

ACTON AS A MEMBER
OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

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In a previous paper (1) I have described how Sir John Acton was elected Member of Parliament for the Borough of Carlow in 1859 after a contest in which he took no personal part, issued no election address and in a constituency which he had never previously visited. In this paper I hope to show why Acton so lost the confidence of the electors that he was not even a candidate for the honour of representing the borough at the election of 1865 and to discuss in general Acton's whole attitude towards his parliamentary duties.

The result of the Carlow poll was declared on Friday morning May 6, 1859 but it was not until the following month that the new member presented himself to his constituents with whom he stayed for almost a week, from the evening of Thursday June 2 to the morning of Wednesday June 8. The banquet at which he entertained his supporters was given on the evening of Tuesday June 7 (2). This was the only time Acton visited Carlow during the six years he represented the constituency (3); and there is evidence to show that he was as chary with his cash and with his attention to his constituents as he was with his presence.

Acton was elected as a liberal, or to be more accurate as an opponent of Lord Derby rather than as a supporter of Palmerston, though, of course, his step-father Earl Granville was a member of the cabinet Palmerston formed after the election of 1859. He was the nominee of that section in the borough of Carlow which responded to the forceful leadership of the Rev. James Maher, Parish Priest of Graigue; a leadership so powerful that, despite the disappointment Acton provided as a member, it was able to place another unknown, this time an English protestant liberal — Osborne Stock of Cavendish Square London, in the representation of the borough at the election of 1865 (4).

The parliament which sat from 1859-1865 was one in which no great issues arose and in which the balance of parties was so established that Lord Palmerston's cabinet was permitted to govern with the tacit support of their opponents led by the Earl of Derby who was well aware of the

(1) *Acton's Election as an Irish Member of Parliament* in *English Historical Review* Vol. LXI, No. 241, Sept. 1946. pp. 349-405.

(2) *Carlow Post*, 11 June 1859.

(3) *Carlow Sentinel*, 24 June 1865.

(4) In *The Letters of Rev. James Maher D.D. with a Memoir* edited by Patrick Francis (Cardinal) Moran, Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1877 there are almost no references to politics and the name of Acton does not appear but the following extract referring to the return of Mr. Owen Lewis for Carlow Borough in 1874 is significant: "Mr. Lewis was triumphantly returned and Father Maher was exceedingly consoled by the reflection that, as in his long career he had occasionally been befooled by political adventurers, God had sent to Carlow before he died a member of such honour, high principles and integrity" op. cit. p. civ.

fact that should the government be defeated he would be unable to maintain a stable administration. So much was publicly admitted in the House of Commons by the Rt. Hon. Spencer Walpole when a motion of his on the budget resolutions was treated by Palmerston as a question of confidence (5). Accordingly the stress and strain of the parliamentary session was by no means as severe as in one where the respective whips were constantly kept on their job, and Acton was enabled to treat his membership not in any sense as a trust or a duty but rather as that of a very pleasant political club to be attended or avoided as the spirit moved him.

An analysis of the work he did in parliament, so far as it can be made, shows him, through family relationships, to have been offered great opportunities of which he took little advantage. Unfortunately *Hansard* for the period only gives the division lists on the very rarest and most important occasions and although these divisions are frequently those of special importance to a Roman Catholic member nevertheless the name of Acton is too often conspicuous by its absence. In 48 division lists Acton's name appears 27 times. In 1859 he cast his first vote, on the Queen's speech, and the Palmerston government was established in power by 323 votes to 310, the largest division of the whole session (6). In the following year his name appears three times in the eight divisions for which the names are recorded. He voted for extending the franchise (7), but he was absent from the division on the Ballot Bill which was of decisive importance to Ireland and to his constituents (8). He also failed to vote on the Endowed Schools Bill which by extending certain rights to Dissenters might have opened the way for similar rights for Roman Catholics (9). In all years he seems to have attended the key divisions on the budget resolutions and in 1860 and 1861 he voted three times out of the four possible recorded occasions on the Repeal of the Paper Duties (10). From the local Carlow papers it can be discovered that he voted in favour of an English Reform Bill though the majority of Irish members were opposed to its consideration prior to the passage of Irish and Scottish Bills (11).

In 1861 his average was somewhat better as his name appears on four out of seven possible occasions. He favoured the extension of the County franchise (12) but did not vote on the Borough franchise though he did in 1865 after his name had been a second time missing in 1864 (13). His name in 1861 does not appear in two divisions which were again of importance to the special interests he represented — the Irish and the Roman

(5) *Hansard* 3s. clxvii, June 3, 1862.

(6) *Hansard* 3s. cliv, June 10, 1859.

(7) *Hansard* 3s. clix, June 7, 1860.

(8) *Hansard* 3s. clvii, March 20, 1860.

(9) *Hansard* 3s. clvii, March 21, 1860.

(10) *Hansard* 3s. clvii, March 12 & May 8, 1860; clxiii, May 30, 1861.

(11) *Carlow Post*, 9 16 June, 1860.

(12) *Hansard* 3s. clxi, March 1, 1861.

(13) *Hansard* 3s. clxii, April 10, 1861; 3s. clxv, May 11, 1864; 3s. clxxviii, May 8, 1865.

