

Cathal Leahy.

The late nineteenth century was a time of significant change in Ireland. Inspired by relatively recent events such as the Great Famine, the pan-European cultural revival and by outstanding individuals intent on change, a variety of organisations, political, social, economic and cultural, sought to embrace Irish identity and transform and transfigure Ireland. Between 1870 and 1905, a very tangible and collective journey was undertaken by Irish men and women alert to their needs and open to possibility, in effect, a civil rights movement that had begun with O'Connell and his victory to restore certain rights to Catholics in 1829.

Formal organisations were established to promote and progress these ambitions, such as the Home Government Association, 1870, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, 1877, the GAA in 1884, the Gaelic League 1893, Irish Literary Revivalists, the Home Rule Party (or Irish Parliamentary Party) and Sinn Fein, 1905. Alongside these popular catalysts for change was the Fenian movement which lay claim to a series of fraternal groups determined to establish an independent Irish Republic.

Into this milieu were born sixteen children to Sylvester and Johanna Barrett (nee Cotter) at Barnageeha, Darragh. There were ten boys and six girls. Sylvester and Johanna were strong advocates of physical force to achieve a republic. They fostered a love of all things Irish and their sixteen children, born between 1888 and 1909, were active and eager students of Irish politics, culture and tradition. Their home was one in which Irishness was cultivated and nursed. This home life was to determine their paths during the tumultuous early years of the 20th century.

All sixteen played a significant role in the struggle for Irish independence. The eldest, Joseph, was described as 'one of Clare's finest soldiers, noted for his courage, alert brain and military strategy' (*Clare Champion*, 8 May, 1971). He was O.C. of the Mid-Clare Brigade Active Service Unit (ASU), and involved in the Monreal Ambush, 18 December 1920, in which the British lost thirty men; a text book raid in Ennis in which the Royal Scots Regiment were relieved of their weapons at Aherne's Corner and the attack on Ruan Barracks on 18 October 1920.

His brother John (Jack), was involved in the Howth gun-running when 900 Mauser rifles were imported to arm the Irish Volunteers in July 1914. Two months later he joined the French Foreign Legion to fight in World War 1. He died, aged 27, at the Battle of Auberieve, on the Marne, on 20 April 1917. He was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Frank Barrett was born in 1891. He became O.C. of the Mid-Clare Brigade in the Black and Tan War and O.C. of the 1st Western Division (Republican) in the Civil War. He was also a member of the Republican Army Council. In both roles he was taken prisoner and jailed in Wormwood Scrubs, West London and in Dublin and Cork. During these internments he went on hunger strike for long periods. At one time six Barrett brothers were imprisoned and two, Frank and Michael, went on hunger strike. (There were a no. of hunger strikes held during the months of April?May 1920 throughout jails in Britain by Volunteers. In 1926, Frank was a founding member of the Fianna Fáil Party. In 1928, he was elected to Clare County Council and unanimously chosen as Chairman. His son, Sylvester, was to follow in his footsteps later when he was elected TD for his native Clare, 1968- 84 and MEP for Munster, 1984-89. (Syl was born on the same day Fianna Fáil was founded on 17 May, 1926).

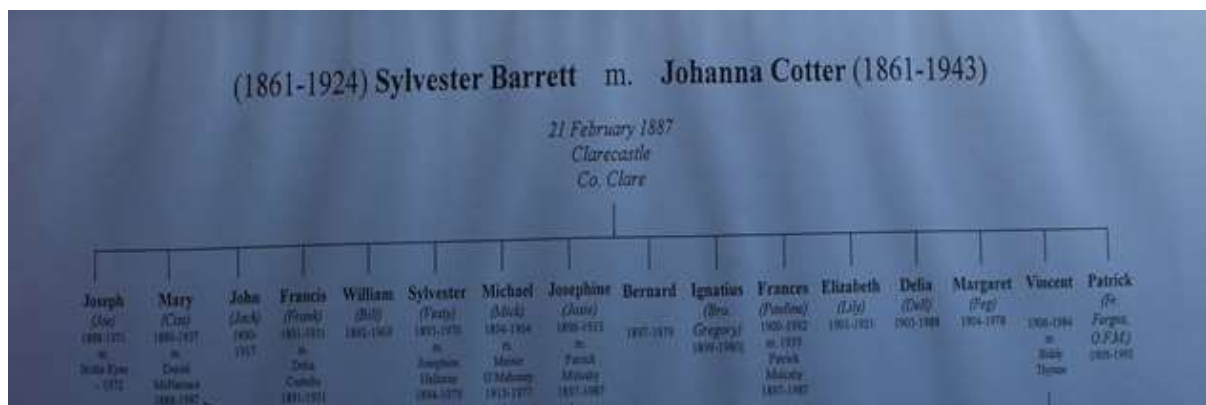
The youngest of the sixteen children, Patrick, became Fr. Fergus O.F.M., and founded St. John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria, South Africa. Here he spent forty five years as rector, administrator and teacher. In later years when he recalled the struggle for independence he joked that he had been 'a gun-runner for the IRA' as a boy.

