

Ian Mitchell's Ireland-related **BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

33 – *Jonah Barrington*
(12 January 2019)

RECOLLECTIONS OF JONAH BARRINGTON

Author: Sir Jonah Barrington

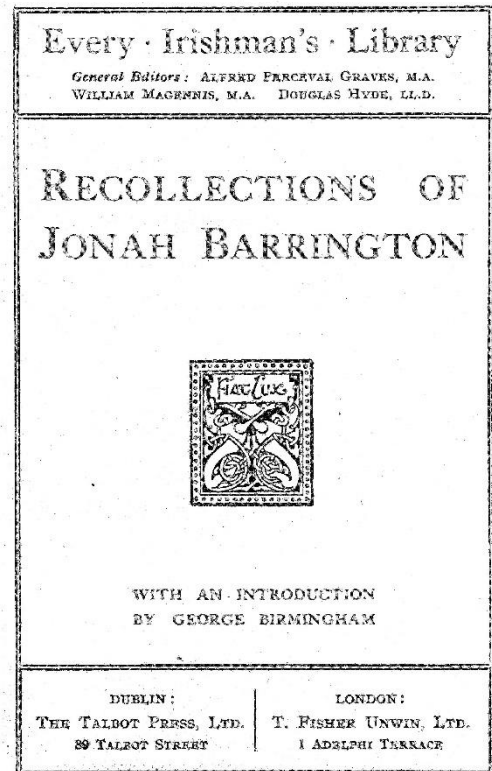
Publisher: Talbot Press, 1918 (1827, 1832)
(available on *Archive.org*, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: Amusing memoirs of Ireland in 1770-90s by the prominent Dublin barrister, Sir Jonah Barrington, to which is added a longish account of his time in Paris during Napoleon's "Hundred Days".

RusRoL relevance: *Illustration of some of the principles of STATUS as revealed by the etiquette of duelling in eighteenth century Ireland.*

Reason to read: A highly readable account of life as a sociable and successful barrister in late eighteenth century Dublin which includes two chapters that bear directly on the way STATUS still survived into comparatively modern times in the **art and etiquette of duelling** among Ascendency Protestants (Catholics were not allowed to bear arms—or, for that matter, to act as barristers or judges). There is much of interest besides this, and many amusing anecdotes and character sketches. I will concentrate on the two chapters about duelling generally, though I should note that Barrington describes at length one of the duels he himself fought (pp. 291ff) and the death of his younger brother in another duel, while acting as a second (pp. 101ff).

Main talking points: Barrington starts by telling us how many prominent judicial and political personages of his day **fought duels**—more than in any other country in Europe, he says proudly. The **Lord Chancellor**, Lord Clare, fought with the **Master of the Rolls**, John Philpot Curran. The **Chief Justice**, Lord Clonmell, fought four duels. John Egan, a **judge** and **Member of Parliament**, fought five, including one with the Master of the Rolls, who also fought with Lord Buckinghamshire, the **Chief Secretary**. "The **Chief Justice of Common Pleas**, Lord Norbury [see *Joyce in Court*], fought Fire-Eater Fitzgerald, and two other gentlemen, and frightened Napper Tandy and several others besides; one hit only." (p. 279). The **provost of Trinity College**, the Rt. Hon. Hely Hutchinson fought a Mr Doyle, **Master in Chancery**, among others. "The **Chief Justice**, C.P. Patterson, fought three country



gentlemen, one of them with swords, another with guns and wounded all of them. The Rt. Hon. George Ogle, a **privy councillor**, fought Barney Coyle, a distiller, because he was a **papist**. They fired eight shots and no hits; but the second broke his arm... **Counsellor** O’Connell fought the **Orange chieftain**; fatal to the champion of Protestant ascendancy... In my time the number of killed and wounded among the bar was very considerable.” (p. 280, and following) The lawyers who decided points of honour in this way “were in general gentlemen of good connexions and most respectable families, otherwise nobody would fight or consult them.”

These are only a few in what Barrington calls a “dignified list”, though many quarrels did not result in duels. “I saw a very brave king’s counsel, **Mr. Curran**, horse-whipped most severely in the public street by a very savage nobleman, **Lord Clanmorris**¹, and another barrister was said to have his eye saluted by a moist messenger from a gentleman’s lips in the body of the House of Commons. Yet both these little *incivilities* were arranged very amicably in a private manner, and without the aid of any deadly weapon whatsoever, I suppose for variety’s sake.”

