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LORD ACTON'S IRISH ELECTIONS*

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ABSTRACT. *From the age of twenty-three until his death at the age of sixty-eight, Lord Acton was or sought to be a member of the United Kingdom parliament. Although Acton remains a subject of scholarly interest, his political career has received relatively little attention. This article examines Acton's search for an Irish parliamentary seat, a search which was twice unsuccessful in 1857, but which resulted in May 1859 in Acton's return as the member for Carlow borough. Although Acton was pushed towards parliament by his family – and particularly his stepfather, Lord Granville – a close examination of Acton's campaigns reveals more dedication to a political career than has previously been accepted.*

From the age of twenty-three until his death in 1902 at the age of sixty-eight, John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, eighth baronet, first baron Acton, was a member of the United Kingdom parliament or actively sought to be. In 1857, he was twice unsuccessful in locating an Irish constituency for which to stand; in 1859, he won election for the Irish borough of Carlow; his 1865 election for the English borough of Bridgnorth was overturned on petition; in 1868, he stood unsuccessfully for the same seat; the following year William Gladstone recommended Acton's elevation to the peerage and thus to the House of Lords.

Acton's political career has received relatively little attention. With one partial exception, treatments of Acton's parliamentary ambitions have been based on J. J. Auchmuty's 1946 article and two subsequent essays by the same scholar.[1] More recently, in his well-received biography of Acton Roland Hill revisited his subject's political career, but only in passing.[2] Hill did not substantially alter Auchmuty's account. Nor is he always accurate. For example, Acton is credited with his first parliamentary vote 'early in March 1859' – a full two months before

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[1] James J. Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament', *English Historical Review*, 61 (1946), pp. 394–405; 'Acton as a member of the House of Commons', *Bulletin Faculty of Arts, Farouk I University*, 5 (1950); 'Acton: the youthful parliamentarian', *Historical Studies: Australia & New Zealand*, 9 (1960), pp. 131–9. The last is more an anti-Acton polemic than a considered piece of scholarship.

[2] Roland Hill, *Lord Acton* (New Haven, CT, 2000).

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his election.[3] This article seeks to examine freshly Acton's search for an Irish parliamentary seat and eventual election. Acton's tenure as member for Carlow, his campaigns in Bridgnorth, and career in the House of Lords will be treated at another time.

Since 1946, the available sources have dramatically increased. Auchmuty was obliged to rely primarily on newspapers and the published correspondence of Acton and his stepfather, Lord Granville. These provided details of the Carlow election itself, and something of the importance of Granville's role, but little more. It is now possible to consult the voluminous Acton papers in the Cambridge University Library, as well as Granville's papers in the National Archives and the published correspondence of Acton and Richard Simpson.[4] In addition to these collections – which were partly used by Hill – there exist important Irish and English archives that have not previously been utilized. As a result, it is now possible to reconstruct in detail the 1857 and 1859 campaigns, casting light not only on an important part of Acton's life but also on Irish electoral politics in the period between the collapse of the Independent Irish party and the rise of the Home Rule party. As Acton sought election for an Irish constituency, this article considers that search in both its English *and* Irish contexts.[5]

As Hill notes, 'Acton's entry into politics – a hesitant entry, it must be said – was largely the work of his stepfather.'[6] He was Granville George Leveson Gower, from 1846 the second earl Granville. An Anglican from a family at the heart of England's high Whig aristocracy, Granville married Acton's widowed mother in 1840, when Acton was aged six. Acton's even more aristocratic Franco-German mother was, and remained, a devout Catholic. The marriage was childless, and throughout his long life Granville took an almost paternal interest in his stepson.

As early as 1851, Granville had apparently informed Acton's tutor, Ignaz von Döllinger, that he wished to place Acton 'as secretary to some cabinet minister, so as to begin public life in some measure'.[7] The next year, he asked Acton to serve as his own private secretary at the foreign office.[8] Acton was far too

[3] Ibid., p. 86. Hill is not alone. John Kenyon, for example, makes a muddle of Acton's early political career by confusing one 'Johnny' with another: Lord John Russell. See Kenyon, *The history men* (London, 1983), p. 127.

[4] Josef L. Altholz, Damian McElrath, and James C. Holland, eds., *The correspondence of Lord Acton and Richard Simpson* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1971–5).

[5] A stark example of the failure to do this may be found in D. T. Horgan's otherwise extremely useful prosopographical study 'The Irish Catholic Whigs in parliament, 1847–1874' (Ph.D. thesis, Minnesota, 1975). Horgan limited his study only to those Catholic Whig MPs actually born in Ireland – a definition that excludes Acton and artificially divides Irish and English Whigs.

[6] Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 81.

[7] Memorandum 'Monday July [1851]', Cambridge University Library (CUL), Acton papers, MS Add. 8122(3)/1. This peculiar document – in Acton's hand – takes the form of a dialogue between Acton and Döllinger about the former's future.

[8] Granville to Acton, 5 Feb. 1852, The National Archives (TNA), Granville papers, PRO 30/29/18/9/2. Granville succeeded Lord Aberdeen as foreign secretary in late 1851.

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young for the post and uninterested in what Döllinger called 'some subordinate place'.[9] Nevertheless, Granville hoped that his stepson would pursue a career in public life in keeping with the high Whig emphasis on politics in general and parliament in particular. He saw to Acton's political education, arranging a series of trips: to the United States in 1853, and as an attaché with Granville's official delegation to the coronation of the new Tsar, Alexander II, in 1856.

In early March 1857, Granville, then a senior member of Lord Palmerston's Whig-Liberal government, suggested to Acton that he stand with government support for the Irish constituency of Clare. As Granville told a friend, 'I am trying to get Johnny Acton in for some place in Ireland.'[10] Acton replied at length with a perceptive – if slightly coy – statement of what Granville and the government could expect if he won. Although appropriately grateful for the offer, Acton recognized that as a Catholic, he would not always be able to act with a government headed by Palmerston or Lord John Russell (the other most likely Whig-Liberal leader); both were enthusiasts of Italian nationalism, and the latter was tarred by his infamous Durham letter and the 'no-popery' agitation of 1850–1.[11] On the other hand, Acton knew he would not find a comfortable home amongst the Independent Irish Catholic MPs. He never considered the Tories; as he told William Gladstone in 1867, 'I have no Tory fibre.'[12] To Granville, Acton wrote that 'Reasons of religion must separate me occasionally from the Whigs, and political conviction from the Irish party.' He made it clear that 'I cannot undertake always to vote with Lord Palmerston's Government or any other.' Given that no existing party would otherwise sponsor him, Acton acknowledged that Granville's support was 'the only hope I possess of ever entering the noblest assembly in the world'.[13]

Acton's inability to conform fully to any one parliamentary party was hardly novel at a time of unusual instability in the British party system.[14] In fact, Acton's letter near-perfectly described the position of a Catholic Whig, a familiar feature of the Irish political landscape, largely without English equivalent.[15] It did not display, as Auchmuty asserted, 'an essentially cross-bench mind'.[16] Nevertheless, Acton warned Granville that by 'supporting my election with Government influence you would be rendering an uncertain service to the party.' He assured

[9] Memorandum 'Monday July [1851]'.

[10] Granville to Charles Canning, 10 Mar. 1857, TNA, Granville papers, PRO 30/29/21/2/6.

[11] Russell was never forgiven for comparing Catholic worship to 'mummeries of superstition'. Although older, E. R. Norman's *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (London, 1968) remains an excellent account of the 'papal aggression'.

[12] Acton to Gladstone, 1 Jan. 1867, British Library, Gladstone papers, Add. 44093, fo. 55.

[13] Acton to Granville, 'Tuesday' 1857 [probably 3 Mar.], CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121 (7)/1103.

[14] The shifting political alliances and their effect on the political parties in the period are treated in depth in Angus Hawkins, *Parliament, party and the art of politics in Britain, 1855–1859* (Stanford, CA, 1987).

[15] See Horgan, 'The Irish Catholic Whigs in parliament', for a detailed account. The only Catholic MP for a British seat was Lord Edward Howard, in his brother's pocket borough of Arundel.

[16] Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament', p. 395.

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his stepfather that he would understand if the offer were withdrawn. Still, he tempered his warning of equivocal support by noting that he would have to give much the same caution to his prospective constituents in Clare, and concluded by hoping 'that if I am Whig enough for the Government I shall be Catholic enough for them'.[17]

Granville – who already believed that the government were 'going too fiercely against many people who for conscience sake voted against them'[18] – was not deterred by Acton's conflicted loyalties. 'I am glad', he told a friend, 'to find that although he is only a moderate Whig, he is also a very moderate Catholic.'[19] Granville informed Acton that he had read his letter out to Palmerston, who 'was pleased with it, & said he hoped the more you knew us the more you would like us'. Granville also told Acton that he knew nothing specific about either the chances in Clare or the cost. Acton was urged – with a warning that 'We shall dissolve as soon as we can' – to come to London for a discussion with the Irish attorney general, J. D. Fitzgerald, a Catholic who was one of the lord lieutenant's advisers on political matters.[20]

Ireland was the obvious venue for an Acton candidacy. As a Catholic, he would have faced an uphill struggle in England, Scotland, or Wales. In Ireland, Acton's faith could count for him, not against. Moreover, Granville hoped that his own family could help his stepson win an Irish seat. His first cousin, George Howard, seventh earl of Carlisle was, in 1857, lord lieutenant of Ireland, and played a crucial role in the Liberal's election effort there.[21] Granville's own first parliamentary seat – obtained not long after his twenty-first birthday – was a Howard family borough.[22] Both Granville and Carlisle were nephews of William George Spencer Cavendish, sixth duke of Devonshire and one of Ireland's largest landowners. A more distant cousin, John Ponsonby, fifth earl of Bessborough, had substantial Irish holdings and took a close interest in the island's politics.[23] His family connections did not prove as useful as Granville had hoped, but they provided Acton with a useful starting point and a reasonable chance of success.

Although Clare was the first constituency mentioned, it was by no means the exclusive focus of either Granville or Acton. As early as 7 March, Granville had secured an undertaking that the duke of Devonshire would 'give the support of his legitimate influence to any candidate approved by Lord Granville for Youghall [sic] or Dungarvan' – but only so long as no financial support was

[17] Acton to Granville, 'Tuesday' 1857 [probably 3 Mar.].

