Dr. **James Miranda Steuart Barry** (c. 1789 – 25 July 1865) was a military surgeon in the [British Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Army), born in Ireland. Barry obtained a medical degree from the [University of Edinburgh Medical School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Edinburgh_Medical_School), then served first in [Cape Town](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape_Town), South Africa and subsequently in many parts of the [British Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire). Before retirement, Barry had risen to the rank of Inspector General (equivalent to [Brigadier General](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigadier-general_%28United_Kingdom%29)) in charge of [military hospitals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_hospital), the second highest medical office in the British Army. Barry not only improved conditions for wounded soldiers, but also the conditions of the native inhabitants, and performed the first [caesarean section](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesarean_section) in Africa by an Irish surgeon in which both the mother and child survived the operation.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-New_Scientist-2)

Although Barry's entire adult life was lived as a man, Barry was born Margaret Anne Bulkley[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-%22%22BBCNews%22-3) and was known as female in childhood. Barry lived as a man in both public and private life, at least in part in order to be accepted as a university student and pursue a career as a surgeon, Barry’s birth sex only becoming known to the public and to military colleagues after death.

Other than some personal correspondence, there are few sources of information about the non-military parts of Barry's life. The scant available evidence provides a skeleton onto which a great deal of myth and speculation has been added by various commentators. In his detailed research into Barry's early life,[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_Preez2008-4) Michael Du Preez states that Barry was born in [Cork](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cork_%28city%29) in 1789, a birth date based on Mrs Bulkley's description of her child being fifteen years old in a letter dated 14 January 1805.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield20165-5) Various other sources give birth dates of 1792,[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEKubbaYoung2001352%E2%80%93356-6)[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-leitch-7) 1795,[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-canada-8) and 1799, but these incorrect dates are almost certainly the result of Barry later lying about age on official documents to aid passing as a man.[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-ondb-9)

**Early Life**

Barry was the second child born to Jeremiah and Mary-Ann Bulkley, and was given the name Margaret Anne.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield20165-5) Mary-Ann Bulkley was the sister of [James Barry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28painter%29), a celebrated Irish artist and professor of painting at London's Royal Academy. Jeremiah Bulkley ran the [weigh house](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weigh_house) on Merchant's Quay, Cork. However, [anti-Catholic sentiment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Catholicism) led to his dismissal from this post. This and subsequent financial mismanagement left Mary-Ann and Margaret without the support of either Jeremiah Bulkley (whose debts led to him spending time in [the Marshalsea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_Marshalsea%2C_Dublin) prison in Dublin) or later the Bulkley’s married son John.[[10]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield20167-10) A third child appeared in the Bulkley family and was named Juliana. Although presented as being Margaret Anne's sister, it is likely that she was her daughter as a result of childhood sexual assault, as the charwoman who discovered Barry's sex when laying out the body stated that [pregnancy stretch marks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stretch_marks) were present. It is suspected that Mary Anne’s rough sailor brother, Redmond, raped Margaret when she was 14 because she and her husband Jeremiah expelled him from their home and had nothing more to do with him.

Mary Anne became estranged from her husband who was in a debtor prison in Dublin and her son, John, a trained lawyer, had spent all the money given to him by his father, leaving his mother and sister destitute. Mary Anne then decided to write to her brother the painter James Barry who lived in London and had been successful, but by now was old and eccentric. He was expelled from the Royal Academy for his drunkenness and eccentricities. He did not help his sister and niece, but they became acquainted with the painter’s friends. For a while Mary Anne, Margaret and little Juliana were taken in by the Penrose family in Ireland, who was connected to the Barry family.

