

Editorial

TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF THE CURIOUS BIRTH OF A DOCTOR – JAMES BARRY AKA MARGARET ANN BULKLEY



Dr. James Barry
(1792/95?-1865)

Let a man get up and say, “Behold, this is the truth,” and instantly I perceive a sandy cat filching a piece of fish in the background. Look, you have forgotten the cat, I say.

Virginia Woolf (*The Waves*, 1931)

By all accounts it now appears that James Barry – the British Army doctor – was actually a woman named Margaret Ann Bulkley. Thus, Dr. James Barry was the first woman medical practitioner, albeit in disguise, in England.

In November 1809, Margaret Ann Bulkley when she was a teenage girl of 15-18 years changed her name to James Barry so that she could study medicine. Barry qualified with Medical Doctorate from the University of Edinburgh in 1812 and attended the Autumn Course 1812-1813 at the United Hospitals of Guy’s and St. Thomas at London. Barry then qualified the examination for the Royal College of Surgeons of England in July 1813 and was commissioned as a Hospital Assistant with the British Army and eventually promoted to Assistant Staff Surgeon. Barry served the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and then moved to Cape Town in 1817, and by the time Barry left Cape Town in 1828 was promoted to the post of the Medical Inspector. Barry had postings in India, Mauritius, Canada and West Indies. Barry retired in 1864 as an Inspector-General of Hospitals and returned to England. The records suggest quite strongly that Barry was an able doctor and surgeon, had passion to serve humanity and was a good policy maker and applicator, but was known for belligerent attitude. Albert S. Lyons concluded that ‘Of slight stature, squeaky voice, and beardless face, Barry evidently aroused no suspicion – possibly because of an aggressive manner and a reputation as an accurate marksman.’ Thus, the case history of Dr. Barry may ‘serve to reflect the prevailing attitude’ during the early nineteenth century.

In July 1865, Barry fell victim to the epidemic of dysentery in London and died on 25 July. Sophia Bishop, a charwoman who took care of the body revealed after the funeral of James Barry that Barry had a female body. The British Army sealed all related records for 100 years until an historian Isobel Rae examined the army records in 1950s and concluded that Barry was

indeed a woman and a niece of James Barry, a famous Irish painter (1741-1806). More recently, Hercules Michael du Preez, a South African retired urologist undertook extensive research on Barry and substantiated the earlier reports about James Barry.

Hercules M. du Preez reconstructed the following story about the emergence of James Barry, the British Army doctor. Barry started life in Ireland as Margaret Ann Bulkley, the daughter of Jeremiah, a grocer in Cork and

Mary-Ann, sister of James Barry who was a Professor of Painting at London's Royal Academy. In 1803, Margaret's father was jailed for debt. Margaret's mother requested his brother James Barry, the famous artist, for support so that Margaret could finish her education and earn a respectable living subsequently. The artist however died suddenly in 1806, but he probably discussed the matter of Margaret's education and future with some of his friends in his progressive friends circle. Two of his friends, Edward Fryer, a physician and Francisco Miranda, a

During the first half of the nineteenth century, medical schools in England, Europe and United States were generally close to women, although many women were midwives, nurses and apothecaries. Besides the case of James Barry, the historic struggle of Harriot Hunt (1805-1875), Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910) and many others demonstrates the prevailing societal norms and diktats.

The application of Ms. Hunt to Harvard Medical School was rejected by the students, not by the faculty. The resolutions of rejection stated:

Resolved, that no woman of true delicacy would be willing in the presence of men to listen to the discussion of subjects that necessarily come under consideration of the students of medicine.

Resolved, that we object to having the company of any female forced upon us, who is disposed to unsex herself, and to sacrifice her modesty by appearing with men in the lecture room.

For Elizabeth Blackwell, a number of American medical schools turned down her application for she was a woman. However, she kept on applying until she gained admission to a small school in upstate New York, The Geneva College of Medicine, by chance. When her application was presented by the dean to his students: should a woman be allowed to enter the classes, the students voted unanimously to admit her, considering it as a great joke. The entire town however snubbed Elizabeth Blackwell throughout her stay.

Abala Das (1864-1951), popularly known as Lady Abala Bose, passed entrance test in 1881 but was refused admission to the Calcutta Medical College for she was a woman and she went to Madras to study medicine in 1882 on Bengal Government Scholarship, but had to give it up because of ill health. Later she was married to Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose in 1887. Thus, Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923) and Anandi Gopal Joshi (1865-1887) were the first Indian women who received formal award to practice western medicine in the same year, 1886. While Anandi Gopal Joshi received her training in the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, Ganguly studied medicine at the Calcutta Medical College. Like Elizabeth Blackwell and Elizabeth Garrett, Kadambini was also snubbed by her society, although her professional acumen was commendable.

Venezuelan revolutionary and the money she received from her deceased artist uncle were of great support to Margaret. Margaret and her mother migrated to London in 1806 within months after the artist's death. For next three years, Margaret studied with the help of Ed Fryer and using Francisco Miranda's personal library to get admission into British medical school, but British medical school at the time did not allow women to study medicine (see *Box*). Between 1806 and 1809, Margaret therefore might have prepared herself to pose as a boy to the world. The disappearance of Margaret Bulkley and the appearance of a young medical student James Barry were carefully planned and the plot was known to only a few persons that included Margaret's mother, Edward Fryer, Francisco Miranda and the family solicitor, Daniel Reardon.

Was such planned transformation of gender for a cause painful to Margaret? We do not know. But we know what Virginia Woolf observed in 'A Room of One's Own' in 1929: "For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty." An interesting note of the story is that James Barry arose from nowhere, studied medicine, became a fine doctor, and might have reduced to obscurity if Barry did not return to England and had not fallen victim of epidemic of dysentery in London with no known relatives around, thus the job of preparing the body for burial was given to Sophia Bishop, the charwoman at Barry's lodgings. Margaret Ann Bulkley was buried



Fig. 2: The burial of Dr. James Barry, Inspector-General of Hospitals in Kensal Green Cemetery at Harrow Road, West London.

in Kensal Green Cemetery as Dr. James Barry, Inspector-General of Hospitals.

Michale du Preez writes, "...the sex of the deceased had not then yet been cast into doubt, but Sophia Bishop's later revelation excited much attention and controversies and continues to do so." Further he says, "Dr Barry is remembered for this sensational fact rather than for the real contributions that she made to improve the health and the lot of the British soldier as well as civilians." The real stroke of the story in the history of medicine however lies in the fact that a women, two hundred years ago, could have mastered the courage to become a man in male dominated society, learn medicine, became an accomplished army doctor, surgeon and administrator at a time when women were generally marginalized in

the society anywhere in the world, the study and practice of medicine being no exception. In this way, James Barry *aka* Margaret Ann

Bulkley shall remain as a beacon light in the turns of the road of the history of medicine towards modernity.

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