Lurid Literature of the Last Century

The Publications of E. E. Barclay

On February 1, 1841, a nineteen-year-old youth stopped at the United States District Court in New York City to file a small pamphlet for copyright. The youth was Erastus Elmer Barclay, just beginning his career in the publishing business; the pamphlet was a twenty-four-page work bearing the informative title, *Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon Who was Tried, Convicted and Sentenced to be Hung at Georgetown, Delaware, with Two of Her Accomplices, Containing an Account of Some of the Most Horrible and Shocking Murders and Daring Robberies Ever Committed by One of the Female Sex.*

On the credit side, we are told that Miss Cannon "was extravagantly fond of music, and dancing, a great talker, very witty and fascinating in her conversation." Despite these accomplishments, there was a less agreeable side to her character: "She was very sensual in her pleasures, and totally incapable of appreciating that high-toned moral feeling, and the true dignity, self-respect and refinement which should govern the female sex. She was almost indifferent to any principle of justice, as well as human suffering; she was bold; revengeful; courageous; cunning and determined in the objects of her pursuits; she was also very deceitful, shrewd and artful in laying her plans, which enabled her to exercise an extensive influence over the lower order of minds."

Miss Cannon also, as we learn by reading this ennobling little work, murdered eleven persons with her own hands and was accessory to a dozen others—or so the author and publisher would have us believe. Young Barclay was testing a formula for lurid literature.
that was to set a style for which we have our own counterpart. He was to make "True Confessions" and "True Crime" a popular form of adult reading, and he was just beginning a career in publishing which would keep him busy shaping and catering to the American taste in melodrama for the next forty-five years.

In May, 1841, Barclay's name appeared on another pamphlet jointly with one George Watson, The Burglar's Companion; or Fatal Elopement of Sarah Williamson, The Misguided Victim of Artful Depravity. Like the first, it purported to relate the adventures of a woman; female escapades were more exciting and titillating. The real difference between Barclay's works and those of other publishers of the time was that his claimed to be true. "Our books," he wrote, "embrace truthful, personal narratives; lives and trials of criminals, such as murderers, assassins, poisoners, etc.; works on travel and true adventures on sea and land."

While drawing on the style of English chapbooks in these early publications, Barclay tried to evolve a more successful narrative form. A girl, usually running away from home, was the leading protagonist. She was invariably disguised in men's clothing, and often served as a soldier. Whether it was Leonora Siddons, the female warrior, Amelia Sherwood at the bloody scenes at the California gold mines, or Amanda Bannorris, the female land pirate, the heroine rarely exceeded sixteen years of age; older heroines are a relatively modern product.

The spoiled, aristocratic daughter was a popular figure for romantic reminiscences. Cordelia Thompson, who became "The Pirate's Bride," was one of these who ran away from home only to be deceived by her suitor. She discovers herself in a house of whose character she becomes suspicious. "The apartment was furnished in a gorgeous manner, but I noticed it was utterly destitute of any signs of refinement; for the walls were covered with naiads, Venuses and other paintings and engravings of the French or modern school of art." Trapped in this iniquitous den, Cordelia kills three would-be attackers with three shots, all in one brief page of text. Should the reader consider this a mere accident, she repeats the triple homicide ten pages later, again with the same economy of ammunition. "I stood and calmly looked upon the three muscular villains at my feet and, while so doing, one of them turned and spoke. 'We deserve our
fate. The Commodore told us to go to your mansion and kidnap you.' Then he expired."

But even Cordelia accepted a pirate as her lover, though she had to reassure herself that he was probably not a cruel one. Vice, however, must never triumph, or at least it must have its disadvantages. Cordelia's pirate husband dies while they are returning to the United States, leaving her in sole possession of his six million dollars in gold. It is doubtful if the tale had the effect which Cordelia intended when she wrote, "Trusting that this narrative will have a tendency to warn young girls from eloping with strangers."

Because Barclay's tales purported to be true, the principal character is often the avowed author. Never in any of these tales does Barclay himself claim authorship. However, to lend the stories, as William S. Gilbert would say, "an air of verisimilitude," some of them are given a clergyman author. Thus, The Entwined Lives of Miss Gabrielle Austin and of Redmond, the Outlaw is credited to "Bishop Crittenden of North Carolina." The title page carries his endorsement: "I emphatically endorse this narrative as true in every particular. Miss Austin I have known since she was an infant." The Felon's Doom is credited to Rev. Oscar Valeria; Rev. W. Stuart took down Lathrop's confession at the stake in the Dark and Terrible Deeds of George Lathrop, while Adelaide Lane's Fearful Adventures in Pennsylvania's Wilds was "Written by herself at the suggestion of the Rev. Barry Hillyard, Pastor of the M. E. Church, Shattucksburg Co., Pa." Compiling thrilling narratives seems to have occupied a great many of the cloth.

