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Clara Barton: The True Story

“I have found it extremely hard to restrain the tears today, and would have given almost anything to have been alone and undisturbed.”¹ This is a quote from the diary of one of the world’s most accomplished women, Clara Barton. At this point, she was 31 years old and working in the Patent Office, but her diaries take this melancholy tone throughout her life, from her childhood until her death at age 90 in 1912. While her personal manuscripts consistently reveal deep suffering with mental illness, secondary sources on Clara Barton present a very different image.

Historians romanticize Clara Barton’s story. Twentieth century historians have a paradigm for successful American women of the 19th century, they were cheerful, independent, and most importantly, feminists. Clara Barton was none of these things, so historians have changed the story to fit her into the paradigm. The truth about Clara Barton is that she struggled extensively with mental illness, much of her career success came from the endorsements of powerful men, and her motivation was not related to the feminist cause.

When reading Clara Barton’s personal manuscripts, it is undeniable that she struggled greatly with mental illness. Her writing is very melancholy, even to the point of being suicidal. A diary entry from her adulthood says, “Cannot see much in these days worth living for” and she

¹ Clara Barton, "Diary of Clara Barton" (unpublished manuscript, 1852-1865), accessed November 5, 2013, North American Women's Letters and Diaries, Colonial to 1950.

frequently says, “How long I can endure such a life, I do not know.”² Her manuscripts throughout her life have a similar tone. In a letter to her close friend Harriette Reed, written when Barton was 78 years old, she says, “The mental part of this winter has been hard.” She goes on to compare the current phase to the traumas she experienced in her past, describing it by saying, “The weight so heavy, the way so dark, the abyss so deep. I dare not think of it, but step by step I hold my way.”³ She consistently sounds downtrodden, burdened and deeply distressed. This highly significant aspect of her life is hidden in 20th century representations of her.

In reality, her mental illness and her poor physical health catalyzed her career advancements. As a child, Barton was very shy. Her parents were worried that she had a developmental problem and so they took her to see a physician. The physician diagnosed her with “shyness” and told her parents that in order to cure Barton of her shyness, they needed to force her to speak in front of crowds. Her parents set up a makeshift schoolhouse for her, and at the age of nine Barton began tutoring neighborhood children. This tutoring program eventually blossomed into a school, which Barton ran for twenty years.⁴

After twenty years of teaching, Barton had a nervous breakdown, lost her voice and decided to move from her home in Massachusetts to Washington D.C. to recuperate. William Barton says, “Her energy was exhausted, her voice completely failed, a nervous collapse such as came to her a number of times later in life, left her prostrate.”⁵ After deciding to permanently retire from teaching, Barton began work in the Patent Office. It was her move to D.C. which led

² *Ibid.*

³ Clara Barton to Harriette Reed, April 1900, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1, University of Maryland Hornbake Library, College Park, MD, accessed October 29, 2013, <http://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/12621>.

⁴ "Clara Barton," in *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 18.

⁵ William E. Barton, *The Life of Clara Barton: The Founder of the American Red Cross* (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1969), 74.

to her involvement in the Civil War. If she hadn't needed to retire from teaching, she may not have been involved in the Civil War at all.

In the early days of the war, the Capitol building served as a residence for Union soldiers. Women would visit and read to the soldiers and bring them provisions. Barton was very moved by her first experience visiting the soldiers, saying in a letter to her brother, "So far as our poor efforts can reach, they shall never lack a kindly hand or a sister's sympathy!"⁶ Barton quickly developed an attachment to the soldiers and an emotional investment in their wellbeing. The Battle of Bull Run occurred on July 21st, 1861 in Prince William County, Virginia. This was the first battle which inflicted heavy casualties. Many wounded Union soldiers were brought to Washington to be cared for, and Barton immediately went to the Washington hospitals to volunteer. This was her unofficial induction into Civil War nursing service. For the next four years, Barton expended all of her energy on caring for the wounded.

After her involvement in the Civil War, Barton was disturbed and unhealthy. According to William Barton, she suffered the same type of breakdown that she experienced after her work as a teacher. He says, "Her physicians pronounced it nervous prostration, prescribed three years of complete rest, and ordered her to go to Europe."⁷ She retired to the mountains of Switzerland in 1869 for a vacation to rebuild her strength and distance herself from the horrors of war.⁸ According to William Barton, she never even intended to return to the United States. She entrusted her savings to a friend and gave him instructions for what to do with the money if she

⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁸ "Clara Barton," *National Repository, Devoted to General and Religious Literature, Criticism, and Art (1877-1880)*, February 1879, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/127678014?accountid=14696>.

died.⁹ At this point she was 48 years old. It was in Geneva that she discovered the International Society of the Red Cross, which ultimately led to the foundation of the American Red Cross.

