Townshend, George

by Thomas Bartlett

Townshend, George (1724–1807), 1st Marquess Townshend, lord lieutenant of Ireland, was born 28 February 1724 in London, eldest son of Charles Townshend (1700–64), 3rd Viscount Townshend, a Norfolk politician, and his wife Etheldreda (c.1708–1788), daughter and heir of Edward Harrison of Balls Park, Hertfordshire.

**Early career** George Townshend was educated at Eton (c.1740) and St John’s College, Cambridge (1741) and made the grand tour. In 1743 he began his career in the British army, seeing action at Dettingen (1743) and later serving as ADC (1746–8) to the duke of Cumberland at the battles of Culloden in Scotland (1746) and Laufeld (Lafelt, eastern Belgium, near Hasselt) (1747). He quarrelled with Cumberland, quit the army in 1750, and turned his attention to politics, having been returned unopposed in 1747 as MP for Norfolk. He used his position as MP to mount parliamentary attacks on the duke of Cumberland, and his animosity towards him continued throughout the 1750s. He also revealed a precocious talent for viciously caricaturing opponents, and this drew adverse comment. On Cumberland’s retirement from the army, Townshend applied to be reinstated, and through the good offices of the secretary of state, William Pitt the elder, he was promoted to the rank of colonel (May 1758) and brigadier (February 1759). He took part with Maj.-gen. James Wolfe, for whose military talents he had little regard, in the expedition against the French in Quebec, and on the death of Wolfe on the Heights of Abraham, Townshend controversially took command and received the surrender of Quebec. He saw further service in Germany (1761) and Portugal (1762). In 1764 he succeeded his father as viscount. From 1760 Townshend had been a noted supporter of Lord Bute, George III’s favourite, and this connection, along with his close association with his brother Charles, whose political star was in the ascendant, obtained for him the office of lieutenant general of the ordnance (1763–7). Charles Townshend was chancellor of the exchequer in the Grafton administration in 1767, and he was almost certainly behind George Townshend’s appointment as lord lieutenant of Ireland on 19 August 1767.

**Lord lieutenant of Ireland 1767–72** The terms or conditions on which Townshend was appointed to the lord lieutenancy continue to arouse controversy among historians. In February 1765 the Grenville administration had made a decision that, for the future, lords lieutenant were to reside constantly in Ireland. Previously, the custom had been for a lord lieutenant to remain in Ireland only while the Irish parliament was in session, roughly eight months every two years, and in his absence three lords justices (typically, the speaker of the Irish house of commons, and two other powerful figures in church and state) had been appointed to conduct business. A constantly resident lord lieutenant would, it was believed, reestablish the authority of the lord lieutenant and undermine the power of the undertakers,
those leading Irish parliamentary magnates who ‘undertook’ to manage government business in parliament in return for a major share of government patronage. A resident lord lieutenant would also remove the need for lords justices. This system of parliamentary management had been in existence since the 1690s, but by the 1760s it was held to be very inefficient, much too expensive, and contrary to the principles of good governance. Administration was to be brought back to Dublin Castle, and the lord lieutenant henceforth would be a resident political force in the land. However, despite the decision of the Grenville cabinet, the next two lords lieutenant, Lord Weymouth (who never came to Ireland) and Lord Hertford (qv), showed no interest in constant residence, and while Lord Bristol, on his appointment as lord lieutenant in August 1766, did indicate that he was prepared to reside constantly, he rather spoiled matters by resigning in July 1767 without setting foot in Ireland. Because Townshend, who succeeded Bristol, did in fact reside constantly in Ireland for five years and did effect the establishment of a new system of parliamentary management, it was assumed that he was appointed under the same conditions as Bristol, and that he was to carry out the same policies with regard to the undertakers. In point of fact, the evidence for this assumption is very sparse, and there are strong grounds for concluding that Townshend's residence in Ireland came about at his own urgent suggestion, and that his onslaught on the undertakers was not pre-planned but instead arose out of the difficulties he found himself facing in Ireland.

