

Violet Barbour

(5 July 1884–31 August 1968)

Born on 5 July 1884 and raised in Cincinnati, Violet Barbour was among the minority of women of the time who were able to attend college; among fewer still who went on to earn a doctoral degree; and rarest of all, the only woman among the fifteen inaugural Guggenheim Fellows.

She received her undergraduate and graduate degrees at Cornell University. Her time there was punctuated by two years in the editorial department of Bobbs-Merrill (1906–1908) and another two (1909–1911) as a history teacher at Tudor Hall, a private school in Indianapolis. But an exceptional student, by the time she received her Ph.D. in 1914, she had already been the beneficiary of three grants: a graduate scholarship to support her work toward a master's degree in European history; the Alice Freeman Palmer Fellowship from Wellesley College (1911–1912) where she worked for a year on her dissertation; and Cornell's President White Fellowship in European History (1912–1913). The latter two had allowed her to complete the research for her doctoral dissertation in London at the Record Office and British Museum, and at the Rijks Archief in The Hague, respectively. The resulting work, *Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington, Secretary of State to Charles II*, won the American Historical Association's Herbert Baxter Prize and was published under its auspices in 1913. More than fifty years later, it remained the authority on the subject.

At the time of her Guggenheim Fellowship appointment, Violet Barbour was an Associate Professor of European and English history at Vassar College, and had been a faculty member there for ten years. She had applied for the Fellowship to support her work, already underway, on another biography, this time of Sir George Downing. In her proposal, she explained that “Since [Downing's] great ambition was to destroy Dutch commercial hegemony and build up that of England, his biography will be mainly a study of the great Anglo-Dutch rivalry at sea, which constitutes an important chapter in the history of the 17th century.”

Her work on Downing had been prompted by the widow of Ralph C. H. Catterall, a professor at Cornell. Knowing Barbour's interest in seventeenth-century European history, she gave over all of her husband's researches on Downing to Barbour on condition that the young woman continue the biography Professor Catterall had intended to write. By 1925, Barbour had already spent three summers reviewing, sifting, and supplementing the mountain of information she had at hand, but looked forward to returning to London and The Hague as a Guggenheim Fellow to complete the preliminary research for and writing of her work on Downing.

Just before Barbour arrived in London, a long-rumored biography of Downing by John Beresford, entitled *The Godfather of Downing Street*, was published. But always optimistic, in a 1 August 1925 letter from London she assured Henry Allen Moe that she was “deeply thankful” for the timing of the Beresford book since it allowed her to steer her own research down a different, untrodden path:

I'm throwing overboard the biographical theme, and rearranging and broadening my work with the intent of putting it into a book to be called The State of Trade in the Period

of the Dutch Wars, or something like that, with two chapters on Downing's particular contribution. It's a good deal more work, but also more fun than the biography pure and simple.

More work indeed. Although in her Fellowship proposal she had confidently asserted that with time abroad, supported by the Foundation, her biography of Downing "might be tidily done within in a year," that is, by September 1926, after six months in England she wrote to Moe on 27 February 1926 to request an extension of her Fellowship. Given Beresford's usurping of her original topic, she explained to Moe,

I must write either a smaller book or a bigger book than the one I had planned. It seemed more appropriate to the opportunity afforded me to attempt the larger undertaking. . . . I find it extremely interesting, and think it will have some originality and value . . .

She was granted an extension of her sabbatical leave by Vassar and a six-month renewal of her Fellowship, but at the end of that time, she was still far from completing her project. The sheer volume of material she unearthed and the number of new angles on the topic that she discovered gave her "enough by-products" to last a lifetime, as she described them in her 2 April 1927 report to the Foundation. "I'm hanging on to them all, not being sure how much I can work into the Book Itself."

Her letters to Moe in the ensuing years followed a familiar pattern: they would include mention of the latest scholarly reviews that she had authored, or less frequently an article she had published on Anglo-Dutch trade that she had gleaned from the "encyclopaedic possibilities" suggested by the materials she had amassed, and an apology for not yet completing her book, which "gets made an[d] unmade like a bed" (27 September 1927):

"If you have come to the conclusion that this book is pure phantom, I should feel that the evidence justified you in that belief." (13 June 1929)

"I do really expect to give a better account of myself soon, which affirmation probably has a familiar ring to you." (7 July 1932)

"Probably you can scarcely believe that I am still working on the same book, but so it is, and I'm rather expecting that I shall need two more years to complete it." (29 June 1936)

"I would like to say that I am still at work on that same book, incredible as it may seem. . . . If I live a few years longer, the book will be finished, I think." (24 August 1947)

Finally, in 1950, the same year she retired from Vassar, *Capitalism in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century* was published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. As she acknowledged in her preface, "This study when first contemplated was to have been a chapter in a book on Anglo-Dutch commercial rivalry in the seventeenth century. [That] book remains stubbornly unfinished, while the chapter has taken on independent existence and is here presented" (p.7). The seeming monkey wrench that Beresford's book had thrown into her

original plan, hinted at in the preface, proved to be fortuitous since the articles her quarter-century of work produced—the “chunks” and “slices” of her prodigious study, as she called them—and especially *Capitalism in Amsterdam*, are still considered the best authorities on their subjects. Thirteen years after its initial publication, continued demand prompted the University of Michigan to reissue it in hardcover and paperback. A bemused Barbour expressed surprise that *Capitalism in Amsterdam* had been granted “the dignity of paperbackery.” In 1965, a Dutch translation was published by J. H. de Bussy of Amsterdam; the book became a standard text that the University of Amsterdam uses in teaching Dutch economic history.

Even after the publication of *Capitalism in Amsterdam*, she kept working on the project she originally proposed in her 1925 Fellowship application, making another foray into English archives in 1955 funded by an SSRC grant, and assuring a correspondent that the freedom of retirement would allow her to complete it. As she acknowledged, “the project is not one of earth-shaking importance, but it has a great deal of human nature knocking about in it and I find it quite absorbing.” Her best intentions were finally thwarted by her death on 31 August 1968.

Violet Barbour could not boast of a lengthy bibliography. In fact, in the course of her career, she authored only the two monographs already mentioned, four articles—“Privateers and Pirates of the West Indies” (April 1911) and “Consular Service in the Reign of Charles II” (April 1928) in the *American Historical Review* (she was among the first women historians to be published by that journal), “Dutch and English Merchant Shipping in the Seventeenth Century” in the *Economic History Review* (January 1930), and “Rigidities Affecting Business in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” in the *American Economic Review* (March 1940)—and about fifty scholarly reviews. However, her tenacious and meticulous research methods were evidenced in all she wrote and earned her recognition as one of the foremost economic historians studying seventeenth-century Europe. She was an active member of the American Historical Association, the Economic History Association, and the Conference on British Studies. Of particular note, Barbour was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of England, and of the Historisch Genootschap, the oldest and most prestigious historical organization in the Netherlands, among the few foreigners so honored.