THE GREAT PRETENDERS

'… I had a strong inclination for the army …'

Kit Cavanagh

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1667–1739

Soldier

Kit Cavanagh was born into a family of maltsters in Dublin. Soldiering was in Kit's blood: her father was a Protestant, but he fought and was wounded on the Catholic King James II's side in the Jacobite wars of 1689.

Kit was a capable girl who enjoyed spending her time on the family farm in Leixlip, County Kildare. But when she was a teenager a relative of her mother's seduced her at the farm, and Kit subsequently fled to her aunt's pub in Dublin. She lived with her aunt for four years, helping out and learning the pub business, which she inherited when her aunt died. Shortly afterwards, Kit fell in love with and married one of the servants, Richard Walsh. They lived happily together for four years until one day, in 1692, Richard disappeared without warning or explanation.

Kit was pregnant with their third child and was distraught by her husband's disappearance. She searched for him everywhere, but for a whole year she heard nothing. Then she received a letter from the Netherlands. It was from Richard, describing how he'd got blind drunk on that last day in Dublin City and had woken up in Holland – he had been forcibly conscripted to fight for King William III against the French. Kit immediately put her children in her mother's care, cut her hair, dressed in one of Richard's suits and enlisted in the Duke of Marlborough's infantry under the name of Christian Walsh. She was twenty-six years old.

Immediately nicknamed the 'pretty dragoon' by her comrades,

Kit heard what she called the 'rough music' of cannon fire almost immediately and she was wounded in her first action, at the disastrous Battle of Landen (1693). She recovered and the following year was back in action, but was quickly taken prisoner by the French. She was exchanged after nine days, and returned to the front. All the time she continued to enquire after her 'brother', Richard Walsh, but no information was forthcoming.

This disappointment did not impede what Kit calls in her autobiography her 'natural gaiety of temper', and she admits she 'lived very merrily' with her comrades in their winter quarters. Amazingly, she managed to do this without being discovered: she ate with them, drank with them, slept with them, played cards with them, even urinated alongside them by using what she describes as a 'silver tube with leather straps'. No one was ever the wiser.

So convincing was Kit as a dragoon that when a young girl was attacked by a sergeant in the regiment, Kit fought for the girl's honour and wounded the sergeant in a duel, whereupon the grateful girl fell in love with Kit. She 'got off from this *amour* without loss of credit' when she cited her inferior rank as an impediment to marriage. On another occasion, a prostitute claimed that Kit was the father of her baby. Rather than prove the mother a liar and give away her own secret, Kit admitted paternity and paid for the child's maintenance.

Things continued in this manner until the end of the war in 1697. Kit returned to Dublin, still having had no news of Richard. By now she had grown resigned to the loss of her dear husband, but upon the renewal of hostilities in 1702, she discovered that her

'martial inclinations' had been awakened and she promptly re-enlisted. She spent the next two years fighting under the Duke of Marlborough's command, enjoying the marauding and looting that followed every battle, and intermittently enquiring after Richard. She was wounded in the hip at Schellenberg, but managed to get through Blenheim unscathed – and with her secret still safe.

In the autumn of 1704, as she was guarding prisoners after the Battle of Hochstat, Kit was idly gazing at a soldier from another regiment being embraced by a Dutch woman. The soldier turned – and Kit recognised her husband, Richard. Perhaps a touch unreasonably – it had been twelve years after all – she immediately felt herself 'divided between rage and love, resentment and compassion'. She secretly made herself known to him, but as a punishment for his infidelity and because she still had a 'strong inclination for the army', she demanded they live apart so she could continue her military career. Richard kept her secret and they carried on with the war in separate regiments.

In 1706 Kit was wounded again, and this time, to the general amazement of all, it was finally discovered that she was a woman. On regaining consciousness and realising her secret was out, her main worry seems to have been financial: she feared she might be 'prevented in [her] marauding, which was very beneficial'. However, instead of being drummed out of the army, Kit became a celebrity across the ranks for her quick-wittedness and 'indomitable courage'. She remarried her husband, on the battlefield this time, and was allowed to continue in his regiment as a 'sutler' – a kind of black marketeer, thief and cook combined.