Catholic. He failed to vote on the Trustees of Charities Bill, which aimed at the admission of Trustees who were not members of the Church of England (14); and on the Marriage Law Amendment Bill which hoped to smooth out differences between the marriage law of England, Scotland and Ireland (15). The local papers record his failure to vote on Isaac Butts' motion for a system of Irish National Education suitable for all classes, a motion naturally extensively supported by the Irish members yet only 40 out of 105 voted (16). He also failed to vote on a project for extending Volunteer Corps to Ireland proposed by Colonel Fitzstephen French; in this division only 18 Irish members recorded their votes (17).

In 1862 only two lists have been noted and his name appears in both but, as will be shown in discussing his membership of various select committees, one would not be justified in presuming that he was taking his parliamentary duties more seriously. He continued to support the financial policy of the government (18), this was on the second vote of confidence already referred to, and he voted for a Church Rates Abolition Bill, having missed a division on a similar subject in 1860, and voting against an alternative solution in 1865. He apparently wished to see these rates abolished without compensation, and when compensation was proposed in 1865 he withdrew his support. On no occasion was the Bill passed during the lifetime of this parliament (19).

Acton's name appears on two of the five possible occasions in 1863, but, although he opposed a motion from the extreme Protestant party for an enquiry into the Maynooth grants (20) he failed to vote on the Affirmations Bill intended to relieve tender consciences other than Roman Catholic, and thereby to widen the catchment of consent. In 1864, when his name appears in ten of the thirteen lists, he gave four out of the five votes he cast at various times in favour of the Abolition of the Tests at Oxford (21). He supported the foreign policy of the government in connexion with the bombing of the Japanese town of Kagosima (22) but he was against government on a motion involving a Junior Lord of the Admiralty, James Stansfield, in an Italian plot for the assassination of the French Emperor Napoleon III. As the result of the vote Stansfield, who obviously was not personally implicated, was compelled to resign, though he afterwards had a most distinguished political career (23). In the same year Lowe, the Vice-

(14) *Hansard* 3s. clxii. April 17, 1861.

(15) *Hansard* 3s. clxii. April 17, 1861.

(16) *Carlton Post*, 21 July, 1860.

(17) *Carlton Post*, 4 August, 1860.

(18) *Hansard* 3s. clxvii. June 3, 1862.

(19) *Hansard* 3s. clxvi. May 14, 1862; clvii. March 28, 1860; clxxix, May 10, 1865

(20) *Hansard* 3s. clxxi. June 2, 1863.

(21) *Hansard* 3s. clxxiv. March 16, 1864; clxxvi. July 1, 1864; clxxx. June 14, 1865.

(22) *Hansard* 3s. clxxiii. Feb. 9, 1864.

(23) *Hansards* 3s. clxxiv. March 17, 1864; Stansfield became P.C. & G.C.B. and was a member of several cabinets.

President of the Privy Council in charge of Education, was also compelled to resign as the result of an adverse vote of a small house (101-93) on a motion regarding the Mutilation of Inspectors Reports which had an underlying religious significance. On this occasion Acton voted in favour of the Minister (24). He gave one further vote on foreign affairs when he opposed the Cabinet policy of non-intervention in the war between Prussia and Denmark. This was a major division which government only carried by eighteen votes (313-295) and the Commons came to the opposite conclusions to that of the Lords where, by the use of proxies, Acton's view was approved (25). In this year also he defended his co-religionists by voting against a Select Committee to enquire into St. Mary's Private Burying Ground, Sydenham and the Order of St. Philip Neri (26) but in 1865 he failed to turn up to oppose an enquiry, which was refused by 106-79, into the existence, character and increase of Monastic or Conventual Establishments and Societies in Great Britain (27).

In 1865 his name appears in five out of twelve division lists. He was with the majority of 67 (193-126) who supported the Roman Catholic Oaths Bill and who desired especially to excise the following words from the legal form: «and I do hereby disclaim, disavow and solemnly abjure any intention to subvert the present Church Establishment as settled by law within this realm; and I do solemnly swear that I will never exercise any privilege to which I am or may become entitled to disturb or weaken the Protestant religion or Protestant government in this Kingdom» (28). In this year he was not so careful to attend on the Budget resolutions and although for four years a member of the Select Committee on the Poor Relief he was absent for one of two divisions on the Union Chargeability Bill (29). In the third case of a parliamentary vote forcing the resignation of a Minister, this time of the Lord Chancellor — Westbury, implicated in charges of nepotism, Acton failed to vote (30).

At the election of 1865 Acton was elected for Bridgnorth by one vote and his name appears on the roll of the House of Commons as amended to February 1, 1866 (31). On the 22 March of the same year an election committee reported as follows: «That Sir John Emerick (sic) Dalberg

(24) *Hansard* 3s. cxciv. April 12, 1864.

