

Sir James William Barrett (1862-1945)

Sir James William Barrett (1862-1945), ophthalmologist and publicist, was born on 27 February 1862 at Emerald Hill (South Melbourne), eldest child of James Barrett, physician, formerly of Oxfordshire, England, and his wife Catherine Oliver, née Edkins; she died when young James was 12.

Barrett was educated at a private elementary school, Melbourne Church of England Grammar School and Carlton College, where he was dux. In 1876 he matriculated and entered the University of Melbourne (M.B., 1881; Ch.B., 1882); he was the first secretary of the Medical Students' Society in 1880. He worked for two years as a resident medical officer at the Melbourne Hospital where he became a strong advocate of antiseptics and gathered powerful statistical evidence against the old ways; in 1883 he published his first paper, *Typhoid Fever in Victoria*. In October he went to London (M.R.C.S., 1884; F.R.C.S., 1887); his professor at King's College, G. F. Yeo, remarked on his earnestness, quickness, assiduity, urbanity, and courtesy. He taught at King's College, Moorfields Ophthalmic Hospital and elsewhere, gaining his main source of income from coaching in physiology for F.R.C.S. examinations, and visited Austria and Germany, where he met Robert Koch. He developed a lifelong affection for German language, literature and music, together with an attachment to the scientific rationality and agnosticism of Thomas Huxley. He researched into the anatomy of the mammalian eye, published seventeen papers, and decided to spend his life in London on investigative work, but in 1886 he was called back to Australia for family reasons.

In Melbourne Barrett took up private practice and in 1887 became part-time demonstrator in physiology and histology at the university under his revered mentor, Professor G. B. Halford. That year he passed M.D. and in 1888 Ch.M. He continued research into the eyes of animals and began a long association with the Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital. On 31 October 1888 at South Yarra he married Marian, née Rennick (d.1939), the 27-year-old widow of F. J. Pirani; Charles Strong of the Australian Church officiated.

In 1897 Barrett took up a lectureship in the physiology of the special senses which he was to carry on for forty years, earning a reputation as a 'lucid, simple and informed' teacher. In 1901 he was elected to the university council. An exponent of 'national efficiency', he urged closer attention to vocational training. He recommended the university's affiliation with the teachers' and veterinary colleges, and its involvement in agricultural and commercial education: he reiterated his views in 1902 to the royal commission on the university. He could claim some credit for the introduction of 'professional' courses including mining engineering (1901), education (1902), dentistry (1906), and agriculture (1911). Barrett also took a close interest in medical education. He fought for a revision of the curriculum which was adopted in 1911, and in 1913 advocated clinical chairs. He was joint secretary of the committee appointed that year to inquire into the university's administration, and saw its thorough-going survey translated into legislative action in the Act of 1923.

In 1912 Barrett visited the United States of America and was deeply impressed with the universities' 'energy, drive, liberal support and receptivity to new ideas', particularly that of Wisconsin. In London he helped to set up the Universities Bureau of the British Empire, and organized a parliamentary delegation to Australia which he and (Sir) George Fairbairn funded.

By 1914 Barrett had an assured professional and public reputation (C.M.G., 1911), a family, and a fine house and property, Palmyra, with a 338-foot (103 m) frontage on Lansell Road, Toorak, where wallabies grazed to the delight of passing schoolboys. On the outbreak of World War I he became honorary secretary of the Australian Red Cross and in October he joined the Australian Imperial Force with the rank of major (serving without pay until the following May, when he was promoted lieutenant-colonel). In December he sailed in the *Kyarra*, arriving in Egypt on 13 January 1915. He was posted to the 1st Australian General Hospital at Heliopolis as registrar and oculist and was also consultant to the British forces in Egypt; he nurtured a close connexion with the director of medical services, Major General Sir R. W. Ford. He was also executive officer of the Australian Red Cross Society in the region. In June he was appointed by Ford, quite irregularly, as 'Assistant Director of Medical Services, Australian Forces', thus securing authority which went far beyond the 1st A.G.H.

Barrett's shambling figure, often with gaiters on the wrong legs or spurs upside down, was militarily grotesque, but he was enabled to carry out his varied duties by 'immense energy and astonishing indefatigability, great organising and administrative ability, and intellectual capacity, and social flair'. Yet in doing so he made bitter enemies. By 5 April Lieutenant-Colonel John Springthorpe, a student contemporary, was writing in his diary that Barrett was 'playing himself in everywhere with the bigwigs', while sections of a virulent diary written by Major (Sir) Stanley Argyle, referring to Barrett as the 'octopus of Heliopolis', were circulated in Melbourne drawing-rooms.

Barrett, however, was more the victim of an inexperienced administration than of his own personal characteristics. By July the 1st A.G.H. had become 'administratively unmanageable' and in August, as a result of a War Office inquiry into its affairs, its commanding officer and Matron Jane Bell were recalled to Australia. Barrett was relieved of all military duties but was permitted to retain his Red Cross work. However, Springthorpe had circulated in Australia a lengthy and substantially inaccurate charge against his administration in this field. Early in September Barrett was asked to resign by the council of the Australian Red Cross. He did so and immediately asked for an inquiry, which exonerated him, as did further inquiry into the affairs of the 1st A.G.H. that was set up at his request. Shortly after, Barrett was ordered home.

