

# ROBERT BARRIE ROSE

1929–2015

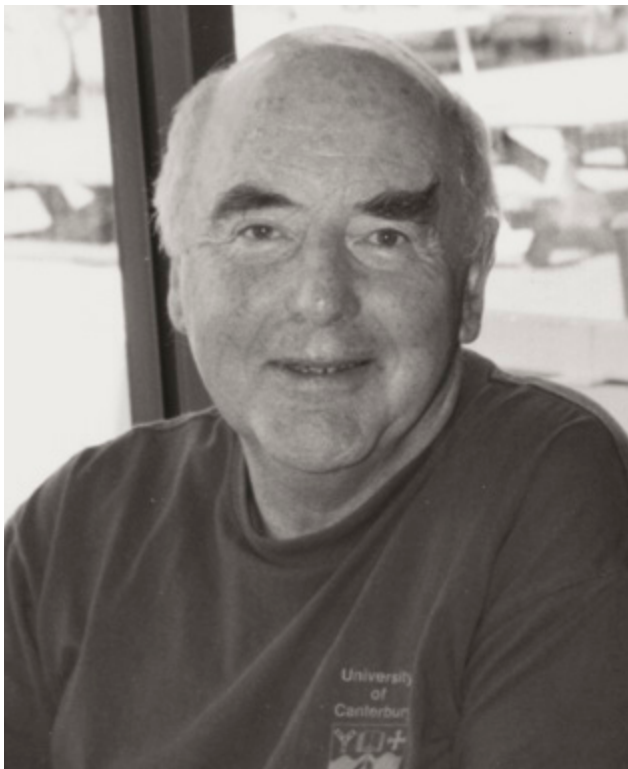


PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ROSE FAMILY

Robert Barrie Rose, eminent scholar of the French Revolution, was born in Bebington, England, on 10 July 1929, only child of a railway clerk and his wife. The mother encouraged her boy in thought and reading, historical and science fiction dominant; the family lived in Chester, its ambience further stirring young Barrie's feeling for the past. At Chester's City Grammar School arose interest in social forces, the Depression and war having their part. English and geography were among Barrie's academic interests, but his achievement in history was strongest; one teacher was expert in fact-marshalling, while another went beyond rote to concentrate on problematic issues. Extra-curricula activities included membership of a coterie that deepened this consciousness, in a radical way. Soviet Russia's role in the defeat of Nazism aroused sympathy for the further Left.

In post-war England it became the norm for sixth-form achievers to continue their education, and so Barrie entered the University of Manchester's honours school of history. The great History man at Manchester was Lewis Namier, and as Barrie remembered he gave to

the school a dominant tone of empirical scepticism. While recognising the virtues of these values, and assimilating them, the young undergraduate ventured otherwise. Bertrand Russell, H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis were among radical influences. Barrie moved towards Marxism, and even membership of the Communist Party. Events ranging from the impending victory of Communism in China to the triumph of Labour in Britain seemed to promise a brave new world. In tune with this Barrie's intellectual interests came to centre on the French Revolution, harbinger of this advance. The enthusiasm thus fired was to sustain a grand intellectual life. One key inspiration came from Albert Mathiez, historian and admirer of popular action within the French Revolution; within the Manchester Department the pertinent expert was André Bourde, pupil of Georges Lefebvre and supervisor of Barrie's undergraduate thesis, which studied the Hébertists, ginger-group among the Paris proletariat. The thesis doubtless helped Barrie win first-class honours and top ranking in his year, achievements the more notable in that his mindset differed from that fostered by Namier – although, as the recipient acknowledged, the award showed a prevailing openness among those who conferred it.

That result opened the way for postgraduate Master's research, through mid-1952. In natural progression from the Hébertists Barrie now studied the Enragés, an overlapping cluster of radicals. Mature and scholarly, his thesis concentrated on five individuals. With two of these, Pauline Léon and Claire Lacombe, Barrie showed an interest in women's agency that began before latter-day feminist scholarship gained momentum and ever persisted in his work. All five biographical studies are illuminating, but generalisation about the group at large presented difficulties; coming closest to distinctive traits were leftist opposition to the Jacobin dictatorship (with consequent defeat thereby) and anticipation of socialist ideals. Barrie was later to remark that his subjects had proved less interesting than he had expected.

