

THE BARRINGTONS AND THEIR TENANTS

by Donal Ryan

The Barringtons were a major landowning family, possessing a huge estate of over 9400 acres in County Limerick. My own people were tenants of the Barringtons, and the high esteem in which the family was held by the older members of the community is indicative of the fairness with which they treated their tenants. In writing on the Barringtons, I wish to convey the basis behind the family's popularity, and to remind the reader that the role of the Anglo-Irish gentry was not always a negative one, and that many of their number contributed positively to the development of Ireland.

The Barringtons had lived in Limerick since the seventeenth century, but it was only in 1818 that Matthew Barrington acquired a lease of a substantial area of land including Cappercurllan, Garran-

bane, Glenstal, Meentolla etc. for annual rent of £150. In 1825, the report of the Select Committee on the state of Ireland made reference to a 'new village ... built on Mr. Barringtons estate'. The new village was Murroe, and many of those who lived there were craftsmen and labourers, who were to work on buildings that Matthew Barrington had planned. The building of the castle began about 1835, and Matthew Barrington took up residence in 1840. In the same year, on 28 May, his family bought out all the lands for which he had been paying rent up to then for the sum of £30,193.15.10d. This was paid to the heirs of Lord Carbery, who had left considerable debts. On 7 December, 1843, Matthew bought for himself some of the share belonging

to his family, and acquired complete control by a payment made on 6 October, 1858.

Sir Matthew was a Crown Solicitor, and therefore was responsible for securing convictions against many of those involved in the appalling outrages in Munster during the 1820s. However, this did not prevent his becoming friendly with Daniel O'Connell, with whom he corresponded. Matthew Barrington was well aware of the support O'Connell commanded, and allowed him to organise a 'monster meeting' on the estate. The meeting which took place at Lisavoora Hill in June, 1843, attracted 200,000 people.

During the late 1840s, the Barrington estate was, like the rest of the country, struck by the Famine. Steps were taken to alleviate suffering. The castle was extended with a view to providing work. Building, under Mr. Kelly, a Dublin architect, commenced in 1847, and continued until 1849. During the winter of 1846-7, many people were engaged in drainage work on the Barrington estate, as extensive flooding had taken place. No rent was demanded of the tenants during the Famine years.

Community relations were to become strained in 1852. In 1850, Sir Matthew had given a grant of land for the building of a school, which was opened 2 years later. A Catholic master was appointed to the boys' school, but a Catholic mistress could not be found immediately. While the Barringtons were waiting for the arrival of such a mistress, they appointed a Protestant, Eliza Miller. Her function was simply to teach fancy needlework to the girls, but the parish priest, fearing proselytism, ordered all Catholic children out of the school. The school then closed, as there were no pupils attending. The intervention of Lord Cloncurry, the owner of a neighbouring estate was sought. He wrote to the parish priest, Fr. Maher: 'I know, with sorrow, the foolish spirit of proselytism which possesses many good persons of both Churches, but never heard Sir Matthew Barrington accused, or suspected of such folly'. Lord Cloncurry later wrote that it would be a departure from the national system, and from commonsense, to discharge a poor woman on grounds of religion. 'I respect you, but think that you were in too great a hurry to withdraw the girls from the school, where I hope you could not think their salvation in any danger'.

Fr. Maher, of course, did not accept

Most confidential
Dear Sir
 My dear Barrington
 On reflection I think you should
 speak to Volmer not to mention my
 name - and I presume you do not
 think it necessary to do so steps
 at head quarters
 Most confidential - Do you
 think that you could get a reform
 candidate for Clonsilla of both my son
 and of my - need to resign - Just that
 of this will I consider but do not
 mention it to a human being
 Yours most sincerely
 Daniel O'Connell

Letter to Matthew Barrington from Daniel O'Connell.



were not then any Catholic mistress in the school to teach the Catholic children their Catholic catechism and Catholic prayers. I acted on that occasion, not from a narrow feeling of bigotry, but from a stern sense of duty, as the Catholic pastor of Murroe'.