At first, when she was asked by the Red Cross to help in the Franco-Prussian war effort, she refused because she was not healthy enough. It wasn't until a German duchess asked her personally that she agreed to help.¹⁰ The common perception is that Barton became involved in the Red Cross through her own initiative, but the true story is quite the opposite.

Clearly, Barton's mental and physical health played a crucial role in her life. To tell her story without mentioning her health is untruthful history. Her struggles with mental health catalyzed her teaching career, her retirement to Washington where she became involved with the Civil War, and most importantly her retirement to Geneva where she was discovered by the International Society of the Red Cross. Historians avoid mentioning Barton's health because it threatens the image of strength that she deserves.

Another aspect of Barton's biography that isn't mentioned is the fact that much of her success came from the endorsements of powerful men, not simply her own determination. At the time when Barton was advancing her career, the feminist movement had just begun. Women were still years away from obtaining the right to vote, and fewer than ten women had obtained college degrees. Considering her context makes it even more remarkable that Barton was able to create such a huge organization. Her determination is what drove the operation, but most of her career advancements never would have happened without the help of prominent men.

In the early phases of the Civil War especially, there was a widespread lack of supplies and medical personnel. At this point women could not attend medical school, and could therefore only be nurses. Only the men received sufficient training for battlefield conditions, the women

⁹ Barton, *The Life of Clara*, 86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

were not able to perform surgery.¹¹ This frustrated Barton because she felt that she belonged on the front line. In 1862 she appealed to Quartermaster Daniel Rucker and received special permission to work on the front line.¹² After months of being denied by other commanders, Barton gathered her own supplies and appealed to Rucker. Rucker accepted her because he recognized her skill and persistence, but also because in 1862 the Union was in no position to be turning down help and supplies.

Barton was very passionate about her work in the Civil War. Her advancements in medicine during the war did originate with her own initiative. It wasn't long before Barton's medical work was recognized. General Benjamin Butler, governor of Massachusetts, took a liking to her immediately and became a mentor figure in her life. He invited her to serve under his command caring for wounded soldiers on the battlefield. Barton gained the bulk of her battlefield experience working on his soldiers.¹³ Butler and Rucker endorsed her many times throughout the rest of her life, sending their own letters of recommendation along with any letters of appeal that Barton sent. These endorsements gave Clara great recognition, which gave her more exposure and endorsements from even more prominent figures such as General Ulysses S. Grant and President Andrew Johnson.¹⁴ These men's endorsements made her a commodity overseas, which is why the International Red Cross members pursued her for help even after she refused. Her work with the International Society of the Red Cross led to her commission to begin

¹¹ Ann Douglas Wood, "The War within a War: Women Nurses in the Union Army," *Civil War History* 18, no. 3 (September 1972): 197-212, accessed October 10, 2013,

http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/journals/civil_war_history/summary/v018/18.3.wood.html.

¹² "Clara Barton," *National Repository*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 308.

the American Red Cross. Barton's initiative and passion drove her life forward, but she would not have achieved what she did without the help of powerful men.

When she returned to America to begin the Red Cross, she needed support from the president. She began working on this in 1873, but could not start the Red Cross until 1878. This was because she was denied support until she changed her approach and Chester Arthur decided to back her, again, largely because of endorsements from prominent men.¹⁵ She could not, and did not establish the Red Cross until she received this support. Barton had more determination than anyone of her time, but it wasn't enough to actually accomplish what she desired. She described this frustration in a journal entry, saying, "I find that some hand above mine rules and restrains my progress."¹⁶ The process of founding the Red Cross is routinely skipped over in the historical record. Modern historians never make mention to Chester Arthur, when in fact he was integral to the founding. Historians also fail to mention that the process of garnering support took five years, instead making it sound like Barton put the Red Cross together without help, immediately upon her return to the States.

Another unspoken truth about Clara Barton is that her motivation was not related to the feminist cause. She did fully endorse women's suffrage, but she did not become involved in feminism until the late 19th century, when she was in her seventies.¹⁷ Barton decided to pursue medicine when keeping vigil by her dying father's bedside and talking with him. He told her that it was her Christian duty to help those who needed it.¹⁸ Her motivation throughout her career

¹⁵ "Clara Barton," in *Dictionary of American Biography*.

¹⁶ Barton, *The Life of Clara*, 337.

¹⁷ "Clara Barton on Women's Suffrage," *Friends' Intelligencer*, December 2, 1899, [Page #], accessed October 1, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/americanperiodicals/docview/91000414/abstract/140DCC3321E24A9C9F3/4?accountid=14696>.

¹⁸ Barton, *The Life of Clara*.

came from her heart. She was deeply moved by the plight of others and felt a strong need to help them. From her father's bedside, she wrote this letter to General John Andrew, saying, "I would fain be allowed to go and administer comfort to our brave men, who peril life and limb in defense of the priceless boon the fathers so dearly won."¹⁹ Her intentions always came from a place of compassion, not of ambition or a desire to further the position of women in society.

