

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 2, 2020:
[JAMES BARRY](#)

James Barry was a high-ranking military surgeon in Queen Victoria's British Army. No one in the army or elsewhere knew that he had been born Margaret Ann Bulkeley.

THE STORY

James Barry would have been an impressive doctor in any era. Barry stood out, and not only for his considerable ability: the doctor was a hot-headed army surgeon, prone to dueling and political grandstanding; not to mention that he dressed extravagantly, dyed his hair red, kept a series of poodles (each one of them inexplicably named Psyche) and was a strict vegetarian. As a physician, Barry advocated for the care of marginalized populations including lepers, slaves, women and children; protested against patient care abuses; and researched local plant medicine for treatment of syphilis. In 1826, while serving in South Africa, Barry performed a [successful C-section](#) at a time when it was a highly untested and dangerous procedure, saving both mother and child in the process. He eventually rose to become Inspector General of Hospitals, a senior position in Queen Victoria's army.

And when James Barry died, folks were shocked to find that the army's top medical man was, in fact, a woman: Barry was biologically female.

The historical narrative suggests that the girl born as Margaret Bulkeley was guided into medicine by her mother and some helpful family friends as a means of independence and escape from her young life, which was frankly pretty awful. James Barry's lie and work raise tantalizing, ultimately unanswerable questions: was Barry transgender before terminology and culture had evolved to fully understand it? Was medicine the means to an end – and if so, which end, gender expression or professional success (or both)? Scholars and commenters [differ](#).

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

How is or isn't it problematic to read modern gender and sexuality norms backward in history?

How important is it that a historical figure's orientation or gender identity be part of scholarship and education?

Barry's story is [rumored](#) to be in film development. How might you choose to tell it?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

"[James Barry](#)," The University of Edinburgh

"[Dr. James Barry: A Woman Ahead of Her Time](#)" (Review), Guardian (UK)

Primary source: [James Barry's headstone](#), Wellcome Collection

"[LGBTQ History and Why It Matters](#)," Facing History and Ourselves