(25) *Hansard* 3s. clxxvi. July 8, 1864; As one result of this opposition to the government he was theoretically supposed to support the *Carlton Sentinel*! 16 July, 1864 announced the rumour that, anticipating a dissolution, the local liberal leaders were in communication with a certain «political adventurer» who had suffered defeat in a neighbouring borough but being connected with certain banking and commercial interests «makes him peculiarly eligible and attractive in the eyes of a *disinterested* clique, who appear heartily tired of their late choice, and are now on the look out for a man of «more attractive metal to replace the Shropshire Baronet». The *Sentinel* was confident that the Carlton liberals were tired of absentees.

(26) *Hansard* 3s. clxxiv. April 8, 1864.

(27) *Hansard* 3s. clxxvii. March 3, 1865.

(28) *Hansard* 3s. clxxix. May 30, 1865.

(29) *Hansard* 3s. clxxviii. March 23, 1865; clxxix. May 15, 1865.

(30) *Hansard* 3s. clxxx. July 4, 1865.

(31) *Hansard* 3s. clxxxi.

Acton, baronet, is not duly elected a Burgess to serve in this present parliament for the Borough of Bridgnorth.

« That Henry Whitmore, esquire, is duly elected, and ought to have been returned a Burgess to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough of Bridgnorth.

« And the said determination was ordered to be entered in the Journal of this House.

« House further informed that the Committee had altered the poll taken at such election by striking off the name of William Edwards, as not having had a right to vote at such election; also of Mark Philip Lee, it having been proved that he had received money for the purpose of influencing his vote:

« House further informed that the Committee had agreed to the following resolution:

« That it was proved to the Committee that the said Mark Philip Lee had been bribed with the payment of £4 by Charles Selby Bigge, under the pretext of travelling expenses; but that it was not proved that such bribery was committed with the knowledge or consent of the said Sir John E. D. Acton or his Agents » (32).

The name of Henry Whitmore was thereupon substituted, and he was sworn and took his seat the same day, being the eighth of his family to be M.P. for the Borough of Bridgnorth (33). During the period of the enquiry Acton's name does not appear in either of the division lists recorded although they were both of special concern to him — the Habeas Corpus Suspension (Ireland) Bill (34) and the Church Rates Abolition Bill (35). His admitted and reported expenses at this election in which he was unseated amounted to more than those of his opponents combined:— £699.13.11 against £336.15.10 for John Pritchard who headed the poll and £296.11.3 for Henry Whitmore who was ultimately successful (36). Of course what the real expenses were there is little chance of knowing.

Not merely was Acton a poor attender at the House but he never intervened in debate, not even on foreign policy, although during the period as Editor or Contributor to the Rambler and the Home and Foreign Review he contributed some 475 pages of articles and 77 pages of current events, the latter entirely and the former to a considerable degree concerned with the subject of foreign affairs (37). In six years he asked two questions and answered one. His subjects were: The Condition of the Roman States, May

(32) *Hansard* 3s. clxxxii. March 22, 1866.

(33) *Burke's Landed Gentry*. (1939 ed.)

(34) *Hansard* 3s. clxxxi. Feb. 17, 1866.

(35) *Hansard* 3s. clxxxi. March 7, 1866.

(36) *Parliamentary Papers*. 1866. Vol. 56. No. 363.

(37) Lally, T.A. : *As Lord Acton Says*. Newport, U.S.A. 1942. p. 50.

4, 1860; Catholic Inmates of Prisons, May 7, 1861; Inspection of Roman Catholic Schools, April 11, 1862 (38). On the treatment of the Catholic inmates of Prisons he gave notice of a motion in the 1860 session and in the following year another Irish Member, Mr. E. McEvoy (Co. Meath) enquired as to when he intended to bring forward the motion. Sir John's answer was that he was awaiting the result of an analogous enquiry into the treatment of Catholic inmates of workhouses (39). In fairness to Acton it should, of course, be remembered that the number of questions and questioners in the 1860s was far fewer than in the parliaments of today. At the commencement of the particular parliament under discussion the number of daily questions rarely exceeded ten and was often very much less; though towards the end of its lifetime there was a persistent and considerable increase.

A parliamentary activity on which members may spend a considerable proportion of their time and do very useful and often unpublicized work is membership of the various select committees. During his parliamentary career Acton was appointed to three; to two in the normal course of duty and to one obviously because of his European and cosmopolitan background. At none was he more than an adequate attender and in none does he appear to have exercised a really effective influence. Service in committee was an essential means to close and friendly intellectual contact, not only with members of one's own party but also with the opposition, and many a parliamentary reputation has been made in Committee which would never have been made in the House. In the average session of this parliament's lifetime approximately one-third of the House was appointed to membership of one or more select committees; ranging from 142 out of 654 in the short session of 1859 to 305 in that of 1861 (40). All Acton's appointments were made in 1861 but one committee, that enquiring into the Administration of the English Poor Law, was re-appointed in each of the three following years, the report being signed in 1864, and Acton therefore obtains the credit of service in four years out of six. Very few members failed to serve on any committee. Of those who sat through the entire parliament about 23 were never appointed. When the parliamentary report asserts that 100 members of the 1859-1865 parliament did not serve, of whom 26 were re-elected in 1866, it must be remembered that very few of

(38) There is an amusing discrepancy between the bare factual question recorded by *Hansard* and the additional words to be found in the *Carlow Post* April 19, 1862: 'Moreover I feel bound to do so (ask the Question) as representing a large and important Catholic Constituency, the Borough of Carlow' (Hear! Hear!).

