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INTRODUCTION

ASHBOURNE PAPERS

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Ashbourne Papers (T2955 and MIC264))

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Summary

The Ashbourne papers comprise copies of c.500 letters and papers, c.1840-1913, of Edward Gibson, 1st Baron Ashbourne, MP for Dublin University, 1875-1885, Attorney General for Ireland, 1877-1880, and Lord Chancellor of Ireland, 1885-1886, 1886-1892 and 1895-1905.



Background

Edward Gibson came from a Dublin legal family, who owned a small estate in Co. Meath. He was a barrister, and went the length of taking silk, but his ambitions were political rather than professional, and within two years of entering Parliament he had distinguished himself as the Conservative Party's most effective and influential Irish spokesman and adviser on Irish policy.



Lord Ashbourne

His influence within the party was out of all proportion to his office of Attorney General for Ireland, and continued to grow after he lost office with the defeat of the Conservatives at the general election of 1880. When the Conservatives returned to power under Salisbury in 1885, Gibson was offered the Home Secretaryship, but declined it, preferring instead to take the Lord Chancellorship of Ireland and to go to the House of Lords as Lord Ashbourne. At the very beginning of his term of office as Lord Chancellor, he drafted the celebrated Land Purchase act, which is still called after him in common parlance and which was the Conservative Party's first constructive contribution to the Irish land question since the 1840s. Thereafter, his political influence declined sharply, although he retained until his death in 1913 a place in the Conservative Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet, an unprecedented status for a Lord Chancellor of Ireland.



Ashbourne's diary/commonplace book, 1881-1912

The Ashbourne papers contain many memoranda, notes on speeches, drafts of various kinds, diaries, etc, kept by Ashbourne himself. Of these, the most important, and almost certainly the most important item in the archive, is a diary or commonplace book, kept by Ashbourne over the period 1881-1912. The first part of this diary, which covers the period January 1881 to March 1882, is a first-hand, contemporary account of political events as they occurred, at a time of grave crisis, and the only surviving account written from the Conservative Party's standpoint. The main political issues covered by the diary are the Conservative Party's attitude to Gladstone's second Land Bill and, after its passing, to its workings which created acute controversy. Ashbourne had considerable influence on both, and his account is therefore of special value. After March 1882, the diary ceases to be a daily chronicle, and becomes a record of events long after they had happened. This makes it less interesting, although Ashbourne's recollections of, and reflections upon, such luminaries as Disraeli, Lord Randolph Churchill and Queen Victoria, together with his thoughts on Cabinet government as it had operated in his experience, are not without importance.



Correspondence

The bulk of the Ashbourne papers is composed of letters to Ashbourne, with a few copies of his replies, and these are arranged alphabetically by correspondent. The quality and interest of the letters on public matters varies, as might be expected, according to who the writer is, how intimate Ashbourne was with him and how important Ashbourne was at the time.

Letters from Northcote, Carnarvon and Cadogan

The outstanding sections of the correspondence are probably those that involve Sir Stafford Northcote, a now largely forgotten aspirant for the leadership of the Conservative Party in the period 1881-1884, the 4th Earl of Carnarvon, the party's controversial Home Ruler Lord Lieutenant, 1885-1886, and the 5th Earl Cadogan, a subsequent and more conventional, Conservative Lord Lieutenant, 1895-1902. There are: c.40 letters from Northcote, 1879-1885, relating to the politics of the land question, law and order in Ireland and Home Rule; c.30 letters from Carnarvon, 1885-1886, relating to all aspects of Irish policy, including the workings of the Irish



Earl of Carnarvon



Lord Cadogan

Redistribution Act, land purchase, Carnarvon's relations with Salisbury, the abortive Irish University Education Bill, the Catholic hierarchy, etc; and c.50 letters from Cadogan, 1896-1902, which relate primarily to Cadogan's belief that he does not enjoy the confidence of the party leaders, particularly Salisbury and A.J. Balfour, and to his gratitude to Ashbourne for his loyal support.

