

Barton, Robert Childers by Pauric J. Dempsey and Shaun Boylan

Barton, Robert Childers (1881–1975), agriculturist and revolutionary, was born 14 March 1881, eldest son of Charles William Barton, DL, landowner, of Glendalough House, Annamoe, Co. Wicklow, and Agnes Alexandra Frances, fourth daughter of the Rev. Canon Charles Childers, HM chaplain at Nice and canon of Gibraltar. The staunchly protestant, unionist Barton family, who owned 1,542 acres in Co. Wicklow in 1876, had accrued considerable wealth from the French vineyards of Barton and Guestier. Charles William Barton had fallen out irreconcilably with his neighbour and close childhood friend, Charles Stewart Parnell (qv), on the issue of the union. The Bartons were further connected to the Childers family when Charles's sister married a son of Canon Childers. Erskine Childers (qv) (1870–1922) was a child of this marriage and Robert Barton's first cousin on both sides. Barton and Erskine Childers grew up together almost as brothers, and Barton would later be best man at Childers's wedding.

Robert Barton was educated at Rugby School, at Christ Church, Oxford (BA, Dip. Econ.), and at the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, Gloucestershire (Dip., 1901). A progressive agriculturist, Barton greatly improved his Co. Wicklow estate and the lot of his tenants by introducing modern farming techniques. While at Oxford, he had written to Sir Horace Plunkett (qv) expressing an interest in working for the Irish Agricultural Organization Society; he became a committee member in 1910. According to Erskine Childers, it was while he and Barton were on a tour of co-operatives in the west of Ireland in 1908 that they were converted to home-rule nationalism. Barton joined the Irish Volunteers in 1913 and acted for a spell as secretary to the inspector general, Col. Maurice Moore (qv), brother of the author George Moore (qv). In 1914 he accepted a British army commission and served in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. The war took a heavy toll of the Barton family: in mid July 1916 Barton's youngest brother, Thomas Eyre, was killed in the Somme offensive, and in August 1918 his remaining brother, Charles Erskine, died in France, both of them as officers in the Royal Irish Rifles.

Prior to the general rebel surrender in Easter week 1916, Barton was dispatched to Dublin, where the subsequent treatment of the rebels, and their stoicism and conviction in the face of such treatment, made a deep impact on him. He soon resigned his commission and joined the republican movement. Interestingly, as early as 1907 he had made a £50 contribution to Sinn Féin. To Michael Collins (qv), he had distinguished himself by his kindness to the prisoners and their relatives. In the December 1918 general election Barton, now a Volunteer commandant, was elected Sinn Féin MP for Wicklow West. In the same month he accompanied Collins, Seán T. O'Kelly (qv), and George Gavan Duffy (qv) to London to make representations to see President Woodrow Wilson concerning the Paris peace conference.

At the first meeting of the dáil (21 January 1919) Barton read the 'Message to the free nations of the world' in English and was named as the first minister for agriculture. He established the national land bank, which facilitated land redistribution through the co-operative farming societies. In February 1919 he was arrested and held in Mountjoy jail for making seditious speeches at Carnew, containing threats of unspecified retribution if his election agent was not released from custody. While awaiting trial, he escaped (16 March), thanks to Richard Mulcahy (qv), who smuggled in a file and arranged for a party of Volunteers to throw a rope ladder over the 20-ft (6 m) prison wall. Ever the gentleman, Barton left a dummy in his bed and a note for the governor saying that he felt compelled to leave, owing to the discomfort of his surroundings. While on the run, he convinced his cousins, Childers and David Lubbock Robinson, to join Sinn Féin and become active in the movement. In January 1920 he was rearrested on Oakley Road, Dublin, and later tried by general court martial under the defence of the realm act and sentenced to three years' penal servitude. Unsuccessful attempts were made to free him on his journey from the courthouse, and he was sent to Portland convict prison, where he was subjected to considerable brutality. During his imprisonment he was elected chairman of Wicklow county council. Sir Horace Plunkett, now a close friend, made strenuous efforts to have him released, and Collins considered exchanging him for Gen. Lucas, captured by Liam Lynch (qv) in July 1920. Barton was finally released in early July 1921, along with Arthur Griffith (qv) and Eoin MacNeill (qv), to help with the truce negotiations. He met Gen. J. C. Smuts (5 July) on board Smuts's boat at Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire) and signed the terms of the truce (11 July) with Gen. Sir Nevil Macready (qv) at the Mansion House, Dublin. Elected to the second dáil for Kildare–Wicklow (1921–3), he was made minister for economic affairs, and in that position established the economic relations committee to advise the government on the implications of the British government's financial proposals for the settlement of the Irish question, published after the truce. Before the treaty negotiations he and Éamonn Duggan (qv) accompanied Éamon de Valera (qv) to London for preliminary talks with Lloyd George.

