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MARIA EDGEWORTH: NOVELIST AS A SOCIAL
HISTORIAN OF EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY IRELAND

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Patricia Neumann Shreves

May 1972

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To my husband and children . . .

Accepted for the faculty of The Graduate College of the
University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	iii
CHAPTER I. MARIA EDGEWORTH'S IRELAND	1

Introduction--England gets involved in Irish affairs--
Henry II--England's interest in Ireland fluctuates--
Internal disorder--Ireland under the Tudors--Conquest
and colonization--Protestant ascendancy--Penal laws--
Mid-eighteenth century Anglo-Irish political arrange-
ments--Resulting hostilities--American and French
revolutions influence Irishmen--Nationalism--Patriots
and public opinion--The Volunteers--Henry Grattan--
Lord North and trade restrictions--Rockingham and
legislative independence--Insurrection of 1798--United
Irishmen--Act of Union, 1801--The Catholic cause--
Impact of Anglo-Irish political system on society and
economics--Land monopoly--Absenteeism--Middlemen--
Tenants--Absence of a middle class--Industry and trade
crippled--Economic distress--Peasantry--Potato crop--
Famine--Over-population--Emigration--A poor law

CHAPTER II. MARIA EDGEWORTH	26
---------------------------------------	----

Edgeworth family's Irish connections--Maria's father--
Maria's mother--Maria's early life--Maria moves to
Ireland--Edgeworth's dynamic personality influences
the family--Father and daughter, companions--Brothers
and sisters--Family illness--Maria's correspondents--
Intellectual friends--Fashionable entertainments--
Pastimes and pleasures--Maria's travels--Friends in
France--A marriage proposal--Maria, "Assistant Manager"
of Edgeworth estate--Edgeworth tenants--Maria accepts
her father's business principles--And his political
views--No religious prejudice--Maria's interest in
reading--A woman of the "world"--Maria and Edgeworth,
co-authors?--Castle Rackrent, a unique story--Contrast
her favorite device--"Essay on Irish Bulls"--The Irish
stories

CHAPTER III. IRELAND'S "FASHIONABLE SOCIETY" AS PORTRAYED IN THE IRISH STORIES	62
---	----

Introduction--Maria's "heroes"--Lord Colambre--
Absentees--Qualifications of a hero--Earl of Glenthorn--
Marriage of convenience--Maria, a Utilitarian--Harry
Ormond--"Maria's anti-heroes"--Rack-renting--Weaknesses
and vices of ruling class--An election--Old Thady's
attitude toward ruling class--The Murtaghs, oppressive
landlords--Lawlessness prevails--More absentees--An
Irish schemer--Irresponsible politicians--Racial
prejudice--Maria reprimanded for prejudice--A glib
Irishman--A Catholic landlord--Shallow Irish ladies--
Noble Irish ladies--Nationalism--A weak and reckless
aristocracy--A solution?--Conclusion

CHAPTER IV. IRISH COMMONERS, IRISH PEASANTS AND IRISH SCENES	95
---	----

Wealth and poverty--Penal laws--Informers--Impact of
codes on Irish Catholic gentry--On Irish peasantry--
Land agents and middlemen--Burke, a "good" agent--
"Old Nick" and Dennis Garraghty, "bad" agents--
Disinterested landlords--Irish servant class--Results
of their close association with aristocracy, Thady
and Jason Quirk--Thady, the faithful steward--His
loyalty--His "honesty"--His warm-hearted nature--
Shrewdness of Irish peasantry--Ellinor--Compassion
of the peasantry--Irish fairies and folklore--Life
style of the lower classes--A benevolent landlord--
Procrastination an Irish trait--Change of life style
of peasantry difficult to accomplish--Cotters--The
elite tenant farmers--Peasant women and marriage--
Dublin--The countryside--Irish "parks"--Irish scenes:
funerals and wakes--"Public houses"--Illegal whiskey
distillers--A ride in an Irish carriage--The "great-
coat"--Lady Bluemantles and "party" men--The potato--
"Killing is no murder"--Conclusion

CHAPTER V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	132
---	-----

BIBLIOGRAPHY	146
------------------------	-----

PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to call the attention of present day historians to the importance of Maria Edgeworth's "Irish novels." Miss Edgeworth's significance in the field of literature has long been acknowledged. However, she is also entitled to recognition as a social historian because of the content of her novels, especially those dealing with Ireland. These novels accurately depict the social situation and life styles of the various classes of early nineteenth century Irishmen. This study begins with a brief survey of the early history of Ireland and a review of the Anglo-Irish political arrangements of Maria's day. A consideration of those aspects of Maria's life which qualified her to write about all classes of Irish society follows: an examination of the various aspects of Irish life and character as they are portrayed in the Irish novels completes the study.

The writer wishes to gratefully acknowledge the guidance and criticism of her advisor, Professor A. Stanley Trickett; the assistance of her friend and proof-reader, Lois Skog; and the patience and consideration shown by her family during the writing of this thesis.

CHAPTER I

MARIA EDGEWORTH'S IRELAND

Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) was an author and fiction writer who used the novel as a vehicle to convey the patterns of the social customs of early nineteenth century Ireland. While it is true that the setting for most of her stories is in England, in the several novels which are set in Ireland, Maria made a noteworthy contribution to the study of Irish social history. Her novels also contain an obvious didactic quality because she wished to point the way to correcting the social ills of Ireland. While Miss Edgeworth made no attempt to consider all of the complex political and religious problems of early nineteenth century Ireland, the modern reader of today can better appreciate many aspects of her Irish novels if he possesses at least minimal knowledge with respect to how the English became involved in Irish affairs; the arrangements of the Anglo-Irish political system at the beginning of the nineteenth century; the strides Irishmen took toward freeing themselves of the detrimental aspects of English influence during Maria's lifetime; and the social and economic problems Irishmen were faced with during this period.

