

Ireland's Lord Lieutenant: '...a fount of all that is slimy in our national life'

By Mark Duncan

The inauguration of a new Lord Lieutenant for Ireland was an occasion for pomp and ceremony. In February 1915, when Sir Ivor Churchill Guest, the 1st Viscount Wimborne (along with his close entourage of a private secretary and two aid-de-camps) arrived in Dublin as a replacement for the departing Lord Aberdeen, the attendance at Dublin Castle for his ceremonial investiture encompassed the political, administrative, military and social establishment of pre-Independence Ireland. Attired mostly in 'sombre morning dress' were men and women of land and title, Lord Justices and members of the privy Council, the Governor of the Bank of Ireland, university presidents, the Presidents of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce and the Incorporated Law Society, as well as consuls from America, France and Italy.

The centre-piece of the ceremony was the swearing of the oath of allegiance, after which the new Viceroy was handed the Sword of State and invested with the collar and insignia of the Order of St. Patrick as Grand Master. At the moment that the ceremonial concluded, a fifteen gun salute was fired from across the River Liffey in the Phoenix Park.

The whole occasion didn't so much impress as intrigue observers. It was, the *Irish Independent* reported, 'quaint and interesting, but more formal than brilliant.'

That, of course, was really what it was all about. Events of this sort were primarily about the performance of ritual and the perpetuation of long-established tradition. And yet, within a decade, the office of Lord Lieutenant was no more. The role of Irish viceroy (as its office-holder was also known), was abolished, swept away by the revolutionary tide that resulted in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

In many ways, the abolition of the office serves to underline both the scale of the separatist achievement and the extent of the Constitutional fracture brought about by the political and social upheaval of the 1913-23 period. For centuries, the viceroy had served as the representative of the British crown and the chief governor of Ireland. The role – in its various

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¹ Irish Independent, 19 February 1915



manifestations –originated in the last years of the twelfth century when Hugh de Lacy was appointed as King Henry II's representative in Ireland in 1172.²

As an institution of State, it was subject to repeated and significant change thereafter. Indeed, across the following seven centuries, the manner in which it evolved was reflective of the changing character of British rule in Ireland, the office straddling a time-frame which encompassed the proclamation of Ireland as a distinct 'kingdom' under the English Crown in 1541, and its later absorption, by way of the Act of Union of 1800, into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

While security and the centralisation of power were principal motivations behind this legislative union, the maintenance of the viceroy – and of an administration at Dublin Castle – emphasised Irish exceptionality. Ireland may now have been part of a larger Union, but it was still governed as a place apart. In their introduction to an excellent 2012 collection of essays on the Irish Lord Lieutenancy, the historians Peter Gray and Olwen Purdue point out that: 'As both royal surrogate and, in theory if not always in practice, the working head of a subordinate administration, the Irish Lord Lieutenant was an increasingly anomalous office within the United Kingdom. Neither the Welsh (1536) or Scottish (1707) unions maintained a separate executive or court for those territories'.³

If the preservation of the Irish Lord Lieutenant suggested a semblance of continuity between pre and post Union affairs, there is no denying that the effect of the Constitutional comingtogether of 1800 was profound and far-reaching.

For a start, Dublin was deprived of its parliament as Irish elected members were now compelled to travel to the House of Commons in London for debates. More crucially, however, the entire system of governance was reshaped by the fact that legislative, fiscal and administrative policy decisions were thereafter made in London. Responsibility for implementing those decisions in Ireland lay with the Chief Secretary's Office in Dublin Castle, which was charged with the running of day-to-day Irish business and which, over

² The extent of the evolution of the role can be seen by the various names by which its holders were known. The chief governor of Ireland was known at various times as Justiciar, King's Lieutenant, Lord Deputy and, finally, as Lord Lieutenant. The term, Lord Lieutenant, was the term applied to all chief governors after the 1690s.

³ Peter Gray and Olwen Purdue eds., The Irish Lord Lieutenancy: c. 1541-1922 (2012) p. 2



time, was staffed by a burgeoning body of paid officials. By the end of the nineteenth century, more than 3,000 people were employed in central and local government, a ten-fold increase from 1841.

