

Philip Barron: Man of Mystery

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With the coming of summer, courses for students of Irish will re-open all over the Gaeltachts. In County Waterford, Colaiste ne Rinne will be packed out as usual; one of the oldest colleges in constant existence. But County Waterford may also lay claim to the first Irish language college ever founded in Ireland, as far as back 140 years ago – an extraordinary college, the dream and the heartbreak of an extraordinary man, Philip Barron. Even today Philip Barron is something of a mystery.

He was born at Durrow, near Stradbally in either 1801 or 1802 - like most of the available information no-one seems quite certain, and was the eldest of the seven children of Richard Barron and Catherine Hey. Douglas De Hide in his book "Mise agus Conradh" says that he was a native speaker of Irish and that the Barron family was one of the most respected families in County Waterford at that time. They had a substantial amount of land and although the father died in 1812 when Philip would not have been more than seven years old, the widow and the family were well-provided for. Towards the end of 1820 Philip was enrolled as a resident student in Trinity College, Dublin. His application form, still extant, states that he was educated by Mr. Collins, Waterford. Seamus O'Caseide in "The Irish Book Lover" July-August 1929 states that there was no trace at all of any Mr. Collins having a school in Waterford at the beginning of the last century, but there was a Mr. Collins who did teach in the City at that time, and the two names could have been confused if given orally to whoever was filling in the applications for entrants. Dr. J. H. Singer, who was afterwards to become Protestant Bishop of Meath appears to have been his tutor. Philip Barron left Trinity without getting a degree. Sean O'Cadhlá says that he spent three years there.

Shortly after, in the year 1825, he bought himself a newspaper, the Waterford Chronicle. He was deeply interested, as were his family, in the Catholic question, and it is likely that his main objective in buying the "Chronicle" was to help the Catholic Association. For a year he ran it and its tone was brave, independent, and nationally-minded. During the 1826 Elections he took the Stuart side and supported their candidate Henry Villiers Stuart, in opposition to Lord George Beresford. During the election campaign he published an article in the Chronicle speaking severely of the treatment which Mr. Dunn, a Cork Barrister was alleged to have meted out for the tenants near Tallow. This was the opportunity that the Beresford faction was waiting for. A writ for libel was issued against Philip Barron as proprietor of the "Waterford Chronicle". There are reports of the case in the "Dublin Morning Register", 9th April 1827, the "Dublin Morning Post", 9th April 1827, and the Waterford Chronicle, April 1827, also the "Dublin Evening Mail", 11th April 1827. Barron himself did not appear in Court, but was defended by two very famous men, Sgt. Gould K.C., and Daniel O'Connell. But for all Dan's

eloquence, this was one case he did not win and damages to the sum of £1,350 were given against Barron.

On the 8th May, an appeal was heard on the ground that one of the jurymen was a relative of Lord George Beresford and had been on his committee during the elections. It was moved by Mr. Curran, but failed. But meanwhile Philip Barron has fled the country and the writ was never served. His last public appearance was at a meeting in the Town Hall, Waterford, where he spoke on Mendicity on 19th April 1827. Then he decided to leave the country rather than pay what he no doubt considered an abnormally large and unjust fine.

The “Chronicle”, after a short silence appeared again on the 8th May and soon letters began to appear in it under the pen-name “Hibernicus”. They were from Paris, and from their National outlook, and their style, they were generally considered to be from the pen of the ex-proprietor. He was in Paris until April of the following year and then would appear to have gone to Italy. Mr. Dunn’s libel action was the ill wind that blew some good; for Barron, while in exile began to become conscious of the national identities of the countries he saw, and observing the music, song, culture and languages of other countries, was convinced of the great loss Ireland was suffering by the neglect and suppression of her national language. From this was born his dream.

The next place we hear of Philip Barron was in July 1830 when he went on a delegation to Kilkenny to see his older defender Daniel O’Connell. This time he and his colleagues were asking O’Connell to consider standing as a candidate for County Waterford in the Westminster elections. But the great man was not interested. Matthew Butler states that Barron had returned to Ireland the previous August or September.