Mary Anne and Margaret were in London (Juliana left in charge of the Penrose family) when the painter James Barry died. Mary Anne claimed to be an heir of her brother, but so did her sailor brother Redmond. The women were lucky in having Daniel Reardon who was a solicitor at the High Court in Chancery as their lawyer. Mother and daughter were living on monies advanced by Mr Reardon against their expectations. He took a fatherly interest in Margaret’s education, and so did Edward Fryer, a physician friend of James Barry the painter. Margaret also met General Sebastian Francisco de Miranda, a Venezuelan: he and his wife were also friend of James Barry. General Miranda was a liberal, an educated man who would attempt to free Venezuela and Colombia from Spanish rule.

Mary Anne ended up sharing her brother’s estate with her sailor brother, but they could only live on the income comfortably if Margaret had a job and the only job open to a young woman was that of governess. Unfortunately for Margaret her education had been neglected. She couldn’t speak French or play the piano sufficiently well, and she was an Irish Catholic. It was urgent that she find employment. Therefore, a conspiracy appears to have developed between Margaret, Mary-Ann Bulkley and some of the late James Barry's influential, liberal-minded friends (General [Francisco de Miranda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_de_Miranda), Dr [Edward Fryer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Fryer), who had become Margaret's personal tutor, and Daniel Reardon, the family's solicitor) to enable the teenage Margaret to enter medical school.

General Miranda was 57 and spent years trying to raise an army to free his country, Venezuela, from Spanish rule. He was hoping the British Government would assist him. His first attempt for freedom for his country had failed. General Miranda’s wife, Sarah, had been a friend of the painter James Barry and she was struck by the plight of Margaret and her mother. General Miranda was a learned man, who had a vast private library. Margaret showed him two poems she had written for her uncle Barry’s epitaph, and the general was impressed by the intellect of this young woman and gave her a reference. Margaret was so grateful to Miranda and his family that she later took his name. The plan was that Margaret would qualify as a medical doctor, then move to the new, liberal Venezuelan republic to practice medicine as a woman. However, General Miranda ended up dying in a Spanish prison having been betrayed by Simon Bolivar.

 The [University of Edinburgh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Edinburgh) was chosen and Mary-Ann and Margaret boarded a [Leith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leith) [smack](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smack_%28ship%29) on 30 November 1809.[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016pp._62%E2%80%9363_reproducing_a_letter_dated_14_December_1809_from_Mary-Ann_to_Daniel_Readon-14) And so, Margaret Anne Bulkley became James Barry, nephew of the late [James Barry RA](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28painter%29) the Irish romantic painter and remained known thus for the next 56 years.[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield201658%E2%80%9360-15) In a letter to Daniel Reardon, sent on 14 December, Barry asked for any letters addressed to Margaret Bulkley to be forwarded to Mary-Ann Bulkley (whom Barry now refers to as "my aunt"), and mentions that '...it was very usefull [[*sic*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sic)] for Mrs. Bulkley (my aunt) to have a Gentleman to take care of her on Board Ship and to have one in a strange country...'. Although the letter was signed "James Barry", the solicitor indiscreetly wrote on the back of the envelope 'Miss Bulkley, 14 December'; this crucial piece of evidence was the one which enabled researchers to finally confirm that Margaret Bulkley and James Barry were one and the same.[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016407-16)

Arriving in Edinburgh in November 1809, Barry began studies at the [Medical School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Edinburgh_Medical_School) as a 'literary and medical student'. Barry's short stature, unbroken voice, delicate features and smooth skin led many to suspect that Barry was a young boy not past puberty, and the University Senate initially attempted to block Barry's application for the final examinations due to this apparent youth.[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield201675%E2%80%9377-17) However, the [Earl of Buchan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Erskine%2C_11th_Earl_of_Buchan), a friend of Dr Fryer and Barry's late namesake, persuaded the Senate to relent and Barry qualified *[Medicinae Doctor (MD)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_of_Medicine%22%20%5Co%20%22Doctor%20of%20Medicine)* in 1812.[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEBarry1812-18)[[a]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-19) Barry then moved back to London, signing up for the Autumn Course 1812/1813 as a pupil of the United Hospitals of [Guy's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy%27s_Hospital) and [St Thomas'](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Thomas%27_Hospital), whose teachers included [Henry Cline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Cline) and celebrated surgeon [Astley Cooper](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astley_Cooper).[[19]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezeDronfield201682%E2%80%9393-20) On 2 July 1813, Barry successfully passed the examination of the [Royal College of Surgeons of England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_College_of_Surgeons_of_England).[[2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield201697%E2%80%93100-21)

