

Title: Edith Somerville

Known As: Martin, Violet Florence; Martin, Violet; Ross, Martin (Irish writer)

Irish Writer (1862 - 1915)

Author(s): [Claire Denelle Cowart \(Southeastern Louisiana University\)](#)

Source: [British Short-Fiction Writers, 1880-1914: The Realist Tradition](#). Ed. William B. Thesing. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 135*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Biography



Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1994 Gale Research, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Table of Contents: [Biographical and Critical Essay](#) [The Irish R.M. and His Experiences](#) [Irish Memories](#) [Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.](#) [Writings by the Author](#) [Further Readings about the Author](#)

The following essay covers the collaborative literary efforts of Irish writers Edith O'Enone Somerville and [Martin Ross](#).

The Irish writers Edith O'Enone Somerville and [Violet Florence Martin](#), who wrote under the pseudonym [Martin Ross](#), collaborated on many novels, short stories, travel books, memoirs, and essays during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. From the time they published their first novel, *An Irish Cousin* (1889), the authors enjoyed great popularity. Their most critically acclaimed work is the novel *The Real Charlotte* (1894), but they are best known for three volumes of humorous stories-- *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899), *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1908), and *In Mr. Knox's Country* (1915), which were later collected as *The Irish R.M. and His Experiences* (1928).

The two women, who were second cousins, were born into the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, at that time the ruling class of Ireland. Their families, although originally English, had lived in Ireland for generations as part of the group that governed the country from its Big Houses, the family seats at the center of each estate. The cousins' short stories and novels reflect the Ireland they knew from this vantage point.

Born in Corfu on 2 May 1858 to Col. T. Henry Somerville and Adelaide Coghill Somerville, Edith was raised in the Somerville family home, Drishane, in the village of Castletownshend on the southern coast of West Cork. Drishane was built by her great-grandfather Thomas Somerville during the Georgian period and is described by Thomas Flanagan in "The Big House of Ross-Drishane" (*Kenyon Review*, January 1966) as a "masculine" house, whose "true life lay out of doors ... a life of dogs and guns, tenants and estate agents, stables and kennels." During Edith's youth her grandfather, known as "The Big Master," headed the household, and he kept a firm hold on the estate until his death in 1882. As the eldest of six children, Edith took over the daily running of Drishane after her mother's death in 1895. Edith was a woman of many activities: a serious painter and an enthusiastic hunter (becoming first female master of the West Carbery Hunt), as well as an organist at Castletownshend church for seventy-five years. She also helped support herself and her family with the proceeds from her writing, imported the first Friesian cattle into Cork, and in her later years raised horses and sold them in America. This busy,

productive life at Castletownshend echoes throughout many of the works on which Somerville collaborated with Violet Martin.

[Violet Florence Martin](#) was born on 11 June 1862 at her family home, Ross, in West Galway. Her mother, Anna Selina Fox Martin, was the second wife of Richard Martin, and Violet was the youngest of fourteen children. Like the Somerville family, the Martin family is of Norman origin, but because the Martins settled in Ireland many centuries before the Somervilles, their history as Anglo-Irish is much longer and more complex. The founder of the Irish branch, Oliver Martin, had come to Ireland in the twelfth century with the army headed by Strongbow and acquired the land near Galway where the family eventually settled. Originally Catholics, the Martins suffered religious persecution during Oliver Cromwell's invasion. Partly in response to the eighteenth-century penal laws, which prevented Catholics from owning property, and partly because Violet's great-grandfather wished to marry a Protestant woman, the family elected to become Anglican and thus saved their land.

By the time Violet was born, the family had lost much of its wealth and power. The Great Famine of 1847 had weakened the Martins' hold on Ross; in the election of 1872 the Ross tenants voted against the interest of Richard Martin. This particular reversal hit the family hard, and despondency may have contributed to Richard's death later that year. Violet's bitterness at what she considered a betrayal and a personal injury to her father contributed to her conservative political views. The misfortunes of the Ross estate multiplied in the following years. The crops failed in 1879, and a land commission later took over the estate. After her husband's death Anna Martin and her unmarried daughters, including ten-year-old Violet, moved to Dublin and stayed there for sixteen years, interspersing their residence in the city with extended visits to relatives. When Violet and her mother returned to Ross, they were tenants rather than owners. Violet's brother Robert, heir to Ross, elected to live in England, where he gained fame as a songwriter and went by the name "Ballyhooley," the title of his best-known work. He was also a journalist, and his connections to various periodicals later proved helpful to his sister.

Somerville and Ross did not set out to become serious authors. When the cousins first met, in January 1886, they were well into adulthood; Somerville was twenty-seven and Ross was twenty-three. Neither woman had had much formal schooling. Each had been taught to some degree by a succession of governesses, and each had taken some classes in Dublin at Alexandra College, a school for women founded in 1886. Both had also read extensively on their own. Somerville up to this time had concentrated most of her energies on painting; she had studied art in Düsseldorf in 1881 and in Paris in 1884. Before they began their joint writing career, each had published some of her own work, primarily as a means of generating much-needed income. Ross had placed some articles, mostly political, in various periodicals, especially in the *World*. Edmund Yates, editor of the *World*, became a great supporter of Somerville and Ross; Major Yeates, the narrator of the *Irish R.M.* stories, was named in his honor. As an outgrowth of her painting career, Somerville had been illustrating texts since the age of eighteen. She had published comic-strip stories, with the emphasis on pictures rather than text, in the *Graphic* and other journals.

