

FRANCIS BARRYMORE (BARRY) SMITH

1932–2015



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Professor Francis Barrymore (Barry) Smith died in Canberra on 3 March 2015 after a long illness. He was a distinguished historian of modern Britain and Australia, making original contributions to the history of politics and culture, and especially to the social history of health and medicine, a field he pioneered. As a supervisor of over forty doctoral students, a founder of the journal *Australian Cultural History*, and Honorary Secretary of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, he was a formative influence on humanities scholarship in Australia.

Barry Smith was born in Hughesdale, an outer Melbourne suburb, on 16 May 1932. His father Frank, of Irish Catholic stock, tried his luck, on and off, as a small farmer before settling in Oakleigh where he ran Jackson's Service Station on the Princes Highway. A family photograph depicts Frank, holding baby Barry, standing beside a row of petrol bowsers. His mother Bertha, a state schoolteacher and avid reader, encouraged her son's educational aspirations. Impelled by a strong social conscience, she helped children with intellectual

disabilities, was active in the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and wrote letters on behalf of political prisoners. Barry's primary schooling was patchy, spread between six or seven primary schools, Catholic and government, in both city and country. The tiny one-teacher school at Wattle Creek tended by Edmund Foxcroft, 'a gentle man' and author of an early study of Aboriginal policy, was the only one he recalled 'with delight'. His memory of Catholic schools was bleaker. After his first day at Oakleigh's Sacred Heart Convent, his mother asked what he had learned: 'I said they stripped the nuns naked and put them in shop windows in Barcelona'. The 'war-ravaged world of my childhood', with its mindless violence and sectarian enmities, was the dark backdrop of his lifelong aspiration towards a safer, saner world.

At Dandenong High School, where he completed his secondary education, he found a kindred spirit in his history teacher, the 'wonderful' Wilfred Ford. Ford's teaching – sceptical, empirical, morally engaged – was simply 'life-changing'. Barry later nominated Richard Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), a gift from Ford, as one of the books that had most influenced him. Its 'sweep, Miltonic prose and passion entranced me', he recalled. His school friends included John and Peter Heath, sons of local dentist John Heath. Reared among the Plymouth Brethren, Heath senior had enlisted as a medical orderly in the Great War, became a freethinker, trained as a dentist (he owned the first x-ray machine in Australia), dabbled in Aboriginal anthropology, and, under the influence of his friend Max Meldrum, became a moderately well-known artist. His home, a converted Presbyterian Church, was an oasis in the cultural desert of Oakleigh. Many of Barry Smith's lifelong interests – in freethought, unorthodox science, literature and art – were kindled there. Heath himself exemplified a type who would often appear in his writings: the talented, versatile, high-minded, unorthodox outsider.

Barry matriculated in 1949 and, after working for a while, enrolled for a Pass degree at the University of Melbourne on a secondary teaching scholarship. Only later, after winning the Henry Gyles Turner Prize for Australian History, and inspired by the teaching of Kathleen Fitzpatrick FAHA and Margaret Kiddle, did he convert to honours. He became active in the Labour Club, ran foul of its Communist leaders and 'defected' to the ALP Club where, he recalled, 'I received a rich alternate education'.

He graduated with first-class honours in 1956, with a thesis on the Sunday Closing question, and embarked on a Dip. Ed. but abandoned it part way through to begin a Master's thesis on 'Religion and Freethought in Melbourne', while tutoring part-time. Barry's thesis, later published as a book, was deeply researched, original and penetrating, and would easily win the writer a PhD today. If secularist sympathies drew him to the subject, it hardly shows. He recounts the foibles and failures of the movement's leaders as unsparingly as those of its opponents. Militant unbelief, he concludes, was as unsuccessful as evangelical Christianity in perturbing the profound indifference of colonial Australians.