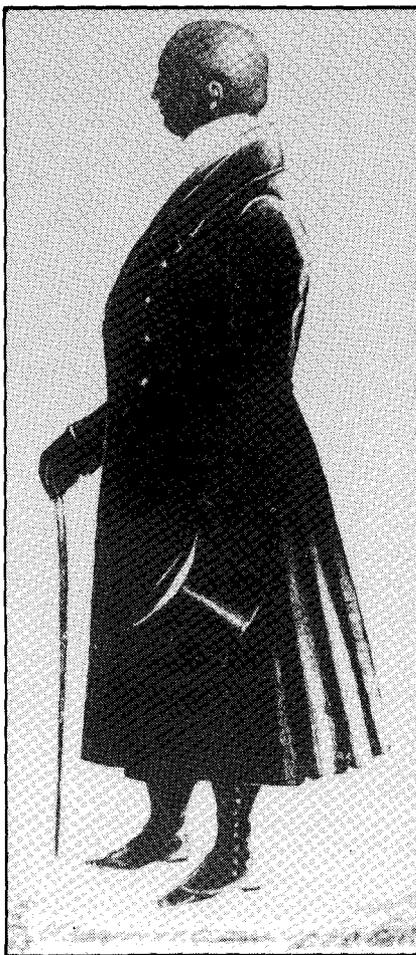
So an impasse was reached, and the school remained closed. The deadlock was broken in July, 1856, when Eliza Miller retired. A Catholic mistress was appointed, and the school was allowed to re-open.

The Barrington estate was not afflicted by the brutal evictions and outrages which were seen in many areas of the country. However, the neighbouring Cloncurry estate was not so fortunate and, on occasion, the Barringtons became embroiled in the conflict on the estate.

Sir Croker Barrington settled amicably with his tenants. Recognising that the fall in agricultural prices had created hardship, he agreed to a 15% immediate cut in rents, and was willing to have rents set by the land courts. Lord Cloncurry was not so accommodating, and embarked on widespread evictions. It was proposed that some huts to provide shelter for these tenants should be built on a holding held by Patrick Ryan and owned by J.B. Barrington. Ryan's son, John, was a senior figure in the Murroe Land League, and had been interned in 1881 under the Coercion Act. J.B. Barrington refused to allow the erection of the huts and, when Ryan persisted, he was evicted.

Mark Tierney, in his definitive book, *Murroe and Boher*, summed up the record of the Barringtons as landlords:

'The Barringtons were benevolent landlords, and there is only one case



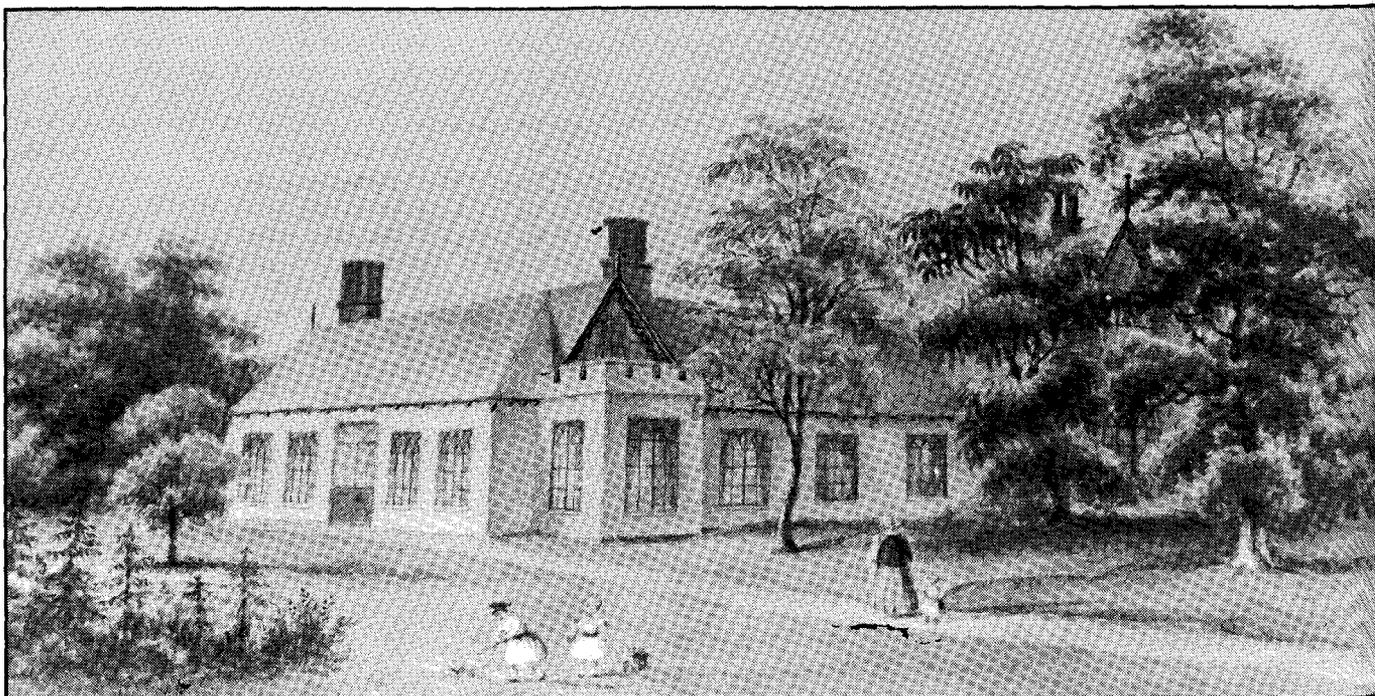
Fr. T. O'Brien Costello, Parish Priest of Murroe, 1814-50.

