

Gerald Fitzgerald (Gearóid Iarla), 4th Earl of Desmond (1333 – 1398)

Speak not ill of womankind

(Mairg adeir olc ris na mnáibh)

Speak not ill of womankind,
‘Tis no wisdom if you do.
You that fault in women find,
I would not be praised of you.

Sweetly speaking, witty, clear,
Tribe most lovely to my mind,
Blame of such I hate to hear.
Speak not ill of womankind.

Bloody treason, murderous act,
Not by women were designed,
Bells o’erthrown nor churches sacked°. *to destroy and steal*
Speak not ill of womankind.

Bishop, King upon his throne,
Primate° skilled to loose and bind, *an archbishop (priest of very high rank)*
Sprung of women every one!
Speak not ill of womankind.

For a brave young fellow long
Hearts of women oft have pined°. *to be very sad because sb has died or gone away*
Who would dare their love to wrong?
Speak not ill of womankind.

Paunchy° greybeards never more *a fat stomach on a man*
Hope to please a woman’s mind.
Poor young chieftains they adore!
Speak not ill of womankind.

Version: Earl of Longford

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Also known by the Irish Gaelic “Gearoid Iarla” (Earl Gerald), Gerald FitzGerald was the 4th Earl of Desmond, in southwestern Ireland, under the first creation of that title, and a member of the Hiberno-Norman dynasty of the FitzGeralds, or Geraldines.

Gerald was made Lord Chief Justice of Ireland in 1367. In 1370, he was imprisoned by Brian O’Brien of Thomond. While in prison, Gerald wrote poetry in the Irish language, most famously the poem “Mairg adeir olc ris na mnáibh” (“Speak not ill of womenkind”). Indeed, Gerald was instrumental in replacing French with Irish as the preferred language of the Hiberno-Norman aristocracy, and typified the cliché among later Irish historians that the Geraldines were “more Irish than the Irish themselves.”

Gerald Fitzgerald was the first to adapt the courtly love tradition of the Norman French to the Irish. In the poetry of courtly love, which originated in the 12th century in southwestern France, the love of woman is exalted, a redemptive force for both the lover and his beloved. Gerald’s poem is a rebuttal of the fierce clerical misogyny that was prevalent in the Middle Ages. He draws on the older, Celtic tradition, in which women were held in high esteem.

In local legend, Gerald was romantically linked with the goddess Áine, a legend which drew upon a pre-existing local Celtic legend about liaisons between Áine and the King of Munster, but updated it with themes drawn from the Franco-phone courtly love poetry of Continental Europe, in particular the motif of the man who falls in love with a swan maiden.

After his disappearance in 1398, another legend grew up that Gerald sleeps in a cave beside (or under) Lough Gur, and will someday awaken and ride forth on a silver-shod steed to rule again in Desmond (or, alternatively, “save Ireland”).

Gerald Fitzgerald, fourth Earl of Desmond

FITZGERALD, GERALD, fourth Earl of Desmond (d.1398), justiciar of Ireland, was the son of Maurice Fitzthomas, the first earl of Desmond [q.v.], by his second wife, Evelina or Eleanor Fitzmaurice, and was generally styled Gerald Fitzmaurice. He was in 1356 taken prisoner by the Irish, but was released on a truce being made (*Cal. Rot. Pat. et Claus. Hib.* p.59). His father's death in the same year was soon followed by that of his elder brother, Maurice, the second earl. This produced great disturbances in Munster. To appease them Edward III granted to Gerald the lands of his brother Maurice, together with the custody of his idiot brother, Nicholas, who seems to have been regarded as incompetent to succeed (*ib.* p.72). This was on 3 July 1359. On 20 July the king renewed the grant on condition of Gerald's marrying Eleanor, the daughter of James Butler, earl of Ormonde, then justiciar of Ireland (*Foedra*, iii. 422). The peerage writers describe Gerald as the fourth earl, on the assumption that either Nicholas or another brother, John, previously bore the title (Lodge, *Peerage of Ireland*, i, 65; cf. 'Pedigree of the Desmonds,' in Graves, *Unpublished Geraldine Documents*, pt. ii.) But the authorities only know of Maurice and his father as his predecessors in the title. The 'Book of Howth' (p.118) describes him rightly as third earl.

