Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Barton, Bernard 🔓

(1784–1849)

A. H. Bullen, revised by James Edgar Barcus, Jr.

Barton, Bernard (1784–1849), poet, was born at Carlisle on 31 January 1784, the son of Quaker parents, John Barton (1755–1789) and his wife, Mary, *née* Done (1752–1784). His mother died a few days after his birth, and while he was still in his infancy, his father, a manufacturer, married another Quaker woman, Elizabeth Horne (1760–1833), moved to London, and finally engaged in the malting business at Hertford, where he died in the prime of life. To be near her family, his widow and children then made their home at Tottenham. Bernard was the brother of the educational writer Maria Hack (1777–1844) and the half-brother of the economist John Barton (1789–1852). He was sent to a Quaker school at Ipswich, and at the age of fourteen was apprenticed to a shopkeeper, Samuel Jesup, at Halstead in Essex. After eight years' service he moved to Woodbridge, married his employer's daughter, Lucy Jesup (1781–1808) on 6 August 1807, and entered into partnership with her brother Benjamin as coal and corn merchant. In the following year his wife died giving birth to a daughter, Lucy, whereupon Barton abandoned business and became tutor in the family of William Waterhouse, a Liverpool merchant. After staying a year in Liverpool, where he got to know the Roscoe family, he returned to Woodbridge, became a clerk in Messrs Alexander's Bank, and stayed there for forty years until within two days of his death.

Finding the work in the bank tiresome, Barton turned to his pen, eventually producing some eight volumes of verse, and numerous occasional pieces. In 1812 he published his first volume of poetry, *Metrical Effusions* and began a correspondence with Southey. Although Southey and Barton met only once (at Thomas Clarkson's home in Playford in 1824), Barton eventually felt that he knew Southey well enough to request help with the publication of a manuscript. Barton also hoped that Southey would arrange for favourable reviews in influential periodicals. About this time he addressed a copy of complimentary verses to James Hogg, who hastened to respond in grateful and flattering terms. Hogg had written a tragedy, which he wanted to see presented at a London theatre. Not knowing how to proceed, Hogg solicited Barton's assistance, who in turn sought counsel from Capel Lofft, on whose advice the scheme was dropped. Following *The Triumph of the*

Orwell (1817), in 1818 appeared the *Convict's Appeal*, a protest in verse against capital punishment. The pamphlet bears no name on the title-page, but the dedication to James Montgomery is signed 'B. B.'. In the same year Barton published by subscription *Poems by an Amateur*, which received little attention. Two years later, Harvey and Barton published *Poems*, favourably noticed in the *London Magazine*, the *Monthly Review*, and the *Edinburgh Review*; it reached a fourth edition in 1825. *Napoleon and other Poems* (dedicated to George IV), and *Verses on the Death of P. B. Shelley*, appeared in 1822.

It was at this time that Barton first wrote to Charles Lamb. The freedom with which the Quakers had been handled in the *Essays of Elia* induced Barton to remonstrate gently with the essayist. Charmed with his correspondent's homely earnestness and piety, Lamb carried on an extensive and intimate correspondence with Barton. The two men met first in 1822, perhaps at a contributors' dinner given by the proprietor of the *London Magazine*. Shortly after getting to know Lamb, Barton contemplated resigning his post at Woodbridge and living by his literary work. Lamb advised him strongly against such a course. 'Keep to your bank', wrote Lamb, 'and the bank will keep you' (*Letters of Charles Lamb*, 2.363). Southey gave similar advice.

After receiving some public notice and moderate praise, between 1822 and 1828 Barton published five volumes and some minor pieces, including *Poetic Vigils* (1824), *Devotional Verses* (1826), *A Missionary's Memorial* (1826), *'A Widow's Tale', and other Poems* (1827), and *'A New Year's Eve', and other Poems* (1828). His pursuit of literary fame may have taxed his health, for in his letters to Southey and Lamb he complained that he was suffering from low spirits and headache. Lamb attempted to encourage him with banter, while Southey advised him seriously never to write verses after supper. Clearly Barton wrote too hastily and too easily. 'The preparation of a book' says his biographer, Edward Fitzgerald:

