

Barker Fairley (1887–1986)

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He had moral courage, the most important public virtue.

THE ABOVE WORDS about Barnsley-born Barker Fairley are said by Eda Sagarra, Emeritus Professor of Modern German Literature at Trinity College Dublin. Professor Sagarra had come across Barker in her research for the centenary lecture she delivered in 1996 at Manchester University, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Henry Simon Chair of German.

Barker, a German scholar, had been appointed to the Henry Simon Chair in June 1932. He stayed in Manchester for four years, his only lengthy academic period in the UK in a long academic life.

Arriving in Manchester during the depression of the 1930s must have been quite a change for Barker and his family, as from 1915 he had made Canada his home. He remains a most distinguished citizen of Canada whilst being almost unknown in Barnsley, Yorkshire and the UK.

Professor Sagarra believes that Barker's time in Manchester was important in the development of what were to become his major academic works on the German writers Johann Goethe and Heinrich Heine. She says he was politically active in Manchester and to her one of his most important acts was to be part of a small group of professors of German to invite ostracised German professors of literature to come to England to celebrate the bicentenary of Goethe's birth. For many years students at the University followed the changes he made to the curriculum at the University, which embraced the study of literature rather than dry philological studies.

Detailing Barker's academic achievements as a German scholar would present him as a clever, charismatic teacher but there was much more to him. In 1981 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation made a film entitled *Barker Fairley at 93* as part of the arts series 'Spectrum' and watching the film on YouTube one has the feel of the person not the academic. The sound of his voice still with its Yorkshire tones, the modesty, the clear thought, the emotion and the passion. It is hard not to embrace such a dignified human being.

In the film he speaks of his dislike for introspection, his total lack of interest in theology including a total disdain for the supernatural and what he calls superstition. The interviewer remarks that in a series of interviewing people of 90 years old, only Barker talked about the future throughout the interview.

Barker himself says, “The older I get, the more interesting life becomes.” From a man who had led a full and varied life, the future for Barker, in his 90s, held out a promise of even more interesting things to come.

He was a remarkable and gifted man, an academic, painter, poet and critic. Born on 21st May 1887 at 129 Park Road, Barnsley, to Barker and Charlotte Fairley, he was baptised at St John’s Church Barnsley in 1887. He was one of a long line of Barkers, a name he was said not to like and did not carry on the tradition within his own family. The family moved at some point to 175 Park Grove, Barnsley.

His father had come to Barnsley from Sunderland to be the head teacher at St John’s National School which opened on 6th November 1882 with 35 boys. In 1883 he returned to Sunderland and married Charlotte Rutter a dressmaker. Barker Snr was to remain at the school until 1920. The log book of the school in Barnsley Archives describes school life in a very poor area and trying to gain any sort of academic progress combined with the distresses of poverty must have been a tough job. The childhood illnesses and neglected children may have shaped a youthful Barker’s understanding of the human state as he had, throughout his life, a deep love for all human beings.

Barker Snr was very much involved in the Barnsley Naturalist and Scientific Society, being its President 1903–1904 and delivering a paper in that year to the Society entitled ‘Science in the days of Queen Anne’. He was also the compiler of a book printed by the *Barnsley Chronicle* in 1914 entitled *History of the Barnsley Auxiliary Bible Society*. The Bible Society was set up as a non-denominational Christian society aiming to give easy access to a copy of the Bible. Barker Snr was also an active member and sometime Vice-President of the Barnsley Literary Society.

Both Barker and his brothers Joseph, born in May 1884, and Duncan, born in 1890, were students at the school. Duncan was then a Locke scholar at Barnsley Grammar School, obtained a degree at the University of Manchester and then became a school master in Scarborough. In 1915 Duncan became a Lieutenant in the York and Lancaster Regiment. He died at Serre in 1916. He is commemorated on the war memorial at the University of Manchester and by a twist of fate at the Cooper Gallery Barnsley. In 2012 a plaque commemorating pupils who had died in the First World War was moved from Holgate Grammar School Barnsley to the gallery, the previous site of the grammar school. He was a poet, as was his brother Barker for a brief period in the early 1920s, and the *Alumnus* magazine for Barnsley Grammar School has a photograph of him and a poem by him published posthumously called ‘Forward’.