At Collins's suggestion, both Barton and Childers were selected as part of the delegation that travelled to London for the treaty negotiations. Barton, one of three cabinet members in the delegation, was chosen as its economic expert. The British government considered him to be the head of the de Valera–Childers faction and sought to exclude him from the talks at every opportunity. Their antipathy came to be shared by Griffith, and it was not long before the Irish delegation split along this fault line. Without doubt, Barton was the chief proponent of 'external association' within the delegation, and – with Childers – the most doctrinaire republican. Lloyd George described him as a pipsqueak, adding that he would not make him a private secretary to an under-secretary. Griffith criticised Barton and Gavan Duffy for 'being too emphatic and creating the wrong atmosphere' in talks concerning trade and neutrality. Of Griffith's performance Barton wrote that 'he fell for the baited trap'.

Griffith, Collins, and Duggan were committed to signing the treaty, and Gavan Duffy followed Barton's lead. This in effect gave Barton the casting vote, for the conditions attached to the treaty required that every member of the Irish delegation should sign and recommend it; otherwise, the British government threatened, there would be immediate and terrible war. Duggan warned Barton that he would be in danger of being hanged from a lamp-post in Dublin, if his refusal to sign caused a new war in Ireland. Three times Griffith, Collins, and Duggan put on hats and coats to set out for Downing St. to sign the articles of agreement, but each time Barton called them back. Under immense strain and moved by the emotional appeals of his colleagues, he finally agreed to sign, sometime after 2 a.m. on 6 December 1921.

On his return to Dublin, he attacked de Valera for his refusal to attend the talks, and blamed him for what had come to pass. However, having honoured his commitment to vote for the treaty in the dáil, he then rejected it and took the anti-treaty side. Later he would write that many times he wished that he had died in Portland jail, so troubled was he by 'those cursed negotiations'. Reelected to the dáil in June 1922, he did not take his seat. During the civil war he occupied the Hammam Hotel, O'Connell St., Dublin, with de Valera, Cathal Brugha (qv), and Austin Stack (qv), and in October 1922 was appointed minister for economic affairs in de Valera's republican council of state before being imprisoned. The following month Barton's home was the subject of a raid, during which Childers was arrested and subsequently executed for possession of a firearm. Barton lost his dáil seat in the general election of August 1923 and was released from prison in December 1923. He never again stood for election.

Barton reentered public life on Fianna Fáil's accession to power in 1932. A close but not uncritical friend of de Valera, he considered him to be the personification of the republic and was appointed by him as a director of Irish Press Ltd. He served as chairman of the Agricultural Credit Corporation (1933–59), having been appointed by Sean MacEntee (qv) to the board in 1932. In the 1933 general election Barton campaigned for Fianna Fáil and claimed that Collins and Griffith had been misled by Lloyd George during the treaty negotiations into believing that the nationalist communities in the north would have a vote on the issue of the border. In 1934 he became the part-time and unpaid chairman of the Turf Development Board, later to become Bord na Móna. In *Man of no property* C. S. Andrews (qv) claimed that 'turf development would never have been brought to fruition in the face of the opposition ... from the Department of Finance' without Barton's commitment and prestige in official circles and in the country generally. Barton retired as chairman of Bord na Móna in 1960. His other public appointments included membership of the banking, currency, and credit commission (1934–8), of a committee to advise on postwar agricultural policy (1942–5), and of the Hospitals Trust board during the 1940s. He was admitted to hospital shortly after the death of his first cousin once removed, President Erskine Hamilton Childers (qv) (1905–74), and died 10 August 1975.

He married (21 July 1951) in Boston, Massachusetts, Rachel Warren Lothrop (d. 25 August 1972 at Harvard), a niece of Molly Childers, widow of Erskine Childers. When probate on his will was granted (29 November 1976) his estate was valued at £182,441. The Childers papers in TCD have material relating to Barton; the NAI has a small collection of his papers (MS 1093) relating to 1915–74.

Times, 23 Feb. 1920, 6 July 1921, 6 July, 7 Oct. (photo), 11 Nov. 1922; *TIWW*; Robert Barton, *The truth about the treaty* (n.d.); Elizabeth Lazenby, *Ireland a catspaw* (1929); *Times*, 19 Jan. 1933; Frank Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal* (1935); *Times*, 26 July 1950; Rex Taylor, *Michael Collins: the Big Fellow* (1958); *Times*, 21 Sept. 1961; J. Anthony Gaughan, *Austin Stack: portrait of a separatist* (1971); Richard Davis, *Arthur Griffith and non-violent Sinn Féin* (1974); obits, *Ir. Times*, *Ir. Independent*, *Ir. Press*, 11 Aug. 1975; Tom Cox, *Damned Englishman* (1975); Burke, *IFR* (1976); *Ir. Times*, 26 Aug. 1976; NAI calendar of wills (1976); Andrew Boyle, *The riddle of Erskine Childers* (1977); Burke Wilkinson, *The zeal of the convert* (1978); C. S. Andrews, *Dublin made me* (1979); id. *Man of no property* (1982); Leon Ó Broin, *Protestant nationalists in revolutionary Ireland: the Stopford connection* (1985); John N. Young, *Erskine Childers, president of Ireland: a biography* (1985); Trevor West, *Horace Plunkett: co-operation and politics* (1986); Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins* (1990); Richard English and Cormac O'Malley (ed.) *Prisoners: the civil war letters of Ernie O'Malley* (1991); Nicholas Mansergh, *The unresolved question* (1991); Tim Pat Coogan, *De Valera: Long Fellow, long shadow* (1993).

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