of eviction for which they were responsible. This concerned a Scotsman, who coveted land at Ballyguy. The Barringtons forced the tenants, the Flannerys, to leave their

home and gave it to the Scotsman'. Lord Cloncurry eventually reached agreement with his tenants in 1894. The agreement was, however, unsatisfactory as the rents were still above the norm suggested in Griffith's Valuation. J.B. Barrington became agent for Lord Cloncurry in 1900, and attempted to make a settlement, but was powerless to do so, as the Cloncurry tenants had signed 31 year leases. The jurisdiction of the land courts only extended to leases of 30 years and under. It was another ten years before the land courts were allowed to rule on the case, and substantial reductions in the rents were then achieved.

By this time, the land acts had been passed, allowing for the sale of estates. The Barringtons sold most of their estates in the early years of the century, but continued to live in Glenstal until the 1920s.

A number of reports from the period give a flavour of the relations between landlord and tenant in the post-Land War period, and suggest a remarkably amicable and relaxed state of affairs. One minor incident of conflict is recorded in the Limerick quarter sessions of June 1896. It is recounted how the curate of Cappamore, whilst riding by the road skirting Sir Charles Barrington's estate, allowed his greyhound to wander into the fields. John Hayes, the gamekeeper of Sir Charles, came upon the scene, and promptly shot the dog. Father English, the curate, sued Sir Charles, but failed to secure damages against him because Hayes had lied both to Sir Charles and the court. Damages of £5 were, however, awarded against Hayes. One newspaper comment caustically on this affair: 'Verily, wsome people about Murroe think more



A 19th century painting of Clonshavoy House, in the parish of Murroe, the home of Florence Barrington until her death in 1968. She was the last of a long line of Barringtons to live in Co. Limerick.



By the Lord Lieutenant General and General
Governor of Ireland.

Heytesbury

Whereas we have been pleased to nominate and appoint you
for and to be High Sheriff of the County of *Limerick*
during Her Majesty's Pleasure, these are therefore to require you to
take the Custody and Charge of the said County, and duly perform
the duties of Sheriff thereof during Her Majesty's Pleasure, and
whereof you are duly to answer according to Law.

Given at Her Majesty's Castle of Dublin, this
2nd day of February 1846.

By His Excellency's Command,

Richard Pennefather

Now appointing

William H Barrington Esq.
to be High Sheriff of the
County of *Limerick*

Certificate of appointment of William Barrington as High Sheriff of the County of Limerick, 2 February, 1846.

of a hare or a pheasant than they do of a
peasant or a priest. As it was in the
beginning, it is now and ever shall be'.

