The practice of helping people in incurable pain and distress to die has a long history in many civilizations and cultures. Indeed, one of the objections to Barbara's Bill was that, in Britain, new legislation was unnecessary, since doctors already practised, quietly, without making a great fuss about it, what the Bill preached. There had been three previous attempts to introduce a Bill legalizing assisted dying in 1936, 1950 and 1969. The first was the brainchild of a retired public health doctor, C. Killick Millard, a maverick character who championed such causes as temperance, cremation, birth control, and the sterilization of the 'eugenically unfit'.²⁰ 'A Plea for Legalisation of Euthanasia', a talk given in Leicester in 1931, resulted not only in the first draft Bill but the formation in 1935 of a Voluntary Euthanasia Society (VES). Millard's plea caught the public's attention in a climate spattered with an increasing number of cases of 'mercy killings', both in Europe and the USA, which demonstrated how random the law's response could be. For example, in Michigan, in 1920, Frank Roberts was convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment, solitary confinement and hard labour, because he had helped his wife, who was suffering from multiple sclerosis and had already tried to kill herself, to die by administering a substance called 'Paris Green' containing arsenic. In Britain, fourteen years later, sixty-two-year-old May Brownhill killed her thirty-one-year-old 'imbecile' son with tablets and gas; she was about to have a serious operation and there was no-one else to care for him. She was sentenced to die for 'mercy murder' but, within two days, the Home Secretary had pardoned her; she had her operation and went on holiday with her husband.²¹

It was not until 1969 that a Bill legalizing assisted dying was voted on in the British Parliament. By this time, the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society and the National Council for Civil Liberties – all organizations with which Barbara Wootton was associated – had come out to join the VES on the side of changing the law. Barbara became a Vice-President of the VES in 1985. During the 1960s, opinions about assisted dying had been severely shaken by the thalidomide scandal, but Lord Raglan's Voluntary Euthanasia Bill of 1969 was rejected, following a big campaign led by the right-wing politician Norman St John-Stevas.²²

Barbara Wootton's own Incurable Patients Bill was rejected in the House of Lords by 62 votes to 23, a worse result than for Lord Raglan's 1969 Bill. She

admitted that her Bill had been poorly drafted, although many such Bills did eventually succeed.²³ What particularly depressed her was that doctors connected with hospices for the dying had actively lobbied against the Bill, arguing that methods of pain relief had improved so much that no dying person need suffer. Maybe so in *your* hospices, she retorted, but in ordinary hospitals up and down the country they do not always do it so well, and the terminal pneumonias which used to be known as 'the old man's friend' are 'thwarted by the administration of the latest antibiotics by enthusiastic young doctors'.²⁴ When her Bill was rejected, she was inundated with letters from people with distressing stories about 'what they regarded as the cruel prolongation of the lives of their incurably ill friends and relatives by the increasing ingenuity of modern medicine'.²⁵

After this failure, she declared she did not have the energy to try again,²⁶ but she did, in fact, work with a barrister and with the VES two years later to draft a further Bill, which was to be called the Suspension of Medical Treatment Bill. It seems that there was a disagreement about the wording, which in all such legislation was complex, and the Bill never saw the light of day.²⁷ Attempts to reform the law in Britain on assisted dying were blocked by various episodes of adverse publicity in the late 1970s and early 1980s: the British journalist Derek Humphry published a much-discussed book called *Jean's Way* about his wife's choice to end her life with his help in the terminal stages of breast cancer; in 1981, two of the VES's workers, Nicholas Reed and Mark Lyons, were tried and imprisoned for a number of cases of assisting people to commit suicide (Lyons was also charged with a case of technical murder). Barbara wrote a column in *The Sunday Times* about the Humphry case,²⁸ and she corresponded with Reed during his two and a half years in prison. He had come to see her in High Barn in 1978 to discuss the wording of a possible new Bill;²⁹ in prison, he read a couple of her books on penal policy and discussed her ideas with other inmates.³⁰ The VES, temporarily renamed Exit, had adopted Barbara Wootton's term, and produced a contentious *Guide to Self-Deliverance*. In 1982, the Attorney-General deemed the *Guide* in contravention of the 1961 Suicide Act and ruled that distribution should stop.³¹

To her friend Shena Simon, Barbara had expressed the opinion in 1966 that she did not expect to have a very long life – none of her family had got past eighty, so whatever life remained to her was of the nature of an epilogue, and she would be content if it proved to be a short one.³² In the event, it was a long one, twenty years of both old and new diversions which continued well into her late eighties. For example, in 1982, she arranged for a group of Andy Croft's WEA students to tour the House of Lords; Croft and she had stayed in touch after he had incorporated her novel *London's Burning* in his review of 1930s utopian fiction. He was still trying to

find a publisher who would produce a new edition of her book.³³ She took up the issue of war service and university pensions, challenging the regulation that for war service to count towards a university pension, the job needed to have been started before 30 June 1950 – far too early for some service personnel who might not have completed their undergraduate degrees until then.³⁴ The same year, she subscribed to a new initiative, to save the Regent's Park site of Bedford College from extinction; the college was merging with Royal Holloway College out in Egham, Surrey, and a campaign was mounted to keep hold of the Regent's Park site as a continuing base for a separate Bedford College identity. Barbara was a member of a forty-strong committee of dons, governors, students, and ex-students, which ultimately failed in holding on to the site.³⁵ In 1984, she signed a letter to *The Guardian* launching the 'Liberty Campaign' of the National Council for Civil Liberties; it had been fifty years since the formation of that organization, yet the need for a pressure group to defend civil rights remained frighteningly acute.³⁶ The following year, she acted as a referee for an research grant application to the Economic and Social Research Council by the sociologist and poverty campaigner Peter Townsend (unfortunately, he failed to get it).³⁷ Around the same time, sociologist Bob Pinker asked her to speak at a big Community Care conference. 'She said, "Oh, I'll do it for you, Bob," but she said they must send a car to Abinger, and "they must take me back and I can only speak for twenty minutes because after that I'll run out of energy".' (She was eighty-eight.) Apparently, she put on an absolutely bravura performance.³⁸ She was quite herself, too, in the two television interviews she did in 1984, one with MP Ann Clwyd, 'Women of our Century',³⁹ and the other a rather gruelling exposure to three journalists in 'Face the Press'.⁴⁰ There is no diminution of her radicalism in her last publications, just an accelerated impatience with political resistance to what are obviously (her) sound and sensible ideas. In 1982, criminologist Philip Bean asked Barbara to write a chapter in a book with a title of which she approved, *In Defence of Welfare*. She agreed, and he was very grateful, as other potential authors had backed off with a variety of lame excuses now Mrs Thatcher was in office, afraid of what standing up to her policies might do to them. 'But Lady B didn't care. She was fireproof, wasn't she?'⁴¹ Barbara's chapter, 'The Moral Basis of the Welfare State', returned to the values of altruism and equality celebrated by the welfare state's founders, dismissed some contemporary (mostly economic) alternative proposals as 'utterly contemptible', and ended with the plan she had already put forward many times before that 'the simplest method of establishing a universal standard of civilized living would be to make a regular welfare payment from the tax revenues to every citizen', regardless of personal circumstances. It was a remote dream, but then someone of her age had witnessed many instances of utopian dreams becoming accepted commonplaces.⁴²

