

Fowler, Robert

by Linde Lunney

Fowler, Robert (1725–1801), Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin, was baptised 3 March 1725 in Skendleby, Lincolnshire, England, third and apparently youngest son of George Fowler, grazier, and Mary Fowler (née Hurst), of Skendleby Thorpe, who had at least one other child, a daughter. His mother inherited property from her father, Robert Hurst. Robert Fowler was educated as a king's scholar at Westminster school, and graduated BA (1747), MA (1751), and DD (1764), from Trinity College, Cambridge. He was ordained a deacon and priest in the church of England in 1752, and was a chaplain to the king in 1756; he was a prebendary in Westminster 1756–71, and dean of Norwich 1765. He married (1766) Mildred (d. 1826), daughter of George Dealtry of Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. He was promoted to the Irish bishopric of Killaloe by patent dated 29 June 1771, and became archbishop of Dublin on 8 January 1779. His unusually accelerated promotion was engineered by Richard Robinson (qv), primate of Ireland, who wished to block the career prospects of Charles Agar (qv). Fowler – described by an opponent as a ‘paltry, pragmatic man of straw’ (John Hamilton, quoted in Malcolmson, 413) – supported government in the regency crisis of 1789, when with fourteen other peers he opposed the address to the prince of Wales voted by the Irish parliament. After this, he lobbied vigorously for the peerage which he said had been promised him by the lord lieutenant, John Hobart (qv), Lord Buckinghamshire; he went expressly to London, hoping to speak to the king himself, but to no avail. He was also ambitious of still further promotion in the church, but was unsuccessful, even though the lord lieutenant, John Fane (qv), earl of Westmoreland, cynically recommended Fowler in 1794 for elevation to the primacy. Westmoreland's letter on the subject, commending Fowler on the grounds of his advanced age, Englishness, fainting fits, bad temper, and unpopularity, reads like a satirical epistle by Swift (qv), or something from Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*.

Despite these disappointments, Fowler could probably have convinced himself that he had served his church well. He had built a new palace at Killaloe and enclosed the garden at the archbishop's country residence at Tallaght; he opposed the bill for relief of dissenters in 1782; and he somewhat strengthened the degree of control exercised over the clergy of his archdiocese. Any resulting amelioration in church administration, however, has to be set against Fowler's unprincipled stewardship of the property and estates of the archdiocese. It has been shown that he was ‘guilty of some squalid and short-sighted asset-stripping’ (Malcolmson, 413); for instance, he caused oak trees on see lands in Glendalough to be felled for timber long before they were mature, and it seems likely that he profited considerably by his policies of managing lands that were built on as the city of Dublin expanded in the later eighteenth century. His successors' incomes from the archdiocese were substantially reduced, because Fowler took such care to ensure that he and his family prospered. He bought for himself an estate in Essex, where he lived for his

last years as archbishop; his two daughters, handsomely dowried, married into the aristocracy. In 1793 Fowler settled £90,000 on his only son, Robert (1766–1841), who was ordained by his father well before the canonical age, so as not to lose an opportunity of placing him in one of Dublin's richest parishes. Even as rector of Lusk and vicar of St Ann's, however, the young man (who was later bishop of Ossory (1813–41)) was clearly not much interested in religious matters. He took off on his travels to Switzerland and Italy, where he spent several years, enjoying numerous love affairs with married women and complaining about his father's stinginess. When a planned promotion of his son to the deanery of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin, did not work out, Fowler compensated him with the archdeaconry of Dublin, but was later enraged when Robert jr married the daughter of his father's antagonist, Luke Gardiner (qv). In 1783 Fowler had attempted to sway Co. Dublin voters against Gardiner; such clerical interference in electoral politics was resented by the opposition, and the archbishop was criticised in the *Freeman's Journal* (18 Sept. 1783). Fowler died 10 October 1801 in Essex. A portrait by Romney is in the possession of a descendant.

According to William Handcock, part of the ancient cross of Tallaght, 'which had stood from time immemorial in the centre of the town' was incorporated into the wall of a bath house which Fowler built in his palace grounds; a careless appropriation which is perhaps a fitting emblem of a notably greedy and selfish ecclesiastical career.

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William D. Handcock, *The history and antiquities of Tallaght in the county of Dublin* (1899); Harleian Society, *Lincolnshire pedigrees*, lv (1906), 1230; Hubert Butler, *Escape from the anthill* (1985), 32–45; W. J. R. Wallace, *Clergy of Dublin and Glendalough*, ed. J. B. Leslie (2001); A. P. W. Malcolmson, *Archbishop Charles Agar: churchmanship and politics in Ireland, 1760–1810* (2002)