

Gibson, Edward

by Patrick Maume

Gibson, Edward (1837–1913), 1st Baron Ashbourne, barrister, Conservative MP, and lord chancellor of Ireland, was born in Dublin on 4 September 1837, the second son of William Gibson, solicitor, of Merrion Square, Dublin, and Rockforest, Co. Tipperary, and his wife, Louisa (née Grant). His grandfather, John, is alleged to have been a United Irishman who participated in the 1798 rising in Cavan (often cited by commemorationists claiming the Ashbourne Land Act as a posthumous triumph for the United Irishmen).

Gibson was privately educated because of health problems, which disappeared after he entered TCD in 1853; he graduated BA (1858) with a first in history, political science, and English literature (receiving three gold medals) and was admitted to Lincoln's Inn. In 1859 he published a prize essay on *The future of Italy* which was sympathetic to Italian nationalism. The following year he was called to the Irish bar and admitted to King's Inns, Dublin. He graduated MA (1861) from TCD and joined the Leinster circuit. His legal practice was never very extensive, but an inheritance from his wealthy father meant that he did not have to rely on legal income for a living; instead, he worked as a Conservative party organiser in his circuit area, and in 1874 was an unsuccessful Conservative candidate for Waterford city. In 1875, however, Gibson won a parliamentary by-election in the TCD constituency against an official candidate. (Gibson's victory aborted the political career of his college contemporary Gerald Fitzgibbon (qv), who had arranged with the government to stand aside in return for a clear succession to the seat whenever the new MP was promoted to the bench; his previously cordial relations with Gibson cooled noticeably.)

Gibson was a clear and forceful speech-maker (as auditor of the College Historical Society in 1858 he had campaigned for a compulsory course in oratory to be added to the TCD curriculum; he always retained a strong connection with the society and was its president for many years until his death) and he soon made an impression at Westminster and became a protégé of Disraeli. Appointed attorney general in 1877, he rejuvenated the office and became increasingly influential at Dublin Castle; he was seen as more influential in determining Irish policy and defending it at Westminster than the chief secretary, James Lowther (qv). His refusal of judicial office in 1878 and 1880 confirmed the impression that he saw his future in politics. After the Conservatives lost the 1880 general election, Disraeli chose Gibson as his principal advisor and spokesman on Irish affairs, which the Conservative leader had identified as key to detaching conservative whigs from the Liberal party and restoring the Conservatives to office. Gibson spearheaded attacks on the government's Irish policy, criticising W. E. Forster (qv) for alleged unwillingness to crack down on the Land League and helping to bring about the rejection of the 1881 compensation

for disturbance bill by the house of lords through blistering commons attacks on its interference with property rights. T. M. Healy (qv) claimed the 'Healy Clause', giving tenants credit for improvements, would never have been incorporated in the 1882 Land Act had Gibson finished his lunch five minutes earlier. Gibson also played a prominent role in the exclusion of the atheist MP Charles Bradlaugh from the house of commons: as well as presenting the devout Gladstone as an advocate of atheism and birth control, this had the advantage of appealing to the numerous anglican clergy among the Trinity College electorate. In 1881 Trinity conferred an honorary doctorate on him.

After the death of Disraeli – whom Gibson always regarded as the greatest man he had ever met – in April 1881, Gibson associated himself with Sir Stafford Northcote, the Conservative leader in the house of commons. (The period 1881–5 was marked by jockeying for position between Northcote, Lord Salisbury, and a third contender – Lord Randolph Churchill, who presented himself as a populist 'Tory democrat'.) Northcote's record as an orator was poor and he was regularly overawed by Gladstone in debate; the confident, forceful Gibson was therefore invaluable to him. Gibson also helped to defuse clashes between the lords and commons which Salisbury regularly engineered in the hope of strengthening his position against Northcote – a strategy which eventually proved successful for its author over the 1884 Reform Act. Gibson's tall figure and shock of prematurely white hair became a familiar sight in the commons chamber and on public platforms in Ireland and across Britain; he was regarded as the foremost spokesman for Irish loyalism and brought Northcote on a speaking tour in Ireland as proof of Conservative sympathy with Irish loyalism. One of Churchill's allies protested that Gibson was dragging Northcote along to pander to 'Protestantism of the hottest type, fanaticism of the deepest orange' (Foster, 105–6). It was generally expected that Gibson would hold high office in the next Conservative government, and one or two commentators even thought him a potential prime minister. (In the process his old college associate and fellow Trinity MP David Plunket (qv), who in 1880 had seemed better placed to emerge as a Conservative front bencher, was decisively marginalised.)

