

BOOK REVIEW

Dr James Barry: A Woman Ahead of Her Time *by Michael du Preez and Jeremy Dronfield*

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This is a remarkably interesting book. Tales of Dr James Barry (née Margaret Bulkley) have been recounted for decades but few have put together such an impressive and highly readable biography. Blending their individual medical and writing talents to spin a vivid, colourful and informative story of this fascinating woman, the authors transport the reader into scenes of contemporary Georgian society and medical training.

The book describes Margaret's early life in Cork including her rape and pregnancy, the family's destitution exacerbated by the fall-out from the Irish rebellion of 1798, and the desperate measures to which they resorted. The death of her irascible, eccentric but talented artist uncle, James Barry, offered only transient financial relief but created an opportunity. Having disguised herself as a man, Margaret assumed her uncle's name, gained an MD and joined the British Army.

After two years of home service as an assistant staff surgeon, she was posted to Cape Colony, where by dint of her skills and some necessary patronage, in 1823, she was promoted to Colonial Medical Officer. Intolerant of inefficiency and non-compliance, she battled to improve conditions for her patients, prisoners and the care of the insane. "Battled" is used advisedly since Barry was dogged all through her life by a vicious temper: fighting duels, upsetting the establishment and challenging authority. As a rule, however, her causes and protestations were just.

Later, serving as Principal Medical Officer in Trinidad, Barry became seriously ill and her true identity was discovered by a few attendants, although they respected her privacy. By 1851, she was a Deputy Inspector of Hospitals at Corfu where she was to see many damaged men returning from the Crimea. Fulfilling a longing to visit the peninsula, she had a run-in with a nurse, none other than Florence Nightingale! Like Nightingale, Barry's continued care for the welfare of the common soldier was paramount.

In the year of Lister's work on antiseptics, Barry, now bereft of many friends and patrons, died in London on 25 July 1865 under miserable circumstances. The details of how she duped most of her colleagues, friends and patients are indeed remarkable and it was only after her demise that the world was made aware of her secret. With such meticulously detailed research and so few errors, *Dr James Barry* makes an outstanding contribution to social, military and medical history.

Michael KH Crumplin
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