

DR JAMES BARRY – A WOMAN AHEAD OF HER TIME

Picture yourself at Scutari Hospital in the Crimea in 1855 on a hot summer day. The sun is blazing down on a curious scene. A tiny, self-important peacock of a man is mounted on a grey Arab horse. He has servants, a poodle and a pet goat in tow.

In a high-pitched voice, he is loudly scolding a tall nurse for not wearing a hat to protect her against the sun. The nurse is glaring at him – how dare he?! Who was this man anyway?

He was the dazzling **Dr James Barry**, the British Army's Inspector General of Hospitals, whose obsession with hygiene, clean water and proper ventilation of nursing areas had already transformed hospitals across the British Empire. He was also the first recorded surgeon in the British Empire to perform a caesarean section in which both mother and baby survived.

She was the heroine **Florence Nightingale** admired to this day for her nursing reforms. (Miss Nightingale's "Notes On Nursing" were still being supplied to student nurses in the 20th century.) In fact many of Florence Nightingale's nursing reforms had already been quietly pioneered by Dr Barry beforehand.

While Miss Nightingale became elevated almost to sainthood, Dr Barry remained forgotten except as a freak, because when "he" died in 1865 it emerged that Dr Barry was in fact an Irish woman – **Margaret Anne Bulkley** from Cork City – who had masqueraded as a man to become a medical doctor, then a surgeon and continued the deception up to her death. While she should be honoured as a medical visionary, she has been regarded until recently as a medical curiosity.

The authors **Michael du Preez** and **Jeremy Dronfield** have set the record straight in their book entitled "**Dr James Barry - A Woman Ahead of Her Time**" published in 2016. Michael Du Preez is a retired surgeon living in Cape Town, South Africa, where Dr Barry also practised medicine and surgery. Jeremy Dronfield is a biographer and novelist living in Ely, Cambridge.

This is a tale that Charles Dickens might have written but it is stranger than fiction. Miss Bulkley broke the rules of Georgian society to become one of the most respected surgeons of the 19th Century. She was a medical pioneer and reformer; a duellist and an eccentric who outraged the military establishment. Despite her success in the field of medicine which would have been unattainable for a woman of that era, her long daring deception left her isolated in the long run with no chance to be with the man she is thought to have loved.

She was born at Merchant Quay, Cork City, circa 1789, the daughter and second child of Jeremiah and Mary Anne Bulkley. Her elder brother John was the favoured child of this family and expected to become a lawyer, although Margaret was also recognised as highly intelligent.

Her father was a grocer who provisioned ships, which made Cork an important port of the period. He also held a post in the Weigh House of Cork with a salary of £140 per annum. After the 1798 rebellion he lost this post at a time when many Roman Catholics were expelled from official positions. Mr Bulkley also transferred property assets to his son to fund John's marriage to an heiress. This alarmed Jeremiah's creditors, who had lent him large sums secured by these properties to set up his business. They pressed for repayment in cash. Unable to meet their demands, he deserted his wife and family and was later committed to a debtor's prison. He later died alone in Dublin, and in poverty.

Some years before this tragedy, a baby girl called Juliana appeared in the Bulkley family between 1801 and 1803. Although the family claimed her to be Margaret's baby sister, it seems from family papers that the adolescent girl had been raped by her dissolute uncle, Redmond Barry, her mother's brother. Juliana was the result. Margaret parted from this child at the age of 20. Juliana is thought to have become a dressmaker in Cork City and her later life is unrecorded.

Margaret's other uncle, **James Barry** (her mother's brother) died in 1806 and it was chiefly his connections in high society that enabled and encouraged Margaret to take the extraordinary step of studying medicine disguised as a man.

James Barry (1741 – 1806) also from Cork, was one of the most important Irish Neoclassical artists and one of the earliest Romantic artists in Britain. He also influenced **William Blake's** paintings. He was a child prodigy. His patron was **Edmund Burke**, who, with his friends, funded Barry's continental journeys where he studied the art of great Renaissance painters. Barry is best remembered for six paintings in a series called "The Progress of Human Culture ". This is in the Great Room of the Royal Society of Arts in London. The art expert Andrew Graham-Dixon has described it as "Britain's late, great answer to the Sistine Chapel". Although neglected after his death Barry's work was reappraised and given an exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1983.