Joseph joined the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force in Edmonton, 31st Battalion, on 25th November 1914 stating his occupation as a teacher. He was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for “from the 22nd September 1917 to 24th February 1918 in the field and for consistent good work and devotion to duty”. Joseph remained in Canada for the rest of his life.

A sister, Jesse Charlotte, was born in 1885 and died in 1886.

Barker became a pupil at Leeds Central High School between August 1899 and July 1904, travelling there by train from Barnsley. The school had been



Barker Fairley Senior, extracted from the archive of the Barnsley Literary Society 1903–1904



Duncan Fairley, brother of Barker,
extracted from Barnsley Grammar School
Alumnus, 1913–1919

founded in 1885 as a co-educational Higher Grade School and had premises in Woodhouse Lane, Leeds. The school later became a boys school and then the City of Leeds School.

On leaving Leeds Central High School, Barker went as a County Scholar and student of modern languages to Yorkshire College, later Leeds University, where he graduated in 1907, with a first class honours degree in modern languages and literature, with distinctions in German and French.

In 1950 Barker was to return to Leeds to be awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters whilst also undertaking a tour of 10 other universities and addressing the English Goethe Society. He is described in the tour literature as probably the greatest living authority on Goethe. This visit followed rather a traumatic year for Barker. In March 1949 he and Margaret were delegates at the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York. This conference was attended by 800 prominent literary and artistic figures including Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer and Tennessee Williams and the group called for peace at any price with Stalin. The Cold War had started and tensions between East and West were high. Margaret was questioned at the Conference by the United States Immigration Service and she and Barker were deemed a threat to national security and were deported. They were barred for life from entering the USA and when invited by Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia in the same year, to deliver a lecture on Goethe, Barker was refused entry. His lectures were later printed as essays on Goethe.

From Leeds, Barker went to Jena University in Germany. In supporting Barker's application to Jena, F.W. Moorman, Assistant Professor and later Professor of English Language at Leeds University, writes to a Professor Keller at Jena about Barker:

He has a good knowledge of German philology (including some Goethe but no Old English) and also of German literature. I also understand that he speaks German fairly well. Now as to his personality, he is certainly bright and keen, with nothing of Hodgson's shyness about him and I believe he would make his teaching lively and interesting. He has a good clear voice and speaks perfect English without any trace of a dialect as far as I have noticed... He is very young for the post – not more than 22 I should think... I want you to understand that if you appoint him to the post you are taking a young, unpractised man, who has plenty of ability and would be willing to learn and whose bright pleasant ways would make him an agreeable assistant to yourself and an attractive teacher.

A further testimonial to Barker is provided by Professor Schuddekopf at Leeds University in a letter to Professor Keller:

...our external examiner told me his written and oral performances were outstanding and neither Oxford nor Cambridge has witnessed better work. He speaks good English with no dialect, expresses himself well, has an attractive personality, is a 'gentleman' and would without doubt soon become a popular teacher with his students.

With such glowing references, Barker was offered a post at Jena and on 24th September 1907 writes to a Dr Eggeling from 195 Park Road, Barnsley to accept the post of English Lektor at Jena. At Jena he became a Doctor of Philosophy.

Barker recounts in the 1981 film that it was a chance discussion that led him to Canada. If he had any thoughts about where to go next he found the idea of South America the most attractive. However in 1910 he found himself in Edmonton at the University of Alberta which had been founded in 1908.

