

**DROMANA:
Lords of Decies and Villiers-Stuarts (1)**

By **JULIAN WALTON**

(2) Dromana, the seat of Lord Stuart de Decies, is one of the most splendid edifices on the river. The house is built on rocks, that rise almost perpendicularly from the right bank as we approach Cappoquin; and the demesne extends a considerable distance by the water-side, stretching away far into the hinterland, and diversified by lawn and woodland.

Thus wrote the Fermoy author James Roderick O’Flanagan in 1844, and indeed the dramatic beauty of the place is still apparent today. And of course Dromana provides a rare example of a major Irish family that has occupied its family seat almost continuously for at least five and a half centuries, though the surname has changed several times through marriage.

A fine memoir of the Dromana FitzGeralds, by Thérèse Muir-Mackenzie (née Villiers-Stuart) was published in 1906. More importantly, a wonderful collection of family papers exists for the entire period, both for the FitzGeralds themselves and for the allied families of Villiers, Mason, Aland and so on – maps, rentals, title deeds, leases, financial matters, political and personal papers. This collection is now held by the Boole Library, University College Cork, and it is my pleasure to assure you that priority is being given to compile a detailed listing of the collection, so that it may be available to the public. In the meantime, we have the thirty-three reels of microfilm commissioned by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and the very detailed calendar of the papers compiled by Dr Anthony Malcomson. A summary is available online at the PRONI website.

To give a worthy account of this fascinating family in a mere forty-five minutes would do justice to neither me, nor you, nor them. So instead I propose to concentrate on the period that I know best – the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – and to confine myself to a bird’s-eye view of the later generations, which are to some extent being dealt with by other speakers.

(3) The theme of this conference is the Blackwater valley, its houses and landscapes; few of these houses owe so much of their dramatic siting to the peculiar behaviour of that river. For, having wandered more or less consistently in an easterly direction from its source in the Kerry mountains, on reaching Cappoquin its logical course would be to continue a meandering route along the flat lands between the Knockmealdown and Monavullagh Mountains and the Drum Hills that would bring it to the sea at Dungarvan. Instead, however, it takes a sharp right turn as if terrified at the very thought of entering Dungarvan, forces its way through hilly country, and enters the sea at Youghal. Geologists will give you a technical (if far-fetched) reason for this paranoid behaviour. Personally, I prefer the explanation offered by an American tourist to the late Stephen Rynne: “I guess it hit a rock.”

(4) It is this southerly turn of the Blackwater that creates the gorges that lend such a sense of drama to the houses built along this stretch of the river. It also, of course, provides some ideal locations for military fortification. The medieval remains at Dromana appear to date from the 13th century, possibly even from the time of Thomas fitz Anthony, Seneschal of Leinster, who in 1215 was granted by King John custody of the counties of Waterford (except the city) and Desmond. His descendant was created Earl of Desmond in 1329. James the 6th Earl died at Mocollop in 1462, leaving the territory of Decies to his younger son Gerald, known as Sir Gerald Mór. With him begins the separate existence of Dromana as the seat of an important junior branch of the FitzGerald family and as the centre of their huge estate. Moreover, this is the great era of tower-building in Ireland, and it is probable that the tower-house that forms the core of the present mansion was erected at this time.

(5) It's important at this stage to clarify what is meant by the term Decies. In pre-Norman times it applied to the territory ruled by the tribe of Déisí, which was roughly coterminous with the diocese of Waterford and Lismore. In the 12th century the area north of the River Suir was conquered by the Tipp men – hence the modern application in GAA circles of the name Déise to the county of Waterford, just as Tipperary is the Premier County, Clare the Banner County, and so on. But in early modern Irish history Decies is the area roughly between the rivers Blackwater and Mahon, as can be seen by a glance at the seven baronies that make up the county. The territory of Decies is divided into two baronies, “without” and “within” the Drum Hills. To the west, across the Blackwater, lay the lands of the Earls of Desmond; to the north and east, beyond the Mahon, lay the Paorach or Power's Country.

