



**Ann Heilmann, *Neo-/Victorian Biographilia and James Miranda Barry: A Study in Transgender and Transgenre* (Palgrave, 2018)**

Senior colonial officer from 1816 to 1859, Inspector General James Barry was a pioneering medical reformer who after his death in 1865 became the object of intense speculation when rumours arose about his sex. This cultural history of Barry's afterlives in Victorian to contemporary (neo-Victorian) life-writing ('biographilia') examines the textual and performative strategies of biography, biofiction and biodrama of the last one and a half centuries. In exploring the varied reconstructions of the historical personality across time, the book illustrates that the 'real' James Barry does not exist, any more than does the 'faithful' biographical, biofictional or biodramatic rendering of a life in a generically 'stable' and discrete form. The factual Barry will always elude us because from the very outset the historical character disappeared into the myth and shifting, sometimes simplistic, at other times more multi-layered representations of whatever 'James Barry' came to signify for the specific cultural, gendered and socio-political contexts of the period. A striking illustration of the submersion of documentary sources in the omnipresence of the mythos is provided by the portrait of the dignified and self-possessed Barry featured in neo-Victorian life-writing both here and elsewhere. Resident in early nineteenth-century Cape Town, this James Barry is not the military surgeon who is the subject of this volume but a wine merchant and member of the Legislative Assembly at the Cape.[1] He is, however, the Barry who captures the historical moment of our own time. This is how we envisage Barry: fully embodied and supremely at ease with his identity.

Ultimately, all cultural representations of Barry, then, speak potently to the myth-making powers of neo-/Victorian biographilia. What Barry represents and how he is represented invariably pinpoints the speculative and the performative: reflections and refractions in the looking glass of genre. Just as 'James Miranda Barry', as a subject of cultural enquiry, comes into being and remains in view in the act of crossing gender, so neo-Victorian life-writing constitutes itself through similar acts of boundary transgression. Transgender thus finds its most typical expression in transgenre.

---

[1] I am grateful to David Obermayer, University Archivist, Forsyth Library, Fort Hays State University, US, for drawing my attention to the two James Barrys.