Grey (Gray), Lord Leonard

by Judy Barry

Grey (Gray), Lord Leonard (d. 1541), lord deputy, was sixth son of Thomas Grey, 1st marquis of Dorset, and his wife Cecily, daughter and heiress of William Bonville, Lord Harington. He spent some time at court, in which he held the ceremonial office of carver to the royal household, before securing appointment as marshal of the English army in Ireland in the last stages of the revolt of ‘Silken Thomas’, 10th earl of Kildare (qv). Grey’s sister Elizabeth was Thomas’s stepmother, and a month or so after his arrival in Ireland on 28 July 1535 Thomas surrendered to him on the undertaking that his life would be spared. The condition was not one that Henry VIII was prepared to honour. Thomas was imprisoned in the Tower and executed on 3 February 1537, despite Grey’s plea that he should be pardoned.

In the meantime Grey had been created a viscount in the Irish peerage in October 1535 (and taken his title from the dissolved nunnery of Grane in Co. Kildare which had been granted to him in June), elected lord justice by the Irish Council on 1 January 1536, on the death of Sir William Skeffington (qv), and appointed lord deputy by the king on 23 February 1536. Grey’s first official task was to preside over the opening of the parliament (1536–7) called to enact the Henrician Reformation statutes, the attainder of the earl of Kildare, and the dissolution of the religious houses. More generally, his instructions were to reduce the army, cut costs, and establish the crown’s authority in the country at large, directly in the English areas and through pledges to keep the peace in the Gaelic lordships.

These objectives were unwelcome to those who had hoped for systematic reform in the wake of the overthrow of the Kildare dynasty and showed little appreciation of the destabilizing impact of that event on political structures in Ireland. Outside the Pale, the Geraldines and their many supporters among the Gaelic chiefs were unprepared to accept defeat. Young Gerald FitzGerald (qv), heir to the earldom of Kildare and son of Grey’s sister Elizabeth, was still at liberty and Grey was required to capture him, alive or dead. The difficulty of controlling the now leaderless and dangerously volatile Geraldines was complicated by Grey’s need to remain independent of their Butler rivals. Faced with these problems, Grey chose to come to an understanding with the Geraldines, and set about forging alliances with those Gaelic lords who had traditionally allied with the earls of Kildare.

In 1536 he embarked on the first of a series of tours around the country in which he negotiated written agreements with the principal lords in each province, making effective use of artillery power to deal swiftly and decisively with those who resisted his offers of friendship. In August 1536 he marched southwards to the Shannon, capturing and destroying Carrigogunnell castle and O’Brien’s bridge, symbols of Desmond and O’Brien defiance. The following year he destroyed O’Connor’s (qv)
new castle at Dangan in Offaly and took command of the crossing of the Shannon at Athlone; in 1538 he attacked the MacMahons in Farney, and invaded Offaly again, forcing O'Connor's submission and confirming that of the Kavanaghs in Carlow and Wexford; and in 1539 he inflicted a serious defeat on O'Neill (qv) and O'Donnell (qv) at Bellahoe, Co. Monaghan. This policy of coercive conciliation met with considerable success: when Gerald FitzGerald fled to France early in 1640, it seemed that the most intractable Geraldines in Ulster and Munster had decided to come to terms.

But his strategy met with strong opposition. The Butlers were deeply critical of his policy of appeasement, suspicious of his failure to capture his nephew, and apprehensive of the processions through Ireland which led Lord Butler to call him 'the earl of Kildare newly born again' (LP, Hen. VIII, iii, 32). Criticism also came from within his own administration, where the anti-Geraldine reformers saw his conduct as a betrayal of all they had worked for. As early as 1537 his formerly enthusiastic supporters John Alen (qv) and Gerald Aylmer (qv) were asking for his recall. In response, on 31 July 1537, King Henry appointed a commission led by George Paulet and Sir Anthony St Leger (qv) to investigate the charges against him, but the commissioners came to no definite conclusions. Grey's credit at court remained good, and he successfully rebutted accusations that his failure to secure Gerald FitzGerald was deliberate.

On 1 May 1540 Grey sailed for England to marry. On 12 June 'poor Leonard Grey', as he often described himself in his correspondence, was arrested and imprisoned on a charge of treason. This sudden fall had more to do with English politics than with disagreements about Irish policies, though use was made of them. On 10 June Grey's family friend, ally and direct superior at court, Thomas Cromwell, was arrested on foot of an accusation of treason by the duke of Norfolk (qv). Norfolk's close associate, St Leger, completed Grey's ruin. It was in Norfolk's interests that the policies that Cromwell had promoted or endorsed in Ireland should be discredited along with all the other policies with which he had been associated. Thus it was that, although his commission had offered no conclusions when it finished its inquiries in 1538, St Leger now openly endorsed all the criticisms of Alen, Aylmer, and the Butlers.

In December 1540 the English privy council, concluding that Grey's conduct had been influenced by the marriage of his sister to the 9th earl of Kildare (qv) and by his affection for the Geraldines, declared him guilty of 'heinous offences' against the king through his support for Irish rebels. Grey was tried, pleaded guilty, and condemned to death. On 28 July 1541 he was beheaded on Tower Hill.