(6) The study of Early Modern Ireland is not for the faint-hearted! Briefly, south Munster is dominated by powerful warlords – the FitzGeralds of Desmond, Butlers of Ormond, Powers of Dunhill and later of Curraghmore, Barrys of County Cork. They are frequently either fighting or intermarrying with each other, sometimes both. There are many junior branches of these families – FitzGeralds of Decies, Mocollop, Lisfinny, and the MacThomas FitzGeralds of Ballykeroge. Then there are Gaelic client families such as the O’Briens of Comeragh and the MacGraths of Sliabh gCua.

Sir Gerald Mór, first lord of the Decies, died in 1488 and was succeeded by his son John, who married Ellen daughter of John FitzGibbon the White Knight and died in 1533 leaving an only son Gerald, the third lord. But there was also a daughter Catherine whom we must consider at this point. (7) Catherine’s childhood was presumably spent at Dromana. She then married as his second wife Thomas Maol [the Bald] FitzGerald, 11th Earl of Desmond, by whom she had one daughter. Her husband died in 1534, but Catherine survived him by no less than seventy years, dying in 1604. Upon his death she received as her jointure the castle and lands of Inchiquin, near the modern village of Killeagh in east Cork. (8) The grim and squat ruins of Inchiquin Castle still survive, its circular keep indicating that it dates from the early years of the Norman occupation. Here she lived in solitary splendour, beating off all attempts by English planters to wrest the castle from her. There are several portraits of her, including this one at Dromana.

By all accounts she was a formidable character, and legends accumulated around her long after her death. It was said that in her youth she had danced at court with the future King Richard III, and that in her old age she had grown a third set of teeth, and had walked all the way to London to consult with Queen Elizabeth. She lived on and on, and indeed she might still be alive today had she not climbed a tree to gather cherries and fallen out of it. Our national poet Thomas Moore refers to her as follows:

As old as the mountains, if not quite as old
 As that Countess of Desmond, of whom we are told
 That she lived to the age of a hundred and ten
 And was killed by a fall from a cherry-tree then.
 What a frisky old girl!

Sir Walter Raleigh knew her well enough to mention her in his *History of the World*, and Fynes Morison states in his *Itinerary* that she was aged 140 when she died. This is stretching our credulity a little too far, but she must have been ninety at the very least, and probably well over a hundred. So perhaps our national bard was not so far out in his estimate of the age of the Old Countess of Desmond.¹

Amid the chaos that was Ireland in the early 16th century, one of the few unchanging features was the hatred that existed between the two most powerful families in Munster, the FitzGeralds earls of Desmond and the Butlers earls of Ormond. Matters came to a head in 1565 with a major clash between Gerald, 14th Earl of Desmond, and “Black Tom” Butler, 10th Earl of Ormond. (9) The cause of conflict was Desmond’s claim to rule over the territory of Decies. The Lord of Decies was Sir Maurice FitzGerald, and on the principle that my enemy’s enemy is my friend he looked to the Earl of Ormond as his ally.

(10) In late January 1565 Sir Maurice got a tip-off that Desmond was about to raid his territory, and he sent for help to the Earl of Ormond. When Desmond reached the ford of Affane over the little river Finisk he got a very nasty shock indeed. His raiding party, looking forward to a pleasant day’s cattle rustling, found themselves faced by a much larger force commanded by the Earl of Ormond and equipped for battle.

Lord Power, who was related to all three leaders, begged him not to fight, but Desmond was headstrong and stupid and launched his little force straight at the enemy earl. It was cut to pieces. Desmond himself was shot in the thigh by one of the Butlers and taken prisoner. Famously, as he was being carried off the field on a stretcher, he is said to have been taunted with the words: “And where is the mighty Earl of Desmond now?” to which he replied defiantly: “Where but in his rightful place, on the necks of the Butlers.”

Ormond paraded his stricken foe through the streets of Waterford, then took him off to England where they both faced the wrath of Queen Elizabeth.

¹ Anthony M. McCormack in *ODNB*; R. Sainthill, *The Old Countess of Desmond* (1863); GEC, *Complete Peerage*, new edn, IV, 249-50.

It has been said that the government of Ireland under Queen Elizabeth was dominated by knaves and fools – Ireland was simply too far from London to attract anyone else. There's a certain amount of truth in this, but there were also notable exceptions. One of these was perhaps Sir Henry Sidney, Lord Deputy for much of the period from 1565 to 1579. **(11)** Sidney was able, energetic and resourceful, and cast himself in the role of the great administrator who would create order out of the chaos that was Tudor Ireland. In his self-imposed role of super-cop, he made several expeditions to different regions of Ireland.

