

Kathleen Anne Barbour and William Pirie Barbour

A Tribute by James Barbour

Welcome, and thank you all for coming today.

We are gathered here to see away the physical remains of Mother and Father, who died in Enniskillen on the evening of Monday 23 November 2009. The shock and the suddenness of their dying was felt deeply by all of us, but we have had a few days now to begin to come to terms with this, and this gathering is an occasion for us formally to acknowledge that there was so much more to their lives than the rather unusual circumstances of their deaths. We are going, as has begun in recent years to be a tradition in our families, to do this without the tried and tested framework of religious ceremony. Mother and Father did not have beliefs in the religious sense, although both of them had great faith in the potential for good of people generally, and much of their 66 years together was dedicated to the realisation of that potential in, and for, as many people as possible.

Mother was born in London in January 1926. Her father was Frank Borrell, a policeman who had served as a medical orderly in the First World War, eventually enduring captivity, from which he was released at the Armistice. Her mother was Ivy Carson, who had entered domestic service as a child of 13y and subsequently taught herself to read and write. Mother left school at 14 and entered office employment in wartime London, soon joining the clerical staff of the Foreign Office; she was 17 years old when she met Father. Earlier this year, for the first time, Father gave me a delightful account of deciding to approach her for the first time, and running down flight after flight of stairs in the building in which they both worked, to intercept her as she left her office!

Father's mother Blanche Redman had grown up in wealthy circumstances in London and worked in show business, and his father Walter Barbour was also wealthy when he married Blanche a year or two before the First World War. We all know Father's joke that his parents had one interest in common; spending money, but unfortunately the money ran out.. The family were newly-poor from 1930 on, and moved repeatedly, Blanche "downsizing" their rented accommodation in the North Down area at the start of each summer when the landlords raised rents to benefit from seasonal tourism. Blanche's profligacy was legendary. Twice in the late 1930s Bill's older brothers came into legacies which would each have been enough to buy a family home; but each time Blanche took the family to live in London, spending it all on high living and returning to Ulster penniless.

Father got his university education by winning a scholarship to study Classics at Trinity College Dublin; he got a First Class degree and was recruited to code-breaking work in London. As a Northern Ireland citizen doing work of national importance he was exempted from conscription, but in 1944 he remarked that he seemed to be working mainly on the codes of our allies, so he resigned, and joined the Army. He went through basic training in Northern Ireland, and was assigned to Military Intelligence. He rose rapidly through the ranks- well, at least three ranks, as he became a Sergeant not merely once, but three times, the demotions being for having a rusty rifle (with which he had been issued four hours earlier) and, after the end of the war, for failing to march German prisoners in Egypt to breakfast in step. He mentioned once a nice story of Majors and Brigadiers in a post-war transit camp trying to keep him out of a transport meeting, but he was able to prove- to their dissatisfaction- that he

was the commanding officer of his four-man unit at the site , and because of the tiny size of his command was able to move it on ahead of their companies.

Thankfully, Father did not see combat, as the war ended soon after his training had finished. That was actually the second time he had joined an army; the first was as a student in Dublin in 1940, when the Irish Government recruited a part-time militia to help protect against the possibility of invasion. And, as nearly everyone knows, there was a third time of joining an army. When the Ulster Defence Regiment was formed early in the Troubles, Father , over-age at 51, but very fit, was keen that the new regiment should not be dominated by hard-line loyalists, and so , to Mother's anxious fury, he talked his way in, to serve as a private for a couple of years.

But back in 1947 when he was demobilised , he came home from Egypt ill with malaria. He collapsed on the doorstep of Frank Borrell's flat in London, and Mother nursed him back to health. He obtained a job as junior classics master at the grammar school in Colchester, and without him my mother was so unhappy in London that her father eventually allowed her to go to Colchester and live with Father. At that time, non-married cohabitation was not as unremarkable as it is today, and they feared trouble at the school if their status was discovered. So one lunch hour, they slipped away to the Registry Office to marry. Having overlooked the need for a witness, they had to go back to the following day! I and Charlotte and Pauline and Tom were born to them in 1949, 1951, 1953 and 1955..