With his military career in the Australian forces clearly at an end, Barrett brought off a remarkable defensive *coup* by arranging to be invalided to London on two months sick leave. There he quickly made as many influential friends as possible. In January 1916 he was ordered home again, but his busy involvement in military, political and diplomatic intrigue resulted in the Australian government assenting to his transfer to the British Army. He resigned from the A.I.F. in February 1916, and returned to Egypt in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the same rank as before. In 1916-17 he served as consulting aurist to the Egypt Expeditionary Force, and in 1917 as president of the invaliding and classification boards for most of Egypt. Although the attacks on him and the death of his son Keith in France in 1917 had brought him to a low ebb, he became active in the British Red Cross and the Young Men's Christian Association in the area, and wrote with Percy Deane, *The Australian Army Medical Corps in Egypt* (1918). He also published in London his collected articles in two volumes, *The Twin Ideals: An Educated Commonwealth* (1918), *A Vision of the Possible: What the R.A.M.C. Might Become* (1919), and *The War Work of the Y.M.C.A. in Egypt* (1919). He ended the war with a K.B.E., a C.B. and an Egyptian order—honours which may have softened his relentless determination to have legal vengeance on Springthorpe, Argyle, and the Melbourne *Age* and *Herald*.

In 1919 Barrett returned to Australia and decided to enter politics. He organized a branch of the National Party in Toorak, with himself as chairman and his daughter as secretary, and won pre-selection there for the 1920 Legislative Assembly election. But his enemies persuaded Argyle to stand as an independent Nationalist, and he easily defeated Barrett.

Barrett now busied himself with professional and public affairs, apparently developing a cynical attitude to politics. His major interest was the University of Melbourne, of which he became vice-chancellor in 1931, deputy chancellor in 1934 and chancellor in 1935-39, while continuing to sit on almost innumerable university committees. He retired from teaching in 1937. While bitterly unpopular with the professors, whom he regarded as employees to be kept in their place, on council he reigned supreme. He was imperturbable in debate, having 'a supreme forensic gift: his capacity to put his point in a few sentences was remarkable'. So too was his capacity to prepare his cases, the usual reason why 'Barrett got his way again'. In the absence of a salaried vice-chancellor until 1934, he was an extremely important administrator; nevertheless he supported the appointment of (Sir) Raymond Priestley, who soon found his position intolerable. In 1937 a major confrontation, in which council had to support the vice-chancellor, marked the end of Barrett's most active participation in university affairs.

He was never popular in the medical profession, being regarded as a leading physician but a somewhat heroic surgeon. Yet it was a mark of Barrett's commanding presence that his profession paid him his greatest honour when, in 1935 at the annual meeting of the British Medical Association, held in Australia, he was elected as the new president; he gave an incisive presidential address on hospital problems. When the Ophthalmological Society of Australia was established in 1939 he, as a matter of course, became its first president.

From the 1890s Barrett had maintained a voluminous writing to the press, especially the *Argus*, while his list of public and charitable commitments was formidable. Even at 75, he was active on twenty-eight committees, being president of twelve, vice-president of two, chairman of seven and honorary secretary of three. He promoted the Worker's Educational Association, inviting Albert Mansbridge to Australia in 1913, paying the fares himself. He was chairman of the National Parks Committee, and president of the Town Planning and Playgrounds associations and the Japan Society. Other public questions of interest to him were decimalization, proportional representation, Empire affairs, venereal disease, neglected children, technical education, immigration, the League of Nations, preventive medicine, pure milk, baby clinics and a world calendar. By general agreement his most important work was the foundation in 1910 of the Bush Nursing Association movement, aided by his sister Edith, which had a remarkable effect on rural health. By 1945 there were sixty-seven bush nursing hospitals and fifteen nursing centres in Victoria, all owing their existence to his initiative—his 'greatest and his noblest memorial'.

In music Barrett made another major contribution. An able pianist, in 1902-13 he took over the business management of G. W. L. Marshall Hall's orchestral concerts. After the war he helped to form the University Conservatorium Symphony Orchestra and from 1923 worked closely with the young violinist-conductor (Sir) Bernard Heinze to develop support for serious music; in 1932 they had the satisfaction of seeing the university orchestra merge into the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Heinze believes Barrett's influence was critical in building the standard of classical music in Melbourne to a point where it caught the public taste, and indeed sees his hand in the subsequent development of

the Australian Broadcasting Commission's presentation of symphonic music. Barrett married Heinze's sister Monica Ernestine, aged 51, in St John's Catholic Church, Heidelberg, on 4 December 1940.

Barrett was a practical visionary, a rare combination. Lord Horder in 1935 said of him that he seemed 'to have been a pioneer in all the things that one could think of by which the human race might be bettered and improved'. Despite his almost complete lack of humour, especially about himself, he recognized that he possessed an 'unconquerable propensity for having a finger in every pie'. He was dogmatic and ruthless but was guided by the vision of civic virtue. Only some of his childhood friends ever called Barrett 'Jim'. He was a 'remorselessly purposeful' golfer. One of the paradoxes about him is that, despite his prowess and immense talents, despite his achievements, he was not only an unpopular man but also a widely ridiculed one. No doubt his physical ungainliness had something to do with satirical attacks on him and perhaps too a reputation for busybodiness and over-reaching himself. But Barrett was neither a dilettante nor ineffective; he was an extraordinarily capable operator on many fronts, and his very competence aroused jealousy. He concentrated on power and influential connexions rather than on public relations and popularity; he said of Melbourne doctors of his generation that they had 'never been accustomed ... to brook control of any description'. He did not bear grudges, and was generous and kind to many; he lived unostentatiously, gave generously to very many causes and did not seek wealth. But he could be mean, especially to those near him, and his treatment of his associate, Dr Ethel Parnell, has occasioned criticism. None the less, if not a great man, he had elements of greatness.

Barrett, who had long had bronchitis, and a complete heart block for two and a half years, died at his home at Toorak on 6 April 1945 of cerebral haemorrhage, and was buried in Melbourne general cemetery. He was survived by his second wife and by three daughters and a son of his first marriage. His estate was valued for probate at £58,437.

Last updated: 14 January 2025.

Source: S Murray-Smith, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.7, 1979.

