The Barnard Bulletin
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A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce Vermont writers who deserve wider renown.

Elsa Barker **1869 – 1954**

Undated photo of Elsa Barker

Not much can be known for sure about Vermont writer Elsa Barker. A listed reference with the alluring title "Biography of Elsa Barker" turns out to be a brief squib published by an occult society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, in January 2010. She's mentioned in Lewis Spence's 2003 entry in the hard-to-find *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology.* One crucial fact that can be verified, however, establishes her as a Vermont writer: it's definite that she was born in Leicester, Vermont, in 1869.

Both Elsa Barker's parents—Albert G. Barker and his wife, Louise Marie—died when she was young.Who cared for the orphaned child? That fact is unknown, but evidently she was brought up in circumstances genteel enough to provide her with a good education, at least good enough that eventually, according to Wikipedia, she became a published writer of novels, short stories and poetry. She left Vermont early on to live in New York City most of her life, and occasionally she took up residence abroad in London and Paris. Perhaps fleeing her small village was her own way of being a Vermont writer. She rejected a pastoral life that inspired other writers, finding it provincial and stultifying.

Barker's first book, a conventional novel entitled *The Son of Mary Bethel*, did not appear until 1909 when she was forty. She had been making her living in New York as a journalist (a "shorthand reporter") and a teacher. She was a lecturer for the New York Board of Education, and she authored a "labor play"—"The Scab"—which was produced in New York and Boston from 1904 to 1906. During that time, she briefly joined the editorial staff of *Hampton's Magazine*.

Barker's eventual claim to fame would become three unusual books she published that she maintained were "letters" dictated to her in a mysterious way. She was living in Paris when her literary inspiration suddenly became a spirit's visitation: "I was strongly impelled to take up a pencil and write." This so-called "automatic writing" was an honored feature of the occult and a popular fascination. The fact that Elsa's father had been known as someone interested in spiritualism may have given his daughter an easy admission into those circles.

Barker wrote *Letters from a Living Dead Man* (1914) while under the influence, she said, of someone who called himself X. She later made much of her discovery that she had been channeling the words of a Los Angeles lawyer and judge named David P. Hutch, who had died in 1912. Hutch's son Horace was convinced the words Miss Barker wrote had come from his father; he declared that all of the passages were genuine. Barker went on to publish two more volumes: *War Letters from the Living Dead Man* (1915) and *Last Letters from the Living Dead Man* (1919). An anonymous critic describes how these letters record "the impressions of an intelligent traveler in a strange country, his mistakes, prejudices, ideals and new insights."

In Elsa Barker's era, there was a keen interest among the literate masses in what was called "para-psychology" and "the occult." (That interest seems to parallel our current high ratio of individuals who embrace conspiracy theories.) Quasi-scientific investigations of reported communications with the dead had the force of a new religion for many people. Elsa Barker, while in Paris, was initiated into S. L. MacGregor Mathers's "temple" known as the Rosicrucian Order of Alpha et Omega. The interest she took in spiritualist phenomena would eventually lead her into a passionate study of the psychology of Carl Jung. Her abiding belief in the power of "unseen" forces seems to have been the common denominator.

Cont. next page - Barker

Barker - Cont. from previous page

From 1928-1930, Elsa Barker lived on the French Riviera. Perhaps it was there that she met several of her correspondents, whose letters to and from Barker have found their way into the Special Collections of the University of Delaware's library. One of these correspondents was Count Raoul Wachmeister, a German noble and composer who set Barker's poem "The Frozen Grail" to music and also introduced her detective novel *The Cobra Candlestick* (1928) to a German publisher. Another correspondent was Barker's friend Rowena, Countess of Somerset. Letters from the countess are rich with detail about life in England during World War II. The collection also holds letters from two literary societies to which Barker belonged: The New York Poetry Group and the Poetry Society of America. In all of these archived letters, Barker's friends express admiration for her poetry and concern about her health.

Elsa Barker's last published book was the 1930 novel *The Redman Cave Murder.* After that, no more books—and no further indication of Barker's activity as any sort of writer.

Mysteriously she went quiet, yet lived another twenty-four years; she died on August 31, 1954, when she was 85. Her obituary was published in *The New York Times* under the heading "Mrs. Elsa Barker, Poet and Author." A reader might be startled by the title "Mrs." Is it a typographical error? Or a clue? As it happens, the placement of "Mrs." in front of a maiden name used to be a traditional honorific for a respected mature spinster. Often housekeepers were called "Mrs." even though they were not married. By 1954 such a tradition had become old-fashioned, but it took a quite a while for *The New York Times* to stop identifying women by their marital status as Mrs. or Miss.