[18] Granville to Canning, 10 Mar. 1857.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Granville to Acton, [?6] Mar. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/73. For Fitzgerald, see K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, politics, and society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford, 1984), p. 280.

[21] For Carlisle, see Diana Davids Olien, *Morpeth: a Victorian public career* (Washington, DC, 1983). Carlisle was better known by his courtesy title, Lord Morpeth.

[22] Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic government in the age of reform* (Oxford, 1990), p. 53.

[23] There is a useful genealogy of the four families in Mandler, *Aristocratic government*, p. 47.

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required.[24] The same day, Bessborough told Carlisle that 'Sir John Acton is very anxious to come in & has been recommended Cashel if Sir T. O'Brien will withdraw.'[25] The following day, Granville wrote to Carlisle in Dublin. 'I am very anxious', he told his cousin, 'to get J. Acton into Parliament.' He assured Carlisle that 'on the whole he is favourable to [the] Gov^{t}, but wishes to be quite independent'. Palmerston, Granville continued, was 'perfectly satisfied with his Political creed'. According to Granville, Acton 'thought that New Ross would suit him'.[26] Carlisle was to ask a likely candidate if he planned to stand there, and 'if not whether it would do for Acton'. Granville finished by asking the lord lieutenant if there was 'any use in Johnny going over to Dublin'.[27] Although neither New Ross nor Cashel (nor indeed Clare) was again mentioned, Carlisle must have responded positively; on 12 March he assured Granville that 'Sir John Acton will be a welcome addition to the party I mentioned.'[28]

Acton arrived in Dublin later the same day. As Carlisle noted in his diary, 'Sir John Acton arrived to look for an Irish seat.'[29] Despite enjoying access to the highest levels of the Whig-Liberal establishment, Acton discovered that the political climate was unfavourable. Of the likely seats, Clare appeared expensive and uncertain; Sir Timothy O'Brien was unwilling to vacate the Cashel seat he had held since 1846; New Ross appeared likely to return a Conservative; and Youghal was held by Isaac Butt, a popular Protestant lawyer who enjoyed the duke of Devonshire's tacit support after promising to back Palmerston.[30] Dungarvan seemed the best chance. On 9 March, the Irish chief secretary, Edward Horsman, told Carlisle that 'Sir John Acton, Lord Granville's son in law [sic], ought to stand for Dungarvan.'[31] The sitting member was John Francis Maguire, the founder of the *Cork Examiner* and a member of the Independent Irish party. As such, the duke (diffidently) and his Irish agent (actively) hoped to unseat him. The Liberals thought Maguire vulnerable, and on 10 March Horsman informed Carlisle that J. D. Fitzgerald and Bessborough believed that 'the seat is to be had & they are thinking of Sir John Acton for it'.[32]

[24] Sixth duke of Devonshire to Carlisle, 7 Mar. 1857, from the Castle Howard Archives (CHA), J19/1/71/31. With the kind permission of the Hon. Simon Howard. There is a copy in TNA: Granville papers, PRO 30/29/23/10.

[25] Bessborough to Carlisle, 7 Mar. 1857, CHA, J19/1/71/42.

[26] New Ross was a small borough in county Wexford. Formerly the seat of Charles Gavan Duffy, the leader of the Independent Irish party, the constituency fell into Conservative hands in an 1856 by-election occasioned by Duffy's resignation. It remained Tory until 1868.

[27] Granville to Carlisle, 8 Mar. 1857, CHA, J19/1/71/36.

[28] Carlisle to Granville, 12 Mar. 1857, TNA, Granville papers, PRO 30/29/23/10.

[29] Diary of the seventh earl of Carlisle, 12 Mar. 1857, CHA, J19/8/35.

[30] Butt had previously been a Protectionist, but, according to Edward Horsman, he had 'submitted his [election] address to [Viscount] Monck & me & gives his unqualified adhesion to Lord Palmerston – so we have agreed not to oppose him'. Horsman to Carlisle, 10 Mar. 1857, CHA, J19/1/71/52. For Devonshire's support, see Granville to Carlisle, 8 Mar. 1857.

[31] Horsman to Carlisle, 9 Mar. [1857], CHA, J19/1/71/43.

[32] Horsman to Carlisle, 10 Mar. 1857.

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As Granville had the power to commit the Devonshire interest, it seems surprising that Acton did not stand for Dungarvan. The duke of Devonshire was among Ireland's largest landowners with some 60,000 acres, mostly in counties Cork and Waterford. He also owned a number of towns, including the parliamentary boroughs of Bandon, Youghal, and Dungarvan. In common with other great Irish landowners, successive dukes of Devonshire had long sought to use their economic power for political ends.[33] However, in the years since the 1832 Reform Act that ability began to diminish, a process accelerated by the sixth duke's declining interest in political affairs. By 1857, the sixth duke could not on his own ensure the return of any candidate. Beyond the real limitations on the duke's ability – and desire – to interfere in Dungarvan, the first priority was to remove Maguire, and a relatively conservative local landlord, Sir Nugent Humble, intended to stand against him.[34] Humble had enjoyed the support of the Conservative government in 1852 – and sought it unsuccessfully in 1859 – but in 1857 he presented himself as a Palmerstonian to secure support from the Liberal government.[35] If both Humble and a Liberal stood, the anti-Maguire vote would be split and his return assured. Humble was allowed to challenge Maguire alone, and lost by nineteen votes.

Acton reported the bleak news to Granville, telling his stepfather that 'in abandoning the project I am in agreement with the opinion of everybody whom I have thought it worth while to consult'. 'I hope', Acton concluded, 'you will not be more annoyed at the failure of my undertaking than I am myself.' He planned to leave Ireland as soon as possible.[36] Granville replied with alacrity, expressing his disappointment in Acton's failure 'this time' to find a seat, and urging again the desirability of public life. Acton would be, Granville wrote, not only a 'valuable member' of the House of Commons, but would also gain from the experience: 'I am sure that in the line of history which you have chosen, a practical acquaintance with Political business, and with public men must be of great advantage.' He also urged Acton to persevere in Dublin: 'Do not come away. I hear you are making yourself very popular.'[37]

Although Acton received Granville's letter 'a few hours' before his departure, he saw no point in remaining. Not only was there no hope of a seat for himself, the Liberals as a whole were reeling: 'on the day of my departure I found both Lord Carlisle and Fitzgerald desponding, and I received no encouragement from

[33] See Lindsay J. Proudfoot, *Urban patronage and social authority: the management of the duke of Devonshire's towns in Ireland, 1764–1891* (Washington, DC, 1995), p. 2.

[34] Proudfoot describes Humble as a Liberal-Conservative (*Urban patronage and social authority*, p. 292), while Hoppen refers to him as a 'Protestant Conservative landlord' (K. Theodore Hoppen, 'Tories, Catholics, and the general election of 1859', *Historical Journal*, 13 (1970), pp. 48–67, at p. 55).

[35] See Lord Eglinton to Lord Naas, 31 Mar. 1852, National Library of Ireland (NLI), Mayo papers, MS 11,031(1); Humble to Lord Donoughmore [copy], 9 Apr. 1859, NLI, Mayo papers, MS 11,036(5). For Humble and the Devonshire interest in 1857, see NLI, Lismore Estate papers, MS 7188.

[36] Acton to Granville, 16 Mar. [1857], CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(7)/1104.

[37] Granville to Acton, 17 Mar. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/74.

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any portion of the clergy, although I had cultivated the leaders of several parties amongst them'.[38] In fact, the Irish elections were a mild Liberal success, although nothing like that enjoyed in Britain.[39] Beyond official gloom, Acton was worried that 'the expenses of a contest were likely to be so great that I should not have undertaken one without very good chances of success.'[40] This was a real concern. Acton's finances were precarious, and the cost of an Irish election could be substantial; the successful Liberal candidate in Clare – the seat first mooted for Acton – spent some £1,500 in 1857.[41]

To soften the blow, Acton told Granville that he had been looking forward to parliament 'with great pleasure, and should still do so if I meet with another opportunity' – although he knew that he could not 'hope ever to come forward under more favourable and satisfactory auspices than, thanks to your kindness, I enjoyed this time'. Nor was Acton insensible to the point about the utility of a political career to an aspiring historian. Here too Acton found a silver lining: 'Admitting the truth of what you say of the assistance given by experience of political life to historical studies, I think the converse is equally true, that my historical pursuits will be of great use to me if I am ever in Parliament, and with that conviction I am content to return to them.'[42] Nevertheless, Granville was still 'low at Johnny's failure'.[43]

The impression left by Acton's March 1857 search for an Irish seat is one of dutiful diffidence. As he told his beloved cousin (and future mother-in-law), Anna Arco-Valley, 'I have not the slightest regret that my projects to be elected had no success.'[44] In his biography, Hill entitled the chapter treating Acton's parliamentary career 'Pleasing Lord Granville and Mama', and that catches the tone accurately, at least for the 1857 general election. Although Acton went along willingly enough – his declaration of qualified political independence was not a serious attempt at evasion – he did so largely out of a desire to please his family. That said, Acton would soon – and apparently on his own initiative – try again for an Irish seat when it appeared that a suitable vacancy might occur. Whatever his uncertainties in March 1857, in his subsequent campaigns Acton showed, despite continuing expressions of diffidence, a much greater and effective desire to secure his place in the House of Commons.

In mid-November 1857, Acton heard a rumour that J. F. Maguire intended to resign Dungarvan. His informant was Ralph Bernal Osborne, who was first secretary of the Admiralty from 1853. Although Bernal Osborne was, as Acton

[38] Acton to Granville, 'Sunday' [probably 22 Mar.] 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121 (7)/1105.

[39] The Liberals made a net gain of three seats in Ireland.

[40] Acton to Granville, 'Sunday' [probably 22 Mar.] 1857.

[41] This was Francis Calcutt, and he was barely able to raise the money in 1857, and unable to in 1859 when he lost the seat. See Hoppen, 'Tories, Catholics, and the general election of 1859', p. 59.

[42] Acton to Granville, 'Sunday' [probably 22 Mar.] 1857.

[43] Granville to Carlisle, 17 Mar. 1857, CHA, J19/1/71/81.