On December 5th 1830, he attended a meeting of the Catholic inhabitants of Dungarvan and spoke there. The meeting had been called by the townspeople to refute some particularly slanderous rumours that has been circulated in an attempt to vilify the local priests – the Parish priest Fr. Foran and the curate, Fr. Fogarty. Barron was elected to the committee that was formed at that meeting. An interesting sidelight to this can be found in An tAhair Padraig Breathnach’s little song-book, “Sidh-Cheol”, published in 1924. Giving the song “Sile Ní Gehdra” with the traditional County Waterford words, he follows it with a note about Dr. Forma, mentioned in the song, saying “The P.P. of Dungarvan, Dr. Foran, took part with the Nephew of the Duke of Devonshire, the Hon. George Lamb”. He is, of course, referring to the elections. So, in spite of the fact that Dr. Foran has taken the side of the people who had been responsible for bringing him to court, Philip Barron was willing to defend his good name publicly and serve on a committee formed for his defence.

Barron’s ambition was to provide the Irish people, the great poverty-stricken masses of them with their language, traditions, history, songs, archaeology, in books that would be so cheap that even the poorest could buy. And his other dream was a college, where through the Irish language he could provide a truly Irish education for young students and night courses for the

adult population of West Waterford. He now began a period of intense study to ready himself for this mammoth task.

From 1830 to 1834, he contacted scholars all over the country, writing and receiving, it is estimated, hundreds of letters, not one of which survives. Then in 1834, he began working on the building of his college. He father's lands, known as the Mountain Castle Estate, has been left to Philip and it was on his own land that he chose the site for his College building. Mathew Butler states that while the building was in progress he lived in Seafield House. Barron himself describes the result: "In this building, the ancient Gothic order has been adopted. There are two returns in the rear with a yard in the centre. These returns are also Gothic". The 1841 Ordnance Survey map shows such a building to the East of Seafield townland, although Butler says it was situated at the South boundary of the townland of Seafield close by the Glenanearbail Road and that it had three spires. In 1916, when Butler's exhaustive series of articles began in the "Catholic Record of Waterford & Lismore", on Barron he says, that the ruins there covered about 20 x 16 yards, not a very large building, apparently, but probably quite imposing. Barron describes the situation as being "in a silent glen, shut in by hills from every storm, a mile from Bunmahon and three from Stradbally".

ON the 1st January 1835 Philip Barron's college was opened. He had advertised it in the "Freeman's Journal" as teaching, as well as Irish, Writing, Ciphering, Mensuration, Navigation, English, Grammar, Geography, History, Latin, Greek & Hebrew. It was to have been a bilingual College at first, and as soon as all his pupils had become fluent Irish speakers, he intended teaching all subjects through the medium of Irish. There is no record of who his teachers were, or how many there were. He himself could have taught several subjects. He also ran night classes for local people, which included a class in agriculture. He was very interested in improving agriculture in Ireland, probably realising that we were heading towards the Famine. In many ways Barron foreshadowed Pádraig Mac Piarais and Colaiste Eanna. He organised competitions for his pupils that were very like the early Oireachtas competitions.

Simultaneously with the opening of the Bunmahon College, Philip Barron commenced publication of his booklets. On January 1st "Ancient Ireland 1" appeared. It was the result of almost 9 years of preparation, according to himself, and he had no doubt that he was now about to produce a Gaelic renaissance. He writes "I am well aware of the enthusiasm which will burst forth on the appearance of this magazine. I let it now go out to the world without the slightest fears as to its reception.....From this era (1st January 1835), we shall have to date the revival of learning in Ireland.

This revival was to take place through the college, the magazine, and no less than 25 types of publication, ranging from a 24 issue set of Irish Primers, through dictionaries, Catechisms, sermons, geographies and histories to a Hebrew Grammar (Barron believed Irish and Hebrew to have close affinities). 10,000 copies of "Ancient Ireland No. 1" were printed and a reprinting had to be done. Volumes 2 & 3 also appeared in January, each of 16 pages and over the following month six of the other publications were issued. "Ancient

Ireland IV” appeared in April as a monthly of 112 pages and the May issue contained 176 tightly printed pages. So far Barron has 200,000 booklets in circulation according to Butler.

Yet the editorial in “Ancient Ireland” (May ’35) declares “some disappointment has been felt that these elementary works not being, before now, out in greater abundance and greater variety”. He then comments on the lack of contributors: “Where are the persons of learning and national records? aid cannot be had even from those who feel the deepest interest and anxiety.....In a very short time we shall have a great variety of small Irish works out”, Nothing further appeared.

