

Barrow, Sir John, first baronet

(1764–1848)

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Sir John Barrow, first baronet (1764–1848)

attrib. John Jackson, c. 1810

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Barrow, Sir John, first baronet (1764–1848), promoter of exploration and author, was born on 19 June 1764 at Dragley Beck, Ulverston, Lancashire, the only child of Roger Barrow, journeyman tanner, and his wife, Mary. Educated at the local Town Bank grammar school, which he left at the age of thirteen, Barrow worked successively as a clerk in a Liverpool iron foundry, as a landsman on a Greenland whaler, and as a mathematics teacher in a Greenwich academy preparing young men for a naval career, until offered the position of comptroller of household to Lord Macartney's embassy to China (1792–4). He served with distinction during this embassy and Macartney's governorship of the Cape of Good Hope (1797–9), collecting much of the commercial and strategic intelligence about the eastern seas and southern Africa that Macartney forwarded to Henry Dundas, president of the Board of Control and secretary of state at war. Barrow was promoted to the post of auditor general to Cape Colony in September 1798, and married Anna Maria Trüter (1777–1857) at Stellenbosch on 26 August

1799. His intention to settle at the Cape was frustrated by its return to the Dutch in 1803. He was offered the second secretaryship of the Admiralty by Dundas (by then Lord Melville) on 5 May 1804, and this he held, except for the period between 10 February 1806 and 7 April 1807, until 28 January 1845.

Barrow was elected to the Royal Society in 1805 and the Royal Society Club three years later. Through these he formed his close personal and professional relationship with Sir Joseph Banks, the president of the Royal Society. At Banks's suggestion, Barrow served on the council of the Royal Society for the first time in 1815 and over the next fifteen years alternated his council membership with his Admiralty colleague John Wilson Croker. He was appointed a vice-president several times thereafter. With Croker, assisted by Davies Gilbert, Thomas Young, and Thomas Amyot, Barrow attempted to have Robert Peel elected as president in 1826. The rift between amateur and professional scientists over the election of the duke of Somerset was a factor in his agreeing to assist Francis Beaufort and William Henry Smyth to form the Royal Geographical Society in 1830. He chaired early meetings of the new society, and secured royal patronage; he served as president between 1835 and 1837 [*see* Founders of the Royal Geographical Society of London].

An ardent imperialist, Barrow entered the Admiralty convinced that Britain's security and future wealth depended on control of the world's sea lanes both for trade and for defence. He took an active interest in the development of naval dockyards and other facilities during the Napoleonic and American wars, and actively promoted the careers of promising young naval officers when peace was declared in 1815. His incomparable knowledge of naval traditions and organization was drawn upon by Sir James Graham in 1832 when the Navy Board and other civilian boards responsible for aspects of naval administration were replaced by departments answerable directly to the Board of Admiralty.

Even before hostilities ceased, Barrow, with Banks's assistance, initiated a series of expeditions to trace the course of the Niger, which culminated with Richard Lander's expedition of 1831. News of the melting of the north polar ice cap, conveyed to Banks by William Scoresby in 1817, prompted an equally sustained search for the north-west passage. Sir John Franklin's fatal voyage (1845) was the last of these planned attempts. Other parts of the world also claimed Barrow's attention. Australia was of particular interest, and he actively fostered the careers of the explorers Phillip Parker King, Allan Cunningham, and Charles Sturt, among others.

In 1837, when negotiating the details of George Grey's expedition to north-western Australia, Barrow convinced Lord Glenelg, then colonial secretary, to occupy Port Essington on Australia's north coast to safeguard the Australia–Asia trade route. This was the culmination of a string of strategic annexations which Barrow advocated publicly from 1804, when he argued that the Cape of Good Hope should have been retained after the peace of Amiens. His successful arguments for the annexation of Fernando Po to control the west African slave trade, made in 1827, compelled the then colonial secretary, Lord Bathurst, to declare: 'if coveting islands is a breach of the Ten Commandments, then he [Barrow] is the greatest violator of the decalogue in the kingdom' (Eddy, 235). Barrow was an equally strenuous advocate of overseas settlement, publicizing both the Albany settlement in Cape Colony (1820) and the

foundation of Swan River Colony (Western Australia) in 1829, and emigration to southern Africa, southern and eastern Australia, and Upper Canada. He played a major role in the decision to send the Amherst embassy to China in 1815, having advocated such a mission as early as 1809.