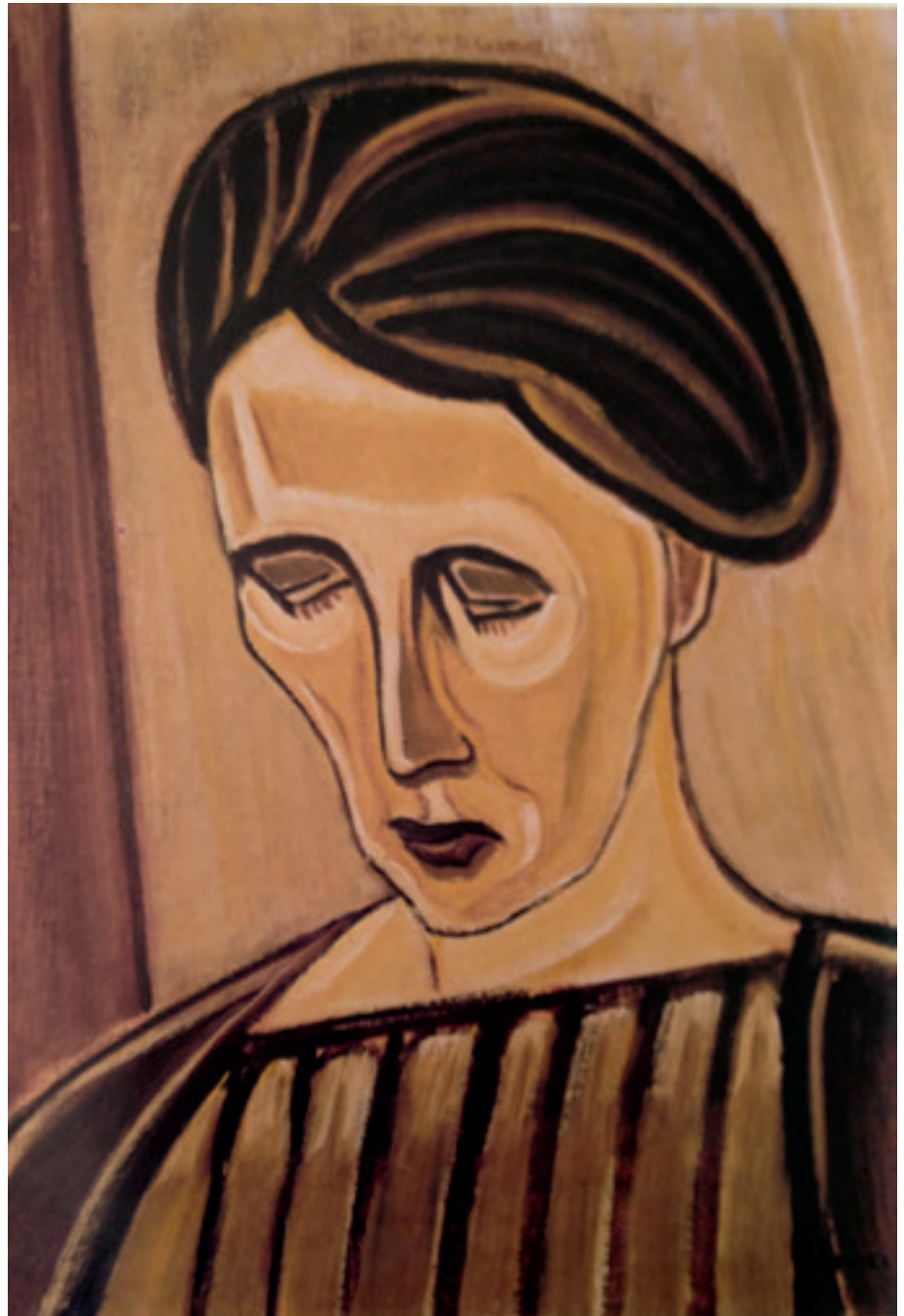
In Edmonton he met and married Margaret Adele Keeling. He says of that marriage that the finest thing about it was the respect they had for each other's individuality, so when she died in 1968, he found himself standing on his own two feet. Margaret was a remarkable woman. She was born in Bradford in 1885, the daughter of Reverend William Hulton Keeling, born in Blackley Lancashire, and Henrietta Frances Gedge, born in Birmingham. William Keeling became Headmaster of Bradford Grammar School where he remained for 44 years.