The six girls in the family were also involved in cultural, political and revolutionary movements. Cumann na mBan was a natural home for the Barrett girls and all six, ranging in ages from thirty down to sixteen years, played active roles in the War of Independence and Civil War.

Mary, born in 1889, gave the address to welcome de Valera back to Clare on his release from prison in 1917. There were a number of meetings held in June and July 1917 to organise a candidate to run in the by-election to be held on 10 July 1917. We know that de Valera arrived in Ennis on the 23 June and remained canvassing after he had been chosen to contest the seat. It's very probable that he was 'formally' welcomed back from jail in England at the Old Ground hotel on the 23/ 24 June 1917. Margaret (Peg) and Frances (Pol or Pauline) were wounded on 15 August 1923 shielding de Valera from Free State gunfire as he gave a speech in Ennis. [See pictorial family history which has a wide range of newspaper articles relating to the family in the War of Independence.....Joan Barrett has a copy of this.](#) Josephine married Major General Patrick Mulcahy (brother of Richard Mulcahy, IRA Chief of Staff, 1919-21 and subsequently Minister for Defence, 1922, and Leader of Fine Gael, 1944-59). She died prematurely, aged just 39. Her sister Frances (Pauline) married Major General Patrick Mulcahy four years later.

Aunty Peg, as she was affectionately known, often recalled incidents from the War of Independence. One in particular serves to illustrate the imagination and creativity of Cumann na mBan activists. Their role in the fight to win Irish independence was equally fraught with danger. On one occasion Peg had a dispatch to deliver in Limerick. It was going to Liam Deasy. She remembered:

'I was told whatever would happen I was not to let it into enemy hands. I was to eat it or burn it. I had no money to buy a ticket for the train to Limerick but was given one at the station ... sure we had friends everywhere. An officer had seen me get on the train and I knew he'd phone Limerick. It was a nerve wracking journey. As I got off the train an officer walked up to me and said, "You'll be held." They sat me down but their attention was called elsewhere. And like a flash I was gone through the crowd. I slipped into a shop, went under the counter, out through the kitchen and over a wall. Eventually, I got down William Street and who should I bump into but another officer whom I knew from Ennis. He was always asking me out for a date. He asked me to come to Cruises for a cup of coffee. He wanted me to go to the pictures with him in the afternoon but I told him I had to go home. We walked around for a while and I told him I had a message to get in a shop at the top of William Street. I knew my dispatch would be taken care of and sent to Liam Deasy from there. The officer in question escorted me to the shop where I delivered the dispatch. What a relief it was to be rid of it. I have to say I enjoyed the irony of being escorted by a British Army Officer to deliver an I.R.A. dispatch.'



Sons and daughters of Sylvester and Johanna Barrett.

Barrett family collection.

*left to right: Sylvester Barrett, T.D.,
Mr De Valera, Peg Barrett*



Margaret (Peg) Barrett

Born: 4 November 1904
Died: 7 January 1978



Fr Pius Barrett, O.S.B., ordained priest in Rome, 8 July 1954



Translation of Official Record from the French War Office

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John Joseph Barrett
 Matriculation number 36421
 Born : 2 May 1890
 in : Ennis, Ireland
 Parents : Sylvester and Johanna
 Occupation : Accountant
 Enlisted from 10 September 1914
 Function : Volunteer for the duration of the war at the local military barracks DUNKIRK NORTH DEPARTMENT
 Physically present from 10 September
 Recruitment no. 192

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Incorporated into the 2nd Foreign Regiment as a volunteer for the duration of the war at Dunkirk, starting on 10 September 1914. Physically present and a legionnaire 2nd class on the said date. Left for Morocco on 17 September 1914. Ministerial Prescription (i.e. Order) 3786 of 29 August 1914. Transferred to 1st Foreign Regiment on 24 September 1915. Ministerial Decision 6049+ of 10 August 1915. Promoted to Corporal 1 September 1915 under (Order) no. 93. Joined the Front on 18 November 1915. Killed by the enemy, 20 April 1917 at Auberive in the Marne. (Official notice no. E.P. 1422 of 29 May 1917.)

Citations

Cited at Divisional level - no. 91, 2 May 1917, 41st grade. Killed 20 April 1917 at the time when he was advancing at the head of his squad of riflemen on the assault of a heavily defended enemy trench.

Decorations : CROIX DE GUERRE
 SILVER STAR

(1861-1924) Sylvester Barrett m. Johanna Cotter (1861-1943)

21 February 1887
Claremont
Cal. U.S.