Here the great mystery begins. It is believed that the college closed in May or June. No one knows for certain when it closed. O’Cadhla says he had to close it “í gcionn leath bhliana”. What happened to end so suddenly and finally all the dreams and ambitions of this extraordinary man? All we have to go on is rumour, conjecture, and probability. Seamus O’Casoide says “he fell into poor circumstances after failure of his literary ventures and the expense of building the college”. Butler, more exhaustively mentions several of the reasons suggested for the closure of the college:-

Barrons dictatorial manner when alienated even his one-time friends, (Daniel Corkery mentions that O’Curry & O’Donovan were among his enemies); the veiled antagonism of powerful Irishmen; O’Connell’s evident success while at the same time deriding the Irish language; Michael O’Mahony of Bunmahon says in the “United Irishman” of 14th October, 1905 that the college was closed because, according to a tradition in Bunmahon, of the foreclosing of a mortgage on Barron’s property by the Powers of Lisnageragh. There is however, no record of such a mortgage although others of the same time are extant. All accounts seem to point to the fact that Philip Barron had over spent. But is this sufficient to make him disappear completely from the pages of history? To me it looks as if he had completely broken down in spirit. Seamus O’Casaide believed that he fell sicj, went to London, had died in 1837 and was buried in one of the Catholic cemeteries there. He also states that an anonymous writer said that Barron had a wife who survived him many years, eventually dying in Switzerland. But Fr. Stephen Barron (O.CIST.), a distant relative says he died unmarried. William Williams, writing in “The Shamrock” on 26th October 1867 mentioned that Philip Barron, on the failure of his college, went to Paris “where he died about 7 years since” – that would be about 1860.

Barron was definitely alive in 1839 - his signature exists on a document that was dated the 6th July of that year. That was when all that was left of his property was sold. £7,650 was got for it but he owed \$4,000, £1,472 of that being tithes. He must have been still alive in 1841 for a Carrigtuoil poet, Daithi De Barra wrote a poem in Irish in his honour and wrote a accompanying letter when sending it to Barron. I think it would be a reasonable conclusion to say that he died of a broken heart, for not one word came from his pen during his final exile.

The picture that emerges of the man is of an intelligent, scholarly, un-businesslike person, a linguist and historian, a man who did not suffer fools gladly and made enemies by his dictatorial manner. Obviously an idealist, he seems to have been hot-tempered and it is on record that he fought duels on at least two occasions. Only twenty when he first threw down the gauntlet, a British Army Officer was his opponent, challenged by Barron for an alleged insult to a girl cousin of his. They fired two pistol shots each and Barron, with his second shot shattered the Officer's thighbone. This duel was fought at Mount Neil, beyond the Skibbreen turnpike on the Cork Road. The other was an early morning Duel in Co. Kilkenny with one Richard Sargent who in the "Mail" had called Barron "a Liar and a scoundrel". Each fired three shots without doing any damage and went home. Honour was satisfied.

In the Royal Irish Academy there are two books that had been presented to Philip Barron (he was a member of the Academy from 1834 to 1837). They are Irish translations by Thomas Feenachty of two of Maria Edgeworth's novels, "Forgive and Forget" and "Rosanna". Little else remains – no letters, papers, personal belongings of Philip Barron. Could he, in deep despair have put a light to all that mass of correspondence that paved the way to the compiling of "Ancient Ireland", or could they be in some old trunk, attic or shed?

O'Mahoney said in 1905 that he found the site of the College. He explained the disappearance of the stones it was built from by saying that the local farmers took them for cow houses, or alternately that they went to build cottages for Bunmahon miners, but Seamus O'Casaide says that doubt has been expressed as to the accuracy of these theories.

Philip Barron lies in an unknown grave, probably somewhere in Europe, Professor Eoin Mac Neill described him as "the first Gaelic Leaguer" and he was undoubtedly a man well in advance of his time. In a time when few if any did so, he grasped the importance of national identity. Had he lived a century later, he would have lived among kindred spirits – the men of 1916 and their immediate successors. But instead he ploughed a lone furrow in his own district. His is a memory worth honouring.

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The document is based on an original piece written by Dóirín Ni Mhurchú in May 1976 for "Decies", a popular circular of the time by The Old Waterford Society. It was digitally transcribed in 2009 by Daithí de Paor and James Mernin and kindly translated into Irish by Caoimhín de Paor in 2010. Daithí is the Principal at Gaelscoil Philip Barún, an Irish-language school in Tramore, Co. Waterford established in memory and honour of Philip Barron. James Mernin is a parent from the school and Caoimhín de Paor is a retired teacher from the school.

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