Most of Barker's published books, beyond the "dead" man's *Letters* in three volumes, seem to be crime fiction aimed at sales so she could make a living. She probably also wrote her *Stories from the New Testament for Children* (1911) for a ready market. However, Barker published two books of poetry: *The Book of Love* (1912) and *Songs of a Vagrom Angel* (1916). Then as now, books of poetry generally made little if any money.

The Book of Love is out of print and very rare. But it is extraordinary. It comprises 231 pages of closely printed, expertly rhymed verse—all on the topic of love. The voice in an early poem, "Sometime," is that of a woman who awaits a lover:

Sometime

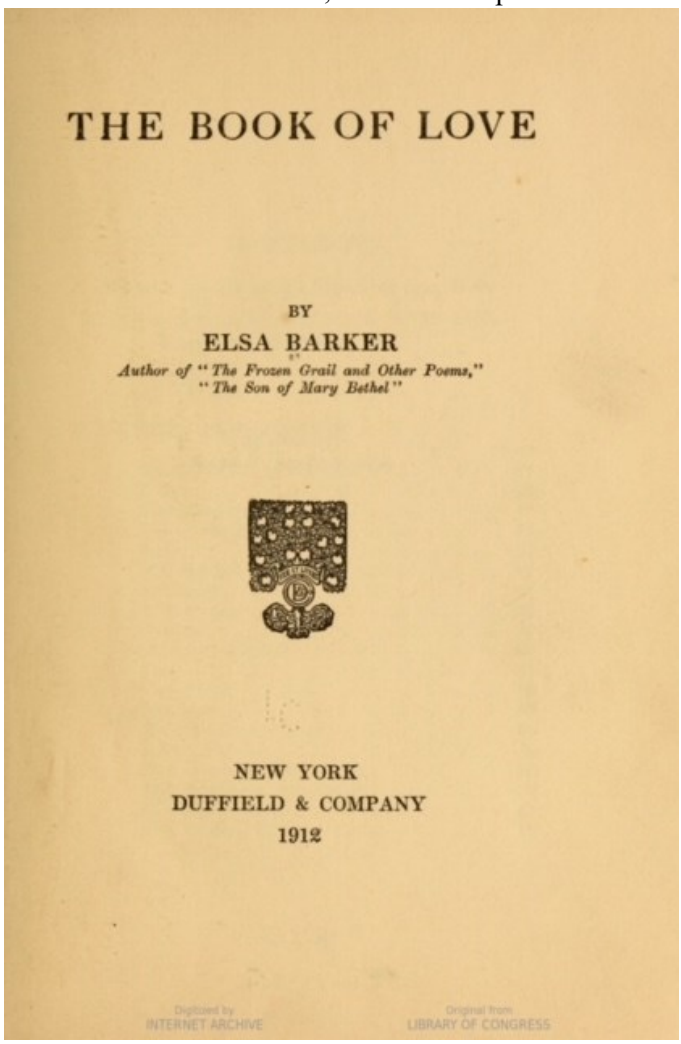
Sometime the spring will come with darker green
Than ever dared to touch the world before ;
Sometime the Guest my soul has never seen
Will pass the threshold of my waiting door.

Sometime the passion of my book of song
Will face me in the eyes of Destiny;
Sometime the question I have asked so long
Of the slow stars, will turn and answer me.

A sail, now tossing on the sea of dreams,
Sometime will rest in the broad port of waking ;
Sometime the Weaver, that now idle seems,
Will show some splendid fabric of her making.

There lies a light upon the peaks of faith
That makes my heart beat faster as I climb ;
And wistfully before me floats a wraith—
The Presence that will walk with me sometime.

The Presence has yet to appear—and it might be mistaken for a divinity—but Barker insists she waits for an answer to "the question" she has "asked so long" and leaves little doubt she hopes to meet a flesh and blood "Guest" who's not a dream, but an actual person.


THE BOOK OF LOVE

BY

ELSA BARKER

Author of "The Frozen Grail and Other Poems," "The Son of Mary Bethel"

NEW YORK
DUFFIELD & COMPANY
1912

Stanzas from Barker's later poem "The Rose" make clear her conviction that poets know love most powerfully:

Only the poet looks Love in the eyes:
He knows the meaning of the mystic sighs,
The rapturous tears, the pain, the mad desire
That starves upon the lips it satisfies.

And after all our toils and dreams and prayers, '
T is only Love for which the future cares;
Labour and fame are steps along Love's way,
And art is but the garment that he wears.

Cont. next page - Barker

Barker - Cont. from previous page
Barker is not entertaining a "dream lover" in this case, but has fallen in love with a real man whom she met:

Yea, thou didst make me captive with a glance—
An arrow shot across the gulfs of chance;
Its gleam appeared to my enchanted eyes
The light of immemorial romance.