In *Irish Memories* (1917), written the year after Ross's death, Somerville explains that the cousins' initial intention in collaborating on a novel had been to write a "shilling shocker," partly as a lark, partly as a way to make money. Although their gift for writing would probably have raised the level of their endeavor in any case, Somerville recalls a visit they paid to an old house near Drishane as sparking both their interest and talent. They called on a distant cousin living in

isolated circumstances. Somerville describes in detail the moment when they turned to leave and the effect that the scene had on Ross and herself:

The sunset was red in the west when our horses were brought around to the door, and it was at that precise moment that into the Irish Cousin some thrill of genuineness was breathed. In the darkened facade of the long gray house, a window, just above the hall door, caught our attention. In it, for an instant, was a white face.... The shock of it was what we needed, and with it "the Shocker" started into life, or, if that is too much to say for it, its authors, at least, felt that conviction had come to them--the insincere ambition of the "Penny Dreadful" faded, realities asserted themselves, and the faked "thrills" that were to make our fortunes were repudiated for ever.

According to [Maurice Collis](#) in *Somerville and Ross: A Biography* (1968), the cousins believed that the face in the window was that of "some half-witted relative, a living ghost that haunted the house." In *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross* (1989) Gifford Lewis maintains that only Somerville actually made that visit and saw that face, which she described to her cousin in a letter. Somerville's experience did have a marked effect on the cousins' work, however. In the decline of the Big House, a topic suggested by the old woman's face, they found a subject to which they could turn their insights and skills--one that would preoccupy them and serve as the unifying theme of their work. Rapidly changing economic and political circumstances brought about radical changes in the authors' lifetimes, and they took account of these in their fiction. In *Shadowy Heroes: Irish Literature of the 1890's* (1980) Wayne Hall claims that "their combined experiences brought to their collaboration an epic breadth that depicts the Protestant Ascendancy in relation to every other major social force in Ireland."

The comic stories of Somerville and Ross have too often been dismissed as unimportant; the stories, however, reveal the authors' understanding of and attitude toward Ireland. And even when considered simply as entertainment, the short fiction is superb. The Irish poet [Katharine Tynan](#) pays tribute to the skill of Somerville and Ross in mastering humor as well as drama. As she puts it in an article for the London *Bookman* (June 1916): "In very few writers can there have been such a true proportion between the tragedy and comedy of life." The world of their humorous stories is on its surface secure and carefree. Beneath that surface, however, are signs that unrest and transition in the outside world are making themselves felt.

Before they began the *Irish R.M.* stories, the cousins had written four novels and several travel books, which were previously serialized in magazines such as the *Lady's Pictorial*. This was predominantly a fashion magazine, but Somerville and Ross, at this point in their careers were more concerned with finances than literary credibility. They submitted their works to various periodicals in search of the best possible pay and were elated when a publication agreed to take Somerville's drawings along with their writing. Of the magazines that published their work, *Black & White* and the *Graphic* were both heavily illustrated weeklies. They also published stories in *Longman's*, a monthly with no illustrations, which was an offshoot of Longmans, Green and Company, a firm that published many works by Somerville and Ross.

The cousins achieved particular success with stories featuring hunting, a sport they both loved and at which they excelled. They proved more than equal to the task of transferring their enthusiasm into print. Many of these early hunting and hunt-related stories appeared in *Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, a monthly with stories and articles designed to amuse men and women with sporting interests. As a result of the public's demand for their stories, the authors' literary agent, J. B. Pinker, urged them to produce more stories with hunting themes. In an 1897 letter to Ross, Somerville describes a visit she and Pinker paid to Hedley

Peek, an art editor for *Badminton* who also worked for the publishing firm Lawrence and Bullen's. She writes that Peek and Arthur Henry Bullen "raved of the Bad Mag stories ... especially the Grand Filly [later collected in *All on the Irish Shore*, 1903].... They then all ... swore that we had got hold of a very good thing in this serio-comic hunting business ... said Pinker, 'this is *your own stuff* and no one else does anything like it.'"

Pinker, Peek, and Bullen urged Somerville to stay true to the style of "A Grand Filly," which is told from the point of view of an Englishman visiting Ireland. His host's aunt is eccentric, and the story centers around comic hunting mishaps. All these elements appear in the first group of *Irish R.M.* stories, for which Pinker arranged exclusive serialization with *Badminton*. Major Yeates, the narrator of the stories and the R. M. (Resident Magistrate) of the first volume's title, is an Anglo-Irishman who has been living for some time in England and who returns to Ireland with an English wife. His neighbor, Flurry Knox, is reminiscent of the host of "A Grand Filly," and Flurry's grandmother far outdoes the aunt of that story in eccentricity. Somerville and Ross connected some of these early stories by continuing characters and situations from one to another; they pursued this unifying technique with great success throughout the *Irish R.M.* stories.

The first *Irish R.M.* story, "Great Uncle McCarthy's Ghost," appeared in *Badminton* in October 1898, and the monthly series concluded in September of the following year. These stories were then collected in *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* The stories in the second volume, *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, first appeared in various periodicals, while the stories in the third volume, *In Mr. Knox's Country*, seem to have been written specifically for that volume. In 1928 the series was collected in one volume, *The Irish R.M. and His Experiences*, and the stories have not been out of print since. Some of them were adapted for a British television series, *The Irish R.M.*, which was shown in the United States on *Masterpiece Theatre* (1984). In all of their incarnations these tales of an R.M. in Ireland at the turn of the century have been wildly popular. They helped to establish the cousins as successful authors and contributed handsomely to their incomes.

