

# WILEY



---

Sir John Barrow, Bart., F. R. S.

Author(s): G. S. Ritchie

Source: *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 130, No. 3 (Sep., 1964), pp. 350-354

Published by: geographicalj

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1794759>

Accessed: 24-11-2015 21:45 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley and Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Geographical Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## SIR JOHN BARROW, BART., F.R.S.

CAPTAIN G. S. RITCHIE, D.S.C., R.N.

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, on 19 June 1764, John Barrow was born of humble parentage at Dragleybeck near Ulverstone, North Lancashire. Barrow was to travel widely, to hold the important post of Second Secretary of the Admiralty for forty years, to be directly responsible for the great upsurge of British Arctic exploration in the years 1817-45 and to play a vital part in founding the Royal Geographical Society in 1830. Although never a surveyor himself, Barrow's influence for good upon the fortunes of the naval surveying service was such that Commander Dawson honoured him by inclusion in his well known *Biographies* (Dawson, 1885). Barrow wrote freely in his leisure hours, regarding it happily as a recreation, and left a number of works on such diverse subjects as his travels in China and Africa, Arctic exploration and the life of Peter the Great. He also wrote on the lives of famous Admirals, and the first full account of the mutiny on the *Bounty*, which aroused enormous contemporary interest, was from his pen. He published his autobiography in 1847 (Barrow, 1847). In addition, no less than 195 articles by Barrow appeared in *The Quarterly Review*, an astonishing record of interest covering almost every subject except politics!

Obviously, Barrow's formative years were important ones in his long life of eighty-five years, the first half of which was spent actively out of doors, and the second at the Admiralty at a single desk, a 'venerable ink-stained relic' which was presented to him by the First Lord of the Admiralty upon his final retirement. John Barrow was an only child, educated at the local grammar school, where he did well. Just before he left school at the age of thirteen, he was employed with another boy to help in the making of a survey of a large estate near by. The task occupied about two months working in very varied country and was, he later judged, of 'incalculable benefit' to him. He was interested at this time in the study of the 'celestial globe' and a 'map of the heavens', which he describes 'as a pleasure then and a profit thereafter'. Another influence on his life at this stage was his friendship with the son of a local farmer. This young man had been a midshipman in the Navy until he lost an arm in action and returned home to study for the Church. Barrow coached him in mathematics and the classics, and he in his turn instructed Barrow in navigation. He turned his enquiring mind to the study of electricity and made an 'electrical kite' modelled on Benjamin Franklin's, which he flew with success until he yielded to temptation and gave an electric shock to an inquisitive old woman who had been watching him 'drawing down fire from heaven'. This pastime was then forbidden by his parents.

Barrow's father had wished him to enter the Church, but John himself felt he had no vocation, so that when he was just turned fifteen he was fortunate to be offered a post in Liverpool in an iron foundry. He had here to superintend the workmen and keep the accounts at which task he acquitted himself well. But after two years the owner died and the factory was sold, and young Barrow found himself out of a job. And whilst at a loose end in this seaport town he eagerly accepted an offer of a voyage to Greenland in a whaler as guest of the captain, who was part owner. This was to be John Barrow's only glimpse of the Arctic but it left an

→ Captain G. S. Ritchie, D.S.C., R.N., is Commanding Officer of H.M. Surveying Ship *Vidal*.

impression which remained with him for life. At home again after this exciting voyage, where he had seized every opportunity for learning seamanship and navigation, he chafed at idleness and thankfully accepted an offer to teach mathematics at an academy at Greenwich. And thus he came south to London for the first time, where he was to spend half his lifetime.