Other principal correspondents and sections of the correspondence are:



Correspondents A-B

Judge John Atkinson, afterwards Lord Atkinson, who writes about land agitation in the same year;

A.J. Balfour, who writes mainly about Irish patronage and policy during the period 1887-1891, when Balfour was Chief Secretary for Ireland;

J.T. Ball, ex-Lord Chancellor of Ireland, who writes about official appointments, including the appointment of a Provost of Dublin University, 1878-1888;

Judge Charles Robert Barry, who writes in the late 1870s about the Whiteboy acts;

Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, afterwards 1st Earl St Aldwyn, who writes about Ashbourne's career prospects in 1878 and about the appointment and payment of sub-sheriffs in 1897;

John Henry de la Poer Beresford, 5th Marquess of Waterford, who writes mainly about the position of the Irish landlords under the land acts, Ashbourne's included, 1881-1896;

Alexander Hugh Bruce, 6th Lord Balfour of Burleigh, who keeps Ashbourne posted about developments in Cabinet meetings, 1900; and

Sir Redvers Buller, who writes chiefly in his capacity as Irish Under-Secretary, 1886-1887.



Correspondents C-D

Hugh McCalmont Cairns, 1st Earl Cairns, who writes about the Land Act and other Irish legislation, 1880-1881;

Sir Edward Carson, afterwards Lord Carson, who writes about the unfairness of the land courts, 1892;

Robert Gascoyne Cecil, 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, who writes, either as a leading member of the Conservative opposition or as Conservative Prime Minister, about the operation of the 1881 Land Act, about the dismissal of Lord Rossmore from the magistracy in 1883, about the Local Government Bill of 1892 and about Ashbourne's place in successive Conservative Cabinets, 1881-1902;

John Winston Spencer Churchill, 7th Duke of Marlborough, who writes, as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, about Ashbourne's refusal of a judgeship and other matters, 1878-1880;

Lord Randolph Churchill, who makes irreverent comments about colleagues, 1880-1886;

Sir Richard Cross, afterwards 1st Viscount Cross, who writes about Irish policy, 1880-1892;

William F. Cullinan, the Irish Office draftsman, who writes about the Conservative Party's bill to suppress the National League, January 1886;

Benjamin Disraeli, 1st Earl of Beaconsfield, who writes offering Ashbourne a Lord Justiceship of Appeal, 1878;

Lawrence Dundas, 1st Marquess of Zetland, who writes as Lord Lieutenant, 1889-1892; and

Sir William Hart Dyke, who writes as Chief Secretary, 1885.



Correspondents F-M

Lord Justice Gerald Fitzgibbon, who writes mostly about legal matters, 1873-1909;

Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, afterwards 1st Lord Fitzmaurice, who writes about the Land Bill, 1881;

Henry Charles Petty Fitzmaurice, 5th Marquess of Lansdowne, who writes about the Conservatives' proposed land legislation, 1896;

Sir Hardinge Giffard, 1st Earl of Halsbury, Lord Chancellor of Great Britain, who writes about matters of policy in the sphere of judicial appointments, 1885-1898;

John Hope, 1st Marquess of Linlithgow, who describes Cabinet meetings, 1905;

W.L. Jackson, afterwards 1st Lord Allerton, who writes about the Irish Local Government Bill, 1892; the 1st Lord James of Hereford, who writes about the Boer War, 1902;

Arthur McMurrough Kavanagh, who writes about his electoral defeat in Co. Carlow and about the plight of Irish landlords under the land acts, 1879-1889;

Judge William Keogh, who abuses Parnell and Biggar, 1877; Edward Macnaghten, Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, who discusses the appointment of Presbyterians to the magistracy, 1891;

Judge D.H. Madden, who writes about the Local Government Bill, 1892; and Lord Chief Justice Michael Morris, afterwards Lord Killanin, who writes about legal appointments and political gossip, 1881-1892.



Correspondents P-T

David Plunket, 1st Lord Rathmore, who writes, among other things, about constituency politics and parliamentary tactics in the late 1860s and 1870s;

Professor Goldwin Smith of Toronto, Canada, whose letters contain general reflections on British politics, Ireland and the Irish across the Atlantic, 1882-1886;

W.H. Smith, later 1st Viscount Hambleden, who writes about his own brief period as chief Secretary in 1886, and the Irish land question, 1881-1887;

John Poyntz Spencer, 5th Earl Spencer, who writes, as Lord Lieutenant, about the composition of the Irish Boundary commission under the Redistribution Act, 1884-1885;

Charles Vane-Tempest-Stewart, 6th Marquess of Londonderry, who discusses comparatively minor matters relating to his Lord Lieutenancy of Ireland, 1886-1890; and

Anthony Traill, later Provost of Dublin University, who writes about University politics and his personal ambitions, 1880.