The political, religious, social, and economic systems of "Maria Edgeworth's Ireland" developed, or evolved, as the result of centuries of English involvement in Irish affairs. The patriot, Daniel O'Connell, began his account of this relationship by stating, "The English dominion

in Ireland commenced in the year 1172."¹ In truth, Pope Adrian IV had conferred the dominion of Ireland on King Henry II of England in the Bull Laudabiliter some years earlier,² but it was not until 1172, while Henry was in Ireland, that he established an Irish policy and made an attempt to bring the island under his control.

Henry was prompted to make this visit to Ireland when the power of an English adventurer, the Earl of Pembroke, Richard of Clare, better known as "Strongbow," rapidly increased. Originally, Strongbow was invited to Ireland by the Irish chieftain, Dermot MacMurrough, who asked his assistance during a period of warfare with a rival chieftain. Once in Ireland, however, Strongbow married MacMurrough's daughter, Eva; upon the sudden death of MacMurrough, Strongbow asserted his right as his successor. Strongbow's claim, however, was not legal because, while MacMurrough had no direct male heirs, he did have a legal successor in his brother's son, Murtaugh. In defense of his claim, Murtaugh formed an alliance with another chieftain, O'Connor; but the combined forces of the two were not strong enough to defeat Strongbow. In the meantime, Henry became jealous of Strongbow's success in Ireland, but at an appropriate moment, the rebel crossed over to England and surrendered his possessions before he incurred the wrath of the King.

¹Daniel O'Connell, M. P., A Memoir on Ireland Native and Saxon (Port Washington, N. Y./London: Kennikat Press, 1843, Reissued, 1970), p. 1. Hereafter cited as O'Connell, Memoir.

²David C. Douglas, George W. Greenway, eds., English Historical Documents 1042-1189 (vol. II; New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), II, 776-77.

O'Connor was still in the field, however, and Henry was forced to act. He crossed over to Ireland, and soon after, he formed an Irish policy.

Henry's policy was aimed at "establishing conformity in doctrine and discipline between the Church of Ireland and that of England," and at obtaining recognition from the Irish chieftain, O'Connor, who was the most powerful among those few chieftains who refused to acknowledge Henry's feudal superiority.³

In the second objective, Henry's policy failed; and he was therefore prompted to take a new approach to the Irish problem. Henry announced his intention of transferring the dominion of Ireland to his youngest son, John. He was determined to one day make him King of Ireland. By 1185, Henry considered John mature enough to become acquainted with his dominion. The King ordered his son to cross over to Ireland for a visit. The reluctant "King John," accompanied by an equally discontent contingent of "youthful companions," spent eight months in Ireland--a visit which was marred by the unruly behavior of the young men. More important than their misconduct, however, is the fact that John generously bestowed gifts upon these men in the form of tracts of land in Munster and Connaught.⁴ Thus, within thirteen years of Henry II's visit to Ireland, the English Crown began the process of becoming involved in the affairs of the Irish Church, and of "confiscating"

³Robert Dunlop, Ireland From the Earliest Times to the Present Day (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 29-32. Hereafter cited as Dunlop, Ireland.

⁴Ibid., pp. 32-34.

Irish lands.

This process continued for centuries, although at various times the English Crown was either too involved in its own affairs or it lacked sufficient interest in the country to maintain an effective government in Ireland. At best, the administration of the Crown, which was centered in Dublin, extended only to the surrounding territory, the area which came to be known as the Pale. While the rest of the country was nominally under the authority of the Crown, it was actually divided into fifty or sixty regions, each one nominally independent under the rule of a chieftain or an Anglo-Norman noble. When the occasion demanded it, these petty rulers submitted to the Crown; otherwise, they conducted their own affairs, "made war or peace" as they saw fit, and ignored the central authority. Disorder arising out of endemic warfare among the chieftains, and diverse political arrangements, severely limited the economic and political development of Ireland.⁵

By the time the first Tudor monarch ascended the English throne, one of the great Anglo-Norman families--the FitzGerald of Kildare--had gained supremacy in eastern and southeastern Ireland. Henry VII did not immediately challenge the strength of the Kildare's, however, because it was his policy to rule Ireland as economically as possible so long as the Irish did not threaten the security of England. Even though the King knew the head of the Kildare family to be a Yorkist supporter, Henry

⁵J. C. Beckett, The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923 (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 14-15. Hereafter cited as Beckett, Modern Ireland.

allowed the Earl to rule Ireland because he could do so with little expense to the Crown. When Kildare's loyalty to the Yorkist party interfered with his duty to the Crown, Henry removed him from office and detained him in England until the crisis passed. In the meantime, Henry sent Sir Edward Poyning to Ireland as his deputy. In an effort to prevent the Irish parliament from becoming a "mere machine for registering Kildare's decrees" or those of any powerful personality who should come forward in future, Poyning and the Irish parliament enacted legislation which prohibited the summoning of a parliament in Ireland without the knowledge and consent of the King; it also prohibited any measures being submitted to the Irish parliament until such measures had been approved by King and Council in England. Once Henry's authority in Ireland was buttressed by Poyning's Law, and his Crown in England secured, he allowed Kildare to return to Ireland and to resume the task of ruling the country.⁶

