

Meredith (Meredyth), Robert

by Colum Kenny

Meredith (Meredyth), Robert (a.1597–1668), chancellor of the exchequer in Ireland, was one of two sons of Richard Meredith (qv), Church of Ireland bishop of Leighlin and dean of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin, and his wife Sarah (née Bathoe). Richard Meredith, who had first come to Ireland as chaplain to Sir John Perrot (qv), died in 1597. Robert was admitted into Lincoln's Inn in 1611. In 1618 he married Anne, a second cousin of Sir Adam Loftus (qv) (1568?–1643) and daughter of Sir William Usher, clerk of the council in Ireland. Loftus, who himself married Robert's widowed mother, became lord chancellor of Ireland in 1619.

Robert Meredith, of Greenhills, Co. Kildare, was probably the 'Mr Meredith' who sought a position in the court of wards about 1623. By 1625 he was secretary to Loftus. The Irish commissioners in 1627 let it be known that they had 'a high opinion of him', and in 1634 he was appointed chancellor of the exchequer. He retained that position, throughout the interregnum and even after the restoration of the monarchy, until his death. Not without reason, in 1806, the legal historian Bartholomew Duhigg (qv) described Robert Meredith as a 'crafty time-server' (Duhigg, 178).

Meredith worked closely as a privy councillor with the lord deputy, Thomas Wentworth (qv). On 6 September 1635 he was knighted. During the 1630s he was a member of the court of castle chamber, one of the commissioners for the remedy of defective titles and a commissioner for Ulster. In return for his services but 'especially his diligent care of the customs' Meredith was awarded an increase in his remuneration as chancellor from August 1637. He was actively associated in castle chamber with the abuse of crown prerogative there, including the period after Wentworth departed when he participated in the final adjudication of that court for which any substantial record has been found and which its historian J. G. Crawford has described as 'exceptionally harsh' (Crawford, 589). However, Meredith had also plotted with Loftus and others against the lord deputy, who was trusted neither by catholics nor by protestants in Ireland. He managed to survive Wentworth's fall.

Some months after the catholic rebellion of 1641, Meredith conducted with Lord Lambart (qv) (1600–60), governor of Dublin, the examination of Conor Maguire (qv), 2nd Baron Maguire of Enniskillen, who confessed to them that there had been a plot to seize Dublin Castle and secure or kill the lords justices and council. Meredith was one of the privy councillors who in 1642 chillingly authorised James Butler (qv) (1610–88), 12th earl of Ormond, whom Charles I had appointed lieutenant-general of the army, 'to wound, kill, slay, and destroy, by all the ways and means he may, all the said rebels, and their adherents and relievers, and burn, spoil, waste, consume, destroy, and demolish all the places, towns and houses where the said rebels are, or have been, relieved and harboured; and all the corn and hay there, and kill and

destroy all the men there inhabiting able to bear arms' (Carte, *Ormonde*, iii, 61). A puritan, Meredith did not favour efforts by royalists to appease the rebels by making peace with catholics. The royalist James Tuchet (qv), 3rd earl of Castlehaven, alleged that in 1642 Meredith browbeat witnesses in an attempt to drum up a case against him.

When a peace was negotiated between rebels and royalists Meredith found himself constrained and intimidated. One of the Eustaces of Castlemartin, Co. Kildare, a protestant family that favoured concessions to catholics and to which the future lord chancellor Maurice Eustace (qv) belonged, burnt Meredith's house. In revenge, early in 1643, Meredith's brother Thomas and some of his soldiers entered the chapel at Castlemartin and dishonoured the Eustace family by breaking one of its tombs. In July that same year, Robert and his fellow council members Sir Adam Loftus, Sir William Parsons (qv) and Sir John Temple (qv) (1600–77) were arrested for actively supporting the English parliament, now at war with the king, and were imprisoned. Meredith only regained full liberty of movement when in 1645 the English parliament agreed to exchange Sir James Ware (qv) and others held in the Tower of London for eleven persons jailed by the 'enemy' in Dublin. As parliament thereafter worked to remove Ormond, the king's lord lieutenant, it twice sent commissioners from London to negotiate his surrender of military control, firstly in 1646 and again in 1647: only Meredith and the prominent settler politician Sir Robert King (qv) (d. 1657) served on both commissions. They were also among those to whom, under articles of agreement, Ormond handed over Dublin and his regalia of authority in June 1647.

During 1648 the English parliament approved Meredith as keeper of the great seal of Ireland in place of William Hilton, who had briefly held that responsibility. By October 1650 Meredith was said to have 'daily met and faithfully laboured' (*CSPI 1647–60*, 781) with Sir Ger(r)ard Lowther (qv), Sir James Barry (qv) (1603–73) and Sir Paul Davies (qv) 'for two years and three months' as commissioners and trustees of the ordinances for raising £50,000 for Ireland (*CSPD 1650*, 394)). His skill at raising revenue, in years when military campaigns required much funding, helped him to survive as chancellor of the exchequer.

During the interregnum Meredith also served as a commissioner 'for hearing and determining all such differences as may have arisen' (Dunlop, 603) between the adventurers concerning lands, and was commissioned with others in October 1656 to inquire into the state of public revenues. While F. E. Ball (qv) does not include the office of chancellor of the exchequer in his definitive *Judges in Ireland, 1221–1921* (1926), it is clear that Meredith in various capacities long exercised judicial functions. In 1655, for example, he and Sir Gerrard Lowther jointly signed the decree in a case decided at the Four Courts in which two complainants had successfully challenged a decision of the attorney general. Moreover, while there is no record of his admission to King's Inns, he regularly attended council meetings of the benchers there both before and after the restoration.

