

ROBERT BARR spent his boyhood days in WALLACETOWN as told by Mrs. A. Bobier in year 1934

ROBERT BARR AND PARENTS

Noted Novelist Spent Part of His Boyhood Days At Wallacetown

At the last meeting of the Wallacetown Women's Institute a very interesting paper was given by Mrs. R. Bobier on Robert Barr, the novelist, and his parents, which is of more than usual local interest, as the late novelist spent some years of his boyhood days at Wallacetown—the first home of his parents in Canada. In later years, when Robert Barr had achieved fame as a writer, he made several visits to the scene of his boyhood days and also visited his sister, Mrs. Alex. S. McMillan, who resided west of Campbellton for many years.

Robert Barr, Sr., was born in the village of Houston, Scotland, in the year 1826. When 24 years of age he married Jane Watson of "West Glen" farm, a mile's walk from his village home. His father had been present in the Houston church for 30 years, and each member of the family was musical. Robert Barr and his wife made their home in Glasgow, and their eldest child, Robert, was born in that city, at Hillhead, near the botanical gardens. The family left Scotland for Canada in 1854, in a sailing vessel which took seven weeks for the crossing. They landed in Quebec and proceeded to St. Thomas by canal boat and stage coach. They were met by an uncle of Mr. Barr, Mr. Archie McVannell, who drove them to friends in Dunwich. This was Mrs. Barr's sister, Mrs. Alex. Thomson, who lived on a farm not far from Dutton. On their arrival in Wallacetown they took up their residence on the lot adjoining the home of the late Mrs. Gunn.

Who was to prophesy that more than one of the family was to become famous? They occupied the old house which was on the lot until Mr. Barr, who was a builder and contractor, put up a new one.

In those early days there was scarcely a church or school house between Highgate and St. Thomas that was not built by Mr. Barr. They brought three children to Wallacetown: Robert, Mary and William. The next three were born in the village: John, Grace and little James. Mary and little James died in Wallacetown and were buried in Black's cemetery. The little boy was drowned in a tiny spring well, near a house being constructed by his father at Cowal. "Wee Mary," the invalid bed-ridden daughter, died about 14.

There was a curious incident in connection with their child's passing. A neighbor, running in, found Mrs. Barr making a shroud. In reply as to Mary being worse, Mrs. Barr said no, but that previous to her leaving Scotland a soothsayer had told her the date Mary would die. And as the time was near, she was getting the shroud ready. The amazing fact is, the child died just when predicted.

Mr. Barr was engulfed in the infidel trend that was sweeping the country at that time, and wrote to some extent, expounding his opinions. In time his better judgment prevailed, he thought differently, his belief had changed. He arose one morning, gathered up all his manuscript, and burned them.

Mrs. Barr was fine looking, clever, and a good business woman. With all the handicaps she had she was able to put on a good appearance. She had good silken apparel, silk and brocade shawls, etc.

The family was growing up and there was not employment in Wallacetown. They left and bought a farm between Highgate and Duart, before the old Canada Southern R. R. went through. The younger children attended a school near Muirkirk, having two miles to walk. Another, James Alexander, and Thomas, were born on the farm, while the youngest child, Jeanie, was born in Duart, where her father was building a church and her mother had come to keep house for him. About 1877 the family removed to Windsor, principally to secure better education for the younger children.

The parents lived in Windsor for the remainder of their lives. Mr. Barr taking a lively interest in politics. He was what he called a "George Brown Grit." He became a member of the Windsor council; was a Presbyterian, and a staunch member of St. Andrew's Society, of which he was bard for many years.

Like many Scotchmen he possessed an unchanging, romantic affection for his motherland, as he says in one of his poems:

"Thy very name, auld Scotland,  
Thrills through and through my heart;  
Thy mountains, glens and sea-girt shores  
We grieve that stern fate has designed us to part,  
And the land that we love we may never see more."

But he did see it again. He made two visits back to Scotland. The first while he was still on the farm; the second, a memorable occasion, when he spent a month in London, England, the guest of his two gifted sons, Robert and James.

At this time he made a more leisurely visit to his native land. He saw Abbotsford and Melrose by moonlight, Ayr and the Burns country, stately Edinburgh, and visited all his youthful haunts at Houston and along the bonnie river Clyde.

In his younger days Mr. Barr was a good singer, and had knowledge of hundreds of Scottish songs. These, with his witty stories, made him much sought after for concerts and other gatherings. He and his daughter Grace, who had a lovely voice, were great favorites as entertainers in Elgin and Kent counties, and always sang their songs free of charge.