Barrington says that “a duel was considered a necessary piece of a young man’s education, but by no means a ground for future animosity with his opponent.” (p. 281) The origins of this ritual in tribal custom are implied when he links duelling with family history—all prestige being a question of *past* achievements. Family STATUS derives from family history. “The national propensity for fighting and slaughtering was nearly universal, originating in the spirit and habits of former times... Manslaughter in an *honest* way—that is, not knowing which would be slaughtered—was the most chivalrous and gentlemanly of all their accomplishments... No young fellow could finish his education till he had exchanged shots with some of his acquaintances. The first two questions always asked as to a young man’s respectability and qualifications, particularly when he proposed for a lady-wife, were—‘What family is he of?’ and ‘**Did he ever blaze?**’” (p. 282)

Barrington reflects more widely: “Every family had a case of hereditary pistols, which descended as an heirloom, together with a long silver-hilted sword, for the use of their posterity. Our family pistols, denominated *pellets*, were brass... one of them was named ‘sweet lips’ and the other ‘darling’. The family rapier was called ‘skiver the pullet’ by my grand-uncle Captain Wheeler Barrington, who had fought with it repeatedly, and run through different parts of their persons several Scots officers who had challenged him all at once for some national reflections.” (p. 283)

Referring to what he calls “the *lex pugnandi*”, Barrington says, “All was decorum, gallantry, spirit, and good temper... Doubtful points were solved generally on the peaceable side, provided women were not insulted or defamed.” (p. 285) He then describes the rules, saying “The practice of duelling and points of honour were settled at **Clonmell Summer Assizes**, 1777, by the gentlemen delegates of Tipperary, Galway, Mayo, Sligo, and Roscommon, and prescribed for general adoption throughout Ireland.” (p. 286) He evokes higher practice by quoting Hugo Grotius, the first great theorist of international law, in support of the principle that “it is for the benefit of all belligerents to adopt the same code and regulations.” (p. 284) These are a few of the less technical regulations:

“(5) A **blow** is strictly prohibited under any circumstances among gentlemen.” A **lie** is the other absolute offence for a gentleman. “(9) All imputations of **cheating** at play, races, etc., to be considered

¹ The first Lord Clanmorris, to whom Barrington refers, acquired his title by selling two pocket boroughs he controlled in County Mayo to the government for a peerage and £8,000 as a way of helping get the controversial Act of Union through the Irish House of Commons in 1800.

equivalent to a blow... (10) Any **insult to a lady** under a gentleman's care or protection to be considered as, by one degree, a greater offence than if given to the gentleman personally. (15)

Challenges are never to be delivered at night... for it is desirable to avoid all hot-headed proceedings.” Finally: “All matters and doubts not herein mentioned will be explained and cleared up by application to the committee, who meet alternately at Clonmell and Galway, at the quarter sessions, for that purpose.”

Thought(s) provoked: How much nicer it would be if we had politicians who “blazed”, rather than “put the case” in endless unread documents and unlistened to speeches on unwatched political TV channels—thereby inducing premature death from hyper-tedial somnolence (i.e. boredom).

Incidental interest: The material about Barrington's time in Paris during **Napoleon's Hundred Days** is very interesting, especially about how support ebbed away from the Emperor after Waterloo under the malign influence of Joseph Fouché, the sinister, scheming and vicious regicide and turncoat, the Duke of Otranto—but that is another story.

Style: Chatty, personable, eccentric, literate and Irish. Barrington is always polite, though I suspect not always entirely reliable.

Smile(s): “Fencing with the small sword is certainly a most beautiful and noble exercise; its acquirement confers a fine, bold, manly carriage, a dignified mien, a firm step and graceful motion. But alas! Its practitioners are now supplanted by contemptible groups of smirking quadrillers with unweaponed belts, stuffed breasts, and strangled loins—a set of squeaking dandies, whose sex may readily be mistaken, or, I should rather say, is of no consequence.” (p. 284)

Author: Sir Jonah later accepted the post of Admiralty Court judge, on a decent salary, but with an indecently small amount of work to do. Nonetheless, he contrived to get money he confiscated paid into his own bank account, and then abandoned the post altogether, appointing a substitute who carried on his work while he left Ireland to travel and to escape his creditors. The Act of Settlement (1701) confers on British judges security of tenure for life, on good behaviour, as a way of preventing any official influence being brought to bear on them. The only way to get rid of a judge has since then been through an address to both Houses of Parliament. Barrington is the *only judge in British history ever to have been dismissed from office in this way*.



Overall recommendation level: WONDERFUL EXCURSION INTO A LIVELIER PAST

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called

Russia and the Rule of Law—hence the “Rus&RoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).