Sadly, his career was halted due to his belligerent personality. In 1771 he was elected a member of the prestigious Royal Academy of Arts but was expelled in 1799 when he published "A Letter to the Dilettanti Society ". This extolled his own art while castigating other professors of it. He is only one of two people ever to be expelled from the Academy. As a result he also lost a post as a professor of painting and most of his friends.

Despite his notoriety in the art world he was given a huge public funeral in 1806 and buried in St. Paul's Cathedral. His sister Mary Anne and niece Margaret benefitted financially from his death but not greatly. Margaret however, had inherited something more profound from her uncle - his looks, genius, charm, eccentricity and bold belligerent temperament. The latter quality led her to challenge authorities head-on when, in later life, under the name of her uncle, James Barry and as a doctor and

surgeon, she met with deplorable conditions in sick rooms, hospitals, prisons, asylums and leper colonies across the British Empire.

What did Margaret Bulkley achieve as Dr James Barry?

She was -

- 1. The first woman we know of to receive a Medical Degree from Edinburgh University (in 1812) and to qualify as a surgeon from St Thomas's and Guy's Hospitals (in 1813) while also training with an apothecary in pharmacy and medical botany.**
- 2. The first surgeon on record in the British Empire to carry out a successful delivery by caesarean section in which both mother and baby survived.**
- 3. A pioneer in hospital and prison reform also improving conditions in the British Army by campaigning for better food and sanitary conditions for soldiers and separate married quarters for army wives and families.**
- 4. The first woman to achieve the rank of Inspector General of Hospitals in the British Army – the equivalent of an Army General.**

What circumstances led this grocer's daughter to take such an outlandish step for a woman in Georgian Society?

She must have realised that she was facing poverty once her uncle James Barry's legacy had been spent. This meant trying to find work as a governess for which she was ill prepared, or even worse, as a paid companion to a rich lady. She was also influenced by the powerful friends of her late uncle who took an interest in her. This was a group of progressive thinkers inspired by the 18th Century Enlightenment. For example, James Barry knew **Mary Wollstonecraft** who wrote the ground breaking "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman". Another believer in women's rights to equality of education with men was the Scottish peer **David Erskine, the 11th Earl of Buchan** whose essays on feminism fuelled his reputation as an eccentric aristocrat. Buchan assumed responsibility for Margaret's career possibly because he saw in her already the elements of her uncle's genius and drive.

An even more exotic friend with feminist views was **General Francisco De Miranda (1750-1816)** a Venezuelan revolutionary trying to enlist support from Britain to overthrow Spanish rule in Venezuela. He allowed her to use his extensive library of medical textbooks and when he saw how enthralled she was by this subject he assured her that if she could qualify for a medical degree he would send for her to practise openly as a female doctor in Venezuela once he had liberated his country.

Margaret felt strongly that her intellectual gifts lay in the field of medicine. The life of a governess or a companion was abhorrent to her and a good marriage impossible without a fortune. Moreover the practice of medicine could be lucrative - a way to rise in life and stay out of debt. Apart from her uncle

James Barry's looks and charm Margaret had inherited his brilliance and drive along with a determination to succeed. She also had Barry's fighting spirit and fearlessness of authority.

It was with the help of her mother who now pretended to be her aunt and her uncle's avant garde friends that Margaret now assumed the name of James Barry and presented herself in Edinburgh dressed as a man, claiming to be James Barry's nephew. She enrolled for medical studies at Edinburgh University in 1809 wearing second hand men's clothing with padding to make her look more muscular. She wore a greatcoat over her clothes most of the time. In later years, she would also wear boots with stacked heels and a red wig – all to add height.

Standing five feet high with a smooth face, a high voice, feminine features and reddish hair she was assumed to be a child prodigy like her late uncle. Accepted as a student no one voiced any suspicion that she might be a woman. A woman of around 20 years of age was instead taken to be a 12 year old boy.