Mr and Mrs. Barr's married life covered a space of 61 years. Mr. Barr passed away in 1915, aged 88.

He published one volume of verse, and wrote a great many articles for the local papers, always taking a keen interest in affairs of the day.

Robert Barr was born at Hillhead, near the botanical gardens in Glasgow, Scotland, 1850, and reached Wallacetown at the age of about four. His brother John's earliest mental picture of Robert shows a barefoot boy with tangled hair and a terribly-pock-marked face. He had smallpox in Glasgow, where they did not pay more attention to it than to a case of tummy-ache, and no care was taken to prevent the disfigurement of the victim.

To quote from his brother, "In those days in Wallacetown it was just one fight after another among the boys. They giped Robert for his Scotch accent. Those from back in the country were called bushwackers by the town boys, who, in turn, were called toadwackers, taking the name from the great number of frogs in the swamp to the east of the place. Jack Rose, town boy, could lick any of the country boys, but the rest of us did not always fare so well." Mr. Barr moved to a farm in Orford, Kent county, and there the boys attended a country school, where Robert was by far the smartest pupil, and early in life began to show a great desire for books. These were very scarce, and while in Wallacetown he never visited a neighbor without looking round for a book and borrowing it, if he could. In this way he got hold of the "Arabian Nights," which was a forbidden volume and had to be kept out of sight of his parents. The book was hidden in a hollow tree back in the woods, and three of the boys would take every opportunity to sneak back, especially when their parents were at church, and seated behind a fallen tree Robert would read aloud the wonderful stories.

About this time he began to develop the ability to make up stories of his own. These he would tell his brothers, a chapter at a time and they were so interested that he held them in bondage, fearing that he might stop the story. A threat to do this always made the younger members obedient to his orders.

When he was a little over ten years of age he began the publication of a paper. It was called "Peter Puzzle's Paper," and there was only one copy issued each week. It was done in pencil and carried illustrations of the parts of the story still untold. It was intended to sharpen his brother's interest in the story. His brothers said, "These pictures always caused us much wonder, for we were to be connected with the story. One day the story would stop with the hero fighting Indians out west, and the next paper would show all the characters fighting pirates on an ocean ship. How were they to be transferred so far in such a short time? But the change would be made and another issue of the paper would have all hands riding camels over the desert." The paper also contained puzzles, in the making of which he was very clever. His brother remarked: "If I could get those stories just as he used to tell them under some tree in the woods, they would sell for a good deal of money. Of course paper was very scarce, and the supply was obtained by removing the fly leaves from Sunday School books. These books were usually returned unread, as they were flat compared with those he told."

He got the idea of writing for publication while yet a small boy. Once a travelling phrenologist gave a lecture in their log schoolhouse. After his talk he would invite the people to come up and have him examine their bumps, and told the young fellows that they would make good farmers, doctors, lawyers, etc. Robert went up. The man ran his fingers over his head and then looked sharply into his face. "This boy," he said "has a small, but very active brain." Robert immediately asked, "Will I make a writer?" "A writer! What do you mean?" "I mean a man like Horace Greeley." The lecturer did not take the trouble to reply, but with a look of disgust on his face administered a slap that sent Robert sprawling, much to the delight of the audience. He had a hard time securing his education. He attended school in Wallacetown and Duart and got his second class certificate and left for Toronto to Normal School. This impressed him greatly as he tells in "The Measure of the Rule." He liked all the teachers, and made good headway. He passed his exams, but his health failed and he went home and taught in the old Block school at Muirkirk for a short time, and wrote a good deal while teaching. Probably a turning point in his life came at Iona. He was working with his father as a carpenter, and had a bad fall from the drill shed. This put him out of action for a time, and after that he did more studying, and was on the staff of the St. Thomas Journal for a time. Later he taught school in Walkerville and lastly in Central School, Windsor. While still teaching he wrote a most humorous account of "A Dangerous Journey," taken with his friend Mack (Alex. McNeil), who attended Normal with him. They sailed in an open boat from Detroit to Toledo, with adventure at every turn. This was submitted to the Detroit Free Press, was accepted, and published under the pen name of "Luke Sharp." He was offered a position on the Free Press, which he gladly accepted, in 1876, and remained there until he began writing stories. He once wrote a series of sketches under the heading, "Annals of a Quiet Town," that were all based on Wallacetown experiences. He did the usual reporting but ultimately came to have a department of his own, in which he wrote under the pseudonym of "Luke Sharp." The department was largely given to Mr. Barr's personal reminiscences, and to casual stories of city life, usually narrated with much piquancy and vigor. The "Luke Sharp" contributions ranked at that time with those of another since distinguished Free Press man, Charles B. Lewis, who wrote the "Lime Kiln" sketches under the name of M. Quad. In 1881—partly as the result of the international reputation which these two men had built up for it—the Free Press wished to issue a weekly English edition of its paper, and it sent Mr. Barr to London to do so. This he did most successfully, his younger brother, James, joining him in a few years and taking much of the work off his shoulders. In

