

JAMES BARRY—1792 (?)—1865

INSPECTOR-GENERAL OF ARMY HOSPITALS

By M. P. RUSSELL, M.A.

JAMES BARRY, or *James Miranda Steuart Barry*, as she chose to call herself, was a little woman, barely five feet high, with reddish hair, high cheek bones, a prominent nose and a curiously high-pitched voice; of a quarrelsome temperament with its sequence of trouble, yet of refined manners with evidence of gentle birth.\* Her record might more appropriately appear in this journal than any other, for Edinburgh University conferred upon her the degree of M.D. in 1812, and thereby initiated a career that was well-nigh incredible. She was the first woman known to have graduated in medicine from any University in Great Britain, so long as eighty-two years before the pioneer fight of Sophia Jex-Blake gave women the right of admission to graduation in medicine at Edinburgh University.

She entered the Army Medical Service on 5th July 1813, and after a service of forty-six years, achieved the rank of Inspector-General of Army Hospitals. Only at her death in 1865 was her sex revealed. The sole exception to this ignorance of her sex was Sir Thomas Longmore, who attended her professionally at Trinidad in 1844, and kept her secret. Throughout her life of some seventy-three years, this woman had practised what Havelock Ellis considered to be one of the most remarkable sex impersonations ever known.

Until the entry of her name in the University medical register of 1809-10, no authentic record exists. In the "List of Graduates in Medicine" "Anglus" appears after her name, but of her birth, parentage and early years there is only conjecture and surmise. Such a life-history has already provided material for two novels and a play, but of the many references to her that have appeared in the press from time to time, no attempt has yet been made to present the fullest account of such facts as there are. A pity, for "truth is strange, stranger than fiction."

Of the novels, that of Lt.-Col. E. Rogers was the first, entitled

\* A photograph is kept under lock and key in the Mess at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley; a miniature painting is in the possession of the Munnik family in South Africa.

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*A Modern Sphinx*.<sup>\*</sup> Published in 1880 to the length of three volumes, it was re-edited in 1895 and purported to be the story of Barry under the fictitious name of Fitzjames. Colonel Rogers in subsequent years sought persistently to obtain knowledge of her identity, but without success. The second, by O. Racster and J. Grove, published in 1932—*Dr James Barry, Her Secret Story*—weaves a tragic romance about her and deals mainly with her years at the Cape of Good Hope. At an earlier date they had written a play, "Dr James Barry," which was staged at St James's Theatre in 1919, with Sybil Thorndike in the name part, and aroused considerable comment. It provoked a correspondence between the authors and Sir William Osler, for whom they strove to obtain the post-mortem report on Barry, but by 1919 all records pertaining to her had been eliminated from the War Office files.

From 1809 to 1812 Barry studied medicine at Edinburgh. Stormy days within the University walls, and storm outside in a Europe that had for long known no settled peace, and then as now the country steeled itself against the ever-present threat of invasion! The Faculty of Medicine of these days comprised such names as Andrew Duncan, *senior*, James Gregory, Daniel Rutherford, James Home, James Hamilton (*the younger*), Thomas Charles Hope and Alexander Monro, *tertius*, and many are the stories told of the controversies and bitter quarrels amongst them, culminating more than once in legal proceedings! It is significant to recall that at that time the examinations for the degree of M.D. were conducted in Latin, and although the help of a "grinder" was often enough employed in the exposition of a thesis, no candidate escaped the question and answer of the oral examination. This fact should allay the repeated assumption that Barry "learned Latin with the children of Lord Charles Somerset while at the Cape."

1809! Napoleon's hopes of the mastery of Europe were still bright, and six years had yet to run before the strain of war was over. Our army needed medical men. In the light of after-events, it becomes apparent that Barry's enrolment in the course of medicine was the first step in a career wherein those interested would attain for her the most advancement. For promotion in the Medical Service a University degree was becoming an essential qualification, and "on 29th July 1811, instructions were

<sup>\*</sup> Lt.-Col. Rogers was formerly Captain with the 3rd West India Regiment and had known Barry.