During a gruelling training which involved dissecting corpses bought from body snatchers and handling decaying body parts, James Barry displayed great aptitude which was noticed by the University authorities but they were unwilling at first to let him take final examinations since they thought he was a mere child. The Earl of Buchan however pointed out that the University's statutes did not impose any age restrictions for the award of degrees. This was acknowledged after some debate. James Barry was eventually permitted to sit final examinations and awarded a medical degree in 1812. It was assumed with some misgivings that the degree had been conferred upon a child, but the University would have been even more horrified to know that it was awarding the first ever medical degree to a woman. She was 23 years of age.

In 1813, armed with this degree, Dr Barry studied surgery at St Thomas's Hospital and Guy's Hospital in London under the best surgeons of the day. He also studied pharmacy with Richard Whitfield, an apothecary and spent long hours in the garret above St. Thomas's Church. This was a large airy space where herbs were dried and medicines distilled.

In 1813 then Dr Barry not only had a medical degree but had qualified as a surgeon and with a working knowledge of pharmacy and medicinal botany.

By now Margaret knew that she would never be able to practise as a female doctor in Venezuela. In 1812 on his return to that country the charismatic General Miranda was betrayed by Simon Bolivar and handed over to the Spanish authorities who branded him a traitor and sent him to Spain where he died in 1816 in a prison in Cadiz.

Dr Barry could have practised medicine privately but this required start-up funds. She chose to join the British Army firstly because, from childhood, Margaret had always admired soldiers and the

military life. Secondly, she would earn a regular salary – much needed security. Thirdly, in those days a doctor's word would be accepted that he was physically fit for duty without requiring a physical examination something which the Doctor managed to avoid for most of her life.

Dr Barry's first posting was to Cape Town as a Hospital Assistant then he was promoted Physician to the Governor's household. The Governor was **Lord Charles Somerset (1767-1831)**. He had been recently widowed and left with two daughters Georgiana and Charlotte. Doctors had reassured him that his wife would recover from an illness from which she later died and as a result he was sceptical about the ability of the medical profession. When his elder daughter Georgiana fell ill however, the Governor changed his opinion as Dr Barry's devoted and expert care led to her early and complete recovery. The doctor became known for his total dedication and devotion to his patients also his soothing bedside manner. He insisted on well-ventilated sickrooms and deplored many patent medicines of the day. He reportedly rushed into airless bedrooms throwing up sash windows which sometimes shattered! He was also known to throw bottles of unapproved medicines against walls in a fit of outrage. These eccentricities however only seemed to add to his reputation.

Dr Barry was completely accepted into the Governor's household and it is surmised that Somerset knew that Dr Barry was a woman through his friend Lord Buchan. From his researches author Michael Du Preez is convinced that the two had a love affair and that love letters from Lord Somerset in Dr Barry's possession were conveyed secretly to the Somerset family after his death in 1865. Lord Somerset re-married in 1821, while visiting England, to Lady Mary Poulett, a 33 year old heiress. Dr Barry's feelings may be imagined but he/she remained on good terms with the family.

As to the rest of Dr Barry's career, he was appointed as Colonial Medical Inspector in the Cape Colony then Army Staff Surgeon in Mauritius. He served in the Caribbean – in Jamaica, Antigua and Barbados. He was promoted to Principal Medical officer in Trinidad. He also served in Malta and was promoted to Deputy Inspector General of Hospitals at the then British outpost of Corfu. Dr Barry also toured field hospitals in the Crimea during the Crimean war (1854-56) and made an enemy of Florence Nightingale as described earlier. Miss Nightingale on learning in 1865 that Dr Barry had been female described the Doctor as "The most hardened creature I ever met throughout the Army."

In 1857 Dr Barry was made Inspector General of Hospitals for Upper and Lower Canada (today's Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland). He lived an extravagant lifestyle with a fine house and servants. Swathed in furs he was driven about in a red sleigh – one of the sights of Montreal. In personal life the Doctor was vegetarian and teetotal with no close friends but had many pets including a succession of white poodles all named "Psyche".