We were incredibly lucky in our parents! They built their lives around us, and we shall remember for ever their kindness and love. Their company was what we wanted most of the time, and the long holidays that were a benefit of Father's teaching career allowed us more of this than most children receive. Their fairness and concern for others shaped our personalities. Their gentle support made it natural for us to achieve what we needed for our careers. And their love of wild and beautiful places became ours also.

Despite the hard grind of caring for children in an era when mothers made most of the clothes on sewing machines and knitting needles, and kitchen automation was unknown, Mother progressively discovered and achieved her potential in one area after another. Life in Enniskillen was busy. She worked part-time as secretary to the local MP, and later as secretary to the headmaster of Gloucester House Preparatory School. The Enniskillen Debating Society allowed her to test and develop skills in analysing problems and in public speaking. She took part in several productions by the Enniskillen Amateur Dramatic Society, and a number of oratorios with the Choral Society. She was fascinated by, and had a good knowledge of, scientific matters, and the New Scientist magazine was still being delivered to the house at the time of her death. She was physically brave; she would sit in the car to try to prevent it being overturned by thuggish elements (two cars were lost in this manner in an early Liberal campaign) when Father held meetings in hostile villages all over Fermanagh, as he first began to challenge the complacent local political establishment in the 1960s. For several years Portora ran a House for girls at the school as boarding pupils, and she and father were appointed the House-parents. And she was for forty years in great demand as a bridge partner all over the county- as of course Father was too. Possibly most of us in this room learnt all our card games from the two of them

Mother completed the four-year part-time training for Marriage Guidance and counselled in this field for many years, and she and Father did duties with Citizen's Advice over a long period. For a time in the early part of the Troubles she was a Prison Visitor at the Women's Prison in Armagh.

Portora School made good use of Father's talents and hard work, not only in the classroom but on the sports fields. His pastoral achievements are recounted by many, many former pupils. His results were achieved by patience, negotiation, empathy; he did not resort to trying to overawe or browbeat. I once asked him how much he had had to use corporal punishment in his time as a teacher; he replied that he had employed it on three occasions, and each time he had felt afterwards that he should have managed to avoid it. For a time in the 1960s the school magazine ran a gentle lampoon of the school, peopling it with gnomes and sorcerers; Father featured as "Broubra the Gentle". In 1983, announcing that he would go while he would still be missed, he retired from the school he loved.

And then as Mother said, he just got busier! The old, discredited political system in Northern Ireland lurched sclerotically into conflict with the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, sparking the ghastly terrorist era known to all of us by the euphemism "The Troubles". Father had seen the disaster looming and, from 1963 on, was openly active in trying to achieve the overdue changes by civilised means, first acting for Liberal Party candidates, then helping to found the New Ulster Movement (for which the Liberals had to expel him!), then in the Alliance Party. He stood himself as candidate in several elections, and once was very pleased to save his deposit because of votes transferred from the Sinn Fein candidate's surplus. He took on much responsibility in the Royal British Legion, who named their Enniskillen sheltered housing project "Barbour Court" in recognition of the fact that without him it would probably never have been built. But his proudest achievement was to make integrated education a reality for a large section of the people of Enniskillen and the surrounding area; the Integrated Primary School and the Integrated College are in significant measure the fruit of his labours. For these last things he will be remembered outside the family for a very long time to come.

Father and Mother bore a heavy cross in Mother's Alzheimer's disease. For ten years Mother was losing capacity implacably. But the gifts of humour, of love and of energy allowed them both a great deal of happiness in their life together nearly all that time. It was only in the last three months that the happiness began to be often absent. When Father said, in his note on that last dark evening, "we lived too long", I think it was those last three months that he was regretting. And even in those last three months, as well as foreboding, their company brought joy whenever we were with them.

They were magnificent grandparents to Daniel and William and Sam, and to Thomas-Oliver and Nicholas, and to Eoibhe and Michael and Charity, and to Edward and Tara, and they were marvellous parents. Their lives were full and they have completed those lives. Going into the future without them feels strange now, but they made us strong enough for it also to be natural, and we shall do it well, because of the example of their life together.

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