Barrow was to have three great benefactors to whom he freely and often admitted his indebtedness. The first of these was Sir George Staunton who visited the academy and engaged Barrow to coach his ten year old son in mathematics and astronomy. It was Sir George who suggested to Lord Macartney, Barrow's second benefactor, that as the newly appointed Ambassador to China he could use Barrow on the Embassy staff—"knowing, as I have reason to do, his Lordship's desire to have about him such persons as are likely to be useful, in preference to others'. And so Barrow was appointed 'Comptroller of the Household'. Sir George Staunton himself was accompanying the Ambassador as Secretary of the Embassy and Plenipotentiary, with his young son, Barrow's pupil, as an attaché.

The Embassy sailed on 26 September 1792, in H.M.S. *Lion* and the E.I. Co. Ship *Hindustan*. It was on his arrival at Chusan that Barrow had his pulse taken for the first and only time in his life. This was the only sickness he ever admitted to and was brought about by eating jellyfish cooked by one of the Chinese pilots. This necessitated bringing a doctor from shore to attend him. The Ambassador arrived in Peking in August 1793 and it was John Barrow's first task to assemble the mechanical and scientific instruments, which had been brought from England as gifts for the Emperor, in the great hall of the royal palace at Yuen-min-Yuen. Lord Macartney's embassy to China was a success despite the fact that he refused to 'Koo-Too' to the Emperor, a custom whereby visitors had to prostrate themselves nine times at the Emperor's feet. The Embassy returned via Macao where they embarked at the *Typha* on a homeward bound convoy of East Indiamen escorted by the *Lion*. Spithead was reached in September 1794. Barrow assisted Sir George Staunton to write the official account of the Embassy to China, and ten years later wrote and published a 'volume to show the view which I had taken of the great empire of China and its very extraordinary overflow of population'. Of course the energetic Barrow had learnt the language: 'There is no difficulty whatever, as has been supposed, in acquiring a knowledge of the Chinese language'.

The Dutch Colony of the Cape of Good Hope had just fallen into British hands, Lord Macartney was offered the Governorship, and Barrow was again asked to join his staff, busying himself at once with frequent visits to Kew Gardens to botanize, for Kew was already in possession of a large portion of the flora of the Cape. All the Governor's party landed in Cape Town 'in health and high spirits' on 4 May 1797. But the new administration had trouble on their hands at once. The Boers of Graaf-Reynet had expelled both their *landrost* and their clergyman and were in a state of revolt—nor did available maps even show where Graaf-Reynet lay. Barrow was therefore sent to reinstate a reluctant *landrost* and to make a map of the troubled area. He set out with a small pocket sextant of Ramsden of 5-inch radius, an artificial horizon, a case of mathematical instruments, a pocket compass, a small telescope and a double-barrelled rifle-gun. 'The only books I carried with me were Aiton's "Hortus Kewensis", and the "Systema Natural", which were of great importance, affording me both comfort and assistance, some small quantity of wine and spirits; but I left the cooking apparatus, the kitchen utensils and the table appendages to the landrost'.

Thus started John Barrow's extensive travels in Southern Africa during which he intervened frequently in the quarrels between the Boers, the Kaffirs and the

Hottentots, each striving to graze or hunt over the same vast territory, and which led Barrow to the belief that each should be allotted their own lands upon which to live, farm and hunt. What a difference might have been made to South Africa's history had Barrow's early form of 'Apartheid' been adopted then. But in 1797 Barrow's extensive travels in the hinterland were over, for he was then appointed Auditor-General of Public Accounts. Settled in this sedentary post Barrow, in his methodical way, decided 'to find a wife, to look after a small comfortable house and become a country gentleman of South Africa'. Thus did he come to marry Miss Anna Maria Trüter in 1800, a daughter of a member of the Court of Justice. Then he bought Liesbeck Cottage with paddock, garden and vineyard from which this happy man looked out on to the western slopes of Table Mountain. Lord Macartney had left the Cape in 1798 owing to a recurrence of his gout, but Barrow remained in his post of Auditor-General, first under the Military Governor General Dundas, to whom he gave excellent advice and service, and then under Sir George Young the new Governor. But the Peace of Amiens returned the Cape Colony to the Dutch and so Barrow sailed to England with his young wife and son in 1803.