During the time that they were writing the first series of stories in 1898, Ross took a bad fall while hunting. The accident left her in great physical distress for several years, and she did not hunt again until 1909. She somehow managed to put aside her pain in order to conjure up, with her cousin, the entertaining world of the *Irish R.M.* stories, but she was too weak to take on the task of writing another novel with Somerville.

Not all readers were pleased with the *Irish R.M.* stories, however. To some the tales seemed to consist of stereotypical representations of Irish "types." Some readers and critics, then and now, have focused on the minor players in the stories. In a 1968 article for *Eire-Ireland*, Sean McMahon says that "the jolly, childlike servants of the R.M. stories--Mrs. Cadogan, Slipper and the rest--smack of white Uncle-Tomism." But the authors are much more likely to zero in on the jolly, childlike behavior often exhibited by the servants' masters and to direct their barbed comments toward the gentry.

In fact, Ross criticized English audiences for expecting to meet "the Stage Irishman" in Irish literature. While acknowledging this fact, Ann Power writes in a 1964 article for the *Dubliner* that although Somerville and Ross do show great sympathy and admiration for the Irish, they are unable to keep "that deadly touch of condescension ... the fatal sense of displaying the Irish to an English reader ... from their work." In response to charges that Somerville and Ross wrote primarily for an English audience, Conor Cruse O'Brien comes to their defense in *Writers and Politics* (1965):

They exaggerate, obviously, as every comic writer does, but their exaggeration is firmly based on Irish ground which they knew well and which in their own way they loved deeply. They lived in Ireland for almost all their writing lives and they had, as a writing team, a sensitive ear and a penetrating, humorous eye. If their writing is not part of the literature of Ireland, then Ireland is a poorer place than many of us believe it to be.

In a 1945 article for the *Irish Times*, [Frank O'Connor](#) points out that the cousins' connection to England has more to do with literary technique than with subject matter. He observes that their "intellectual centre is rather London than Paris" and emphasizes that their writing is in the realistic mode favored by English writers of the time, while Irish writers such as [James Joyce](#) preferred naturalism and symbolism, which were prevalent on the Continent.

Even their exaggerated characters must have been rooted in truth, for as Somerville notes in the preface to the 1928 edition of the stories, many readers believed that they knew the original persons on whom the authors had based characters in the *Irish R.M.* stories. Somerville claims that "of them all, Slipper and Maria alone had prototypes in the world as [Martin Ross](#) and I knew it." Maria is a dog, while Slipper is a canny resident of the Castletownshend area with a special affinity for horses. On another occasion she admitted that some characters should indeed be thought of as types--not types of Stage Irishmen, but "composite photographs of the people of an Ireland that has not yet lost its originality and its sense of humour." Despite the disclaimer, letters of the time show that the character Flurry Knox was to some degree based on Somerville's brother Aylmer. Somerville herself shared characteristics with Bobbie Bennett, an attractive hunting enthusiast frequently encountered by the R.M., and the traits of other family members also can be recognized in the stories.

In addition to using the characters of their native land to create much of the humor in the stories, Somerville and Ross reproduce the speech of the Irish of all classes. In 1902 they published a picture book, *A Patrick's Day Hunt*, with a story written primarily by Ross and illustrations by Somerville. The narrator speaks in an Irish, rather than an Anglo-Irish, voice--a rare departure for the authors. This book was well received, contributing to the demand for more hunting stories. For the most part, however, both women believed that idiom rather than dialect was the defining characteristic of Irish speech, and they were preoccupied with recording it as precisely as possible. Somerville carried a sketchbook and a notebook at all times so that she could record what she saw and heard. Ross had the ability to remember conversations word for word, and she held on to the memory until she could write them down.

This interest in language and research among the Irish people is also characteristic of the writers associated with the Irish Literary Revival, which was contemporaneous with the writing careers of Somerville and Ross. In most ways, however, Somerville and Ross operated outside the revival. Although Ross was a cousin to Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory and occasionally socialized with [William Butler Yeats](#), she and Somerville did not share Yeats's romantic view of Ireland, nor did they share his politics. Their focus on the Big House was aimed at a much different audience from that targeted by those involved in the revival. Ross was once invited to write a play for the Abbey Theatre, but the comical, good-natured peasant often found in Somerville and Ross works would not have been welcome there, nor would the authors' darker visions of the crumbling Anglo-Irish life. The "Celtic twilight" did not hover over their world. The authors impart a subtle, pervasively humorous slant to the *Irish R.M.* stories by using the device of a detached narrator. When the first volume begins, Major Yeates has just arrived in Ireland to take up the post of resident magistrate. Although he is Irish by birth, Yeates has been living in England and has married an Englishwoman. Consequently, he views his new home in

the west of Ireland from the perspective of an outsider; behavior and conditions that the natives take for granted as normal seem outlandish and amusing to him. Yeates's point of view may at first seem to lend credence to the criticism that Somerville and Ross were playing to an English audience. But the freshness of the major's perceptions has its own charm. He sees things in a way that the natives do not; his nearsightedness corresponds to his apprehension of the world he inhabits. Many times Yeates is the butt of the humor in the stories. Because he is not an insider in the fairly closed society of Skebawn and its environs, he is often in the dark about events that are well known to the natives. In addition, Yeates would be an innocent in any society; he is eminently dupable, a characteristic his neighbors often recognize.