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issued by Horse Guards letter, that Physicians should be chosen from among the Regimental and Staff Surgeons who possessed the degree of M.D. of a University in Great Britain." From this beginning to the end the influence of persons in high places was evident beyond question, but their identities and relationships to Barry were ever concealed with scrupulous care, and the hope of unravelling the mystery would seem to diminish with the years.

A letter to the *Medical Times and Gazette*, published in 1865, from an old classmate, Dr J. C. Cookworthy, tells us what manner of student she was—"small of stature, yet proportionate, juvenile, and apparently of delicate constitution, but in no respect wore the aspect of a girl or woman . . . vain and could be frivolous, yet was prompt to resent an offence." Juvenile she must have seemed, for having completed the required course of study with a thesis "De Merocele," the Senatus refused to admit her to the degree on account of her youth. At this point influential interference is first noted. The Earl of Buchan is said to have intervened with the Senatus on her behalf, contending that no stipulation regarding age appeared in the regulations and, provided a candidate had observed the specified curriculum, he had a right to sit the examination and present himself for the degree. Her candidature was thereafter approved, and no doubt in gratitude Barry dedicated her thesis to the Earl of Buchan.

The dedication was of a dual nature, the other participant in Barry's eulogism being Francesco Miranda, a famous soldier, mainly concerned in Venezuelan affairs but well known in Europe. He fought in the Republican Army of France, 1790-93, and visited many capitals, including London. On a book belonging to Barry, one time in the possession of a Dr Ahern, she had written her name as *James Miranda Steuart Barry*—a curious link with the two dedications of her thesis, for both Steuart and Stewart were names in the Buchan family.

The difficulties of her entry into the Service without disclosure of her sex must have been insurmountable but for the amazing power behind her. The physical examination required of a candidate at that time was very strict, and in Barry's case the Director-General must have deferred to a higher authority in relaxing the routine. She was gazetted on 5th July 1813 as Hospital Assistant (until 8th June 1813 the rank had been termed "Hospital Mate") at Plymouth. The principal medical officer of the hospital, it is said, objected to her childish

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appearance, but was informed that "it was not desirable to agitate the question."

At some time in 1815 she was appointed to serve at the Cape of Good Hope, and on 7th December of that year was promoted to Staff Assistant Surgeon, the Governor of the time being Lord Charles Henry Somerset. More is known of her during the ensuing six years than at any other period of her life. This is accounted for by her close association with the Governor; her reputation as a physician; by the fact that the South African records have been fully investigated by O. Racster and J. Grove; and the birth of the Munnik baby.

From the moment of her arrival at the Cape, Barry made it plain that she was no ordinary member of the staff and had no intention of conforming to the routine of one of her rank. This involved her in frequent trouble with other officers, and constant appeals had to be made to the Governor, who repeatedly condoned her offence. She entered fully into the social life of the colony and always gave the impression of intimacy with those of high rank at home. Her preference for female companionship was pronounced, and is said to have been the cause of many *contresens* with those of her assumed sex, and on one occasion she is said to have fought a duel!

She is regarded in South Africa as something of a heroine, and visitors to the Cape are told of her story with great pride—Mark Twain mentions this in *More Tramps Abroad*. While she lived there her skill as a physician was generally acclaimed, and her attendance as accoucheur sought by ladies in and beyond the station. She would be remembered there, if for no other reason than the birth of the Munnik baby. It is recorded as fact that she performed Cæsarean section on a certain Mrs Munnik and delivered her of a son, duly christened James Barry Munnik. This James Barry Munnik in the course of time had a son and daughter. The daughter married a Hertzog, and their son became the late Prime Minister of South Africa—"James Barry Munnik Hertzog"!