Next came two years' national service, a defining experience for British youths of that day. Barrie served in the educational world – a relatively sheltered area, but still delivering culture shock as university graduate met commonalty. That our man won sergeant's rank indicates he met the challenge. His lofty stature might have helped.

Early on return to civilian life, in October 1954, Barrie married Madeline Mary Hebden, an honours graduate in English from Manchester, a union which proved close and supportive. His first employment was as assistant to the Archivist in charge of local material at Liverpool public libraries. He made time for research on popular/radical history thereabout. In early 1956 came a shift to employment in London with the *Victoria County Histories*. Here through the next four years Barrie specialised in urban studies, especially of Birmingham. Now too he published two major articles on British late eighteenth-century riots in the *International Review of Social History*, with another following in *Past and Present*. Earlier interests were kept alive by attending Alfred Cobban's seminar on French Revolution at the University of London. There he befriended George Rudé, older in years but just beginning his phenomenal record of publication; the pair united in opposition to Cobban's anti-Marxist critique of the Revolution. Their research interests were close, but Barrie was more interested in those who led crowds in radical protest, George in collective behaviour.

Barrie's concern to pursue European studies prompted him to seek a university post. The British market being scanty, he duly sought and received appointment at the University of Sydney. His arrival there in 1960 nearly coincided with that of Professor John McManners, distinguished for French Revolutionary studies. Perhaps this was a somewhat mixed blessing in that at first Barrie had to teach earlier European history. McManners left Sydney in mid-decade, and Barrie largely succeeded to his teaching role, including an honours course on revolutions (duly prompting a lengthy published essay on the Russian revolution). He assisted in a course on modern political thought directed by Ernest Bramsted, whom Barrie praised as he did few others. In 1965 appeared *The Enragés: Socialists of the French Revolution?*, a polished but – it seems – essentially unchanged presentation of the Master's thesis (Melbourne University Press on behalf of the Australian Humanities Research Council). Generally the Sydney years offered much, in both professional and personal terms. A daughter (Alison) had been born in Britain and was now followed by Michael James. Among several friendships, the closest was that with Neville Meaney.

Promotion to Readership complemented this story, and qualified Barrie to seek professorial rank – then narrowly confined. Thus he joined the History Department at the University of Tasmania in mid-1971. Since 1956 the Department had had three successive professorial heads and then a long interregnum. Yet student numbers had greatly increased and continued to do so over the next few years, giving opportunity for creative action. As Head of Department almost continuously through to 1976, Barrie's particular concern was to extend European courses

back into medieval times. Coming to teach in this area were two brilliant young scholars, Rodney Thomson and Michael Bennett. As well, Barrie encouraged a Sydney colleague (and Tasmanian graduate c. 1940) Maida Coaldrake to teach Japanese history, which she did with rare enthusiasm and so increased the Department's long-standing commitment to Asian studies. The Professor's own teaching, grounded in scholarship and comporting with an impressive mien, evoked appropriate response, especially from better students – although none ever surmounted the (formidable) language barrier to pursue relevant postgraduate study.

In 1978 Barrie was elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, an honour he much appreciated: four other (all long-serving) staff were eventually to share this accolade, comprising a remarkable cadre, near half of the Department's then number. Around this time Barrie took on some broader university tasks, having a term as Dean of Arts and chairing library and grounds committees. The latter chimed with his enjoyment of gardening, deployed at the family's fine Sandy Bay home. Other pleasures were listening to music, and sailing. As of 1980 Barrie cited three memberships: the Academy, the Royal Historical Society, and the Royal Yacht Club, Sandy Bay; this last interest was probably his major tie with the broader Tasmanian community. Meanwhile the political man had so changed that in the storm of late 1975 his sympathies were with Fraser as against Whitlam. He was to joke with Neville Meaney that his Marxism (never rigid) became so diluted with scepticism as to make him almost an English Whig.