The Thatcher years were a hostile climate for radical legislation. In the winter of 1985, Lord Jenkins, one of the Vice-Presidents of the VES, sent Barbara a copy of yet another new Bill to amend the Suicide Act.⁴³ This one tried a different tack, of highlighting the absurdity that aiding suicide was still an offence, whereas suicide itself was not. Introducing the Bill in the House, he justified its relative timidity on the grounds that bolder souls in the past, such as 'my good and noble friend Lady Wootton' had tried something braver and had failed.⁴⁴ The eighty-eight-year-old Baroness was present on this occasion, and she voted, though she did not speak. The last time she spoke in the House of Lords was on 4 July 1985, in the debate about the Education (Corporal Punishment) Bill. This aimed to abolish corporal punishment in schools and other institutions, and was a cause she had championed throughout her life. Baroness David, speaking in its support, reminded their Lordships of Barbara Wootton's Protection of Minors Bill in 1973, of which the current Bill was the direct descendant.⁴⁵ Barbara was an active supporter of this renewed attempt to stop adults beating children, and she had corresponded with Peter Newell at the Children's Legal Centre about strategies for opposing the Bill which they regarded as deficient in allowing parents to opt out.⁴⁶ In her last House of Lords speech, she recalled her visit to Russia all those years ago, when the children had greeted them with the words, 'So you come from Britain, where they beat the children?'. This had, she said, 'remained a stain and a mark of guilt on my mind ever since...I carry this sort of mark of the devil about with me. And so do all of you who are equally to blame!'⁴⁷ The Bill was finally passed in the House of Commons in the summer of 1986 by one vote, a result aided by the event of a royal wedding in the capital which caused traffic congestion and delayed several pro-caning Tory MPs.⁴⁸

'Her work was her life.'⁴⁹ Although she continued to be busy, by the early 1980s, it was obvious to Barbara that not only the BBC but other people were beginning to drop her from their radars: there were fewer and fewer invitations to speak or write. She was not going to let them get away with it easily. Aged eighty-four, she wrote to Anthony Howard at *The Listener* anticipating his imminent departure for *The Observer* to canvass the possibility of him publishing her in his new journalistic home if she had an idea worth writing about, 'which does still happen now and then'. She complained that the BBC considered her senile: both David Jacobs and Brian Redhead had dropped her from their regular programmes in 'a most discourteous manner'.⁵⁰ She took up the cudgels again with Robin Day, writing in late 1981 to express her delight at the return of 'Question Time', and to let him know that 'a wicked thought crossed my mind. I fully appreciate that you do not want to be cluttered up with "regulars" or old stagers; but is there any chance that if you have a vacancy on Thursday April 15, you might give me

a birthday treat, as I should reach the age of 85 on the previous day? That would be greatly appreciated.’⁵¹

Happily, Robin Day was delighted by her ‘wicked’ thought, although he did recall a TV discussion they had had about fifteen years before in which she had said she did not believe in ‘wickedness’.⁵² She took part in ‘Question Time’ on 18 March 1982, a few weeks before her birthday. Audrey Bradley, who worked with Robin Day on the programme, advised her through their mutual neighbour, Bridget Trotter, what to wear. ‘She did look absolutely gorgeous in a navy-and-white dress with white hair ... and I said to the floor manager, “Could you please give Baroness Wootton plenty of time because she’s quite slow on her feet ...” I took her onto the platform. There were cables everywhere, she came in on my arm and the audience just clapped and she said, “What are they clapping for, dear?” Because she looked so gorgeous... She was sitting next to Ken Livingstone and I said to Ken, “Please look after her”, and he did. And in the Green Room afterwards they had some champagne, because it was nearly her birthday. And he said to her across the room in front of everybody, “What are you going to do for your ninetieth birthday, Barbara?” “Oh, I’m going to have a party”, she said, and he said, “Well, I hope you’ll ask me to your party,” and she said, “Well, young man, you have to have done something really important to be asked to my ninetieth birthday”.’⁵³

The tidal wave of energy that had carried her through so many important spheres and phases of public policy was beginning to dry up. Gradually, work was reduced to attending the House of Lords, dealing with correspondence, a scattering of public events, and a trickle of publications. Abinger was a quiet place, and Barbara Wootton had been lonely there now for more than twenty years without Barbara Kyle. People had expected her to sell High Barn when Barbara Kyle died, but why would she want to do that?⁵⁴ She went on living there simply, doing her own housework, sometimes crying despairingly that she was living in a sea of papers.⁵⁵ She had no possessions of any material value, just the books and the papers: ‘The less you have the less likely you are to be burgled’, she would say. ‘They can peep in the window and see that I’m not worth burgling.’⁵⁶ She had given up driving after a late night car crash sometime in the early 1970s, an incident which demonstrated the neighbourliness that was a positive aspect of living in rural Surrey. She had been on her way back from a dinner party when she crashed into the gateposts outside the house where the Bradleys lived. Her car was on its side. Don Bradley came out and managed to extract her through the window with a stepladder. He walked her gently home, called the doctor and gave her a brandy, so, by the time the police came, the presence of alcohol in her bloodstream would have been quite expected.⁵⁷ There had been the donkeys, but, by the late 1970s, these had gone: the old man

who fed them had died and Barbara could not manage to feed them every day, so 'they had to go to their eternal rest... It was a great sorrow'.⁵⁸

Yet there were several new friendships, all noticeably attractive men who were considerably younger than her. Campbell Adamson and Barbara Wootton met on the radio programme 'Any Questions?', discussing incomes policy in 1975. He was a New-Labour-style businessman with a background in the steel industry, best known for his directorship of the Confederation of British Industries at a difficult time for the Labour Party and the trade unions in the early 1970s; later, he became Chairman of the Abbey National Building Society, and oversaw its transformation into a bank as a model followed by many others. In the late 1970s, Campbell Adamson set up various initiatives in the field of family policy in which he involved Barbara – a Working Party on the Family, a Study Commission on the Family, and then, in 1980, the Family Policy Studies Centre, an independent body supported by the Leverhulme Trust to study the social effects of marital breakdown.⁵⁹ It was Barbara who directed the progression of these initiatives, since Adamson was ignorant about research and social studies, and so relied on her advice.⁶⁰ Like Barbara, he had read economics at Cambridge, though not at the same time – he was twenty-five years younger than her; he remembered his father, John Adamson, speaking highly of her when they had both been Governors of the BBC.⁶¹

The Labour MP Malcolm Wicks first met Barbara when she was co-opted by Campbell to interview candidates for the post of Research Director / Secretary of the Study Commission on the Family in 1978: 'She struck me as a very eminent old lady, if I can use that term ... She was certainly very sharp, intellectually very strong, she asked good questions ... I had put together a cv to attach to my application and I'd totally forgotten to put down that I'd got a degree and she pointed this out, which shows she'd read the papers. "I assume you've got a degree." Oh God, I've left it off, why should they appoint me to run this body? I remember her always – well, she may have missed the odd one – assiduously attending all the meetings.' When Malcolm later introduced his wife Maggie to her, Barbara, who hated Maggie Thatcher, said, 'You can't call her Maggie, call her Margaret'. The only two people Barbara hated (apart from her mother) were Maggie Thatcher and William Beveridge's wife Janet – according to her, they were both bullies.⁶² Thatcher's conviction of her own infallibility reminded Barbara of the same infelicitous trait in Beatrice Webb.⁶³ However, Thatcher did have some admirable characteristics: her mental and physical courage, and her ability to take decisions quickly (although sometimes *too* quickly and without enough consultation).⁶⁴ Frank Field pointed out the considerable similarities between the personae of Barbara Wootton and Margaret Thatcher. Both had very

secure handbags which they plonked down, and both of them, facing a difficult audience, made it clear that they were not going to give an inch.⁶⁵