A comparable situation occurred during the reign of Henry VIII. This time, the Kildare family was in league with the Spanish King, Charles I, who had rallied their support in a crusade against the schismatical King Henry VIII. Like his father before him, Henry failed to initiate a decisive policy in Ireland until England's security was threatened. Henry's crisis was not as easily resolved as was the Yorkist episode during his father's reign. The threat of a conspiracy between the followers of Kildare and those of Charles of Spain forced Henry to

⁶Dunlop, Ireland, pp. 57-58.

remove the Kildare family from power in Ireland. Incensed over their dismissal, the Kildares led an insurrection in 1534 and quickly overran the English Pale. Forced into action, Henry conducted a major campaign which continued at intervals until 1540. Annihilation of the male members of the Kildare family, followed by a submissive Irish Parliament which accepted the ecclesiastical legislation of the English Reformation Parliament, added to the significance of the Crown's military victory. The spoil was distributed among the loyal followers of the Crown, and the destruction of the religious houses got underway. For a time, Ireland was at peace.⁷

During Elizabeth I's reign, however, intermittent insurrections prompted her to put aside the Tudor principle of economy in Ireland. The increasing threat of Spanish intervention in Ireland necessitated careful supervision of particularly vulnerable areas, such as the coastal province of Munster. When an uprising did occur in this area, it was quickly suppressed; and the then popular idea of planting a colony in a conquered territory was implemented in Munster. Even though the number of Englishmen who settled in this province fell short of the desired goal, the plantation did mark an advance of royal authority. Recognition of the Crown gradually diffused, and by the 1590's the only significant barrier to the expansion of royal authority was the isolated province of Ulster. Here, the rebels were led by the powerful O'Neill family. Outwardly, Hugh O'Neill made a show of loyalty

⁷Beckett, Modern Ireland, pp. 16-18.

to the Crown, but secretly he trained his forces against the day when the Ulster men would openly challenge the power of the Crown. In 1595, O'Neill's forces struck. The early victories of the rebels assured their defeat, because Elizabeth then employed the full military strength necessary to conquer the rebels.⁸

With the fall of O'Neill's Ulster forces, the Tudor monarchs completed the conquest of Ireland.⁹ It was left to the Stuart and Puritan governments to further implement colonization, thus expanding the population of non-Irish Protestant aristocracy within Ireland. The most significant wave of colonization followed the Cromwellian Act of Settlement in 1652, an Act which literally gave all of Ireland, except the province of Connaught, to "English and Scots Protestant landowners." A further stipulation of the settlement ordered the Irish to either renounce their religion, or to remove themselves to the Connaught province. Regardless of which of these alternatives the Irishman chose, he was destined to lose, for he must forfeit either his land or his religion. The provisions of the Act were never fully realized, but a substantial growth in plantations did occur. Both the displaced and the "converted" segments of the native population looked with hatred upon the power which had so drastically altered their lives.¹⁰

New causes for resentment were periodically forced upon the Irish.

⁸Ibid., pp. 21-23. ⁹Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰Patrick O'Farrell, Ireland's English Question: Anglo-Irish Relations 1534-1970 (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 36-38. Hereafter cited as O'Farrell, Ireland's English Question.

The year 1691 marks the beginning of the period known in Irish history as the Protestant Ascendancy, a period which lasted until approximately the time Maria Edgeworth was born. In this year, 1691, an English Act of Parliament brought a severe political disability against Catholics in Ireland by closing the Irish Parliament to all those who refused to take an oath renouncing their belief in Transubstantiation. At this point, Catholics in Ireland were not denied the elective franchise, but in 1727 the Irish Parliament (a misnomer, since by that time it largely comprised English and Scots landowners) did deny them this privilege.¹¹

As the Catholics sought to evade these Penal Laws, the codes were expanded until the despicable laws soon came to control nearly every aspect of their lives. Aside from the disabilities mentioned above, a Catholic layman could not educate his children at a seminary. The professions of lawyer, schoolmaster, magistrate, justice of the peace, and any office under the Crown were closed to him. He could not become a member of a trade-guild or a corporation; and should he engage in trade, he was restricted to having no more than two apprentices in his employ. Engaging in the manufacture of any type of weapons, and carrying arms were also forbidden practices.

Intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants could become a risk for both parties. Upon marrying a Catholic, a Protestant woman must forfeit all property valued at 500£ or more. In the event a

¹¹Dunlop, Ireland, pp. 129-30. Daniel O'Connell's Memoir is an account of the English transgressions against Irishmen of the Roman Catholic faith.

Protestant wife wished to sue her Catholic husband for separate maintenance, she could do so with the assurance that she would retain custody of the children. Children who became Protestants automatically passed out of the control of their Catholic father, and the eldest son could deprive his father of the bulk of his estate if he so desired. The Catholic man's property was also controlled by the Penal Codes which set forth separate laws under which he might inherit or bequeath his property. Plagued with the vicious actions of the spy and the informer, the Catholic in Ireland found little respite during his life. Even in death, he could not escape the Penal Laws, for the sacred burial places of his ancestors were denied him as a final resting place.¹²

The Penal Laws were an outgrowth of the Anglo-Irish political arrangement which, having itself changed from time to time, permitted a steady increase in the Crown's authority in Ireland. The Anglo-Irish political system, as it was during the years 1760-1800, consisted of an executive branch of government, a two-house parliament which represented the landed proprietors who controlled the majority of the borough constituencies, and an inequitable and corrupt electoral system. As the executive head of the Irish government, the King had greater power in Ireland than he did in England because very few specific legislative restrictions were placed on the authority of the Crown in Ireland. Those few restrictions which were defined by legislation originated in the "English, rather than the Irish parliament." The King was also in a