As a writer Barrow is best known for his *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1831) but, during his lifetime, his accounts of his travels in eastern Asia and southern Africa, published between 1801 and 1807, were better known and more influential. These established new standards for travel writing. In all, he wrote or edited seventeen full length books (including biographies of his personal heroes Peter the Great and the admirals Howe and Anson) as well as half a dozen articles in both the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Geographical Journal*, more than twenty entries in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and over two hundred articles in the *Quarterly Review*. His interests ranged widely, but the great bulk of his output had a geographical focus, usually with an underlying imperial theme and a belief in progress and the superiority of British civilization. He wrote extensively about Asia, the Americas, Australia and the Pacific, the eastern Mediterranean, and Africa, and used the *Quarterly* for his promotion of exploration and imperial expansion. Through his friendship with John Murray, the *Quarterly's* publisher, he also secured the publication of a succession of travellers' accounts which generated the great public interest in exploration in the period after 1815. Collectively, these activities established his pre-eminence within British geography.

In 1835 Barrow was made a baronet for his contributions to science and literature. He died on 23 November 1848 at New Street, Spring Gardens, London, and was buried in the Pratt Street cemetery, Camden Town. His friends and admirers erected a memorial to him (modelled on the Eddystone lighthouse) on Hoad Hill at the head of Morecambe Bay and overlooking his birthplace, in 1851.

Of Barrow's children, the eldest son was George Barrow (1806–1876), while the second son, John Barrow (1808–1898), most closely mirrored his father's career. He was born on 28 June 1808, educated at Charterhouse, and entered the Admiralty as a clerk in 1824 through Croker's influence. He was appointed head of the Admiralty record office in 1844 in recognition of his development of a system for recording naval correspondence and of his rescue of valuable Admiralty documents dating back to the Elizabethan period. Equally active in geographical and Royal Society circles, he was a founder member of the Hakluyt Society (1846) and the only civilian member of the Arctic council established in 1851 to co-ordinate the search for Franklin. A minor, if fairly prolific, author, he published ten well reviewed volumes of his travels throughout Europe, as well as biographies of Drake (1843) and Sir William Sidney Smith (2 vols., 1848); he also edited several other works. Following his retirement from the Admiralty in 1855, he took an active interest in the militia, where he held the rank of lieutenant-colonel. He was a founder member of the Alpine Club in 1857. He died on 9 December 1898 at Monterosa, Kingham, near Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire, and was buried at Kensal Green cemetery.

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BL, letters to Macvey Napier, Add. MSS 34611-34625, *passim*

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NL Scot., John Murray archive

NL Scot., letters to Lord Stuart De Rothesay

NMM, 1812-17 letter-books

RGS, letters to Royal Geographical Society and papers

Scott Polar RI, corresp. with John Richardson

BL, corresp. with Sir Robert Peel, Add. MSS 40226–40608, *passim*

Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, Macartney MSS

Kimberley public library, corresp. with Lord Macartney

Likenesses

attrib. J. Jackson, oils, 1810, NPG [see illus.]

J. Jackson, oils, 1825, priv. coll.

J. Lucas, oils, 1844, Ministry of Defence

T. Macdonald or J. Macdonald, watercolour and chalk drawing, 1844, RGS

J. Lucas, oils, 1846, Gov. Art Coll.

S. Pearce, group portrait, oils, 1851, NPG

T. Milnes, relief portrait on memorial tablet, Ulverston parish church, Cumbria

miniature, NPG

Wealth at Death

£23,105 16s. 6d.—John Barrow: will, 1899

View the article for this person in the Dictionary of National Biography archive edition.

See also

Founders of the Royal Geographical Society of London (act. 1828–1830)

Barrow, Sir George, second baronet (1806–1876), civil servant

Arctic council (act. 1851)