(39) *Hansard* 3s. clxii. May, 7 1861.

(40) *Parliamentary Papers*: 1859 (S. 2) Vol. 16, No. 159; 1860 Vol. 56, No. 43; 1861 Vol. 50, 457; 1862 Vol. 44, 205; 1863 Vol. 48, 43; 1864 Vol. 48, 99 1865 Vol. 44, 417.

(41) P. P. 1866 Vol 51.1.

this hundred were M.P.s for more than a short period; some died, several came in at bye-elections, others succeeded to or received peerages, and some few resigned.

In the Select Committee to which the Births, Deaths and Marriages (Ireland) Bill and the Registration of Births (Ireland) Bill were referred, ordered on April 15, 1861 and appointed on the 29th. of the same month with the Rt. Hon. Edward Cardwell as Chairman, Acton took very little part. He was certainly a silent and unimportant member (42). The Select Committee to enquire into the Constitution and Efficiency of the Present Diplomatic Service of this Country was both more important and more interesting. Ordered on March 8, 1861 and appointed on the 15th, it included among its members both Benjamin Disraeli and Lord John Russell; the Chairman was the Rt. Hon. Richard Monckton Milnes, later Baron Houghton, and evidence was heard from several who had held the portfolio of Foreign Affairs. Although he only attended one half of the meetings, 9 out of 18, Acton did ask some 20 to 30 questions, and it is obvious from the voting on the draft report, which suffered severe handling before approval, that he had a considerable share in its preparation even if his handiwork was ineffective. The report was in a sense revolutionary and certainly timely. The committee recommended the establishment of an entrance examination which might be in two parts. They thought that the position of unpaid attachés was most unsatisfactory; in future the maximum period without payment should they recommended be not more than four years, after which graded pensionable appointments should be made. The four years should include at least six months service in the Foreign Office and they recommended that, at all grades, the possibility of interchange between service abroad and at the Foreign Office should be envisaged. They also thought that Ambassadors and Ministers should have increased leave of absence; that embassies and missions should own their own buildings; and that the salaries and allowances at the larger missions should be increased.

Acton desired further reformation than his colleagues would support. He favoured no person entering before 21 or after 25 but was defeated 6-4; he favoured an annual examination and the appointment of the first twelve candidates but was overwhelmed 9-2; he supported a two years unpaid attachéship instead of four but lost 8-3; he wished to see permanent archivists at each mission, these were to rank between the attachés and the secretaries, this proposal was lost by 7-3; finally, he recommended specific salaries for the highest appointments, £12,000 per annum for the Ambassador at Paris, £9,000 each for those at Vienna and St. Petersburg, in these suggestions he was defeated by 10 votes to 1. As all these proposals had been included in the draft report and as their general principles were adopted in after years Acton definitely performed a useful service in his contribution to the labours of this select committee. His questions too were

(42) P. P. 1861 Vol. 14.13.

enlightened. He was interested in the importance of English as a diplomatic language, and he was very inquisitive regarding the respective merits of the British and Foreign diplomatic services, the calibre of their personnel and especially, the quality of their handwriting; he also made enquiries regarding the connexion between Diplomatic, Consular and Commercial Affairs (43).

The Select Committee on Poor Relief encountered a much more serious and lengthy task than those on Irish Births, Deaths and Marriages and on the Diplomatic Service. The Irish Committee met eleven times in less than three months and completed its report, the Diplomatic Committee eighteen times in four months, but the Poor Relief Committee held eighty one meetings in something over three years before presenting its conclusions. Appointed on the 22nd April 1861, the Select Committee was re-appointed, at its own request, on March 27, 1862, June 19, 1863 and February 24, 1864. Obviously something went wrong in 1863 the members being re-appointed so late in the session that they held only one meeting, at which Acton was present, and at which the sole resolution recommended the re-constitution of the Select Committee early in the following session. In the first year Acton attended 21 or 22 meetings out of 34; in 1862 only 4 or 5 out of 30; in 1863 the only meeting that was held; and in 1864 11 meetings out of 16. Except in the session of 1864 when it was increased by one there were 21 members of the committee of which the Rt. Hon. Charles Pelham Villiers was Chairman (44). The average attendance in 1861 was 13, ranging from a maximum of 18 to a minimum of 7; as the session progressed the monthly attendances declined. 13,475 questions were asked of the various witnesses, not more than 20 of them by Sir John Acton and those almost all on minor points connected with Irish Poor resident in England. To his co-religionists, Sir George Bowyer and Lord Edward Howard, he left the protection of Roman Catholic interests which occupied a good deal of the committee's time. Acton was not even present at the second part of the examination of the principal Roman Catholic witness, the Rev. John Morris, whose interrogation was almost entirely in the hands of Bowyer and Howard. It took six reports to cover the proceedings of the first year. At the final sessional meeting, which was held on July 25, 1861, with only nine member present, a proposal was made that the committee should continue its enquiries during the recess, Acton was one of the four who opposed the motion which was defeated by the use of the Chairman's casting vote.