In Barbara's handbag was a photograph of Campbell Adamson.⁶⁶ Her connection with Campbell was an attraction of like minds, but it was also for her a relationship of some emotional significance. According to Campbell's second wife, Mimi, Barbara regarded Campbell as a son – a son and a boyfriend. He was someone who meant a great deal to her, but he was also a member of the family of friends she had chosen, rather than the one into which she had been born. Mimi understood this perfectly. In Barbara's later years, the Adamsons took Barbara out to dinner every other week. Either Barbara would stay with them, or she would be driven back to Abinger afterwards.⁶⁷ Her driver was a handsome young man called Alan Bryant. For more than ten years, Alan drove her three days a week to London when the House was sitting. She stole Alan from Jack (Lord) Wolfenden, who lived in the village of Westcott nearby, after she scared herself with the late night car crash. Alan and his wife Anne lived with their two young children in a modest house in Westcott, and Barbara became very fond of them: she loved being invited to their house, and they took the children up to tea at High Barn.⁶⁸ This was the family life from which she had been parted by Jack Wootton's death, and by her estrangement from her own family. One famous winter night, Alan brought Barbara back to Abinger from the House of Lords but was unable to get the car up the hill through the snow, so she stayed the night with the Bryants. Anne Bryant remembers: 'There was no snobbery about it – I kept thinking I ought to turf one of the kids out [of their bedrooms] but she said, "No, no, I'll be quite happy", and she parked herself here [on the sofa]. She was one of the loveliest people... she absolutely adored Alan, no doubt about it.' On a normal day, Alan would get Barbara back to High Barn by about 9 p.m., and then he would make sure she was comfortable before leaving: 'I'd put her tea on. She only wanted simple things. Soup. I'd sit her down and get her eating.' Alan took Barbara shopping every Friday and also took her to have her hair done.⁶⁹

It would have been cheaper to have taken the train from Dorking to London to get to the House, but, as she was developing various infirmities, and she was still Deputy Speaker, Frank Field took her to see the Clerk of the Parliaments, who agreed that Alan driving her was a legitimate expense.⁷⁰ It did not help that the fast train service to London had been cut in 1978, and, in the winter, passengers like Barbara had to sit and shiver in the waiting room in front of a gas fire choked with dirt; she had written to Peter Parker, the Chairman of British Rail, about it.⁷¹ She did not see why the travelling public had to shiver, and had once asked a question in the House about the Government's failure to ensure an adequate level

of heat on trains when technical difficulties did not prevent travel to the moon, and had got a 'not very warming' answer.⁷²

The relationship with Frank Field was another important strand in Barbara's life in these last years. He met Barbara at an LSE lecture in the early 1970s, after which Peter Townsend introduced them to each other properly. Frank and Barbara used to meet every other week for tea in the Lords; she would carefully note down if it were her turn to pay or Frank's. Barbara's concern for monetary equality was reflected in Frank Field's editorship of *The Wealth Report* in 1979, a book he dedicated to Barbara 'with affection and gratitude for a lifetime's service to the cause of greater equality'.⁷³ She talked to Frank, not necessarily about her innermost feelings, but about some of the things that still concerned her: the tragedy of her brief life with Jack Wootton; her thwarted desire for children; and about politics, of course. She puzzled over what to do about High Barn. Not only was she alone there, but the house was quite remote from its neighbours. 'She said, "I've been thinking very carefully, Frank," – this must be some years before she died – "the only person I could live with is you. Would you come down to High Barn?" And I said, "Barbara it's impossible, I go up to Birkenhead every weekend, I've got this and all the rest of it, but Barbara you can come and share my flat." And she looked at me and she said, "Typically selfish!".' Frank went to see her in High Barn, taking food from Marks & Spencer, partly to save her the trouble of preparing a meal, but partly because her standards of hygiene were falling now her sight was not what it had once been.⁷⁴

Barbara's parsimony over the tea bill convinced Frank that she was not very well off. So he had got her a grant from the Rowntree Trust: 'The opposition spokesman would have an assistant to help them mug up the facts so they'd be more effective against the Government, and I argued that the most distinguished person in public life was Barbara, and that she should have one.'⁷⁵ Rowntree gave her £250 a year towards secretarial and research help; in 1983, this was increased to £1,500 a year. It was an unconditional award for any purpose Barbara thought fit, and not subject to any accounting to the Trust in recognition of the 'great work which you have done over so many years'.⁷⁶ Barbara was very grateful, especially when in the summer of 1975 she fell on a marble floor in Italy and broke her right wrist. The grant enabled her to consider investing in a tape recorder, and also to make more use of Vera – though in fact Vera was not paid: 'I did it for love. We argued but I won.'⁷⁷

The faithful and most wonderful Vera was becoming increasingly important as the mainstay of Barbara's last years: she who had carried on beyond the time of *Social Science and Social Pathology* to become Barbara's typist, copy editor, friend, and personal assistant. All Barbara's letters in her last years were typed by Vera, who described herself in various different ways – as Barbara's 'personal assistant'⁷⁸ or

just ‘an old friend who helps with letters’.⁷⁹ The routine went like this: ‘She would ring me up and, say, perhaps she’d just done this review or she’d done this article, and I’d say, “Ok I’ll pick it up on my way to work in the morning”. I’d go early, about half past six, and get to Abinger, and she’d give me her piece – we never trusted the post, you see – and I would take it home and that evening I would type it and then the next morning I’d go to work again and then at lunchtime I’d go to the House of Lords and she’d be in the guest room waiting.’⁸⁰ Barbara had also engaged Vera as a chauffeuse at the beginning and end of holidays: Vera not only had to fill Barbara in when she returned on anything that had happened politically, but she also had to undertake difficult traffic manoeuvres, such as navigating her way in and out of Southampton Docks.⁸¹ And then Vera went to High Barn every other Sunday – the Sundays when Barbara and Dorothy Russell were not playing Scrabble. The purpose was gardening. Vera had to be there on the dot at ten. ‘It was always the same. At a quarter to one, she would say “I’m going in now... and you come in at 1 o’clock”. It was always exactly the same lunch, chicken and peas.’ After a post-lunch session in the garden, Barbara would have a bath upstairs and Vera one downstairs. At six o’clock, the bar opened. Some Sunday evenings, Vera would drive her to see the Adamsons or her friends the Hookways in Twickenham. Otherwise, ‘There was a window in her door and I would walk out of the door and she’d stand there, I’d see this serious sad face looking through the window and it wasn’t easy’.⁸² Vera said she would have done anything for Barbara. But the last thing Barbara wanted was the only thing she felt unable to do. ‘When she knew she was failing, before she went into the nursing home, she kept saying she wanted me to go and live there and look after her. I couldn’t do it. I knew I couldn’t do it.’⁸³ Vera was close to sixty, and already quite disabled with osteoarthritis – she needed sticks to walk with – and Barbara, who had never been very physically active, and who enjoyed her food and drink, had put on a considerable amount of weight. She would be too heavy for Vera to lift if she fell. Vera had other commitments: two of her close friends were dying. There was also the concern that, with a live-in carer, the help of neighbours would drop away.