1892 he left the paper to join with Jerome K. Jerome in founding "The Idler."

The ambition, however, to produce material of a more permanent nature than was possible either in a newspaper or a magazine had been growing in Barr for some time, and in 1895 he resigned from the co-editorship of "The Idler" to devote himself to novel writing. His first story was "In a Steamer Chair;" the second "The Face and the Mask." In his third novel, "A Woman Intervenes," the author displayed much shrewd observation, based on his memories of life back in the United States, of American finance and journalism. He essayed the historical novel in the "Countess Tekla" (1899). In the "Midst of Alarms," published in 1894, is a tale of the attempted Fenian invasion of Canada in 1866. Incidentally it contains a notice of the Canadian rural library system. "Countess Tekla" is a romance of adventure in mediaeval Germany. The heroine is a fascinating and high-spirited countess who, after the usual perils, is wooed and won by an emperor in disguise. The border of the Rhine is the stage on which the action is set, and the time is the thirteenth century. "The Strong Arm" (1900), contains brief tales of adventure chiefly in mediaeval Germany. The prince-bishop of Trever appears in many of the narratives with other fighting prelates, and the sinister tribunal, the Vehingericht of Westphalia, plays a dramatic part. Other books are "The Unchanging East," travel sketches, published in 1900; "The Victors" (1901), "A Prince of Good Fellows" (1902), "The Tempestuous Petticoat" (1905), "Stanleigh's Millions" (1909), "The Synod Maker" (1910), "The Palace of Logs" (1912.)

Mr. Barr's death occurred in this last year and "The O'Ruddy," which had been written with Stephen Crane, appeared posthumously in 1913. Robert Barr's last book portrays the youth of Col. Talbot, and its sequel was to be the story of this remarkable man in Canada. Had he written this book we would have had a novel with the scenes on the shores of Lake Erie and its characters men in Wallacetown and the surrounding country.

After he had married and made a home for himself in Detroit, his lifelong enthusiasm for all things new, his love of adventure, his compelling desire for the best, found outlet. Everything he did was carried through with great dash. His day's work was an adventure. He had a genius for starting new things, and his enthusiasm would inspire those about him. He would urge them to carry through his plans, and if they did so he would assure them of success. He never wanted to be alone in good fortune, but would carry his brothers and his associates along with him. He loved music and the drama, and would go to see all the good performances. When returned home at night he would be filled with the music of the opera and would start at once to work it out on his own piano. Nor would he stop until he had the theme complete.

In the "Mutable Many" he gives vent to his musical soul in portraying the organist, Langly.

Robert came home to Canada in the midst of his success. He had grown prosperous in London, and was known and admired wherever he went. He was full of magnetism and power and was a most interesting talker when he had his own folk for an audience. In his early days his enthusiasm had been almost too much for him; but now this was overcome. He cleared his mind of all plots before five o'clock in the afternoon, and would not permit them to govern him. But he had cultivated what, at that time, seemed a most peculiar faculty.

After he relaxed for the night he would tell his mind the work for the next day, and leave the plot of the story with his mind. In the morning, after a good night's sleep, he would come down with the story completely

worked out by the subconscious mind.

It was a delight for his father to hear Robert tell of the great people he knew in London—Gladstone, the leader of men; Parnell, the Home rule fame, and all the lights of literature—Rudyard Kipling, the empire poet; Sir J. M. Barrie, the gentle wit from Scotland; Sir Conan Doyle and all the others.

While editor of the "Idler" Barr would go any distance to find a new writer. In their spacious offices they held a weekly "At Home," and almost every man and woman of importance in London would be present at one time or another.