The formation of Salisbury's first government in July 1885 matched the decisive defeat of Northcote, who was sent to the Lords. Salisbury, who was preparing for a showdown with the rising power of Churchill, regarded Gibson as a potentially valuable ally and offered him the home secretaryship. There was widespread astonishment at Gibson's decision to become lord chancellor of Ireland instead and go to the lords as Baron Ashbourne. He was given a seat in the cabinet – the only lord chancellor of Ireland to be so treated. Critics retrospectively interpreted his career as aimed at securing this notoriously lucrative office (it paid £8,000 a year, with a life pension of £4,000; the home secretary received a salary but no pension). A. B. Cooke argues that Ashbourne was in fact motivated by desire to provide for his family. In 1868 he had married Frances Maria Cope Colles, the daughter of Henry Cope Colles, a prominent Dublin barrister, with whom he had four sons and four daughters; he was particularly devoted to his family and preferred domestic life to

high society. Cooke further argues that these worries were probably unfounded, since Ashbourne had significant private means and left £100,000 (though it should be recalled that by then he had drawn the chancellor's salary for over sixteen years and the pension for ten). It should also be remembered that Ashbourne was not to know that the Conservatives would be in office for the next seventeen years, or that the winner of the Churchill–Salisbury conflict would retain him in office.

Immediately after becoming lord chancellor, Ashbourne, drawing on ideas which had been circulated in Conservative circles for some years, single-handedly drafted the 1885 Land Purchase Act with which his name is associated. Although the Ashbourne Act provided the relatively limited sum of £4 million, it laid down the method which was to be the basis for all future land purchase legislation: government loans for tenants to purchase their holdings, to be repaid over a fixed period (in this case forty-nine years) by land annuities (at 4 per cent interest in this case) lower than the current judicial rent. Ashbourne subsequently alienated most of his admirers by his ambiguous role in the dealings of Henry Herbert (qv), 4th earl of Carnarvon, with Charles Stewart Parnell (qv); he helped to arrange the meeting between Carnarvon and Parnell though he did not attend it himself (as Carnarvon intended). By December 1885 this gave rise to rumours, circulated by Gladstone, among others, and believed by Edward Saunderson (qv), that Ashbourne had actually declared for home rule and drafted legislation on the subject. Just before the fall of the government in January 1886 Ashbourne hastily distanced himself from Carnarvon and advocated coercive measures within cabinet, while failing to supply his colleagues with detailed proposals for such measures or concrete evidence that Ireland was currently lawless enough to require them.

On the formation of Salisbury's second administration in June 1886 Ashbourne was reappointed chancellor and readmitted to the cabinet, to some extent as a gesture by Salisbury against Churchill, who wished to replace Ashbourne with his ally Fitzgibbon, and had secured the appointment of allies as chief secretary and lord lieutenant. Having secured the chancellorship Ashbourne threatened to resign unless readmitted to the cabinet. He retained his position in the Conservative and Unionist governments of 1885–92 and 1895–1905, though he was never again a figure of more than departmental importance. As chief secretary, Arthur James Balfour (qv) complained that Ashbourne irritated the civil servants by his mannerisms (which included a very loud voice) and behaviour, and that he shared Irish officials' chronic inability to take decisions without clear authorisation from superiors. Balfour claimed that Ashbourne's hesitancy helped to bring about the 1887 Mitchelstown shootings. In 1889 he offered Ashbourne the post of lord chief justice of Ireland to remove him from politics, but was unwilling to grant the earldom which Ashbourne demanded. Ashbourne's close political and personal friendship with George Cadogan (qv), 5th Earl Cadogan, also acted as a brake on Gerald Balfour (qv) and George Wyndham (qv).

