

Acheson, Archibald

by C. J. Woods

Acheson, Archibald (1776–1849), 2nd earl of Gosford, landowner, politician, and colonial governor, was born 1 August 1776, probably on the Acheson estate at Markethill, Co. Armagh, elder son among two sons and three daughters of Arthur Acheson (c.1742–1807), who succeeded as 2nd Viscount Acheson in 1790 and was created an earl a year before his death, and his wife Millicent (d. 1825), daughter of Edward Pole of Radborne, Derbyshire, England. Archibald Acheson entered Christ Church, Oxford (January 1796), and graduated *h. c.* (October 1797). During the 1798 rebellion he was a major in the Armagh militia, afterwards becoming colonel (1801). In 1798 too he became MP for Co. Armagh, as such opposing the bill for the union of the Irish and British parliaments, the passing of which removed him from Dublin to Westminster. On succeeding (14 January 1807) to his father's Irish peerage, he was disqualified from representing an Irish constituency in the British house of commons, but some years later he was elected by his fellow Irish peers to be one of their representatives in the house of lords (1811). Thanks to his sister Mary's marriage (1803) to Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, a future governor-general of India, he received attention and favour from the whigs. Notwithstanding his base in Co. Armagh, the cradle of the Orange order, he proved a friend of the catholics, opposing a bill (1825) to outlaw the Catholic Association, voting for catholic emancipation (1829), and defending the whig assault on the privileges of the protestant church in Ireland (1833). He was noted as a reformer and as an outspoken critic of Orangeism.

Gosford's political opportunities widened when the whigs came back to power (1830). On 3 September 1834 he became captain of the yeomen of the guard and a member of the British privy council. Some months later he was supported by the radicals and O'Connellites for the conciliatory nature of a report he had made, as lord lieutenant of Armagh, on riots in that county. The height of his career was his appointment (1 July 1835) as governor-in-chief of British North America, with a commission to head an inquiry into the grievances of the French-Canadians in Lower Canada (Quebec). The choice of Gosford for the post was due in part to the whig government's dependence on radical and O'Connellite support; it seemed a wise one, as the political situation in Canada was in some respects similar to that in Ireland, which Gosford had proven his ability to deal with. After arriving at Montreal he endeared himself to the more moderate of the French-Canadian politicians, though not to Papineau, leader of the extremist wing of the 'Patriote' party, or to the Anglo-Canadians. The issue of the day was a conflict between the executive (controlled by the British government) and the legislature (where the French-Canadians were strong). The commission made two reports (January, March 1836), neither of which received widespread approval. In his aim of creating in Lower Canada an alliance of moderate politicians from both parties and holding the

balance of power (as the whig government did in Ireland in the 1830s) he failed to such an extent that in November 1837, just before his departure from Canada, a rebellion, already smouldering, broke out, sparked by the arrest of Papineau, the executive having already renewed its earlier alliance with the English-speaking minority (viewed by Gosford as akin to the Orangemen in Ireland). He left on 27 February 1838, little loved by either party. From then on, while opposing the union of Lower and Upper Canada, he devoted himself to his estates and to the promotion of agriculture and the linen industry in Ireland.

Gosford's property in Co. Armagh, consisting of some 8,000 acres and including the small towns of Markethill and Hamilton's Bawn, lay in the barony of Lower Fews. In 1815 (or just before) he appointed as his agent a member of another Armagh family, William Blacker (qv), who 'became famous for the system of management which he introduced on to the Gosford estate and on to the other estates of which he became agent' (F. M. L. Thompson). In 1817, possibly influenced by Blacker, Gosford commissioned William Greig to carry out a detailed survey of the property. Greig's report (presented in 1821 but unpublished till 1976) was the first of its kind for an Irish estate; it recommended retrenchment. Gosford, none the less, began planning the construction of an extravaganza, the large and imposing baronial castle erected in the 1820s to the design of Thomas Hopper, at a cost probably of about £80,000. The earl, who also had estates in Co. Cavan and in Suffolk, added to his lands in Armagh by purchasing the Graham estate (1828). The Gosford estate papers are in the PRONI; the castle is now in state ownership. Gosford died at Markethill 27 March 1849.

He married (1805) Mary (1777–1841), daughter and heir of Robert Sparrow of Worlingham Hall, Beccles, Suffolk, whose property therefore passed eventually into his ownership. Their only son, Archibald (1806–64), was MP for Co. Armagh from 1830 to 1847, when he was created Baron Acheson before succeeding as 3rd earl. They had four daughters: Mary (d. 1850), who married the 4th Viscount Lifford; Millicent (d. 1887), who married her cousin Henry Bence Jones and produced a large family; Olivia (d. 1852); and Annabella (d. 1849).

Burke, Peerage (1912); G.E.C., *Peerage*; William Greig, *General report on the Gosford estates in County Armagh*, intro. F. M. L. Thompson and D. Tierney (1976); *Hist. parl.: commons, 1790–1820*, iii (1986), 17–18; *DCB*, vii (1988)