

Edited by Alexander G. Gonzalez

Irish Women Writers

An A-to-Z Guide



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MARIA EDGEWORTH

(1767–1849)

Claire Denelle Cowart

BIOGRAPHY

Maria Edgeworth was born in Oxfordshire, England. Her Anglo-Irish father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, eventually became the dominant influence in Edgeworth's life, but she saw little of him during her early childhood years in England. She spent her first five years with her mother, Anna Maria Elers, at her mother's family home, Black Bourton, while her father traveled extensively. Her parents' marriage was not happy, and when Edgeworth's mother died in 1773, her father remarried after only four months.

Richard Edgeworth's second marriage, to Honora Sneyd, brought significant changes to his daughter's life. Scholars Marilyn Butler and Ann Weekes have argued convincingly that these early years affected both the development of Edgeworth's character and the course of her writing career. Edgeworth's father and stepmother were devoted to each other and paid little attention to Maria, his second child and only daughter at that time. When they took her to Ireland to visit Edgeworthstown, her father's estate in County Longford, she became very difficult to control. In her biography of Edgeworth, Marilyn Butler describes an episode in which the child Maria expressed a desire for her own death, saying "I'm very unhappy" (quoted by Butler, 47). Both Richard and Honora had studied theories of childhood education and behavior, but they failed to recognize the six-year-old's difficulties in adjusting to her new circumstances. After two years they sent her to boarding school in London.

During her school years Edgeworth made a determined effort to please her father and stepmother. She corresponded faithfully with both, expressing a strong desire for approval and a wish to modify her behavior to be more acceptable to them. After his second wife's death, in 1780, Richard Edgeworth married Elizabeth Sneyd, Honora's sister, who proved kinder, and Edgeworth's situation improved noticeably. In 1782, when the family returned to Edgeworthstown, she made herself indispensable to her father as his secretary and bookkeeper and also began teaching the younger children in

her father's growing family. Richard Edgeworth married four times, fathering a total of twenty-two children, Maria's third stepmother, Frances Beaufort, was a year younger than Maria herself, and the two became close friends.

When Edgeworth was fourteen years old, her father began to give her writing assignments; one of her first tasks was to write "an inquiry into the causes of poverty in Ireland" (Weekes, 36). She returned to this theme in her Irish novels, but most of her early writing focused on education for children. Her first publication was *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), followed the year after with *The Parent's Assistant* (1796). Two years later came *Practical Education*, cowritten with her father. Edgeworth wrote educational primers throughout her career, filling these books with illustrative stories about children whose moral choices are rewarded or punished according to how deserving they are. Interspersed with these educational works were "tales," such as the very popular *Castle Rackrent* (1800), and fictional works set in England, such as *Belinda* (1801) and *Leonora* (1806); these last two are modeled on the "novel of manners" and usually criticize fashionable life.

Her early works were first published anonymously, but Edgeworth did not remain unknown for long, and when she traveled she received a great deal of attention. Although most of her adult life was spent at Edgeworthstown, she occasionally made extended visits to England, Scotland, and the Continent. An especially significant journey took place in 1802, when Richard Edgeworth took his family abroad. In Paris, Edgeworth met Abraham Edelcrantz, a Swedish diplomat who proposed to her in January of 1803. Although some evidence exists that her father hoped she would marry, Edgeworth refused the proposal, claiming reluctance to leave her home and family. At the time, Edgeworth was thirty-three and Edelcrantz was forty-six. Neither ever married, but references in Edgeworth's letters and journals make it clear that she kept track of developments in his life.

Her fame as a writer, plus her father's involvement in the Enlightenment movement of eighteenth-century Britain, put Edgeworth in contact with leading intellectual and literary figures of the time. These include Elizabeth Hamilton, Lord Byron, Etienne Dumont, Thomas Malthus, and others. In 1823 she traveled to Scotland and met Sir Walter Scott, whose own novels were strongly influenced by her fiction. Their friendship endured, and Scott visited her in Edgeworthstown in 1825.