Barclay did not use regular distribution channels to sell his publications. Instead, he hired his own salesmen and gave each an exclusive territory. With a stack of pamphlets and broadside sheets, these agents would go from door to door, leaving the descriptive sheets, returning after a circuit of the street either to pick up the sheets or to sell the pamphlets described.

Barclay decked his books in bright-colored pictorial wrappers and included numerous full-page drawings to enliven, as if that were necessary, the already lurid text. In the 1860's, a few of his pamphlets appeared in multicolored wrappers, looking like present-day comic strips, but he soon returned to his favorite single-color covers of yellow, purple, maroon, or blue. Many titles were issued in both English
TIE PIRATES BRIDE,
OR, THE
WONDERFUL ADVENTURES
OF
MISS CORDELIA THOMPSON.

When about half way down, I looked up and beheld Merton attempting to cut the cord.

RICHMOND, VA.:
PUBLISHED BY BARCLAY & CO.

455
and German editions. When this happened, the illustrations bore both English and German captions to make a single plate available for both editions.

In the forties, Barclay's price was 7½ cents a copy, although a long pamphlet bore the special price of 18¾ cents. Through the years, prices rose to 12½ cents, fifteen cents, and finally to twenty-five cents. Length may have had a part in setting the price, though here Barclay was a little less than honest with his readers. Many of his pamphlets have pages skipped in the numbering, and almost all of them begin with page 19. Thus, a pamphlet whose last page was numbered 64 might have only thirty-eight pages of text, eight pages being lost in skipped numbers.

Those who think today's comic books and detective stories too strong should read the Sufferings and Horrible Tortures Inflicted on Mortimer Bowers and Sophia Delaplain. Miss Delaplain was the high-spirited daughter of a New York merchant prince, to whom Mortimer was low indeed. "Bowers belongs to the class of plebians and his proper place is obscurity," observed the merchant prince. "You, Sophia, belong to the order of patricians. Eagles must sleep in an eagle's nest. Let Bowers seek a wife in his own sphere."

Sophia had no wish to sleep with eagles; she wanted Mortimer. So they made plans to flee. At a tryst that night, Mortimer was late, but his explanation was convincing. "As I was preparing to meet my appointment with you, my mother was seized with a sudden attack of cholera, and I was under the necessity of remaining to attend upon her." This explanation satisfied Sophia, and the two decided to flee to California.

The ship, by that contrariety that appears so frequently in melodrama, is, instead, headed to aid the Cuban rebels. Mortimer and Sophia fall into the hands of the regulars, and those who have found Mickey Spillane too sadistic might skip over the sufferings of Mortimer. "A small rope, drawn over a pulley, was suspended from the ceiling, on the end of which was fastened a small hook, somewhat resembling a fish-hook. We were now partially strangled in order that the organ lingua might protrude from the mouth. The tongue was then perforated with an awl, and the hooks attached to the ropes were inserted therein. The ropes were then drawn over the pulleys, until they became so tight that we were under the necessity of stand-
ing on tip-toe to prevent our weight from being wholly borne by the
tongue.” Mortimer succumbed to his tortures, but Sophia survived
to return to her parents contrite, if unimaginative. In reminding
others to be warned by her example, she can do no better than to
quote the adage, “Look before you leap.”

Barclay had his troubles getting established in the early years of
his business. After his start in New York, he moved to Cincinnati in
about 1846. There his titles continued to appear intermittently. In
the summer of 1849, however, he moved to Philadelphia and set up
at 283 Market Street. In his first year there, he published seven new
titles beginning with *The Wonderful, Astounding, Mysterious and
Strange History of Laura A. Marston of Baltimore.*

Barclay’s titles were an art in themselves. One might wonder what
was left of the narrative after reading the title page of a pamphlet
such as the one about Charles Wallace (illustrated on page 458).
Here we see Barclay at his best with his mythical Rev. Henry Tracy
taking down the villain’s last words. The pamphlet purports to have
been published in New Orleans. Locating the printing of pamphlets
near the sites of the reported events was another device of the pub-
lisher. The pamphlet was actually issued in Philadelphia. Sometimes
he used Richmond, Charleston, or St. Louis when it served his pur-
pose. The reader may recognize the case of Mary Rogers, in the
Charles Wallace tale, as the one which Edgar Allan Poe used in his
famous short story, “The Mystery of Marie Roget.”