Townshend came to Ireland with a single clear instruction – to obtain the consent of the Irish parliament to an increase or augmentation in the number of soldiers paid for by Ireland from 12,000 to 15,325. This increase was to facilitate the implementation of a uniform system of regimental rotation throughout the British empire and was a scheme that George III had as a favourite object. To sweeten this pill, the British government was prepared to allow an octennial act for Ireland to provide for general elections every eight years rather than, as heretofore, on the death of the sovereign. What evidence there is points towards the difficulties encountered by Townshend in securing the Irish parliament's consent to this augmentation as lying behind his decision to reside constantly in Ireland in order to reform radically the way Ireland was governed.

On 19 April 1768 the augmentation proposal was dramatically rejected by the Irish house of commons, and although a second attempt succeeded over a year later on 21 December 1769, Townshend had by that date seen enough in Ireland to be more than ever persuaded that radical reform was essential. In particular, a month earlier (21 November 1769) the Irish house of commons had rejected by a narrow majority a ‘money’ or ‘supply’ bill, stating that it had done so because it had not originated in the Irish commons. Alarmed by this attack on Poynings’ law, the British government gave Townshend the go-ahead to take the offensive against those former undertakers, now in opposition. Townshend entered a protest against the commons’ action and the Irish parliament was prorogued. By the time it met again, thirteen months later in February 1771, Townshend dismissed the leading undertakers – Richard Boyle (qv), 2nd earl of Shannon, and John Ponsonby (qv),
head of the Irish revenue board – and had built up a ‘Castle party’ or ‘party of lord lieutenant’s friends’ with which to conduct business in the Irish house of commons. Townshend’s methods of securing a majority in the commons were at the time and later denounced as amounting to outright bribery and corruption, but in fact his distribution of the ‘loaves and fishes’ of office, pension, and place, while on a lavish scale, was in keeping with current practice; and certainly little different from those employed by the former undertakers. In fact, patronage aside, Townshend enjoyed a number of other significant advantages in seeking to build up a parliamentary majority and in bringing the Irish political magnates to heel. Relative political stability in England meant that he could count on backing in London, and also that he was not liable to be recalled suddenly. In addition, George III was a supporter. Moreover, in Ireland, the opposition to Townshend was divided, while his chief secretary, Sir George Macartney (qv), despite his ambition for a more lucrative, less troublesome, post elsewhere, was an efficient parliamentary organiser. Lastly, Townshend held a major tactical advantage in that having prorogued the Irish parliament he could summon it at a time of his choosing. The ensuing short parliamentary session of February 1771 was a triumph for Townshend, for his major opponent, John Ponsonby, having been dismissed from his office of head of the revenue board in December 1770, now felt compelled to resign the speakership of the commons a few weeks into the parliamentary session. To Townshend's delight there were large parliamentary majorities in favour of government for the remainder of the session.

However, Townshend's difficulties were by no means over with this session of parliament, for in the next session, which opened in October 1771, his new supporters – the so-called ‘secondary interests’ – now proved unreliable. Some absented themselves from the commons, and some voted against Townshend’s plan to divide the Irish revenue board into separate boards of customs and of excise. Townshend explained that those who had helped defeat the undertakers now ‘would fain form their own parties with the materials of government that they may be the managers in their turn’ (Clements Library, Townshend letterbook, iii, Townshend to Lord North, 10 October 1771). Townshend’s solution to this indiscipline was to ignore the vote against the division of the revenue board, and proceed to split it into separate boards of customs and of excise. He also opened negotiations with a former undertaker, the earl of Shannon, who had shown signs of being weary of opposition. It was under Townshend’s successor, Lord Harcourt (qv), that satisfactory terms were concluded, but the credit for bringing Shannon and his parliamentary following back to administration properly belongs to Townshend. The accession of Shannon as a supporter, rather than as a principal, brought a much-needed stability to the Castle majority and helped discipline the ‘lord lieutenant’s friends’.

