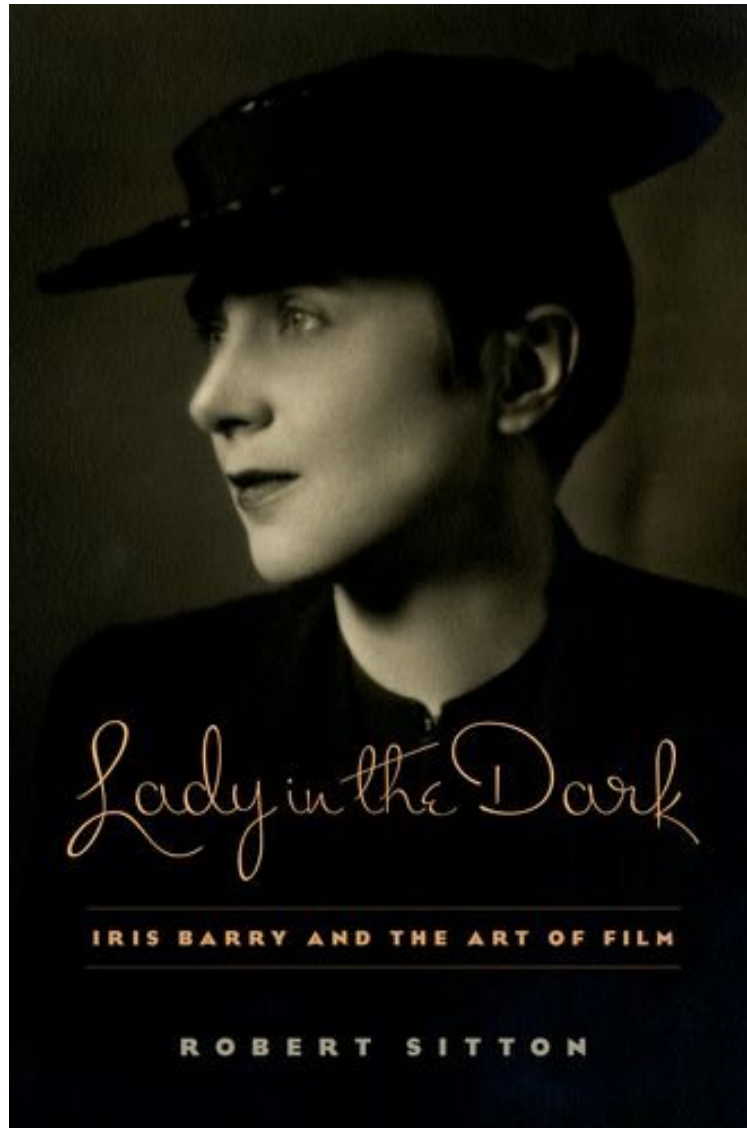


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Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film

Robert Sitton

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Robert Sitton : Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy henri schindlerLOVELY BIOGRAPHY OF A FILM COLOSSUS5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. The appealing woman who largely invented film criticism and built audiences for great movies finally gets her dueBy James MorrisonA biography whose major characters include Ezra Pound, Nelson Rockefeller, and a Corsican olive smuggler isn't easy to classify. But it does