¹²Dunlop, Ireland, pp. 131-32.

stronger financial position in Ireland than he was in England because the perpetual nature of the hereditary grants of revenues given to the King came to be looked upon as the King's "private property;" originally, however, these revenues were granted for specific purposes. The King was also the administrative head of the Irish army, and the "chief governor" of the church in Ireland. With him originated the final decisions to bestow tokens of gratitude to "deserving" politicians in the form of places, pensions, and peerages.¹³

The Lord Lieutenant, who represented the King in Ireland, did not always reside in that country when the Irish parliament was not in session. During the intervening months, while the Lord Lieutenant was out of the country, the government was in the hands of three Irish politicians known as the Lords Justices. These men were referred to as the "undertakers" because it was their duty to "undertake the King's business in return for a generous share of administrative patronage." Those justices in office during this period were frequently motivated by personal aggrandizement, and they overstepped the boundaries of their power. By 1771, government by undertakers proved to be ineffective, and the system was abolished in favor of a British executive--a Lord Lieutenant and a Chief Secretary--who would reside in Ireland, but who would be "directly dependent" upon the cabinet in England.¹⁴ From this point forward, this

¹³Edith M. Johnston, Great Britain and Ireland 1760-1800: A Study in Political Administration (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), pp. 12-15. Hereafter cited as Johnston, Great Britain and Ireland.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 16-17.

arm of government became more effective, and consequently its powers were expanded.

The most notable expansion of executive power during this period was that manifested in the centralization of administrative and political power in the hands of the Chief Secretary. This office, in its administrative duties, became the equation of Secretary of State for Ireland; and in its political responsibilities, it became the equation of the Leader of the Irish House of Commons.¹⁵ Until 1777, this office controlled both the civil and military affairs of Ireland; but during this year, these two branches of government were segregated, with two Under-Secretaries each taking charge of one branch. Aside from these departments, there was also the office of private Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant and that of Second Secretary. However, the Second Secretarial office, created to take care of civil affairs in Munster and Ulster and some routine military business, was abolished in 1777 when the civil and military affairs were segregated.¹⁶

As set forth in Poyning's Law in 1495, the administrative policy of the government in Ireland was determined by the King and cabinet in England. While each country had a cabinet, and each one consisted of elite members selected from the larger bodies of the privy councils of the respective countries, their duties were not similar. The English cabinet determined the policy for Ireland; but the Irish cabinet, known as the King's Servants, was supposed to put these policies into operation

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 39-40. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 46.

in Ireland.¹⁷ While Poyning's Law was originally intended to pacify the colonists in Ireland, it contained the seeds of future corruption. Having the authority to decide which measures should or should not be submitted to the Irish parliament, the English Crown and cabinet were provided with the basis for misuse of power at a later time.¹⁸

The history of the Irish parliament was also long and varied. Of the two houses as they stood during the last half of the eighteenth century, the House of Commons was the most important. Commons was dominated by the "Irish borough owners" who preferred membership in this house because it was a more advantageous position from which to exert their influence with the government. The House of Lords, on the other hand, was more readily controlled by the government through the "royal prerogative of creations to, and advancements in, the peerage."¹⁹ The Irish parliament was expected to represent property rather than people, but even in this goal the representatives of property lacked cohesion because each member was motivated by individual self-interest. Because the Irish parliament did not represent all classes and creeds existing in Ireland, it was not a national body. Any victories won by the parliament in its contest with the Crown, such as the legislative independence of 1782, were, then, victories which benefited the minority "ascendancy" group, and not the Irish nation as a whole.²⁰

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 89-90. ¹⁸Dunlop, Ireland, pp. 57-58.

¹⁹Johnston, Great Britain and Ireland, p. 206.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 270-71.

Nor was the electoral system conducive to a return of public-minded officials and parliamentarians. An independent yeomanry, which would undoubtedly have had an impact on elections, was non-existent in Ireland. Penal Laws made it difficult for some (non-Anglican Protestants) and impossible for others (Catholics) to own freehold property which would have entitled them to vote in elections. County gentlemen, on the other hand, wielded a great influence over the enfranchised freeholders in their areas. Abuses of coercion and corruption were rampant in the existing electoral system. The end result was that the membership of the Irish parliament did not vary significantly from one election to the next; therefore, the position of the Irish borough owners in the government was secure. Even though new parliaments were elected at eight year intervals, those elected in 1768, 1776, and 1783 contained at least two-thirds of the members of the previous parliament.²¹

The Anglo-Irish political arrangement left few opportunities for native Irishmen to improve their condition. Hostilities between the natives and the "ascendancy," and between the ascendancy and the Crown increased as time passed. Therefore, when the discontent of other English colonial settlements burst forth into a revolt in America, Irishmen were intensely interested in the war. Not only did the similar positions of the two countries relative to Great Britain form strong ties between their peoples, but the fact that many Irishmen now claimed America as their home also strengthened Irish interest in, and sympathy

²¹Ibid., pp. 201-02; 212.

with, the American revolutionaries.²²

Within a few years, many Irishmen would also respond favorably to the early stages of the French Revolutionary war, although they later tended to be less in accord with this revolt. The great connection between these two countries was religion. Persecuted Roman Catholics sought refuge in France, while Ireland had sheltered the Huguenots who were driven out of France during the late seventeenth century.²³ Perhaps these connections with the revolutionaries of other countries motivated the Irish people to seek a revision of their own political institutions. In any case, nationalism became a factor in determining events in Ireland during the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Activities in parliament at this time usually centered around three groups: the government, the "undertakers" who were supposedly undertaking the King's business in parliament, and the opposition to government. As early as 1720, an opposition group known as the patriots were active in the Irish parliament; but at that time, they were not a coherent body with a fixed policy. Rather, they were a small group of individuals whose numbers fluctuated from one parliamentary session to the next. However, they were significant in the early period because they "kept alive the tradition of constitutional resistance to the

²²R. B. McDowell, Irish Public Opinion 1750-1800 (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1924), p. 40. Hereafter cited as McDowell, Public Opinion.

