



New Zealand prime minister and National Party leader John Key

a continuous newspaper barrage of petty distortion of everything Ed Miliband does. But the bloggers are more powerful in New Zealand because the decline of traditional journalism has gone further and faster as free-market economics decimates New Zealand journalism. A media which can't find or evaluate its own stories is driven more and more to rely on PR handouts and the blogs. They set the agenda and even provide the story. Blogs Rule. Not OK.

Hager's book provides a grim warning of the way in which dirty politics can triumph when good journalism dies. That's where our path to irresponsible journalism,

underfunded media and irresponsible abuse can lead if it's not checked. The book will shock liberal opinion in New Zealand but that's a small group mainly found in the universities, and the most surprising thing about these appalling revelations is that they have left the plotters unrepentant and defiant. Faced with the shocked reaction to his activities, Cameron Slater responded philosophically: "Politics is a nasty despicable game played by nasty despicable people." Where's the surprise in this? 🇯🇲

Austin Mitchell is Labour MP for Great Grimsby and an Associate Editor of *The House*

Conservative historian **Lord Lexden** reflects on the life of James Hamilton, the last Tory politician to be given a dukedom

Abercorn: The Hamiltons of Barons Court

William J Roulston
Ulster Historical
Foundation, £30

www.booksireland.org.uk



James Hamilton (1811-85), 2nd Marquess of Abercorn and a large landowner in Ulster, was the last Conservative politician to be given a dukedom. He received it on Disraeli's recommendation in 1868. He had rendered no great service to his country. He had not been in the Cabinet. Nor had he made a lavish contribution to Tory party funds.

His elevation occurred after he had spent just two years in his first post as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, a largely ceremonial office; the serious political work was done by a colleague. It is true that he had helped suppress a Fenian uprising, but it was an utterly chaotic affair which presented no serious threat to British rule. He failed in his chief aim: to establish a permanent royal residence, an Irish Balmoral. If the plan had been carried into effect, the subsequent history of Anglo-Irish relations might well have been very different. Whenever members of the Royal Family set foot in Ireland, they were greeted by vast, enthusiastic crowds.

So why did Disraeli confer this unexpected favour on a man he did not even know very well? Having written copiously about dukes in his novels, he may have fancied creating one when he found himself in power briefly and precariously for the first time. He told everyone that it was all Queen Victoria's idea. But though she liked him, Abercorn was no particular royal favourite, constantly at court.

The surviving records make it impossible to provide a wholly satisfactory explanation

for a conscientious but unremarkable man's good fortune. In this comprehensive study of the Abercorn dynasty and its deep roots in north-west Ulster going back to the 17th century, William Roulston wisely sticks firmly to the surviving evidence in the vast family papers and elsewhere. He uses it to powerful effect. It is widely believed that Irish landlords were incapable of managing their estates well or treating their tenants justly. Roulston produces abundant evidence to show that generation after generation, the Abercorns – like other landed families in Ireland – were models of prudent and benign management. Not once were they censured for the way they ran their estates in Tyrone and Donegal, which

in the 1870s amounted to some 76,500 acres.

In 1888 a man from the *Times* came to call at Barons Court, the family seat in Tyrone. He found that “the most friendly relations subsist between the owner and tiller of the soil... The estate lies in a fine undulating country, with good-sized farms and comfortable homesteads... For the benefit of the poorer classes outside the estate, who are not well off, a knitting industry, known as the Barons Court Cottage Industry, was established three or four years ago, and has now, thanks to the unremitting energy of the Duchess of Abercorn, attained extensive dimensions”. The feet of some 10,000 soldiers in

the British army were made snug and comfortable by the socks supplied to them by the Duchess's devoted knitters.

Reluctantly, however, her unimpressive husband, the 2nd Duke, accepted the loss of most of the family's long-cherished acres under legislation passed by a Conservative government in 1903, which enabled his tenants to acquire ownership of them. The Duke spoke mournfully in the Lords: “To part with an estate that has been in your family for generations, to sever your connection with tenants with whom you have been on the best of terms, is an unpleasant wrench.”

Sadness and regret are not, however, the principal characteristics of this clearly



James Hamilton, 1st Duke of Abercorn

“ Why did Disraeli confer this unexpected favour on a man he did not even know very well? ”

written and beautifully illustrated book. It reflects the positive approach which the family has always taken to its changing fortunes. Though reduced to 5,500 acres in 1925, the estate was put on a sound commercial basis after the Second World War with substantial investment in profitable forestry. Staunch supporters of Northern Ireland's union with Great Britain, successive dukes have worked hard for reconciliation between the divided communities. The current holder of the title spoke vigorously about the need for economic change in Northern Ireland during his years as an MP and later in the Lords. Ulster, he said, must make the most of its greatest asset: “The excellent and reliable workforce, of keen trained and educated men and women.” Disraeli's curious decision in 1868 has been amply vindicated. 🏰

Alistair Lexden is a Conservative peer and political historian. His publications include *Ulster: The Origins of the Problem* and *Ulster: The Unionist Options*.