The first began in January 1567 and involved an extended tour of the south and west, including the city and county of Waterford. The county he found “much waste and desolate”. The gentry, who had been brought to submission by the Lord President of Munster Sir Warham St Leger, “are ready,” he reported, “according to the parable of the Scripture to play the part of the washed swine in returning to her foul puddle, unless continuance of justice among them detain them from it.” Having dealt firmly with “certain disordered persons named Powers”, he proceeded to Dungarvan and then entered the Decies, where he interviewed Sir Maurice FitzGerald, “between whom and the Earl of Desmond and their ancestors, as your majesty hath heard, hath been long contention. But doubtless I find that gent less evil of the rest that be of any power, and such a one as, if he were not urged to use revenge in his own causes for want of justice resident near him, he would live in a very good and well ordered manner”. And having attempted to adjudicate between the two men he bound them both over to keep the peace, he departed for Youghal.

The government, not surprisingly, tended to favour FitzGerald of Decies over the Earl of Desmond, and in January 1569 Sir Maurice was created Baron of Dromana and Viscount of Decies. His triumph, however, was short-lived, for in December 1572 he died without issue, and his titles died with him.

Almost nine years after his first visit, Sidney was back for another look. The Decies was now ruled by Sir James FitzGerald, brother of Sir Maurice who had so briefly enjoyed the title Viscount Decies. And a right mess Sir James had made. His brother had left him a rich man, but through bad management he was now as good as bankrupt. He had four times as much land as Lord Power, yet his estate had been so wasted that a tenant farmer of average means couldn't even make a living on it. And there were more idle vagabonds than good cattle. The rest of the county, Sidney

reported, either was owned by minor gentry who had been there for generations or had been gobbled up by the citizens of Waterford through purchase or mortgage.²

At least the FitzGeralds of Decies seem to have kept their heads down during the great Desmond rebellion that followed Sidney's return to England. (12) That sanguinary conflict, and the Munster Plantation that followed it, brought about the fall of the Earls of Desmond and several junior branches of the family, and the lands west of the Blackwater were settled by English Protestant colonists, the Lismore estate in particular being acquired by Sir Walter Raleigh and later by Sir Richard Boyle the "Great" Earl of Cork. The Dromana FitzGeralds, however, were left unscathed. Sir James died in 1581, being succeeded in turn by his son Gerald or Garrett (died 1600), then by a cousin Sir John FitzGerald (died 1620), and then by the latter's son Sir John Oge.

The second Sir John died in 1626 leaving a son Gerald who was a minor. His wardship was held by Sir Edward Villiers, Lord President of Munster, and this ensured that unlike his forebears he was brought up as an English Protestant. Upon Villiers's death almost immediately afterwards the wardship was sold back to the boy's grandmother. A suitably English and Protestant wife was secured for Gerald in the person of Mabel Digby, daughter of Sir Robert Digby whose wife was a FitzGerald of the Kildare family.

(13) The wars of the 1640s are probably the most complicated period in the whole of Irish history. The great rebellion that broke out in Ulster on 23 October 1641 spread to County Waterford the following December. As a wealthy landowner of Old English Catholic stock, Gerald's support was courted by the local rebel leaders, and an unusual Christmas party took place at Dromana that year. Several of the Irish leaders invited themselves to supper, and then:

At night after supper there passed a certain communication between the said parties and Gerald fitz Gerrard of Dromany esq., to this effect. The said Gerald demanding them a question, being all papists, whether they could say the Ten Commandments, they answered: yea. How then comes it to pass (quoth he) that you worship graven images? They answered, that that commandment was none of the Ten, but added by Protestant ministers. They

² Sidney's first tour is published in the *Journal* of the Waterford & SEI Arch. Soc., XII (1909), pp 74-76 and 132-3; his second in *Cal. Carew MSS*, [II], 1575-88, p. 157.

further urged the said FitzGerald to turn to Masse, and then he answered, he would never do so while he had life to breathe.