make for a great read. In "Lady in the Dark", biographer Robert Sitton has brought to life Iris Barry, whose remarkable journey included these and many other disparate individuals and whose influence on films continues today. Barry's story resonates beautifully with our time, and not merely because she spent a lifetime ignoring the rules about what women were or were not supposed to do. Daughter of a farmer and a fortune teller, she was an aspiring poet who mailed some of her teen-aged work to Ezra Pound. Impressed, Pound drew her into a literary circle that included T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats. She later began living with a member of the group, Wyndham Lewis, a British artist whose casual cruelty toward her included forcing her to leave their flat most afternoons to make way for his assignations with other women. She found solace in movie theatres. And gradually, a new focus for her energies. Soon she was writing occasional articles about movies. She aimed higher. Thanks to the first of her many velvety yet fearless assaults on upper class, male worlds, she got *The Spectator*, a stodgy pillar of the British establishment, to make her its first regular movie reviewer. Thus in 1923, she became the country's - and possibly the world's - first substantive film critic writing on deadline. In her new role, she championed half-forgotten films from the earliest days of cinema. She invented film categories and film terminology that are still in use today. She courageously endured the wrath of the British film industry by extolling American, French, German, and Soviet films that she found aesthetically superior to standard British fare. But how to build an audience for these esoteric films? Simple. Transform British film distribution and exhibition. Of course, she had a plan. There would be a club. Not just a "movie club", but a "film society". Having managed a miraculous ascent through the rigid British class system, she used her hard-won skills to weave together the people who could provide the snob appeal needed to build a British society for the appreciation of artistic films. In a key move, she somehow recruited the elite's most prominent skeptic of film as an art, the playwright George Bernard Shaw, to join the Board of her London Film Society. With the imprimatur of Shaw and other such prominent figures, the world's first Film Society became a huge success. By then she was 29. Still ahead were the most consequential decades of her life. The rich tapestry of this life lay hidden away in disconnected pieces before Sitton, one of Barry's intellectual heirs, undertook this magnificent biography. From interviews, libraries, archives, personal collections, books, newspapers and magazines, he's reconnected all of the strands. Remarkably, he did it all without ever having met Barry, who died in 1969, or indeed having met most of the book's main characters, who have also passed from the scene. As intense as this research must have been - and it fills up 45 pages in fine print at the end of the book - Sitton's writing is inviting and graceful. He offers vivid observations and well-chosen quotations, but he doesn't shout. Clear and crisp, he's never overbearing. If there is more than one side to a story, he explains each side briefly and moves on. His refreshing fair-mindedness is just about the ideal way to absorb biography, not to mention history. Barry's subsequent years in the United States are somewhat better known, but Sitton draws out nuances and telling details. For two years, she was essentially unemployed in New York. At one point, she wrote to a friend that she "didn't have 45 cents". But her strategic skills didn't fail her. She moved methodically from friends and acquaintances to salons, and from there to contacts with the newly-founded Museum of Modern Art in New York. In another masterpiece of persuasion (admirably pieced together by Sitton), Barry convinced MoMA to develop a "film library". She would be the "librarian." Once inside of MoMA, she deftly guided the "library" into a "Department", with her as its head. She then sketched out a plan for exhibiting critically-acclaimed films across the entire country -- a breathtaking expansion of her earlier British effort. She would not only encourage film societies to form across the U.S. She'd get universities to develop film studies programs. MoMA, the nexus of all of this activity, would identify and preserve the most important films. MoMA would also mount an ambitious daily film exhibition program, replete with critical notes on each film. And Barry would engineer and direct everything. Needing allies to pull all this off, she enlisted MoMA backers who were some of the richest men in America -- Nelson Rockefeller, Conger Goodyear, and John Hay Whitney. What she needed next was the films. In one of the most entertaining and amusing chapters of the book, Barry accomplishes perhaps the most inspiring feat of leadership in her long career. She goes to Hollywood to get the studios to part with their films. John Hay Whitney, who had financial interests there, makes some introductions for her. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., grateful for the praise she bestowed on their films while she was in England, lend their mansion for a dinner party with movie moguls, directors and actors. After sceneing some of her favorite silent movie clips, Barry addresses the assembled crowd. She promises them not further riches, but immortality. Astonishingly, it works. A bunch of hard-headed and decidedly non-artistic movie moguls begin opening their vaults and donating dozens of classic films -- prints and negatives -- to MoMA. Sitton delineates very well the historical impact this and other visionary Barry accomplishments of the 1930's. Not only did she build at MoMA the first, and for at least a generation the finest, American center for film studies, film criticism and film preservation. (It was the template from which the American Film Institute and the Film Society of Lincoln Center, among many others, were later developed.) And not only did she create the first nonprofit channel for the exhibition of theatrical films in the U.S. Above all, she literally saved our film heritage. Until 1952, motion pictures were shot on a nitrate film stock that chemically decomposes over a period of years and is notoriously prone to fires and explosions. Had not MoMA, and other archives following the example set by MoMA, begun preserving these films in the 1930's - had another ten or twenty years elapsed before serious film preservation efforts got underway - much if not most of the world's film heritage from 1895 to 1952 probably would have been lost. Her career in the following years followed a good many