At this time delivery of a child, in certain circumstances, by Cæsarean section, was a subject much in the minds of those who practised midwifery. In Great Britain the operation had not yet been performed with the result of a live mother and child, but on the Continent it had lately become fashionable for every surgeon to attempt it. Whether mother or child lived or not, his reputation was enhanced with the attempt! In this country results had

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been fatal for mother or child, and it was not until 1833 (*Lancet*, 1833-34, ii, 148) that an operation was performed with successful results for both lives concerned. In 1805 the operation was performed with both lives saved, at Martinique (*Edin. Med. and Surg. Journ.*, 1808, iv, 178). In 1817 the celebrated accoucheur, Dr J. J. Locher, of Zurich, saved a mother and child through this means, and the case was reported as remarkable to the Medical and Chirurgical Society of London in 1818.

Attendance at midwifery classes was not compulsory for graduation in 1809-12 when Barry studied at Edinburgh, but the subject was a popular one and students availed themselves of the opportunity, and conceivably Barry learned what she knew of it from James Hamilton's lectures. In a manuscript collection of these lectures (1819) the operation is described in detail, Dr Hamilton having performed it twice unsuccessfully. He states that "the want of success in this island may be owing to several reasons. The people in other parts of Europe use much less animal food than we do, therefore inflammatory diseases are more frequent with us; besides, they perform the operation in every case where the capacity of the pelvis is much diminished, consequently the patients are in the most favourable state," adding with typical Scots judgment and candour, "We are not altogether to trust to the report of Baudelocque concerning the number of successful cases, we must only calculate one in five, six or seven saved."

When one considers the case of a mother being saved (the child was already dead) by the operation done in 1739 by an Irish midwife of limited knowledge (*Medical Essays and Observations*, 4th edition, v, 360 (Edinburgh, 1752)), it is feasible that Barry with her knowledge and practice, not to mention courage, should have attempted it. Racster and Grove, in an appendix to their novel of 1932, vouch for the truth of this operation and give the references in authentic South African records.

Amongst other relics, the Munnik family have in their possession a letter written by Barry from St Helena in 1837 to the boy she brought into the world, which begins, "My dear James Barry," and in tone denotes an undeniably strong personal interest.

On 12th January 1820 Lord Charles Somerset returned to England on leave. He did not resume Governorship until December 1821, and during this period Barry must have sadly missed the protection of his marked personal interest. Sir Rufane

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Donkin, who deputised in Somerset's absence, was reputed to have revoked certain plans in progress and generally rendered his Governorship unsatisfactory to Lord Charles Somerset. At least he did not co-operate to the extent of condoning Barry's breaches of discipline, and on 25th May 1821 she was placed on half-pay and remained so for three years.

From 1824 onwards she was with the 3rd West India Regiment based at Jamaica and serving at Georgetown, British Guiana, and Freetown in Sierra Leone. In later years many officers who served with her contributed their recollections of the eccentric P.M.O. An amusing tale is told of how in the course of her duties an up-country garrison had to be visited and the hospital inspected. The Royal Navy co-operated in the military expedition, providing the necessary conveyance in the form of a small gunboat. What was the consternation of the captain of the gunboat on finding an irate little medical officer anxiously enquiring if her goat and dog had arrived; if the store of vegetables on board was plentiful (she was a vegetarian); and demanding to be shown her cabin on a journey where everyone was used to "doubling up"! On arrival at New Amsterdam, the figure that awaited the officers on deck provoked some amusement. Their medical officer was there, resplendent in a large plumed cocked hat, a tunic that swamped one of such small stature, brass spurs above immoderately high heels, a sword rattling in a brass scabbard, and in hand, an umbrella! On threatened arrest the hilarity subsided.

About 1832 an epidemic of yellow fever broke out amongst the Europeans of the garrison at Georgetown, and officers of the regiment have vouched for the indefatigable efforts of Barry in attending the stricken victims. She fought for all souls alike, irrespective of rank. Soon after, overwrought no doubt from the strain, she grew tired of the West Indies and sought a change. It is said that she precipitated the change by sailing for home; and what would have been regarded as desertion on the part of any other officer resulted for Barry merely in a change of station.