In 1959 Barry travelled to Trinity College Cambridge on a British Council scholarship. His PhD supervisor, George Kitson Clark, a bachelor don who lived in College and prayed in chapel, came from a world far from Barry's but the two men – each curious, outspoken, imaginative – clicked. Barry became devoted to 'Kitson', later bringing him on a lecture visit to Australia. *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (1966), the book of his Cambridge thesis, tackles one of the famous puzzles of English political history: How did Disraeli's Conservatives come to support the most radical measure of parliamentary reform in the nineteenth century? As Barry wrote: 'They did not want it, they did not like it, they feared what it might do, but they passed it.' Solving the puzzle elicited some of his most characteristic qualities: a love of paradox, a respect for the contingent and unforeseen, a resistance to neat theories of Left and Right. 'Historians should disturb their readers' presuppositions, not reinforce them', he believed – and practised.

In 1962 Barry returned to a lectureship in modern British history at the University of Melbourne where he became an inspiring undergraduate teacher, bringing to his lectures the excitement of recent revisionist work in British history as well as his own blend of moral passion, rationalist conviction and sardonic humour. Alternately cheerful and grumpy, his bark was always worse than his bite. In 1963 I sought his support for an embryonic postgraduate history society. The life of the history researcher, he sternly observed, was a solitary one, and if you didn't enjoy your own company it was not for you. Yet then and later he was one of the great encouragers. In a department in need of rejuvenation he injected new vigour, co-editing the journal *Historical Studies*, lecturing in schools, supporting the Society for the Study of Labour History, and supervising honours and postgraduate students. He published a new edition of Vere Gordon Childe's brilliantly acerbic account of *How Labour Governs* (1964). His pamphlet *The Conscripted Plebiscites in Australia 1916–17* (1965), written for secondary history students, asked the kind of moral questions Wilfred Ford had posed to him. 'By what dispensation does government compel men to serve a cause in which they do not believe,

in a war they did not make?' The happiest and most enduring legacy of his return to Melbourne, however, was his marriage to his former student Ann, with whom he was to have four children, and share more than fifty years of love and mutual support.

In 1966 Barry joined his old Melbourne colleague John La Nauze in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University (ANU). Like his predecessor Keith Hancock KBE FBA FAHA, La Nauze believed that Australian history should be studied as part of the British world. With the arrival of Oliver Macdonagh FAHA, Ken Inglis AO FAHA, and later Allan Martin FAHA, Barry's collegial circle widened. Although he gave occasional lectures in other departments around Australia, and made regular expeditions to Britain and America, the Coombs Building was Barry's intellectual home for the rest of his career. He thrived in its interdisciplinary atmosphere and remained a convivial presence in the Coombs tearoom long after formal retirement, when many of his younger colleagues had become electronic hermits. In the short-lived age of full academic employment, the ANU turned out many of those who would occupy senior posts in Australian history departments. Graduate supervision, like parenting, is largely learned by emulation, and what Barry learned from Kitson Clark ('Write early and write often' was one injunction) he imparted to successive generations of doctoral students at the ANU.

Over four and a half decades, Barry Smith published nine books – eight sole-authored, and one co-authored – seven edited collections and over fifty pamphlets, chapters and refereed articles. I recall him vowing sometime in the late 1960s to write three books: one on politics, one on art, and one on science. He had recently begun to work on the papers of the Chartist and engraver William Linton, acquired by the National Library of Australia as part of the collection of the London radical bookseller Leon Kashnor. His biography of Linton, *Radical Artisan* (1973), is the book that best captures his vision of nineteenth-century society, opening a window into a 'rich, shadowy Dickensian understorey of artisan toil, high aspiration, self-education, impecuniosity, eccentricity, and sub-parliamentary political activity which has passed, for want of recording, mostly into oblivion'.

The scientific dimension of Barry's plan was revealed in 1979 with the publication of his best-known book, *The People's Health 1830–1910* (1979). 'Patients loom small in medical history', it began. 'They are the off-stage army in the drama of medical advance'. By inverting that paradigm, and writing about health and illness from the patient's viewpoint, Barry challenged the Whig view of medical history as a procession of heroic discoveries. Reviewing the phases of the human life-course from birth to death, he turned a clear compassionate eye on

the sufferings of patients and a sceptical one on those who tended them. ‘Doctors’, he dismally concluded, ‘were sorcerers who supplied an interpretation to otherwise meaningless afflictions’. When mortality fell it was often for reasons that doctors did not understand. The ‘retreat of tuberculosis’ – the subject of his later book of that name – was one such puzzle. His portrait of the medical profession – ‘rapacious’ and ‘callous’ are among his epithets – elicited howls of protest. Yet for all their misguided actions, he concludes, the doctors ‘did, in the long run, save millions of lives’.

