

de Blaquiere, Sir John

by James Kelly

de Blaquiere, Sir John (1732–1812), 1st baronet and 1st Baron de Blaquiere, politician, of Ardkill, Co. Londonderry, was born 15 May 1732, fifth son of Jean de Blaquiere, an *émigré* huguenot merchant of Greenwich, Kent, England, and Mary Elizabeth de Blaquiere (née de Varennes). First employed in the counting-house of a London merchant, de Blaquiere did not find the work to his liking, and purchased a military commission. A major in the 18th Dragoons in 1759, he was made a brevet lieutenant-colonel in 1762 and a full lieutenant-colonel in the 17th Dragoons in the following year. During the mid 1760s de Blaquiere's regiment was stationed in Ireland, and it has been claimed that it was during this time that he made friends with Lord Townshend (qv) when the latter was lord lieutenant. However, it was his acquaintance with Simon, Earl Harcourt (qv), Townshend's successor in Ireland, that provided him with the entrée to politics that set the tone for the rest of his career. As ambassador to the French court, Harcourt brought him to Paris in 1771 as secretary to the legation there, and was sufficiently impressed to determine that de Blaquiere should become his chief secretary the following year on his appointment as lord lieutenant in Ireland.

As a result of the undoing of the undertaker system by Townshend, the profile of the chief secretary and the centrality of that office to the effective administration of the kingdom of Ireland and the maintenance of the Anglo–Irish nexus had increased greatly. It was now anticipated that he would play a key role both in the maintenance of a Castle majority and in the presentation of government business in the house of commons. This was beyond the immediate capacities of de Blaquiere, a political novice. The general expectation was that he would leave the political cut-and-thrust of the commons to those more experienced than he, and concentrate on administrative duties. Elected to represent the government borough of Old Leighlin and appointed to the Irish privy council shortly after his arrival in Ireland, de Blaquiere rose to the challenge of his new office with unanticipated speed. Content to allow Harcourt take the lead in determining strategy and policy and to yield to experienced parliamentarians such as Philip Tisdall (qv), John Hely-Hutchinson (qv), and, to a lesser extent, Henry Flood (qv) in the commons, de Blaquiere gradually imposed himself on the job. His coolness under fire when he was challenged to a duel (February 1773) by the irascible Beauchamp Bagenal (qv) helped, as it won him considerable public and political applause, while his willingness to stand forward in the house of commons was also respected. De Blaquiere was not a natural orator: he was possessed, according to one contemporary, of a 'weak, thin' voice and poor powers of projection, but he compensated for this by a careful choice of language (MacDougall, 152) which, while it did not appease all, satisfied many. His forte as chief secretary was man-management, and he employed his convivial skills and enthusiasm for entertaining to good effect in this cause. He also had few

qualms about bestowing patronage, which caused Harcourt and him to agree to an exceptional number of requests for offices and pensions, and which, in the case of a protracted negotiation with Henry Flood, resulted in an agreement that was quite out of the ordinary. Nor did de Blaquiere neglect his own interests. Having secured the office of bailiff of the Phoenix Park, which paid only £40 a year, he had the salary augmented to £500 a year, and the modest lodge and grounds that came with the position expanded and developed through the expenditure of £8,000 from the public purse. In 1775 he acquired the office of alnager, which was worth £3,000 a year for life, and this combined with his marriage in the same year to Eleanor Dobson of Anne's Grove, Co. Cork, which brought him the Ardkill estate in Co Londonderry, to give him financial independence and to ensure that he remained in Ireland when Lord Harcourt returned home after a broadly successful viceroyalty in 1776. It proved a shrewd move, as de Blaquiere was made a baronet (1784), a trustee of the linen board (1784), and a commissioner of the Dublin paving board (1786).

He also continued to be politically active. Content to play the role of Castle loyalist during the late 1770s, he was so dismayed by the inability of the earl of Buckinghamshire (qv) to rise to the challenge of managing Ireland that he joined with other devotees of the British connection in urging his recall in 1779. De Blaquiere's commitment to the security of the British connection remained a constant thereafter, but from his position as MP for Carlingford (1783–90), Charleville (1790–97), and Newtownards (1797–1800) he also promoted a range of economic and social issues. He had most impact on prison reform, where he played an important role in securing the enactment of the innovative prisons amendment act of 1787. His efforts to secure an inquiry into the maladministration of the Foundling Hospital in the early 1790s were less successful, because of the fear among conservative political interests for the future of such institutions as the charter schools. Ironically, de Blaquiere was at one with conservatives in opposing the admission of Catholics to the political process in the 1790s, and was a warm proponent of a legislative union at the end of the decade.

For his support for the union, he was elevated to the peerage as Baron de Blaquiere, but when the administration were unable to deliver on their promise to him that it should be representative, he insisted that they provide him with a seat at the house of commons at Westminster. Despite complications arising from his continuing possession of the Irish alnagership, he was returned to represent Rye (1801–2) and Downton (1803–6) in successive parliaments. During this time, de Blaquiere was a useful supporter of government policy in Ireland, a proponent of a strong security response to disorder, and an opponent of Catholic relief. The accession of the 'ministry of all the talents' deprived him of government support and hastened the end of his political career. His death on 27 August 1812 brought the curtain down on the career of a man who during his lifetime was deemed to put personal interests before those of the public. There is much to sustain this view: he certainly did well out of politics, but he was also a man with a strong humanitarian instinct which vitiates the accusation that he was purely motivated by self-interest.

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Henry MacDougall, *Sketches of Irish political characters* (1799), 150–53; *DNB*; W. E. Harcourt (ed.), *Harcourt papers* (15 vols, privately printed, 1876–1903); G.E.C., *Baronetage*; B. Bayley Butler, 'Lady Arabella Denny 1707–1792', *Dublin Hist. Rec.*, ix, no. 1 (1947), 8–9; Joan Tighe, 'Sir John Blaquiere in Dublin', *Dublin Hist. Rec.*, xxiv, no. 2 (1971), 3–14; Oliver MacDonagh, *The inspector general: Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick and social reform 1783–1802* (1981); *Hist. parl.: commons 1790–1820*; James Kelly, 'That damn'd thing called honour': duelling in Ireland 1570–1860 (1995); id., *Henry Flood: patriots and politics in eighteenth-century Ireland* (1998)

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