General Dundas had been impressed with Barrow's services at the Cape, and as he was the nephew of Mr. Henry Dundas, this led Barrow to his third great benefactor. For Henry Dundas in 1804 became Lord Melville and First Lord of the Admiralty in the Tory Government. Melville had heard what his nephew had said about Barrow and had now read his *Travels into Southern Africa*, and thus he came to offer John Barrow the post of Second Secretary of the Admiralty, and the long sedentary part of his life began. Barrow at once threw himself into furious activity, for it was the belief of the new administration that the Navy had suffered severely in the years 1801-4 under Mr. Addington's Government, which had been following a policy of retrenchment in the Dockyards under the erroneous assumption that the Peace of Amiens was to last. But Melville had his political enemies and an attempt by Mr. Whitbread, a wealthy brewer, and other M.P.s to impeach him for irregularities and abuses in Naval Departments, although it failed, led to Melville's resignation from public life. His easy-going successor, Lord Barham, who had been Comptroller of the Navy Board since 1775, was to have his greatest moment at 1 a.m. one October night when Mr. Marsden, the First Secretary, shook him from his slumbers to report Britain's greatest naval victory. Barrow had been the last man to talk to Lord Nelson when he had called at the Admiralty on September 12, the day before he finally embarked in *Victory* at Spithead. Barrow had assured him that the new code of signals just completed would be on board *Victory* before she sailed.

The Whigs returned to Office in 1806 and Barrow lost his post to Mr. Tucker. But the Grenville Government was short lived and in 1807 Earl Mulgrave, the new First Lord, offered Barrow his old post. He would have wished to make him First Secretary, but this had now been made a political post to be held by an M.P. and Mr. J. W. Croker shortly took up this appointment. Although of greatly different temperaments Croker and Barrow worked harmoniously together for twenty odd years. Old Lord Melville died in 1811 and his son Robert succeeded to the title and became First Lord of the Admiralty in 1812, a post which he held for fifteen years. During the early days of his office, peace finally came to Europe and the American War of 1812 was concluded.

It was inevitable that a man of Barrow's enthusiasms should become friendly with the elderly Sir Joseph Banks, and in fact the mantle of that great instigator of naval exploration fell upon Barrow's shoulders. The advent of complete peace by 1817 coincided with information from Banks that his whaling friends reported that the

Greenland Sea was free of ice and that conditions were uniquely favourable for northern exploration. Barrow saw this as the opportunity for renewing the search for the North-west Passage, and for a voyage towards the North Pole. He believed many valiant officers now seeking employment would welcome this chance. 'Knowledge is power', said he, quoting Queen Elizabeth and added: 'These voyages produce officers and men not to be surpassed, perhaps not equalled, in any other branch of the Service'. Barrow, supported by the Royal Society, and with his own long experience of bureaucratic manipulation, carried Lord Melville with him and thus became largely responsible for the resurgence of Arctic exploration. This led directly to Parry's three great voyages in search of the North-west Passage, the explorations of the shores of the Polar Sea by Franklin, Richardson and Back and the voyages of Buchan and Parry towards the North Pole.

When Barrow finally retired in 1845 he was presented with a candelabrum by the many officers who had taken part in these arctic expeditions, the letter of presentation being signed by four of the greatest of their number—Captains Parry, Franklin, Ross and Back. To follow Barrow through his career at the Admiralty under thirteen administrations, which lasted into the age of steam and iron ships, would be a lengthy business. However, in view of changes now current in the administration of the Royal Navy, it is interesting to note that Barrow served under the Duke of Clarence in 1827 and 1828 when he held the ancient office of Lord High Admiral, which had been revived by the Duke of Wellington when he took office as Prime Minister. The Second Secretary had nothing but praise for the Lord High Admiral, who, with his naval training and love of the Navy, undertook his tasks with zeal and energy; these included many exhaustive inspections of the Dockyards with Barrow at his side. But restriction on his office by Orders in Council, and by long established regulations, in fact, 'red tape', so hampered the Duke that he felt the dignity of the office was undermined and he resigned in September 1828. And since that date until 1 April 1964 the office of Lord High Admiral has been in abeyance, but is now graciously performed by Her Majesty The Queen.