Margaret was one of nine children, spending their childhood in Bradford with her parents, grandmother and two aunts. One of her siblings in particular was a brilliant man. Bertram Francis Eardley Keeling, Margaret's brother gained a first class degree at Trinity College Cambridge, became a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1907 and was appointed the Superintendent of the Helwan Observatory, Egypt. He fought in the First World War with distinction gaining an MC and an OBE. In March 1919 in London he married Katherine Menke, born in 1888 in England to German parents. In September 1919 he committed suicide in Cairo and is buried in Cairo War Cemetery. Katherine later married the archaeologist Sir Charles Leonard Woolley in 1927, best known for his excavations in Ur, now in Iraq. Agatha Christie's husband Sir Max Mallowan worked with Sir Leonard Woolley at Ur and it there that he met Agatha Christie. It is thought that Christie based her character Louise Leidner, the murder victim in her book *Murder in Mesopotamia* on Katherine, who was a somewhat mysterious, divisive and dominating personality. Another sibling Edward, a barrister, became the Conservative MP for Twickenham and Mayor of Westminster.

Margaret was a pupil at the Girls Grammar School Bradford and then a student at St Hilda's College, Oxford. She could attend lectures and sit examinations but could not gain a degree as these were only awarded to women by Oxford from 1920. She was a brilliant pupil, earning such comments as "In my opinion considerably the best student of the year" and "Miss Keeling is always thoughtful and interesting. She has plenty of ideas." After leaving she gained a teachers training certificate at St Mary's, Paddington, London and for a time returned as a tutor to St Hilda's. There she met Henry Marshall Tory, President of the University of Alberta. He offered her a post as Dean of Women's Studies and a degree and she accepted, so moving from one of the oldest universities to one of the newest.

She was to become an educator, writer and social activist and there is a Margaret Fairley Park with a bust of her in Toronto. Her time in Manchester with Barker may have precipitated her increasingly left-wing views as 1932 saw the

Portrait of Margaret by Barker, 1937



birth of the British Union of Fascists. They had early rallies around Manchester and Salford became their northern headquarters. Their leader Oswald Mosley addressed a meeting in the Free Trade Hall Manchester in 1933. During her time in Manchester she joined the Communist Party of Great Britain.

In 1915 Barker, Margaret and their two children Joan and Tom moved to the University of Toronto where he was to remain until his retirement in 1957. Like his father and father-in-law, he was not one to change jobs too often. Three more children were born to them, Elizabeth, William and Ann.

What is now the University of Toronto has its origins in the foundation of Kings College in 1827. It is a prestigious university and operates on a collegiate system as do the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. As Professor of German, Barker was an inspired teacher but he had wider interests than the study of German. At the University there existed an undergraduate newspaper called *The Rebel* and after contributing to this, he and others decided that the newspaper should have a wider audience and so they set up a magazine they called *Canadian Forum* in 1920. This progressive liberal magazine existed until 2000 and was in effect the first modern magazine of Canada. It gave Barker and Margaret a forum to express their sometimes provocative views and Barker could champion Canadian poetry, literature and especially art. In 1919 he had written about the Canadian-born artist Percy Wyndham Lewis and his war work 'A Canadian Gunpit' in the *Canadian Magazine*. This work is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Barker seems to have remained on friendly terms with Wyndham, the co-founder of the Vorticist art movement and he was one of a number of academics Wyndham had contact with in Toronto throughout the second world war. His geometrically abstract work style may have had an influence on Barker's own painting.

The year 1920 also saw the emergence as a group of a number of artists who were to become known as the Group of Seven and it was this group who Barker befriended and championed in the pages of the *Canadian Forum*. The group broke away from the more traditional style of landscape painting and, using bold bright colours, painted what they saw as the real Canada including its vast wilderness. They were distancing themselves from European traditions and striking out in a confident Canadian style. Barker became friendly with a member of the group, J.E.H. MacDonald. MacDonald was born in Durham in 1873 and had emigrated with his family to Canada in 1887. Two of the other members of the group, Arthur Lismer and Frederick Horsman Varley, were born in Sheffield and had been members of the Heeley Art Club, Sheffield.

