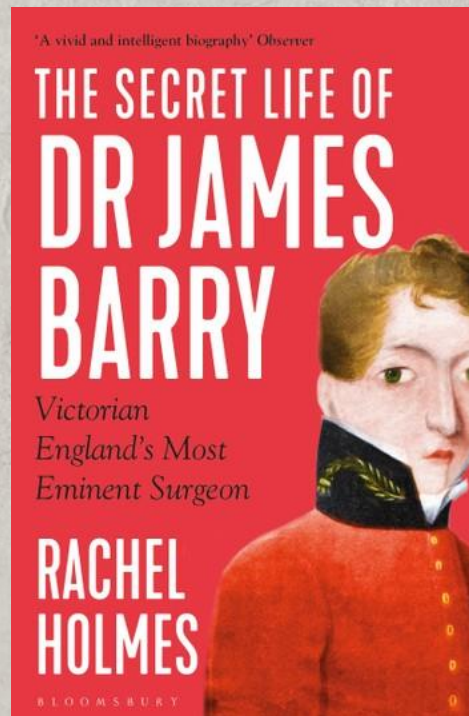




The Secret Life of Dr James Barry: Victorian England's Most Eminent Surgeon

Author: Rachel Holmes

Bloomsbury Publishing (September 2020), ISBN: 978 1 40889 157 5



Reminiscences on the James Barry Room resulting in a good read, by Col (ret'd) Frank Davis

A few days before *The Secret Life of James Barry* written by Rachel Holmes was officially published (17 September 2020) I received a copy of the book in the post, endorsed by the author "For Frank with affection and thanks Rachel". It is axiomatic that I was thrilled, and the memories of James Barry and Rachel Holmes welled up in my mind.

My introduction to James Barry is as clear a memory as Rachel's book is on my desk.

The day is the 1st of August, the year is 1966. I have just pressed the doorbell to gain entrance to the Headquarters Officers Mess Royal Army Medical Corps, the door was opened by a liveried door man and in the entrance a hand was stretched out in welcome. The greeting was by the Assistant Post Graduate Dean Brigadier Jack Lapper, there to welcome me - a diminutive, but excited Lieutenant.

I had entered through the portals of this august building to have lunch in what was the RAMC Headquarters Officers Mess Dining Room on the day I was commissioned.

Let's go back to the entrance hall, such style surrounded me; as I stood in the hall gazing around I saw on my left a door marked James Barry, a plaque marked Chavasse VC and bar and another plaque opposite for Martin Leake VC and bar. Then to my right were boards listing the Directors General and





tucked away to my right the entrance to the VC Room, such a wealth of History. Not knowing where to start my opening conversation with Brigadier Jack Lapper I asked who was James Barry, to be told that the ladies room was named in his memory.

Many years later, my career had somewhat changed from being a young lieutenant to being the Director of Medical Supplies during the first Gulf War [1991] and I needed a refuge to meet and plan vital and classified medical equipment developments. The assumption was that Saddam Hussein had manufactured nerve gas and we needed ventilators to treat the potential case load (a parallel to COVID-19) so the consultant advisers in anaesthetics asked for large quantities of oxygen and multipoint respirators. The respirators were designed and manufactured by Pneupac™ run by Rachael Weiss's father;¹ we developed and designed the oxygen concentrator in the Barry Room!

Time moved on and many years later I was very much involved with Friends of Millbank and developing the lecture programme. James Barry's name came back into my head when I read a book review of Rachel Holmes' first biography (2007) of James Barry. I decided to include a lecture on James Barry for the Friends of Millbank; so began my hunt for a lecturer and my reward was to meet Rachel Holmes, an exciting knowledgeable lady and, most importantly, an expert on the history of James Barry. The lecture was held in the Anteroom of what used to be the Officers Mess and it was very well attended and dare I say a major success...²

David, in his Newsletter, reviews *The Secret Life of Dr James Barry*.³ I very much endorse his recommendation to buy the book. Read and enjoy every word.

Chairman's notes

Colonel Frank Davis kindly mentions my own review of Rachel Holmes' excellent biography of Dr James Barry, a truly eminent and influential surgeon, with a great interest in public health and preventive medicine. This review was published in my Autumn 2020 Newsletter (4 October 2020), available on our website, and reproduced below, including an extract from the book's Introduction.

There is so much more to Dr James Barry than his post-mortem.

Col (retd) Frank Davis
Emeritus Chairman, Friends of Millbank
October 2020

¹ Pneupac™ Ventilators <https://www.smiths-medical.com/en-gb/brands/pneupac>

² Rachel Holmes delivered her lecture 'The Life of Dr James Barry' to Friends of Millbank on 23 September 2011.

³ Chairman's Autumn Newsletter – 4 October 2020 <https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/newsletters>



Friends of Millbank



'Dr James Barry was transgender before the term was introduced. This fact is not recent news.'

So starts the introduction to this new and very readable paperback (published by Bloomsbury on 17 September), a re-issue of Rachel Holmes' remarkable biography of a most extraordinary, energetic and eminent Victorian army surgeon, who rose to the top rank of Inspector General of Hospitals and was found at post mortem to be female.

The Royal Army Medical College proudly commemorated Dr Barry through the 'Barry Room', and the Queen Alexandra's Military Hospital at Millbank, whose wards were mainly named after recipients of the Victoria Cross, had the Barry Ward for female officers. My predecessor and now Emeritus Chairman, Colonel (retd) Frank Davis L/RAMC, carried on this tradition by actively assisting the author in her researches and inviting her to talk to us on 'The life of Dr James Barry', which she did on 23 September 2011.

She very generously acknowledged this support in her introduction:

The Friends of Millbank, Royal Army Medical Corps, proved loyal and supportive friends indeed to Dr James Barry, proud of his legacy and membership of their ranks.

The Friends of Millbank and the Royal Army Medical Corps remain proud of Dr James Barry's legacy and membership of their ranks



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