On Christmas Day 1982, Barbara wrote to Campbell and Mimi to say that she was awaiting her escort to the first of four local outings to celebrate her eighty-sixth Christmas: ‘I am wearing a claret-coloured trouser suit with a multi-coloured blouse, warm and cosy and nice and commodious, for which, after much labour, you are responsible. The effect is, I think, quite smart, but you experts shall judge on a suitable occasion. Meanwhile many thanks indeed for it, and specially to Mimi for her extra trouble.’⁸⁴ Barbara was not renowned for her dress sense. O.R. McGregor’s son, Ross McGregor, recalls as a young man being exposed to some

very entertaining dinners when his father invited Barbara together with W.J.H. (Jack) Sprott from Nottingham, who was a Visiting Lecturer at Bedford College. Jack Sprott was a sociologist, an intimate of Lytton Strachey and of E.M. Forster, and probably Keynes' last male lover, a member of the Bloomsbury group who knew him as 'Sebastian'.⁸⁵ Ross remembers Sprott and Barbara together: 'There was a wonderful double act, a pure bit of fun... they had some shared characteristics, one of which, I don't think it was an unfriendly relationship, but the pair of them used to spar. She loved it, so did Jack... And there was one wonderful evening – they both had a profound love of gin – we used to put a bottle of gin and some tonic by each of their beds before dinner... if I had a quid for every time I carried Jack or Barbara or both of them upstairs to bed... They fell to having a row about something one night – I wish I could recall the whole of the conversation – as usual by that time of the night some considerable amount of wine had been taken, but they'd been battling away at something all evening, and Jack had, I think, lost on points, and there was a long pause, and he took a swig of his wine and he just leant across the table, "Barbara, my dear, where *do* you buy your frocks?" Barbara was gobsmacked, absolutely no comeback.'⁸⁶

There was Frank, and there was Campbell, and the dashing Alan with the perfect family, and there was also Tony Gould, the writer who was Reviews Editor of *New Society*, the journal to which Barbara contributed many pieces over the twenty-six years of its life before it merged with the *New Statesman*. Tony and Barbara met through *New Society*, and they found they had a lot to talk about: writing, politics, personal relationships. They took to meeting regularly for lunch in the House of Lords. He was an important confidante, and she probably performed the same role for him. The other side of her meanness with money was her generosity in offering to lend or give him some when he was in difficulty – an offer he refused.⁸⁷ She had, he said, a definite eye for younger men. There was a clear quality of sexual flirtatiousness on her side of the relationship. He gave her novels to read, and Philip Larkin's poems: 'I read the two of the latter that you had recommended,' she wrote to him, 'and liked the fucking one very much. The aged one I found rather grisly.'⁸⁸ Once Tony took his wife and six-year-old son to visit her at High Barn. They had a pleasant time, but the next day Tony had an irate call from Barbara: her alarm clock had gone off in the middle of the night, obviously because his son had fiddled with it when he was sent up to her bedroom to watch television. But she was old, and Tony forgave her.⁸⁹

There was also 'Mac', O.R. McGregor, whose staunch friendship dated back to the 1940s when Barbara had hired him as a young man to teach one of her tutorial classes in Romford.⁹⁰ Under her patronage, McGregor proceeded to a professorship

at Bedford College and to the House of Lords. Among the many interests they had in common was the freedom of the press: Barbara was a member of the first Royal Commission on the Press in 1947, and McGregor chaired the third in the 1970s. As Barbara aged and acquired various disabilities, Mac assumed a practical role in her life, giving advice and helping to make decisions, and generally acting as a backup to Vera.

She went on holiday until 1983: several times to an old haunt, Malcesine on the eastern shore of Lake Garda in Italy, usually with Margaret Hetherington, her relative Arthur's wife, who had become a regular holiday companion since Barbara Kyle's death. On one occasion, it seemed that Margaret was second choice, replacing Frank Field: Barbara had to change the name on the second ticket at the last minute from 'Frank Field MP' to 'Lady Hetherington'.⁹¹ Margaret's daughter, Ann Ashford, described these holidays the two women took together: one sat and painted, the other (Barbara) sat and read. (Margaret once did a rather good painting of Barbara.) They enjoyed good Italian food, with wine and laughter. Barbara 'thought that taking a nap after lunch was absolutely wicked. She never did it. You did not waste time by doing anything as indolent as having a nap. She never had a nap on holiday with mother. She would go to sleep over the book, and then she woke up and it had never happened.'⁹² Barbara's Italian holiday in 1982 was not a successful trip, due to the weather and transport difficulties, as she confided to Lenore Goodings at the feminist publishing house Virago, who invited her to give a lecture to mark the Virago publication of the first Beatrice Webb Diary. Barbara accepted, but then wrote to say she would not be able to do it: she had been very unwell for several months with circulatory problems affecting her legs and feet, problems which were now aggravated by incipient arthritis.⁹³

But the illusion that travel would be therapeutic was long-lived. In 1983, she asked Alan, her driver, if he would go on a cruise to Norway with her. Alan declined; she asked her Surrey neighbours, the Trotters. Bridget was a rotten sailor, so David Trotter, who had been in the Merchant Navy and who loved the sea, accompanied Barbara on the coastal voyage from Bergen to Kirkenes: 2,500 miles in eleven days from the south to the north of Norway. They bought drink on the plane to Bergen to reduce costs on the boat. Barbara paid for David's ticket because the Trotters had been victims of the Lloyds insurance fiasco, and she booked a rather classier cabin for herself than for him. They went right round the North Cape, but they missed the aurora borealis because it was the wrong time of year. David did his job well; he cosseted Barbara, always seeing her down to her cabin in the evening.⁹⁴

For most of her life, she had enjoyed splendid health. After the episode of acute tonsillitis that had ended her career as a classical scholar in 1918, there is hardly a

trace of her ever being ill in the records that are left. She did have some operation in a Harley Street clinic in 1948; Ernest Gowers, with whom she was working on the Shop Hours Committee, wrote to commiserate.⁹⁵ The broken wrist she acquired when she was seventy-eight mended, but she was left with some permanent residual dysfunction in the fingers of her right hand.⁹⁶ She was knocked down by a car in London when she was eighty-one, but she picked herself up and was quite alright after resting for a while in a local shop.⁹⁷ But from about 1982, when she was eighty-five, references to various infirmities multiply. She complained she was getting tired, though she *was* trying to carry out a programme 'before which many people would quail at 40'.⁹⁸ When the Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University, a place with one enormous asset – its location at the end of an underground line – invited her to lunch to discuss war service and the university pension scheme, she objected that she was too old and not mobile enough.⁹⁹ To one correspondent, Lee McIntyre, in Portland, Oregon, who was writing a PhD on his own thoughts about social science which were closely modelled on Barbara's *Testament*, she said in the summer of 1983 that she was suffering from 'senile degeneration of this and that' – which accounted for her failure to produce any recent published work. There was no concealing the fact that she had become a grumpy old woman: would he please remember to put his address on every letter if he wanted a reply – she kept her files upstairs but did her correspondence downstairs, and being 'partially disabled' wanted to keep the journeys on the stairs to a minimum?¹⁰⁰ Actually, she had always been quite grumpy – punctilious, attentive to the desirability of correct grammar, spelling, referencing and behaviour, and a keen recorder of any misrepresentations of her position. She wrote many letters about all this, though the habit did intensify in her later years. 'In the various notices about myself which you have produced', she reprimanded the BBC in 1984 when they were preparing material for her contribution to the programme and the book, *Women of Our Century*, 'there is a remarkable collection of untrue statements. You credited me with two extra weeks of effective marriage to Jack Wootton which I could well have done with. You also robbed me of three years in age at the time of that marriage ... You also perpetuated the falsehood that I supported the legalisation of cannabis during the sixties ... It would seem that accuracy is not a virtue highly regarded by the Corporation's employees.'¹⁰¹ The BBC apologized, and Lee McIntyre was able to recover from the black mark against him. When he inquired about her health in 1985, she informed him that her various organs and limbs did not function as they used to. 'Notably I fear that my brain is inclined to think that it has been over-taxed, and resents my attempting new projects.'¹⁰² She was, simply, 'very old and very tired'.¹⁰³ At eighty-eight, she was still going to the House of Lords two or three days a week, though increasingly Alan

would get her there in time for lunch and then she would 'totter into the chamber and go to sleep'.¹⁰⁴ In 1984, the House of Lords had presented her with a walking stick carved by a craftsman from wood obtained from Mickelham Downs, near Box Hill in Surrey.¹⁰⁵ Her last recorded attendance at the House was on 21 October 1985.

