



'Few incoming landlords can have inspired such a sense of promise.' David Stewart Ker, c.1842, by W.C. Ross, watercolour on marble. (Ker family)

'Lord Mentalto'

How different it had all seemed twenty-eight years before, when in 1844 at the age of twenty-seven, David Stewart Ker had formally inherited his family's great estates. Their collective future had looked so bright then. So full of promise. Yes, there was the shadow of their father's illness, the awful shock of the burning of Portavo. But for all that, it had been a wonderful time, a *belle époque*, a time of fresh and exciting departures. He had gone abroad. His dear sisters, Frances and Madalena, had married and begun new lives. And of course his brother David had taken charge of the estates.

It had been the smoothest of successions. There was no question of this heir being threatened with disinheritance, or being made to feel ashamed of his parentage. Nor was the new incumbent driven by his father's

insatiable territorial hunger, or his outsider's need to belong. David Stewart Ker was born to the purple. Rank and standing were a given for him. His mother was a Londonderry. He was a pure-bred landed gentleman, the first that his mercurial family had produced.

And he looked every inch the part. The young David had a glamorous, almost princely air. Lank, elegant, doe-eyed, affable, David Stewart Ker was a gilded creature, with a proven record of commitment to the estates and the people who lived on them, people with whom he had publicly shared the great milestones of his life. His accession was greeted with satisfaction. Few incoming landlords can have inspired such a sense of promise. The Kers had come up trumps again. Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

'From the Bar of Dundrum to the town of Belfast': the Ker estates

Ker became master of a small landed empire. One in every twenty acres of County Down belonged to the family, whose territories ran 'from the Bar of Dundrum to the town of Belfast' and then beyond, through Broadisland to mid-Antrim, an area of some 35,650 acres, made up, not of barren mountain and sucking bog, but of fertile, well-tenanted agricultural land.¹ This vast domain included the villages of Clough, Whitehead and Ballycarry, the town of Ballynahinch, the county town of Downpatrick, mills, schools, two ports, slate and limestone quarries, and a borough seat in parliament that the family had made their own after a bloody contest in 1837.

Some six thousand of these verdant acres lay in County Antrim, where Ker's main presence was the 4,600 acre Red Hall or Broadisland estate, which lay between Carrickfergus and Lame. This was centred on the largely disused mansion house of Red Hall, and had been left to Ker's



Thatched cottage, Dunderon Bay, by Kenneth Webb. The bay marked the estate's southern border. (Private collection)