Upon joining the army, Barry was commissioned as a Hospital Assistant in the British Army on 6 July 1813, taking up posts in Chelsea and then the [Royal Military Hospital in Plymouth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMNB_Devonport), achieving a promotion to Assistant Surgeon to the Forces, equivalent to lieutenant, on 7 December 1815. As a young child, Margaret had said to her brother John that she were a man she would become a soldier, so her wish came true.

**Career**

Following this military training, Barry was posted to [Cape Town](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape_Town), South Africa in 1816. Through Lord Buchan, Barry had a letter of introduction to the Governor, [Lieutenant General Lord Charles Henry Somerset](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Charles_Somerset).[[26]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016119-27) Following the successful, even spectacular, treatment of Lord Charles's sick daughter, Barry was welcomed into the family,[[27]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016123-28) maintained a close friendship with the Governor, and became his personal physician. His close friendship with Lord Charles provided him with the care for private, wealthy patients, but Barry also worked among the poor and took an interest in the plight of the colony’s black population. However, as a military surgeon it was severely disapproved for James to have private patients, therefore his status as Physician to his Excellency Household became official. He was also appointed as Vaccination Physician to the Vaccine Institution at the Cape. This was an important post, as there had been outbreaks of small pocks in the colony. For his private patients James only took expenses and sometimes payment in kind.

In October 1818 Lord Charles became seriously ill with dysentery and typhoid fever. He had high fever, slow heartbeat and mild delirium. James took care of his friend day and night, sponging him with cold water and making sure that the room was properly aired to dissipate the miasma. James was also strict on hygiene. In little over a week, Lord Charles began to recover. James and Lord Charles became even closer and his opinion of his doctor now knew no bounds. James’ position at the Cape was more elevated and secure than ever.

Margaret could never totally succeed in imitating a male persona. Some remarked on a ‘certain effeminacy in his manner’, but no one doubted that she was a man. A female military surgeon would have been ludicrous. Also, James developed a persona of a flirt, a lady’s man, a keen dancer and party goer. Despite efforts to appear masculine, witness reports comment on Barry's effeminacy[[52]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016125-53) and on a somewhat contradictory reputation - Barry had a reputation for being tactless, impatient, argumentative and opinionated,[[33]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016pp._251,_252_citing_Bradford,_Edward,_'The_Reputed_Female_Army_Surgeon',_The_Medical_Times_and_Gazette_vol._II_for_1865,_p._293.-34) but was also considered to have had a good [bedside manner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor-patient_relationship#Bedside_manner) and famous professional skill.

Only two colleagues found out that he was a woman, when he was ill and they started to examine him. He begged them to keep it a secret, which they did. Barry would never allow anyone into the room while undressing, and repeated a standing instruction that "in the event of his death, strict precautions should be adopted to prevent any examination of his person"[[33]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016pp._251,_252_citing_Bradford,_Edward,_'The_Reputed_Female_Army_Surgeon',_The_Medical_Times_and_Gazette_vol._II_for_1865,_p._293.-34) and that the body should be "buried in [the] bed sheets without further inspection",[[55]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTELoudon2002-56) indicating a desire to conceal physical sex both in life and in death.

