

Biography of Leonard Dacre,

(taken from *The History of Parliament*)

ConstituencyDates

CUMBERLAND 1558

CUMBERLAND 1559

CUMBERLAND 1563

Family and Education

b. by 1533, 2nd s. of William, 3rd Lord Dacre of Gilsland (d.1563), by Elizabeth, da. of George, 4th Earl of Shrewsbury; bro. of Francis and Sir Thomas†. unm.

Offices Held

Commr. gaol delivery, Carlisle Oct. 1554; dep. warden west march Aug.-Oct. 1558; j.p. Cumb. and Yorks. (N. Riding) by 1559.¹

Biography

The re-election of Leonard Dacre—‘Dacre of the crooked back’—to the first two parliaments of Elizabeth’s reign can hardly have been other than a matter of form. His family, pre-eminent in Cumberland, was among the oldest and most powerful on the northern border, ranking with the Percys and Nevilles; he had received some part of his education in the household of the 2nd Earl of Bedford, and the 2nd Earl of Cumberland was his brother-in-law. Though later he became notorious, the first 30 years or so of his life are lost in unchronicled obscurity, and in the history of the Commons he is no more than a name. A letter from the Privy Council in January 1559, thanking him for his ‘late good exploit upon the Scots’, administered a mild but revealing rebuke: the Council ‘wished he had forborne the annoying of them, and stood only upon his own guard, considering they will seek to revenge it’.²

The sequence of disasters and miscalculations which brought ruin to Dacre and his house began with the death in 1566 of his elder brother Thomas, 4th Lord Dacre. In the following January Thomas’s widow became the third wife of the 4th Duke of Norfolk and in September of the same year died, leaving in Norfolk’s charge her children by her previous marriage, all minors, three daughters and a son George, 5th Lord Dacre, Norfolk’s ward. When in May 1569 the young Lord Dacre died, Leonard Dacre claimed the barony and its lands as next male heir. His claim failed, the commissioners ruling on 19 July that the barony with all its lands was in abeyance between the deceased Lord’s three sisters, whom Norfolk, with

an eye on the extensive Dacre estates, had contracted in marriage to his own three sons. The judgment, questionably sound in law, seems to have turned Dacre's thoughts to treason as a means of countering the threatened extinction of his family's power.³

No favourer of the Elizabethan religious settlement, he had written in friendly terms to Mary Queen of Scots while she was still in Scotland. He now joined the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland and others in plotting her escape from Shrewsbury's custody, hoping thereby, in Northumberland's words, 'to have some reformation in religion' and the freedom 'of her whom we accounted the second person and right heir apparent'. On the choice of a husband for Mary the conspirators were divided, some favouring the proposed match with Norfolk, but Dacre, Northumberland and others wishing to see her 'bestowed on a sound Catholic; yea, and if it were with some foreign Prince'. Along with Francis Norton, Dacre went to Wingfield 'to practice the matter', found that Mary was too closely guarded, and the plot was abandoned. For a time the conspirators contemplated open rebellion but, failing to agree, they separated, all glad, according to Northumberland, to extricate themselves from an increasingly hazardous situation.⁴

For the two earls the respite was short. Some few weeks later, when their rebellion began, Dacre went to court instead of joining them, was received by the Queen at Windsor and allayed her suspicion to the extent at least that he was allowed to return to Cumberland. At some time he appears to have tried to involve Lord Montagu and the Earl of Cumberland in the rebellion, but Montagu advised him 'to forsake the matter'. Even after the flight of the earls from Hexham he remained ostensibly loyal, taking the field against them. On 24 Dec. the Earl of Sussex, writing to the Privy Council, commended Dacre, among others, for having shown himself 'honourable and diligent at the rebels' entering into the West Marches', praise repeated on 26 Dec. by Lord Scrope to Cecil for report to the Queen. But behind this show of loyalty Dacre was keeping in touch with the leaders of the rebellion and planning to gain possession of his family's estates. These were being administered for his nieces by Norfolk's agents, Norfolk himself was in the Tower, and local officials were distracted by the rebellion. By the end of December, Dacre and his brother Edward had captured Naworth, Graystock, Kirkswold and other castles and property in Cumberland, Norfolk's officers stating that 'the taking of the castles was as it were all in one instant, in the name of Lord Leonard Dacre, to the Queen's use, for that his grace [Norfolk] was beheaded, as the report was, with the day and place of his execution'.⁵