The sensual aspect of their affair becomes unmistakable in these two stanzas:

Thy body is a living shrine for me,
Thy deep embrace the bread and wine for me;
Thy fervid kisses are the prayers of faith,
Thine eyes the altar lights that shine for me...

I touch the breathing marvel of thy flesh,
Like throbbing rose-leaves, and as dewy-fresh.
How sprang this blossom from the common soil—
World dust, that holds thy spirit in its mesh?

The astonishing volume of poetry in *The Book of Love* has an incantatory effect. Barker's imagery veers from positive to negative in strange ways. And sometimes she seems to invite psychosis, as in this stanza taken from "The Rue":

There is a crevice in Love's garden wall
Where mandrakes thrive, with lilies rank and tall;
Where stealthy Death peers through a purple veil
In madman's eye, and strange worms crawl and crawl.

A fierce desperation is the other side of her worshipful attachment:

Is there no anodyne despair may buy,
No draught of dreamless sleep for such as I?
Discordant singer in the choir of Love,
Who neither cares to live nor dares to die.

How many minutes are there in a day?
Love's restless watchers know, and only they:
The clock ticks, and the quivering nerves are strained
For sound of steps—that never come their way.

Elsa Barker, in the poems that follow, manages to pull herself together in spite of her distress at a love gone sour. She understands that she has gained a valuable wisdom which is only available to sufferers. The simple short verse below expresses her very traditional revelation:

I Know

Oh! I know why the alder trees
Lean over the reflecting stream ;
And I know what the wandering bees
Heard in the woods of dream.

I know how the uneasy tide
Answers the signal of the moon,
And why the morning-glories hide
Their eyes in the forenoon.

And I know all the wild delight
That quivers in the sea-bird's wings,
For in one little hour last night
Love told me all these things.

Barker, in her ambitious and lengthy *Book of Love*, praised the wisdom she had acquired from indulging her passion, and also confessed her faith that these "songs" of hers would last. She believed, in effect, that she might become immortal through her poetry.

When I Am Dead

When I am dead and sister to the dust ;
When no more avidly I drink the wine
Of human love ; when the pale Proserpine
Has covered me with poppies, and cold rust has
Has cut my lyre-strings, and the sun has thrust
Me underground to nourish the world-vine,
Men shall discover these old songs of mine,
And say : This woman lived—as poets must.

This woman lived and wore life as a sword
To conquer wisdom ; this dead woman read
In the sealed Book of Love and underscored
The meanings. Then the sails of faith she spread,
And faring out for regions unexplored,
Went singing down the River of the Dead.

At her death, Elsa Barker was one of the last surviving charter members of The Poetry Society of America. Mention of her appears in editor Leslie Shepard's *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (Vol. 1, Detroit Gale Research Co., 1984).

She may have gone "singing down the River of the Dead," confident that she had "underscored the meanings"—but alas, except for this short essay, she has now faded entirely from the scene.

The Danforth Library does not have any book written by Elsa Barker. It is unlikely that a copy of her masterpiece, *The Book of Love*, can be found that would fit our budget.

DANFORTH LIBRARY NEWS

September is National Library Card Sign-Up Month. When launched in 1987, the original goal of the campaign was to emphasize the importance of library cards to a child's education and to combat illiteracy. **Today it's geared toward celebrating and promoting local libraries.**

We invite all Barnard and East Barnard residents to stop by this month to sign-up for a patron ID number (you don't receive a physical library card) and for residents who already have one, to update their contact information with us. We have books, audio books, state park and historical site passes, and DVDs for check-out.

We hope to see you all soon!

ARTISTREE PRESENTS A SILENT AUCTION AND A SENSE OF PLACE

Artistree's silent auction goes through September 30th at 9pm.

Here are a few pieces by local ceramicists:

#27 Maxine Hugon Ceramic Platter

This 14" diameter ceramic platter is handmade with ivory stoneware and a navy blue sgraffito-carved birds and foliage design. Valued at: $190

#28 Laura White Stoneware Vase

This large 12" tall stoneware vase is handmade by Laura White. Valued at: $225

#29 Deborah Goodwin Ceramic Butter Dish

This hand built ceramic butter dish is made of food & dishwasher-safe stoneware, glazed with a buttery glaze. Valued at: $100

#30 Veronica DeLay Sunflowers Platter

This 14" diameter stoneware platter is decorated with Veronica DeLay's intricate brushwork. A swirling rim of blueberries surrounds a field of sunflowers blooming in the center. The underglaze painting is finished with a clear, food-safe glaze. Valued at: $200

#31 Amanda Ann Palmer Ceramic Fruit Bowl

Handmade carved stoneware 9" diameter fruit bowl with Amanda Ann Palmer's signature food-safe glaze. From the artist: "This fruit bowl is made on the potter's wheel. After the clay hardens a bit, I cut out the shapes by hand. It is great for fruit or for serving bread." Valued at: $200