In "Holy Island" (*Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*), the entire populace save Yeates seems to know about a ruse to smuggle liquor from a shipwrecked vessel. And in the preceding story, "A Misdeal," Yeates and another outsider, Bernard Shute, mistakenly exchange horses--an error that knowledgeable natives, such as the Knoxes, would never make. Despite or perhaps because of his naiveté, though, the R.M. seems sympathetic both to the reader and to the other characters in the stories. In addition, Yeates is the only character in these stories who really develops. As the volumes progress, he becomes more informed about his environs and more adept at reading both character and situation. He also comes to be accepted as friend and compatriot by those who once regarded him as an outsider. As these changes occur, the source of the humor in the stories also alters so that the laughs more often come to depend on character than on situation. In the early stories Yeates is often taken advantage of and made fun of by the native Irish, but gradually, as he gains understanding and trust, he moves to a position of conspirator rather than dupe. In many of these instances, moreover, Yeates as narrator laughs at himself. Rarely are the Irish of the lower or servant classes the main targets of his amusement; more often, the Anglo-Irish are given that distinction.

If any social class or group can be described as stereotyped or consistently made fun of in the *Irish R.M.* stories, that group must be the English visitor. Although the R.M.'s wife, Philippa, comes to have a fairly good understanding of her neighbors and seems eventually to feel at home in a foreign environment, her early misadventures provide much mirth. Somerville and Ross, however, always portray casual English visitors as totally on the outside; they are unable to understand the Irish way of life or to adapt themselves to it. For instance, in "Lisheen Races, Second-Hand" (*Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*), Yeates's point of view has already changed enough so that he can regard his English visitor, Leigh Kelway, with disapproval because Kelway views the Irish as a subject for study. His college friend's new profession of politician has made him much less amusing than in earlier days, and Yeates concludes that Kelway's "society, when combined with a notebook and a thirst for statistics, was not what I used to find it at Oxford." Such a staid Englishman is a convenient butt for humor, but the role in which Somerville and Ross cast Kelway also reveals something of the authors' negative attitude toward the English and their treatment of Ireland. Although Ireland's problems do not play an overt role in the R.M. stories, they often have a place in the background.

Just as elements of comedy sometimes find their way into the more-dramatic works of Somerville and Ross, however, so do more-serious elements find their way into the *Irish R.M.* stories. Many critics believe that the gradual unraveling of the Anglo-Irish glory days, the subject of so many novels by Somerville and Ross, simply does not appear in their stories. Today's reader should keep in mind that the authors compiled the *Irish R.M.* volumes from individual stories. It may be tempting, especially when reading them straight through, to think that the authors intended the atmosphere they created for these tales to re-create completely the

atmosphere of everyday life in the Ireland of their time. The reader of Somerville and Ross novels, however, knows that the authors were well aware of, and were well able to convey, a much bleaker picture of Irish life.

That bleaker Ireland is not entirely absent from the *Irish R.M.* stories. It lives below the surface and sometimes at the edges of the stories. The reader should not assume that the characters in the stories are unaware of the realities of Irish life. In some ways, in fact, the Anglo-Irish of the stories may have a more realistic, more balanced view of Irish life than the Anglo-Irish of the novels, who are apt to deny reality until it overtakes them. The humor of the stories does not invalidate them as a portrait of Irish life; indeed, humor is probably essential to such a portrait. But, because the stories concentrate primarily on funny episodes in the lives of the characters, every moment of their lives need not be funny. After all, Flurry Knox does go to war, his mother does live in reduced circumstances, and Major Yeates, as a magistrate, must certainly have to deal with serious affairs. Because the emphasis in the stories is not on these circumstances but on humor, the reader must look to the details that provide the backdrop for the action in order to see that some of the same themes that inform the tragic fiction of Somerville and Ross are also present, though not predominant, in their comic work.

In the first story of the series, "Great Uncle McCarthy's Ghost," Somerville and Ross demonstrate the wide range of status that can exist within one family. An elderly couple is discovered living in Yeates's attic, from which they have been engaged in the disreputable business of selling foxes and stealing from the major. Yeates's neighbor Flurry Knox, who is slightly down-at-the-heels but nevertheless a true member of the gentry, is embarrassed when he realizes that the woman who has been squatting at Shreelane is his relation. She, however, seems to believe that her bloodlines have kept her actions from being disgraceful: "And is it you, Flurry Knox, that's calling me a disgrace! Disgrace, indeed, am I? Me that was your poor mother's own uncle's daughter and as good a McCarthy as ever stood in Shreelane!"

Flurry's cousin disappears fairly early from the *Irish R.M.* stories, but many other members of this far-flung family make up for her absence. Flurry is one of the most engaging, memorable characters in the stories, and Yeates initially appraises him, in a line that has become well known, as one "who looked like a stableboy among gentlemen, and a gentleman among stableboys." Yeates further describes the Knoxes as "a clan that cropped up in every grade of society in the country, from Sir Valentine Knox of Castle Knox down to the auctioneer Knox, who bore the attractive title of Larry the Liar." Flurry, he feels, "occupied a shifting position about midway in the tribe."

