Butler, James

by David Beresford

Butler, James (c.1390–1452), 4th earl of Ormond, called the ‘White Earl’, probably because of his pale hair, was the elder of the two legitimate sons of James Butler (qv), 3rd earl of Ormond, and his wife Anne, daughter of John, Lord Welles, and became earl on his father's death (September 1405). As he was still a minor, the wardship of his lands was granted to the king's son, Thomas of Lancaster, later duke of Clarence (qv), although the actual maintenance of the estates was granted to others.

The young earl may have been brought to Dublin to learn the craft of government, and was appointed as a deputy to Thomas of Lancaster (September 1408), while both Lancaster and his regular deputy, Sir Stephen Scrope (qv), were absent in England. Ormond formed an attachment to Thomas of Lancaster, went to serve him in England perhaps as early as 1409, and was a prominent companion of Thomas (now duke of Clarence) on the French expedition of 1412. Ormond was granted full possession of his Irish lands in 1411 and his English lands in the next year, and sometime before 28 August 1413 he married Joan, daughter of William Beauchamp, Lord Abergavenny, and his wife Joan, further strengthening his family's English connections.

Ormond was active in the king's service, both in Ireland and in Henry V's French campaigns. Some traditions state that he served in the Agincourt campaign (1415), which is doubtful, but he definitely served in the more extensive campaigns of 1418–20 and was present at the siege of Rouen (1418). He was appointed (February 1420) to succeed Sir John Talbot (qv), Lord Furnivall, as lieutenant of Ireland, and took up office in April 1420 to start a two-year term. Intense factional rivalry, centred around the Talbots – Sir John and his brother Richard (qv), archbishop of Dublin – and Ormond, came to plague Irish politics and dominate the lordship till the 1440s. The roots of the dispute may lie in Talbot's seizure of Ormond's lands (1417), but it spiralled out of control, creating a great weakness in the ability of the Dublin administration to govern the country. Both sides in the factional dispute sought support in the English court by denouncing the other, and while the minority government of Henry VI tried to mediate, it could not control the factions. Ormond's ability to use the mechanisms of local government effectively made him useful to the English government, but his inability to come to terms with the Talbot faction forced him in and out of favour. He served as deputy to the earl of March (qv) in 1423–4, and was appointed lieutenant (for one year) in 1425, although he served as justiciar afterwards until the arrival of the new lieutenant (July 1427).

For the next thirteen years Ormond concentrated on building his position, gaining contacts, and strengthening his power in his own lordship. For example, in an
attempt to secure better contacts with the English nobility, he sent his eldest son, James Butler (qv), to be raised in England, first in his grandmother's household and later at the royal court, after the death of Ormond's first wife (August 1430). By chance, Ormond was in England in 1429 and joined the royal expedition to France, which removed him from factional politics in Ireland for the next two years. When his wife died, he returned to London to bury her but then rejoined the royal party, and may have attended the French coronation of Henry VI (December 1431). He considered a pilgrimage to Rome but returned to Ireland, where he married Elizabeth, daughter and heir of Gerald FitzGerald (qv), 5th earl of Kildare, after receiving both royal and papal permission, in the summer of 1432. Through this marriage, Ormond gained possession of two-thirds of the lands of the earldom of Kildare later that year, and spent the rest of the decade consolidating his position in Ireland. He applied for the position of lieutenant in 1438, but was disappointed. However, the position was given to his cousin Lionel, Lord Welles, who made Ormond his deputy in March 1441, but only after Ormond signed a peace indenture with Archbishop Talbot.

Ormond returned, for the third and last time, as lieutenant in February 1442. His term of office was marred and shortened by the final outbreak of the Talbot–Ormond feud, which ended with his summons to England to face treason charges. These charges eventually led to a trial by combat between Ormond and Thomas FitzGerald, prior of Kilmainham, although the matter was postponed several times. The issue dragged on for three years before Ormond was acquitted by royal decree in September 1447. In the meantime, the Talbot–Ormond feud had been largely settled by the marriage of John, son of Sir John Talbot (now earl of Shrewsbury), to Ormond's daughter, Elizabeth. Ormond had been replaced by Talbot as lieutenant of Ireland in 1445, but he returned to Ireland (1448) to settle the disputes that had arisen within his own lordship, and afterwards reappeared in the Dublin administration, serving with Richard (qv), duke of York. Ormond's last period as chief governor began when he indented to serve York as his deputy lieutenant when York returned to England (September 1450), a position he kept till his death (August 1452).

Ormond was the single most dominant figure in Irish politics in the first half of the fifteenth century. He was by far the most active of the Irish earls in the affairs of the English realm, serving the king both in Ireland and in France. When in France and England, Ormond acted no differently from his rival Sir John Talbot. Within an Irish context, however, Ormond's activities show a far more complex understanding of the Irish lordship's problems than that shown by the Talbots, indicating the growing differences between 'Anglo-Irish' and 'English' solutions to Ireland. For example, Ormond was prepared to condone the limited use of Gaelic law and customs within his lordship as a means of keeping the peace. This is not to say that he was interested in 'home rule' or that he was any less forgiving to the Gaelic Irish when he campaigned against them in defence of his own lands or the lordship in general; indeed, when he died in August 1452 he was returning from a lengthy campaign.
His usefulness in Ireland came from his ability to use the mechanisms of government to their greatest extent in defence of the Anglo-Irish lordship. Ormond was definitely an ambitious man, desiring power and authority both for himself and for his family (witnest his decision to have his son reared in England), but he seems to have had a ruthless and vindictive streak, as indicated by some of his actions during the Talbot–Ormond feud. This vindictiveness, coupled with a general inability to back down from confrontation, may have prolonged the feud; but the feud was also fuelled by the weakness of the government of Henry VI and its inability to control him. From a royal standpoint, Ormond was too valuable not to be used, but was often too volatile to be trusted.

Ormond has come down in history as an educated man who sponsored a translation of the ‘Secreta secretorum’, was possibly a source for the poem ‘The lybelle of English policy’, and was indirectly a source for the first biography of Henry V. Paradoxically, his plans for increasing the power of his family, in the form of his eldest son being sent to the court of Henry VI, actually resulted in the decrease of that power in Ireland, as his sons became absentee earls, creating a power vacuum in Ireland that came to be filled by the earls of Kildare. While Ormond’s career is generally less well known than that of the great earl of Kildare, it is certainly no less significant for the study of fifteenth-century Ireland.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------