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JOHN EVELYN BARLAS, A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY: POETRY, ANARCHISM AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN LATE-VICTORIAN BRITAIN

John Evelyn Barlas,
A Critical Biography



By [Philip K. Cohen](#)

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Reviewed by [Jad Adams](#) on 2013-07-09.

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It is widely known that John Evelyn Barlas (1860-1914) was a poet, a radical socialist, and a friend of Oscar Wilde; that he was arrested for shooting a pistol near the Speaker's House; and that he spent his later life in an insane asylum.

With these few colorful facts he is repeatedly mentioned in letters and memoirs of the 1890s. In 1915, the year after his death, he was commemorated in a twenty page pamphlet, *John Barlas: Sweet Singer and Socialist*, by a Scottish socialist called David Lowe. But this was the sole contribution that even approached scholarship until the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry by Gutala Krishnamurti in 2004, with its obvious limitations of space. Only now do we have a full-scale biography. In this valuable contribution to studies of the 1890s, Philip Cohen not only illuminates the poetry and politics of Barlas, but also deepens our understanding of insanity in the late nineteenth century.

Barlas was born in Rangoon to a Scottish family doing business in Burma, but when his father died soon after, his widow brought her child back to Britain. She died when Barlas was seventeen, which a contemporary note said he "felt keenly" (qtd 11). But from then on, he was free to chart his own course, studying Marx and other radical writers at the British Museum and then heading to New College, Oxford. There, A.J.A. Symons reports, he "attracted attention by his handsome appearance, verse and extreme socialist opinions" (qtd 50).

At Oxford he came to know Robert Harborough Sherard, a comrade in social idealism. "Both," writes Cohen, "lacked impulse control and consequently may have felt comfortable in the company of the poor, among whom they could escape the rigid behavioural codes of their own class" (16). For their freedom from middle-class morality Barlas idealized the day laborer and the prostitute. But his disregard for convention bordered on mental instability. While still at Oxford, he broke into the house of a girlfriend, smashed through several doors, seized the girl, took her to London, and married her. Since he then treated her with similar violence, the marriage was not a success.

While working as a teacher after graduation, he started publishing his volumes of love poems with a heroic edge. As Cohen notes, Barlas followed Plato in defining love in a number of ways, some of which encompass the love of man in general and yearning for an ideal society, which motivated his politics.

His Victorian mind was prepared for the ideas of Marx by the progressive individualism of Herbert Spencer, who assumed that society continuously improves. Following Spencer to Marx, Barlas became a well-known player in what was then extremist politics. Joining the Social Democratic Federation, he became one of its leading speakers and journalists. But these were years of struggle. Though he won the admiration of Ramsay MacDonald, who became Britain's first Labour prime minister in 1924, the trade union and socialist movements that Barlas supported were not to have their day until after his death.

During this period of struggle for nascent socialists and anarchists (no great distinction was then made between the two), the Social Democratic Federation and the Irish National League organized an event that came to be known as **Bloody Sunday**. Not to be confused with other events of that name, this one took place on 13 November 1887 in London's Trafalgar Square, where demonstrators clashed with police --as commemorated in [William Morris's *News from Nowhere* \(1890\)](#).

Cohen's diligent research and analysis show that other writers (including me) have been mistaken in believing that Barlas was clubbed to the ground in this clash and fell bleeding at the feet of Eleanor Marx. To Cohen, the similarity of the accounts on which we have all relied suggests that they all derive from a single source. According to Cohen, no references to the supposed beating appear in Barlas' letters, in any contemporary press accounts, in the accounts of others such as Fabian Society members, or in the subsequent trial of Robert Cunninghame Graham and John Burns for actions that took place on Bloody Sunday. Now we know just why the beating got so little notice: it never occurred. In a letter about the day that Cohen has uncovered, a friend of Barlas writes to him, "There has been some 'serious fighting' today as you predicted...I am glad you were not there" (qtd. 65). So it is no longer plausible to believe, as commentators have claimed, that Barlas' insanity dated from what happened to him at Trafalgar Square.

In the wake of Bloody Sunday, however, Barlas was increasingly influenced by anarchists who spread "propaganda by deed," and in January 1892, he fired a revolver towards the Speaker's House from Westminster Bridge. Along with Harry Campion, a leading member of the Social Democratic Federation, he was bailed out by Oscar Wilde.

Returning the favor, so to speak, Barlas probably influenced Wilde's social philosophy. As the author of *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (1978), Cohen is well equipped to judge what Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891) owes to Barlas. Shining a welcome light on figures often ignored in studies of the 1890s, Cohen also considers less celebrated members of Barlas' circle such as Ernest Dowson, John Davidson, John Gray, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons and Robert Harborough Sherard.

