



James Barr was born at Glasgow in 1820, the son of Peter Barr, manufacturer, and Helen, *née* Graham. Little is known of his early life beyond the autobiographical details he later contributed to the *Otago Witness*, under the pseudonym of Peter Gentles, which suggest that he was brought up in accordance with the strict standards of the day. Together with his brother, he emigrated to Otago in the *Mariner* and arrived at Port Chalmers in June 1849. They took up land at Halfway Bush, near Dunedin, apparently with little success, for in 1851 Barr left for Sydney. Five years later he was back in Dunedin where he set himself up in business as merchant and accountant. In a quiet way Barr played an active part in public affairs. He was not interested in colonial politics but, as an ardent provincialist, he supported Macandrew, the Otago Superintendent, in the stirring campaign of 1876 against the abolition of the provincial system of government by the General Assembly. He also shared in the many social and educational activities of the community, was first secretary of the Early Historical Society of Otago, and was a promoter of several early building societies.

On 4 July 1861, at Dunedin, Barr married Sophia Dickson. There was no issue. He died at Dunedin on 4 April 1885 in his sixty-fifth year.

Barr was a man of happy disposition, fond of a joke, and full of anecdote. As a writer he displayed charm and humour, sharpened at times by a native shrewdness. These are the qualities that give distinction to his chronicle of early Otago, *The Old Identities* (1879). The book is essentially an appraisal of a fast-vanishing past, somewhat sentimental and nostalgic in temper but free from a blind worship of the Otago “Pilgrim Fathers”. With more than a touch of irony, Barr questions the standards of piety of the Free Church settlement and the soundness of many of its colonising principles. He rather damns the Rev. Thomas Burns with faint praise; is somewhat warmer in his appreciation of old Cargill; is enthusiastic, or almost

so, of Macandrew and his myriad schemes; sees through Sir George Grey as a “pawky” fascinator of men and women; and, withal, smiles benignly on the foibles and follies of the community at large. All in all, *The Old Identities* gives Barr a not unworthy place in the ranks of such writers of the pioneering era as Charlotte Godley, Lady Barker, and Edward Jerningham Wakefield.

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