However, in his eagerness to appear male, Barry made a serious mistake. One morning Barry was talking to Captain Cloete of the 21st Light Dragoons at Government House outer office, when a wealthy, buxom woman was introduced to Lord Charles’ office on ‘business of a private nature.’ Barry then decided in engage in masculine banter as he said with a sneer:” I say, Cloete, that’s a nice Dutch filly the Governor’s got hold of”. It was a faux pas: it wasn’t done for an officer to speak in a disrespectful manner to another officer about a lady. Cloete demanded that Barry apologise, which he refused, and Cloete pulled James’ nose. This to Barry challenging Cloete to a duel. Barry has hit in his thigh, but it was only a flesh wound. James’ bullet struck Captain Cloete in the middle of the forehead, but the bullet was deflected by the peak of his shako. James Barry and Josias Cloete remained on good terms for decades, keeping in touch as they rose through the ranks.

In 1823 Somerset appointed Barry as Colonial Medical Inspector,[[28]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016167-29) an extraordinary jump in expectations from Barry's low military rank which brought with it great responsibility. This gave James great powers. He had responsibility for prisons, civilian hospitals, regulating the treatment of lepers, the insane and the poor sick together with provision of medico-legal opinions to the colonial government. Over ten years of work in the Cape, Barry effected significant changes, among them improvements to sanitation and water systems, improved conditions for slaves, prisoners and the mentally ill, and provision of a sanctuary for the leper population.

One example this improvement in conditions, is the case of a slave who had been so severely flogged that he died. However, the report on his death declared that it was lock jaw (tetanus) that led to the man’s death. James contested this assessment of the situation vigorously, asserting that it was indeed the severe bruises inflicted on the slave the cause of death. Another change effected by Barry was the regular inspection of medicines sold by apothecaries. He also inspected the asylum and in his report he wrote of the dirt and dismal conditions and also found that at least 5 patients were not insane, but physically injured and neglected. He made sure that improvements were carried out.

 Barry also performed one of the first known successful [Caesarean sections](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesarean_section) in which both mother and child survived;[[29]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016215,_216-30) the child was christened [James Barry Munnik](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_Munnik) in Barry's honour, and the name was passed down through the family, leading to Barry's name being borne by a later Prime Minister of South Africa, [J. B. M. Hertzog](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._B._M._Hertzog). Barry also gained enemies by criticising local officials and their handling of medical matters, but the advantage of a close relationship with the Governor meant that the repercussions of these outspoken views were usually smoothed over.

Margaret and Lord Charles were very close, and Michael du Preez suggests that she saw him as a father figure, and may even have been secretly in love with him. He also suggests Lord Charles eventually found out that James was in fact a woman. I has been suggested that their relationship was more than friendship.[[50]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016154-51) Their closeness led to rumours and ultimately an accusation briefly appearing on a bridge post in Cape Town on 1 June 1824 saying that the writer had "detected Lord Charles buggering Dr Barry",[[51]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016182-52) which led to a court trial and investigation, as [homosexuality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality) was at that time strictly illegal. Lord Charles and his wife stood by James and the whole scandal was seen as slander. Despite these allegations, if Somerset was aware of Barry's sex, he did not reveal it.

Barry was promoted to Surgeon to the Forces on 22 November 1827.  Barry's subsequent posting was to [Mauritius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauritius) in 1828, where there was a cholera epidemic. Dysentery was endemic, along with problems of venereal infection and lacerated backs from floggings. Lord Charles Somerset had returned to Britain because there had been criticism of his governorship of the Cape and he had gone back home to defend his record.

In 1829, Barry risked a great deal of trouble by going absent without leave to return to England and treat Somerset, who had fallen ill, and remained there until his death in 1831. However, he had the protection of the Somerset family, several of whom had high positions in the army. Lord Charles’ much younger brother, Major General Lord FitzRoy Somerset, who was a protégé of the Duke of Wellington, took a liking to James and protected him. Instead of a reprimand, he was given a new posting to Jamaica. However, he did not take his post while Lord Charles, who was suffering from heart failure, needed his care. His symptoms were shortness of breath and swollen legs. At the funeral, James was the only one who was not a relative. Lord Charles died just as his reputation was being rehabilitated.