But Kit's 'martial inclinations' were not entirely laid to rest. When she discovered her husband's Dutch ex-mistress had followed his regiment, she attacked the poor woman and cut off her nose. She then had her placed on a 'turning stool' – a charming local punishment for minor misdemeanours, whereby the victim was spun around at high speed until he or she vomited. 'The violence of my temper, which was a very jealous one,' an abashed Kit afterwards admitted, 'pushed me on too far in this business.' The Dutch woman had her nose stitched back on and retired, defeated. Sadly, Kit was destined to lose Richard one way or another. Six months after their remarriage, Richard was killed at the Battle of Malplaquet. A heartbroken Kit trawled the battlefield and turned over more than 200 dead bodies before she found her husband's corpse.

Within three months of Richard's death, Kit had married again, to a soldier by the name of Hugh Jones. It is possible this was a hasty match that she repented soon afterwards because when Jones was killed in action only one year later, she admitted she felt nothing like the grief which had seized her when she found her 'dear Richard Welsh [sic] among the dead'.

Two years later the war was over and Kit went to London, where she found her fame had preceded her. Living on pensions from Queen Anne and the Duke of Marlborough, she travelled back to Dublin. Two of the children she had left ten years earlier were dead, and the third was in the workhouse. She started another pub, but then her 'evil genius' for penniless soldiers entangled her in a third marriage with one named Davies, who, she said bitterly, always 'spent more than he got', mostly on drink.

The years that Kit had spent on the move with her regiment left her unsuited for settled living, and she spent the next twenty-seven years moving between Ireland and England. She lived on charity from her admirers among the top army brass and other members of 'the quality' who knew her story. She started and lost several pub businesses, and eventually managed to get her husband a job in the Chelsea Hospital, where she herself became an out-pensioner. She ended her days there and was buried with full military honours at St Margaret's Church, Westminster.

Anne Bonny

c.1698–c.1720s

Pirate

In the early eighteenth century, just over 100 years after the Elizabethan heyday of English and Spanish piracy, there were still motley crews of French, British and American colonials on the high seas. Women are rarely heard of in these situations, and those that do get a passing mention in history were probably 'companions' to the real pirates. But one Irishwoman stands out from this unappetising crowd and is able to claim the dubious honour of being a pirate in her own right.

Anne Bonny was born in County Cork *c.*1698, the daughter of a servant, Mary Brennan, and her married employer, local lawyer William Cormac. Due to the scandal caused by the illegitimate birth, Mary, William and baby Anne left Ireland forever and fled

to the New World. They settled in Charleston, South Carolina, where William bought and ran a successful plantation. Anne's mother died and Anne grew up the spoilt mistress of a large house who was used to having her own way.

Anne was strong and sturdy and had a ferocious temper. In one account of her early life (*A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates* by Captain Charles Johnson *alias* Daniel Defoe), she is said to have knifed her maid for some minor misdemeanour. When she was the victim of a rape attempt, she beat up the would-be rapist so badly he took to his bed to recuperate. She is also said to have become an expert fencer and markswoman – skills that were to stand her in good stead later on.

The undisciplined Carolinas were full of people running away from past sins, and there was plenty of opportunity for a young woman with a wayward streak and an inheritance to get into trouble. As soon as she was old enough, Anne fulfilled the worst expectations of all who knew her by marrying one of the less savoury characters of the area – a pirate named James Bonny. Her long-suffering father appears to have disowned her at this point.

The couple gravitated to New Providence, in what is now Nassau, in the Bahamas, probably at James's suggestion because of its reputation as a gathering place for renegade seamen. Surrounded by a wide choice of men of a certain type, it wasn't long before Anne tired of her charmless partner and attached herself to a succession of lovers, eventually hooking up with someone quite exalted in pirate circles: Captain John Rackham, also known as Calico Jack.