David Plunket,



Correspondents W

William Walsh, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, who writes about the Land Bill, 1887;

William Humble Ward, 2nd Earl of Dudley, who writes as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 1902-1903;

John Wodehouse, 1st Earl of Kimberley, who informs Ashbourne that none of the 1st Earl of Clare's papers survive, and that they were probably destroyed by Clare himself, 1889; and

Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, whose letters include an amusing skit on Ashbourne's political position and promise in 1882.



'Topic' sections



Sir Michael Hicks Beach

In addition to these and the many other sections of the Ashbourne Papers arranged alphabetically by correspondent, there are a few sections which remain, as arranged, in Ashbourne's own filing system, or that of his daughter, the Hon. Constance Gibson, according to topic. These 'topic' sections include a group of letters and papers on Ashbourne's candidature for Dublin University, 1874-1875; letters of congratulation to him on his speech in the Bradlaugh debate, May 1880, and on his appointment as Lord Chancellor and elevation to the peerage, June-July 1885; memoranda about the administration of the affairs of lunatics by the Irish Court of Chancery, 1892; correspondence, manuscript and typescript memoranda, and miscellaneous printed papers, about the powers and privileges of the Lord Lieutenant and Chief Secretary, 1900; and a series of printed and manuscript memoranda relating to Ashbourne's successive offices of Attorney General and Lord Chancellor of Ireland, or to his position as a member of the British Cabinet, 1879-1904. The series consists of: memoranda by the Irish Law Officers about Whiteboy offences and agrarian agitation in 1879; confidential memoranda by A.J. Balfour on the 'Plan of Campaign' in 1887 and on the political condition of Ireland in 1889, the former being also among the Cabinet Papers; a confidential memorandum by Henry Matthews on diplomatic relations with the Pope in 1887; a confidential memorandum by George Goschen on charges on the estates of Irish landlords and on the working of the Ashbourne Act in 1889; a confidential memorandum by Sir Michael Hicks-Beach on the 'Financial Relations' question in 1898; and Cabinet Papers about the Sir Antony MacDonnell affair in 1904.



'Personal scrap-books'

Among the considerable volume of printed matter in the Ashbourne papers is a series of 'personal scrap-books' kept by Ashbourne, with the help of a press agency. Three of these deal with the politics of the period and with Ashbourne's part in them, and include a few invitations, circular letters and trivial manuscript items, covering respectively the periods 1875-1885, 1886-1898 and 1898-1913. In addition, there is a volume of newspaper cuttings, 1898-1899, including some manuscript letters of congratulation, on Ashbourne's one historical work, *Pitt: Some Chapters of his Life and Times* (1898), and a further volume compiled for his family and consisting of newspaper cuttings and other articles written at the time of his death in 1913.



Ashbourne's work on Pitt



Thomas Orde

Ashbourne's *Pitt* has been the means of introducing some incongruous material into the Ashbourne Papers. Quite a few of his working documents during the writing of *Pitt* survive, including late 19th century copies of various letters contemporary with Pitt, and the originals of some Pitt family correspondence, most of which exist in copy form elsewhere. Inevitably, there are a good many letters to Ashbourne giving him permission to publish material in the book, congratulating him on it, etc, and covering the period 1895-1905. The most significant part of this section of the Ashbourne Papers consists of a small number of documents borrowed by Ashbourne from his son-in-law, the 5th Lord Bolton, the descendant of Thomas Orde, Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1784-1787, and never returned. These papers derive from Orde's Chief Secretaryship, and include two important lists of members of the Irish House of Commons, dated 1784 and 1787 respectively.

Almost all the originals of the Ashbourne papers, as arranged and listed by PRONI in 1971-1972, were subsequently deposited in the House of Lords Record Office.

PRONI's calendar of the Ashbourne Papers has been published, with an introduction by A.B. Cooke, under the title, *The Ashbourne Papers ... 1869-1913* (Belfast, 1974).