After the death of Edgeworth's father in 1825, her brother Lovell began managing the family property but was not successful. With the backing of the rest of her family, Edgeworth took control from the mid-1820s until 1839. During these years she concentrated on running the estate. She continued to write, although not quite so prolifically as before, and avoided fiction, with the exception of one late novel, *Helen* (1834). When the Great Famine struck in 1846, Edgeworth applied herself to the relief efforts with vigor and practicality. She sent out successful appeals for assistance to England and the United States, provided grain as a substitute crop for potato farmers in her area, and supplied many of the poor with shoes. In May of 1849, after a short illness, Maria Edgeworth died at her home in Edgeworthstown.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Many of Edgeworth's books for adult audiences were labeled "tales" by the author, who thought that her father disapproved of novels and would prefer all her writing to make a moral point. The first book she composed without her father's input was *Castle*

Rackrent, An Hibernian Tale: Taken from the Facts, and from the Manners of the Irish Squires, Before the Year 1782. For feedback on this book, Edgeworth went to her aunt Ruxton and her cousin Sophy. The freedom and encouragement she experienced in their company led her to experiment with technique and content in this short novel detailing the history of the Rackrents, Anglo-Irish landlords who ruin their estate through four generations of riotous living, neglect, and poor judgment.

Castle Rackrent is narrated by Thady Quirk, a long-time retainer of the Rackrent family who presents himself as a trusted and admiring servant of the family. Gradually the reader realizes that his judgments are often faulty, and that the Rackrents have been failures as landlords. Thady's dialect and idioms, combined with the irony of his observations, make this character one of the most memorable in Edgeworth's fiction. Another unusual feature of the novel is the glossary with explanatory notes that Edgeworth appends to the story. These explanations of the vernacular English spoken by Irishmen demonstrate both Edgeworth's interest in language and her preoccupation with improving understanding between Ireland and England.

Another theme of *Castle Rackrent*, the Big House in decay, became a recurring subject for Anglo-Irish writers who followed Edgeworth. For Edgeworth herself, the relationship between landlord and tenants had been significant since her early days of assisting her father at Edgeworthstown. Her belief that a landlord owes a responsibility to the land and its tenants derives from her father's teaching and example and is explored further in her other Irish fiction.

In *Ennui* (1809), the plot revolves around two young men who are exchanged at birth, so that the supposed Earl of Glenthorn is in fact the son of the true earl's old nurse. The false earl has been living in England for most of his life and suffers from "ennui" as a result of his empty, meaningless lifestyle. A visit from his old nurse, Ellinor, prompts him to visit Ireland, where a series of encounters and conversations with Irishmen, visiting Englishmen, and his Scots agent prompt him to revise both his own character and his opinions of Ireland. After some plot twists involving the 1798 rebellion, Glenthorn learns the truth of his birth and hands the property over to his foster-brother. The plot ends happily when a wiser and better Glenthorn regains the property through marriage.

Another landlord is at the center of *The Absentee* (1812). In this "tale," Lord Colambre returns from London to Ireland; like Glenthorn, he moves from the unimportant round of fashionable life into social responsibility. In the course of traveling throughout Ireland in an attempt to learn about his own nation, Colambre encounters some properties as ruined as Castle Rackrent and others as successfully managed as Edgeworthstown. Upon discovering that his own estate has fallen into a deplorable condition through the mismanagement of a corrupt agent, he convinces his family to return home from England and become responsible landlords.

Ennui and *The Absentee* were originally published as part of Edgeworth's series, *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809–12), which uses didactic methods similar to those in Edgeworth's illustrative stories for children. The central male characters both learn how to be praiseworthy landlords from characters who practice the theories Maria Edgeworth learned from her father. Ireland itself also becomes a subject of the novels as Glenthorn and Colambre travel throughout the country and interact with vivid characters drawn from all levels of society. Edgeworth's ability to engage readers with her depiction of the country inspired Sir Walter Scott and others to follow her example and write their own "national" novels; Scott was particularly inspired by *The Absentee*.

