

Relations Between Edward IV's Sons and the Irish Nobility of 1479

Mary Shelley LOI Research Report (10 August 2025)

Background

For the Irish, 1478 was a time of great uncertainty. In February, their Lord Lieutenant, George, Duke of Clarence, was declared a traitor and put to death by his brother, Edward IV. The king then appointed his brother-in-law, John de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk to take Clarence's place. Edward would soon have a change of heart, replacing Suffolk with his third born son, George. To assist the toddler in his new role, Edward chose Sir Henry Grey to act as his Deputy in Ireland, a decision which would produce a ripple effect of unintended consequences.

Grey's appointment signaled a change in fortune for the FitzGeralds, a family who had served the House of York as Irish-born deputies since the time of Edward IV's father, Richard, Duke of York. The current head of the FitzGerald family, Gerald, had become the 8th Earl of Kildare the previous year.¹ Edward's reasons for replacing Kildare are unclear; he may have been trying to lessen the FitzGerald influence or perhaps he was looking for someone with more experience (Kildare was in his early twenties at the time). Regardless the reasoning, the choice of forty-three year old Grey remains a head-scratcher.

Initially Lancastrian, Henry Grey, the 4th Baron of Codnor switched his allegiance to Edward IV after the Battle of Towton in 1461.² Although now a loyal Yorkist, trouble seemed to follow in Grey's wake. In 1467, a feud developed between Grey and the Vernon family. To resolve the dispute, Edward IV appointed a commission headed by his brother, the aforementioned Duke of Clarence, along with the king's father-in-law, Earl Rivers, and William, Baron Hastings. This decision proved less than satisfactory. Clarence would favor the Vernons while "*the king's men*" fell in on the side of Grey.³ⁱ

The following year, Grey faced charges pertaining to the Liveries Act which prohibited the formation of "*private armies*." However, no evidence exists to show the outcome.⁴ Grey's issues continued when in 1471 he was accused of inciting riots in Nottingham. Summoned before the Star Chamber, where the "*sovereign lord by his own mouth asked and questioned*" the errant noble and then "*gave the same Lord Grey in strait commandment and injunction*" that he should cease stirring up trouble in Nottingham, a response which again allowed Grey to skate with little in the way of meaningful consequences.⁵

In Ireland, feelings were already running high over the implications that an Englishman could do a better job of governing them than a noble of native birth. But when this particular Englishman began practicing his brand of dubious diplomacy, tensions soon boiled over.

Kildare vs. Grey

On the death of his father, Gerald had become not only the Earl of Kildare but Justiciar of Ireland, elected to this position by the Irish Council. His first parliament met on 29 May, 1478. It was then prorogued to 14 September, 1478. Upon his arrival, Grey unwisely chose not to acknowledge the Justiciar position nor honor any decisions made by Kildare's parliament.

Incensed, Kildare and the chief officers refused to recognize Grey's appointment because it had been made under Privy Seal. Their reasoning was based on enactments of the 1460 parliament which declared the King's subjects in Ireland would not be bound to answer any writs save under the Great Seal of Ireland.⁶

The Chancellor, Sir Roland Fitz Eustace (Kildare's father-in-law) then declined to surrender the English Great Seal of Ireland to the new Deputy while the Constable of the King's Castle of Dublin, James Keating, refused to admit Grey, going so far as to breaking down the castle's drawbridge to prevent him from entering. Grey retaliated by convening his own parliament, voiding the enactments of Kildare's "*pretended parliament*" and ordering all records destroyed with heavy penalties for those who disobeyed.⁷

By now the King's patience had run out. He recalled Grey and appointed Sir Robert Preston, an Englishman, who the previous year had been made the first Irish Viscount, to now become the acting deputy in Ireland.⁸

On 10 February 1479, a patent of safe conduct was issued for "*Protection for William, archbishop of Dublin, the King's kinsmen, Gerald Fitz Morice, Earl of Kildare, brother James Ketyng prior of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in Ireland, William, prior of All Saints by Dublin, and Alexander Plunkette, who are coming to the King's presence from Ireland for certain causes concerning the peace of the land, and others in their company.*"⁹