The growth in the importance of the office of Chief Secretary for Ireland coincided with a diminution in that of the Lord Lieutenant. Increasingly, the role of the viceroy became titular and ceremonial, monarchical almost. There were still duties to perform, including the appointment of various office-holders, the exercise of the prerogative of mercy and correspondence with the Prime Minister in London. Beyond that, however, the ability of a Lord Lieutenant to make a mark was only somewhat dependent on the power of the individual personality. Some were clearly more competent and ambitious than others, yet there were also those like the Earl of Clarendon (1847-52) whose desire to exert influence, however ill-judged, was frustrated by constraints on resources and the circumscribed nature of the role.⁴ The sheer ineffectiveness of the Lord Lieutenant was such that questions as to the utility of the office frequently arose: in 1823, 1830 and 1844, belief in the redundancy of the role was strong enough to justify debates about its abolition in London's House of Commons.⁵

Diminished politically, the viceroyalty of Ireland was, as the 19th century progressed, considered neither a plumb job nor a particularly popular one. It got so that the mere task of filling it was no straightforward matter for a British Prime Minister: few relished the prospect of a near permanent life in Ireland in a posting that offered neither a springboard to better things nor, despite it being well-paid, a route to easy riches.⁶

And yet, the life of the Irish Lord Lieutenant was hardly one of hardship. The incumbent lived in the splendour of Dublin's Phoenix Park in a house built in the mid-18th century by Park Ranger Nathaniel Clements before being subsequently acquired, for a sum of £25,000 in 1782, as an official residence for the viceroys.⁷ A world of parties and privilege here

⁴ See 'Villiers, George William Frederick,' by Bridget Hourican, Dictionary of Irish Biography

⁵ S.J. Connolly, *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (1998); also K. Theodore Hoppen, A Question None Could Answer: 'What Was the Viceroyalty For? 1800-1921, in Peter Gray and Olwen Purdue eds., *The Irish Lord Lieutenancy: c. 1541-1922* (2012) p. 145

⁶ Admittedly, many of the incumbents were independently wealthy and therefore in no need of a route to further riches. See K. Theodore Hoppen, Op. Cit. in Peter Gray and Olwen Purdue eds., *The Irish Lord Lieutenancy: c.* 1541-1922 (2012) pp. 137-139

⁷ http://www.president.ie/official-residence/



prevailed, the vice-regal lodge coming to occupy a central place in the elite social life of Dublin in the aftermath of the Union. It was here, for instance, that successive Lord Lieutenants hosted lavish balls and dinners. And it was here too that visiting British royalty resided on those infrequent occasions when they chose to visit Ireland.⁸

By the 1880s, in tune the changing temper of the times, the viceregal lodge acquired its first pro-Home Rule viceroy. John Campbell Gordon, or Lord Aberdeen, was appointed under the administration of William Gladstone, whose liberal project to reconcile Ireland to its place within the British Empire involved a policy of pacification and the addressing of long-standing nationalist grievances. When Gladstone's administration fell and Aberdeen departed - for Canada - it was only on a temporary basis. In 1905, Aberdeen returned after he was reappointed under another British liberal administration, that of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. He remained in office until making way Lord Wimborne, Winston Churchill's cousin, a decade later – the longest tenure of any Lord Lieutenant after the Union.⁹

Long-serving he may have been, but Aberdeen did little to arrest the erosion of his office's influence. In the power balance between the roles of Lord Lieutenant and Chief Secretary, Aberdeen was clearly the lesser figure and the primacy of the Lord Lieutenant in the executive government of Ireland remained more theoretical than real. 'Practically', as William Anson observed in a book on the Laws and Customs of the Constitution, 1892, the executive government is 'conducted for all important purposes by the Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant.'