> was amusement and excitement to one who had little enough of it in the ordinary course of daily life: treaties with publishers—arrangements of printing—correspondence with friends on the subject—and, when the little volume was at last afloat, watching it for a while somewhat as a boy watches a paper boat committed to the sea.
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> *Poems and Letters*, xvi

In 1824 some Quakers, led by Joseph John Gurney, gave Barton tangible recognition and some financial relief by raising £1200 for his benefit. Barton hesitated to accept the money, but Charles Lamb's advice prevailed: 'Think that you are called to a poetical ministry—nothing worse—the minister is worthy of his hire' (Lucas, 2.421).

After an eight-year hiatus, during which Barton corresponded with numerous literary figures and friends including Robert Southey, William Jerdan, John Linnell, William Fitch, Edward Maxon, and Alan Cunningham, Barton, with his daughter, produced in 1836 *The Reliquary ... with a Prefatory Appeal for Poetry and Poets*. After another long period of silence, *Household Verses*, his last volume of poems, appeared in 1845. Dedicated to Queen Victoria, the volume attracted the attention of the prime minister, Robert Peel, who invited Barton to dinner at Whitehall. After Peel left office, he procured Barton a pension of £100 a year.

During the next three years, Barton produced several additional minor works: *Sea-Weeds* (1844), *A Memorial of Joseph John Gurney* (1847), *Birthday Verses at Sixty-Four* (1848), *A Brief Memorial of Major Edward Mann* (1848), *Ichabod* (1848), and *On the Signs of the Times* (1848).

Preferring a sedentary life, Barton seldom left Woodbridge. He occasionally visited Charles Lamb, and once or twice went down into Hampshire to see his brother. Some holidays were spent with his friend W. Bodham Donne at Mattishall, Norfolk. Here he delighted in the conversation of Mrs Bodham, an old lady who in her youth had been the friend of Cowper. In later life Barton took less and less exercise. He liked to sit in his library and enjoy the view through the open window, or, if he started with any friends for a walk, he would soon stretch himself on the grass and wait for his friends' return. In 1846 he made a short visit to Aldborough for the benefit of his health. In later life, he complained of chest pains and shortness of breath, which his physician attributed to angina. Barton died at Thorsfare, Woodbridge, on 19 February 1849, after a short illness. In the same year his daughter, Lucy, published a selection of his letters and poems, to which Edward Fitzgerald contributed a biographical introduction. Concerned about his daughter's welfare, Barton had elicited from Fitzgerald a promise to look after Lucy. Lucy's subsequent marriage to Fitzgerald was not a success.

Bernard Barton is chiefly remembered as the friend of Lamb. His many volumes of verse are seldom read. Even the scanty book of selections published by his daughter contains much that might have been omitted. He never troubled to correct what he had written, but all his work is unaffected. As Fitzgerald recognized, Barton never thought his verse rose to great heights. His desire was 'to be a household poet with a large class of readers' (*Poems and Letters*, xxxv). Free from all tinge of bigotry, simple and sympathetic, Bernard Barton won the esteem and affection of a large circle of friends, young and old, orthodox and heterodox. His numerous letters are now valued above his poetry. More than 800 Barton letters survive, and include communications with many leading literary figures of his time. However, he treated his letters as he did his poetry, taking little care in producing them, and was unselfconscious about the art of letter-writing. Still, his comments on poets such as Hogg and Wordsworth, and on artists such as Colman and Blake, reveal a mind actively and eagerly engaged with the arts during his time.

Sources

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Archives

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Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, Friends Historical Library, papers

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Bodl. Oxf., letters to James Montgomery; letters to G. Virtue

CUL, letters to Elizabeth Charlesworth and John Charlesworth; letters to Mrs E. S. Cowell

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Likenesses

R. Cooper, print, BM, NPG

J. H. Lynch, print (after S. Laurence, 1847), NPG; repro. in *Edward Fitzgerald*, ed. Barton

R. Mendham, oils, Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich

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See also

Hack [née Barton], Maria (1777–1844), educational writer

Barton, John (1789–1852), political economist and botanist

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