[44] Acton to Anna Arco-Valley, 2 Apr. [1857], quoted in translation from the French in Hill, *Lord Acton*, p. 82.

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put it, 'a person well acquainted with Waterford',[45] he was not necessarily the most reliable source. Bernal Osborne was unpopular with leading Irish Whigs; when his name was suggested for Irish chief secretary in April 1857, Lord Bessborough told Granville that he was a 'political adventurer'.[46] Carlisle was also hostile.[47] As nobody other than Bernal Osborne seems to have believed in Maguire's resignation, it is possible that the frustrated politician was seeking to curry favour with Granville through his stepson.

Whatever Bernal Osborne's motives, Acton took action. On 18 November, he wrote from his Shropshire estate to Archbishop Paul Cullen of Dublin. Cullen was the most politically influential of the Irish bishops and known to favour Catholic Whig candidates.[48] (As Disraeli put it, 'Cullen is a mere Whig'.[49]) Acton, who had sought Cullen's advice in March, told the archbishop that in the event of a by-election at Dungarvan he could count on the support of the duke of Devonshire and 'the countenance of the Government'. Acton's concern was to secure clerical support: 'if I am not opposed by the influence of the clergy I may be the successful candidate'. He knew that the powerful parish priest of Dungarvan had previously backed Maguire against the duke's preferred candidate, 'but I am not without hopes of obtaining his support'. He solicited Cullen's advice on the wisdom of running, and 'the steps which you think it would be wise to take with respect to the clergy'. 'I should not feel', Acton continued, 'that I was acting in accordance with my duty and with the respect which I owe Your Grace if I failed to inform you at once of this project and to take your private wishes and counsel regarding it.'[50]

This was the sort of deference Cullen sought in a politician. From the archbishop's perspective, Acton was an ideal candidate: Catholic, aristocratic, politically well connected, and the nephew of a curial cardinal Cullen had known and admired.[51] If elected, as an Englishman with no particular views on Irish nationalism Acton was unlikely to disappoint Cullen by siding with the more advanced nationalists. Moreover, in 1857 Acton's later conflicts with clerical authority had yet to emerge.

Acton's candidacy was even more appealing if the stated reason for Maguire's supposed resignation was true. Bernal Osborne had suggested that Maguire was making way for G. H. Moore, the leader of the rump Independent Irish party

[45] Acton to Cullen, 23 Nov. 1857, Dublin diocesan archives (DDA), Cullen papers, 339/8/1/58. In 1869, Bernal Osborne was elected MP for Waterford city after sitting for five separate English constituencies.

[46] Bessborough to Granville, 23 Apr. 1857, TNA, Granville papers, PRO 30/29/19/8/11.

[47] Carlisle to Palmerston, 28 Apr. 1857, TNA, Granville papers, PRO 30/29/19/8/15. For the full scope of Carlisle's opposition to Bernal Osborne, see Olien, *Morpeth*, pp. 427–9.

[48] For Cullen's political views see E. D. Steele, 'Cardinal Cullen and Irish nationality', *Irish Historical Studies*, 19 (1974–5), pp. 234–60.

[49] Benjamin Disraeli to Montagu Corry, 16 Oct. 1866, W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The life of Benjamin Disraeli, earl of Beaconsfield* (6 vols., London, 1910–20), IV, p. 483. Corry was Disraeli's private secretary.

[50] Acton to Cullen, 18 Nov. 1857, DDA, Cullen papers, 339/8/1/56.

[51] Charles Acton (1803–47) was John Acton's paternal uncle. He was created cardinal in 1839.

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that Cullen had done much to crush in 1854–5. A frequent critic of Cullen, Moore was a close ally of Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam, Cullen's bitter rival in the Irish Catholic hierarchy.[52] The idea was plausible: Moore had just lost his Mayo seat on petition, and he and Maguire were political allies.[53] As Acton presumably knew, Cullen would embrace a chance to frustrate Moore.

The archbishop was encouraging: 'I would be very happy to see you member of Parliament for Dungarvan or any other place in Ireland, for I am persuaded that your knowledge of ecclesiastical matters as well as your zeal for religion would render your presence of great advantage to us in the house.' Cullen agreed with Acton's focus on the parish priest, Jeremiah Halley: 'If you can secure the support of Dr Halley, your return for Dungarvan would be easy.' He thought Acton could easily gain such support, particularly if Moore were the opponent. Cullen also suggested that Acton secure letters of support from Cardinal Wiseman of Westminster and Bishop O'Brien of Waterford to give to Halley. Still, Cullen doubted that Maguire intended to resign, opining that the 'report may have originated … in the anxiety of Mr Moore's friends to get him a place in Parliament'.[54]

In addition to Cullen, Acton had also sought the advice of Charles Russell, the scholarly president of St Patrick's College, Maynooth.[55] Russell was enthusiastic, telling Acton that 'There is no young member of our body to whom I look with so much hope & pride.' More practically, Russell wrote privately to Halley's curate, Michael Mooney, to ascertain 'the state of things' in Dungarvan.[56] Although Mooney had no knowledge of any imminent vacancy, he was prepared, on Russell's recommendation, to support Acton if one occurred. His advice was twofold: first, Acton should avoid the duke of Devonshire and his agents, as 'no one could succeed under their advocacy'. Second, 'The moment Mr Maguire is known to withdraw from Dungarvan let Sir John be the first man forward with his public address', an address which the priest helpfully offered to write.[57] A few

[52] Moore lacks a modern biography, but M. G. Moore, *An Irish gentleman: George Henry Moore: his travel, his racing, his politics* (London, n.d.), is useful for the correspondence its publishes. For the relationship between Moore and MacHale, and MacHale and Cullen, see Emmet Larkin, *The making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1850–1860* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980), esp. pp. 380–9 for the 1857 election.

[53] They fell out in 1859 over Maguire's support of the Derby government. See J. H. Whyte, *The Independent Irish party, 1850–1859* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 129, 153.

[54] Cullen to Acton, 21 Nov. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(2)/C326. Cullen was probably correct: in Moore, *An Irish gentleman*, there is no mention of Dungarvan or any other constituency except Mayo in 1857.

[55] Since at least 1856, Acton had been helping Russell with the latter's life of the famous linguist, Cardinal Mezzofanti: Russell to Acton, 29 Apr. 1856, Shropshire Archives, Acton of Aldenham papers, 1093/481. For Russell, see Ambrose Macaulay, *Dr Russell of Maynooth* (London, 1983).

[56] Russell to Acton, 20 Nov. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R165. Acton's letters to Russell do not survive.

[57] Mooney to Russell, 23 Nov. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R167a. Mooney even sent Acton a detailed draft. See CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R168a.

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days later, Mooney provided a detailed analysis of the borough and its factions.[58] This local knowledge was useful, but only to a point: Mooney was merely the curate, and had not spoken to Halley about Acton. He was afraid of his parish priest's reaction: 'don't betray me', he begged Russell.[59]

Nevertheless, Mooney was worth cultivating. Acton appears to have written to the curate (using Russell as a conduit), offering his thoughts on Irish politics. Pleased with Acton's 'beautiful letter', Mooney was 'delighted to find he is such a literary person'.[60] Although the curate was enthusiastic about Acton – and clearly loved the role of political conspirator – his advice was predicated on there being an actual vacancy: 'I cannot yet feel satisfied', Mooney told Russell on 30 November, 'that Mr Maguire is about retiring – he will not for the purpose of making way for Mr Moore.'[61]

Granville had also poured cold water on Dungarvan, telling Acton on 23 November (the same day Cullen's letter arrived at Aldenham) that the duke of Devonshire's auditor, William Currey,[62] 'does not much believe in Maguire's resignation at present'. Granville had more bad news. He quoted Currey as saying 'that the Duke's interest is not above 60 or 70 votes, [and] that Halley went dead against him last election'. Still, Granville reported that Currey was confident that, if the rumour were true, the duke would support Acton, and 'you being a Catholic is strongly in your favour'. Granville also indicated that he and Currey agreed that there was no point 'bothering' the ailing duke 'till we know something more certain of the vacancy'.[63]

Acton was not deterred. He wrote again to Cullen, informing the archbishop that 'It is the greatest consolation and encouragement to me in the prosecution of my plan to think that I have Your Grace's approbation and good wishes'. He also hoped to consult Cullen 'as to the line to be followed in Parliament by a person in my peculiar position'.[64] At the same time he wrote to John Henry Newman, apparently seeking a letter of recommendation to Bishop O'Brien.[65] As Acton must have known, Newman and Cullen were barely on speaking terms, but he was evidently pursuing every avenue.[66]

As Cullen had suggested, and Russell encouraged, Acton also approached Cardinal Wiseman. Wiseman had a long history with the Acton family, serving as spiritual adviser to Acton's mother and counselling on the education of her only

[58] Mooney to Russell, 30 Nov. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R168a.
[59] Mooney to Russell, 23 Nov. 1857. [60] Mooney to Russell, 30 Nov. 1857. [61] Ibid.
[62] Auditor was a position roughly equivalent to chief financial officer of the Devonshire estate. Currey's cousin Francis Curry was the duke's Irish agent, resident at Lismore Castle. Although the duke might from time to time deal with Curry directly, most estate business passed through Currey.
[63] Granville to Acton, 23 Nov. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/75.
[64] Acton to Cullen, 23 Nov. 1857.
[65] John Henry Newman to Acton, 25 Nov. 1857, C. S. Dessain et al., eds., *The letters and diaries of John Henry Newman* (32 vols., London and Oxford, 1962 –), XVIII, p. 184. For Acton and Newman, see Owen Chadwick, *Acton and history* (Cambridge, 1998), ch. 5.
[66] For the Newman–Cullen relationship, see Colin Barr, *Paul Cullen, John Henry Newman and the Catholic University of Ireland, 1845–1865* (Notre Dame, IN, 2003).

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son.[67] Acton told the cardinal about Dungarvan, and that he could expect the support of the duke of Devonshire and the government. 'But the Election', Acton wrote, 'will be decided mainly by the influence of the clergy, and the Archbishop of Dublin advises me that if your Eminence would consent to write a line to the Bishop of Waterford, to enlist Dr Halley of Dungarvan on my side, I might make sure of success'. Acton stressed his links to Granville and through him Palmerston, but assured Wiseman that 'though disposed generally in favour of their Government I cannot promise them a definite support, and I have mentioned one or two questions upon which I shall most decidedly oppose them'.[68] This was important, as Wiseman was bitterly hostile to the government's Italian policy.