But if Gerald was not for turning, he had no intention of sticking his neck out on behalf of the government forces. Early in February 1642 the insurgent leaders were again admitted to Dromana,

and notwithstanding the said parties [the insurgent army] stood in a full body within the shot of the said castle, one Miles McGrath who commanded the same, and now in open rebellion, would not suffer no shot to be made at them by any of the warders of the said castle. And the said officers and chief commanders of the rebels were entertained in the said castle from morning till two o'clock at night, during which time he [the witness] saw the enemy abroad relieved at the said castle (as he verily believeth) with beef, bread and beer. As also the tower and garden near adjoining the said castle was delivered unto them, whereby to defend themselves against any shot to be made against them out of the King's pinnace which then was expected to come up the river.

And in August John Power of Dunhill and other leaders were invited by Mabel FitzGerald to Cappagh,

and being come stayed in and near Dromanny aforesaid from Friday till Sunday following, and in the meantime were relieved by the said Mabel with beefs, muttuns, bread and beer. And being informed that a barque laden with powder and ammunition came into Dungarvan, they gave a volley of shot for joy, and then went away.

Finally, in the middle of September, Mabel delivered up the castle to the Irish. Retribution was not slow in following: Lords Barrymore, Dungarvan and Broghill (sons and son-in-law of the Earl of Cork) marched to besiege it, and set up their ordnance to batter the walls. The siege was apparently of some duration, as amongst other obstacles Barrymore fell sick. (He died of his wounds at the battle of Liscarroll.) **(14)** On 28 September Inchiquin, who had been sent a plan of the castle, wrote to the besiegers, giving his advice:

It seems to me that by gaining the wall on the garden side, which I consider may be feasibly done if the turret standing this same side with the gatehouse be as demonstrated: [when] that wall has been secured for our men, and a breach made in it, and the ordnance to be planted therein against a chimney which stands on that side of the house; in which a breach being made, I conceive the entry would not be difficult.

Eventually the castle was taken, and an English garrison installed.

Gerald died in August 1643, leaving an infant son and heir named John, of whom presently. In April 1645 the Earl of Castlehaven led an Irish army into west Waterford to recapture the castles that had been taken by the English. Dromana was one of them. Smith spitefully comments that “the castle, with all its furniture, [was] burnt down by the Irish”, but this is nonsense; the place was still intact two years later when it underwent yet another tough siege, this time by Inchiquin. The latter set up his ordnance and made a small breach in the outworks; his men then assaulted the breach and drove the Irish back into the keep. Inchiquin’s officers considered Dromana to be “a place of much strength, and likely to cost a great expense of blood and some waste of time”, and as it was vital for him to press on and invest Cappoquin before it could be relieved he condescended to allow the garrison quarter for their lives and wearing apparel. They surrendered the castle to him on 30 April 1647. Some days later, a parliamentary officer wrote from Youghal that Captain Bannister, “a common drunkard”, had been made governor of Dromana, “a place of such importance that an able, honest man ought to be in it”.

We move forward to early December 1649. Inchiquin, an able general but politically “a poor wavering panther”, is now back on the royalist side, fighting alongside Castlehaven under the overall command of Ormond. Cromwell, having failed to capture Waterford, is marching west with an exhausted army in urgent search of winter quarters. **(15)** Lord Broghill, commanding an army of English Protestant settlers, is marching east to join forces with him. The castles in his path, held by lukewarm English royalists, tumble before him like dominoes. Thus Dromana, having changed hands several times amid so much drama, surrenders without firing a shot. Quite possibly Cromwell visited the place on his way to Cappoquin a few days later.

Dromana seems to have survived all this excitement with comparatively little damage. The Civil Survey of 1654, which describes so many Déise castles as being “ruinated” or “mere stumps” has this to say of the place:

We find on ye premises ye mansion house of Gerrott fitz Gerrald with ye castle and bawn thereof situate and lying on ye Blackwater ... commonly called ye castle of Dromanny, considerable for strength.

Likewise, the FitzGerald estate remained intact during the Cromwellian confiscations: as a Protestant family they were exempt from transplantation, and their interests were protected by the presence of the parliamentary Major Richard Franklyn, who was married to Lettice FitzGerald the elder sister of the infant heir.