We next hear of her at St Helena in 1837, under the Governorship of General George Middlemore, during whose tenure of office, it will be remembered, the remains of Napoleon were transferred from St Helena to Paris in 1840. How long she remained there is not known, but from Hart's Army List it is apparent that she was back in the West Indies serving at Antigua in 1839, Barbadoes in 1840, and at Trinidad in 1843. From

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there she was transferred to Mediterranean stations: Malta in 1847; Ionian Islands 1862, with the rank of Deputy Inspector-General (16th May 1851); and Corfu in 1854-56. Many notices in the press state erroneously that she remained there until her death in 1865. While at Corfu she visited Lord Raglan at the time of the Crimean campaign. Lord Raglan was the youngest brother of Lord Charles Somerset, both being sons of the fifth Duke of Beaufort, and had been Military Secretary from 1827 to 1852.

On 25th September 1857 she was given local rank of Inspector-General of Military Hospitals in Canada, and stationed at Montreal and Quebec. While there she was a well-known figure, and at her death memories of those that had known her stimulated great interest. Dr G. W. Campbell was among those who had known her intimately, without suspicion of her sex, and in later years entertained his students with reminiscences of the quaint little Inspector-General. One student, Sir William Osler, listened with greater interest, and made successive efforts to obtain fuller knowledge of her history. She was given the full rank of Inspector-General of Army Hospitals on 7th December 1858, and on 19th July 1859 was placed on half-pay. She returned to England, and died at 14 Margaret Street, London, on 25th July 1865.

A request that she should be buried in whatever she happened to be wearing was disregarded, and the woman who prepared the last offices discovered that Inspector-General James Barry had been a woman! Intimation of the death and sex was forthwith sent to the Horse Guards, and Alexander Guthrie, Surgeon-Major, A.M.D., came to confirm the information.

In the diary of General Sir Abraham Josias Cloete, her old friend of South African days, the entry occurs, that on a visit to 14 Margaret Street on the 26th of July, "everything belonging to Barry had been removed by two footmen in gorgeous livery."

She was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, and a sandstone slab was erected bearing the simple inscription:—

DR JAMES BARRY  
INSPECTOR GENERAL  
OF ARMY HOSPITALS  
DIED \* 15TH JULY 1865  
AGED 71 YEARS

commemorating her as she had lived.

\* The date of her death was 25th July.

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So ended the life of one of the most baffling personalities on record, and if the now somewhat hackneyed quotation be forgiven, she surely refutes the words of Abraham Lincoln—"You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you can not fool all the people all of the time."

*Who was James Barry?* Opinions have varied. *The Dictionary of National Biography* states that "she is said to have been the grand-daughter of a Scotch earl"; but when the source of information is examined it is found that the authenticity of the statement rests on the following quotation from Lord Albemarle's *Fifty Years of My Life* (ii, 100)—he met Barry on a visit to the Cape in 1819—

"The late Mrs Ward, daughter of Colonel Tidy, from whom I had these particulars, told me further that she believed the Doctor to have been the legitimate grand-daughter of a Scotch Earl, whose name I do not give as I am unable to substantiate the correctness of my friend's surmise, and that the soi-disant James Barry adopted the medical profession from attachment to an army-surgeon who has not been many years dead."

Although the story was generally believed the evidence is slender enough.

A letter to *The Lancet* from Lt.-Col. E. Rogers quotes Sir William Mackinnon as having said :—

