

Hamilton, James

by Desmond McCabe

Hamilton, James (1811–85), 1st duke of Abercorn and lord lieutenant of Ireland, was born 21 January 1811 at Seamore Place, Mayfair, London, elder son of James, Viscount Hamilton (1786–1814), and his wife Harriet (d. 1833), daughter of John Douglas, earl of Morton. His guardian, George Hamilton Gordon, 4th earl of Aberdeen, became his stepfather in July 1815 on marriage to his widowed mother. He succeeded to the title of marquess of Abercorn, and to the extensive family estates in the counties of Tyrone, Donegal, Londonderry, and Renfrew (Scotland), on the death (February 1818) of his grandfather, John James Hamilton (qv) (1756–1818). After some years tuition at home he boarded at Harrow School from c.1820. He later attended Christ Church, Oxford, and graduated BA in 1832. Early that year he took his seat with the tory party in the house of lords in time to vote against the electoral reform bill. Between the 1830s and the mid 1860s his principal occupations were the leisurely cultivation of various offices at the court of Queen Victoria and the peaceful management of his 80,000-acre estate. As one of the most eminent members of the British aristocracy, a fluent socialite, and a skilled cricketer, he was regarded as an appropriate companion for the royal family. From 1846 to 1859 he held the office of groom of the stole to the prince consort.

In the matter of estate administration he reportedly combined a taste for extravagant show at Baronscourt, Newtown Stewart, Co. Tyrone, with a lofty and generous reluctance to have recourse to the aggressive commercial exploitation of his tenantry. Rents were little altered between the late 1830s and the late 1860s. He was unsuccessfully concerned to limit the system of tenant right in order to check the spread of tenant debt. Evictions were, however, carried out on the estate in the early 1860s. One of his abiding preoccupations in these decades was maintaining the dominant Abercorn political interest in Tyrone and Donegal: servants were barred from the dining room at Baronscourt between courses, in order to keep county political gossip from being heard by the wrong ears. He had had slender parliamentary experience, and no term of high public office, when persuaded by the earl of Derby to accept the viceroyalty in July 1866. As elements of Irish policy, the stated conservative principles of firmness and conciliation were embodied adequately in his personal style and bearing rather than in the content of his administrative performance, which was no more than could be expected of an officeholder. He got on well with his chief secretary, Richard Southwell Bourke, Lord Naas (qv). He entered into the spirit of viceregal pageantry, and, as the first Irishman in the office for some time, proved reasonably popular with the nationalist population. It was said that the lower orders succumbed wonderfully to the majesty of his contempt, for he never relaxed his hauteur. From the summer of 1866 he was anxiously involved in the development of measures against the Fenian threat, supporting the suspension of habeas corpus in October, and favouring the dispersal

of troops around the country in discussion in November, when tensions between him and Lord Strathnairn, commander of the forces in Ireland, began to arise. While he and Strathnairn worked to reinforce defences in Dublin city in late 1866, he questioned the advisability of making such measures too obvious and giving publicity to government alarm. The viceregal lodge was deeply sandbagged, however.

As distinct from the unbending high protestantism of the previous tory incumbent, the earl of Eglinton, Abercorn was capable of tactful acknowledgement of the importance of the Irish catholic hierarchy, pleasing Cardinal Paul Cullen (qv) by friendly overtures at a dinner given by the lord mayor of Dublin (February 1867). An invitation to the cardinal to visit the viceregal lodge was, however, declined. Having closely followed the course of action against the Fenian rebellion in early March 1867, he inadvertently offended a prickly Strathnairn by failing, in a congratulatory address, to point up with sufficient clarity the role of the commander in suppressing the rising. On 25 May that year he received Cardinal Cullen at the viceregal lodge to hear a plea for clemency on behalf of the two Fenians sentenced to be hanged three days later for treason, and made a significant contribution to the state decision to commute their sentences to life imprisonment (as viceroy the decision was in theory his alone, but of course a wide variety of other political factors were involved). He determined that a mock-funeral organised in Cork in December 1867 in protest at the execution of the 'Manchester martyrs' be allowed to go ahead, but was affronted when Richard Southwell Bourke, by then earl of Mayo, let a similar procession march through Dublin city centre later that month. Irritated by the stubborn refusal of the militant Orange campaigner, William Johnston (qv) of Ballykilbeg, Co. Down, to make any plea for viceregal mercy in February 1868, he was obliged to allow the sentence of one month's imprisonment for illegal assembly to be upheld.

Preparations for the state visit of the prince and princess of Wales to Ireland in 1868, which was to be the great showpiece of Abercorn's term of office, commenced in early March once the queen had granted approval. Confident that the popular reception would not be hostile, he set about elaborating an unprecedented display of hospitality for the royal couple. The visit (15–20 April 1868) surpassed expectations in terms of popular interest, crowds cheering the royal carriage on arrival and following the prince of Wales to Punchestown races, and out hunting in Wicklow. Abercorn ensured that Cardinal Cullen met and dined with the prince and princess on the first evening. The pomp and glory of a grand ball for 3,500 subscribers at Dublin castle, and above all the glittering ceremonial of the installation of the prince of Wales as knight of the order of St Patrick in Christ Church cathedral on 18 April, seemed in the delighted aftermath to have set the scene for a return to seasonal royal residence in Ireland. However, he found the summer of 1868 taken up with the dull business of canvassing and registration for the forthcoming general election. To his ineffable happiness, and to general surprise, Disraeli arranged that he be promoted to the dukedom of Abercorn (10 August 1868). He resigned from the viceroyalty on the collapse of the tory government in November. It was said that Disraeli affectionately dramatised the vanities of Abercorn's character in the person

of the hero of the novel *Lothair*, published in May 1870. Made grand master of the Irish freemasons in 1874, he was again approached in February that year to take up the office of lord lieutenant of Ireland. Abercorn yielded after an initial refusal, convincing Disraeli that he was swayed by the idea of a triumphal entry into Dublin. His tenure of office was a good deal more humdrum and even more stultifying than in the 1860s – ‘the gilt was off the gingerbread’ (Hamilton, *Reminiscences*, 114). In November 1876 Abercorn resigned, ostensibly on the ground of his wife's ill health. Absorbed principally with domestic affairs at Baronscourt for the remainder of his life, he contributed some amendments to the land bill under parliamentary debate in 1881, and voiced grave disapproval of the direction of Gladstonian policy in Ireland in the house of lords (1883, 1884). He died 31 October 1885 of respiratory failure at Baronscourt, and was buried in the family vault in the demesne church.

He married (25 October 1832) Louisa Jane (1812–1905), second daughter of the 6th duke of Bedford, and sister of Lord John Russell (later prime minister and 1st Earl Russell). They had six sons and seven daughters. Abercorn's papers (originals and typescripts) are held in PRONI.

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