When he found out, James Bonny charged his young wife with

desertion and took her to court where, according to one of the more overheated stories, Anne was forced to appear naked. Bonny succeeded in getting a court order to prevent Anne and Jack from meeting. Legend has it that, to remedy the situation, Calico Jack suggested James Bonny put his wife up for auction and pocket the proceeds. This was not as bizarre a suggestion as it sounds, since divorce law in the early eighteenth century was largely focussed on compensating the divorced husband for the loss of his 'property'. In any case, Anne's response to this was to ignore the court order, pull on a pair of men's breeches and elope with Calico Jack to his ship, *The Revenge*.

Once on board, Anne developed her reputation for a wild temper, but she was apparently competent and well able to use both sword and pistol in the performance of her duties, which mainly involved commandeering the goods of other ships. On one trip she met Mary Read from England – also dressed as a man and living the life of a pirate. Mary had actually been brought up as a boy in a vain attempt by her mother to secure an inheritance. When this ruse failed, Mary had continued in her male persona and run away, first to the army and then to sea. By the time she met Anne she was a pirate of some experience and was one of Calico Jack's lieutenants.

Inevitably the women's relationship has been the subject of much erotic speculation by earlier historians, many of whom preferred to believe that they had a lesbian relationship or – even better – enjoyed a *menage à trois* with Calico Jack. Anne was 'not reserved in point of chastity,' as one biographer waspishly points out, and she 'took [Mary] for a handsome lad'. The story goes on

to relate how Anne, intent on having her wicked way with the 'handsome lad', followed Mary into a cabin, threw her on the bed and ripped open her blouse to reveal not only her intentions but also her not inconsiderable bosom. The startled Mary startled Anne in turn when she responded by ripping open her own blouse. However, setting aside speculations, it is just about possible to believe, 200 years later, that Anne and Mary had a platonic relationship and worked, lived and fought side-by-side.

Around this time the British government issued a King's Proclamation pardoning all pirates who gave themselves up. Calico Jack immediately availed himself of this opportunity to lengthen his life expectancy, but as soon as money ran short and he didn't know how to get any more, he reneged on the deal and went back to sea. Soon Jack, Anne, Mary and the crew of *The Revenge* were up to their old tricks in the waters around Jamaica.

In November 1720 a pirate-hunter named Captain Barnet attacked *The Revenge.* Legend has it that Anne and Mary were the only two that stayed to fight on the deck, and became so enraged as the rest of the pirates, including Calico Jack, cowered below that, in between fending off Barnet's men, they fired their pistols into the hold, killing one of their own comrades and wounding others. Despite the women's valiant efforts, the ship was overcome and the whole crew was taken to Jamaica and charged with piracy. All were found guilty and hanged.

All, that is, except for Anne Bonny and Mary Read. The two notorious women were tried separately and each claimed that she was pregnant, which they knew automatically postponed their date of execution. Pregnant or not, Mary Read died shortly

afterwards of what was called prison fever – probably dysentery or something similar. As for Anne, she had one more meeting with Calico Jack on the day he was being taken to the gallows. Instead of comforting her hapless ex-lover, she roundly berated him, telling him that had he 'fought like a man [on *The Revenge*], he need not have been hanged like a dog'.

Nothing more is known of Anne Bonny. It is possible that her rich and influential father took pity on her and got her off as she seems to have had at least one reprieve. One thing is certain: there is no record of her having been hanged.

Dr James Barry

c.1799–1865

Army surgeon and Inspector-General of British Hospitals

The facts of the life of James Barry are more difficult to swallow than fiction. There are several mysteries surrounding her story, including her parentage and her correct age, but most puzzling of all is the question of her gender.

In the first years of the nineteenth century, a woman named Mary Ann Bulkeley came to London from Cork with her two daughters. Telling a sad story of having been forcibly ejected from the family home by her husband and son, she came to her brother looking for charity. Her brother was the talented but undisciplined artist James Barry RA (*d.*1806); their parents were well-known shipbuilders in Cork City.