After the restoration, Meredith was reappointed chancellor of the exchequer (patent dated 6 December 1660) and a member of the Irish privy council by Charles II; he attended council regularly. That he had survived as chancellor was not due to the Eustace family, for the new lord chancellor, Sir Maurice Eustace, appeared at one point to have successfully opposed his appointment. A senior official in Whitehall informed Eustace that 'the king approves your reasons for not swearing in Sir Robert Meredith, who forfeited the appointment given him by the late king, when he quitted the "right seal" whereby he was appointed chancellor of the exchequer and undertook to act "under the late horrid usurper's seal". His majesty is resolved to appoint another chancellor of the exchequer' (*CSPI 1660–62*, 141). The Eustaces would not have forgotten the Meredith attack on their family tomb, as Meredith recalled the burning of his house. It was said that Colonel Maurice Eustace 'of the Irish party' was long 'hunted for his life by Sir Robert Meredith knight, one of Oliver [Cromwell]'s party, to gain his estate' (*CSPI 1660–62*, 91). Indeed, like a number of his eminent contemporaries Meredith benefited considerably from the many transfers of lands during this period and he acquired property not only in Co. Kildare but also in Co. Carlow, King's County (Offaly) and elsewhere. In 1640 he had persuaded the Irish parliament to pass a private act for better securing lands and the rectory of Kilberry and Clony, Co. Kildare, which the dean and chapter of St Patrick's cathedral had leased to him (legislation that was repealed only in 2009 by the Statute Law Revision Act). Meredith represented a number of constituencies in the Irish parliament, including Boyle, Co. Roscommon (1613–15), Augher, Co. Tyrone (1634–5), Athy, Co. Kildare (1640–41), and Jamestown, Co. Leitrim (1661–6).

He died on 17 October 1668 and was buried in the Meredith family vault in St Patrick's cathedral (by 'torch light without expense', if his last wishes were honoured). He left his widow 'the house in the lane leading from Church Street to Mary Abbey' near King's Inns (Wright, 135). She died on 12 May 1669.

Three of Meredith's sons came to prominence: Adam, who wrote a controversial pamphlet attacking Ormond and his allies that was published with Sir John Temple's help in 1646, died in battle in 1647; William, who was returned to the protectorate parliament for Co. Wicklow in 1654, one of a significant number of electoral victories for the old protestant interest over the army that year, died in 1665; Charles, the third son, who married Sir Robert King's daughter Mary in 1655, sat in the Irish parliament for Old Leighlin (1661–6) and Gowran (1692–3); he served as chancellor of the exchequer (1674–87 and 1693–5), was appointed to the Irish privy council in 1671, and died in 1700. Meredith's daughters included Anne (died 11 July 1637); Grissel, who married George Carr, secretary to both Wentworth and Ormond and sometime clerk of the hanaper; Alice, who married in 1653 Charles Coote, 2nd earl of Mountrath; and Elizabeth, who married Thomas Juxon, an English adventurer, puritan and sugar trader whose noted diary of contemporary events in London was published in the Camden series by Cambridge University Press in 1999.

---

Letter from Sir Francis Blundell concerning proposed appointment of Mr Meredith as receiver of the court of wards in Ireland, 26 Aug. [1623?] (TNA (PRO), Manchester state papers, 30/15/2 (NLI microfilm P6034)); examination of Edward Roe, ensign to Sir Thomas Meredyth, kt, taken at Castle Martin the 24th day of June 1643 (NLI, Ormond papers, MS 11,060); Bodl., Carte MSS 161, f. 47; 'The black book of King's Inns' (King's Inns Library, Dublin, MS B1/1); *Commons' jn. Ire.*; *Lords' jn. Ire.*; E. Borlase, *History of the execrable Irish rebellion* (1680); 'A remonstrance of the right honourable James, earl of Castlehaven, the lord Audley' in John Lodge (ed.), *Desiderata curiosa Hibernica* (1772), vol. ii; John Lodge, *Peerage of Ireland* (1789); *Lib. mun. pub. Hib.*; Burke, *Peerage*; *The records of the Honorable Society of Lincoln's Inn* (1896), vol. i; T. Carte, *An history of the life of James duke of Ormonde* (3 vols, 1735–6), *passim*; B. T. Duhigg, *History of King's Inns* (1806); *Cobbett's complete collection of state trials*, iv (1809), 79, 170, 173; W. B. Wright, *The Ussher memoirs: genealogical memoirs of the Ussher family in Ireland* (1889); R. Dunlop, *Ireland under the commonwealth* (1913), *passim*; CSPD; CSPI; J. L. J. Hughes, *Patentee officers in Ireland* (IMC, 1960), 90; *HIP*, v, 243–4; P. Little, *Lord Broghill and the Cromwellian union with Ireland and Scotland* (2004), *passim*; J. G. Crawford, *A star chamber court in Ireland: the court of castle chamber, 1571–1641* (2005); J. H. Bernard and R. Refaüssé (ed.), *Register of the cathedral of St Patrick, Dublin, 1677–1869* (2007); James Kelly and Mary Ann Lyons (ed.), *The proclamations of Ireland 1660–1820* (IMC, 5 vols, 2014), vol. i, *passim*