Wiseman responded promptly, sending Acton a general letter of approbation, 'which', he wrote in a private covering note, 'as a *first* step, may be better than one personally to the Bishop'. 'If he should write to me', Wiseman continued, 'I could be more full and explicit with him in reply.'[69] As it stood, the letter was clear enough: 'It would give me the greatest pleasure', Wiseman wrote, 'to see you in Parliament. I am sure you would discharge your duties there with independence, and in a thoroughly Catholic spirit.' If any of the bishops or clergy to whom Acton showed the letter wished for 'a more direct communication', Wiseman would be 'most happy to give it'.[70]

In the event, Acton was unable to use the cardinal's letter, although he carefully preserved it. As became clear from late November, Bernal Osborne was mistaken: Maguire had no intention of resigning Dungarvan for Moore or anyone else. Nevertheless, the brief flurry of activity in November 1857 shows a more determined Acton, ready to grasp even an uncertain chance of an Irish seat. Perhaps Granville's belief, expressed in October 1857, that Acton had 'a yearning for public life' was not too far off the mark.[71]

Although he failed in 1857, Acton did not stop thinking about parliament even as he continued his historical studies and embarked on a career in political and cultural journalism. In early 1858, Acton took over as editor and part-owner of the *Rambler*, a Catholic periodical. Under Acton and his friend Richard Simpson, the *Rambler* solidified its position as the organ of the so-called liberal Catholics in England.[72] Acton was mindful of the political risks involved; one of his conditions on accepting the *Rambler* was he would not write anything 'that I should not be

[67] See, for example, Wiseman to Lady Leveson, 18 Nov. 1840, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(8)/534. In this letter, Wiseman advises on a tutor for the young Acton.

[68] Acton to Wiseman, 23 Nov. 1857, Westminster diocesan archives, Wiseman papers, W/3/52/57.

[69] Wiseman to Acton, 27 Nov. 1857, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(6)/W280. Emphasis in original.

[70] Wiseman to Acton, 27 Nov. 1857, John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence, eds., *Selections from the correspondence of the first Lord Acton* (London, 1917), pp. 29–30.

[71] Granville to Canning, 24 Oct. 1857, Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, *The life of Granville George Leveson Gower, second Earl Granville K. G., 1815–1891* (2 vols., London, 1905), I, p. 262.

[72] The definitive treatment is Josef Altholz, *The liberal Catholic movement in England: the 'Rambler' and its contributors, 1848–1864* (London, 1962).

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able to stand by if I came into public life'.[73] Almost immediately, the journal brought Acton into conflict with Cardinal Wiseman and much of the English Catholic establishment.

Even as Acton became embroiled in the controversies provoked by the *Rambler*, parliament and politics remained in his thoughts. In a journal kept in 1858 and 1859, Acton reflected at length on the political obligations of English Catholics, their relation to Ireland, and how each could serve the other in politics.[74] Acton had no doubt that his generation of English Catholics had responsibilities beyond full participation in the intellectual life of the nation: 'in politics we too have a light – for heresy penetrates with its error all human things, and leads to false ideas of government and justice'.[75] In politics, Acton thought, the 'action' of English Catholics was to 'cultivate those principles on which all true gov^{t} rests, of which all parties have a part, and which are above all parties'.[76]

Given his recent experience as an English Catholic in search of an Irish seat, Acton unsurprisingly thought a great deal about the relationship between England and Ireland, and English and Irish Catholics. First, English Catholics had to educate themselves about the sister island: 'Towards Ireland it is clear we have not the knowledge needed to judge and wisely sympathize with them … This should be a great and leading duty for us.' 'On the other hand', Acton continued, 'there is little to be expected, politically, from Ireland.' Acton believed that Irish political leadership since O'Connell had 'fallen to pieces' and that there was 'no class of persons politically independent and educated'. 'The natural leaders of a people', Acton thought, 'are lacking in Ireland.' [77]

> The English Catholics are the natural leaders of the Irish. On the religious field alone can the natural antipathy [between the English and Irish] be removed and wiped away. By services rendered and sympathy shown, and confidence won, we shall obtain our rightful position, and they, a great desideratum. For we have that which to them is wanting. But for this we must be known to them and know them, give and obtain their confidence.

In short, 'We are the natural medium between the Irish and the English nations.' The English Catholics would supply the Irish with 'leaders', Ireland would supply the English Catholics with 'numbers'.[78] Here was justification indeed for seeking an Irish seat.

As well as musing about the English Catholic mission to the Irish, Acton was concerned about other more practical issues involving parliament. For example, in late 1858 and early 1859, he became concerned about the morality of a Catholic swearing the oath required of all MPs. He consulted a number of

[73] Acton to Simpson, 16 Feb. 1858, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 8. Another condition was that he would not write anything of which Döllinger disapproved.

[74] Acton's journal, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 5528. The journal takes the form of notes in a blank book. Most of the entries are undated, although some towards the rear of the volume are dated Sept. 1859. Most seem to be substantially earlier. In most instances, both sides of the page are written on, but there is only one handwritten page number that appears in the lower right-hand corner recto.

[75] Ibid., p. 44v. [76] Ibid., p. 45. [77] Ibid., p. 48. [78] Ibid., p. 48v.

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authorities, including Newman and Bishop Thomas Grant of Southwark, who all 'conspicuously failed in removing' the doubts.[79] Acton had an inquiring mind, but such worry about an issue peculiar to MPs suggests a more than theoretical concern.

With Lord Derby's minority Conservative administration poised to fall at any time, Acton might have to decide about the oath sooner rather than later. Still, and despite the increasing conflict over the *Rambler*, in January 1859 Acton decided to go to the continent. His reasons were largely financial; England was expensive.[80] Granville approved of the plan, but with a caveat: 'I hope you will leave full powers with Fitzgerald about Parl[t].'[81] It was good advice: the government fell on 31 March. Although parliament was not dissolved until 23 April, the campaign began almost immediately.

While Acton was in Munich, Granville was busy. As in 1857, the focus was on a Devonshire-influenced seat. Granville's uncle, the childless sixth duke, had died in 1858, and been succeeded by a great nephew. The new duke was married to Lord Carlisle's sister, Granville's first cousin, and his second son, Frederick, had accompanied Granville and Acton to Russia in 1856.[82] The seventh duke chose the same approach to Irish politics as his predecessor, although as Proudfoot notes, had he not 'willingly adopted an equally low political profile, it would have been forced on him'.[83] Even in England and with his immediate family, Devonshire was diffident. In 1859, he had thought his own son Frederick 'too eager' for a seat.[84]

Acton knew from 1857 that the Devonshire influence alone could not guarantee Dungarvan: hence his approaches to Cullen, Russell, and Mooney. Still, that interest was crucial. On 6 April, William Currey told Devonshire's Irish agent – his cousin, Francis Curry – that he had discussed the forthcoming election with the duke. When asked about Dungarvan and Youghal, Devonshire informed Currey that Acton might stand for the former. The duke was minded to be helpful, but not aggressively so. Curry's instructions were clear: 'The Duke said he should like to express in a quiet way his best wishes for Sir John Acton, but he does not wish you to interfere in the election as on former occasions & thinks it would be wrong under present circumstances to do so.'[85]

[79] Acton to Simpson, 19 Jan. 1859, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 137. Bishop Grant, for example, thought that if Acton disbelieved in a proposition (such as might be contained in the parliamentary oath), he could not swear that he personally accepted it. Grant to Acton, 13 Jan. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(2)/G131.

[80] It was not an exile: Acton enjoyed Munich, had family there, and was in many ways more at home in Germany.

[81] Granville to Acton, 22 Jan. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/76.

[82] This is the same Frederick Cavendish who was murdered by Irish republicans in 1882.

[83] Proudfoot, *Urban patronage and social authority*, p. 293.

[84] Entry for 12 Apr. 1859, diaries of the seventh duke of Devonshire, Devonshire MSS, Chatsworth. By permission of the duke of Devonshire.

[85] William Currey to Francis Curry, 6 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers. The Lismore Castle papers (as distinct from the Lismore Estate papers) are in the process of being catalogued and have not

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The next day, Granville visited Currey, obtaining 'a letter of introduction for a friend of Sir John's' to Curry at Lismore.[86] Since Acton was still in Munich, the name was left blank. Curry was told that while it was desirable 'to please Lord Granville', the auditor did not wish to go against the duke's instructions and 'embroil you in the election actively'.[87] Devonshire made the point himself on 12 April: 'I most certainly do not wish to interfere actively either at Youghal or Dungarvan.' Curry was not to 'accompany or campaign for any Candidate'. All the duke 'contemplated' was that his agent might 'write a few letters to any persons of influence … [who] would be disposed to act in accordance with my wishes … [m]erely intimating that I should be glad to see Sir John Acton returned'.[88] Curry was relieved; he already thought anything more active would 'be attended with much embarrassment in many ways'.[89]

This reluctance was partly driven by the experience of the 1857 contest. As we have seen, Curry had supported Maguire's opponent, the relatively conservative Sir Nugent Humble. Humble's election address had inflamed Catholic opinion – and had embarrassed the duke – and had pushed the clergy firmly into Maguire's camp;[90] Halley was already an ally.[91] During the hustings, Curry had been physically assaulted by supporters of Maguire. The agent had blamed Halley: 'I never believed Dr Halley to be anything but a very hollow & insincere person & now his duplicity & ingratitude are fully unmasked.'[92] Furious, he had suggested economic sanctions on those tenants who 'had allowed themselves to be entrapped and voted against the Duke's wishes'.[93] That never happened, but the election had scarred both agent and auditor. Moreover, the seventh duke planned to sell a portion of his Lismore estate, including Dungarvan,[94] and active electoral interference in a property up for sale would be locally controversial, and 'the sale of the property would be embarrassed'.[95] In fact, the duke does not seem to have taken much interest in the Irish elections. His diary for the period, although it contains entries on a variety of English contests, and much estate business, is silent on Ireland.[96]

Apparently unaware of the duke's tepid support, Granville was making plans. On 4 April, he telegraphed Munich, urging Acton to 'come and try my chance in

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yet been assigned a manuscript number by the Library. I am grateful to Dr Stephen Ball for facilitating my access to these papers.