Barry's arrived in [Jamaica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamaica), in 1831. It was a small colony, but it had a large garrison. Fever was endemic in the West Indies. The damp conditions were a breeding ground for the malaria mosquito and the Aedes mosquito, carrier of the yellow fever virus. The garrison suffered an annual mortality rate of 300 men a year; this was ten times the mortality rate at the Cape. The cause was not understood and the patients were subjected to traditional treatment such as purgatives, bleeding, cold baths along with strychnine, which was used as a stimulant. James did not favour such aggressive treatment, concentrating more on fresh air, a nutritious diet and cleanliness. There were black female practitioners who shared Dr Barry’s approach. They were known as ‘doctresses’, who run small private institutions relying on treatment based on nourishment cleanliness. Examples of doctresses were Cubah Cornwallis, a former slave who was particularly popular among naval officers, having treated Nelson and the future Williams IV. Mary Seacole was another famous doctress. They had greater success in curing fevers than did the doctors.

The plantation owners treated their slaves harshly and objected to the banning of flogging of women slaves. A slave rebellion was inevitable, and it came at Christmas 1831. The rebellion was suppressed by the army and the navy. Twenty one surgeons were at the rear. This was James Barry’s first experience of front line military surgery. Many slaves were killed and the ring leaders executed, including Samuel Sharpe, slave and Baptist preacher. This sorry episode became known as the Baptist War. Westminster passed the Slavery Abolition Act which reached Jamaica in 1834, although it took another four years to be fully enacted.

One of James’ surgeon colleagues in Jamaica describes him thus: “His stature scarcely reached five feet. He was quite destitute of all the characters of manhood. His voice was that of an aged woman….He was always addicted to pet animals, dogs, monkeys and parrots….He delighted in scandal and gossip….Through life his irritable and impatient temper brought him into constant collision with authority…” He also became a vegetarian.

In Jamaica James acquired a new servant and companion, a young soldier from the West India Regiment called John who was to stay with Barry for the rest of his life.

The island of St Helena had been under the jurisdiction of the East India Company, but in 1833 St Helena came under Crown control, which meant that it had to be garrisoned and medical staff was required. In 1834 James Barry was required to transfer to St Helena to take up the post of Principal Medical Officer. However, he sailed to Britain before taking his post. The records show that Dr James Barry was at home on leave on full pay for one year and two months. This coincided with his mother, Mary Anne Bulkley being destitute and having applied for admission to the House of Industry, Cork, a workhouse run jointly with the Lunatic Asylum. She was in her seventies. Because she was the sister of the celebrated painter James Barry, this fact was reported in newspapers throughout Ireland and eventually in *The Times*: “Will the Society of Arts suffer this? The sister of the great genius….is in want and unrelieved!”

Her son John had joined the navy, but had little money. He was now married and was living in Kent. Margaret had joined the army as a man. However, it looks as if Margaret found out what was happening to her mother and saved her from the House of Industry, something unheard of. In 1835 we find Mrs Bulkley living in Kent with her son John and his family.

In 1836 James Barry and his manservant John departed to the island of [Saint Helena](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Helena). During the journey there was an outbreak of small pocks. James had been inoculated, so he could care for those who were sick. They reached Cape Town where the process of quarantine began. All clothing and bedding was burnt including James’ expensive pillows. These were probably padding that Margaret wore to enhance her frame and make her appear more masculine. Once settled in St Helena James inspected the local hospitals. He found the 91st Highland Regiment Hospital ‘clean and well arranged’. However, the Civil Hospital had untidy beds and there was a large number of women with venereal diseases. Also, venereal and fever patients were mixed and there was no proper division between male and female patients. This was deemed improper both morally and medically. He also objected to male attendants on female patients and insisted on the immediate hiring of a respectable woman as Matron. Her duties would also involve medical care.