Ormond (1817), the last of Edgeworth's four novels of Irish life, shares the themes and basic premise of *Ennui* and *The Absentee*, but is longer and more complex. Like her previous heroes, Harry Ormond learns by observation. However, he also participates more fully in Irish life by living for long periods with his two O'Shane uncles: Ulick, a politician, who is urban and sophisticated, and Corny, whose domain is the isolated Black Islands, where he lives like a tribal chieftain from Ireland's feudal past. Harry finds traits to admire in each man but realizes that Corny has given up the benefits of civilization and that Ulick has been corrupted. A third role model is Sir Herbert Annaly, an English-educated landlord whose main concern is justice. After the deaths of Ulick and Corny, Harry marries Annaly's daughter and returns to the Black Islands, resolved to run them in the responsible, enlightened manner he has learned from Annaly. This novel shows the influence of the Romantic movement in literature, particularly in the primitive, natural appeal of the Black Islands.

The didacticism of the novels is directed to the English as well as to the Anglo-Irish, as in many ways Edgeworth defends and justifies the Irish way of life to an English audience. Her *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), cowritten with Richard Edgeworth, delivers a similar message: to explain the meanings behind Irish expressions that have been taken to be blunders, or "bulls," by the English. In the process, the authors use stories, often humorous, to suggest that the English attitude toward the Irish is both unjust and ignorant, in terms of politics as well as language.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Initial reaction to Maria Edgeworth's Irish writing came in the form of positive reviews and praise from her contemporaries. Sir Walter Scott cited her Irish novels as the inspiration for his own national literature: "I felt that something might be attempted for my own country of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland" (Scott's preface to *Waverley* [Franklin Center, PA: Franklin Library, 1981], p. 419). William Carleton appreciated her efforts to improve English opinions of the Irish: "When the Irishman was made to stand forth as the butt of ridicule to his neighbours, the first that undertook his vindication was Maria Edgeworth" (iv). Some evidence suggests that the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev also was influenced by Edgeworth.

Although most critics regard *Castle Rackrent* as Edgeworth's finest work, interpretations of the novel vary, particularly regarding the novel's unreliable narrator, Thady Quirk. In his introduction to the 1964 edition, George Watson describes Thady as "this absurdly loyal family retainer" (xxi). Although Thomas Flanagan acknowledges that Thady has "his own wry view of the matter," he also states that Thady "does not fully understand the story which he is telling" (77). Later critics have viewed Thady as more complex. In Alan Warner's view, "Thady is not consistent, and his behaviour is certainly ambiguous" (47). James Newcomer argues that a conniving Thady uses "guile . . . to turn his employers' weaknesses to his own advantage" (*Maria Edgeworth*, 66). Terry Eagleton hypothesizes that Thady may be fooling not only the readers of the novel but also the "Editor," Edgeworth herself: "In this sense, curiously, it is Maria Edgeworth who is being taken for a ride by one of her own creations" (167). John Cronin is among several critics with a more neutral view; he sees Thady as "neither ingenious nor malign," but "a magnificently realized slave, a terrifying vision of the results of colonial misrule" (36).

Edgeworth's use of the Irish vernacular also has sparked disagreement. According to Brian Hollingworth, "Edgeworth's treatment of the vernacular in the Irish tales remains deeply ambivalent . . . [as] we cannot find an unqualified endorsement of the vernacular voice" (220). Other critics view Edgeworth's use of language in *Castle Rackrent* as an effective means of "revealing a society" to her readers (Kiely, 5).