This was the year, 1985, when her health took an abrupt downward turn. The honorary degree ceremony planned in Cambridge that summer worried her. She wrote to the Vice-Chancellor, saying she was 'rather seriously disabled' and only able to walk a few steps at a time slowly. She could manage steps or stairs if there was a rail, or a friendly arm, but she would not be able to take part in any formal procession. They reassured her that they would cope with her disability, quoting the example of another honorary graduand who had managed to collect his degree earlier in the year despite being both infirm and blind.¹⁰⁶ In the event, her visit to Cambridge was 'in every way thoroughly enjoyable and by no means over-exhausting'.¹⁰⁷ But something in particular happened to her that summer. She told Frank about it in one of their tea encounters: 'She said, "Oh, a funny thing happened to me at the weekend, Frank. I heard part of my brain collapsing and running past my ear as though it was water".'¹⁰⁸ Mac recalled her saying: 'I felt a piece of my mind drop off. Where do you think it went?'¹⁰⁹ His son Ross remembers picking up a telephone call from Barbara: 'I said, "How are you Barbara, long time no see", and she said, "Well, I'm not terribly happy," she said, "The trouble is I'm going mad"... And I said, "Barbara, how terribly tiresome for you". And she said, "Thank God, you said that. You're absolutely right. Everyone else makes these platitudinous statements ... The trouble is that in my lucid periods I know I'm mad, but then I go mad."'¹¹⁰

What had happened was probably a small stroke. This was a diagnosis Barbara herself offered in a letter to Tony Gould.¹¹¹ A stroke would have caused symptoms similar to those of Alzheimer's or senile dementia. The result was that she was forced to recognize that she was now fighting against the odds. She was 'doing her best', but 'working against great difficulties'; she was 'not at all well, mentally or physically,' and was 'liable to devastating gaps in memory which obstruct progress'.¹¹² She wrote to Peter Townsend and complained that she was forgetting things, so he and Jean (Baroness Corston) went to see her. Peter made her scrambled eggs and she said his scrambled eggs were wonderful. She said to Jean, 'I wish I could have you to look after me. I need somebody to look after me'.¹¹³ There was something very plaintive and vulnerable about these requests.

She went to the House less and less, and then it got to the point where she hardly went at all. Despite having suggested resignation at least twice in the early 1980s – an offer their Lordships reputedly refused¹¹⁴ – sometime in the summer

of 1985 Barbara did give up her role as Deputy Speaker. According to her, she succeeded in resigning; the other version of events is that their Lordships removed her from office. Frank Field recalls Barbara telephoning him in some distress; he went down to High Barn to spend time with her.¹¹⁵ The Private Secretary to the Chairman of Committees, Michael Pownall, who was responsible for the rota of Deputy Speakers, arranged with the Chairman of Committees, Lord Aberdare, an informal leaving party. It was a moving and sad occasion which persuaded Barbara it was time to go.¹¹⁶ At the meeting of Deputies in the House on 14 October 1985, Lord Aberdare announced that Baroness Wootton would be no longer be one of them.¹¹⁷ He wrote to her afterwards:

Dear Barbara

I informed the weekly meeting of Deputy Speakers and Chairmen of your decision to resign and they all wished me to tell you how very sorry they were to hear the news and to send you their very best wishes.

I am sure that you have made the right decision for health reasons but we shall all miss you very much. You have not only been one of our most efficient members but you have been wonderfully conscientious in attending meetings and carrying out duties on the Woolsack and in the Chair.

Thank you ever so much for all your help over so many years.¹¹⁸

In 1981 she had said to a journalist, 'If I was to give up the Lords, what should I do? I should sit here and die'.¹¹⁹ Living on her own became ever more difficult. She worried about safety. She slept with a knife under her pillow and a rope coiled in her bed in case of fire (so she could climb out of the window).¹²⁰ There were repeated episodes of her telephoning the police and complaining there was someone in the house, or ringing friends or neighbours in the middle of the night. Bridget Trotter recalls: 'She'd ring up and forget who she was ringing up and you would hear this heavy breathing, which was slightly alarming, and I suddenly twigged, and I'd say, "Is that you, Barbara?" We were quite bothered about her being on her own.' The Trotters used to ring up every few days to make sure she was alright. Barbara took to phoning Alan first if she needed anything; once it was because she was unable to get herself out of the bath.¹²¹ Tony Gould remembers her phoning and saying, 'I can't remember whether I've had breakfast or not'.¹²² In the summer of 1986, she was receiving the help of Meals on Wheels.¹²³ Friends and neighbours tried to persuade her to accept living-in help. Barbara's GP arranged one day for a 'country cousin' – someone who would live in and help with domestic and personal care –

but Barbara was resistant. Vera, who arrived while this was going on, managed to get Barbara to agree to try it. But in the middle of the night Barbara wandered downstairs, and the country cousin appeared, and Barbara attacked her with her walking stick, and that was the end of that.¹²⁴ The stick was called into action on another occasion, when Barbara started accusing Alan of something she said he had done. The police were called. It was, said the criminologist Philip Bean, 'one of the deepest ironies of them all ... the sergeant said she needed a social worker ... she was accusing the chauffeur and trying to hit him with a stick ... and I think they tried to restrain her, and the sergeant said she should have a social worker under the old Section 136 of the Mental Health Act.' But of course calling in a social worker could never be allowed, not after that chapter in *Social Science and Social Pathology*.¹²⁵

In the autumn of 1985, Barbara went into hospital. Neil Kinnock, then Leader of the Opposition, wrote to urge her to find somewhere to live in Dorking when she came out, somewhere where other people could provide meals and see that she was all right. This would mean that she would be able to get back to the Lords. 'Few people have made the contribution you have to improving our country and I look forward to seeing you around again attending to the business of the Other Place.'¹²⁶ It was a warm letter, and certainly indicative of Barbara's importance to the political process at a time when Thatcher's second period of office was set on a relentless programme of de-nationalization, attacking the power of the trade unions, and dismantling the health and welfare services. Barbara herself very much wanted to survive Thatcher's ruinous administrations, but in the end she was the one who went first. She never did what Kinnock suggested; instead, she went to convalesce in a nursing home, and in the nursing home she fell and fractured her hip, which meant another hospital stay and surgery for the hip. In December 1985, she wrote to her friends from Dorking Hospital, a shaky handwritten Christmas greeting: 'The scenery is fine, but hospital wards do not compete with HL [the House of Lords]: so hope springs eternal'.¹²⁷