Transcending all such matters was publication in 1978 of Rose's great life-work, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist*. A prefatory note advised that the research had begun in 1966; this was a project in 'history from below', seeking to explore the roots of latter-day democracy and equality, especially in relation to the French and Russian Revolutions. Whereas the Enragés had proved less inspiring a study than anticipated, Babeuf was, as noted in the introduction, 'a democrat and revolutionary of considerable stature and some personal nobility'. With exemplary scholarship and skill the work traced every chapter of its subject's remarkable life. French and Russian scholars had written much about Babeuf, Anglophones much less – but now that gap was filled, and more. Barrie strove to rescue the man on the one hand from Rightist condemnation as prefiguring totalitarian democracy and on the other (in odd but logical complement) from Marxist adulation as prefiguring Soviet communism. Rather, 'Babeuf asserted the human right to equality in the important things in life, and the right to control and (when necessary) to resist the exercise of political power'. One scholar acknowledged as having pointed toward such a view was the Albert

Mathiez whom Barrie had admired since undergraduate days.

By 1978 research was already proceeding for what became *The Making of the Sans-Culottes: Democratic Ideas and Institutions in Paris, 1789–92* (1983). The dedication was to Albert Soboul, recently deceased and a major historian of Revolution, in the spirit of Mathiez. That Soboul had suggested the topic to Rose marked the latter's standing. The project complemented his earlier studies. It traced the development of revolutionary spirit among the common people, first in the Paris districts and then in various societies, an activity crucial in achieving the Constitution of 1793. But, as with Barrie's subjects at large, outcomes were mixed: 'the triumph of the *sans-culottes* was at best a partial and paradoxical vindication of democratic hopes, and at worst a caricature'.

His service as Head of Department after 1979 was briefer and came with diminished student numbers, limiting scope for innovation. Barrie's own mainstream teaching always remained within later modern Europe and its revolutions. One novelty that received his necessary endorsement was the establishment of a Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, proposed by Kay Daniels, feminist and radical. (Daniels soon left, while the Centre continued.) During study leave in 1985 Barrie suffered a severe breakdown of health. A rally followed, but still early retirement came five years later. Scholarly endeavour remained before and after this *caesura*, notable subjects of published papers being the radical Bishop Claude Fouchet and the radical aristocrat René-Louis de Girardin.

1998 saw *Tribunes and Amazons: Men and Women of Revolutionary France 1789–1871*, an anthology of twenty of Barrie's papers published over the decades, with an additional one on Louis Blanqui. No particular rationale was offered for the book. Director of Macleay Press, Keith Windschuttle – first-class honours man from Sydney's History Department in the 'sixties – might well have seen his author as exemplifying true scholarship as against those radicals and postmodernists whom Windschuttle had belaboured in *The Killing of History* (1994).

In 2000 Emeritus Professor Rose graduated as Doctor of Letters from the University of Tasmania, a degree recognising scholarly excellence and rarely conferred. A subsequent paper ('A Republican Utopia? A Town Called Napoleon') gained resonance from being presented at the 2002 Rudé seminar, meeting in Hobart. Subsequent activity diminished, although in occasional seminar discussions there blew sparks of yesteryear's dissident spirit. Barrie experienced a long period of ill-health before dying on 14 March 2015, survived by his wife and children. At the celebratory service a panegyrist (Peter Chapman) suggested that such tribute as Rose paid Babeuf fitted the man himself. Proceedings ended with the music of *La Marseillaise*.

#### MICHAEL ROE FAHA

The author acknowledges his debt to the National Library of Australia's interview with Barrie Rose: Rose, R. B. & Meaney, N. K. (1987). *Barrie Rose interviewed by Neville Meaney for the Neville Meaney collection*, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2278779>.