Although Sir Valentine lives at Castle Knox in an atmosphere nostalgically reminiscent of better days, the main characters of the *Irish R.M.* stories rarely experience that luxury. Castle Knox serves in some ways as a counterpoint to the ordinary lives of people such as the Yeateses and Flurry Knox and in other ways as a standard by which the reader can judge the extent of change in the lives of the Anglo-Irish. The most obvious example of such change is Flurry's grandmother, Mrs. Knox of Aussolas Castle, succinctly described by Lady Knox in a late story as "a rag bag held together by diamond brooches." In "Trinket's Colt" (*Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*) at his first glimpse of her Yeates declares:

She looked as if she had robbed a scarecrow. Her face was small and incongruously refined, the hand that she extended to me had the grubby tan that bespoke the professional gardener, and was decorated with a magnificent diamond ring.

The dinner she serves likewise indicates Mrs. Knox's unconventional ways: "There was detestable soup in a splendid old silver tureen ... a perfect salmon, perfectly cooked, on a chipped

kitchen dish ... a bottle of port, draped in immemorial cobwebs, wan with age, and probably priceless."

But the incongruity of the dinner and the hostess does not express mere eccentricity; it also demonstrates the rate and the kinds of changes that have occurred at Aussolas Castle. The silver tureen, priceless bottle of port, and dazzling jewelry all bespeak better times, while the cobwebs, chipped dish, and uneven quality of both the supper and her attire attest to a much sorrier state of affairs in the present. Mrs. Knox is clearly not starving, nor is she totally without means. She has made her own peculiar adjustment to changing times. Although she cannot entertain grandly like Sir Valentine and Lady Knox, she does not settle for smooth mediocrity; instead, she lays on a dinner of uneven grandeur and dresses in startlingly uneven fashion, mixing diamonds with an ancient bonnet. Aussolas is an establishment that Yeates sees as "vast, dilapidated, and of unknown age"; nevertheless, Aussolas is and always has been Mrs. Knox's home, which she will retain regardless of its condition.

From Mrs. Knox's point of view, politics bears some of the blame for her estate's condition. When a former tenant comes to her for help in a sticky situation, she snaps, "I have no tenants ... the Government is your landlord now, and I wish you joy of each other!" She does relent and help the man, but she is unhappy about continuing to be held responsible for those who no longer have real ties to her. Politics is not often a topic of conversation with her or with the other characters in the *Irish R.M.* stories, however, and her conduct throughout the stories indicates that she has made an essentially peaceful adjustment to her new circumstances. Occasionally she ventures out to do battle in the new world, as when coaxed by her former tenant, but on the whole she rejects the new rules and simply lives by her own lights.

In some of these ways Flurry Knox is like his grandmother. While he is not by any means the eccentric she is, he is just as strong-willed and just as sure of himself. In time he will inherit Aussolas, and after he marries he gradually makes himself more and more at home there, as he and his wife pay extended visits. In "The Aussolas Martin Cat" (*In Mr. Knox's Country*), Mrs. Knox puts up a brief resistance by planning to lease the house while she takes a long vacation, but Flurry contrives to scare off a potential lessee by simulating a supernatural invasion. In so doing he demonstrates his intention to keep the estate firmly in the hands of the family; there is little reason to believe that once he inherits Aussolas things will be different. Although Flurry is not at the head of the Knox family nor completely secure financially, he seems destined to survive difficulty because he is shrewd, determined, and confident.

An example of Somerville and Ross's ability to recognize social change comes with the entrance of the McRory family, first mentioned in "The Pug-Nosed Fox" (*Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.*). Yeates refers to the head of the family as "old McRory ... a retired Dublin coal merchant, with an enormous family, and a reputation for great riches." The McRorys are social climbers who buy a dilapidated Big House, Temple Braney, and restore it. Mr. McRory also manages to obtain, "by strenuous efforts, that dubious honor, Commission of the Peace," which brings him in contact with Yeates and other members of the gentry. While the McRorys participate in the social life of the gentry to some degree, they are not truly perceived as equals. As Yeates puts it, "The family had worn its way, unequally and in patches, into the tolerance of the neighborhood" by virtue of their talents at dancing and sports, as well as their generosity and participation in local events. Yeates even speaks of De Lacey "Curly" McRory as "the pioneer of his family in their advance to cross what has been usefully called 'the bounder-y line.'" The encroachment of the McRorys into upper-class society clearly occasions some concern among Yeates's circle. They have allowed the intrusion, however, and indeed seem powerless to stop such an exuberant clan.

In this respect their stories show a link to their novels, where so often the listless aristocracy simply gives way before the vital middle class.

Although the social superiors of the McRorys do nothing to stop the latter's rise, they display some insecurity and poor taste of their own when the McRorys first begin affecting their lives. Much of "Sharper Than A Ferret's Tooth" (*Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.*) makes fun of the McRorys by showing their vulgarity. Yeates, Philippa, Sally Knox, Bernard and Cecilia Shute, and Sybil Hervey suffer from the effects of a boating accident and a rainstorm near Temple Braney, the McRorys' home. They are rescued and provided with clothing and lunch by that family. But rather than feeling properly grateful for these ministrations, Yeates and his party, while mouthing thanks to their hosts, make fun among themselves of the expensive garments and lavish food that the McRorys have pressed on them. They regret the prospect of eating with the family, and after the meal Yeates even makes a point of ignoring his host, expressing the foolish belief that this will make "old McRory" feel more comfortable. As John Cronin points out in *Somerville and Ross* (1972), by sneering at their hosts the major and his friends seem vulgar. Rather than finding the story amusing, today's reader is more likely to think of the Anglo-Irish behavior as a lapse in taste.

