FitzGerald, Gerald (Gearóid Mór) (1456/7–1513), 8th earl of Kildare, magnate and lord deputy, was the eldest of four sons and two daughters, and thus heir, of Thomas fitz Maurice FitzGerald (qv) (d. 1478), 7th earl of Kildare, sometime deputy lieutenant, and his wife, Joan, who was the daughter of James (qv) (d. 1462), 7th earl of Desmond, and Mary, daughter of Uilleag Burke (qv) of Clanrickard. Nothing is known about Gerald's childhood, though a near contemporary described him as 'but half a[n] innocent man without great knowledge or learning, but rudely brought up according to the usage of his country' (Carew, 179). About 1470 he married Alison (Alice) FitzEustace (d. 1495), daughter and coheir of Roland FitzEustace (qv), 1st Baron Portlester and deputy governor of Ireland (1462–3). By December 1472 FitzGerald was commander of twenty-four spearmen deployed in defence of the English Pale.

The early years of the 8th earl's career coincided with serious political instability and intrigue arising from the English wars of the roses (c.1455–87). The Kildares' record as staunch Yorkist supporters helped FitzGerald to advance his political career during the reigns of Edward IV (1461–83) and Richard III (1483–5). In March 1478, following the unexpected death of his father, he was elected temporary governor by the Irish council. However, Edward IV considered the new earl too young and inexperienced to hold such a senior post on a permanent basis, and later that year he replaced Kildare with Henry, Lord Grey of Ruthin, a low-ranking English peer. In a show of indispensability, Kildare and his followers on the council refused to recognise Grey as governor and ultimately forced him to retire to England. Having summoned Kildare and some of his associates to court in 1479, Edward IV appointed the earl deputy lieutenant on an annual salary of £600. In an effort to reassert royal control over the Irish administration, the king issued detailed directives for good government and administration of the peace and during the remainder of Edward's reign Kildare largely adhered to this settlement.

Having been confirmed as deputy governor by Richard III in July 1483, Kildare exercised unprecedented control over the Irish council, even appointing his brother Thomas FitzGerald (qv) (d. 1487) as chancellor against the king's wishes. But the political climate changed radically in 1485 with reports that Henry Tudor was set to invade England. In a preemptive strike, Kildare had the Irish parliament pass an act (June 1485) that ensured his election as deputy governor if Henry became king. Kildare and his brother Thomas later colluded in a plot to secure the crown for an apparent Yorkist claimant, who was in fact Lambert Simnel (qv) impersonating Edward, earl of Warwick. Early in 1487 Kildare convened a meeting of the noblemen of the Pale to discuss Simnel's claim, and on 24 May, he and Thomas attended the coronation ceremony at Christ Church cathedral, Dublin. Immediately afterwards
Kildare was promoted lieutenant and summoned a parliament that confirmed the new king's title to the crown. Kildare supported the subsequent Yorkist invasion of England by supplying 4,000 Gaelic foot soldiers, under the command of his brother Thomas. On 16 June Thomas was killed at the battle of Stoke, from which Henry VII's forces emerged victorious. Kildare's lieutenancy was of short duration and came to an end at the same time as Simnel's pretensions to the crown. In July 1488 Kildare took an oath of allegiance to Henry VII and was pardoned in a general settlement negotiated by the king's commissioner, Sir Richard Edgecombe, but for some years he remained aloof in his dealings with Henry VII. In July 1490 Henry summoned him to court but the earl did not reply till June 1491 and then only to excuse his absence on the grounds that he could not leave Ireland for defence reasons.

When a second pretender, Perkin Warbeck (qv), claiming to be Richard, duke of York, Edward IV's second son, won widespread support in Munster in 1491–2, Kildare remained suspiciously inactive as deputy governor. Fearful of his intentions, Henry VII deployed Sir James Ormond (Butler) (qv) to prevent a possible combination of Geraldine forces from the earldoms of Kildare and Desmond in support of Warbeck. Henry also deprived Kildare of the deputy governorship and dismissed his closest followers from office. It soon became apparent, however, that Kildare's influence exceeded that of his two successors, Archbishop Walter FitzSimons (qv) and Sir James Ormond, who jointly held the governorship of Ireland in 1492–3. The king's efforts to cultivate Sir James Ormond as a counterweight to Kildare precipitated another round in the longstanding Butler–FitzGerald feud and resulted in serious unrest in the Pale. Again, crucially, Kildare refused to cooperate in the government and defence of the Pale.

In autumn 1493 tensions were defused when Kildare, among others, gave bonds to observe council ordinances for promoting law and order, and answered a summons to court. By mid-1494 he was helping Henry in efforts to win over the truculent 10th earl of Desmond (qv). But before this was achieved, Perkin Warbeck again threatened invasion. When Henry appointed an English captain, Sir Edward Poyning (qv), as deputy governor (September 1494) and dispatched him and a substantial army to withstand the conspirators' threat and to reform the administration, Kildare was initially supportive, assisting Poyning in negotiating peace settlements with several Gaelic chiefs. However, while on an expedition to O'Hanlon's country in Ulster, Poyning accused the earl of secretly encouraging the Irish to stir up trouble against him. Kildare was arrested in February 1495 and charged with plotting Poyning's assassination, treasonous communications with the king's enemies, and conspiracy with both Desmond and the king of Scotland to overthrow the Tudor regime. He was conveyed to England and attainted by the Irish parliament on these and other counts.