[86] The letter (dated 7 Apr. 1859) is preserved in the NLI, Lismore Castle papers.

[87] Currey to Curry, 7 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers.

[88] Seventh duke of Devonshire to Curry, 12 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers.

[89] Curry to Currey, 9 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Estate papers, MS 7190.

[90] Proudfoot, *Urban patronage and social authority*, p. 292.

[91] Hoppen, 'Tories, Catholics, and the general election of 1859', p. 55.

[92] Curry to Currey, 10 Apr. 1857, NLI, Lismore Estate papers, MS 7188.

[93] Curry to Currey, 4 Apr. 1857, quoted in Proudfoot, *Urban patronage and social authority*, p. 293.

[94] Proudfoot, *Urban patronage and social authority*, pp. 258–9.

[95] Curry to Currey, 10 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Estate papers, MS 7190.

[96] Chatsworth, Devonshire MSS, diaries of the seventh duke of Devonshire.

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Ireland'.[97] Acton expressed his customary diffidence, telling Simpson: 'I fear I shall be obliged to try it, pour acquit de conscience, and because an election is cheaper than being Sheriff, but I do not feel sanguine.'[98] Nevertheless, and despite the fact that in February he had told his mother and his cousin that he hoped to remain abroad 'as long as possible', he left immediately.[99] Meanwhile, on Acton's behalf Granville nominated an agent – Henry J. Lynch[100] – to go to Ireland with Currey's letter and £50 of Granville's money.[101] He arrived in Dungarvan on 9 April.[102]

Lynch's first task was to meet the borough's influential parish priest. From Halley, Lynch learned both that Maguire again planned to stand and that the priest was pledged to support him. This was a disappointment, as Acton's supporters had some reason to hope that Maguire might not contest the seat. In May 1858, Russell had eagerly reported that 'in the event of a dissolution, Mr Maguire would *go to Waterford*'.[103] At Lismore, Lynch asked Curry if there was a chance either to induce Maguire to withdraw or to defeat him, if he did not. Curry replied that only the active support of both the duke and Sir Nugent Humble could secure Acton the seat in a contest against Maguire. Curry did not think that Humble would help (he wanted to run again),[104] and warned Lynch about the limitations of the duke's support.[105] Lynch received the same advice from Sir James Galwey, a locally prominent Liberal. No doubt at Granville's behest, Sir William Hayter (formerly Palmerston's chief whip) also wrote to Galwey, only to be told 'that it was useless for Sir John Acton to come to Ireland for the Borough'.[106] Discouraged, Lynch sought information about Acton's prospects in either Waterford city or county.[107] Galwey told Curry that Lynch had 'gone to feel his way in the City' for Acton.[108]

While his agent was at work in Ireland, Acton returned from Bavaria in a hurry, arriving in London 'the evening after' leaving Munich. There, he found that 'Lord Granville was very eager about my election and had taken steps to prepare it.' Before he left for Ireland, Acton had a 'long conversation with Gladstone who fully confirmed all my own impressions and judgements and spoke with the greatest bitterness of the ministry'.[109] For his part, Gladstone told

[97] Acton to Simpson, 4 Apr. 1859, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 166. [98] Ibid.

[99] Acton to Minny Throckmorton, 3 Feb. 1859, Warwickshire Record Office, Throckmorton papers, CR1998/Tribune/Chest of Drawers/folder 36.

[100] Very little is known about Lynch. By 1862, he appears to have become a Catholic schools inspector. Henry J. Lynch to Acton, 23 May 1862, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(1)/L211.

[101] Lynch to Acton, 21 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(1)/L210.

[102] See Curry to Currey, 10 Apr. 1859.

[103] Russell to Acton, 29 May [1858], CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R191. Emphasis in original. [104] See Curry to Humble [copy], 17 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers.

[105] Curry to Currey, 10 Apr. 1859.

[106] James Galwey to Francis Curry, 10 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers.

[107] See Curry to Currey, 10 Apr. 1859. [108] Galwey to Curry, 10 Apr. 1859.

[109] Acton to Anna Arco-Valley, 13 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(7)/701.

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his wife that 'Of all the birds in the air, Sir John Acton … called on me this morning (before going to Ireland to stand) to ask a lot of questions about politics.' Although Gladstone was probably correct in his assumption that Acton's call was 'a fishing visit prompted by senior persons' – Granville, and behind him, Palmerston – the meeting nevertheless marked Acton's first substantive encounter with the man who would lead him from lukewarm Catholic Whig to committed Gladstonian Liberal.[110] If Granville did prompt Acton's visit, it was a remarkable expression of political confidence in his young stepson. The close Gladstone–Granville relationship had not yet developed (although Gladstone had been invited to call by Acton's mother, Lady Granville, that same evening),[111] and Gladstone's intentions in the new parliament were of pressing concern to all sides.

Acton arrived in Dublin on 10 April, and went directly to Maynooth to meet with Charles Russell, who gave him a 'letter full of praises for the Bishop of Waterford'.[112] The next day, he went south to meet Lynch. At first, Acton was optimistic about Waterford, where he found 'One or two friends are very active in my cause.' Russell's letter, he reported, 'was sufficient recommendation to the higher clergy', and by 13 April, Bishop O'Brien was prepared to state publicly that Acton 'was the person he most wished to see elected'. 'Some of my friends', Acton wrote, 'are sanguine.' Despite this, Acton had done nothing publicly, and told his cousin that 'To morrow it will be settled probably whether I remain for the election, or whether I retire from the contest.'[113] To Simpson, Acton reported (no doubt to Simpson's amusement) that he was 'making great use' of Cardinal Wiseman's earlier letter of recommendation. 'Luckily', Acton continued, 'the date, November 1857, is a little indistinct, and I have not yet been asked for new credentials.'[114] Wiseman's 'endorsement' was a mixed blessing: 'I find … that his authority is not very great with the bishop or older clergy but powerful with the mob.'[115]

Acton's use of Wiseman's name is interesting. In his letter recommending Acton to Bishop O'Brien, Russell asserted that he was only writing himself because Acton had passed through London too quickly to receive 'from the Cardinal Archbishop a letter to your Lordship which his Eminence had promised to him'. According to Russell, Acton had however arranged that this letter 'should follow him' to Ireland.[116] Given the troubles over the *Rambler*, Acton could not have hoped to secure such an endorsement in April 1859, and there is no evidence that he tried to. As we have seen, in Waterford he was prepared to pass off Wiseman's November 1857 letter as a current recommendation. Although Russell's letter to Bishop O'Brien is dated 9 April – a day before Acton saw him in Maynooth – Russell must have had the information about Wiseman's new letter

[110] William Gladstone to Catherine Gladstone, 9 Apr. 1859, Flintshire Record Office, Gladstone–Glynne papers, GG/774.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Acton to Arco-Valley, 13 Apr. 1859.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Acton to Simpson, 12 Apr. 1859, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 170.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Russell to Dominic O'Brien, 9 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R176.

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directly from Acton or, although there is no evidence for this, Lynch or another Acton agent. In any case, Acton either deliberately misled Russell, or at least did not correct his letter to O'Brien before showing it to the bishop. If Acton was being deceitful, it was a particularly dangerous game to play; Russell was a long-standing friend of the cardinal, even if he did not always share his politics.[117]

Nicholas Wiseman loomed large over the 1859 election in Ireland, and nowhere more so than in Waterford. Although English, he was the only United Kingdom cardinal. Moreover, the year before he had enjoyed a triumphal tour of Ireland. Even if that reception had more to do with Irish papalism and love of spectacle than with Wiseman himself,[118] the experience tempted him to active political meddling. Wiseman was encouraged by the Conservatives, who saw a chance to capitalize on widespread Catholic distaste for the likely Italian policies of Palmerston and, especially, Lord John Russell.[119] The government had enjoyed the support of a number of the remaining Independents, including J. F. Maguire of Dungarvan, and now sought to obtain clerical support for Conservative (and often Protestant) candidates against Liberal ones. Although Disraeli was more enthusiastic than the Tory's Irish chief secretary, Lord Naas,[120] the strategy proved a success. As Acton acidly noted, George Bowyer (Wiseman's English spokesman) was returned at Dundalk with the support of a prominent Orange peer.[121] In Waterford, Wiseman wrote a public letter of support on behalf of John Blake, a Catholic Independent who regularly voted with Derby. According to the cardinal, 'from the present government we have received more attention, more courtesy, and more ready assurance of redress … than we have experienced from others'.[122] After representing himself as having Wiseman's support, Acton was caught out.

The cardinal's intervention destroyed Acton's chance in Waterford city. A local Liberal organizer told him on 16 April that Bishop O'Brien had decided not to back any candidate, 'in consequence of the production of a letter from Cardinal Wiseman stating the late vote of Mr Blake and the acts of the government met with *his approval*'. The city's Liberals therefore unsuccessfully intended

[117] Russell and Wiseman had been close since the 1830s, and Russell officiated at the cardinal's funeral in 1865. Macaulay, *Dr Russell*, p. 30.

[118] R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in context: Irish politics & society, 1848–1882* (Dublin, 1998), p. 46.

[119] This was plausible not because the Tories were in favour of the pope's temporal power, but because their foreign policy was pro-Austrian and thus anti-revolutionary.

[120] For example, see Disraeli to Naas, 12 May 1859, M. G. Wiebe et al., eds., *Benjamin Disraeli letters*, (7 vols., Toronto, 1981 –), VII, pp. 376–8.

[121] Lord Roden. See Acton to Simpson, 19 Apr. 1859, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 173.

[122] Wiseman to T. F. Strange, 13 Apr. 1859, quoted in Hoppen, 'Catholics, Tories, and the general election of 1859', p. 56. The successful candidate, John Blake, secured the second seat behind the Protestant Conservative M. D. Hassard. Wiseman's letter was published in the *Tablet*, which was supporting the Tories in 1859. For the strategy and tactics of Wiseman's interventions, see Dermot Quinn, *Patronage and piety: the politics of English Roman Catholicism, 1850–1900* (Stanford, CA, 1993), pp. 42–3.