"The Bosom of the McRorys" (*In Mr. Knox's Country*) also contains some sniping comments about the McRorys' taste and manners. Again, Yeates and his wife socialize only grudgingly, out of a sense of obligation, with the family. Although Yeates suffers some mortification as a result of a prank by the younger McRorys and resolves never to visit Temple Braney again, Philippa actually enjoys dancing with Curly McRory after some initial distress at finding the head of the family as her dinner partner. In addition, the major makes closer acquaintance with the mischievous Larkie McRory, who figures prominently in the following two stories.

In "Put Down One and Carry Two" and "The Comte des Pralines," Larkie's high spirits and friendliness soften Yeates's attitude toward her and, by extension, toward her family. Both stories center around a hunt. The first, which is set the morning after the dinner party with the McRorys, marks a change in the way the narrator regards Larkie. When she attaches herself to him for the duration of the hunt, the burden of her presence at first irks him. But he is gradually won over by her willingness to take chances and by her charm. As the story nears its end, the major is enjoying Larkie's company. His new way of thinking about her continues into the next story, "The Comte des Pralines." Here Larkie shows herself a good sport in more ways than one. When she realizes that Yeates and a few others are playing a practical joke on the other members of the hunt, she willingly becomes a coconspirator. Then, when the hunt becomes serious, she demonstrates great staying power for one with so little experience. By the story's end, which is also almost the end of the series, Yeates accepts Larkie into the world of the hunt, a world dear to him and to both Somerville and Ross.

Many years after the stories were written, the comte de Suzannet offered Somerville a substantial sum for the original manuscripts. The practical Somerville opined that the papers were a "collection of rubbish," but she nevertheless sold them and used the money for her farm overdraft. To the many readers who have enjoyed the stories, the manuscripts are far from rubbish. Few books have inspired so much devotion and appreciation over so many years, and few collections of comic tales have won such critical praise. Flanagan observes that "the *Irish R.M.*" stories are ... miracles of comic exuberance and improvisation in which great literary economy and craft are concealed by an air of infinite leisure." In *The Heart Grown Brutal: The Irish Revolution in Literature from Parnell to the Death of Yeats* (1977) Peter Costello sets the

stories in their proper place: "Somerville and Ross have caught the whole flavor of Ireland in their tales, a light laugh at death's door."

Because Somerville and Ross formed an unusually close relationship both as writers and as friends, many readers and critics have wondered about the nature of their partnership. Within a year of their first meeting, the cousins had embarked on the writing career that would become their main pursuit. Neither woman ever married or became involved in any serious romance with a man, although there is some evidence that, as a nineteen-year-old, Edith was in love with her cousin Hewitt Poole; another cousin, Herbert Greene, proposed to her on a regular basis.

Because Ross lived for many years at Drishane, her collaborator's home, and because their correspondence often takes an affectionate tone, some observers have concluded that Somerville and Ross were lovers. But, while the two women were obviously emotionally close and did in some way love each other, there is no concrete evidence that their relationship ever took a sexual form. In fact, Somerville's family and friends believed that during her friendship with Ross she was, in Lady Violet Powell's words, "unenlightened on the subject of sexual inversion."

Collis, in his 1968 biography of Somerville and Ross, concludes that Somerville felt a "profound distaste" for men and directed her most heartfelt feelings toward women, but he maintains that her emotions were sublimated. Collis indicates that Ross, unlike Somerville, would probably have been able to marry successfully. However, he thinks that her emotional and creative partnership with her cousin took the place of any such relationship and had the additional benefit of giving her "an outlet for her genius." In *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.* (1987), as well as in her 1989 edition of Somerville and Ross's letters, Lewis takes issue with Collis's position, asserting that Collis has misread much of the evidence. Lewis believes that there was no such romantic feeling whatsoever between the cousins and that their avoidance of marriage stemmed from seeing many arranged marriages in which the women were unhappy. In addition, she shows that Somerville was much more of a social being than her cousin, never turning down an invitation to a dance and seeming to enjoy the company of men more than did Ross.

Whatever the depth of feeling between the cousins, their writing clearly benefited from their closeness. In their prose, which C. L. Graves ("The Lighter Side of Irish Life," 1913) calls "the most brilliantly successful example of creative collaboration in our times," no seams are ever apparent. Somerville and Ross often found themselves confronted with questions about how they wrote in partnership, and Somerville's irritation at these queries emerges in a letter to her brother Cameron; it also provides some clues as to why the collaboration was so successful:

The whole "secret" lay in community of tastes, and sympathy as to the point of view and, of course, a certain diversity of gifts and of stock in trade, so that one could and did supplement the other. I am sick of being asked for the key to the mystery, etc. etc. *ad nauseam*.... Why don't they ask me how I write by myself? I could assure them that it is much harder than writing with Martin and much more of a "mystery" to me how I do it.

After Ross's death from a brain tumor on 21 December 1915, Somerville had different questions to answer about collaboration. She and other members of her family had become interested in spiritualism before Ross's death. In September 1912 Jem Barlow, an amateur medium, visited Drishane. She took up residence in Castletownshend the following year, and soon Somerville's Uncle Kendal and cousin Egerton Coghill were joining her for séances. Somerville took a lively interest in the results, but she did not become actively involved until 1916, the year after Ross died. On the evening of 16 June Somerville went to dine with Barlow and took part in a séance designed to communicate with a Colonel Isherwood. When Somerville and Barlow began the

process of automatic writing, however, the author of the script claimed to be Ross, writing: "You and I have not finished our work. Dear, we shall. Be comforted. V.M." Understandably doubtful, Somerville wrote in her diary that night: "Received communication of which I hardly know what to think."