Having fallen ill in Canada in 1859, Dr Barry returned to England and was retired from the Army living in rented rooms in London with no family ties and only acquaintances to visit him.

During his career, some people became aware of the Doctor's gender – a few nurses and servants suffered for this knowledge but did not broadcast it. Fellow doctors who discovered it by accident during a severe illness did not reveal the secret.

What did Dr Barry achieve over a lifetime?

Ahead of other physicians of the day, Dr Barry believed in proper sanitation and hygiene to prevent deadly infections, which patients often picked up in hospitals. Clean instruments were used in the Doctor's work – unusual for the time.

He regarded good diets as crucial to a patient's recovery. This view was shared by **Mary Seacole**, famed for her nursing work in the Crimea, a black Jamaican "Doctress" – one of a group of such women who ran institutions on Jamaica where patients were treated by traditional healing methods. The doctresses also believed in the value of nourishment and keeping patients hydrated.

In South Africa Dr Barry campaigned for better conditions in hospitals, prisons, asylums and a leper colony under his jurisdiction. Unfortunately he tended to be tactless and aggressive in demanding improvements and alienated people in authority. On one occasion he was demoted for challenging a senior officer.

He was known to challenge men to duels and actually fought a duel where he suffered a flesh wound to his right thigh. His own shot would have killed his opponent if it had not been deflected by a peak on the man's military hat.

Wherever he served Dr Barry fought for improvements to the living conditions of the common soldier. He campaigned for better sanitary arrangements and food. He was instrumental in obtaining separate married quarters for lower rank military families having seen the distress of married women forced to live with their husbands in barracks alongside other soldiers.

The climax of the Doctor's career came in July 1826 when he performed in Cape Colony, South Africa, the first caesarean section recorded in the British Empire where mother and baby survived.

The mother was Wilhelmina Munnik the wife of a Cape Town merchant. Her midwife insisted that Dr Barry be summoned when Mrs Munnik had been in labour for over 24 hours and a normal delivery proved impossible. Dr Barry performed a C-Section – a routine procedure today but in those days usually fatal for mother or baby – often both. Dr Barry had probably read a published account from a Dr Locher of Zurich, Switzerland who had performed a successful C-Section eight years previously. Although no anaesthetics were available, Dr Barry had clean hands and instruments. Mrs Munnik survived, also her son who was called **James Barry Munnik**. The forenames passed through

generations of this family to the famous **James Barry Munnik Hertzog**, a Boer War General who fought against British forces and became Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa in 1924.

In July 1865 after 6 years of retirement from the British Army, Dr Barry died of dysentery in rented rooms in London and is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, Chelsea.

The Doctor's last wishes were that he should be buried in the clothes he died in, without being washed. His landlady ignored this request and summoned a woman to wash and lay out the corpse. To her astonishment this person found that the body was that of a woman and moreover one who showed signs of having given birth at an early age.

Margaret's secret might never have been revealed but the woman who laid out the body felt that she had not been properly remunerated. She suspected a conspiracy to keep Doctor Barry's gender a secret and tried to blackmail the Army doctor who had completed the Death Certificate describing Dr Barry as "Male". During an interview with him, however she realised that indeed he had not detected that Dr Barry was a woman nor did he regard this revelation as any of his business. She then sold her story to newspapers, which published it across the British Empire wherever Dr Barry had served. It created a sensation and many people who had met Dr Barry then claimed that they had always known that the doctor was female!

Many articles and books have since been written about Dr Barry but not often highlighting Margaret Bulkley's remarkable achievements in the field of medical reforms. Michael Du Preez and Jeremy Dronfield have remedied this omission in their book published in 2016.

Finally, as we know, the medical establishment tried to keep women out of its profession for many years – that history is for another day. Let me conclude however, on a note of triumph - In April 2014 some 200 years after Dr James Barry's examination for the rank of surgeon, the Royal College of Surgeons appointed Miss Clare Marx, an orthopaedic surgeon, as its first female President. I imagine that Margaret Bulkley AKA Dr James Barry, would have thoroughly approved.

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Sources

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