During the mid-17th century the main power broker in County Waterford was Richard Power of Curraghmore, son and heir of the 5th Lord Power. In 1654 he concluded a very useful match with Dorothy, eldest daughter of the Earl of Anglesey, a powerful English nobleman with extensive Irish interests. **(16)** Four years later Richard’s sister married John FitzGerald of Decies, and when Sir John died in 1664 leaving only one daughter Katherine to succeed him Richard (who on the death of his father had at last succeeded him as 6th Lord Power) became the guardian of his little niece, now owner of the vast Dromana estate. Now, as Katherine’s guardian it was Richard’s duty to find her a suitable husband, and who, he reasoned, could be more suitable than his own son and heir John Power? This daring coup would unite under Richard’s control both the Dromana and Curraghmore estates, making him rich beyond the dreams of avarice.

(17) Children matured faster in those days than now, but even so the couple was hardly ready for matrimony: Katherine was only twelve and a half, and her fiancé only eight! Furthermore, Katherine was a wilful child and it took a lot of pressure to get her to consent to the match. However, thanks to the machinations of Lord Anglesey Katherine and John were married in May 1673 by none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, in his private chapel at Lambeth Palace. After the ceremony they were whisked away to Lord Anglesey’s house, where the bridegroom was sent off to play with his teddy-bears and the radiant bride sat around waiting with growing impatience for his voice to break. Later that same year, Richard Lord

Power's career reached a peak of success when he received from King Charles II a royal patent granting him two further titles: Earl of Tyrone and Viscount Decies.

But Katherine soon proved that she had a will of her own. She had no intention of hanging around until her husband stopped watching Sesame Street and was able to perform his marital duty. Two years after the marriage she made a statement before the Archbishop of Canterbury that she had been forced into it by "immoderate importunity, threats, fear, and the false suggestion of losing her estate". The following Easter, having now attained the mature age of fifteen, she escaped from Lord Anglesey's house and ran away with a handsome young cavalry officer named Edward Villiers (grandson of that Lord President of Munster who had briefly been guardian to an earlier lord of Decies, and nephew of Barbara Villiers the mistress of Charles II), whom she married shortly after. **(18)** The Power faction reacted to her defection with furious indignation: "jadish viper, fair flirt, wicked urchin" are among the politer terms used about her by Lord Anglesey in a letter to his son-in-law. Of the Villiers faction he says to Richard: "Keep up your courage and yield nothing to them till satisfied by their proposals, and this will produce a good issue without the woman, which is all we can aim at, for she is bewrayed [soiled] past touching." In other words, forget about the woman – keep the land.³

As you can imagine, the lawyers had a field day. **(19)** The issue was: in what circumstances can a marriage contracted between minors be repudiated by them when they come of age? For years the case was fought with increasing bitterness through the ecclesiastical and civil courts. The judgement, which was in Katherine's favour, provided a legal precedent for many years to come. Lord Power had to give back her lands and renounce the title Viscount Decies. Poor little John, after his horrendous experience, never married again. He died in his late twenties in 1693 and is and is today remembered as the ghost in the famous Beresford Ghost Story. He was buried in St Nicholas's Church, Carrick, but his fine effigy is now in the family mausoleum at Clonegam.

And here, I'm afraid, we must go into fast-forward. Katherine and Edward ruled at Dromana until his death in 1693 and hers in 1725. On the death of her father-in-law Lord Grandison she was granted the title Viscountess Grandison of Limerick. The

³ Letter among the Marquis of Waterford Papers at Curraghmore.

late 17th or early 18th century additions to the house date from her reign. Her daughter Harriet was grandmother of the “stainless” and “splendid” prime minister William Pitt the elder, Earl of Chatham. Her only son John was created Earl Grandison **(20)** and died in 1766. A wall-plaque at Dromana bears his arms and the date 1745. **(21)** It was during his reign that the demesne was so impressively developed, as you will already have heard, and the amazing folly known as “The Bastions” also dates from his time. **(22)** He was succeeded by his daughter Elizabeth, Viscountess Grandison of Dromana, who married Aland Mason of Waterford. Their son George Mason-Villiers, 2nd Earl Grandison, added the huge late-18th century wing to the main building at Dromana. **(23)**

Their only child, Lady Gertrude Villiers, **(24)** inherited the estate in 1800 and married Lord Henry Stuart, a younger son of the Marquess of Bute and grandson of another prime minister. They both died in 1809, within a few days of each other, and the estate was inherited by their six-year-old son, Henry Villiers-Stuart.