Three reports were issued to cover the Select Committee's activities in 1862 when 9,345 questions were asked of the witnesses, making 22,820

(43) P. P. 1861 Vol. 6.1.

(44) P. P. 1864 Vol. 349.187 gives the final report. Unfortunately as regards statistics and attendances there are discrepancies between the lists in the minutes of evidence, in the interim reports and in the final documents. The interim reports are : P. P. 1861 Vol. 9. Nos. 1 ; 199 ; 405 ; 607 ; 731 ; 831. P.P. 1862 Vol. 10. Nos. 1 ; 183 ; 417. P. P. 1863 Vol. 7. 459.

in all. Acton attended twice in March, twice in April and once in June, and as far as is recorded made no significant contribution to the proceedings. Reference has already been made to his one hundred per cent attendance in 1863; in 1864 the sixteen meetings were concerned with the preparation of the report. The entire committee, including Acton, attended somewhat better than previously, and the average attendance was over 14; for the four meetings in March it averaged more than 17. The chief conclusions of the committee were: (i) That in times of distress charity is not enough, it may be sufficient but it generally lacks organization. (ii) A Central National Poor Law Authority should be established which, among other things, would control the dismissal of officials by the Boards of Guardians. (iii) They recommended that cod-liver oil, quinine and other expensive medicines should be provided at the expense of the Guardians, subject to the orders and regulations of the Poor Law Board. (iv) They suggested many religious provisions to protect the rights of those children who were not members of the Church of England by birth. (v) They would encourage workhouse children being sent outside to school but would not make the practice compulsory.

It is reasonably obvious that Acton was not enamoured of committee service and that only a certain feeling of responsibility to his fellow members ensured any interest. He proved a disappointment to Cardinal Manning and the official leaders of English Roman Catholicism because he took so little part in the public activities of the House: he must have grieved his Granville and whig relatives that he was equally ineffective in these less publicized activities; it but remains to record how the burgesses of Carlow reacted to their little-known member and what services he offered in return for his election.

When criticism, justified by modern standards, is turned on Acton's sense of duty to his constituents it must be stressed that he carefully refrained from any extravagant pledge or promise in the course of the one and only authoritative public pronouncement made in Carlow just after the election. But if he was in every sense of the term a very ordinary house of Commons backbencher, from the point of view of performance his standard was definitely even lower as representative of the people of Carlow. The two semi-political issues which aroused most local interest during his representation of the borough were the Papal Encyclical condemning modern political and philosophical errors and the question of the Galway contract.

The Galway contract should have been a mere matter of economic and business principles but it became a national problem. On the map Galway is the nearest British port to the United States but in the 1860s there was not enough Irish traffic to maintain any reasonable kind of service across the Atlantic, it was therefore dependent on goods and passengers who had transhipped the fifty miles from Holyhead to Kingstown. The traffic was in English goods, Connaught had only one export-men. All were agreed in favour of the economic revival of Connaught but Galway was not a good

harbour and had to compete with Cork and Derry. As well when the line had been opened the ships were not able to perform what had been promised and every crossing resulted in heavy fines. « The Columbia has just arrived from Boston with 33 passengers -- that is to say about half the complement of a single second class compartment on the Great Western Railway. Cargo she had none, and she took fifteen days instead of ten to cross the Atlantic with this load. Not even the large subsidy given by the Imperial Exchequer could keep such a line going without traffic. Until Ireland has developed a traffic of its own Galway cannot become the port the Irish wish it to be » (45).

On the Galway contract the government would have been defeated in 1861 had it not been for the treachery of 15 of the Irish M.P.s, including Acton, who voted with them although they thereby placed the contract in jeopardy. Palmerston had thrown in the apple of discord by suggesting that if government had a chance of cancelling the contract Cork, Limerick and Waterford might have as good opportunity as Galway. Eight of the Irish liberals had the courage to vote against the government (46) and when the Lord of the Treasury, who acted as Irish Whip, resigned as a result the government found it almost impossible to replace him (47). Each year arguments broke out anew and though Acton had the laws of political economy on his side, the real problem was whether there was to be an Irish transatlantic packet station at all and on that Irishmen of all creeds and parties were united (48). In 1861 the Carlow Town Commissioners had unanimously petitioned government on the subject (49) so Acton was in no doubt as to local feeling and, in any case, had voted in 1860 for the extension of the contract though, in that year, the attack on its validity was based on the methods by which it had been obtained, corruption being alleged (50). When 1865 came he had so far compromised himself by voting once each way that he had « also managed to be «accidentally» absent from the House when the most important division, as far as this country is concerned, took place during his whole parliamentary career — the division on the Galway packet question! » (51).

If he proved unsatisfactory to Irish interests on this question of a transatlantic mail service neither was his Catholicity as extreme as his constituents demanded. Soon after his election he showed himself wanting in this respect. It had been announced in the *Freeman's Journal* that he was

(45) *Carlow Sentinel* Feb. 20, 1864. (Quoting an article in the «Times»).

(46) *Carlow Sentinel* June 1 & 8, 1861.