#60 Miranda Thomas Painted Fish Vase

Stoneware vase, 9" tall, brushed fish decoration. Valued at: $125

#64 Farmhouse Pottery Dish

This stoneware dish is one of a special limited edition designed and signed by James Zillian, the owner of Farmhouse Pottery. Valued at: $265

See all the items: https://secure.qgiv.com/event/artistreecommunityartscenterauction/items/

Join us Sunday, October 1st at 3pm for,

"A Sense of Place" - Voices from Prague, Paris and Budapest with flutist, Leslie Stroud and pianist Matthew Odell at Artistree.

Chamber music for flute and piano by Fauré, Schulhoff, Dutilleux, Dohnanyi and Martinu.

Tickets are $15 per person.
Gey tickets at: https://artistreevt.org/concerts

Artistree Collaborative Theatre is presenting "Little Shop of Horrors

Performance Dates: October 19th - 22nd and 26th - 29th

Artistree Community Arts Center & Gallery
2095 Pomfret Road/PO Box 158
South Pomfret, VT 05067
802.457.3500 ext. 111
www.artistreevt.org

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message L = N. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"J C B Y B L K V A F Q L A K Y C J P B A J F

D L J C B C K A A F, J C B E G B V J C D S

J C B P D G L K L Y R C K J B V L O H D A O;

E W J C B R V W F K O B E B L O

F M G V W F D S V F J B G E A D D P V L O

J C B S D G B F J J Q G L F J D G Q F F B J

V L O Y D A O. "

- H. E. Y V A E G B V J C

GLAD RAGS FALL SALE

Friday, September 22, 2:00PM - 6:00PM

Saturday, September 23, 9:00AM - 2:00PM

Sunday, September 24, 10:00AM - 1:00PM
(Everything is half price on Sunday)

The Sale is located at the Masonic Lodge, 30 Pleasant St, Woodstock, VT 05091

For more information visit https://www.gladrags.org or https://www.facebook.com/groups/145529065206.

The Barnard Bulletin is published around the twentieth of each month. On the web at BarnardBulletin.news. Send mail to PO Box 161, Barnard VT 05031-0161, email Info@BarnardBulletin.Info or call 802-457-1792.

BARNARTS EVENTS SCHEDULE

Conversation & Concert with Carli Muñoz

We're excited to host a free conversation and concert in partnership with Yankee Bookshop with prolific jazz composer Carli Muñoz on October 7th at 7pm at the North Chapel UU in Woodstock.

Carli is possibly most well known for his 10 years of touring with The Beach Boys, but has been recording and performing with George Benson, Les McCann, and other jazz legends for decades. His memoir, A Fool's Journey: To the Beach Boys and beyond, will be released in October.

Haunted Village Theater
Oct 21, Barnard Village and Barnard Town Hall

Holiday Cabaret - Dec 9 Wassail Weekend

Winter Carols - Dec 15
First Universalist Church of Barnard

BarnArts Center for the Arts
PO Box 41
Barnard, VT 05031

info@barnarts.org
802-234-1645
www.barnarts.org

FEAST & FIELD MUSIC SERIES

2023 Season Calendar

September 21: Jenni & the Jazz Junketeers jazz/swing/ soul

September 28: DJ dance Party

Feast and Field is located at 1525 Royalton Turnpike, Barnard, VT.

More information at https://barnarts.org/mainstage/music-on-the-farm/

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"The genial sunlight melts on the hills, The breath of the morning white and cold; By the wayside bend sprays of aster bloom And the forest turns to russet and gold."

- C.B. Galbreath

BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE

Home Energy Upgrade Update

The Energy Committee is assisting Barnard residents to improve the efficiency of their homes through the Home Energy Upgrade campaign. Additional funds have recently been made available and in addition to the $500 rebate for a qualified audit, the Barnard Bonus offers up to $2,000 to qualified middle income residents once they have completed the work required by the audit. You can pick up a print copy of the handout at the Town Clerk's office (open Monday and Tuesday) or contact us and we'll mail one to you: BarnardBonus@icloud.com

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 3:00 - 5:00 pm, Saturdays 10:00 am to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi. Contact us: phone: 802-234-9408. Email: charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com.

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, selectboard@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday and Tuesday, 8:00am—3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm.
https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click here for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm via. Zoom. Contact the clerk of the District. secretary@ecfiber.net, for meeting information or visit https://www.ecfiber.net/virtual-meetings/

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

DELECTABLE MOUNTAIN QUILTERS (DMQ) meet the 1st Tuesday of every month at the Bethel Library from 1-3pm. Contact: Mary Croft 802-763-7074