But it wasn't only in the running of Irish government affairs that Aberdeen was overshadowed; he was equally eclipsed within his own marriage – and not just in physical stature.¹¹ Although she was not consulted by Aberdeen on his decision to first accept the Irish

⁸ Queen Victoria, for instance, visited several times and in 1900 she stayed at the vice-regal lodge for a full three weeks

⁹ The Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell informed his under secretary, Sir Mathew Nathan, in December 1914 (when it was known he would be Aberdeen's replacement) that Wimborne was 'a crude young man without any fine strands of character but if he could keep his temper he did not see why, with his charming wife, he should do badly and perhaps he might do really well.' Leon Ó Broin, *Dublin Castle and the 1916 Rising* (1970) p. 31 ¹⁰ William Anson, Laws & Customs of the Constitution, ed. 1892, p. 189. Quoted in 1916: *Rebellion in Ireland: report of the Royal Commission*

¹¹ The historian Leon Ó Broin wrote: The Aberdeens were an earnest, well meaning pair who looked rather grotesque when they appeared together; he, bearded and small and polite, she disproportionately large, matronly and masterful.' Leon O Broin, *The Chief Secretary: Augustine Birrell in Ireland* (1969) p. 125



viceroyalty and was far from enthused at the prospect of crossing the Irish Sea, Aberdeen's wife, Ishbel, would enjoy the higher profile and, in many ways, exert a greater influence on Irish public life than her husband. In May 1914, the *Sinn Féin* newspaper declared that it was '...her ladyship....not the babbling creature who wears the title is the real Governor-General of Ireland..."

In articulating such a view, however caustically, *Sinn Féin* was merely voicing that which was widely understood. The energy and seeming restlessness of Ishbel, or Lady Aberdeen, made her appear almost ubiquitous: she was indefatigable in her championing of charitable causes, social reform and home-grown Irish industrial development. Her philanthropic impulses led her to spearhead, amongst other things, an anti-tuberculosis campaign and, in the wake of the Dublin housing crisis of 1913-14, to promote improved town planning for the city and elsewhere. A supporter of women's suffrage (though unaligned to any Irish suffragist organisation) she didn't confine her activism to Ireland, being twice elected president of the International Congress of Women. ¹³

Impressive as all this undoubtedly was, it did nothing to insulate Ishbel – or her husband - from criticism, and may even have helped to fuel some of it.

For all that it was associated with worthy causes and for all that it was supportive of the Irish home rule cause, the Aberdeen viceroyalty was mercilessly derided by its opponents. If unionists were instinctively hostile on the grounds of the couple's Home Rule sympathies, socialists and advanced nationalists were no less sparing in their scorn.

Arthur Griffith, the founder and editor of *Sinn Féin*, was one of the more unforgiving and constant of critics, believing the Aberdeen's benevolence to be a mere mask which concealed the hard realities of British government in Ireland. Moreover, Griffith argued that the maintenance of a 'mock British King and a mock British Court in Ireland' was corrupting.

¹² Sinn Féin, 10 May 1914

¹³ *The Irish Citizen* claimed that the suffragette cause in Ireland was denied the support of a Suffragist Lord Lieutenant because of the 'theory of impartiality of the King's representative'. Irish Citizen, 9 January 1915.



'The British Lord Lieutenant' he wrote as early as 1906, 'is maintained in Ireland as a fount for all that is slimy in our national life.' 14

As it happened, Griffith would play a part in hastening the eventual departure of the Aberdeen's from Ireland after his own newspaper precipitated a public furore when it disclosed details of a private letter sent by Ishbel to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal* on the need to protect against unionist control of the Irish Red Cross. ¹⁵

Griffith's criticisms of the institution continued unabated, however: for him, the viceroyalty constituted a cornerstone of Britain's imperial architecture in Ireland that needed to be dismantled in its entirety. He suggested that the office at once represented Ireland's separateness and subjugation. In 1915, in the very first issue of *Nationality*, the newspaper he founded to succeed those that had been suppressed under war-time censorship, he stated that: 'A Viceroy, a separate Executive and separate Law Courts remain to attest to the disaffected England's admission that Ireland is an alien nation.' ¹⁶