Barclay published a dozen more titles in the next three years, but
progress was slow and competitors were not long in appearing. A. R.
Orton, who had joined with Barclay in publishing at least one
pamphlet in Philadelphia in 1851, became a formidable contender.
Orton shortly produced a whole series of titles similar to Barclay’s,
even to the clergyman reporter. Fortunately for Barclay, after three
or four years Orton withdrew from Philadelphia and ceased his lurid
publications. H. M. Rulison in Cincinnati issued some similar titles,
and C. W. Kenworthy, a New York publisher who furnished Barclay
one of his own pamphlets for republication, entered the field. How
much Barclay suffered from competition is difficult to assess, but he
did have financial difficulties. In 1854, his pamphlets were copy-
righted in the name of his wife, Mary L. Barclay, and by 1856 he had
returned to Cincinnati, locating at 234 Main Street. There he re-
A CONFESSION
OF THE
AWFUL AND BLOODY TRANSACTIONS
IN THE LIFE OF
CHARLES WALLACE,
THE
FIEND-LIKE MURDERER OF MISS MARY ROGERS;
The Beautiful Cigar-Girl of Broadway, New York,
Whose Fate
Has for several years past been wrapt in the most
profound Mystery:
TOGETHER WITH
AN AUTHENTIC STATEMENT OF THE MANY
BURGLARIES AND MURDERS OF WALLECE, AND THE NOTORIOUS AND
DARING THIEF, SNELLING:
AND AN ACCOUNT OF
THE MURDER AND ROBBERY OF
MR. PARKS, OF NEWPORT, KENTUCKY;
Also perpetrated by Wallace;
A THRILLING NARRATIVE OF
His intercourse with the Brown Murderess,
EMELINE MORERE,
Who, at his instigation, assassinated her Master and Mistress,
and their four helpless children, with an axe.
FOR WHICH ATROCIUS ACT
They were burned alive by a Mob of Infuriated Lynchers, on the banks
of the Mississippi, on the 11th day of August 1850.
FROM HIS OWN MEMORANDA,
GIVEN AT THE BURNING STAKE, TO THE REV. HENRY TRACY.

NEW ORLEANS:
PUBLISHED BY E. E. BARCLAY, & CO.
1851.
mained only two years before coming back to business at 734 Market Street, Philadelphia. He remained in Philadelphia until his death thirty years later.\textsuperscript{1}

For a while Barclay continued to concentrate on the "Startling Confession" type of narrative. The wickedness of the cities was also a popular theme. In this category he produced \textit{St. George De Lisle, or the Serpent's Sting, A True and Thrilling Narrative of Crime in High Life in the City of New York}, and \textit{The Great Wrongs of the Shop Girls. The Life and Persecutions of Miss Beatrice Claflin. How Miss Claflin became the White Slave in the Gilded Dry Goods Palace of A Merchant Prince}. The theme of big-city vice was repeated in \textit{The Startling Confessions of Eleanor Burton}, which reveals "a dark page in the manners, customs, and crimes of the 'upper ten' of New York City."

Barclay, like any wise editor, altered his editorial line with the times. When the Civil War produced a new drama, greater than any devised by Barclay, he proved his adaptability. Overnight his heroines, who had had to travel with thieves and murderers for excitement, now became Union spies or soldiers in men's uniforms. His passion for transvestism reappears in \textit{The Lady Lieutenant, A Wonderful, Startling and Thrilling Narrative of the Adventures of Miss Madeline Moore}, who, in order to be near her lover, joined the Army, was elected Lieutenant, and fought in Western Virginia under the Renowned General McClellan.

At the front, Miss Moore becomes involved with a rebel whose wife has just been slain. He tries to throw the lady lieutenant "over the parapet and dash my brains out in the pavement below." Unfortunately, he slips in his wife's gore and our heroine, "knowing it was either his life or mine," stabs him in the heart with a large knife. Thus he expires, as she is keen enough to note, "with a cry of disappointed rage and agony."