By the conclusion of this session of parliament in June 1772, the British government had grown tired of Townshend’s constant hectoring and never-ending demands for support. He had never been an easy man to work with. Thomas Waite (1718–80), an old Castle hand, memorably described Townshend as follows: ‘I have been young
and now am old, yet never saw I such a composition of agreeable and disagreeable, of bitter and sweet, of starts, whims, irregularity and indecisions without any ideas of time and place, now surly, now placid and gentle. There are days in which he wearies every person to death; there are others in which he blazes to such a degree and is so bright and able that you are astonished and think him the most entertaining man in the world’ (Derby Record Office, Catton collection, xlvii: T. Waite to Sir R. Wilmot, 7 June 1769). Townshend was replaced as lord lieutenant on 29 October 1772 by Simon, Earl Harcourt (1714–77).

Townshend's five years in Ireland witnessed a radical change in the way parliament was managed. The rule of the great undertakers was over; lords justice, except in emergencies, were a thing of the past; future lords lieutenant would reside in Ireland constantly as Townshend had done, and would lead a parliamentary ‘Castle’ party which would undertake the king's business. Significantly, Townshend had established control over the revenue board and he, and future lords lieutenant, would be able to deploy its patronage in favour of the ‘Castle’ party. From 1772 onwards, the lord lieutenant would be the leading undertaker and also the chief dispenser of patronage, whether in the church, in the army or in the revenue service.

Remaining career 1772–1807 Ironically, for all his success in Ireland Townshend was never again to hold high political office, probably because he did not seek it. He declared on leaving Ireland that he intended to retire ‘completely’; but the premature death of his brother and patron, Charles, in 1767 may also have been a factor in his withdrawal from front-rank politics. He was master-general of the ordnance, with one brief interval, from 1772 to 1783, and was created Marquess Townshend in 1787. In 1792 he was appointed lord lieutenant of Norfolk, an office he held until his death. In 1796 he was appointed field-marshal. However, if largely ignored in England, he was by no means forgotten in Ireland. *Baratariana, a select collection of fugitive pieces*, a volume of satirical attacks on Townshend and his administration written by, among others, Henry Grattan (qv) and Henry Flood (qv), had been published in Dublin in 1772 and another edition appeared in 1773. In 1779 Townshend won applause in Ireland for speaking out in the British house of lords in support of an end to English restrictions on Irish trade. Moreover, every year until at least 1801 those secondary interests who had reason to bless his lord lieutenancy in Ireland for setting them free from the rule of Ponsonby and Shannon met to celebrate Townshend's birthday in suitably raucous style. He died on 14 September 1807 at Raynham, Norfolk.

Townshend married (19 December 1751) Lady Charlotte Compton (Baroness Ferrers in her own right from 1747); they had four sons and four daughters. She died in Ireland on 14 September 1770: Townshend noted that ‘Dublin has been plunged into real and expressive concern’. On 19 May 1773 he married Anne, daughter of Sir William Montgomery (1717–88), MP for Ballynakill, Queen's Co. (1768–88), and his second wife Anne, daughter of Henry Watt. They had two sons and four daughters.
Portraits and papers An oil painting of Townshend, painted by Thomas Hickey (qv) in 1769, is in the Mansion House, Dublin; a later oil portrait by George Reynolds painted in 1778–9 is in the Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada. The principal collections of letters and papers relating to Townshend's viceroyalty in Ireland may be found in the Boston Public Library (MS Eng. 1800); the BL (Add. MS 38497); the PRONI (Macartney letter books, D 572); the Derby Record Office (Catton collection); the PRO, London (State Papers 63 series); the NLI (Townshend papers, MSS 397, 1390, 1470, 13260, 8009); the National Archives, Dublin (M648–735); the National Army Museum, London; the W. L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and the W. R. Perkins Library, Duke University, North Carolina.