That Griffith focussed on the symbolism of the office is significant. As the viceroyalty of Lord Aberdeen gave way to that of Lord Wimborne, there really was little more to it. In the pithy assessment of the historian Theo Hoppen, the Lord Lieutenant had become 'an irrelevance ignored by everyone with any influence on events'.¹⁷

Just how irrelevant was underlined in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising when the British Government appointed a Royal Commission to examine what exactly had occurred in Dublin and why. In the report that resulted there was no sugar-coating the dysfunctionality of the Irish system of government. The conclusions of the Commission were damning in the extreme. Not alone did it declare the government of Ireland to be 'anomalous in quiet times and almost unworkable in times of crisis', the Commission also pointed to the very obvious

¹⁴ Sinn Fein, 4 August 1906. Quoted in Patrick Maume, *Lady Microbe and the Kailyard Viceroyalty: The Aberdeen Viceroyalty, Welfare Monarchy, and the Politics of Philanthropy*, in Peter Gray and Olwen Purdue eds., *The Irish Lord Lieutenancy: c. 1541-1922* (2012) p. 207

 ¹⁵ Patrick Maume, 'Lady Aberdeen, Gordon (Marjoribanks), Dame Ishbel Maria', Dictionary of Irish Biography.
¹⁶ Nationality Vol. 1 No 1, Saturday 19 June 1915

¹⁷ K. Theodore Hoppen, A Question None Could Answer: 'What Was the Viceroyalty For? 1800-1921, in Peter Gray and Olwen Purdue eds., *The Irish Lord Lieutenancy: c. 1541-1922* (2012), p. 135



gap that existed between the roles ascribed to institutions and the powers that actually exercised. 18

So while the Lord Lieutenant was 'by the terms of his patent...responsible for the civil government of the country, and the naval and military forces of the Crown in Ireland are under his orders.... all powers and responsibility are in practice vested in the Chief Secretary. His policy is the policy of the British Government as a whole, and it is obviously impossible that there should be any other independent authority or responsibility in Ireland. For many years past the office of the Lord Lieutenant has been a ceremonial office; apart from the exercise of the prerogative of mercy he has no executive functions. Proclamations, appointments and other State documents are issued in his name, but they are not before him for signature, without previous consultation. He is only furnished with information as to the state of the country which he nominally governs, when he asks for it, and then as a matter of courtesy. The military and naval forces in Ireland take their orders from the War Office and Admiralty respectively.⁷¹⁹

The Royal Commission investigating the Irish Rebellion essentially exonerated the Lord Lieutenant. Quite apart from the acknowledgement of his limited executive role, it also noted evidence to the effect that Wimborne had advised that the leaders of the Rising should have been arrested on the morning of Easter Sunday, a course of action that had been deferred as the under-secretary in Dublin Castle, Sir Mathew Nathan, sought to consult with the Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell, who was then absent in London.

One of those who spoke in support of Wimborne, pleading his case to the Prime Minister, was his influential aide Sir Basil Blackwood. Elsewhere, however, Blackwood confided that Wimborne's conduct in the crisis had been far from faultless: in his contrary version of events, recounted to Lady Cynthia Asquith, Blackwood told of a brandy swilling Lord

¹⁸ 1916 *Rebellion in Ireland: report of the Royal Commission.* Accessible online at: http://www.dippam.com/eppi/documents/22373/page/733877.

¹⁹ Ibid. The historian Charles Townsend noted that the Government appeared 'undisturbed by the findings of the report and its advice on the system of government – it laid blame on the division of the police forces and the confusion within the administration. The system of government therefore remained unchanged. 'In fact', he wrote, 'by 1919 the structure of the Irish executive was to become perhaps more confused than it had been before the Rising. The prime reason for this was the traditional British lack of 'touch' in Irish affairs. The real effect of the Rising was not understood, and most political efforts in 1917 centred on the abortive Irish Convention.' Charles Townsend, *The British campaign in Ireland, 1919-1921 : the development of political and military policies* (1975) p. 2