Within days of Kildare's arrest his brother James FitzGerald besieged Carlow castle in a familiar tactical show of force, staged to convince Henry VII that Poyning could
not govern Ireland without the earl's support. Finding it difficult even to maintain the status quo, Poyning had sailed for England by late December. Faced with the problem of how best to govern Ireland and what to do with Kildare, whom he still detained at court, Henry reverted to the economical expedient of relying on the earl to govern and defend the Pale on his behalf. In October 1495 the English parliament reversed the Irish attainder against Kildare, and in 1496 testimonies by Magennis and O'Hanlon cleared him of the charge of treason.

On 6 August 1496 he was reappointed deputy. He swore before the king's council to adhere to Poyning's law, to govern impartially, to defend the lordship from the king's enemies, to arrest and surrender to the king any English rebels taking refuge in Ireland, and to remain at peace with Thomas, 7th earl of Ormond (qv), Sir James Ormond and Archbishop Walter FitzSimons. The remarkably favourable terms of his commission as deputy reflected the king's new-found confidence in him. He was appointed for ten years and thereafter during the king's pleasure. He was invested with the authority to appoint to all offices except the chancellorship and received a grant of all crown lands that he could reclaim from the Gaelic Irish. As a guarantee of his good behaviour, the earl's young son and heir, Gerald (qv), was sent to the English court where he was brought up. Also that year, as a mark of favour, Henry VII granted Kildare, whose first wife had lately died, permission to marry Henry's first cousin, Elizabeth St John, daughter of Sir Oliver St John, of Lydiard Tregoz, Wiltshire, and his wife, Elizabeth, daughter of Henry Scrope, 4th Baron Scrope.

The last years of Gerald's career were characterised by amicable relations with the crown, relative peace and prosperity in the Pale, and a significant extension of effective royal authority in the lordship. Kildare refused to support Perkin Warbeck when he made his final visit to Ireland in 1497, and down to his death in 1513 the earl campaigned extensively throughout Ireland, making progresses to Carrickfergus (1503), Galway (1504), and Limerick (1510). On 28 February 1504 he was appointed treasurer of Ireland. Following Henry VIII's accession in 1509, Kildare was elected justiciar (temporary governor) by the council. The king summoned the earl to court but accepted his excuses for not attending and appointed him deputy on 8 November 1510.

Kildare continued to govern and campaign as he had done during Henry VII's reign. His unequalled success as governor was attributable to his unique capacity to reconcile the divergent interests of successive English monarchs, the Englishry, and the Gaelic Irish. He combined a strategic position at the interface between the English Pale and Gaelic territories with an extensive network of cross-border marriage and military alliances, authority over border chieftaincies, and the deployment of a standing force of approximately 300 soldiers for the defence of the Pale to provide the crown with a cheap and effective form of provincial government. Through skilful manipulation of the dual roles of governor and nobleman, Kildare greatly enhanced his dynasty's wealth, estates, and political influence. The extent of his authority over both English and Gaelic elements was best demonstrated at
the battle of Knockdoe on 19 August 1504, when he inflicted a resounding defeat on the combined forces of Uilleag Burke (qv), lord of the Burkes of Clanrickard, and Toirdealbhach Donn Ó'Brien (qv). Henry VII acknowledged the earl's victory by investing him with the special military honour of knight of the garter in 1505. In August 1513, while engaged on a routine campaign against the Gaelic O'Carroll clan, he was shot by an O'More at Kilkea in south Kildare. Severely injured, he was moved slowly to Kildare town, where he died 3 September 1513 in his fifty-seventh year. His body was taken to Dublin and interred in Christ Church cathedral in the chapel he had built in 1511 on the north side of the high altar. In 1896 a set of line drawings of the tomb, which is no longer extant, was published.

From his two marriages Kildare had fourteen children (eight boys and six girls), all of whom survived him. Five of his sons were executed at Tyburn in 1537 following the Kildare rebellion (1534–5). Both marriages greatly augmented the earl's estates in Ireland and England. At his death Kildare was Ireland's richest magnate, his annual estate income being approximately £1,800. While he occasionally resided at St Thomas's Court in Dublin and at Castledermot in south Kildare, his seat was Maynooth castle and his main landed holdings were in Kildare, Meath, Carlow, and east Ulster. He was succeeded as earl and governor by the only son of his first marriage, Gerald FitzGerald (1487–1534). Papers relating to the 8th earl and his estates are held in the British Library, TCD, PRONI, and NLI.

In general, both English and Gaelic contemporaries expressed admiration for the earl. The Dublin-born chronicler, Richard Stanihurst (qv) (1547–1618) regarded him as 'a man mighty of stature full of honor and courage . . . of the English well beloved; a good justiciar, a suppressor of the rebels, a warrior incomparable' (Holinshed, vi, 275), who demonstrated great 'valour and policy in war' (ibid., 277). In the Gaelic Annals of the Four Masters, he is described as being ‘a knight in valour, and princely and religious in his words and judgements’ (AFM, v, 1327), while in lamenting his death, the Annals of Ulster praised Kildare as ‘the unique Foreigner who was the best and was of most power and fame and estimation . . . and was of best right and rule and gave most of his own substance to the men of Ireland’ (AU, iii, 507). The ‘Great Earl’, the most authoritative figure in the English lordship from the late 1470s until his death, greatly augmented his familial estates in Kildare and beyond, and established the foundations for the Kildare ascendancy during the period c.1478–1534 – the high point in that dynasty's history.

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BL, Rental book, Harley MS 3756; PRONI, Leinster MS D. 3088; TCD, Red Book of the earls of Kildare, MSS 9825, 9827; NLI, MS 20625; NLI, Red Book of the earls of Kildare, MS 5769 (copy); Holinshed's chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland, ed. H. Ellis (6 vols, 1807–08), vi; AFM, v; C. W. Fitzgerald, duke of Leinster, The earls of Kildare and their ancestors, from 1057 to 1773, 3rd ed. (2 vols, 1858–62);