Ordered in mid-January 1570 to arrest him, Lord Scrope reported to Cecil that Dacre was in Naworth castle, following a fall from his horse. 'I dare assure you, that by the force of this country he is not to be touched; for that although I may levy a good number, yet very few will be found to execute their force against a Dacre.' Angry letters from the Queen followed, but it was not until the third week in February that Dacre was dislodged, Lord Hunsdon, Scrope and Sir John Forster joining forces in face of the rumoured advance of a column from Scotland to raise the virtual siege of Naworth. Tempted out, Dacre was crushingly defeated on 20 Feb., although he had about 3,000 troops to Hunsdon's 1,500, Hunsdon reporting that the rebel, 'so bold in conspiracies, was faint-hearted in the field', and 'being with his horsemen was the first man that flew', crossing the border into Scotland. He would have been captured if one of his Scottish followers had not rescued him from a government soldier who 'had him by the arm'. Next day he was proclaimed a traitor.⁶

In spite of repeated demands from England for his surrender he remained in Scotland until late in 1570, receiving asylum from Lord Herries, Lord Hume and other magnates, and being 'openly received' by Lord Maxwell at Dumfries. In April, the month in which he was attainted, forfeiting all his lands together with his London house in the Strand, he attended a convention of Scottish notables at Linlithgow. The date of his removal to the Continent is not known, but on 15 Jan. 1571 he arrived in Antwerp from Malines with four or five servants, and in the summer of 1572 he was at Mechlin with the Countess of Northumberland, having the previous winter failed in several attempts to cross over to Scotland. He was still expected there in April 1572, when Scrope told Burghley that there were dangerously few troops in the west march whose loyalty could be depended on.⁷

Though at first he had been met with suspicion 'for his double dealing', he was granted a pension by Philip of Spain but in January 1572 wrote that he had 'not received a groat these twelve months but £10, which does not bear the bringer's charges'. To his financial difficulties were added the anxieties occasioned by differences among the exiles, one of Burghley's spies reporting in January 1573 that 'there is great and inward misliking between the Earl of Westmorland and Leonard Dacre, and between the Earl and the Lady of Northumberland, of whose secret council Leonard Dacre is'. He died in Brussels, 12 Aug. 1573, the Latin epitaph in the church of St. Nicholas there describing him as Baron Dacre, the title accorded him by his fellow-exiles.⁸

Ref Volumes: 1558-1603

Author: N. M. Fuidge

Notes

1. CP, iv. 22-5; CPR, 1554-5, p. 106.
2. CSP Dom. Add. 1566-79, p. 201; APC, 1558-70, p. 41.
3. CP, iv. 23-4; C. Read, Mr. Secretary Cecil, 445-6.
4. Cam. Misc. ix(3), p. 71; Haynes, State Pprs. 446; Sir C. Sharp, Mems. of the Rebellion, 192-6.
5. Sharp, 214; HMC Hatfield, i. 455-6, 557; CSP Dom. Add. 1566-79, pp. 139, 148, 159, 164, 167, 173, 185, 193.
6. Sharp, 215-17, 219-20; CSP Dom. Add. 1566-79, pp. 239, 241.
7. CSP For. 1569-71, pp. 197, 224, 294, 300, 319, 322, 325, 392; CSP Scotland, 1569-71, p. 88; CSP Dom. Add. 1566-79, pp. 337, 363, 385, 393.
8. CSP Dom. Add. 1566-79, pp. 342, 381; CSP For. 1572-4, pp. 43, 229; Sharp, 223.