Lieutenant who had delighted in the opportunity the Rising had presented to 'at last' position himself 'really in the limelight'. He remarked on how Wimborne had been 'superlatively theatrical and insisted on his poor secretaries using the most melodramatically grandiloquent language down the telephone – standing over them to enforce his dictation: "It is His Ex's *command.*" On listening to Blackwood, Cynthia Asquith, the wife of the Prime Minister's son, unsympathetically concluded: 'Altogether he seems to have behaved like the Emperor of Asses.'20

Overall, the events that flowed from the 1916 Rising – and the authorities' response to it - had the effect of radicalising Irish politics and transforming the context in which Britain's Irish executive, whose structure remained remarkably unchanged, was expected to operate. For those occupying leading positions within that administration, the pressures building from within the country were compounded by those from without; namely, ongoing demands of the First World War and the increasingly urgent demands for more troops to serve on the Western Front. In 1918, Wimborne, who had watched powerlessly the unspooling of Ireland's established political order, made way for a new Lord Lieutenant, whose job was essentially to enforce Conscription on a country whose hostility to the measure was already deep-rooted and, amongst nationalists, widely shared. The role was entrusted to a military man –one of long standing and considerable distinction. Sir John Denton Pinkstone, or Lord French, was a veteran of the South African War of 1899-1902, whose rise through the ranks of the British Army was such that, by the time the First World War erupted in August 1914, he was considered the obvious choice to lead – as Commander-in-Chief - the British Expeditionary Force that set sail for France.

Lord French's war experience was far from triumphant, however - a series of setbacks, failed offensives and heavy troop losses were stains on a record of command which ended with his resignation in December 1915. Ireland, as it happened, proved a no more pleasant a posting, though French's arrival did, briefly, signal a restoration of the political primacy of the Irish viceroyalty. That was because the new Lord Lieutenant assumed for himself a leadership role in Irish affairs and his determination to assert himself on issues of policy was explicit in both his advocacy of a draconian, security-oriented approach to the growth of the Irish separatist

²⁰ Lady Cynthia Asquith, *Diaries* 1915-1918 (1968) p. 163



movement and his creation, in an effort to improve the administrative matters, of a series of Councils to advise on military and governance issues.

In the end, the French Viceroyalty became associated less with reform than repression and failure – the failure to introduce Conscription in 1918 and the failure, from 1919 onwards, to avert Ireland's slide into violent struggle for independence.²¹ As that violence escalated, French became increasingly sidelined as power swung back to a Chief Secretary and a cohort of senior civil servants at Dublin Castle who were more inclined towards conciliation than the solitary pursuit of a futile strategy of suppression.²²

In April 1921, having survived a number of Republican assassination attempts²³, French was removed from Ireland against his will and with his reputation further damaged.²⁴ Mark Sturgis, a leading British civil servant in Dublin Castle at the time, noted how French, on leaving Ireland, cut a 'terribly pathetic figure – such a little while ago the hero of England and now goes out to nothing.'²⁵

In his place came Lord FitzAlan, the last Lord Lieutenant and the first Catholic incumbent, the prohibition on Catholic becoming Viceroys having been abolished under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. FitzAlan's religious background was calculated as a sop to Irish nationalist sentiment, but it came too late to be of any practical consequence. Put simply, it cut little ice with either the nationalist press or the Catholic prelates. On being asked his view

²¹ Conscription was not enforced, notwithstanding French's original determination. Instead the Cabinet accepted Shortt's proposal of a voluntary recruiting campaign

²² According to Michael Hopkinson, following the arrival in Ireland of Hamar Greenwood as Chief Secretary (in late March 1920)and the appointment of Neville Macready as Commander-in-Chief (as Llyod's George's personal choice), French became 'a mere figurehead.' Michael Hopkinson ed., *The last days of Dublin Castle : the Mark Sturgis diaries* (1999) p. 5

²³ French recorded in his diary in Dcember 1919 that he was attacked by IRA 'bombs and revolvers' outside the Phoenix Park. See Ronan Fanning, *The Fatal Path: British Government and the Irish Revolution 1910-1922* (2013) p. 215. Another attempted ambush of Lord Frecnch, in Cobh ion July 1920, is recounted in the Bureau of Military History Witness Statements: of WS Ref: 1424, Witness: Michael J Burke, Captain IRA, Cork, 1921. http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1444.pdf#page=7