In 1899, Sir Charles married Mary
Rose Bacon. An account of the
celebrations, written by Michael Hayes of
Moher, demonstrates the extraordinary

goodwill that was felt by the Barrington
tenants towards their landlord: 'The
village of Murroe was decorated with fir
trees, placed in barrels, and a big scroll
'Cead Mile Failte' ... strong across the
street. Flags flew from every window in
O'Connor's public house. When the

carriage with Sir Charles and Lady
Barrington arrived in the village, the
horses were taken from the carriage and
the tenants on the Barrington property
pulled the carriage up the avenue to the
front door'.

Equally impressive celebrations took



'Ashroe House', Murroe, once the home of Jack Barrington.

place in 1902 on the birth of the heir to Glenstal. The *Limerick Chronicle* recounts how great bonfires were lit all over the estate, and there was singing and dancing on the roads of Murroe.

Mark Tierney has described the social life in Glenstal Castle:

'Entertainments were arranged on a large scale, especially during the shooting season. A large number of people were employed both in the castle and on the grounds. All in all, it is clear that Glenstal was the centre of considerable activity throughout the second half of the 19th century. The Barringtons maintained a house in Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, and they also made frequent trips to England and Scotland. Whenever they were in residence in Glenstal, the Union Jack was flown from the flag-staff of the watch-tower.'

By this time, although a great deal of goodwill existed on a personal level, the political situation had shifted against the Barringtons. In 1898, the Grand Juries were abolished and replaced by County Councils. Sir Charles had, like previous members of his family, given long service to the Grand Juries and now sought a place in the new power structure. A meeting was held in Murroe on 30 January, 1899, to select local candidates for election to the Limerick County Council. The chairman of the meeting was Father Michael Ryan, brother of John Ryan, who had been evicted in 1882. Sir Charles entered the hall and asked if there was any objection to his being present. Fr. Ryan said there was none, and then declared: 'The chief good of the Local Government Act was to place great political power for the first time in the hands of the people. It is the beginning of the government of the people, by the people, for the people. It is

the incipient parliament of the people, and if worked well it can be made the stepping-stone to the final measure of Home Rule'.

Sir Charles then spoke, and asked that he be considered as a candidate. He would support a Catholic University and help the labourers, but as a unionist, he could not support Home Rule. Father Ryan replied that he 'could not possibly be acceptable to the people as an opponent to their national arms'. Sir Charles was rejected as a candidate. He subsequently ran as an independent, but was defeated by Anthony Mackey of Castleconnell.

However, this was not quite the end, for in 1902, J.B. Barrington successfully contested the seat and held it until 1917, a year which was to become a turning-

point in the history of the area. According to the account given by Michael Hayes,

'The I.R.A. started recruiting in Murroe in 1917, and drilling began openly in 1918. Early in 1920, the R.I.C. barracks in Murroe were attacked. The Doon barracks were attacked soon afterwards. Later that year, 1920, the I.R.A. raided Glenstal Castle for arms. They took the national flag with them and put it on the flag-post. This was the first time it flew over Glenstal. The Black-and-Tans came almost immediately and took it down'.

On another occasion, an attempt was made to burn Clonkeen House, but it did not succeed. However, Sir William Barrington's daughters, who were living there, had to leave and take up residence at Clonshavoy House.

Much of the credit for maintaining good relations with the local community must rest with Charles Barrington. By all accounts he was a remarkable man. An outstanding sportsman, his prowess as a rugby player and oarsman have been widely chronicled. He was also a lively and genial personality, and appears to have showed no bitterness over the loss of Glenstal Castle and his estate.

An interview, published in the *Hampshire Telegraph* on 13 March 1942, gives a flavour of this personality:

'Law student, country squire, sportsman and soldier, Sir Charles Barrington, Bart, M.B.E., of Fairthorne Manor, Botley, has led a varied and interesting life, which has brought him adventure in many parts of the world. To-day, at the age of 94, he is able to look back on the years and enjoy a hearty laugh over many of his experiences, and his air of good humour gives one the impression that he has enjoyed life to the full. An excellent raconteur with



'The Red House', Murroe, another of the Barringtons' Co. Limerick houses.



