

AFFABLE NEW ZEALANDER GOVERNED ULSTER

RALPH GREY, the only son of a Wellington accountant married to a teacher, was a New Zealand lawyer destined to become the last Governor of Northern Ireland. As Lord Grey of Naunton he served with quiet distinction in troubled times from 1968 to 1973. As the 'Troubles' spread across the Province the affable Kiwi reported that "All sides have been extremely nice to me. I only wish they were a little nicer to each other!"

Today his coat of arms is displayed to the left of the entrance to Hillsborough Castle. Better known to many as Government House it was home to the Monarch's representatives in NI until the post was abolished in 1973.



Described by a Guardian journalist as "An open-faced New Zealander with a nice line in self-deprecating humour" Lord Grey and his wife Esme proved popular though holding post in an increasingly impossible situation. In typical Kiwi fashion he engaged all equally in conversation yet behind the scenes was warning London of trouble ahead. Telling Home Secretary James Callaghan in 1968 that "You are in for an impending conflagration."

Having served in the British Colonial office as the wind of change swept across the old empire he must have been well used to some London ministers failing to act on advice from their man on the ground. Ralph Grey spent 22 years as a Colonial administrator in Nigeria leading up to independence followed by a spell as Governor in British Guiana. A colony with two racial groups, Indian and African, plus a fair share of rabble-rousing local politicians! Having coped with this he became Governor of the Bahamas for two years where Lord Grey helped stabilise an island populated by poor blacks and rich, white tax dodgers!

Unlike the previous four NI governors he asked to see the outcome of all cabinet meetings of the devolved government at Stormont and had the sad duty of accepting the resignation of two Ulster Prime Ministers. Captain Terence O'Neill and Major James Chichester-Clarke. Both brought down when they tried to bring in electoral reforms already in place on the UK mainland since 1948. Overdue reforms that were then promptly put in place by direct rule ministers.



Lord Grey served on for the last year almost powerless but is recalled around Royal Hillsborough village by the older generation as a 'very civil man'. During WWII his best friend, RAFVR Pilot Officer Kenneth Kirkaldie was killed and a few years later the future Lord Grey wed his widow, Esme Mae, nee Burcher, from Auckland. They were married for 52 years until her death in 1996 leaving a daughter and two sons.

And where did the title Lord Grey of Naunton come from? During their years moving around the globe with the Colonial Office Ralph and Esme maintained a family home in the Cotswolds overlooking the village of Naunton.

His success in dealing with near impossible situations was rewarded with elevation to the peerage not as usual on retirement, but five years earlier in 1968. Other honours poured in including becoming a Freeman of both Lisburn and Belfast. Ralph Grey, the kindly Kiwi, died aged 89 in 1999 having had a very active retirement including serving as Chancellor of the Ulster University.