²⁴ See Charles Townsend, *The British Campaign in Ireland, 1919-21* (1975) p. 174. In his diary the civil servant Mark Sturgis refers to the reluctance of the Viceroy to leave. On 9 March 1921, he writes: ''His Ex is not happy about his position – the long and short of it is he doesn't want to be bundled out at a moment's notice while the country is in such a state that he could not go to his home. I'm not sure myself that now that the time has come to appoint a new Viceroy under the new Act he doesn't want to quit at all.' Michael Hopkinson, *The Last Days of Dublin Castle: The Diaries of Mark Sturgis* (1999) p. 139

²⁵ Quoted in Patrick Maume, 'French, Sir John Denton Pinkstone', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Sturgis recorded his fondness for French, who had been 'very kind' to him. See also *Diaries*, p. 156.



of the appointment, Cardinal Logue, the leader of the Irish Catholic Church, acidly retorted that "Ireland would as soon have a Catholic hangman". ²⁶

Within the walls of Dublin Castle, Mark Sturgis had arrived at a similar assessment. Confiding to his diary, he wrote: 'That he is a Catholic is outweighed in their view by the facts that he is an Englishman, and a Tory politician, and Irish RCs dislike English RCs anyway.'²⁷

In so much as FitzAlan had any input into Irish affairs, it was as an advocate within the British establishment for an accommodation with Irish nationalists and, in the wake of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921, it ultimately fell to him to perform the symbolic handover of power to a new Irish government and bring down the curtain on seven centuries of British rule over most, if not all, of the island of Ireland. ²⁸

On the afternoon of 16 January 1922 Michael Collins arrived in the Council Chamber at Dublin Castle where he presented the Lord Lieutenant with a copy of the Treaty and introduced him to the members of the new Provisional Irish Government. FitAltan congratulated the new Government, wished them well and 'expressed the earnest hope that under their earnest auspices the ideal of a happy, free, and prosperous Ireland would be attained '29

The enormity of the moment was lost on no-one, though there were those who regarded it more as a reason for mourning, anger and fear than jubilation. For the unionist *Belfast Newsletter*, the viceroy's formal handing over of Dublin Castle, so-long the 'fortress of British rule', was 'one of the most humiliating' events in British history, an act of surrender that was in 'every way deplorable'.³⁰

The Irish Times, then an organ of southern unionist opinion, likewise focussed on the historical associations of Dublin Castle and the significance of the old garrison passing

²⁶ Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, M.J. Curran, Rector, Irish College, Rome, 1921 http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0687.pdf#page=555

²⁷ Michael Hopkinson, The Last Days of Dublin Castle: The Diaries of Mark Sturgis (1999) p. 152

²⁸ The core elements of the Anglo-Irish Treaty can be accessed at: http://www.nationalarchives.ie/topics/anglo_irish/dfaexhib2.html

²⁹ Irish Independent, 17 January 1922

³⁰ Irish Independent, 18 January 1922



peacefully into the 'hands of the Irish nation'. Hereafter, however, 'Ireland will be her own mistress and the maker of her own laws. The glory of success or the tragedy of her failure will be hers, and hers alone.'31

The fate of southern Ireland may now have been in her own hands, but FitzAlan remained on as Lord Lieutenant until December 1922, when the Irish Free State came formally into existence and the office of Lord Lieutenant was finally wound up. FitzAlan would not depart without leaving something behind: before abandoning his residence at the viceregal lodge he planted two copper beeches within its grounds.³²

Whether intended or not, the symbolism of the act was undeniable: it was one thing to rid Ireland of British rule, quite another to uproot the British influence.

³¹ Ibid

³² Keith Jeffery, Vizekonigerdammerung: Lords French and FitzAlan at the Lodge, 1918-22, in Peter Gray and Olwen Purdue eds., *The Irish Lord Lieutenancy: c. 1541-1922* (2012) p. 229