Ashbourne's judicial manner was marked by geniality and considerable 'sound common sense', though limited legal knowledge. He was criticised for favouring landlords against tenants in the judicial interpretation of land legislation and (more widely) for nepotism in his official appointments. Serjeant A. M. Sullivan (qv) claims that Ashbourne's favouritism was usually justified in terms of ability, though this may be intended as a contrast with the favouritism of post-1906 Liberal governments, which Sullivan criticised for jobbery after they failed to appoint him.

Irish lord chancellors since Edward Sugden (qv) in 1843 had extended their responsibility for the care of lunatics who were wards in chancery into a wider brief to inspect lunatic asylums in general; Ashbourne was particularly conscientious in this task and was an assiduous visitor to asylums. He may have been influenced by the conspicuous eccentricity displayed by some of his own children, notably his eldest son William Gibson (qv) and his daughter Violet (1876–1956). On 7 April 1926 the latter shot at and slightly wounded Mussolini as he sat in his car in Rome; she was deported and spent the last thirty years of her life in an asylum in Northampton. The lord chancellor's role (supported by a staff of inspectors) was widely resented by the medical profession and was discontinued after 1901. Ashbourne's commitment to lunatics' welfare did not extend to reassessing the asylum system, and in 1901 he rejected proposals by Dr Conolly Norman (qv) that a system of out-patient care should be created to supplement asylums.

In 1898 Ashbourne published *Pitt: some chapters of his life and times*, a spirited defence of Pitt against accusations that he had intended to damage Ireland by the Commercial Resolutions, that he had sabotaged the reforming viceroyalty of Lord Fitzwilliam (qv), and that he had used corruption unparalleled even by eighteenth-century standards to persuade the Irish parliament to extinguish itself. Ashbourne believed, however, that Pitt had been at fault in his post-union dealings with George III; he should either have used his influence to thwart the king on catholic relief, or have stayed in office and passed interim measures of Irish reform.

In his last years Ashbourne won acceptance as a minor elder statesman. As a former cabinet minister he continued to attend shadow cabinet meetings even after the Conservatives fell from office in 1905, and he was still politically active when he died suddenly at St George's Hospital, London, on 22 May 1913, having suffered a seizure while walking with his wife in Hyde Park. He was buried at Mount Jerome cemetery, Dublin. His papers in the Parliamentary Archives in London (photocopies in PRONI) are a major source for Conservative politics of the period 1880–85, though they decline sharply in importance thereafter.

Warder and Weekly Evening Mail (1880–83), passim; Burke, *Peerage* (1912), 131; *IBL*, iv (1913), 213; *Times*, 23, 29 May 1913; *WWW*1, 25; John Ross, *The*

years of my pilgrimage: random reminiscences (1924); T. M. Healy, *Letters and leaders of my day* (1928); A. M. Sullivan, *Old Ireland: reminiscences of an Irish K.C.* (1928); *Alumni Dubl.*, appendix C, 45; Maurice Healy, *The old Munster circuit* (1939); L. P. Curtis, *Conflict and conciliation in Ireland: a study in constructive unionism* (1963); A. B. Cooke and J. R. Vincent, 'Ireland and party politics 1885–7: an unpublished conservative memoir', *IHS*, xvi/61 (1968); A. B. Cooke and A. P. W. Malcomson (ed.), *The Ashbourne papers, 1869–1913: a calendar of the papers of Lord Ashbourne* (1974); Mark Finnane, *Insanity and the insane in post-famine Ireland* (1981); R. F. Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill: a political life* (1981); Joseph Robins, *Fools and mad: a history of the insane in Ireland* (1986); *ODNB*; Guy Beiner, *Remembering the year of the French: Irish folk history and social memory* (2006)