Holmesdale Park residential home in Nutfield, Surrey, was built in the 1880s and had enjoyed a varied career as an adjunct of Guy's Hospital and then a police training establishment before opening its doors in 1980 to people like Barbara who were no longer able to care for themselves. It was a large solid house in wonderful grounds, about nine miles from Abinger. There were thirty-six residents and sixty-two nursing beds. Barbara had a room on the ground floor. The decision to move her into Holmesdale was not one she was party to; Bridget Trotter and Barbara's GP had taken it.¹²⁸ At first, it was a temporary arrangement, but quite soon she began reluctantly to accept that it was likely to become her permanent home. She had a set of sticky labels printed with her name and the address and telephone

number of the nursing home which she attached to House of Lords notepaper. In April 1986, she wrote to McGregor: 'This is almost certain to become a life sentence ... I am necessarily fixed here for as long as I can afford it and am alive to pay the bills'. As with a Christmas note she wrote to friends, she was effusive in her appreciation of his friendship and urged him to visit as much as possible: seeing him would be 'a wonderful oasis in an otherwise dreary existence'.¹²⁹ Barbara, a feisty critic of many institutions over the course of her life, seems to have been relatively satisfied with the physical care provided at Holmesdale. To her friends in New York, the Lekachmans, she reported she was 'reasonably housed and fed'.¹³⁰ 'There are some difficulties in the arrangements, but on the whole the system is working reasonably well', she told Florrie Wright; she would stay at Holmesdale largely because she could not think of any accommodation that would suit her better.¹³¹ To Vera Delf, who had saved her from scalding in China, she commented that, 'If one has to be in an institution (which is I think at present my fate) it is better to be in a good one than a bad one'.¹³² When she first went to Holmesdale Park, she was sufficiently *compos mentis* to interrogate the other residents, and she was amazed to find that almost everyone except her had been in service. Frank Field explained why: the social security rules had changed, with the result that many people could now get the full cost of residential care covered, so the rich had tipped all their elderly servants out into residential care.¹³³

She never returned to live at High Barn again. The house which had meant so much to her was put on the market in August 1986 and sold quickly the same month. Sometime before this, Barbara had asked Vera if she would live there if she left it to her, but Vera had said it would be like living with a ghost.¹³⁴ Its contents were given to Bridget Trotter, who had two daughters on the verge of setting up homes. Frank was asked if there was anything he wanted: he chose the dark picture that hung over the mantelshelf. It turned out to be by Henry Lamb, a follower of Augustus John and a relative of Lord Longford, so there might have been something worth burgling the house for, after all.¹³⁵

Even after her removal to Holmesdale Park, the world continued to behave as though the eminent Baroness Wootton would live forever. Janusz Stechley of the Orchestra of the World wanted her as a Patron; so did the International Benthamite Society; and the Bentham Club at University College in London, of which she was a past President, instated her as an Honorary Fellow. The Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign asked her to become a Patron; and in 1987 the International Campaign for Peace and Democracy in Iraq and Iran, of which she was already a sponsor, requested Barbara's attendance at a World Congress in Moscow. Vera Seal wrote politely to explain that a ninety-year-old could hardly undertake such

expeditions.¹³⁶ An invitation with a more colourful background arrived in January 1987 from one Michael Luvaglio. He ran a charity for disabled people called Share, and, like all the others, wanted Barbara on his notepaper as Patron, but he also wished to thank her for all the support she had given him during his long years in prison.¹³⁷ In a high-profile case which was commemorated in the film *Get Carter* starring Michael Caine, Luvaglio had been sentenced in 1967 for shooting the one-armed bandit cash collector Angus Shibbert. It was a seamy story set in the shadowy world of gaming machines and night clubs in the north of England, and involving the notorious Kray twins; a number of notable people, including Barbara Wootton, had campaigned to reclassify Luvaglio's sentence as a miscarriage of justice.¹³⁸ Her role in the Luvaglio case was typical of her tendency to pay personal attention to the experiences behind public causes.

During her unenviable decline, various of Barbara's colleagues and friends in the House of Lords wrote or visited, or spoke in the House to wish her well. In the summer of 1987, Lord Longford referred to her in a debate about the Criminal Justice Bill: 'No individual has done so much for penal reform in our time in the domain of policy as has the noble Baroness, Lady Wootton ... She has a wonderful record and my thoughts go out to her at this moment because she has not been well for some time'.¹³⁹ Baroness Jean Trumpington sent her a postcard from Strasbourg: 'We miss you in the House of Lords, Mother dear'.¹⁴⁰ Baroness Lucy Faithfull wrote warmly to say how much she personally missed her;¹⁴¹ and Baroness Joan Vickers told her that 'the Ladies Room does not seem the same without you', and to offer to send her a daily Hansard.¹⁴² It was an offer Barbara turned down – she was quite happy to have a rest from Hansard.¹⁴³ Lord Harmar Nicholls dispatched a slightly curious note to complain that her 'absence from the "corridors" has taken all the flavour out of my own attendances. Make sure you obey this "whip" in the New Year. I am so happy to hear you are making excellent progress – so until we next meet please accept my love and good wishes for Christmas. Yours ever Harmar (your corridor boyfriend)'.¹⁴⁴ Lord Walston's 'long-smouldering intention' of writing to her was 'fanned into flame by a Bill in their Lordships on Donkeys. Do you still retain a love for them?'¹⁴⁵ Lord Aberdare kept her informed of progress on the attempt, which Barbara had spearheaded, to change the laws about who could marry whom: 'I am in a welter of negotiation on those Marriage Enabling Bills, in which you were so interested. We have Lord Merton's Bill now which has Church support to permit "Step" marriages, but not "In-law" ones. But we have two Personal Bills for the "In-law" sort! ... We miss your wise counsel.'¹⁴⁶

Although she had given up being Deputy Speaker, she had absolutely not given up the idea of returning to the House. In the spring of 1986, she wrote to Neil

Kinnock to say so,¹⁴⁷ and to Lord Elwyn Jones, Speaker of the House of Lords: 'I cannot accurately forecast when I may be able to contribute help in dealing with the heavy programme of work which you say is now starting. I am afraid I must leave all the burdens on the shoulders of those of our colleagues who are at full strength in both physique and mind, which is slightly more than I can claim as yet. However, I shall certainly make my way back to the Lords when I can be satisfied that it is really safe to do so'.¹⁴⁸ The staff at Holmesdale told Jean Corston that sometimes Barbara became very stressed and disoriented, and she kept saying, 'I've got to be on the Woolsack today, I've got to be on the Woolsack today', and they could only satisfy her by saying, 'the House isn't sitting today, Milady', and then she calmed down.¹⁴⁹

Barbara Wootton: Social Science and Public Policy, Essays in Her Honour was published in 1986. Barbara was not pleased when the senior editor, Philip Bean, wrote to her to suggest it. She wrote back to him with her grumpy old woman response saying he had absolutely no right to ask people to write chapters about her work. Then two or three weeks later she followed this by apologizing and saying could they please start again.¹⁵⁰ The finished product is a handsome hardback with a smart picture of Barbara – neatly done hair, sparkling spectacles and lipstick – on the cover, and sixteen chapters by people she knew well and less well about her work in economics and social policy, and in crime and penal reform. McGregor wrote the Introduction, called 'Champion of the Impossible'. They decided to present her with the book at a carefully orchestrated party in the House of Lords. Vera took her to have her hair done, and then drove her there. Philip Bean remembered the occasion: 'The plan was that, because she didn't know where she was, though she had a vague idea that she was the centre of it all, we would present her with the book, and, if she started talking inconsequentially, we would all applaud. But we didn't need to, she stood up and said something that was vaguely relevant, mainly about unless you have evidence for it you can't sustain the argument.'¹⁵¹ According to Vera, Barbara, rising from her wheelchair, gave a very short, witty and to-the-point speech of thanks.¹⁵²