In London, James Barry's main patrons were two powerful and influential men: a Venezuelan war hero named General Francisco Miranda (*d.*1812) and David Erskine Stuart, the earl of Buchan (*d.*1829). All three men were radicals in their own way – influenced, for example, by the feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft – and all three spotted early on that the younger of Mary Ann's two children was an extremely intelligent and precocious little girl. Such was her brilliance and promise, especially in her favourite science subjects, that it wasn't long before they decided she should live a life that fulfilled her potential. Instead of the female lottery of spinsterhood and poverty or marriage and an early death in childbirth, they believed Mary Ann's daughter should do the unthinkable: she should have a career in medicine.

The problem, of course, was that she was a girl. Girls, brilliant or otherwise, simply did not go to university and qualify as doctors (it would be another seventy years before the pioneers of the women's movement in Britain would make this possible). There was only one solution: Mary Ann's daughter had to be a boy. In 1809, swamped in a high-collared shirt and greatcoat, Mary Ann's small, slight, red-haired daughter enrolled at Edinburgh University as a boy and signed her name for the first time as James Miranda Stuart Barry, after her benefactors. Thus began a deception that was to last for the rest of her life.

Barry claimed to be ten years old at enrolment, but she may have been up to four years older than that. She was small and she had no Adam's apple, so she needed to pretend to be a prepubescent boy to deflect attention from her appearance. Nobody passed any remarks about the shy but clever student, and Dr Barry passed

out of Edinburgh University with flying colours in 1812. A year later, having gained some work experience in St Thomas's Hospital, London, Barry enlisted in the British Army medical corps. She spent three years in Plymouth as a hospital assistant, and in 1816 was posted to the Cape colony as an army staff-surgeon – the start of a lifetime's service to the British Empire.

In Cape Town there was gossip about Barry's effeminate appearance and high, squeaky voice. A writer named the 'Count de Las Cases', who published a *Journal of the Private Life and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon at St Helena* during Barry's lifetime, speculated in print after meeting Barry, who had come to examine his sick son. 'The grave Doctor,' wrote the Count, '… was a boy of eighteen, with the form, the manners and the voice of a woman, [but] was described to be an absolute phenomenon. I was informed that he had obtained his diploma at the age of thirteen, after the most rigid examination, and that he had performed extraordinary cures at the Cape.'

Phenomenally skilled she may have been, but Barry was also known for her phenomenally hot temper. On one occasion, a fellow officer protested against some of her more acidic remarks about one of the high-born ladies of the garrison, and Barry challenged him to a duel. They fought with pistols but, fortunately, neither was hurt, and both were able to retire with honour.

In Cape Town the dapper doctor was generally a favourite with the ladies because she was intelligent, fastidious, an excellent dancer – and, of course, she knew just how to talk to women. Privately, Barry spent a lot of time with the governor of the Cape colony, Sir Charles Somerset. Their relationship, obviously

intimate though punctuated by ferocious rows, was almost lover-like in its intensity. Did she, a woman in her early twenties, trapped behind the myth of manhood, nurture an unrequited love for the governor? The biographer June Rose speculates that, not only was there a love affair, but that James Barry actually bore the governor's child.

Professionally, Barry was a stickler. Although skilled, she made herself unpopular by expecting the same high standards of everyone around her that she demanded of herself. She insisted on the modern fad of strict hygiene in hospitals – and added the outlandish idea of treating all patients equally, even the non-whites, lepers and lunatics. This policy extended to the prison hospitals, including that of the notorious Robben Island where serious offenders were housed. Barry also forced through smallpox inoculations some twenty years before these vaccinations became compulsory back in England. She also improved the standard of nursing care thirty years before Florence Nightingale by employing only respectable women as nurses instead of the usual drunks and thieves who regarded it as a cushy job.

In 1822, after six years' sterling service, Barry's superiors recognised her efficiency and she was promoted to Colonial Medical Inspector. Now she was in charge, the rather autocratic Barry continued to make herself unpopular with her colleagues in the Cape. This culminated in 1825 in a clash with the Colonial Medical Board over who had the final say on prisoners' welfare. The Board had decided one particular prisoner, Aaron Smith, was insane; Barry examined him and declared him sane. She took on all the powers at the Cape – including the governor – but eventually lost the case. For

her pains, she received a suspended prison sentence for contempt of court and was demoted to Assistant Staff-Surgeon.