In January 1826 Henry married an Austrian widow named Theresia Pauline Ott. Their arrival at Dromana was a cause of celebration among the tenantry, who erected a triumphal arch at the old bridge that crossed the purling waters of the little river Finisk. It was presumably constructed of temporary materials – perhaps wood and papier-mâché – but so impressed were the happy couple that they had it replaced some years later by a Hindu-Gothic arch and gate-lodge, built in sandstone with a copper dome according to the designs of Martin Day. **(25)** [Actually that’s the Taj Mahal – I just wanted to see if you were awake!] **(26)**

The inspiration for this amazing building was John Nash’s Royal Pavilion at Brighton. This extravaganza was the subject of much ironic comment; it was said, for instance, that St Paul’s Cathedral had gone to the sea and pupped. As a result the style never became popular, which makes the Dromana example especially important. After the estate was acquired by the Forestry Department it quickly fell into serious disrepair, but fortunately was rescued by the Georgian Society and later by the County Council, who replaced the bridge in 1971. Much marketed today as a tourist attraction, it urgently demands immediate restoration once again, and constant maintenance thereafter.

Henry Villiers-Stuart **(27)** earned his place in the national history books through his courageous support for Catholic Emancipation. Lending his support to Daniel O’Connell, he stood for election in 1826 for Waterford County as a pro-

Emancipation candidate in opposition to the all-powerful network of the Beresfords. His victory paved the way for O’Connell’s election in Clare two years later, and the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1829. So it’s really Waterford, not Clare, that deserves the title “the Banner County”.

In 1839 Henry was created Baron Stuart de Decies, but alas – when his son and heir succeeded to the estate in 1874 his claim to the title was disallowed owing to doubts as to the validity of his parents’ marriage.

(28) Henry Windsor Villiers-Stuart may not have been a lord, but he seems to have been almost everything else – an officer in the Austrian and British armies, a vicar in Warwickshire, an Irish landowner, a member of the House of Commons (first as a Liberal, then as a Unionist – he introduced into the House a bill on labourers’ cottages and allotments), a globe-trotter and successful author (*Adventures amid the equatorial forests and rivers of South America, also in the West Indies and the wilds of Florida*). After the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 he was sent to investigate the condition of the country, and his reports were published as a parliamentary blue-book. He took a keen interest in Egyptian archaeology, and published several works on the subject: *The funeral tent of an Egyptian queen* (1882) was printed in colours, in facsimile, from drawings he had made at Boulak.

Alas, his life was abruptly cut short in 1895 by a trivial accident. Entering a boat off Villierstown Quay, he slipped into the water and drowned.

(29) I first visited Dromana in 1959 as a youth of eighteen to further my study of the castles of County Waterford – a work still unpublished half a century later. The whole estate had been sold, and the house lay vast and empty – it seemed the end of an era. An obliging caretaker turned a key in a lock, and for the next few hours I had the house all to myself. I wandered from room to room, marvelling at the size and complexity of the building, the feeling of centuries of history accumulated around me, and the dramatic views of the Blackwater far below. Of human presence nothing remained: no portraits, no furniture, no documents – except that on the floor of one room, amid a heap of waste paper, lay (amazingly) a huge volume containing all forty sheets of the first-edition six-inch ordnance maps for County Waterford, beautifully bound and coloured.

(30) Within a few years of my visit, all that had changed. The huge eighteenth-century part of the house was demolished (indeed it would have proved

impossible to maintain in the Ireland of those days) and the demesne sold. But the older section – late 17th-century, with the 15th-century tower-house at its core – was retained, restored, and again inhabited by members of the Villiers-Stuart family. And, thankfully, they are still there today, and will be waiting to welcome you at the end of your boat trip today. **(31)**

The late and much lamented Rosemary ffolliott describes Dromana as follows:

Perched on a crag overhanging the Blackwater, [it] commands one of the most glorious views in Ireland – the broad river flows darkly below and in the distance, beyond the luxuriant woods, are the blue peaks of the Knockmealdwn and Galtee mountains. At sunset its beauty is breath-taking.

And so – “Enjoy!”

Julian C. Walton
25 September 2009