

A cabbage, a bohemian, and a genius, or ordinary middle-class folk?

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'Ordinary middle-class folk' was the phrase Fred Barkas used to describe his small family in 1903. Six years later that description, at least to late twentieth century eyes, would seem quite inappropriate; but in 1903, with a thirteen year old daughter at high school, a wife who taught music part-time, and a secure job with New Zealand Loan and Mercantile, Fred saw himself and the two women in his family as 'ordinary' and 'middle-class', and was content to do so. However in an article about women why concern ourselves with Fred's perceptions at all? The simple answer is that in his old age Fred, like many elderly middle-class men, set about recording his reminiscences; and this quite normal occupation seemingly assumed the proportions of an obsession. Between his retirement in 1919 and his death in 1932 Fred accumulated sixty-seven volumes of reminiscences and letters. Most of the letters he transcribed and had bound 'into handy volumes' which he fancied would 'afford amusing, and perhaps instructive, reading for my daughter or my nephews and nieces in the years to come'.¹

The collection thus compiled consists of eight volumes of Fred's reminiscences (modestly titled 'Memories of a Mediocrity'), eighteen volumes of letters from Mary Rushton Barkas to her father, eleven volumes of Fred's letters to Mary, two volumes of letters to Fred from his wife Amy, and twenty-eight volumes of Fred's travel letters. These last twenty-eight volumes consist of letters, addressed mainly to friends in New Zealand, describing Fred's visits to Europe, Asia and America, and are of relatively little interest to those studying women's history. However the remaining volumes build up a detailed picture of individuals, and their lives and relationships, such as researchers are rarely able to find in a single source and are frequently unable to construct after painstaking searches through many collections.

An article of this length could hardly hope to order and interpret such a vast wealth of detail. Instead, I hope, in the following pages, to bring to the attention of researchers in women's history the strengths of the collection and the ways in which the lives of the members of the Barkas family might be used to illustrate broader themes. The collection enables us to reach an understanding of the