

Abbot, Charles

by C. J. Woods

Abbot, Charles (1757–1829), tourist in Ireland, chief secretary for Ireland (1801–02), speaker of the British house of commons, creator of a system of arranging parliamentary papers, and later 1st Baron Colchester, was born 14 October 1757 at Abingdon, Berkshire, England, second son of the Rev. Dr John Abbot and Sarah Abbot (née Farr), who later married Jeremy Bentham, father by a previous marriage of the philosopher and jurist of the same name. Charles Abbot was a student (1776–8) at Christ Church, Oxford, was called to the bar and joined the Oxford circuit (1783), was Vinerian fellow at Oxford University (1786–92), and was elected FSA (December 1792) and FRS (February 1793). Shortly after giving up his fellowship he set off for Ireland, arriving in Dublin 4 September 1792. Having spent some days in and around the capital, he headed north, visited Armagh and Belfast, and then passed along the Antrim coast road to Derry. Later he visited Waterford, Killarney, Cork, and Limerick, reembarking 11 October for Holyhead. The description of the burgeoning Irish economy given in his travel diary 'A tour through Ireland' (MS PRO 30/9/23) says much about his interests and is a valuable source for historians. Abbot was therefore unusually well informed about Ireland when offered an Irish post by Addington, who became prime minister (March 1801) shortly after the union of Ireland with Great Britain. Formally appointed chief secretary on 25 May 1801, secretary of state (a sinecure) on 12 June, and (for life) keeper of the Irish privy seal, Abbot arrived at Dublin Castle on 20 July and quickly set about surveying the administration in all its aspects, as befitted a step-brother of Jeremy Bentham. He paid particular attention to the revenue departments, antagonised vested interests, and prevented the home secretary, Henry Pelham, from abolishing the Irish office. But his stay in Dublin was too brief to effect the major reforms he intended. Soon after leaving Ireland (30 January 1802) he was elected (11 February) to the speakership of the house of commons (of which he had been a member since 1795), and remained speaker till 1816. Abbot always opposed the admission of catholics to parliament and sabotaged a relief bill in 1813. He was created Baron Colchester on 3 June 1817 and died 7 May 1829. His memoranda of his period in Ireland, published with his diaries and correspondence, show his reforming zeal and rationalising spirit.

The diary and correspondence of Charles Abbot, Lord Colchester, ed. Charles Abbot (3 vols, 1861), esp. i, 234–306; Burke, *Peerage* (1912); G.E.C., *Peerage*, iii, 362; *Hist. parl.: commons, 1790–1820*, 1–8; R. B. McDowell, 'Ireland in 1800', *NHI*, iv (1986), 667–70; id., 'Administration and the public services, 1800–70', *NHI*, v (1989), 539, 540

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