In October 1921 Barker wrote an article in the *Canadian Forum* entitled 'Some Canadian Painters: F.H. Varley.' He discusses Varley's war paintings which were exhibited in London in 1919 and how these in his view gave Varley the recognition he deserved. Varley's subsequent portraits he compares with Augustus John, William Orpen, James M. Whistler, John Singer Sargent and concludes that Varley has his place among them. Barker was correct as Varley is now as well known for his portrait work as his landscapes. The article discusses a portrait by Varley of Vincent Massey, a great benefactor to the University of Toronto and a Governor General of Canada. It may have been Barker who helped Varley with the commission. In 1920 Varley painted Barker and the portrait is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

Barker travelled with the group on their expeditions, collected their work and defended it against public criticism. He encouraged discussion of their work and in 1925 invited two members of the group, Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson and a visiting English artist to discuss their work. That artist was Leonard Richmond (1889–1965), a prolific traveller across Canada and North America and now best remembered for his graphic and illustrative work and books on art techniques.



Barker with pipe and members of the Group of Seven. Courtesy of the Arts and Letters Club. Photographer Arthur S. Goss

In May 1917 Barker became a member of the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto which had been formed to encourage all forms of art including literature, sculpture, painting and music. The members of the Group of Seven were also members and the Club has a collection of sketches by Arthur Lismer of club members amongst which Barker and Vincent Massey appear. There is a famous photograph taken in 1920 in the club of Barker with some of the members of the Group.

In 1922 Barker was appointed Chair of the Sketch Club of Hart House at the University of Toronto. Hart House is a mixture of student activity centre, art gallery and type of club. It was financed by Vincent Massey and opened in 1919. The Sketch Club organised exhibitions and encouraged the study and collection of art. To be the Chair of this group put Barker in a formidable position. Perhaps the most knowledgeable about art of the committee, he knew exactly what he wanted for Hart House and guided their acquisitions for a number of years, buying in 1922 a work by A.Y. Jackson: 'Georgian Bay, November'.

In the 1920s there were few commercial galleries in Toronto and wall space at Hart House provided welcome exposure to the artists of the Group of Seven. By the mid-1920s the Group had gained recognition. In 1924 the Tate Gallery acquired a work of A.Y. Jackson – 'The Entrance to Halifax Harbour' and Hart House and Barker can claim some of the credit for this. Barker also showed the work of the artist Tom Thomson at Hart House. Tom Thomson had died in somewhat mysterious circumstances in 1917 so before the group became



Varley, Fairley and McDonald
 Courtesy of the Arts and Letters Club
 Toronto

established, but he was a strong pioneering influence on the group and his work is much collected. The first exhibition devoted to Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven in the UK took place in 2011 at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

In May 1923, another great Barnsley benefactor to the Cooper Gallery, Sir Michael E. Sadler, educationalist, collector and supporter of artists, visited Toronto with his wife, Mary Harvey, the daughter of Charles Harvey linen manufacturer of Barnsley, to attend an educational conference. The records of Hart House show that he presented to the Hart House chapel an altar piece by Eric Gill. It would have been Barker who proposed acceptance of this piece and so it is likely that the two great men met. The Gill sculpture remains at Hart House. On his return from Toronto in 1923 Sir Michael was met with a storm of protest over the work Gill had done for Leeds University as a war memorial entitled 'The Moneylenders'.

Barker wrote freely in later years about the Group of Seven. He did not shy away from questioning their lasting effect on Canadian art. He suggested that what they did for the development of Canadian art was to set landscape painting free and give Canadians national pride in their artists. But at the same time he wonders if they were so overwhelming in their influence that later artists stopped trying, in particular with regard to portrait painting, and Canadian art stagnated. He discusses Picasso's 'Guernica' and how that could be a template for free drawing of people in a Canadian way. He praises Yorkshireman Henry Moore and his ability to take liberties with the human form. Barker always wanted to move on and innovate.