They all trooped out to Nutfield to see Barbara in Holmesdale Park: George Wright's niece, Brenda Collison; Lucy Faithfull; Frank Field; her relative Sir John Ford, who had been an ambassador and who brought her homemade cakes; Tony Gould; the Hetheringtons; Lena Jeger; Lord Longford; Mac (McGregor); Barbara Kyle's cousin and their neighbour in Surrey, Ann Monie; Peter Townsend and Jean Corston; the Trotters; and Vera, of course. Before High Barn was sold, Vera developed a new routine: she would drive from her home in London to Abinger, collect the post, deal with it at the house to make it look as though Barbara were still living there, and then go on to the nursing home – a round trip of some 142 miles via the M25. She would spend the afternoon in the day-room at Holmesdale Park with Barbara, eat

supper with her, stay while she was 'got ready' for bed, and leave when she had gone to sleep. One day, Vera arrived at Holmesdale to find a tense atmosphere: the BBC was making a programme about euthanasia and had rung and spoken to Barbara and asked her to be filmed. She had agreed, but the managers of Holmesdale were not happy; there was no way they were having their home on a programme about euthanasia.¹⁵³ Vera had to extract Barbara from the arrangement. On another matter, Jean Corston remembers that Barbara missed the availability of alcohol in Holmesdale and asked them to bring some in. They had strict instructions not to let any of the staff know. Barbara also asked them to bring a vase, because she only had two vases. 'So I said that I'd brought it and she told me where to put it. She looked out of the door and when she was satisfied there were no staff around she told me to stand on a chair and reach up into this cupboard and get out the three vases. The staff thought these were vases for flowers but they weren't, they were actually drinking glasses. So we sat there drinking out of the vases ... she was perfectly lucid that day.'¹⁵⁴

By the summer of 1986, Barbara was mostly confined to her room, and only able to manage short excursions to the outside world with help. Vera was her lifeline. She still brought in Barbara's post and tried to involve her in it, although increasingly the answers that were composed were entirely Vera's creation. Vera took her to visit her own family in the New Forest and to the wedding of one of the Trotters' daughters, whose entry into the medical profession had been partly spurred by Barbara's encouragement and ability to 'pull a few strings';¹⁵⁵ and the following year to another wedding, of John Ford's daughter in Guildford. The Trotters used to take Barbara out once a week, in her wheelchair. Vera tried to think of interesting places to take her in the car. Once they went to look at a causeway: they drove about twenty miles to somewhere in Kent and Barbara refused to even look out of the window, and then half way back she said, 'Well, where is that bloody causeway?' It was an exception to her normal rule of never swearing.¹⁵⁶ Another day they came across a llama in a field. They met a woman who was the mother of the llama-owner, and Vera explained that her friend was rather poorly and she was trying to find things to interest her: was it alright if they got a bit closer to the llama? 'Yes,' she said. 'It likes bourbon biscuits.' So they went back with some bourbon biscuits, and they stopped outside the field, and there was the llama right at the other end of the field; Vera called and called, and eventually its attention was attracted. 'Barbara was sitting in the passenger seat and I'd opened the door so she could have a good sight of it, and I took these chocolate biscuits and I gave it these chocolate biscuits and it went [slurping sound], and I thought, oh, it likes them, it might like another one, so I got another chocolate biscuit out and suddenly it went [huffing sound] all over my blouse and everything. Barbara laughed. It was the only time she laughed in those

last two and a half years. She laughed, and during the next few weeks, if I said to her, "Barbara, what about the llama?" She would chortle about it. It was lovely.¹⁵⁷

Barbara's friends were careful to ensure that the ritual of birthday celebrations was sustained. In 1986 she had a pleasant lunch orchestrated by Campbell Adamson, and then Vera took her for a scenic drive. There were various celebrations for her ninetieth birthday in April 1987. A telemesssage arrived from four Labour peers in the House wishing her a happy birthday.¹⁵⁸ Campbell and Mimi took Barbara, plus the Bryants and the Trotters and John Ford and his wife, and Vera, and Vera took Barbara in her wheelchair, out to a local restaurant. It was only a partial success. Barbara felt that Campbell did not pay her enough attention, and when Vera took her back to Holmesdale afterwards, she suddenly said, "I've fallen out of love with Campbell" ... This was at a point where many people thought she was not really aware of what was going on.¹⁵⁹ Holmesdale also hosted a party for her; Lena Jeger, who went, wrote a piece about it for *The House Magazine*: 'Barbara Wootton was 90 on April 14. Friends and colleagues who joined her on that sunny felicitous day were glad to see how well she looked – elegantly coiffed and wearing a cheerful ruby velvet suit – as she held court from her wheel chair. After the sherry and the birthday cake there were gracefully short speeches ... Barbara stood to thank her guests and said bravely that she hoped they would all have as happy a ninety years as her.'¹⁶⁰ Ken Livingstone was not there; and we can only guess whether, had Barbara been in a position to draw up the guest list herself, she would have considered his achievements merited an invitation.

The labels Barbara had made to affix to her letters from Holmesdale Park did not mention its status as a nursing home, which may be why her entry in the Dictionary of National Biography describes it as her own home.¹⁶¹ Her correspondents may as well have believed it was. By the time Diana Grassie arrived at Holmesdale Park to be Director of Residential and Nursing Care, Barbara already needed quite a lot of nursing attention. Diana perceived Barbara as someone who hated relying on others for her care, to a greater degree, probably, than many people; she would get very impatient at her inability to do things for herself.¹⁶² Although Holmesdale Park was a well-run home with a 'quietly happy feel' about it, it did suffer from some of the dehumanizing rituals of many such institutions. Barbara did not always take kindly to being dressed, undressed and toileted, according to schedule.¹⁶³ Right until the end, she cared how she looked: 'She had this wonderful hair, silver-white hair, curly, and she liked her hair to be good. We had a hairdresser who used to do it. She looked radiant. She wore spectacles, it was always important that they were sparkling.' The staff called her 'Lady Barbara'. It helped that she was able to form a particular friendship with a West Indian care assistant called Annie. Barbara had

good days and bad days; they had the sense that here was someone who sat and observed all that was going on – all the interaction between staff and patients, relatives and families. ‘She was very quiet but she had an enormous presence ... She did not have a very expressive face at that stage but, when she could, her eyes gave quite a smile as you greeted her in the morning ... I can remember this Ward Sister ... “What do you think about this, Lady Barbara, I can see your twinkle?”’¹⁶⁴

Early in 1986, Barbara was moved to a much better room upstairs, and then to an even larger room, a sunny room at the front of the house, when she got more dependent and needed more space around her for nursing equipment. She had a ceramic donkey in her room, and some of her own furniture, and some photographs, including two by her bed. Frank Field recalled saying to her one day, “Barbara who *are* these people?” ... “I don’t know, Frank,” she said, “I don’t know, but they are the two people who most loved me.” Not that I most loved. Very interesting. They were George, her second husband, and her partner that she went down to live with, whoever she was [Barbara Kyle]. She never told me what the woman’s name was.’¹⁶⁵