²³Ibid., p. 141.

British ministry."²⁴ As time passed, the patriots were supported by increasing numbers among the population at large. By mid-century, the Irish people had developed a new awareness of and interest in public affairs; thus, public opinion came to have a greater impact on politicians. Toward the end of the century, when the American and French wars occupied the time and effort of the British government, the patriots took advantage of the situation and began to agitate for reform.

The strength of public opinion, coupled with a new confidence born with the formation of the Volunteers (a freely enlisted military force of Irish Protestants formed to meet the threat of a possible French invasion, but who were equally eager to support the reform movement) made the patriots formidable foes of the harrassed government. Pressing for concessions at a time when the Crown was already under great duress, the patriots, led by Henry Grattan of the Irish House of Commons, secured the removal of a host of restrictions on Irish trade. While the King's minister, Lord Frederick North, was at first reluctant to submit to these demands, he did so in the end because members of the English parliament, who were more aware of the seriousness of the Irish threat than the minister himself, urged that the concessions be made. North was not, however, in any way responsive to the patriots' demand for legislative independence. But, in 1782, when North fell from power and Rockingham (Charles Watson-Wentworth) replaced him, the patriots in Ireland were elated: the members of the Rockingham ministry were "allies"

²⁴Beckett, Modern Ireland, p. 192.

of the patriots. The legislative independence of the Irish parliament became a reality.²⁵ On the whole, both parties of the struggle--the patriot leaders and the Crown--reacted to the Irish victory magnanimously. The Crown did not grudgingly bestow legislative independence, nor did Grattan wish to alienate the Irish people from the Crown. Grattan remarked, "I am desirous above all things, next to the liberty of the country, not to accustom the Irish mind to an alien or suspicious habit with regard to Great Britain."²⁶

Irish parliament, in a quasi-independent state since the Crown continued to control the executive branch of government in Ireland, continued in existence until the Act of Union of 1801 was put into practice. The legislative branches of the Irish and English governments were then united in one parliament which sat at Westminster. But, the formation of the Union was preceded by the Insurrection of 1798, an uprising which grew out of Irish demands for further parliamentary reforms, and out of the Presbyterian and Catholic demands for redress of grievances. The main military body of these revolutionaries was the United Irishmen, a group which "received all who were disaffected, after pledging their fidelity by the solemnity of an oath." Organization and purpose of a large segment of the United Irishmen paralleled that of the revolutionaries in

²⁵Ibid., pp. 216-22.

²⁶William Edward Hartpole Lecky, The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland: Swift--Flood--Grattan--O'Connell (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871; New Edition, Revised and Enlarged), p. 114. Hereafter cited as Lecky, Leaders in Ireland.

France. A "directory" of five men headed the organization, and its objectives were to throw off the shackles of England and to replace the monarchy with a republic.²⁷

The assistance the Irish revolutionaries expected from France never materialized beyond a few French ships which reached the coast of Ireland in late August and September of 1798. Thus the Irish forces lacked the vital support of their allies and the Insurrection was soon ended. Ironically, the revolt was not, as it was intended to be, a contest between united Irishmen of all creeds against the forces of their English oppressors, but was, in the main, a contest between Irishmen. A large portion of the force which fought on the side of the Crown and which was instrumental in crushing the revolt--the yeomanry and the militia--were "both altogether Irish," and the militia was also largely Roman Catholic.²⁸

The move toward a union between England and Ireland, long a topic of debate in both countries, was hastened as a result of the Insurrection.²⁹ When, on January 1, 1801, the Union was consummated, the Irish parliament passed out of existence. Both the "opponents" and the "champions" of the Union found the actual results of a joint legislative body

²⁷Stephens, Hay, Jones, The History of the Late Grand Insurrection; Or, Struggle for Liberty in Ireland (Carlisle: A. Loudon, 1805), pp. 7-8.

²⁸Beckett, Modern Ireland, pp. 265-67.

²⁹Thomas Pakenham, The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Rebellion of 1798 (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 348. Hereafter cited as Pakenham, Liberty.

to be something other than what they had expected. The opponents--the Protestants who feared they would be "stripped of power," and the liberal opposition, who feared a depleted Irish economy in consequence of the union--were reconciled with the government when their fears did not materialize.

On the other hand, the champions of the union cause--the Catholics who hoped for political equality with the Irish Protestants--were disappointed when parliamentary opposition defeated Catholic emancipation.³⁰ The Catholic cause was not forsaken, however, for Henry Grattan continued to press for alleviation of their political disabilities. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a changing attitude among the Irish Protestants had resulted in the removal of the bulk of the odious Penal Laws. Catholic Relief Acts were passed in 1774, 1778, 1782, and 1792,³¹ but it was not until 1829, under the dynamic leadership of Daniel O'Connell, that Catholic emancipation gave Roman Catholics the right to enter parliament as members.³²

The impact of the Anglo-Irish political arrangement on the social and economic conditions in Ireland cannot be over-emphasized. The British parliament took to itself the right to "dictate government policy towards Ireland." The economic interests of Ireland naturally came in direct conflict with those of Britain. Responding to pressure

³⁰Ibid., pp. 353-54.