Previous authors have postulated that only the Kildare party traveled to England. This is incorrect. A second faction headed by William Sherwood, Bishop of Meath who often worked in opposition to Kildare, sent Philip Bermingham, Lord Chief Justice and regarded as "*the most learned Irish lawyer of his time*" to petition Edward IV on behalf of their interests.¹⁰

Matters complicated when Ireland's young Lord Lieutenant suddenly died, quite possibly from the plague. It is unknown whether either Bermingham or Kildare arrived in time for Prince George's funeral which was held on 22 March, 1479 but Sir Henry Grey is *not* listed as being in attendance.¹¹ As the "Great Death" ravaged London,¹² Edward IV chose to hold off on any decisions regarding Ireland until after the 11 April 1479 **Easter holiday celebrated at Shene Palace.¹³

Enter Edward & Richard

The King's council reconvened at Shene on Thursday, 29 April, reaching at least one decision on the subject of Ireland.¹⁴ Edward IV's second son, Richard, Duke of York, was appointed the new Lord Lieutenant of Ireland on 5 May 1479.¹⁵ It has long been presumed this was when Kildare received his commission as Richard's Deputy and that afterwards, he returned to Ireland, free to appoint his own council. Again, this is incorrect.

The above assumptions were based on a 1480 document from the Cotton library which refers to Kildare receiving his commission on 5 May 1479 after indenturing himself to the King and his heirs.¹⁶ Kildare probably did pay homage at that time but as far as Edward IV was concerned, Kildare's appointment was far from being a done deal.

Instead, Edward IV ordered on 8 May 1479 that Sir Robert Preston was to continue as the deputy of Ireland “*from the first day of June next to come, for a certain time at the pleasure and will of the said Duke of York, namely for four months, along with 20 men at arms and 40 mounted archers...*”¹⁷

Master William Lacy, clerk of the King’s council, was sent from London to Drogheda, bringing “*stipends, bonus payments and allowances*” to cover the first two months of Preston’s expenses. He would be accompanied by Philip Bermingham¹⁸ while the question of who exactly would serve on the Irish council remained unsettled until that October.¹⁹ In the meantime as a show of good faith, Kildare and members of his party would “*make bail*” [mainprize] to ensure that they will “*do no further damage to the king's liege*” on 14 May 1479.²⁰

Six days later, the Kildare party witnessed a significant court observance at Windsor Palace²¹ the Feast of the Ascension. Held forty days after Easter and always on a Thursday (20 May 1479**), this major feast day celebrates the bodily ascension of Jesus into Heaven to rejoin his Father. The presence of nine-year old Edward, Prince of Wales was recorded by Sir John Elryngton. Writing “*Ilt die bemt dis princeps*” (May the day be blessed by the prince), the treasurer of the king’s household often noted such occasions in his account book.²²

Well aware of the optics, Edward IV was sending a clear message about the future of his kingdom. With his heir at his side, the king was affirming the piety and strength of the Yorkist dynasty. May appears to have been a popular month for such events. In addition to May 1479, the prince would also join his father in May of 1474, 1477, and 1481.²³

This demonstration was not lost on the Irish. By fall, an uneasy truce had been reached and old adversaries were forced to work together. On 5 October 1479, Edward IV would “*Grant to the king's kinsman, Gerot, earl of Kyldare, deputy lieutenant of Ireland, William, bishop of Meath, chancellor of Ireland, Roland Fitz Eustace, treasurer of Ireland, Philip Bermyngham, chief justice there, Master William Lacy, and William Robyns, esquire, full power and authority to summon before them any persons who have received any subsidies or part of subsidies granted in the last Parliament in Ireland...*”²⁴