The People’s Health became a foundational text, reprinted several times and widely cited even by historians who resisted its critical thrust. His next book, *Florence Nightingale: Reputation and Power* (1982), generated even more controversy. ‘The Lady with the Lamp’, the founder of modern nursing, was a secular saint. Anyone with the temerity to attack her reputation incurred the hostility of nurses, medical historians, feminists and British patriots. Smith did not question the importance of Nightingale’s reforms – they were ‘a beneficial revolution’ – but by revealing the vanity, manipulation and deceit by which she achieved them he dispelled another cherished fallacy: ‘that doers of good deeds must necessarily be good in themselves.’ Even reviewers who conceded his case balked at his blunt conclusion: ‘Miss Nightingale served the cause of nursing less than it served her.’ Once again, however, Barry was simply being himself: following the evidence, disturbing his readers’ presuppositions.

An even more daunting test of courage and integrity came with the invitation to contribute a long chapter to the official history of Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War, on the health effects of the chemical Agent Orange. Barry’s own convictions about the destructive effects of war were life-long and deep, and his sympathies for its victims heartfelt. But after reviewing the thousands of pages of evidence, he came, once again, to an unwelcome but inescapable conclusion: Agent Orange was *not* the cause of the veterans’ suffering. In following the example of their American comrades, by seeking compensation through the courts, they had been tragically misled. The story, he concluded, was ‘a tangle of decency and folly, courage and chicanery, but above all, waste’.

The social history of medicine had become Barry’s métier, generating a steady flow of penetrating essays on typhoid, alcoholism, diphtheria, venereal disease, Russian influenza and – in his last book – illness in

colonial Australia. Yet his intellectual interests and commitments ranged much wider. Within the Research School, he contributed to the History of Ideas Unit, co-editing a volume on the intellectual responses to the 1848 revolution, wrote entries for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, and contributed a memorable chapter, ‘Sunday Matters’, to Volume 4, ‘Australians 1938’ of the Bicentennial History of Australia, *Australians, A Historical Library* (1987).

He was a regular contributor to conferences of the Modern British History Association, which established an annual lecture in his honour. Elected to the Australian Academy of Humanities in 1971, he became its Secretary in 1974, convened committees on libraries and journal subsidies, and in 1977 joined a Committee on the History of Culture in Australia. Over the next decade, in partnership with Sam Goldberg, he organised a series of annual conferences on this topic. In selecting themes, recruiting speakers and publishing their papers in a new journal, *Australian Cultural History*, they were astutely mapping a new field of inquiry. In 1988 they published a collection of the best papers as the Academy’s contribution to the Australian Bicentenary (*Australian Cultural History*, 1988). ‘These essays constitute a modest introduction to Australian states of mind’, they began.

Modesty, along with honesty and loyalty, was among Barry’s conspicuous virtues. Only reluctantly did he agree to the presentation of a festschrift by his former students and colleagues. *Mind and Body: Essays in Honour of F. B. Smith*, edited by Pat Jalland, Wilfred Prest FAHA and myself, appeared in 2009. Spanning English and Australian, medical, cultural and political history, and with contributions from British and Australian colleagues, the collection reflects the wide and pervasive influence of Barry Smith on Australian intellectual and academic life. ‘An assured cultural inheritance has yet to come’, wrote Smith and Goldberg in concluding their bicentenary volume. Perhaps; but by precept and example Barry Smith had done much to hasten its arrival.

GRAEME DAVISON AO FAHA FASSA

I have drawn on biographical essays by Wilfred Prest and Ken Inglis in the festschrift for Barry Smith, *Mind and Body*, and on an unpublished obituary by Pat Jalland.