‘Nobody wants me,’ she wrote in a diary, the only fragment that has been preserved, on 27 February 1986.¹⁶⁶ Leaving the Woolsack had been a devastating blow: the work, status and ceremonies had been part of her life for twenty years. The withdrawal of the Rowntree Trust’s support in March 1987 on the grounds of her repeated absence from the House of Lords was another rejection.¹⁶⁷ By January 1988, as Vera explained in a letter to Barbara’s friends the Lekachmans, her health had declined further; her memory was thin; conversation and correspondence were difficult; she did not want her friends to know about her disablement; she was very unhappy and it was an appalling situation.¹⁶⁸ She was nearly ninety-one, the age at which her beloved nanny The Pie had died. What did death mean to her, she who had been so clear in her life that it was simply the end to everything? ‘I think she wasn’t very easy about the idea of dying. I don’t think she was entirely resigned to it, let’s put it that way. I think she was afraid. She didn’t believe in any kind of future life ... I’m sure she would have got to a point where her very rationality would have suggested there wasn’t much to live for.’¹⁶⁹ She was rational, and she was consistent, and so she had joined Exit; no-one with her history of association with the assisted dying movement could have done anything else. In the ‘Face the Press’ interview in 1984, when she was eighty-seven, Anthony Howard told her she was a pillar of the euthanasia cause. ‘That cliché I will not have,’ she replied tersely, ‘but I do think that there ought to be some legitimate means by which you could dispose of your life when it is no longer worth living.’ Later in the interview, Polly Toynbee had asked her the straightforward question, ‘If you were to become very seriously disabled yourself,

would you wish to be able to end your own life?' 'Yes,' declared Barbara. 'I hope that I have the means of doing it.'¹⁷⁰

The subject of Barbara desiring to end her life under such circumstances had come up in a conversation with Vera: Vera had said she would do whatever Barbara wanted. Barbara responded that she could not allow Vera to help, as she would go to prison.¹⁷¹ Sometime before that summer of 1985 when she had her first small stroke, Frank Field had gone to see her in High Barn and she had told him that she was now a fully paid up member of Exit. He joked with her: how could she possibly want to be put away by a man in a woolly hat who put a plastic bag over her head and then sat there eating banana sandwiches? Such a story had been in the news at the time. No, what she had done is she had secured some knock-out pills from one of her medical friends in the House. After she moved into Holmesdale Park, Frank kept expecting her to ask him to get her the pills, but she never did. Was this evidence of her determination to live, or was it because those parts of her mind which were needed to put the plan into action were now somewhere else? He would have got the pills for her, and he would have assisted her dying, even though he personally disagreed with any form of suicide. He would have risked imprisonment and losing his seat had she asked him, and he believed that this would have been quite proper, because people in Barbara's position need as much protection as possible from abuse by those who pose as close friends but may have something to gain from their death.¹⁷²

She had always expected to 'go out like a light when I die and that will be the end of that'.¹⁷³ Sometime in the late spring or early summer, three years after she had first complained that bits of her mind had gone somewhere else, she stopped eating. She lost a lot of weight. She drank water, but that was all. She had made up her mind; that was it.¹⁷⁴ According to Vera, Barbara's relative Sir John Ford had instructed Holmesdale not to resuscitate Barbara in the event of such a decline.¹⁷⁵ Vera had been visiting daily for some time. Barbara was much weaker, and had got a chest infection. Vera stayed at Holmesdale all the time. She got up in the middle of the night to check on Barbara, to make sure that the staff had remembered her medication. As the opponents of Barbara's Incurable Patients Bill had observed, good medical practice would keep patients such as her free of pain, and it seemed to do so, in her case. Everyone thought she would die sooner than she did, but she held on – or life held on to her. When Alan and Anne Bryant went to see her on 13 July, she was in a coma. Vera said they would not get any response. 'Alan put his hand on her face and she said, "Oh, my darling Alan". She was with it just for a second. She heard his voice and opened her eyes. That was the last thing she said.'¹⁷⁶

Was it Alan, or was it George, or was it even Jack? It was some man with a smiling face and a masculine body, someone who represented that world of

comforting intimacy she had scarcely had a chance to know: life, which should be equal, is cruel in its imposition of misfortune; and yet she had resolutely carried on. Behind the bravery was always the loss. As Barbara Frances Wootton, Baroness Wootton of Abinger, lay dying early in the ninety-second year of her life, was it the loss that mattered? Did she see Jack Wootton's tall uniformed figure, and hear the rumble of guns in the polished corridors of Girton with the candles burning and the coal fires lit, and were the strains of 'Sleepers Wake' mingled with the sheaves of corn lying in the harvest sunlight of Haslingfield, as Mr and Mrs Wootton took their truncated honeymoon? As we grow older, it is the far-off past that comes back to haunt or delight us most: the stern Adela; the scholar father; the brothers with whom Barbara shared a secret backwards language full of Latin, so that 'dog' would not be 'god'; The Pie as a young woman, fresh from the household of the errant Maynard Keynes in her starched white apron and cap; the brooding contours of Emmanuel House, the fishpond with its little island and the fertile swans; Miss Ratcliffe's dancing class, and the Perse School for Girls – God's partial response to Barbara Adam's lavatorial prayers.

There in the hygienic bed of Holmesdale Park, Barbara Wootton's fading mind must have entertained many ghosts and shadows: Hugh Dalton admiring her ankles and gossiping about party politics; the becaped and airsick William Beveridge on the plane to Paris in search of world peace; Beatrice Webb and Bertrand Russell arguing about socialism and toilets; the harsh landscapes of Russia through the train window, the fellow-travellers munching on almonds and raisins; all the journeys she had taken everywhere – to India with the charming Andrew Shonfield; to Africa with Ilya Neustadt, who made himself ill by eating kippers; to China, to rest her hand on a tortoise, to walk through the Summer Palace and the Great Hall of the People; to America, evading the Inland Revenue with that other man who loved her, the delightful rogue, George Wright, creeping in from his photograph by her nursing home bed to remind her of Summer Schools and the sea at Mundesley where she taught him some things and he taught her others, and bringing her the remembered laughter of friends at that outrageous bathing costume of his; the ice-blue water of the Norwegian fjords, the little coloured houses, and the fishing boats, and made-up stories about men and women; Vera's lilies gathered in The Bothy in Regent's Park; the wide casement window of her bedroom in High Barn; Miranda and Francesca braying in the field; gin and tonic with the Other Barbara on the terrace; the rhododendron parties at midsummer; and then, of course, because she was the Baroness who had married a taxi-driver, the journey to the corridors that led to the corridors of power – the hushed baroque of the House of Lords, making history by being a woman and wearing fake ermine,

and rejecting God; leaping up and sitting down as words poured out of the mouths of noble Lords and Ladies: words, words, words, it was always important to say what you mean and mean what you say.

Vera was in Barbara's room: 'I heard her breathing change so I went straight to the bed, and I looked at her and – I don't think I thought whether she was going to die at that moment – but I sort of crouched down, I can't kneel, I crouched down so I could see her face to face. And, you see, one of the things she used to say to me when I went in, was, "Keep me safe, keep me safe, keep me safe". And I stroked her face and I said, "Barbara, you're quite safe, you know" ... then, at that moment, she looked at me. She looked straight in my eyes and she focused and I was gently stroking her face and saying, "You're quite safe, Barbara, you're quite safe". I don't know whether she recognized me or not.'¹⁷⁷ 'I thought recently, what did she look like? Was she frightened? She wasn't, there was no suggestion that she was fearful, but I thought, well now, could you put a name to it, and I would say she looked puzzled.'¹⁷⁸