Mary-Rose Barrington, wife of Charles Barrington.

an original witty manner, Sir Charles has an almost inexhaustible store of stories. He has enjoyed good health for many years, and in spite of his age his activity is very little impaired even to-day.

The interview contains a brief account of his military career:

'On April 7, 1901, Sir Charles was commissioned as Hon. Colonel of the City of Limerick Royal Federal Reserves, a unit which has since been disbanded. He well remembers the troubles of the seventies when Bismarck "began his devilry and invaded France with his hell-hounds". During the Great War, at the age of 67, he, with four Limerick men, joined his brother J.B. Barrington, in France. There he joined a newly-formed Anglo-American unit which did a useful work among the wounded in various parts of France. This unit, composed entirely of about 60 ex-public schoolboys and Americans, served with the French under Castlemain, and functioned under their own Commandant, Colonel Barry, with Professor Norton, an American, as

second in command. Every volunteer provided his own car, and the unit did a tremendous lot of useful work. Their adventures led them to Amiens and Boulogne and the battle of Champagne, and they met all sorts of people. Sir Charles was a fine baritone singer, and often used to sing in public in his earlier days. He recalls that in a French chateau he taught French people to sing and dance. With a merry sparkle in his eye, he described a party of middle-aged French folk, who under his direction, learned to sing "Tipperary", and joined with wonderful enthusiasm in an Irish gig which he taught them to dance'.

In the same interview, Sir Charles Barrington, then aged 94 and in robust good health, looked back on his life in Glenstal:

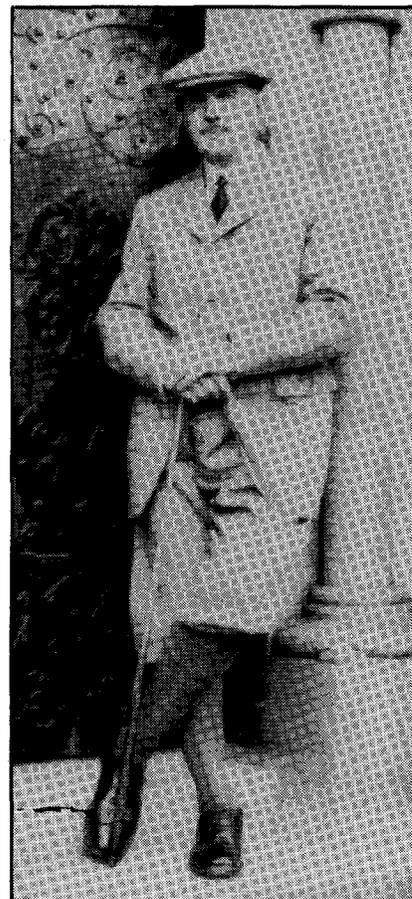
'... his life at Glenstal Castle, Co. Limerick, although a happy one, was chequered by three rebellions, and several threats to take his life. He recalls that on one occasion when he had as his guests at his family seat, Lord and Lady Rosse, he was told that an attempt would be made to

blow up the castle with dynamite. Sir Charles sent a message by his butler to warn the insurgents that he was entertaining guests, and that they must not bring disgrace upon Ireland by blowing them up, adding, "If you want to blow me up, come here again on Thursday when my guests have gone, and you will have a warm reception". Although he experienced so much of the unrest in Ireland, Sir Charles regards the Irish as fine fellows, kind and generous to a fault ...'

It is clear that, despite occasional conflicts, relations between the Barringtons and their tenants were very good. Even the bitterness of the War of Independence and the Civil War in no way tarnished the Barringtons' high standing in the local community. This was a remarkable achievement which reflects great credit on the family. It also serves to dispel some of the nationalistic myths of continuously antagonistic relations. On the Barrington estate, at least, this was not the case.

SOURCES

1. The Barrington papers, Glenstal Abbey Library.
2. *Murroe and Boher* by Dom Mark Tierney, 1966.
3. Interview with Sir Charles Barrington, published in the *Hampshire Telegraph*, 13 March, 1942.



Charles Barrington at Glenstal, c, 1916.