To Sherard we are indebted for the reason why Barlas fired his gun at the Speaker's House. According to Sherard (writing in the *Pall Mall Gazette*), Barlas was frustrated by his failure to gain recognition as a poet after ten years of effort. Starting in 1884, he had published at his own expense eight books of poetry, one anonymously but the others under the name Evelyn Douglas, attaching his own middle name to the surname of an ancestor, the Scottish heroine Kate Douglas.

His poems scarcely courted a wide audience. Though they reveal, says Cohen, a wide range of ideas gleaned from the western literary tradition, they also embody what he calls "a complete withdrawal from life into the realms of art and imagination" (9), a retreat typical of the aesthetic/decadent school.

The poetry is of interest rather than of high literary merit. Like many Victorian writers, Barlas was too prolific, as if mistaking quantity for quality. Since he shared with many of his contemporaries the delusion that the highest art form was verse drama, he "identified himself primarily as a dramatist," Cohen tells us, and wrote limitless plays that are not only unperformable but scarcely readable.

Furthermore, Barlas' verse does not repay the reader. Though he quotes Théophile Gautier's comment that decadent style is "*reculant toujours les normes de la langue* [always pushing back the boundaries of language]," that is precisely what Barlas' verse does not do. Unlike (for instance) his friend John Davidson, whom John Sloan calls *First of the Moderns* in his book of 1995, Barlas cannot compel language to say anything new. He always seems adjectival and hortatory, asking the reader to experience emotion rather than making the language do the work. He offers nothing like what T. S. Eliot appreciatively called the "dingy urban images" of Davidson (qtd. Maurice Lindsay, *John Davidson: A Selection of his Poems* [1961], preface, n.p.).

Selective quotation would be invidious, for every poet wrote some poor lines and one might be suspected of unfairly quoting the worst. But it is difficult to quote him at his best. I cannot find a single line that sings, that is timelessly poetic. Consider what Cohen identifies as one of Barlas' best poems, "A Child's Death." Clearly a heartfelt piece on the death of Barlas' daughter at the age of three, it runs as follows:

The little hands clasp thee,
And tenderly tighten,
To keep thee, to grasp thee;
The little eyes brighten.
What is her vision?
Of Paradise portal,
Meadows Elysian
And rivers immortal?

She is gone: - her white finger
Unlocks and uncloses.
Why should she linger
After the roses?

This is not a bad piece of minor verse, but neither is it remarkably good. It suffers by comparison with elegies on the same subject such as Wilde's "Requiescat" and Dowson's "It is Finished," which radiate originality. So while Cohen gives Barlas' verse all the attention it could deserve, the value of this book springs less from Barlas's talent than from the scholarship of his biographer.

Or to put this another way, its value springs less from its discussion of Barlas' poetry than from its reading of his life and mind. Two years after the shooting episode, we learn, Barlas was back in Scotland committing violent or bizarre acts including attacking people--perhaps because he thought they were upper class.

Cohen usefully shows that in the 1890s, the mere expression of socialist views was sometimes construed as evidence of insanity. But quite aside from Barlas' revolutionary politics, the doctors' reports that Cohen quotes describe a man who would have been considered delusional in any period. He believed himself to be insulted by small children and old men; he had to leave two hotels because he thought they kept sealed rooms next to his bedroom; he believed that the government was laying traps for him and that people were influencing him "in some hypnotic way" (280).

Certified as a lunatic, he was sent to Gartnavel Royal Asylum on 30 July 1894, never to be free again, and he died there twenty years later. Yet the records of his institutionalization, which Cohen has meticulously combed, show that life in an asylum for a paying patient like Barlas could be highly tolerable. According to Cohen, Gartnavel was "a simulacrum of the combined amenities of a gentlemen's club in town and a country house: reading room with periodicals and newspapers, library...lounge with billiards and card tables, cricket grounds, a bowling green, curling facilities in season, and a croquet lawn, beside which, weather permitting, tea parties were held to the accompaniment of a piano" (290). Gartnavel even had its own golf course.

As one would expect from a book collector, Cohen includes an excellent descriptive bibliography of Barlas' work along with an erudite essay on it. As a whole, this book is a model of how to write the life of a previously neglected character, showing astute use of contemporary letters and newspaper accounts and a deep understanding of the context in which the poet lived.

It also exemplifies the high standards of the doughty Rivendale Press, which nurtures scholarship on the 1890s by publishing books that ought to see the light of day regardless of what their commercial appeal may be. As well as monographs on better-known writers such as Wilde, Beardsley, and Kipling, Rivendale's list includes studies of fin-de-siècle

fringe types such as Ranger Gull, "Michael Field," and Stephen Phillips, a literary star of the 1890s who was almost entirely forgotten until Richard Whittington-Egan's [fine book on him](#) appeared in 2006. In the present volume, Cohen acknowledges his debt to Rivendale's publisher, Steven Halliwell, for the biographical material he has collected on Barlas.

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