Lieutenant Moore, partially hidden behind false whiskers, loses her disguise in battle while serving by the side of her lover. The myopic captain, although noting a resemblance to his love, credits it

\textsuperscript{1} In 1861 his place of business is listed as 1 South Sixth St.; the following three years find him at 56–58 North Sixth St. From 1865 to 1869, he occupied 602 Arch St., paused briefly at 610 Arch St. in 1870, and then, until the firm disappeared in the nineties, was located at 21 North Seventh St.
to a putative relationship (she claims to be her own cousin). But she cannot hold from him her secret any longer. "Look well at me, dear Frank, and in Albert Harville—behold Madeline Moore." Had a bombshell burst at his feet, he could not have been more surprised than at these words. 'You! You! You! Madeline Moore?" At this point, the writer interposes—"Reader, let me draw a veil over what followed." And well he might.

After *The Lady Lieutenant* came *Pauline of the Potomac* and then, for alliterative consistency, *Maude of the Mississippi*. Pauline, "the Beautiful and Accomplished Miss Pauline D'Estraye" is billed as General McClellan's spy. A concession was made to the readers of the German edition in which Pauline becomes "General Siegel's Spronin," or spy. While "Maude of the Mississippi" joins Grant in his adventures, Miss Martha Brownlow does a Barbara Fritchie act in Knoxville and dares the rebel soldiers to shoot down the Stars and Stripes. Other titles include *Miriam Rivers, the Lady Soldier, or General Grant's Spy*, and *Dora, Heroine of the Cumberland*.

The author of most of Barclay's Civil War stories was Charles Wesley Alexander, who wrote under the pseudonym of Wesley Bradshaw. Alexander finally set up his own company, the Old Franklin Publishing Company, in competition with Barclay, and himself enjoyed a long publishing history in Philadelphia.

Though Barclay had had his imitators and competitors, a new and more serious type of competition now came into the field. In 1860, Erastus Beadle had started to publish what came to be widely known as the Beadle Dime Novels. Making no pretense at being truthful, these lurid tales rapidly captured a place in the hearts of the American boy, young and old.

With the ending of the Civil War, Barclay widened his line of pamphlets to include songsters, health and cook books, fortune tellers, and dream books. In place of the "truthful narratives," he now began to publish booklets on the current popular murder cases. From "True Confessions," he turned to "True Detective" or "True Crime" stories, stories taken from actual cases.

The murder of Albert Richardson, editor of the *New York Tribune*, the Charlie Ross kidnapping case, the assassination of James Fisk by Edward Stokes, the trial of Guiteau for the murder of President Garfield, the Mollie Maguire trials, and many others now
"Lifting me as if I were but a child, he rushed to the edge of the housetop; and then—horror of horrors! I comprehended his diabolical intention to cast me over the parapet and dash my brains out upon the pavement below." Page 30.
almost forgotten were the subjects of his pamphlets. These often appeared in several editions, beginning with a report of the crime itself and later expanded to include an account of the trial.

In the seventies, Barclay turned to the Indians, those genuine one hundred per cent American villains. The popularity of narratives by the victims of Indian massacres and captivities drew Barclay to publish his own batch of Indian tales, all supposed to be genuine. *The Five Years Suffering and Perilous Adventures of Miss Barber, Wife of “Squatting Bear”* tells the story of a misguided lady who married an Indian to help convert the wild savages. After walking his squaw forty-five miles from Sioux City, the chief rebuffed her efforts to Christianize him: “Woman talk to woman; no tell man what he should do.”

In these Indian stories, there are the conventional raids, scalpings, and the lone female survivor being carried off to be reunited years later with a member of her family in a last-page tableau. Such is *Miss Coleson’s Narrative of Her Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, a little pamphlet now honored in all the bibliographies of Indian lore. It is full of the same melodramatic events as all Barclay’s publications. Apparently the naïveté of the last century made any coincidence believable. Miss Coleson’s story includes the fortuitous discovery of the brother from whom she became separated at her capture. Dramatically, he is driven into the camp she occupies, pursued by howling wolves. “There was something in the voice that thrilled through and through me; I had not seen the man to distinguish his face or features—but those tones, they awoke a whole world of recollection. My brother—my brother!”