Much discussion has centered around Edgeworth's attitudes on political and class issues. One of the first critics to characterize her as a colonialist was Daniel Corkery: "It was natural for the Ascendancy folk of this second period to write in this colonial manner, for what are all their books but travellers' tales?" (8). Later critics have approached Edgeworth's Irish novels from a postcolonialist perspective. Seamus Deane sees *Castle Rackrent* as "a demonstration of the ruin which an irresponsible aristocracy brings upon itself and upon its descendants" (92). Mary Jean Corbett points out that the author herself experienced colonized status. Brian Hollingworth concludes "that Edgeworth by birth, breeding, social role and conviction, remains a committed member of the Irish establishment [Anglo-Irish Protestant]" (218). Others find conflict within Edgeworth's own authorial stance. Eagleton suggests that "*Castle Rackrent* can be read as embodying an ideological conflict we can discern elsewhere in Edgeworth, between the values of a vital if anarchic ruling class which is able, whatever its moral shabbiness, to secure the allegiance of its underlings, and the rational virtues of a more sober social order whose austere utility will win it few ardent adherents" (163). Robert Tracy's analysis of political and social attitudes in Edgeworth's fiction concludes that Edgeworth's instincts as a writer and her awareness of the flaws of the Anglo-Irish "impel her toward . . . an endorsement of Irish tradition and identity," but her grounding in her father's principles prevents her from finally making such an endorsement (9). Detailed discussions of Edgeworth's reaction to major political events of her time, such as the 1798 rebellion and the 1800 Act of Union, can be found in articles by many critics, including Brian Hollingworth, Michael Hurst, Mitzi Myers, and Tom Dunne. Additional analysis of Edgeworth's national and political attitudes, as embedded in the *Essay on Irish Bulls*, can be found in articles by Martin Croghan and Marilyn Butler.

A feminist reading has been applied to Edgeworth's texts by a number of recent critics. Both Ann Weekes and Terry Eagleton point out that Thady Quirk, in *Castle Rackrent*, has a feminine function in the novel; as a servant, he is subject to his masters in much the same way that women of the time period were subject to men. Weekes also argues that Edgeworth continually draws attention to the marriages in *Castle Rackrent* to show that the Rackrent men fail not only as landlords but as husbands. Bonnie Blackwell objects to earlier critics' defining Edgeworth in terms of her father's influence on her and delves at length into the relationship in *Ennui* between the main character, Glenthorn, and the Irish wet nurse, Ellinor, who turns out to be his mother. Marilyn Butler also discusses *Ennui* from a feminist standpoint, pointing out that in the novel "three powerful women, each representing a different strand of the Irish people in history, capture [Glenthorn] and transform him" (283). Additionally, a special issue of *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (31, no. 3) was devoted to Edgeworth in the spring of 2002.

While most modern critics agree on the originality and artistic worth of *Castle Rackrent*, they disagree on the merit of Edgeworth's other Irish fiction. Some dismiss everything but *Castle Rackrent* as didactic and humorless. In the late 1990s and early part of the twenty-first century, however, several critics have reexamined the later texts. Marilyn Butler, Katie Trumpener, and Bonnie Blackwell have found value in *Ennui*, which many previous analysts dismissed as overly preachy. Butler asserts that *Ennui*

is "a story with strong characters and scenes, and a foray into magic realism and the hidden Ireland" (280). *The Absentee* has advocates in Robert Tracy and W.J. McCormack. *Ormond* is much admired by Flanagan, Butler, and a number of other critics for its strong characters and dramatic scenes. Flanagan praises *Ormond* as Edgeworth's "finest work after *Castle Rackrent*" and the O'Shanes as her "most brilliant creations" (93). These later novels have also been examined for their Romantic elements by some critics, including Siobhan Kilfeather and Katie Trumpener.

Despite the wide range of critical writing on Edgeworth available, great potential exists for further interpretations of her work. As W.J. McCormack writes in the introduction to Edgeworth in *The Field Day Anthology*, full justice has not yet been done "to the questions raised by her exemplary fiction" (*Field Day*, vol. 1, 1013).

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Irish Women Writers

An A-to-Z Guide

Edited by Alexander G. Gonzalez

Ireland has an especially lively literary tradition, and works by Irish writers have long been recognized as interesting and influential. While male writers have received the bulk of the critical attention given to Irish literature, contemporary women writers are among the most widely read Irish authors. This reference overviews the lives and works of Irish women writers active in a range of genres and periods. Each entry includes a brief biography, a discussion of major works and themes, a survey of the writer's critical reception, and a list of works by and about the author. The volume closes with a selected, general bibliography.

Included are roughly 75 alphabetically arranged entries written by more than 35 expert contributors. Among the writers discussed are:

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