"You are aware, of course, that Barry was the daughter of a Scotch baronet, Buchan by name, who married one of the Somerset family, and hence the Doctor's great influence at headquarters through Fitzroy Somerset, Lord Raglan. . . . Some years ago I met Sir Josias Cloete (the aide-de-camp in question) at a public dinner, and he told me the circumstances of the duel in these very words: 'I am the only officer in the British Army who has ever fought a duel with a woman. When I was aide-de-camp to Lord Charles Somerset at the Cape, a buxom lady called to see him on business of a private nature, and of course they were closeted for some time. Dr Barry made some disparaging remark about this. "Oh, I say, Cloete," he sneered, "that's a nice Dutch filly the governor has got hold of." "Retract your vile expression, you infernal little cad," I said, advancing and pulling his long ugly nose. Barry immediately challenged me and we fought with pistols, fortunately without effect.' It will here be remembered what I stated in my first letter to *The Lancet* on the subject, that I met Dr Barry in 1858, and voyaged in the same cabin with her to Barbadoes, whither she was going on a visit to her old enemy and present friend, General

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Sir Josias Cloete, commanding troops in that island. . . . 'She had a lovely gray Arab in Corfu,' he went on, 'which, I remember, she gave to one of the Somersets . . . and perhaps you are aware that she left strict injunctions for her corpse to be sewn up in a blanket before being placed in a coffin.'

The foundation of the conjecture that she may have been a daughter of the Earl of Buchan was possibly the Earl's open intervention with the University at the time of her graduation and his possible friendship while she studied there. He was a prominent patron of the arts, etc., in Scotland, and founded the Society of Antiquaries. Of the noblest intentions, vanity coloured all his enterprises. Proudly he associated himself with those of established fame. Sir Thomas Browne, of the *Religio Medici*, he claimed as his ancestor. James Thomson, the poet, he commemorated in the setting up of a Grecian urn at Edrom—an invitation to the ceremony was refused by Robert Burns, dear enemy of cant and hypocrisy in all its forms. He made elaborate arrangements for Sir Walter Scott's funeral, but eventually predeceased him! All such projects were planned to reflect overmuch glory on the Earl of Buchan.

He delighted to address the King, in correspondence, as "My Dear Cousin," and might well have been asked on occasion to promote the interests of anyone living in Scotland who had Royal patronage. The Erskines as a family, of which he was the eldest, were very much in affairs at that time: Henry became Lord Advocate in Scotland and Thomas, Lord Chancellor of England.

Childless by his marriage to Margaret Fraser of Fraserfield, Aberdeenshire, Buchan had a natural son who became Sir David Erskine by his own merit, dramatist and antiquary, tutor to the children of William IV, whose parentage was open knowledge. Had a similar relationship existed with regard to Barry, it is hardly probable that such a full-proof secrecy would have been practised. The various biographies of him throw no light on the subject whatsoever, and a personal communication from the present Earl confirms this view, in that there is no family story concerning her known to him. The solution to the mystery must be sought elsewhere.

That she was closely connected with the family of the fifth Duke of Beaufort is beyond question, instanced by her association with both Lord Charles Somerset and Fitzroy Somerset, afterwards Lord Raglan, whose influence at Army Headquarters was

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considerable as Military Secretary at the Horse Guards for more than twenty-five years. No one of this family of eight sons and three daughters married any one of the Buchan family. Badminton, in Gloucestershire, was not only the home of a devoted family, but at times a centre of social activity in which the Prince Regent himself was no stranger.

Through the mist of surmise the following explanation rises clearer than any other :—

“ It is alleged that she was the illegitimate child of the Prince Regent and that her real name was Joan Augusta Fitzroy. She was taken away from her mother at an early age and placed in a safe refuge, where she was educated and brought up in refinement. She subsequently learnt the story of her mother's betrayal, and approached the Prince Regent in person, intimating to him that in the light of her origin she would cease to exist as Joan Fitzroy and would become James Barry. In this story, which purports to be a manuscript by Joan Fitzroy, she tells the story of her life and a deep pathos underlies the record as that of a woman who set out to overcome the disabilities of her origin by a brave attitude towards life.”

The story was published in *The Cape Times* of 1904 by G. E. Marvel. It is unfortunate that substantiation of the facts is not possible in these times, but the story deserves most credence in that it provides the clue to the many mystifying incidents in her life.

Who knows that, in another day, James Barry may prove to have been the daughter of no less a personage than the “ first Gentleman in Europe ” ?

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