(47) *Carlow Sentinel* June 15, 1861. John Bagwell (M. P. for Clonmell) resigned and was succeeded in the following year by Col. Luke White M.P. for Longford, where he was defeated on appointment, but was subsequently elected for Kidderminster 1862-5. He succeeded as 2nd. Baron Annaly in 1873.

(48) *Carlow Sentinel* Jan. 24 & Aug. 22, 1863; *Carlow Post* May 25, 1861.

(49) *Carlow Post* June 8, 1861.

(50) *Carlow Post* August 11, 1860.

(51) *Carlow Sentinel* June 24, 1865.

to address a meeting to express sympathy with the Pope over Italian and Roman conditions on January 1, 1860 but he failed to turn up to advocate support for the Irish Brigade. « He is the step-son of the Lord President of the Council and as blood runs thicker than water he naturally prefers the interests of his step-father to those of the Holy Father » (52).

Neither in Great Britain nor abroad did Sir John take any part in the activities associated with sympathy for Papal difficulties during the years when Italian nationalism was finding in Pius IX its principal and forceful enemy. When he was condemned for his support of the whigs by a barrister named Weloch in a letter to the *Connaught Tribune* the *Carlow Sentinel* disowned the member it had always opposed in a forceful leading article: « We beg to remind our learned friend (Mr. P. R. Welch was a former resident in Carlow) that out of the fifteen «Catholic Members» there is one, the member for the borough of Carlow, who actually represents none but his patron, Father Maher. He is never heard of an although supposed to represent an important mercantile borough he is as much acquainted with the interests of a commercial community as a resident in Nova Scotia entitled to vote by proxy». The editor went on to ask why Carlow was not represented by an Irish ultramontane Roman Catholic? «... not a stepson of Lord Granville... not a placemonger... an Englishman was preferred — yea a cold aristocrat who despises the mob that shouted for him in the courthouse... What renders the inconsistency of Sir John Acton's reverend patrons the more glaring is the fact that he never appeared at any of those meetings convened to defend the alleged rights of Pius IX. He never uttered a word on the subject. How could he without forfeiting the friendship of Earl Granville, the Lord President of the Council?... the patronage of the borough at the late election may be said to be vested in the Roman Catholic priesthood as an appanage which could not be overlooked... (Sir John) bound himself to no definite policy.. He was a young man unknown to fame, a blank in the political world. He was suddenly pitchforked into parliament. He is there now pro tem and we will do him the justice of stating that no young gentleman ever entered the House of Commons who pays so little regard to the wishes, feelings or interests of a constituency whether Conservative or Liberal » (53).

The tone of the extract is the general tone of *Sentinel* editorials throughout Acton's parliamentary career and that justification existed can be inferred from the rare occasions on which the *Post* comes to the defence of its own candidate or indeed refers to him at all. At the time of his single visit to Carlow Acton is described as a young man who «presents very much the appearance of an ecclesiastic belonging to some religious order» (54) but the welcome was hardly that for a christian ecclesiastic: «the

(52) *Carlow Sentinel* January 7, 1860.

(53) *Carlow Sentinel* May 25, 1861.

(54) *Carlow Sentinel* June 4, 1859.

inhabitants seem engaged in the celebration of one of the Greek festivals in honour of Bacchus ».

On only one occasion were Sir John's pro-Catholic activities in England brought emphatically before the electors of Carlow and the particular speech and the resulting editorial in the *Carlow Post* proved something of a boomerang. In 1861 Acton was a principal speaker at the annual meeting of the Roman Catholics of Dudley. « The exposition of Catholic feeling, Catholic principles and the relative duties and obligations of Catholics to the respective religious denominations forming the various sections of her Majesty's subjects in these realms, could not be surpassed in clearness of enunciation and delicacy of idea and expression... » On the Roman Catholic faith the writer in the *Post* asserted the speech to be « the most forcible and argumentative, is also the most moderate, rational and liberal, in the widest acceptance of the term that we have ever heard or perused... » The *Post* concludes by expressing its pleasure that there were English Roman Catholic laymen like Sir John Acton and Lord Edward Howard to speak up for their co-religionists although surrounded by Protestants (55).

On December 8 of the same year the Pope issued, in conjunction with the Encyclical *Quanta Cura*, his famous syllabus enumerating the errors of the age. Explicitly or implicitly much that the *Post* had approved in Acton's speech was herein condemned. At the time of the promulgation of the Encyclical Acton was living in Rome and it was widely rumoured that he refused to sign an address of congratulations to the Pope from the English residents and avowed as a reason, his positive disapproval of the objectionable Encyclical doctrine (56). In a further document *Invito Sacro* (Invitation to Jubilee) the doctrines were reiterated with the additional assertion that anyone who did not believe and receive them was excommunicate. The Pope declared the duty of the State « to coerce violators of the Catholic religion by authorized penalties » and that liberty of conscience and liberty of worship are mere delirium and liberty of thought the liberty of perdition (57). The *Sentinel* for once felt called upon to congratulate the honourable Baronet for his stand in Rome but then raised the question of whether the orthodox Roman Catholics of Carlow would vote for an excommunicated person. It was immediately rumoured that he was about to retire in favour of a discarded suitor for a Kerry

(55) *Carlow Post* Feb. 13, 1864. England sent only one R.C. member to parliament Lord Edward Fitzalan Howard, created Baron Howard of Glossop 1869 when Acton was raised to the peerage. He was M.P. for Arundel, a family borough of the Norfolk Dukedom. The only reason it had been spared by Disraeli in his Reform Bill was to give English Roman Catholics one vote — «but if fancy franchises were to go then it would disappear». *Carlow Post* Feb. 11, 1865.