plot twists, and Sitton is a great guide to them. D.W. Griffith, the pioneer American film director that Barry rescued from obscurity, essentially stabbed her in the back. Though she was serenely apolitical in an age of mind-boggling political excesses, politics often intruded on her work. In a letter that Sitton discovered, Barry noted wryly that she was thunderously criticized as a fascist supporter in 1938 and then as a communist sympathizer in 1940. She navigated treacherous office politics at MoMA, much of it involving her husband. Then he callously divorced her. She suffered a heart-breaking failure to reconcile with the two children she'd had with Wyndham Lewis. During World War II, she became, for all practical purposes, a producer of wartime documentaries. She gathered together Frank Capra, John Huston and others to develop a patriotic documentary series. And so in 1943, the daughter of the fortune-teller and the farmer, the girl from the English countryside who wrote poetry, the unemployed woman in New York without 45 cents, sat next to President Franklin Roosevelt in the White House, planning war documentaries. She then produced the films. The stories that grew out of the wartime filmmaking effort are some of Sitton's best, so I'm not going to give them away. You'll have to read the book. After the war, Barry seemed to reassess her life and her views toward film. She came to admire Italian neo-realist films, criticizing American films as she'd once criticized British ones. Then came her subsequent life in the South of France -- with an olive smuggler twenty years her junior, whom she met at the Cannes Film Festival. I'm not going to divulge this story either. But it was as though she were starring in her own Italian movie. Scenes included Picasso and sort of a kidnapping. Throughout her life, there were many men who mistreated Barry or tried to block her way. But there were also some who remained steadfast friends and supporters. To the end of her life, she was partially supported by checks from one such admirer, Nelson Rockefeller, in recognition for her work in advancing and preserving film as an art. With this book, Robert Sitton has reciprocated Barry's gift to film art. He's preserved and exhibited, for all to see and study, her remarkable life. It's one terrific book.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. She loved Chaplin films and became a champion of film as ...

By Emily W. Leider This is a first-rate biography of a fascinating woman who had a most unusual life. Born in England and raised by her grandmother, she was one of the first, maybe THE first, newspaper movie-reviewer in Britain. She loved Chaplin films and became a champion of film as an art. She moved to New York City and founded the Film Center at New York's Museum of Modern Art, a hub of film preservation and an archive I relied on when researching my own books on Mae West, Rudolph Valentino and Myrna Loy. Highly unconventional in her relationships, Iris Barry had two illegitimate children fathered by artist/writer Wyndham Lewis, a scoundrel by my lights, but the love of her life. Among her friends and associates were Picasso, Bunuel, D.W. Griffith, Marc Chagall, Ezra Pound and Charles Laughton. Robert Sitton has put together and fascinating and meticulously researched account. Bravo!

Iris Barry (1895-1969) was a pivotal modern figure and one of the first intellectuals to treat film as an art form, appreciating its far-reaching, transformative power. Although she had the bearing of an aristocrat, she was the self-educated daughter of a brass founder and a palm-reader from the Isle of Man. An aspiring poet, Barry attracted the attention of Ezra Pound and joined a demimonde of Bloomsbury figures, including Ford Maddox Ford, T. S. Eliot, Arthur Waley, Edith Sitwell, and William Butler Yeats. She fell in love with Pound's eccentric fellow Vorticist, Wyndham Lewis, and had two children by him. In London, Barry pursued a career as a novelist, biographer, and critic of motion pictures. In America, she joined the modernist Askew Salon, where she met Alfred Barr, director of the new Museum of Modern Art. There she founded the museum's film department and became its first curator, assuring film's critical legitimacy. She convinced powerful Hollywood figures to submit their work for exhibition, creating a new respect for film and prompting the founding of the International Federation of Film Archives. Barry continued to augment MoMA's film library until World War II, when she joined the Office of Strategic Services to develop pro-American films with Orson Welles, Walt Disney, John Huston, and Frank Capra. Yet despite her patriotic efforts, Barry's "foreignness" and association with such filmmakers as Luis Buñuel made her the target of an anticommunist witch hunt. She eventually left for France and died in obscurity. Drawing on letters, memorabilia, and other documentary sources, Robert Sitton reconstructs Barry's phenomenal life and work while recasting the political involvement of artistic institutions in the twentieth century.

