Fitzgerald, James fitz Gerald

by David Beresford

Fitzgerald, James fitz Gerald (c.1380–1462), 7th earl of Desmond, was third son of Gerald fitz Maurice FitzGerald (qv), 3rd earl of Desmond, and his wife Eleanor, daughter of James Butler (qv), 2nd earl of Ormond. His father was granted a licence in 1388 to have James fostered with the Ó Briains. He formally became earl of Desmond on the death of his nephew, Thomas fitz John FitzGerald (qv), 6th earl, in August 1420. However, he had effectively held that title since 1411, when he usurped his nephew's position and banished him. Thomas returned to fight for the earldom with English troops but was imprisoned for several years before James released him at the request of the lieutenant, John Talbot (qv), Lord Furnival.

After formally becoming earl, Desmond set about securing his position and forming alliances. He married Mary, daughter of Uilleag Burke (qv), 3rd lord of Clanricard, and formed a working relationship with James Butler (qv), 4th earl of Ormond, serving with him against the Gaelic Irish in Limerick in 1421. In January 1422 Desmond entered into an agreement with Ormond in which he became steward of Ormond's lands around Youghal. The original impetus for the agreements with Ormond may have been a common dislike of Furnival, but it soon broadened. A marriage alliance was formed in May 1429, in which Desmond's heir Thomas (qv) was to marry one of Ormond's daughters, with Ormond's lands in Youghal as a marriage gift to the couple.

Although he was less involved with the Dublin administration than the other earls, Desmond did maintain some contacts. He was appointed (December 1420) as a justice in Co. Waterford, Co. Cork, and Co. Limerick, and certainly used the inquests after his nephew's death to assert his claims to the lands of the earldom. He also came to the aid of the Dublin administration in 1423 when he brought troops to serve against the O'Connor Faly and the Berminghams in Meath. For his services, Desmond was granted a subsidy from the towns of Meath and custody of Limerick castle (August 1423).

He was granted £100 in December 1429 for his services in protecting Munster from the Gaelic Irish. He withdrew from the national stage in the 1430s, eventually receiving a licence to attend parliament by proxy in August 1445. In the previous year, he had broken his long truce with the earl of Ormond (possibly because Ormond had broken the agreement of 1429) and launched a devastating raid into Kilkenny. His raiding into Ormond's lands continued for three years while Ormond was in England, but eventually ended. Desmond was one of forty-two lords who submitted to Richard, duke of York, in 1449 and then stood with Ormond as co-sponsors at the baptism of York's son George. Desmond remained a firm, if distant, supporter of York for the rest of his life.
His period in power was both long and stable. He administered the Desmond lands from his castle at Askeaton, which he enlarged, including the building of a hall where he entertained his followers and visitors. He died in the summer of 1462, leaving his earldom to his eldest son, Thomas.

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