³¹Lecky, Leaders in Ireland, pp. 130-31.

³²Beckett, Modern Ireland, pp. 304-05.

from the English merchants and manufacturers, the legislative body restricted Irish trade to such an extent that "the country was forced to rely on agriculture." The end result of these circumstances produced a landlord class which virtually held a "monopoly of the means of livelihood."

The stress created by such an arrangement was further complicated because the landlords and their tenants did not share a common heritage. The landlords were "conquerors, or descendants of conquerors," and were not quick to sympathize with the Irish tenants or to understand their customs. Given a free hand, the landlords included duties in their leases which were so excessive that the lower classes could scarcely hope to do more than eke out an existence. Absenteeism multiplied the woes of the tenantry. Landlords, attracted by the cultural centers of England, frequently deserted their provincial Irish homes, leasing their land to "middlemen" at a reasonable rate. The middlemen sub-divided the land, and in turn, let it to tenants at exorbitant rents.³³

These circumstances were slow to change. When, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a movement to reform the inequitable land laws of Ireland got underway, Matthew Arnold spoke in defense of the Irish. He effectively summed up the past evils of the Irish land system when he said:

. . . --their quarrel with us is for maintaining the actual land-system and landlords of Ireland by the irresistible might of Great Britain. Now, the grievance which they allege against the land-

³³Ibid., pp. 167-68.

system and landlords is two-fold; it is both moral and material. The moral grievance is, that the system and the men represent a hateful history of conquest, confiscation, ill-usage, misgovernment, and tyranny. The material grievance is, that it never having been usual with the landowner in Ireland, as it is in England, to set down his tenant in what may be called a completely furnished farm, the Irish tenant had himself to do what was requisite: but when he had done it, it was the landlord's property, and the tenant lost the benefit of it by losing the farm.³⁴

The Anglo-Irish political arrangement also created a class stratification which did not permit the growth of a substantial middle class. The agricultural system produced an upper class, the aristocratic landowner, and a lower class, the tenantry. It is true that, within the lower class, an economic distinction existed between the tenant, cottier, and laborer. However, due to a rapidly growing population, the division between these groups became blurred by the middle of the nineteenth century. The struggle for existence prompted the laborers to try to better their condition by renting a farm, while tenant farmers lost their holdings and became laborers. By this time, the existence of a large portion of the lower classes had become dependent on the success or failure of the potato crop.³⁵ If industrial growth in Ireland had kept pace with the population growth, the excessive farm laborer might have

³⁴Matthew Arnold, Irish Essays and Others (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1891), p. 30.

³⁵R. D. Collison Black, Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817-1870 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 7-8. Hereafter cited as Black, Economic Thought.

been employed in other areas.

Irish industry, however, was sorely limited in its growth by the British government's attack on Irish trade. Those industries which fell under the jealous eye of the British manufacturers were stifled by the acts of parliament. During the eighteenth century, those Irish industries producing woolens, beer, linen, canvas, sail cloth, tallows, candles, and soap were affected by high export tariffs. Irish imports were also controlled by the British government: tobacco was an item the Irish were forbidden to import from the West Indies; glass, on the other hand, could only be imported from England, while the Irish could not export any glass. The final blow to Irish industry was its exclusion, by British law, from the world market.³⁶ Thus, engaging in industry was not a pursuit conducive to substantial profits. Those few Irishmen who did successfully engage in trade and manufacture, along with some prosperous graziers and farmers, comprised the small middle class of early nineteenth century Ireland. However, most accounts of this time note the "virtual absence of a middle class in Ireland."³⁷

Severe economic distress was not, for the major portion of Irish society, an occasional problem to be dealt with in life--for most, it was the backdrop of their daily existence. The system, however, had so conditioned the lower classes to accept their fate that they seemed

³⁶Redcliffe N. Salaman, The History and Social Influence of the Potato (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949), p. 245. Hereafter cited as Salaman, The Potato.

³⁷Black, Economic Thought, p. 135.

incognizant of a better way of life. The peasantry simply made use of what was at hand, and in cases where it was expedient to stretch the moral code in order to encompass their emotional and physical needs, the lower classes did so without a qualm. A foreigner, traveling in Ireland in 1836, made some interesting observations about the life style and character of the peasantry. In describing their abodes and how they constructed them, he had this to say:

On the road, I found the worst description of cottages I had yet met with. They are far less commodious, and indicate less artifice and ingenuity than the lairs provided for themselves by most of the brutes. In general, they are built against the inner side of the low dyke which lines the road; this situation being chosen, I presume, that the wretched building may have at least one wall, almost deserving the name. They have no chimney, and frequently no window; and all the traveller sees to indicate the site of a human habitation, is a small conical heap of dirty straw and mud, rising above the dyke like a dungstead.³⁸

He commented on the peasant's reaction to his world, "when every thing goes wrong; when the crops fail; when even beggary is unproductive:"

He creeps out at night, steals a few potatoes, milks a cow, or commits any other trifling depredation. Robbery on the highway, housebreaking, or murder for the sake of plunder, are crimes of very rare occurrence. When he sheds blood, it is either from private revenge, or for the sake of a public principle. To dispossess a man of his land, is to deprive his family of bread; . . .