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to back a local candidate 'for the sole purpose of defeating Mr Blake'.[123] As Acton put it a few days later, 'I owe my failure in Ireland to the Cardinal, who is recommending Young Ireland candidates who vote for govt. and bearding the bishops in their den.'[124] Thwarted in Dungarvan and Waterford city, Acton turned to the remaining constituency in Waterford: the county itself.

However unlikely it seemed, Acton had some reason to hope that he might manage one of the two county seats. As late as 16 April, a local Liberal, John O'Brien, thought that one of the sitting Liberal members might not relish a contest.[125] In that event, O'Brien believed Acton 'would succeed in obtaining the vacant seat'.[126] And Sir James Galwey wrote that if 'Sir John Acton was put forward by the Duke [of Devonshire] I have no doubt but he would carry the County'.[127] That condition was not met. On 13 April, Granville told Currey that Acton was thinking about the county seat.[128] Granville asked the auditor if Devonshire might be prepared to order Curry to help. Currey thought not. With the prospective land sale in mind, Currey warned the duke that such interference 'would be wholly impossible without most serious inconveniences to the Estate business, not to say injury to his interests'.[129] Devonshire agreed. The same day, he told Curry that he had been 'glad to hear this morning that Sir John Acton has given up Dungarvan'. He was no more positive about Waterford county: 'it seems to me out of the question that totally unconnected as he is with the county, he can have any chance of meeting with general support'.[130]

Even as Acton pursued Waterford county, Dungarvan briefly re-emerged as a possibility. On 17 April, Francis Curry told the duke of Devonshire that he had been approached by a 'Mr Hudson who is professionally retained for Mr Maguire'. Hudson floated a plan by which Maguire would shortly after the election vacate Dungarvan in favour of a seat in Cork (either city or county). He would then support Acton at the ensuing by-election. In return, Maguire demanded 'the same *practical & earnest* support that would have been afforded on the part of your Grace to Sir John Acton had he stood'.[131] The idea was not implausible: Maguire was anxious about the electoral consequences of his support for the government,[132] and there had been other indications that he felt insecure in Dungarvan. In 1858, Russell had speculated that Maguire might be looking for a safer seat.[133] And earlier in April, Mooney had reported to Russell (and through him to Acton) that Maguire, although he would win re-election, was

[123] John O'Brien to Acton, 16 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(4)/9. Emphasis in original.
[124] Acton to Simpson, 19 Apr. 1859.
[125] He was correct: N. M. Power did not stand in 1859.
[126] O'Brien to Acton, 16 Apr. 1859.
[127] Galwey to Curry, 10 Apr. 1859.
[128] Currey to Curry, 13 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers. Granville also wrote directly to the duke: seventh duke of Devonshire to Curry, 13 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers.
[129] Currey to Curry, 13 Apr. 1859.
[130] Devonshire to Curry, 13 Apr. 1859.
[131] Curry to Devonshire, 17 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Estate papers, MS 7190. Emphasis in original.
[132] See Hoppen, 'Tories, Catholics, and the general election of 1859', p. 55.
[133] Russell to Acton, 29 May [1858].

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in 'rather awkward circumstances' politically and was unlikely to 'hold the Borough beyond the next election'.[134]

In any event, Curry was hostile. Given Maguire's support for Derby, he wrote, 'there appears to me a degree of effrontery in his present suggestion which must place it out of the pale of being entertained'.[135] The duke agreed: 'Maguire's proposal is not to be listened to for a moment.' Devonshire was thoroughly disgusted. 'I cannot say', he wrote, 'that I feel any very intense interest to secure Sir John Acton a seat hereafter. But even if I did, I have very little doubt any arrangements of this kind would be repudiated without scruple, if it suited those who now suggested it, to do so.'[136] Although Acton heard the rumour that Maguire might pursue Cork,[137] it is unlikely that he knew the details of his proposal or the duke's reaction.

Acton did not invest all his hopes in county Waterford or the Devonshire connection. As early as 11 April, Granville – who was 'sorry to get a bad account from Lynch' about Dungarvan – reported that the county Cork borough of Kinsale was 'vacant'.[138] Acton dutifully headed for Cork, where he was briefed by the bishop.[139] He spent two days there, although he told Simpson that he stood no chance.[140] He had arrived 'trop tard': clerical support had already been promised to another candidate.[141] In the meantime, Lynch was despatched to the Queen's county, with a letter of introduction from Russell to the bishop, to test the waters there.[142] Limerick received at least passing attention as well.[143]

Acton was also approached to stand for Dublin city. The details are obscure, but on 17 April Acton told both his mother and cousin about the overtures, which he received while still in Cork. The approach was not as surprising as it might at first appear; the Liberals traditionally had trouble attracting plausible candidates in the capital. With around 10,000 electors, the city was expensive.[144] It also tended to return Conservatives.[145] In 1857, Carlisle was reduced to wooing prospects over dinner and dancing at Dublin Castle; perhaps after a bit too much vice-regal wine, one prospective candidate agreed to stand only to change his

[134] Mooney to Russell, 10 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R177. According to Mooney, Maguire's problems came from local anger at his refusal to support a popular public works project, not his support of Derby.

[135] Curry to Devonshire, 17 Apr. 1859.

[136] Devonshire to Curry, 19 Apr. 1859, NLI, Lismore Castle papers.

[137] Acton to Marie Louise Dalberg Leveson Gower, Lady Granville [his mother], 17 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(7)/586. In French.

[138] Granville to Acton, 11 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/77.

[139] Acton to Anna Margareta Arco-Valley, [17 Apr.] 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121 (7)/702. In French.

[140] Acton to Simpson, 16 Apr. 1859, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 173.

[141] Acton to Arco-Valley, [17 Apr.] 1859.

[142] Russell to James Walshe, 18 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(5)/R178.

[143] See Lynch to Acton, 21 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8119(1)/L210.

[144] The total electorate in 1862 was 10,847. See B. M. Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801–1922* (Dublin, 1978), p. 271.

[145] In the elections of 1852, 1857, and 1859, both Dublin city seats went to Conservatives. A Conservative headed the poll in every election from 1841 to 1868.

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mind in the morning.[146] The Catholic stepson of a prominent former (and certain future) minister must have been attractive to the city's Liberals. For his part, Acton not unreasonably worried about what standing there might entail. In Dublin, he told Anna Arco-Valley, it was the 'Protestants enragés' who dominated. Although flattered (*flatté*) to be asked, especially as he was not Irish, Acton dreaded the contest, which he believed would be contentious and 'très coûteux'.[147] He told his mother much the same thing.[148] In the case of Dublin, Acton felt obliged 'de réfuser et de cacher et calmer un peu mon ambition politique'.[149]

Although more persevering than in 1857, Acton was easily frustrated. He arrived home on 19 April, two days after his brief flirtation with Dublin. 'You seem to have been very active', Granville told him, 'and it is provoking that you have had so little success.' Although he thought Acton wise to avoid a large personal expenditure such as Dublin might entail, 'I am sorry that you have left Ireland.' 'There are so many openings sometimes at the last moment', Granville continued, 'and it is possible that something might have been done about a subscription for Dublin.' Optimistically, Granville concluded that 'Of course you would not shrink from the contest in consequence of the row or the trouble.'[150]

Even while Acton was home nursing a toothache or gum infection that had dogged him since Waterford,[151] Granville remained active. On 23 April he reported a (false) rumour that Isaac Butt would not contest Youghal, '& that they were clamouring for a Catholic who could walk over'.[152] Six days later, Acton received a telegram from his stepfather reporting that Alexander McCarthy, a Liberal incumbent in Cork county, was standing down: 'McCarthy resigns Cork tonight. Scully disliked.[153] Opening for Acton with letters to Bishops. Nominations tenth May.'[154] A week earlier, yet another constituency had been suggested: Carlow borough.

Granville had heard from 'an excellent authority' – W. Baker, the secretary to the Liberal Election Committee – that if Acton were prepared to 'stand £700 to be used legitimately, & not in Bribery, that you may be certainly returned for Carlow'. Baker and Lord Bessborough had written to 'Father Maher the head Priest, who is to telegraph tomorrow as to whether he is of the same opinion'.

[146] Diary of the seventh earl of Carlisle, 19, 20 Mar. 1857, CHA, J19/8/35.
[147] Acton to Arco-Valley, [17 Apr.] 1859. [148] Acton to Lady Granville, 17 Apr. 1859.
[149] Acton to Arco-Valley, [17 Apr.] 1859.
[150] Granville to Acton, [Apr.] 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/78. The date on the letter is written as 1 April, but that cannot be correct. The letter clearly dates from the period 19 April to about 2 May. The most likely date is somewhere between 20 and 25 April.
[151] Acton to Arco-Valley, 13 Apr. 1859, and Acton to Simpson, 24 Apr. 1859, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 177.
[152] Granville to Acton, 23 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/80.
[153] Vincent Scully, QC. Stood unsuccessfully for Cork county in 1857, came second in the poll, 1859. [154] Granville to Acton, 29 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/81.

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If Maher agreed, Baker would inform him of Acton's 'immediate arrival as a candidate'.[155]

Carlow was an odd choice. It was outside the Devonshire or any other family connection, it was small, held by a Conservative, and famously corrupt. Carlow was also violent: at a recent election, John Bright told the House of Commons in March 1859, 'There were two troops of dragoons, two companies of infantry, and 150 police' engaged in 'keeping the peace in a town which comprises only 200 electors.'[156] In fact, the electorate was 236 (from a population of some 9,000), which made Carlow one of the smallest Irish boroughs.[157] Even Phineas Finn's Loughshane had 307 electors.[158] According to Granville's information, there were '136 Catholic [and] 95 Protestant Electors'.[159]

Despite its small size, Carlow was competitive; no family or interest could command a reliable majority. Although the elections were usually close, Whig-Liberals had the advantage. In the nine general and by-elections held between 1832 and 1857, candidates who might broadly be defined as Whig-Liberal had been returned in six, including the contested 1839 election.[160] By 1859, however, the borough was still emerging from the long shadow cast by a previous MP, John Sadleir. In 1847, Sadleir had won by a wide margin as a Whig-Liberal, and in 1852 he was returned as an Independent with a reduced majority. The 1853 by-election, caused by his appointment as a commissioner of the Treasury in the Aberdeen coalition, became a referendum on Sadleir's supposed betrayal of independent opposition. On a low poll, he narrowly lost to the Conservative John Alexander, although he thereafter found a seat in Sligo. Sadleir's status as a nationalist bogey had been exacerbated by his complicity in the frauds that led to the collapse of the Tipperary bank in 1856, and he killed himself the same year.[161]

Sadleir had enjoyed the political support of Carlow's 'head Priest': James Maher, the parish priest of Graigue. Sadleir's 1853 defeat, and subsequent disgrace and suicide, had been a great embarrassment for the Carlow Liberals in general and Maher in particular; in 1859, the Protestant *Carlow Sentinel* was still using the term 'Sadleirism' to link the Liberals to corruption.[162] Worse, the local Catholic bishop was at best a lukewarm Liberal, and had wanted to let Alexander stand unopposed in 1857. At elections, Bishop Walshe disapproved of what he called 'Sacerdotal Knight Errantry' and sought to limit clerical involvement in

[155] Granville to Acton, 20 Apr. 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/79.