Amazing and improbable coincidences were a built-in feature of many of the works. Long-lost sons or lovers regularly turn up on the last page, meeting parents or spouses by the strangest chance. In *The Rival’s Revenge*, the heroine’s lost suitor turns out to be her longer-lost brother, and in the end he murders her (while she is disguised as a soldier in the Cuban army), each being unaware of the other’s identity. This Oedipus-like tale is matched for coincidence in another story, whose title tells the whole tale: *The Startling, Thrilling and Interesting Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, Singular and Surprising Adventures of Fanny Templeton Danforth*, who, disguised in the uniform of a midshipman, went in search of her lover, an officer in
the U. S. Navy, was taken prisoner by the Pirate Ship “Demon of the Sea” and was rescued by the U. S. man-of-war, Macedonian, led by her lover, just as she was to have been burned alive by her captors, “The Pirates of the Isle of Pines.”

Barclay’s son, George Lippard Barclay, named for his father’s friend the writer, had joined his father in the publishing business. From his pen came a series of pamphlets on catastrophes like the Chicago and the Brooklyn Theatre fires. He also wrote on the discoveries of explorers. His father published his pamphlets on the African adventures of Stanley, Livingstone, du Chaillu, Speke and Grant, and the Arctic adventures of Greely. Barclay still advertised for agents to sell his cheap publications, promising each an exclusive territory. New publications, however, were being added to the line at a slower rate. From 1879 on, he issued no more than two new titles a year, and by 1884 he was down to only one.

In October, 1886, the younger Barclay died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-six. The elder Barclay continued to carry on, but it was not for long. On March 29, 1888, at his home at 1546 Centennial Avenue, Erastus Elmer Barclay died of gastroenteric fever at the age of sixty-seven. He was buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery at Thirty-First Street and Lehigh Avenue. Forty-seven years had passed since Barclay had started his career with Lucretia Cannon. His contribution to American literature was ended.

Barclay is practically unnoticed in the history of the publishing field. I have found only two references to the man or his publications. He is omitted from all lists of Philadelphia publishers; he appears in no indexes, bibliographies, or references which have come to my attention. He is referred to briefly in the Life and Choice Writings of George Lippard as a friend of Lippard’s. He had republished at least three of Lippard’s titles.

Edmund Pearson, the writer on murder cases, apparently discovered Barclay’s books in the course of his crime collecting. In Queer Books, published in 1928, in a chapter called “Sidewhiskers and Seduction,” he writes: “We who believe in the good old times must never examine the printed records. If we do, we may be stricken with

---

3 Anon., by John Bell Bouton (New York, 1853).
doubts that the present is the age of sin. My authority for this sad discovery is the pamphlets, and especially those issued by the Messrs. Barclay & Co. of Philadelphia. This firm knew of some events which are sufficient to draw tears from any group of gallery gods.” Pearson makes particular mention of the Burton and Claflin pamphlets, as well as the Cannon pamphlet, without identifying the last of these as Barclay’s work.

For a few years after the publisher’s death, the firm continued to sell its regular titles; it even managed to add a few new ones. Mrs. Barclay appears in the records as publisher for a short time; Silas A. George, a printer of some of the pamphlets, took over as proprietor of the company in 1893.

In 1896 two new pamphlets appeared in Barclay’s name with a Cincinnati address, 210–212 East 4th Street. This was the address of Andries Nielen, a publisher of ephemeral literature, whose own publishing ventures have been mostly of the dream and song book variety. His success must have been limited, for his entry in the city directory reads: “A. Nielen’s Publishing House. The Cash Buyers Agency, Clocks, Bronzes, Crockery, Household Goods, Musical Novelties, Publishers for Agents.” Ever so far removed from old Erastus Elmer himself, the titles still bear the Barclay stamp. The last of the famous “cheap publications” reports the case of the infamous Herman W. Mudgett, alias H. H. Holmes, who maintained a murder “castle” in Chicago and was hanged in Philadelphia, May 7, 1896: Holmes, The Arch Fiend, or, A Carnival of Crime. The Life, Trial, Confession and Execution of H. H. Holmes. Twenty-seven Lives Sacrificed to this Monstrous Ogre’s Insatiable Appetite.

In the years between 1841 and 1896, Barclay or his company issued one hundred sixty-three different titles, and there are undoubtedly others not yet identified. Of this number, about half were the “adventure” type fiction, there being at least eighty-five titles in this category. About forty titles reported general crime cases, and the remainder consisted of songsters, travel episodes, catastrophes, joke and dream books, how-to-do-it and other miscellaneous publications.4

Purchase, N. Y. Thomas M. McDade

4 A complete check list of all known Barclay titles has been deposited by the author at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.