.
The starving peasant steals food when he cannot or will not beg; but he does not dream of enriching

³⁸Leitch Ritchie, Ireland Picturesque and Romantic (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1837), p. 97.

himself by plunder. He punishes by assassination, but he never thinks of murdering for the sake of robbery.³⁹

The peasant's standard of living, under ideal circumstances, was austere. Add to this the periodic failure of potato crops, which occurred in some part or other of Ireland every year, and the plight of the peasants in those areas bordered on destitution. But dependence on a single crop was certain to increase the risk of a national disaster. When, in 1845 and 1846, a blight swept across Ireland laying waste to the potato crop, the nation was ill-prepared to meet the crisis.⁴⁰ Attention, too, had long been called to the alarming increase in population, an increase the philosopher, T. H. Malthus, attributed to the introduction of the potato into Ireland.

Malthus, among others, proposed emigration as a partial solution to Ireland's problem.⁴¹ While the British government discouraged the emigration of Englishmen, especially the artisan class,⁴² it encouraged the departure of the Irish emigrant.⁴³irate members of the public, the

³⁹Ibid., pp. 112-13.

⁴⁰Salaman, The Potato, pp. 289-90.

⁴¹T. R. Malthus, Occasional Papers of T. R. Malthus, Edited and with an Introduction by Bernard Semmel (New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), pp. 36-39.

⁴²The Times (London), October 9, 1811, p. 4; February 21, 1812, p. 3. During this period, The Times supported the government. In Pitt's lifetime, it was regarded as Pitt's special "Gazette." Among newspapermen, The Times was the most hated paper because it sought to keep all other papers in line with ministerial policy. Lucyle Werkmeister, A Newspaper History of England, 1792-1793 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 24-25.

⁴³The Times (London), September 24, 1814, p. 3.

notable William Cobbett among them, took the government to task for neglecting to assist the destitute Irishmen through legislation.⁴⁴ Finally, in 1847, a series of acts were passed which were intended to aid the starving Irishmen.

A Labour Rate and a Board of Public Works were established by parliament in an effort to either contribute to the support of the desperately poor, or to assure their gainful employments. Bureaucracy and corruption swallowed up the funds, and the government was forced to adapt new measures.⁴⁵ Previously, the poverty-stricken peasants in Ireland were not protected by a poor law,⁴⁶ but late in the year 1847 a relief act was passed which was somewhat akin to the English Poor Law.⁴⁷ Emigration, in the end, appears to have been the quickest way for Irishmen to avert death by starvation. Ironically, the peasantry continued to rely on the "fickle" potato. A visitor to Ireland in 1891, reminiscing about the dreadful Famine of 1846, was puzzled that the peasantry themselves, or if not them, then the "legislators and

⁴⁴"Letter to the Editor," The Times (London), February 28, 1828, p. 3; William Cobbett, Selections from Cobbett's Political Works: Being a Complete Abridgement of the 100 Volumes Which Comprise the Writings of "Porcupine" and the "Weekly Political Register" (6 vols.; London: Ann Cobbett; Edinburgh: W. Tait; Manchester: W. Willis, 1835), "Emigration," May, 1803, I, 299.

⁴⁵Annual Register of World Events: A Review of the Year, ed. by Robert Dodsley, et. al. (London: 1758-), 1847, LXXXIX, 21-22.

⁴⁶The Cambridge History of the British Empire, ed. by J. Holland Rose, A. P. Newton, E. A. Benians (8 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), II, 445.

⁴⁷Annual Register, 1847, LXXXIX, 35-52.

landlords," had not yet remedied the ills inherent in the peasant's reliance on the potato.⁴⁸

These pages are a discussion of the serious side of "Maria Edgeworth's Ireland." Frustration, anger, prejudice, hardship, and even starvation--some, if not all of these things affected Irishmen of every class. But there was another side to "Maria's Ireland," and that was the national character of its people which embodied the wit, humor, pathos, loyalty, and generosity that made the serious side bearable. Maria's ability to convey this depth of the Irishman's character does, in fact, provide one of the most appealing aspects of her Irish stories.

⁴⁸S. Reynolds Hole, A Little Tour in Ireland, with Illustrations by John Leech (London: Edward Arnold, 1892), pp. 53-54.

CHAPTER II

MARIA EDGEWORTH

The seventeenth century was nearly over before a family of Edgeworths took up permanent residence at Edgeworthstown in Ireland.¹ Family records indicate that Maria's ancestors were originally established in a market town called Edgeworth or Edgeware, in Middlesex County, England. However, two brothers of one branch of this family, Edward and Francis Edgeworth, went to Ireland in 1585. Edward became a bishop; Francis was interested in practicing at the bar and held several positions in this connection.² When Edward died, he was childless, and Francis inherited his fortune. Francis married Jane Tuite, a young lady from an old, established Irish family.³ In 1619, James I granted Francis approximately six hundred acres of land near Mastrim, Ireland, the town which later came to be known as Edgeworthstown. Thus, from Francis and his union with Jane Tuite stemmed the Edgeworth family's "Irish connections"--their Irish lineage and their Irish estate at Edgeworthstown.

¹Harriet Jessie Butler and Harold Edgeworth Butler, eds., The Black Book of Edgeworthstown and Other Edgeworth Memoirs, 1585-1817 (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1927), p. 20, n. 2. Hereafter cited as Butler, Black Book.

²Ibid., pp. 7-9.

³Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Begun by Himself and Concluded by His Daughter Maria Edgeworth, with an Introduction by Desmond Clark (2 vols.; Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1969), I. 6. Hereafter cited as Edgeworth, Memoirs.