Fitz Eustace had retained his office of treasurer but Edward transferred the chancellorship to William Sherwood, bishop of Meath. The king then cautioned the two men and Bermingham to “*forget all their mutual malice and evil will.*”²⁵ The penalizing didn’t stop there with Sir Henry Grey finally getting more than a slap on the wrist. While deputy, Grey had been granted a subsidy from the Irish, yet much of it remained unpaid. Edward ordered Kildare to audit the collectors’ accounts and make them answer for the remainder due which was now to be paid to Kildare instead of Grey.²⁶

The relations between the royal family and Irish strengthened. On 10 December 1479, a parliament was held at Dublin in the presence of both Kildare and “*the beloved and most dear son of our said lord the King, Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York, Lieutenant of our lord the King's own land of Ireland.*”²⁷

The following spring, Prince Edward's council would test the Irish waters for themselves, writing to the mayors and aldermen of both Dublin and Drogheda that "*Edward...the future Kyng of England and of France and Lord of Ireland,*" was instructing all ships coming from Ireland to his Palatine must first stop at Chester "*there to discharge and recharge*" or else run the risk of being arrested.²⁸

Unintended Consequences

On 9 April 1483, twelve- year-old Edward would inherit the throne after the announcement of the unexpected death of his father. Edward V's reign was brief, ending on 25 June 1483 when he and his siblings were declared illegitimate. The following day, his uncle would ascend to the throne, ruling as Richard III until 22 August 1485 when he died in battle fighting the troops of Henry Tudor.

Concerned with establishing himself in England, Henry VII initially made few changes in Ireland. In March 1486, he conferred the Lieutenancy of Ireland on his uncle, Jasper Tudor, Duke of Bedford. He would also welcome Thomas Butler (Botiler), Earl of Ormonde, and enemy of the FitzGerald to his Privy Council.²⁹

Later that same year or early 1487, a teenage boy appeared in Ireland, declaring he was Edward IV's son and requesting Irish support. This presented a huge problem for Henry VII since Parliament had re-legitimized Edward IV's children in November 1485. If this boy was indeed the son of Edward IV, he would have a far better claim to England's throne.

Tudor chroniclers record that "*the boy had already been tutored with evil cunning by persons who were familiar with the days of Edward,*" and "*very readily answered*" the questions put forth to him.³⁰ However, it's important to note these same chroniclers shared very little detail about *what exactly* was being asked, especially from the Irish.

In all likelihood, the Irish nobles and clergy who had observed the Prince of Wales in 1479, would have had plenty questions, asking the boy about details which could only be answered if one had actually been there.

The Tudor narrative would later assert that Irish nobles such as Kildare, were being manipulated by Yorkist conspirators. Bemoaning how these "*Irlandois sauvaiges*" lacked true understanding or loyalty, Henry VII vowed to put Ireland in order.³¹ In doing so, he would employ a strategy of character assassination, depicting the Irish as intellectually inferior. Henry also ordered the destruction of records, leaving little in the way of clues as to why the men of Ireland would risk their lives and lands in support of this particular boy.

Conclusion

In a period where few facts are verifiable, there is one thing we know. The same group of Irish nobles and clergy who were so often at odds with each other, would now unite under one cause. Those who had spent months at Edward IV's court in 1479, would to a man, recognize the young claimant as Edward V.

These men are: John Walton, an English canon who became Archbishop of Dublin in 1472 (not William as in the patent of safe conduct); Gerald FitzGerald, Earl of Kildare; Brother James Keating, Prior of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in Ireland; William Stewart, Prior of All Saints by Dublin; Alexander Plunkette (an esquire who would be appointed in 1492 as Chancellor of Ireland); Sir Roland Fitz-Eustace, Walter FitzSimons (Archbishop of Dublin in 1487 and who is supposed to have crowned Edward V in Dublin) and William Wellysley de Dengyn (knight and owner of Dangan Castle).³²

Although they did not attend the Feast of the Ascension (but are mentioned in the text), Philip Bermingham and Sir Robert Preston, would also be supporters of Edward V.³³

Special thanks to Evelyn Apolinária for her transcription of Prince Edward's Chester letters.

** Dates are based on the Julian calendar. Also see: <https://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/cal/medcal.shtml>

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