Despite her colleagues' impatience with her outspokenness and fastidiousness, Barry was a brilliant and respected doctor. In 1826 she was called out to an emergency childbirth. The mother was dying before her eyes, so Barry made the decision to perform a dangerous operation that she had only ever heard about and that in almost all other cases had resulted in the mother's death – a Caesarean section. It was only the second time on record this operation had been performed successfully, but thanks to the doctor's speed and dexterity both mother and child survived. The baby boy was named after Barry, and that baby's godson, named after him in turn, would be a future president of South Africa: James Barry Munnik. This exploit guaranteed Barry 'a celebrity for skill as a surgical operator' (*Manchester Guardian*, 21 August 1865).

In 1828, Barry was posted to Mauritius, but she did not like it and left soon after. After home-leave in 1831 she was posted to Jamaica, where she worked herself into poor health looking after the interests of the garrison's soldiers. By 1836 she was on the island of St Helena and was promoted to Principal Medical Officer. Here the marginal groups she chose for special protection were the thousands of female paupers and people of colour on the islands. On St Helena she disobeyed her superior on a matter of principle – this time because he was blocking supplies for her hospital – and eventually went over his head to the War Office. The result of this rash action was that she was arrested and court-martialled for 'conduct unbecoming to an officer and a gentleman'.

This was the lowest point in Barry's career. The old boys' network ganged up against her and, despite her brilliance, the doctor who had devoted twenty years of her life to healing the sick in the outposts of the Empire was once again demoted from Principal Medical Officer to Staff-Surgeon and sent home on extended leave.

Her next posting, in 1838, to the Windward and Leeward Islands in the West Indies, nearly killed her. She contracted yellow fever, and it was during her illness that she was seen naked in bed by two young doctors, one of whom was able to confirm, more than forty years later, that Dr James Barry had indeed been a woman.

When she recovered, Barry fought back to regain her exalted position – and her efforts paid off. In 1846 she was posted to Malta where she was specially commended by the Duke of Wellington for her work in improving public sanitation systems and for her role in quashing the 1848 typhus epidemic. This commendation from such a luminary eventually led to James Barry being made Inspector-General of British Hospitals – the highest rank a doctor could attain. This new position gave her immense status as an officer and as a doctor.

After Malta she was transferred to Corfu, where, by 1852, she was dealing with the wounded from the Crimean War. Always interested in the welfare of the common soldier, Barry spent her leave in the Crimea in 1855. Inevitably, she fell out with the famous and rather officious Florence Nightingale, whom she scolded and who later referred to Barry as a 'brute'.

In 1857 Barry received her last and most dismal posting. In its

wisdom, the army transported the doctor who had served in tropical climes for forty years to the freezing wastes of Canada. Not surprisingly, Barry's health took a turn for the worse and despite being as enthusiastic in her work as ever, she retired in 1859 with a small pension and chronic bronchitis.

She returned to England and took rooms in Marylebone, London, where she lived out the remaining six years of her life in increasing eccentricity. The only creatures allowed near her were John, her West Indian servant, and her pets – a succession of dogs named Psyche, a cat and a parrot. She lived simply and kept to a strict vegetarian and teetotal diet. Despite these precautions, in the hot summer months of 1865 when dysentery was rife in filthy London, James Barry succumbed to the sickness she had managed to avoid her whole life in the tropics.

After her death, Barry's female gender was confirmed by a woman employed to lay her out. The woman even claimed that there was evidence that Barry had had a child. The story was widely circulated and, in a final injustice, Barry's military funeral was abandoned. The Establishment ignored the claim – it would never do that the Inspector-General had been a mere woman – and gagged the press. But the story of a woman who sacrificed her womanhood so she could do the job she loved has refused to go away.