The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6613

Barton, Charlotte

(1796 - 1867)

Born	17960213, Marylebone, City of Westminster Greater London England
Died	18671010, Oldbury, Moss Vale New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Author, Feminist, Governess, Grazier

Summary

Born Charlotte Waring in London in 1796, Charlotte sailed for Sydney in 1826 employed to teach the children of Hannibal Macarthur. On the voyage she became engaged to James Atkinson who was returning to his property at Oldbury, Sutton Forest; they married on 29 September 1827 and had four children. When the youngest, Louisa, was only two months old James Atkinson died aged 34, leaving Charlotte to manage a large holding, run far-flung outstations and control convict labour in a district beset by bushranging gangs. In need of male protection, she married the Oldbury superintendent, George Bruce Barton, who turned out to be violent, unpredictable, a drunkard and mentally disturbed, from whom she made a daring escape with her children. Fiercely independent, Charlotte succeeded in challenging the male-dominated legal system and retaining custody of her children. In 1841 while receiving no money from the Atkinson estate, she wrote A Mother’s Offering to Her Children, the first children’s book published in Australia. Charlotte died at Oldbury on 10 October 1867.

Details

Charlotte Waring Atkinson Barton (1796-1867), governess, grazier, feminist, author, was baptised in London on 13 March 1796, third daughter of Albert Waring, a barrister of independent means, and his wife Elizabeth Turner, who died when Charlotte was less than two. Reputed to be a child prodigy, from the age of ten Charlotte attended a school in Kent where she was instructed in the ‘general branches of polite female education’ including music, drawing and French. She studied painting under the celebrated painter, John Glover, then President of the Society of Painters in Water-colours. Immediately after leaving school at the age of about fifteen she was engaged as a governess in the family of John Lochner of London and Enfield, under an arrangement that allowed her to continue her education. After about four years she took a position in the family of Thomas Trafford, of Trafford Park, Lancashire, where she was in charge of five children, the eldest fifteen. Two years later she resigned because of ill health.

At 30 she was engaged by Harriet King, to teach the children of her brother-in-law, Hannibal Macarthur at his property The Vineyard in New South Wales at the very high salary of £100 a year. She sailed for Sydney on the Cumberland in 1826 on the voyage displeasing Harriet King by becoming engaged to James Atkinson, a leading agriculturalist and grazier in New South Wales. Atkinson was returning to his property at Oldbury, Sutton Forest, after publishing his book, An Account of the State of Agriculture and Grazing in New South Wales (1826). Charlotte dismissed Harriet King’s criticism of her engagement saying she ‘must be mistress of her own actions’.

Charlotte Waring took up her position with the Macarthurs but left after seven months marrying James Atkinson on 29 September 1827 at St Paul’s Church of England, Cobbity. Her first child, Charlotte Elizabeth, was born at Oldbury on 22 July 1828; (Jane) Emily on 6 June 1830; James John Oldbury on 7 April 1832 and (Caroline) Louisa Waring on 25 February 1834. Two months after the birth of Louisa, James Atkinson died suddenly at the age of 34. Charlotte was left to manage a large property, run far-flung outstations, control convict labour in a district beset by bushranging gangs where there was a breakdown of law and order, as well as care for her children.

In need of a protector, on 3 March 1836 at All Saints’ chapel, Sutton Forest, Charlotte married George Bruce Barton, superintendent at Oldbury. Her remarriage changed her legal position from being custodian of Oldbury to merely the lessor’s wife. The executors of Atkinson’s will, John Coghill and Alexander Berry, leased the property to Barton, who proved to be violent, unpredictable, a drunkard and mentally disturbed. In 1839 Charlotte fled from him with her children down the precipitous Meryla Pass through the wild gorges of the Shoalhaven River to a coastal outstation at Budgong where she continued their education, particularly inculcating a love of nature. In 1840 the family moved to Sydney and Charlotte applied for legal protection from Barton. In an unrelated matter that is an indicator of Barton’s violent disposition, he was tried for murder in February 1854 at the Bathurst Circuit Court and found guilty of manslaughter. Charlotte’s relations with the executors deteriorated, Berry referring to her as ‘a notable she-dragon’. She became involved in long-running legal battles, Atkinson v. Barton and Others, in which she fought to retain custody of her children and financial support. At one stage the master in equity determined that they should be taken from her and educated in boarding schools but this decision was overturned.

At a time when she was receiving no money from the Atkinson estate, Charlotte published A Mother’s Offering to Her Children (1841). The first children’s book to be published in Australia, it was a collection of instructional stories arranged in the form of a dialogue between a mother and her four children. The anonymous author was ‘A Lady Long Resident in New South Wales’, but a contemporary review in the Sydney Gazette, where the book was printed, identified Charlotte Barton. Despite the disruption of continuing legal cases, Charlotte maintained a close-knit family life in an atmosphere of learning and scholarship. In 1846 the family returned to Oldbury. There, and later in Sydney and at Kurrajong, she particularly fostered the talents of her youngest daughter Louisa. Survived by a son and two daughters, Charlotte died at Oldbury on 10 October 1867 and was buried in the family vault at All Saints’ graveyard, where her first husband was interred.

Charlotte was a small woman, 5 ft 1½ ins (156 cm) tall, of ‘particularly handsome and brilliant’ appearance with ‘full large black eyes, black hair which curled naturally and fine features’, well educated, with artistic talent and a great interest in natural history. Fiercely independent, as an abused wife and sole parent she succeeded in challenging the male-dominated legal system.

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Patricia Clarke, 1887-2010 [manuscript]

National Library of Australia
Journal kept on board the "Cumberland" bound from England to New South Wales [manuscript]

Author Details
Patricia Clarke

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