She set aside her initial doubts, however, and came to believe strongly that she could not only communicate but also collaborate with the spirit of her cousin. Because of her grief over Ross's death, Somerville had not attempted to do any writing of her own and had indeed worried that she was not equal to the task. She found encouragement and promises of help in the supposed messages from Martin. With Barlow always acting as medium, she engaged almost daily in "communication" with Martin's spirit. The book that Somerville wrote as a result of this experience, *Irish Memories*, was not a novel or a collection of stories but a selection of essays and remembrances, some written by herself and some by Ross before her death. Somerville continued to demonstrate her faith in the automatic writing by listing Ross as co-author in almost every book she published until her death in 1949.

Yet whether Somerville completely believed in this form of spiritualism is open to some doubt. In a letter to her brother Cameron at the time she was writing *Irish Memories*, she seems to be trying to convince herself of the communication's validity:

She [Ross] is helping me. I am quite sure of it. By suggestion, not by direct writing. Yet I cannot be mistaken and when we are writing (the daily talk that I am now able to have with her), she has often confirmed my own feeling as to which bits she inspired and which originated with me and were touched up by her. Just as always was our practice. It is a very wonderful thing and becomes more so. Anyhow it has changed the world for me.

In any event, the automatic writing helped Somerville move forward. Furthermore, believing that she was in touch with Ross's spirit allayed her grief, allowing her to concentrate on her work. Although she took time to discover her own voice, Somerville went on to produce a daunting quantity of literature. She wrote five novels, the most notable of which is *The Big House of Inver* (1925). *Maria, & Some Other Dogs* (1949), Somerville's last published work, features some slight pieces reminiscent of the *Irish R.M.* stories; Maria is Major Yeates's dog in that series. Partly from a desire to preserve her cousin's work and partly from the need to generate income, Somerville began to gather articles that she and Ross had written separately for various periodicals, along with unpublished pieces. Sometimes she combined these with new pieces or reminiscences of her own. The first volume of this sort was *Irish Memories*. She followed it with *Stray-Aways* (1920), which is chiefly notable for several short stories that were separately authored. Among these is Ross's "The Dog from Doone," which features a supernatural element. This is an interest more usually attributed to Somerville, but for most of her life she was a realistic, practical person. Only after her cousin's death did she become interested in phenomena such as automatic writing.

Somerville also wrote several other volumes of reminiscences as well as more travel books. In 1929, when she was seventy-one, she traveled to the United States to sell some horses. Ever one to combine business with not only pleasure but more business, Somerville managed to do some hunting (from a buggy, not on a horse) and to write a series of articles for *Vogue* describing her experiences. She then worked the pieces into book form, *The States Through Irish Eyes* (1930). Somerville also remained actively involved with the politics of her day. She had been the first president of the Munster Women's Franchise League, a suffrage group that she and Ross had joined in 1910, and she continued to work for woman's rights after Ross's death. Somerville's

position on the Irish political situation was more complex. While Ross had been a staunch unionist, Somerville favored nationalism. Her beliefs frequently put her at odds with others of her class and even with members of her family, so that she often felt torn. In a 1921 letter to Ethel Smyth, Somerville refers to herself as "half-rebel and a Miss-Facing-both-ways." Her brother Boyle shared her Nationalist beliefs, and when he was murdered in 1936 for helping local boys join the English navy, Edith was understandably shaken. She did not blame the local villagers, however, and maintained an optimistic outlook for Ireland's future.

In other respects the 1930s were a source of great satisfaction for Somerville. In 1932 Trinity College, Dublin, offered her an honorary doctorate, which she accepted on condition that Ross's name be included along with hers. In that year Yeats founded the Irish Academy of Letters, which he invited her to join. She attended an academy dinner in 1933, an occasion that heralded a sense of fellowship with other Irish writers; in her own words, "All was peace and love." She gained further recognition in 1941, when the academy awarded her the Gregory Gold Medal for literary excellence. Somerville died on 8 October 1949, having reached the great age of ninety-one. She is buried in the cemetery of Saint Barrahan's Church, Castletownshend, next to her collaborator, cousin, and dearest companion.

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

Books

- *Mark Twain Birthday Book*, by Somerville (London: Remington, 1885).
- *An Irish Cousin*, by Somerville as Geilles Herring and Ross (London: Bentley, 1889; revised edition, London: Longmans, Green, 1903).
- *The Kerry Recruit*, by Somerville (London: Perry, 1889).
- *Naboth's Vineyard*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Blackett, 1891).
- *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Allen, 1893).
- *In the Vine Country*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Allen, 1893).
- *The Real Charlotte*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Ward & Downey, 1894).
- *Beggars on Horseback*, by Somerville and Ross (London & Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1895).
- *The Silver Fox*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1898).
- *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1899; New York: Longmans, Green, 1929).
- *A Patrick's Day Hunt*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Constable, 1902).
- *Slipper's ABC of Foxhunting*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1903).
- *All on the Irish Shore*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1903).
- *Some Irish Yesterdays*, by Somerville and Ross (London & New York: Longmans, Green, 1906).
- *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1908).
- *Dan Russel the Fox*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Methuen, 1911).
- *The Story of the Discontented Little Elephant*, by Somerville (London: Longmans, Green, 1912).
- *In Mr. Knox's Country*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1915).