James was later arrested and court marshalled for a trivial motive. He needed daily supplies for his patients in the Civil Hospital, and relied upon Assistant Commissary General Francis Edward Knowles, who was an awkward man to deal with. Knowles refused James his medical supplies, so instead of writing to the Governor of the Island, he wrote directly to the Secretary of State in London. This was regarded as "conduct unbecoming of the character of an Officer and a Gentleman". Barry was found not guilty, and honourably acquitted.[[32]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016268%E2%80%93271-33)

In 1840 Barry was posted to the [Leeward Islands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leeward_Islands) and [Windward Islands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windward_Islands) of the West Indies, there focusing on medicine, management and improving the conditions of the troops, and receiving a promotion to [Principal Medical Officer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principal_Medical_Officer). James was now the Army’s fifth most senior staff surgeon. One of the places he was stationed was Port of Spain and the town was crowded with Indians, Spanish Americans, French, English, Bengal coolies, negroes: people from all sorts of places, speaking all sorts of languages. It had been taken by the British in 1797, it was still predominantly Latin. It was an unhealthy place with swampy ground. The annual mortality rates were about 10% for whites and 4% for blacks. As well as fevers, small pox and tuberculosis there was the problem of chronic alcoholism. This was because the soldiers had a rum ration. Soldiers could still be flogged and the cat o’ tails was used. The regimental surgeons were required to be present – with authority to stop the proceeding if they judged it dangerous. Five hundred lashes were common.

In 1842 James succumbed to malaria and in 1845, he contracted [yellow fever](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_fever). In October of that year, with his constitution damaged, James left for England for sick leave. After being cleared for duty, Barry was posted to [Malta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malta) in 1846 as Principal Medical Officer. Malta had been British since the Treaty of Paris 1814.It was a popular posting – its climate and lively social life attracted officers of both the Army and the Navy. A lot of trust was being placed in James by Lord FitzRoy. In September 1848 there was an outbreak of what was diagnosed as cholera. Some did not agree with this diagnosis, including James Barry. This can be explained because there were several other diseases that had similar symptoms to cholera. Also, sporadic cholera was seen as much less dangerous than Asiatic cholera. It is possible that stating that there was no Asiatic cholera in Malta James was being politically sensitive. If word got out that it was in Malta it could ruin trade, destroying the livelihoods of local people as well as harming the Empire’s economy. Therefore, doctors had to be absolutely sure before a diagnosis was given out.

The following posting was to [Corfu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corfu) in 1851, which brought with it a promotion to the rank of Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals on 16 May, equivalent to [lieutenant colonel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieutenant_colonel). From here, Barry temporarily visited the [Crimea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimea) on leave - as a request to be posted there officially had been denied - where a famous altercation took place between Barry and [Florence Nightingale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence_Nightingale) at [Scutari Hospital](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selimiye_Barracks). He reprimanded her in front of a crowd of spectators, because she wore a simple cap, despite the heat of the sun. After Barry's death Nightingale wrote that:

“I never had such a blackguard rating in all my life – I who have had more than any woman – than from this Barry sitting on his horse, while I was crossing the Hospital Square with only my cap on in the sun. "He" kept me standing in the midst of quite a crowd of soldiers, Commissariat, servants, camp followers, etc., etc., every one of whom behaved like a gentleman during the scolding I received while "he" behaved like a brute . . . After "he" was dead, I was told that (Barry) was a woman . . . I should say that (Barry) was the most hardened creature I ever met.”

Finally, in 1857 Barry was posted to Canada (Montreal), and granted the local rank of [Inspector General](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inspector_General#United_Kingdom) of Hospitals (equivalent to [Brigadier General](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigadier_General)) in 25 September. For the first time a woman had achieved general rank in the British Army. More than a century and a half would go by before it happened again. (in September 2015 Major General Susan Ridge became the first official female general in the British Army as Head of the Army Legal Services). [[36]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-37) In that position, Barry fought for better food, sanitation and proper medical care for prisoners, as well as soldiers and their families. He was deeply concerned with alcoholism among the soldiers’ wives. A major problem was that the women suffered due to a complete lack of privacy. James asked the Army to consider: “a woman, humbly born, but modestly and religiously educated, who suddenly found herself in her husband’s barrack room with ten or twenty men behaving as soliers will. Subjected to the coarseness, the foul language, the aggressive and obscene conversation, she becomes frightened and disgusted.” Therefore, Dr Barry recommended that separate accommodation be provided for married couples as a matter of policy.