In 1367 Desmond succeeded Lionel, duke of Clarence, as justiciar of Ireland (*Grace, Annals*, p.154). The appointment was a confession of weakness of the home government, for Gerald carried on even further than his father that policy of amalgamation with the native Irish which it had been Lionel's main object to prevent. The period of his rule was almost exceptionally turbulent. A great meeting was held at Kilkenny to induce the Birminghams to live in peace with the government, and the king's officials petitioned for the removal of the exchequer from Carlow, where it was exposed to the Irish attacks. In 1368 the Irish parliament petitioned that all who held land in Ireland should be compelled to defend their estates in person or by sufficient deputies. In 1369 Desmond was superseded by Sir William de Windsor. In the same year Desmond was defeated near Nenagh, and taken prisoner by Brien O'Brien, king of Thomond, whose victorious army now plundered and destroyed Limerick (*Annals of Loch Ce*, ii, 43; *Annals of the Four Masters*, iii, 649). It was one of the greatest victories ever won by the Irish of Munster. In 1370 Windsor led an expedition to effect Desmond's release, but in 1372 O'Brien was again in arms and threatening Limerick (*Cal. Rot. Pat. et Claus. Hib.* p. 84 b).

In 1377 Desmond was at war with Richard de Burgh (*ib.* p.103 b). In 1381 he was appointed to 'repress the malice of the rebels' in Munster, where no justiciar ventured to show his face after the death of the Earl of March (*ib.* pp.114,115). In 1386 he again acted as deputy of the justiciar in Munster (*ib.* p.127 b). In 1393 he obtained from the council an order compelling the town of Cork to pay him a rent already granted 'considering the great expenses which he continually sustains in the king's wars in Munster' (*King's Council in Ireland*, 16 *Richard II*, p.126, Rolls Ser.) During the latter part of his life he was constantly at war with his hereditary foes, the Butlers (*ib.* p.261; cf. *Cal. Rot. Pat. et Claus. Hib.* pp.121,122b).

Desmond is generally described in the records as the chief upholder of the king's cause in Munster. Yet his policy was to set the law at defiance and adopt Irish customs and sympathies. He obtained in 1388 a royal license to allow his son James to be fostered among his old enemies, the O'Briens, notwithstanding the statute of Kilkenny (*Cal. Rot. Pat. et Claus. Hib.* p.139). The Irish annalists are enthusiastic in his praises. The 'Four Masters' describe him as 'a cheerful and courteous man, who excelled all the English and many of the Irish in the knowledge of the Irish language, poetry, and history' (iv. 761, cf. note on p.760). He was a man of some culture and refinement. He was called 'Gerald the poet,' and some short French verses attributed to him still survive in the 'Book of Ross or Waterford,' in Harl. MS.913,f.15*b*, with the title 'Proverbia Comitum Desmond.' 'The point of these is not very evident beyond an ingenious play on words' (Croker, *Popular Songs of Ireland*, p.287). He is also described as a mathematician and magician. [The attribution of magical powers to him may be the result of confusing him with Gerald the "wizard" earl of Kildare, ed.] He died in 1398, but the Munster peasantry long believed that he had only disappeared beneath the waters of Lough Air, near Limerick, and that every seven years he revisited its castle.[Some say "Lough Gur," ed.]

By his wife, Eleanor Butler, who died in 1392, and is described as a 'charitable and bountiful woman' (*Annals of Loch Ce*,ii.75). Desmond left several children. The eldest son, John, the fifth earl, according to the ordinary reckoning, was drowned in the river Suir, within a few months of his father's death (*Four Masters*,iv.761). The next son, Maurice, died without male issue in 1410. The third son, James, the O'Brien's foster-son, usurped the earldom from his nephew Thomas, the sixth earl, son of John. James was the father of Thomas Fitzgerald, eighth earl of Desmond[q.v.] Two daughters of Gerald and Eleanor are also mentioned ('Pedigree of the Desmonds,' in Graves, *Unpublished Geraldine Documents*, pt. ii.)

[Chartularies, &c., of St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin; Annals of Loch Ce, both in Rolls Series; Calendar of the Patent and Close Rolls of Ireland, Record Comm.; Annals of the Four Masters; Olyn's Annals and Grace's Annals (Irish Archaeological Soc.); Lodge's Peerage of Ireland, vol.i. (Archdall); Graves's Unpublished Geraldine Documents, first printed in Journal of Kilkenny Archaeological Society, and then separately; Gilbert's Viceroy's of Ireland; and the other authorities referred to in the text.] T.F.T.

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