[156] *Times*, 25 Mar. 1859. The context was a debate over the Conservative reform bill, and the subject electoral corruption in small boroughs.

[157] Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament', p. 397.

[158] Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn, the Irish member* (Oxford, 1999), p. 7.

[159] Granville to Acton, 20 Apr. 1850. Granville's calculations give a total electorate of 231; the *Carlow Post* of 14 May 1859 gave 232; 220 actually voted: see Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland*, p. 255.

[160] In 1839, the election of the Conservative Francis Bruen was overturned on grounds of corruption.

[161] For Sadleir, see James O'Shea, *Prince of swindlers: John Sadleir, M. P., 1813–1856* (Dublin, 1999).

[162] *Carlow Sentinel*, 30 Apr. 1857.

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politics.[163] Although locally powerful parish priests could, and did, meddle politically against the wishes of their bishops, active episcopal opposition to clerical involvement could cripple non-Conservative candidates – as the Independent Irish party discovered after 1854. Despite these handicaps, Maher enjoyed an important advantage: he was the uncle (and formerly the guardian) of Archbishop Cullen of Dublin.[164] Maher would have taken no political action without the approval of his nephew, and the connection allowed him ample freedom to play politics even against the inclinations of his bishop.

Given Carlow's history of electing Liberals, Alexander was evidently vulnerable – although the Conservatives seem not to have realized it.[165] Moreover, the incumbent had committed the ultimate Irish political sin: according to Granville, the 'Derbyite candidate is a strong Orangeman who bribed something on forty voters, and did not pay them'.[166] A Liberal-leaning constituency with a Catholic majority held by a Conservative Protestant was a tempting prospect, especially as Maher (like Cullen) remained resolutely anti-Tory even in the peculiar circumstances of the 1859 general election.[167] A number of Liberals also considered a contest. These included John Ball, a former MP for Carlow county who had lost the seat in 1857 and been in search of another since, and an Englishman, H. G. Gridley. Neither man found support. Ball dropped out almost immediately,[168] and Gridley quickly followed suit.[169] Another short-lived candidate, Thomas Norton, became Acton's agent. On examination, potential Liberal candidates found Carlow expensive, corrupt, and prone to violence. Importunate electors were said to be the cause of Ball's departure.[170]

Carlow's toxic reputation might have given Acton pause, but he was ill and may not have known the borough's history. Granville, however, quickly learned how things stood. On 26 April, J. D. Fitzgerald wrote that Carlow was 'not to be obtained save by dealing [*i.e.* bribing] with some 30 of the voters – they are a shocking set'. Fitzgerald was not hopeful: '*The Bishop will support Sir John mildly*. The P. P. [Maher] will come out for him vigorously but I fear that all this wont do

[163] James Walshe to Cullen, 3 Apr. 1857, Cullen papers, DDA, 339/5/1/47.

[164] Maher was the brother of Cullen's mother. Cullen's half-nephew, Patrick Francis Moran (eventually cardinal archbishop of Sydney) wrote a quasi-biography: *The letters of Rev. James Maher, D. D., late P. P. of Carlow-Graigue, on religious subjects: with a memoir* (Dublin, 1873).

[165] There is no mention of Carlow borough in Lord Naas's election correspondence in the National Library of Ireland (MS 11,036(5)), whereas other at-risk seats such as Newry and Louth received substantial attention. When Acton's victory was announced, the Conservative chief whip, T. E. Taylor, thought it 'unexpected quite'. Taylor to Donoughmore, n.d. [but May 1859], Trinity College Archives Department, H/19/1/1598. I am grateful to Dr Andrew Shields for this reference.

[166] Granville to Acton, 20 Apr. 1859.

[167] For Cullen and Maher, the very real objections to the Whig-Liberals, and especially their leaders, were outweighed by the ultra-Protestant character of Irish conservatism.

[168] Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament', p. 399.

[169] *Carlow Sentinel*, 23 Apr. 1859.

[170] Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament', p. 398, quoting from the conservative *Saunders Newsletter*.

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& that whoever bribes will have the 30 votes.' Still, it 'can do no injury to Sir John to come over & make the attempt keeping clear of all illegalities'.[171]

Acton's illness prevented a quick commitment to Carlow. As he told Simpson on 2 May, 'I am only just getting better, and have not been able to look after my election interests.'[172] The delay was nearly fatal to Acton's chances. On 1 May, Ball (who had earlier dropped out of the race) reported to Acton that he had received an approach from Carlow which led him to believe that 'the prospect of success was quite favourable enough to have warranted me in going on with the contest'. Despite this, Ball told Acton that 'five or six of the Electors were better disposed to vote for you than for me'. Although the reasons for this preference for a man they had never met are not clear, the most likely explanation is that Ball's friendship with a number of Italian liberals, including Cavour, had alienated Maher and other papally minded Catholics; in 1858, this had been enough to turn the clergy against him in a by-election in Limerick.[173] Since a Liberal victory was the most important thing, Ball decided that 'it wd be more desirable that you shd be the candidate even though it were necessary for you to be represented by a friend'.[174]

Although the threat of a Liberal challenger had been averted, Acton was still unable to travel. On 2 May, Acton told Simpson that he had 'telegraphed to a Mr. Norton, whom I don't know, but who is said to be a Catholic colonial judge … and asked him to be my representative'. Acton had no idea whether Norton would agree, or even if he was still in the borough. Still, Acton hoped Simpson could travel to Ireland, as he wanted a friend in Carlow who knew his 'real opinions'. Noting that Ball, Norton, and Maher were all 'confident of my success', Acton told Simpson that he was 'in better spirits after a whole week of misery'. Even the short campaign might prove an advantage: '[The] Poll closes on Thursday, so there will be no time to ask many unpleasant questions of the C. [Wiseman] or others.'[175]

Although Simpson was unable to go to Carlow, it did not matter. Once Acton was committed, the mechanics of his election were a local concern. According to the hostile *Carlow Sentinel*, Acton's name was first heard in the constituency in late April. 'The telegraph', the *Sentinel* reported, 'was set in motion, and messages were transmitted in every direction, to catch some stray candidate in search of a seat.' 'At length, after a long process of incubation, it was alleged that Sir John Acton had been discovered in England.'[176] By 2 May, pro-Acton flyers had begun

[171] J. D. Fitzgerald to Granville, 26 Apr. [1859], CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/39. Emphasis in original. Although the date on the letter is clearly written as '1856', from the context there can be no doubt that that is a slip of the pen and the letter dates from 1859.

[172] Acton to Simpson, 2 May 1859, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, pp. 177–8.

[173] See Gordon L. Herries-Davies' entry on Ball in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*.

[174] Ball to Acton, 1 May 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS. Add. 8119(1)/826.

[175] Acton to Simpson, 2 May 1859.

[176] *Carlow Sentinel*, 30 Apr. 1859.

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to appear in the town.[177] The *Sentinel* had never heard of Acton, and asserted that he 'had no claim upon any county or borough in Ireland – if we except that of alleged [Catholic] orthodoxy – and, at the present crisis, if this were exclusively his only qualification, to represent the Borough of Carlow, no one could reasonably expect to have it endorsed by a majority of the constituency'.[178]

Acton's lack of qualifications was irrelevant; Maher, Carlow's Liberals, and the *Carlow Post* were determined to return a Catholic Liberal. That Acton was politically well connected and favoured by the archbishop of Dublin was welcome, but incidental. Other than Catholicism, his only absolutely necessary attribute was an ability to fund, or find others to fund, the campaign. Carlow's Catholics certainly had reason beyond Acton's qualities to engage with the contest. As part of his lecture tour of Ireland, the Italian republican (and apostate priest), Alessandro Gavazzi, had stopped in Carlow a few weeks before the election. His visit had raised a storm, with Maher and Gavazzi's Presbyterian host trading insults in the newspapers. In much of Ireland, Catholic papalism had been turned against the Liberals; the party of Russell and Palmerston was plausibly portrayed as a danger to the temporal power. In Carlow, however, Maher and the Liberals were able to channel the Catholic anger that everywhere greeted Gavazzi into opposition to the town's Protestant establishment and the candidate associated with it.[179]

If the election turned exclusively on religion, Carlow's Catholic majority guaranteed a narrow Liberal victory. The point was made starkly at the nominations on 3 May. In nominating Acton, Edward Flood reminded his audience that, in Carlow, Catholics outnumbered Protestants both in electors and in population. According to Flood, as a result the 'representation is fairly ours'. 'I trust therefore', he continued, 'that no Catholic will desert his colours at this critical moment, when the battle may be regarded not as between Tory and Liberal, but as between Protestant ascendancy on the one part and Catholic liberty on the other.' Seconding Acton's nomination, Thomas Price, the proprietor of the *Carlow Post*, asked how any Catholic could vote for a Protestant like Alexander when Carlow's Protestant elite had recently 'swarmed together like a flock of crows round carrion to listen to that vile character [Gavazzi] who was brought here to curse the Pope, and throw a slur upon the Catholic religion'.[180] In what was quite an achievement even for Ireland, Gavazzi and his hosts had unwittingly ensured the return of a candidate who had never set foot in the constituency. Maher acknowledged as much when he wrote, with heavy irony, that he owed a 'debt of gratitude' to the rector of Carlow's Scots Church, both for

[177] Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament', p. 399.