It is of interest, too, that but for a 'revolt' in the House of Lords earlier this year we might again have had a Navy Board after 130 years. Barrow largely assisted in the liquidation of the former Navy Board when Sir James Graham held the office of First Lord under the Whig administration of 1830-4. Up till this time the civil departments, such as victualling, pay and transport, were established separately in Somerset House under three Commissioners of the Navy Board, over whom the Board of Admiralty had scant control. The whole of this civil administration was now placed under the five Lords of the Admiralty, each having a particular and direct responsibility, as they continued to have up to 1964. There was much obstruction by the old Navy Board before this was brought about, but the clear plan set out by Barrow, together with his flair for committee work and administration, ensured that this much needed reform was satisfactorily introduced.

Barrow's absorbing interest in travel and exploration and the enthusiasm with which he assisted every worthwhile proposal for an expedition have been noted, as has his skill in administration acquired during his long experience at the Admiralty. Added to this Barrow was a sociable man and had many friends among politicians of both parties, in the learned professions and scientific circles. Thus when the forming of a Geographical Society began to crystallize Barrow found himself the natural centre of these developments. It would be difficult to name the founders of the Royal Geographical Society, for a number of persons were simultaneously thinking along similar lines in the late 1820's. Letters certainly appeared in the *Literary Gazette* on the subject of forming a geographical society and Jerdan, the editor, and

Jolin Britton, an antiquary, formed a nucleus of interested persons. They attended on 12 April 1830 a party at the house of Mr. Francis Baily, President of the Royal Astronomical Society, at which three naval captains were also present. These were W. H. Smyth, renowned for his Mediterranean surveys, Francis Beaufort, recently appointed Hydrographer of the Navy, and Basil Hall whose enlightened scientific voyages in the Pacific had been so well reported by him in his beautifully written travel books. There was clearly the need for a guiding hand and it seemed probable that it was Beaufort, who worked so closely with Barrow, who proposed to him that he should take up the cause of Geography. Somewhat reluctantly Barrow accepted this invitation and, with his experience, saw how the matter could best be forwarded. He placed the proposal to form the new society before the Raleigh, a dining club of travellers of which Barrow was a member. At this meeting a Provisional Committee was formed which then met regularly under Barrow's leadership in his own room at the Admiralty. These deliberations led to a public meeting in the rooms of the Horticultural Society with Barrow in the chair on 16 July 1830. Here the Geographical Society of London was constituted and a distinguished Council was elected to serve under Viscount Goderich, F.R.S., the first President. Barrow was soon able to report 460 members, and an approach by him to the former Lord High Admiral, who now reigned as King William IV, resulted in His Majesty's becoming Patron, and this was taken as justification for the word 'Royal' first appearing before the name of the Society.

Sir John Barrow, Bart., F.R.S., died in 1849 aged eighty-five years. The Royal Geographical Society was indeed fortunate that this man worked so whole-heartedly to bring about its foundation, for his wide travelling experience, his great administrative powers and his extensive social and intellectual contacts combined to make him uniquely suited to perform this task.

#### *References*

- Barrow, Sir John 1847 *An auto-biographical memoir of Sir John Barrow, Bart., late of the Admiralty, including reflections, observations, and reminiscences at home and abroad, from early life to advanced age.*
- Dawson, Commander L. S. 1885 *Memoirs of hydrography, including brief biographies of the principal officers who have served in H.M. Surveying Service between the years 1750 and 1885.*



*Sir John Barrow, Bart., F.R.S. 1764-1848*  
(see pages 350-4)