After her work in the Civil war, Barton assumed she had already passed the peak of her career. She was in very poor health, physically and mentally. As discussed earlier, she even made arrangements in preparation for her death, expecting never to return from Geneva. It was never her plan to begin the American Red Cross, she did so in response to the persistent request from the International Society. In an interview toward the end of her life, when asked why she founded the Red Cross she replied, "The work was put into my hands. I was asked by the Geneva Commission to take it up."²⁰ It was that simple, and it had nothing to do with the feminist movement.

Barton was a teacher from the time she was nine years old to when she was twenty-nine. She left that profession to pursue her own education, after having taken a break because of exhaustion and the loss of her voice. The Encyclopedia Britannica claims that Barton left because the school had appointed a male principal, claiming, "Rather than subordinate herself to a male principal, Barton resigned."²¹ This is clearly just an assumption, and it isn't true. Barton's autobiography states, "I decided that I must withdraw and find a school, the object of which was to teach *me* something." Her autobiography makes no mention of this alleged male principal. The

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁰ "Clara Barton: An Impression." *Outlook*, January 25, 1896. Accessed October 1, 2013.

²¹ "Clara Barton," in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/54432/Clara-Barton>.

Encyclopedia Britannica should be a reliable, objective reference source, but instead even these authors change Clara Barton's story. Modern historians change her story because they want Clara Barton to be a feminist crusader. Again, Barton fully supported women's suffrage, but her feminist beliefs had minimal impact on her life and her decisions.

The feminist movement became prevalent in America in the late 19th century. Feminism produced many of the iconic American women who we look to today as examples of strength, such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Betty Friedan. Clara Barton was also a prominent figure at this time, and so historians take the liberty of connecting her to the feminist movement. This implies that the only way a 19th century woman could have succeeded was by associating with the feminist movement. It is hard for historians to make sense of Barton's achievements without placing her with the other successful 19th century women. There is a paradigm put in place for successful 19th century American women, and Clara Barton does not fit into it. Barton pursued her career out of a desire to help the suffering, not for the sake of furthering women in society. Her success came long before the feminist movement took shape.

A stigma exists around mental illness today, and it certainly existed in the past. However, the discrepancy takes place somewhere along the line in the late 20th century. Barton herself was not shy about her mental illness, she spoke openly about it in many letters to relatives and friends. The leading biography on her, which was published in 1922 by her nephew William Barton, also discusses her mental illness openly. Elizabeth Brown Pryor's biographical work *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* is lauded as being the first work to expose Barton's mental illness, with reviewers saying things like, "We realize how little we actually know of this

remarkable woman.”²² Pryor’s work was published in 1987. This means that between 1922 and 1987, historians concealed the truth of Barton’s story. Historians want Clara Barton to be a cheerful, independent, charismatic woman, like the other 19th century female historical figures. Barton’s true fragile, melancholy nature threatens this image.

Clara Barton was very independent, but not to the extent that historians present. The state of American society at the time was such that Clara Barton would not have been successful without the strong male endorsements that she had. She was determined and hard-working, but she did not progress without help.

Historians changed the story because the true story threatens the image of Clara Barton that historians want to create. It is more encouraging to hear that Clara Barton marched right up to the front lines of the Civil War and started performing amputations, that she came home from Geneva and built the American Red Cross immediately and with her own two hands, not that she achieved all that she did thanks to endorsements from influential American men. It is more pleasant to hear that this accomplished woman was cheerful and charismatic, not that she was introverted, chronically depressed and suffered frequent nervous breakdowns. Clara Barton achieved so much for women everywhere. Modern day historians want to claim that this was her original intention, not just a side effect of her success.

The discrepancy between the truth and the presentations of Clara Barton reveals a significant lapse in the integrity of historians. If Clara Barton herself did not hide her truth from the public, historians do not have a right to change her story. In reality, it would do the world a lot of good if we told the truth about Clara Barton. Her mental illness makes her

²² Sarah Stage, review of *Clara Barton Professional Angel*, by Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (September 1988): 620, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1887924>.

accomplishments that much more impressive, because she achieved so much in spite of her frail health. For those battling mental illness in the world today, it would do a lot of good to have a role model in history who changed the world in spite of her illness. Teaching schoolchildren about Clara Barton the right way could help to dispel the stigma that surrounds mental illness, and provide a role model to children struggling with mental illness themselves. By hiding the truth, it makes it seem like mental illness is something that should be hidden. Clara Barton's story presents a challenge to historical integrity. Sometimes historical evidence contradicts what a historian wants to present. In spite of this, for the sake of integrity we must present the truth.