Whilst being in close contact with the members of the Group of Seven, they seem not to have encouraged Barker to paint himself. That encouragement is said to have come from a friend, Robert Finch, Professor of French at the University of Toronto, just before Barker departed for Manchester. It is strange to think that Barker needed someone to encourage him. He wrote poetry in



Drawing of Barker by Arthur Lismer,
 1925. Courtesy of the Arts and Letters
 Club Toronto

Crucifix by Eric Gill donated by Sir Michael Sadler to Hart House Chapel, University of Toronto, 1923



the early 1920s, describing the wilderness of northern Ontario, but he said in later life that as no-one had said it was good and encouraged him to continue, he simply stopped. Barker did paint whilst working in Manchester and living in Buxton Derbyshire. Four works are known of. 'Snow in England', a watercolour dated 1933 and 'Spring at Bakewell' an oil on wood are in the collection of the University of Toronto Art Centre. Another work, 'Bakewell Woodyard', 1935 is in a private collection and an oil, 'Buxton' was sold at auction in 2013. He also painted a portrait, 'Head – Jewish Girl', dated 1933, and portraits of his daughter Joan. Barker had artist friends who would visit him at Buxton to sketch the countryside and amongst them was Barbara Niven. She was a member of the Manchester Society of Modern Painters and of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

In 1938, back in Toronto, he set up a group of amateur artists he called the 'Studio Group' and of which the Canadian figurative painter Isobel Chestnut Reid was a member, but this seems to have been short-lived.

His appetite for painting seems to have revived on his retirement from the University in 1957. Margaret died in 1968 and he had a small exhibition in the 1950s of his work at the Picture Loan Society Toronto, but he did not have an exhibition of his work in Canada until October 1969 when John Sommer of the Gallery House Sol, Georgetown, exhibited 32 of Barker's portraits. Further exhibitions followed at Gallery House Sol in 1971, 1973 and 1977.

Sommer seems to have had an enthusiasm for exhibiting Barker's work and in 1972 an exhibition was held, organised by him, at the Lyceum Club of the Women's Art Association Toronto: *Barker Fairley Retrospective 1932–1972*. The catalogue says:

On the occasion of his 85th birthday...he prefers to be known as a painter. Fairley has given us a new outlook on the Ontario landscape and

something even more important – a new type of interpretive portraiture. In speaking of his painting, Barker says, ‘I am interested above all things in intelligence.’

‘Boy and Cello’ by Barker Fairley
Courtesy of his family

The exhibition was the idea of Nan Purdy who became Barker’s second wife. There were 32 works for the period 1932–1945, five of which related to Manchester. These were titled: ‘Manchester sketches’, ‘Manchester Chimneys’ and ‘Manchester Canal’. There were 31 works for the period 1953–1972. Nan had brought a new perspective to Barker’s life and he began to gain recognition as a more serious artist. His portraits may not be a true likeness but do capture the essence of the sitter, sometimes perhaps so revealing as to make the sitter uncomfortable. All his work has a restricted palette mainly of black, yellows, greys, greens and blues but the colours have subtle tonal differences. He worked quickly, finishing portraits in a day and his landscapes were worked from an outdoor sketch in his studio onto board. There is nothing flamboyant about his work. It is pared to the minimum with no frills, like the man himself.

Barker received many honours during his lifetime including the Order of Canada and numerous honorary degrees. His obituary in the *Times* of 2nd December 1986 opens with the following words:

Professor Barker Fairley OC, one of the foremost Goethe scholars in the English-speaking world, and a leading Canadian painter, has died at the age of 99.

In 2004 the Canadian Conservation Institute acquired two paintboxes. One belonged to A.Y. Jackson, Group of Seven member, and one belonged to Barker. They will analyse the paints and use the information for curatorial research, conservation and to authenticate artworks.

To be the first gallery in the UK to show Barker’s work is very exciting. This could not have happened without support from his family. It seems just that he should be in the Cooper Gallery celebrating its centenary, which recognises the bravery of his brother, acknowledges the donations of Sir Michael Sadler and at last brings Barker, the artist, back to the town of his birth.

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Barker Fairley at 93 years old [online; two parts] YouTube [Accessed: 27th & 28th August 2013]



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