[178] *Carlow Sentinel*, 30 Apr. 1859.

[179] For both Gavazzi's Irish tour and an excellent account of the impact of Italy on the 1859 election, see Jennifer O'Brien, 'Irish public opinion and the Risorgimento, 1859–1860', *Irish Historical Studies*, 34 (2005), esp. pp. 294–7.

[180] *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1859.

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Gavazzi's visit and his public letter extolling it; 'during our canvass', he wrote, 'I found this letter of great value'.[181]

Acton's contribution was limited to the financial and a short public letter to the *Carlow Post*. Although it arrived too late for the weekly paper's pre-election edition, the *Post* helpfully sent a copy 'from our office to every Liberal [i.e. Catholic] constituent of the Borough'.[182] Acton adopted the positions expected of a Catholic Whig: he was for 'any measure which promises to improve the present untenable position of the Irish Tenant'; for religious 'influence' in education; for a 'satisfactory Reform Bill, extending to Ireland'; and in favour of the ballot. He did not explicitly mention Italy, and his language about the European alliance of revolution and despotism, although undoubtedly acceptable to Carlow's Catholic electorate, hints at Acton's complicated attitude toward the temporal power. Echoing the strategy of his proxies, Acton emphasized his religion, and the government's support for the Protestant ascendancy. He quoted Derby's intemperate 1857 remarks about Catholicism ('Religiously Corrupt and Politically Dangerous'), linked them to the hot-button issue of jury packing, and concluded that 'every day of Tory rule is a calamity for the Irish Nation and for the Catholic Religion'.[183] It did not matter that Acton was physically incapable of visiting Carlow and speaking for himself. (He was still suffering from the tooth infection; as late as 8 May, he told Simpson that 'I cannot open my mouth properly yet.'[184]) Given the essential irrelevance of the candidate, the letter was adequate for Liberal needs.

The election proceeded in typical Carlow fashion. According to the *Carlow Sentinel*, 'a large constabulary force took possession of the Court-house' on the morning of the nominations. There was also a party of dragoons waiting nearby. After the nominations, Maher, again according to the hostile *Sentinel*, 'proceeded from house to house, to confirm, we suppose, the principle enunciated on the hustings – viz. that "'No Catholic should vote for Mr Alexander."' The paper also alleged that the Liberals had employed a 'well organised mob to overawe the Roman Catholic voters'. There were even allegations of kidnapping.[185] For his part, Maher denied what he rightly expected to be the *Sentinel*'s account of the election. Although he admitted that after Acton's return was announced 'the people enjoyed their triumph after their own fashion', he placed the blame for any violence squarely on a provocative 'rush of the dragoons amongst the people'. He also pre-emptively denied any hint of bribery or undue clerical influence, claiming that 'We carried the election fairly and honourably.'[186]

[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid.

[183] Acton to the electors of the borough of Carlow, *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1857.

[184] Acton to Simpson, 8 May 1857, Altholz, McElrath, and Holland, eds., *Acton–Simpson correspondence*, I, p. 178.

[185] *Carlow Sentinel*, 7 May 1857. Allegedly, a number of pro-Alexander Catholic voters were seized by the Liberals to prevent them voting.

[186] Maher to the editor of the *Carlow Post*, *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1857.

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Although the *Carlow Sentinel* had every reason to emphasize Liberal misbehaviour, there is little doubt that much of what they alleged actually occurred. Inflamed by alcohol and sectarian passion, the mob made it difficult for any Catholic tempted to vote Conservative.

The campaign was mercifully short: nominations on Tuesday, 3 May, the poll on Thursday, and the formal result Friday morning, 6 May. As Maher shepherded the Catholic vote, Acton's agent, Thomas Norton, gave a number of speeches in which he performed the impressive feat of 'fully explaining the political principles of Sir John Acton'.[187] As Norton later cheerfully told Granville, one reason for his success was that he persuaded his listeners that Acton was 'first cousin to the Queen through a distinguished German family'.[188] Even less accurately, at the nominations Edward Flood described Acton as a 'man possessed of a princely income'.[189]

The Liberal election effort cost some £500, but how Acton obtained that sum is unclear. Financial concerns had already forced him to the continent earlier in 1859, and it is unlikely that he could – or would – have spent so much on Carlow. Whether the money was Granville's, from Liberal party sources, or some combination (perhaps with a contribution from Acton), it is probable that the bulk did not come from Acton's pocket. Whatever its source, the money was personally advanced by Norton to 'an Agent approved by Father Maher'. Norton was then reimbursed on Granville's instructions. According to Granville, Maher had 'asked from us authority to spend £400', but 'tried to get £600 out of Norton'.[190] Acton enjoyed greater financial support than Alexander, who received only £200 from central Conservative funds, which was less than a number of other contested boroughs.[191] Even if no actual bribes were paid (and there is no direct evidence that they were), the conclusion that most of the money was spent on drink and other 'entertainments' seems unavoidable. Certainly matters were sufficiently bad that, for a time, a parliamentary petition to overturn the result remained a real possibility.

Acton polled 117 votes against Alexander's 103 – slightly over £4 per vote – and the total was the highest achieved by a Liberal in Carlow since 1847. The *Carlow Post* was delighted; the borough was now free 'from the Orange incubus under which it has been labouring for the last six years.' 'Farewell, therefore, we say to ALEXANDER, once for all – and welcome, a hearty Irish welcome, a true *cead mille failthe* [sic] to SIR JOHN ACTON.'[192] Acton's return was a welcome consolation to despairing Irish Liberals. In Ireland the 'impossible had happened', as the Conservatives enjoyed a net gain of at least eight seats to secure a majority on

[187] *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1857.

[188] Granville to Acton, 9 May 1859, CUL, Acton papers, MS Add. 8121(6)/82. Granville had just met with Norton.

[189] *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1857.

[190] Granville to Acton, 9 May.

[191] 'Money paid', 1859, NLI, Mayo papers, MS 11,036(1). This is a constituency-by-constituency list of Conservative expenditure in Ireland.

[192] *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1857.

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the island.[193] Carlow was one of only three constituencies to change hands in the Liberal's favour.[194]

Acton had succeeded because of the peculiarities of Carlow. Possessed of a Catholic majority, the borough had a Conservative representative only because of the baleful legacy of John Sadleir. More importantly, the powerful parish priest was unmoved by Conservative appeals for Catholic support, unlike Cardinal Wiseman and many others. The serendipitous appearance of Gavazzi allowed Maher and his allies convincingly to frame the election as Catholic v. Protestant. Once that happened, Maher's careful canvassing combined with fear of the mob ensured that any wavering Catholic elector did his duty. Once local circumstances are taken into account, Acton's election looks less surprising.

Acton was not unaware of the anomalous nature of his election for a place he had never seen. On 8 May, he issued a much longer statement of his political views in the form of a public letter to Maher in which he again declared his opposition to the Derby government, even as he refused a clear identification with the Liberals as led by Palmerston or Russell. As with his first letter to the *Carlow Post*, Acton avoided any sentiment that might offend his new constituents. The letter was re-published in the *Times* on 17 May, and in a leader the following day that paper praised it as an example of the political views of a right-thinking Catholic. It was also necessary that Acton finally meet his constituents, an obligation he postponed – largely due to continuing illness – until 2 June. He enjoyed a very Irish celebratory banquet on 7 June, and returned to London in time to cast his first vote against the government.

The eccentricity of Acton's search for an Irish seat paradoxically makes it a useful case study in mid-Victorian Irish politics, even if it does not substantively alter the picture presented in K. Theodore Hoppen's important book *Elections, politics, and society in Ireland, 1832–1885*. As an unknown Englishman returned for an Irish seat with a Catholic majority, Acton's success points both to the willingness of Irish electors to look beyond nationality, and to the enduring influence of local power-brokers such as Father Maher; the sponsorship of the Catholic Acton, by a Liberal government widely seen as hostile to Catholics, raises the question of exactly how Protestant the Palmerston government really was; and the impact of Gavazzi's visit to Carlow underlines the enduring importance of Italian events in Irish politics.[195] Moreover, Acton's serial failures before success in Carlow further confirms that D. C. Moore's concept of the 'politics of deference' in mid-Victorian England did not extend to Ireland.[196] As Acton discovered, magnate influence was no longer paramount by 1857, even when the landlord literally

[193] Hoppen, 'Tories, Catholics, and the general election of 1859', p. 64.

[194] Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament', p. 401.

[195] For more on the influence of Italy on Irish politics, see Colin Barr, 'Giuseppe Mazzini and Irish nationalism', in C. A. Bayly and E. F. Biagini, eds., *Giuseppe Mazzini and globalization of democratic nationalism, 1805–2005*, *Proceedings of the British Academy* (London, forthcoming).

[196] David Cresap Moore, *The politics of deference: a study of the mid-nineteenth-century English political system* (Hassocks, Sussex, 1976).

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owned the borough. Unlike in England, where a multiplicity of interests – social, economic, and religious – informed political behaviour, what ultimately mattered in mid-Victorian Ireland was religion. Acton implicitly recognized this when, after the Devonshire connection finally proved fruitless, he traded on his Catholicism to secure the support of the radically different interest of Archbishop Cullen and his extended family.

In 1857 and again in 1859, Acton showed sustained interest in obtaining a place in the House of Commons. That interest was no doubt sparked – and cultivated – by his family, but Acton was prepared to call on every resource available to him, and to consider every possible seat. (At least thirteen were mooted at one time or another – more then a tenth of Ireland's total.[197]) At no point did Acton give a political speech or personally campaign; to Simpson and others he claimed indifference to the entire affair. As a result, it is tempting to conclude that Acton was only going through the motions, an impression strengthened by his poor speaking record in the House of Commons, erratic attendance, and singularly robust adherence to Burke's conception of representative government. Still, from March 1857 Acton strove for two years to gain his place in 'the noblest assembly in the world'.[198] What he did there is another story.

[197] Clare, Cashel, New Ross, Dungarvan, Youghal, Waterford city, Waterford county, Kinsale, Queen's county, Limerick, Dublin city, Cork county, Carlow.

[198] Acton to Granville, 'Tuesday' 1857 [probably 3 Mar.].

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