He built a fine home among the Surrey Hills, twenty miles from London, and called it Hillhead, after his birthplace. Near by was a path well centuries ago by the Canterbury pilgrims. His work room comprised the top flat of his home. He arose at five o'clock in the morning, ate a light lunch, then amidst great smoke from his self-made cigarette, would begin his day's work. By breakfast time he would have enough material to keep his secretary busy typing for some length of time. So whatever pleasure the day had in store for Robert Barr his work would be accomplished and friends coming in in the afternoon used to think he was the laziest of men, and wondered how he ever got his stories written.

He was wonderfully generous to his parents. He would receive \$250 for a short story in McClure's or some other magazine, and always thought of these sums as something extra.

After a book was completed and on the market, he would get his family together and go for a long trip. Thus he visited many of the interesting countries of Europe. And while writing at home he would drop his work, take a railway ticket to some quiet country town, and then walk for days, visiting the old castles, windmills and churches, becoming acquainted with the lovely English shires. He would make friends with the men working in the fields, and the women and children at the rose-hung cottage doors. While writing his Scotch story, "Over the Border," he took up his abode with an aunt and uncle on their farm home in Islay. They gave him a big room with a great fire, and windows overlooking the wide Atlantic. Before beginning "Countess Tekla," he and his brother James spent a month roaming along the banks of the Moselle River, taking photographs and exploring the castles of the the Robber Barons and visiting the high, rocky mountain with Castle Thoron on its height.

His wife was Miss Eva Bennett, of Osham, Ont. His only son was killed in the Great War and the widow died shortly after receiving the news. He is survived by one daughter, Laura, now Mrs. Dodd, and two grandchildren.



Mrs. Clark who lived between  
McIntyre's and Turville's houses.

Granny McFarlane who lived east of  
Turville's - "Mr Kelso you preached  
that same sermon 5 years ago."  
She objected to an organ in the church  
- "the devil's whistle"  
Mother of Rev Peter McFarlane  
Baptist Preacher, West Lorne



On the hill, a block  
north of Mrs. McColl's  
opposite Mr Bain's  
Mrs. Shepherd -  
a universal favorite  
in Wallace town



Mr Shepherd  
hoeing in his garden.  
To the left, the school house  
Presbyterian Church tower  
above Mrs. McColl's barn



"Auntie" Campbell  
Lived in a house  
back of the manse  
Daughter Katie (red headed)  
Married late in life  
ALEX Mc Killop  
of Dutton

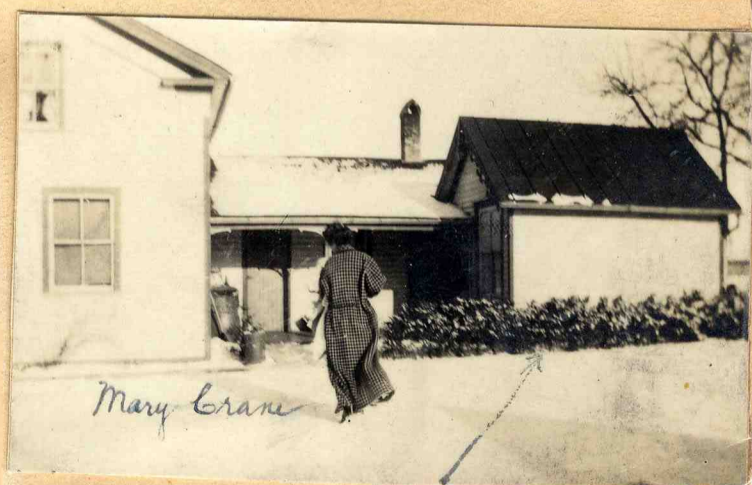


Mrs. Joe Clark  
Photo taken in  
Mrs. McColl's  
parlor

She had a great  
sense of humor  
BORN 1808



MR. DONALD A GUNN AND  
DAUGHTER JENNIE



Widow of Dr. D. McCOLL, ONE of EARLY physicians, his office on right  
A FEW of THE EARLY RESIDENTS



Widow of Dr. D. McColl  
EARLY physician

A FEW OF THE RESIDENTS FROM DR CRANE'S COLLECTION.



VERNA SHEPARD [MRS. McFARLANE]



MARY FORGES



ANNIE TELFORD



J. ALBERT GOW



ALMA (DOLL) CUSACK



MINNIE GOW



By John Drongole  
BERTAUDE DRONGOLE XXIV



LESLIE PEARCE



EMMA SMALL  
MRS. JAS. CAMPBELL