(56) *Carlow Sentinel* March 18, 1865.

(57) *Carlow Sentinel* Jan. 21, 1865.

borough — Mc Kenna (58) — but instead the latter went to Youghal (59). The reply of the Post to these religious worries appeared in the next week's issue: « If the Catholics of Carlow have, on several occasions had an ultra-Protestant representative in Parliament we do not well see why they should reject Sir John Acton even though he should, on some points not vitally affecting the fundamental doctrines of his church, hold opinions somewhat at variance with the majority of his co-religionists. The electors of this borough having, on several occasions, swallowed a Protestant camel, why should they now strain at a Catholic gnat, even though it be not at all perfection » (60). To compare the sitting member with a gnat shows how luke-warm was the article and it was soon widely known that Father Maher and his liberal supporters were looking for another candidate. The news was first published in the Dublin press (61) but was pronounced premature by the Carlow Post (62). But if Acton's own inactivity prevented his re-election he had the opportunity to sever his connexion with the borough on a question of principle rather than of capacity. In January 1865 a committee of the National Association of Ireland issued an address to the public making three major points, support of which was to be essential for holding public office, and suggesting pledges to be taken both by members of parliament and by their electors. All voters were to be asked to sign a statement: « That we hereby declare that we will vote for no candidate who will not pledge himself to support in parliament the three following measures, viz. compensation for improving tenants, the disendowment of the established church in Ireland and free education for all denominations, and who will not further pledge himself to act in opposition to any administration which will not promote one at least of the two measures first mentioned » (62). It is unlikely that the Acton who made no promises in 1859 would be willing to bind himself so categorically in 1865 and all of Catholic Ireland was behind the demand. 24 of the Irish Hierarchy signed the summons to the aggregate meeting at the Dublin Rotunda on December 29, 1864. 7 were present and 4 spoke (63); the entire Irish press was filled with argument; all the possible English candidates, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, looking for Irish seats expressed themselves

(58) *Carlow Sentinel* March 18, 1865.

(59) *Carlow Sentinel* April 1, 1865. At the ensuing election McKenna defeated the sitting member for Youghal — Isaac Butt — by 125-30. Sir Joseph Neale McKenna sat for Youghal 1865-8 and 1874-85 and for South Monaghan 1885-92 Burke's *Landed Gentry of Ireland*, 1912 ed.

(60) *Carlow Post* March 25, 1865.

(61) *Saunders's Newsletter* June 26, 1865. « Since his election Sir John has completely lost favour with his constituents, so much so that it is scarcely supposed he will again seek their suffrages ».

(62) *Carlow Post* Jan. 14 & Feb. 4, 1865. The manifesto was signed by Peter Paul MacSwiney, Chairman; John B. Dillon and R. J. Devitt, Secretaries.

(63) *Carlow Post* Dec. 31, 1864.

forcibly. Acton remained silent and soon other names were before the people of Carlow even though no formal withdrawal took place (64).

Whether he likes it or not a member of parliament is compelled to nurse his constituency by subscriptions to local charities, by small attentions to local voters. For these duties Acton had neither the inclination nor, perhaps, the money. Not merely is his name conspicuously absent from local subscription lists but public attention is drawn to that absence (65). In the Carlow papers for all the years studied his name only appears once as a donor when in 1862 the *Post* could announce: « We feel much pleasure in publishing the following letter from Sir J. D. Acton, M.P. which accompanied a munificent contribution of £25 for the relief of the poor of Carlow and Craigue. » The letter concluded: « If you will have the goodness to send me a few lines to inform me whether matters are improving or growing worse I shall take it as a particular favour » (66).

In 1864 the *Carlow Post* chanced to refer to « the magnificent and hospitable mansion (Aldenham) where the honourable member and worthy baronet spends his frequent vacations and accidental (*Sentinel* italics) retirements from the cares of public duty » and gave the *Sentinel* opportunity to reiterate the opinions it had expressed previously on Sir John's relations with his constituents: « Few, if any, as report goes, of his most ardent admirers in the Borough have ever got beyond the hall door of his town residence in London, and the functionary who did duty there was not exactly the person to whose ears they could confide their wants and wishes » (67). This extract summarizes a complaint first made as early as January 1860 when the *Sentinel* recorded that, shortly after his election,

(64) The principal candidates were James Arthur Dease, a Westmeath Landowner who followed completely the line of the National Association and Osborne Stock, a London Protestant liberal, who succeeded Acton in the representation although not so subservient as Dease to the new society. The rules of the National Association were published in the *Freeman's Journal* of June 24, 1865 : — (i) The Association pledges itself to the policy of complete parliamentary independence and the electors shall in all cases be urged to bind their representatives not only to vote for all the objects of the association but also to oppose any government which shall not incorporate with its policy or otherwise efficiently support a satisfactory measure of tenant compensation — that measure being deemed one of pressing urgency and paramount importance. (ii) That as it is impossible to give an honest and efficient advocacy in parliament to measures and at the same time to incur personal obligations to a Minister who is opposed to those measures, the electors should bind their representatives to accept no place or honour for themselves and incur no personal obligations to a Minister who shall not support a satisfactory measure of tenant compensation. (iii) That there should be an understanding between the electors and their representatives that the latter should take counsel together, so as to secure a general uniformity of policy and a combined action for the ends of the association*.