- *Irish Memories*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1917; New York: Longmans, Green, 1918).
- *Mount Music*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1919; New York: Longmans, Green, 1920).
- *Stray-Aways*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1920).
- *An Enthusiast*, by Somerville (London & New York: Longmans, Green, 1921).
- *Wheel-Tracks*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1923).
- *The Big House of Inver*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Heinemann, 1925; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1925).
- *French Leave*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Heinemann, 1928; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928).
- *The States Through Irish Eyes*, by Somerville (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930; London: Heinemann, 1930).
- *An Incorruptible Irishman*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1932; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932).
- *The Smile and the Tear*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Methuen, 1933).
- *The Sweet Cry of Hounds*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Methuen, 1936).
- *Sarah's Youth*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1938).
- *Records of the Somerville Family, 1174-1940*, by Somerville and Boyle Townshend Somerville (Cork: Guy, 1940).
- *Notions in Garrison*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Methuen, 1941).
- *The Irish R.M. and His Experiences*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928).
- *Happy Days*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Longmans, Green, 1946).
- *Maria, & Some Other Dogs*, by Somerville and Ross (London: Methuen, 1949).

Other

- Somerville and Ross, "A Betrayal of Confidence," in *The Funny-Bone*, edited by Lady Cynthia Asquith (London: Jarrolds, 1928).

Selected Periodical Publications - Uncollected

- Somerville, "Slide No. 42," *Lady's Pictorial* (Christmas 1890).
- Somerville and Ross, "A Regrettable Incident," *Nash's* (November 1909).

Letters

- *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, edited by Gifford Lewis (London: Faber & Faber, 1989).

Papers:

Trinity University, Dublin, holds the manuscripts for works by Somerville and Ross (formerly the Suzannet Collection); their correspondence with their literary agent, J. B. Pinker, and publishers; sketches by Somerville; her correspondence with the comte de Suzannet; and her papers dealing with the Hunt Club of West Carbery, county Cork. Many other Somerville and Ross papers are in the Queen's University of Belfast Library, which has the diaries of both, notebooks, miscellaneous papers, and some of Somerville's correspondence with Ethel Smyth. The mutual correspondence of Somerville and Ross and Ross's correspondence with Lady Augusta Gregory are in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Various branches of the

family also hold some of the correspondence and miscellaneous papers, including a collection at Drishane.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- Elizabeth Hudson, *A Bibliography of the First Editions of the Works of E. OE. Somerville and Martin Ross*, with notes by Somerville (New York: Sporting Gallery & Bookshop, 1942).
- Geraldine Cummins, *Dr. E. OE. Somerville: A Biography* (London: Dakers, 1952).
- Maurice Collis, *Somerville and Ross: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968).
- Violet Powell, *The Irish Cousins* (London: Heinemann, 1970).
- Gifford Lewis, *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R. M.* (Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin, 1987).
- Sir Patrick Coghill, "Opening Address," in *Somerville and Ross: A Symposium* (Belfast: Queen's University of Belfast, 1968), pp. 5-7.
- Coghill, "Somerville and Ross," *Hermathena*, no. 79 (May 1952): 47-60.
- Peter Costello, *The Heart Grown Brutal: The Irish Revolution in Literature from Parnell to the Death of Yeats* (Totowa, N. J.: Roman & Littlefield, 1977).
- John Cronin, *Somerville and Ross* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1972).
- Thomas Flanagan, "The Big House of Ross-Drishane," *Kenyon Review*, 28 (January 1966): 54-78.
- C. L. Graves, "The Lighter Side of Irish Life," *Quarterly Review*, 219, no. 436 (1913): 26-47.
- Wayne Hall, *Shadowy Heroes: Irish Literature of the 1890's* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1980).
- B. G. MacCarthy, "E. OE. Somerville and Martin Ross," *Studies*, 34 (June 1945): 183-194.
- Roger McHugh and Maurice Harmon, *A Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1982).
- Sean McMahan, "John Bull's Other Island: A Consideration of *The Real Charlotte* by Somerville & Ross," *Eire-Ireland*, 3 (Winter 1968): 119-135.
- Hilary Mitchell, "Somerville and Ross: Amateur to Professional," in *Somerville and Ross: A Symposium*, pp. 20-37.
- Conor Cruse O'Brien, *Writers and Politics* (New York: Pantheon, 1965).
- Frank O'Connor, "Somerville and Ross," *Irish Times*, 15 December 1945, p. 4.
- Donal O'Donnell, "The Novels and Stories of Somerville and Ross," *Irish Writing*, no. 30 (March 1955): 7-15.
- Harold Orel, "Some Elements of Truth in the Short Stories of Somerville and Ross: An Appreciation," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 30, no. 1 (1987): 17-25.
- Ann Power, "The Big House of Somerville and Ross," *Dubliner*, 3 (Spring 1964): 43-53.
- V. S. Pritchett, "The Irish R.M.," in his *The Living Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), pp. 267-291.

- Hilary Robinson, *Somerville and Ross: A Critical Appreciation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980).
- Katharine Tynan, "Violet Martin (Martin Ross) and E. OE. Somerville," *Bookman* (London), 50 (June 1916): 65-66.
- Cresap Watson, "The Collaboration of Edith Somerville and Violet Martin," Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity College, Dublin, 1953.
- Ann Owens Weekes, *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990).

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Cowart, Claire Denelle. "Edith Somerville." *British Short-Fiction Writers, 1880-1914: The Realist Tradition*. Ed. William B. Thesing. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 135. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 26 Aug. 2014.