As time went by, James who was now ten years older that the records show (in his 70s) was becoming more eccentric. For example, he publicly insulted without provocation, the Dean and Rector of Montreal in presence of the Bishop and Clergy of this place. Besides, he was serious ill with bronchitis. In April 1859 James was relieved of his duties and on 14th May he boarded a ship for home. James Barry died in July 1865 of epidemic diarrhoea. Some of James’ belonging were lost due the sinking of the steamer John Bull: she was wrecked near the eastern island, the Ile d’Orleans, a dozen miles from Quebec. In the interior of a lid of Barry trunk there was a collage of fashion plates clipped from ladies magazines- a parade of gowns, bonnets, hats and coiffures pasted to the musty leather: a catalogue of loss and longing.



Barry (left) with John, a servant, and Barry's dog Psyche, c. 1862, Jamaica

**Death**

Wherever Barry served across the [British Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire), improvements were made to sanitary conditions and the conditions and diet of both the common soldier and other, under-represented groups. Barry was outraged by unnecessary suffering, and took a heavy-handed and sometimes tactless approach to demanding improvements for the poor and underprivileged which often incited anger from officials and military officers; on several occasions Barry was both arrested and demoted for the extremity of this behaviour. Barry held strict and unusually modern views about nutrition, being completely [vegetarian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vegetarianism) and [teetotal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teetotalism), and, while keeping most personal relationships distant, was very fond of pets, particularly a beloved poodle named Psyche.

Despite protesting the decision, Barry was forcefully retired by the army on 19 July 1859 due to ill health and old age, and was succeeded as inspector general of hospitals by [David Dumbreck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Dumbreck). He and John visited Jamaica in 1862. After a quiet retirement in London, Barry finally died from [dysentery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dysentery) on 25 July 1865. The identity of the woman who discovered the truth of Barry's sex is disputed, but she was probably a charwoman who also laid out the dead.[[42]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016390-391-43) The charwoman, after failing to elicit payment for her services, sought redress in another way; she visited Barry's physician, Major D. R. McKinnon, who had issued the death certificate upon which Barry was identified as male. The woman claimed that Barry's body had been biologically female and had marks suggesting Barry had at one point borne a child.[[43]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEdu_PreezDronfield2016378%E2%80%93379-44) When McKinnon refused to pay her, she took the story to the press, and the situation became public. It was discussed in an exchange of letters between George Graham of the General Register Office, and Dr McKinnon.[[4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEKubbaYoung2001354%E2%80%93355-45)

Sir,

It has been stated to me that Inspector-General Dr James Barry, who died at 14 Margaret Street on 25 July 1865, was after his death found to be female.

As you furnished the Certificate as to the cause of his death, I take the liberty of asking you whether what I have heard is true, and whether you yourself ascertained that he was a woman and apparently had been a mother?

Perhaps you may decline answering these questions; but I ask them not for publication but for my own information.

Your faithful servant

George Graham

McKinnon's response was as follows:

Sir,

I had been intimately acquainted with the doctor for good many years, both in London and the West Indies and I never had any suspicion that Dr Barry was a woman. I attended him during his last illness, (previously for bronchitis, and the affection for diarrhoea). On one occasion after Dr Barry’s death at the office of Sir Charles McGregor, there was the woman who performed the last offices for Dr Barry was waiting to speak to me. She wished to obtain some prerequisites [sic in source, but has to be a slip for perquisites, "perks"] of his employment, which the Lady who kept the lodging house in which Dr Barry died had refused to give her. Amongst other things she said that Dr Barry was a female and that I was a pretty doctor not to know this and she would not like to be attended by me. I informed her that it was none of my business whether Dr Barry was a male or a female, and that I thought that she might be neither, viz. an imperfectly developed man. She then said that she had examined the body, and was a perfect female and farther that there were marks of him having had a child when very young. I then enquired how have you formed that conclusion. The woman, pointing to the lower part of her stomach, said ‘from marks here. I am a maried [[*sic*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sic)] woman and the mother of nine children and I ought to know.’