From Booklist As founder of the Museum of Modern Arts Film Library in 1935 and the institutions first film curator, Iris Barry (1895-1969) was a vivacious and populist critic, an early advocate for film preservation, and a central figure in the legitimization of film as a cultural art form. Sitton relies on first-person accounts from Barry's prodigious correspondence in the first comprehensive biography of the curators thoroughly modern (and often disorderly) life. Barry's story encompasses multiple art histories as she moves from the Bloomsbury group of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W. B. Yeats in 1910s England; through 1920s New York's cultural elite surrounding Alfred Barr, John D. Rockefeller Jr., and John H. Whitney; and on to the glamour of 1930s Hollywood, where she convinces such luminaries as Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, and Mary Pickford to commit their work to her archive. Sitton also delves into fascinating detail regarding the administrative power dynamics at play during MOMA's early years, as well as the Film Library's role in developing propaganda for the U.S. government during WWII. --Lindsay Bosch Sitton's book is chock full of fascinating detail and tells a compelling story about an unusual character, a woman who built institutions

and contributed to a way of thinking about film that we take for granted today. The result is a much larger and untold history about art, film, and culture. (Haidee Wasson, author of *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema*) Museum of Modern Art film legend Iris Barry mattered to cinema history, and this book makes her life matter as well. Sitton's sharp biography spans Barry's life from her fascinating times among the literati of post-Victorian Britain to her famed career in the United States, which entailed her virtually founding the influential MoMA Film Library. This is a rich and captivating story. (Dana Polan, author of *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film, 1915-1935*) Iris Barry was film's first great archivist and a crucial figure in turning a curious novelty into the most significant new art form of its century. She has long deserved a biography as graceful and expert as the one Robert Sitton has delivered so handsomely. It offers a lively portrait of modernist New York when it was fresh and new and is the better for the richness of its quotations from Barry's stirring writings. It cannot be praised too highly. (Richard Schickel) I confess that I thought of Iris Barry as an English snob who had rejected many exceptional silents as products of the much-despised Hollywood, but she is so much more interesting and maddening than I ever suspected. Her autobiographical fragments are superb, remarkable descriptions of history as it happened: a Zeppelin raid on London in World War 1, the Depression in America making the rich richer. As she describes them, these incidents are as evocative as any film, and the book is beautifully illustrated with excellent-quality portraits. Somebody should film it. (Kevin Brownlow, author of *The Parade's Gone By*.) Robert Sitton's remarkably well researched and evocatively written biography of Iris Barry's hitherto largely unknown position at the forefront of film appreciation is long overdue and most welcome. She led a fascinating private and public life and had an extremely complicated female odyssey in the world of her times, which she profoundly influenced through her writings and cultural actions. That influence still reverberates today. (Peter Bogdanovich) Sitton exhaustively traces Barry's career from aspiring poet to playwright, biographer and film critic.... Film students will enjoy this book. (Kirkus s) The most fascinating characters tend to be the unsung heroes of their field, and there may be no greater example of this than Iris Barry.... This remarkable story is richly detailed... and is required reading for anyone interested in film, art, or museums. (Library Journal (starred review)) Meticulously researched, lovingly written.... *Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film* is a must-read biography. (PopMatters) An excellent on Iris Barry's important work at [Museum of Modern Art.] (Lillian Gish's *Happy Life*) A very welcome and long overdue tribute to a fascinating figure. (Henry K. Miller *Sight Sound*) Robert Sitton's biography makes for lively reading. (Philip Kemp *Times Higher Education*) [A] compelling biography... gracefully written, always interesting, and well researched.... Anyone interested in film history, particularly in the history of film history and film preservation, will want to read this book. Iris Barry is a key figure, and she led a fascinating life. (Louise Brooks Society Blog) A terrific new biography.... Sitton brings to light an extraordinary story or, rather, an extraordinary person, who has been languishing unjustly in the shadows. (Richard Brody *The New Yorker*) Sitton's elegant, accomplished book is the first to elucidate Barry's important work... This is an indispensable account of a woman who was not only a singular pioneering personality but also a diligent, cunning creator of institutions and ways of seeing that are now taken for granted. (CHOICE) A full-fledged biography of the woman who changed the course of American film culture. (Leonard Maltin *Indiewire*) [A] fascinating biography of the founder of the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library and the individual who helped institutionalize film studies. (Thomas Gladysz *The Huffington Post*) Sitton, a film historian, has done justice to a fascinating and important subject. Following extensive archival research, he's told a dramatic story and ended with an incisive summary of Barry's character and achievements. (Jeffrey Meyers *The New Criterion*)

About the Author Robert Sitton is adjunct professor of media and culture at Marylhurst University in Portland, Oregon. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Duke University and worked on the cultural news staff of the *New York Times*, as director of film education for the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and, in the 1970s, developed the Northwest Film Study Center of the Portland Art Museum, fashioned after Iris Barry's collection at the Museum of Modern Art.