(65) He declined to enter into correspondence with the committee appointed to get up a regatta on the River Barrow : — « in truth it might be well said that the hon. member is as much a stranger to the borough as if he were a native of Stockholm. . . » *Carlow Sentinel* Jan. 7, 1860. He again failed to subscribe in the summer of 1860 when his defeated opponent, John Alexander, and one of the county members both did. *Carlow Sentinel* August 4, 1860.

(66) *Carlow Post* Feb. 8, 1862. The letter was dated from Aldenham on February 1,

(67) *Carlow Sentinel* Feb. 27, 1864. The article is entitled : « Sir J. Acton's Bottleholders ».

to recognize them until they announced their names, then after a desultory conversation politely bowed them out and bid them good morning. « Perhaps he felt under no obligation to the electors. He may have considered, Father Maher being his political sponsor, that he was his chosen some of Acton's «Liberal» supporters called on him in London. He failed representative » (68). His general attitude has been well set out by Archbishop Mathew: « He early possessed a familiar intercourse with the great and a contemptuous knowledge of those who gained by devious paths the intimacy of politicians. The climber and political middleman was a type distasteful to him; he was not a man who reined in his contempt » (69).

When the election of 1865 came it was obvious to both sides that « a fit and proper representative » should be « a man who can be seen and spoken to when required » rather than « one who would make it his business to have no further contact with the borough than that of being its nominal representative » (70). More than a year before the election the *Sentinel* had thrown down a challenge to Acton which he failed to take up. Describing the way this perfect stranger had been foisted on the borough and his failure to turn up for the election it went on « when the «dirty work» was done for the first, and, we may fearlessly say for the last time (he) made his triumphal entrance into Carlow » (71). With so much time in hand Acton made no attempt to better his chances and the *Sentinel* by election time could write him off: « Sir John Acton obviously does not care «three rows of pins» about the interests of our town or country. As a matter of course his duped supporters now set about the same value upon his devoted head and heart, a fact which the shrewd Englishman appears to see clearly, as he does not intend to go through the matter of form of returning thanks for the honours forced upon him » (72).

Separation from Carlow was evidently by mutual consent. Once the new candidate had been chosen there is no single reference to Acton in the liberal newspaper until he has been elected for Bridgnorth. Naturally he did not get off so lightly in the conservative press where his shortcomings and sins of omission were prime weapons in the unsuccessful armoury against Osborne Stock: « a black stranger to the electors of this borough. Amongst his other qualifications he appears to be an Englishman — at least by adoption — and if elected would in all probability return to Cavendish Square, London to imitate the worthy example of the sitting member and laugh in his sleeve at his duped constituents » (73).

(68) *Carlow Sentinel* Jan. 7, 1860.

(69) Mathew, D. *Acton: The Formative Years*. London: 1946 p. 4.

(70) *Carlow Sentinel* July 1, 1865.

(71) *Carlow Sentinel* Feb. 13, 1864.

(72) *Carlow Sentinel* June 24, 1865. The announcement that Acton was not seeking re-election appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* June 23, 1865.

(73) *Carlow Sentinel* July 1, 1865.

When we consider the sincerity of Acton's confidence in an unchanging moral standard we must believe that were he alive today he would be compelled wholeheartedly to condemn the attitude of the member for Carlow Borough between 1859 and 1865 both to his duties and to his responsibilities; others, wiser perhaps, admitting a historical relativity in these matters will regard him as a typical specimen from the leisured aristocracy concerned with politics more from duty than desire. Contrast the criticism of the *Carlow Sentinel*: «...we will do him (Acton) the justice of stating that no young gentleman ever entered the House of Commons who pays so little regard to the wishes, feelings or interests of a constituency whether Conservative or Liberal » (74), with the standard asserted years before by that Edmund Burke for whom Acton professed such abounding admiration: « It ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. » Acton's attitude to his constituency supports certain generalizations concerning his career made by Archbishop Mathew: « He combined an experience of political machinery which was much wider and more sensitive than his rigid principles would at first suggest with an unparalleled knowledge (75)... few historians have betrayed less appreciation of detailed field work. Such minute application was quite foreign to his cosmopolitan far ranging mind. As a man of the study he had no feeling for village history tracing the development and descent of local land messuage by messuage » (76). In effect as a man of the study he was a quite impossible local representative.

James J. Auchmuty.

(74) *Carlow Sentinel* May 25, 1861.

(75) Mathew D. Acton : *The Formative Years*, p. 1.

(76) Mathew, D. Acton : *The Formative Years*, pp. 106-107.