The woman seems to think that she had become acquainted with a great secret and wished to be paid for keeping it. I informed her that all Dr Barry’s relatives were dead, and that it was no secret of mine, and that my own impression was that Dr Barry was a Hermaphrodite. But whether Dr Barry was a male, female, or hermaphrodite I do not know, nor had I any purpose in making the discovery as I could positively swear to the identity of the body as being that of a person whom I had been acquainted with as Inspector-General of Hospitals for a period of years.

Yours faithfully,

D.R. McKinnon

After the matter was made public, many people claimed to have "known it all along". The British Army, seeking to suppress the story, sealed all records of Barry for the next 100 years.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-New_Scientist-2) The historian Isobel Rae gained access to the army records in the 1950s, and concluded that James Barry the painter was indeed Barry's uncle.[[45]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-sm20081230-46) Barry was buried in [Kensal Green Cemetery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kensal_Green_Cemetery) under the name *James Barry* and full military rank. It was claimed by several sources that the manservant who always attended Barry returned to [Jamaica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamaica), but his actual fate is unknown.

## Intersex controversy[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=James_Barry_(surgeon)&action=edit&section=5" \o "Edit section: Intersex controversy)]

[Kubba & Young 2001](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#CITEREFKubbaYoung2001), p. 355 picked up on Major McKinnon's statement that he did not know whether Barry was "male, female or hermaphrodite" and suggested that it might be more appropriate to say that Barry was "[hermaphrodite](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermaphrodite)" [or [intersex](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersex)] rather than "female", and "may have had ambiguous genitalia". These suppositions are based on the premise that "Concealment of one's sex for ... 40 years in the British Army, is simply unbelievable". However, [du Preez & Dronfield 2016](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#CITEREFdu_PreezDronfield2016) show how Barry might have been able to conceal this secret from all but a few people, and those who did know did not reveal it while Barry was alive. N. Turner has commented on Kubba and Young's conclusion that the belief in an intersex condition was based on "vanishingly slim evidence".[[57]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-turner-58)

[Holmes 2003](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#CITEREFHolmes2003) also raises the possibility of Barry being intersex, but acknowledges the impossibility of knowing, expressing surprise that this is a problem for so many people. The suggestion that Barry may have been intersex has been criticised for both biological and social reasons. In a review of Holmes' biography, [Loudon 2002](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#CITEREFLoudon2002) firmly rejects the implication that Barry might have been intersex.

## In popular culture[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=James_Barry_(surgeon)&action=edit&section=6)]

The character of Barry has been played by [Anna Massey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Massey) in an episode of the BBC [drama-documentary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Docudrama) *A Skirt Through History*.[[60]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-BFI-61)

Barry's life is the subject of the historical novel *James Miranda Barry* (published in the United States as *The Doctor*) by [Patricia Duncker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patricia_Duncker).[[61]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-FOOTNOTEDuncker2000-62)

The Canadian aspect of Barry's career was dramatised in an episode of the series *Heritage Television*, produced by then-independent superchannel CHCH in Hamilton, and hosted by Canadian historian [Pierre Berton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Berton).

A 2004 play, *Whistling Psyche* by [Sebastian Barry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sebastian_Barry), imagines a meeting between James Barry and [Florence Nightingale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence_Nightingale).[[62]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-curtainup-63)

As of April 2018, a film is said to by in early production, in which Rachel Weisz plans to produce and star, on the life of Dr. James Barry.[[63]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Barry_%28surgeon%29#cite_note-Maureen_Dowd_The_New_York_Times_2018-64) No further information on this has been made public beyond what Weisz herself has divulged via the sourced New York Times interview.