From Francis' death in 1627⁴ until the birth of Maria's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, over a century later, the ensuing generations of Edgeworths experienced varying fortunes both in Ireland and England. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, a descendant of the above-mentioned Francis Edgeworth, and an eventual heir to Edgeworthstown, was a remarkable, inventive man whose life was so closely interwoven with that of his famous daughter that one cannot discuss the life of one without discussing that of the other.⁵ Edgeworth was born at Bath in 1744; but during his third year, the family moved to their estate in Ireland where his childhood years were spent. In preparation for formal schooling, the child was taught to read.⁶ Later, young Edgeworth was introduced to the "rudiments of ancient learning"--"latin grammar"--with a local clergyman as an instructor. This phase of Edgeworth's education was completed when he was but eight years, and he was then sent to school in Warwick, England.⁷

At Warwick, the previously sheltered youth found his use of the Irish accent and idiom to be of a definite disadvantage. His classmates viewed him with contempt, dubbed him "Little Irish," and openly

⁴Butler, Black Book, pp. 9-10.

⁵Helen Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, Eminent Women Series, ed. by John H. Ingram (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1883), pp. 2-3.

⁶It is necessary to rely on the first volume of Edgeworth's Memoirs for the facts of Edgeworth's early life. Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 21-23.

⁷Ibid., pp. 46-47.

taunted him for his "Irishness." Edgeworth displayed his physical prowess in an effort to silence his tormentors, but he also quickly developed an English accent.⁸ Unfortunately, he soon became ill with whooping cough and could not continue with his studies. His father took him back to Ireland, but in a short while his education was resumed, this time at Drogheda School in Ireland. Here, young Edgeworth found his newly acquired English accent to be as disagreeable to his Irish schoolmates as his Irish accent had been to his English classmates. Consequently, he dropped his English speech, but ever after, he was able to assume one accent or the other at will.⁹ He remained at Drogheda School until he was fourteen years of age, attended a school in his own neighborhood until he was sixteen, and then entered Trinity College in Dublin.¹⁰

Edgeworth's career at Dublin University was short-lived. Assuming that his natural talents would be sufficient to see him through, he neglected his studies, drank excessively because it was fashionable, and gave himself up to "dissipation of every kind." His activities during this period remained a source of great embarrassment to him throughout life.¹¹ In 1761, his father removed him from Dublin, and he entered Corpus Christi College, Oxford, as a "gentleman-commoner."¹² Here, Edgeworth became a diligent and

⁸Ibid., p. 48. ⁹Ibid., pp. 62-63. ¹⁰Ibid., p. 68.

¹¹Ibid., p. 75. ¹²Ibid., p. 77.

successful scholar.¹³ He did, however, pass his leisure time in pursuit of those entertainments usual among his class. Edgeworth spent a vacation at Bath, mingling with the fashionable element of society, which was, in a sense, an extension of his education. At Bath, the young man acquired a knowledge of human nature and character, and developed fashionable, sophisticated manners appropriate for a true gentleman of the time.¹⁴

Previous to his trip to Bath, Edgeworth had kept "steady company" with the young lady who later became his first wife.¹⁵ She was Anna Maria Elers,¹⁶ a girl of German descent.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the brilliant company he found at Bath caused Edgeworth's affection for Miss Elers to wane. He did not conceal his change of heart, but because the young lady loved him, he determined to make the best of

¹³Butler, Black Book, p. 127.

¹⁴Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 98-100.

¹⁵Before Edgeworth was sixteen years old, he was "married" in a mock ceremony at the end of an evening of revelry with a group of young friends. Edgeworth's father was so disturbed over the prank that he actually had the imaginary wedding annulled in an ecclesiastical court. Thus Edgeworth was married and divorced before he was sixteen, because proof of marriage was necessary before a divorce or an annulment could be granted. Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 70-71.

¹⁶Edgeworth seems to dismiss his first wife, Anna Elers. In his Memoirs, Edgeworth does not even mention her by name. For a complete listing of his various wives and children, another source is necessary. Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, with an Introduction by F. V. Barry (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), p. 42.

¹⁷Edgeworth, Memoirs, I. 78.

the situation and gallantly married her.¹⁸ Even though four children were born of this union--the second child was Maria--the marriage was not a happy one. As an intellectual companion, Anna was a failure.¹⁹

Consequently, Edgeworth avoided family responsibility and sought diversion elsewhere. He was, in fact, in France when Maria's mother died. Edgeworth immediately returned to his children in England, and sought the hand of Miss Honora Sneyd, a young lady he had fallen in love with while Anna still lived. She accepted his marriage proposal; within four months they were married. He then moved his bride and four children to the Edgeworth estate in Ireland which had passed to him after the death of his father. Edgeworth was never again guilty of neglecting his parental duties.²⁰

Honora and Richard Lovell Edgeworth were well suited to one another. Unfortunately, she was in poor health and died after six years of marriage in 1779. On her deathbed, Honora urged her husband to marry again, and "recommended" to him "in the strongest manner, to marry her sister Elizabeth."²¹ While Edgeworth was not unaware of

¹⁸This marriage took place before Edgeworth reached the legal age of twenty. Consequently, he and his bride ran away to Scotland where they could marry without the consent of Edgeworth's father. They were later married again with the father's consent. Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 102.

¹⁹Butler, Black Book, pp. 129, 143.

²⁰Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 5-6.

²¹Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 369-70. For the date of Honora Sneyd's death, see Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, p. 42.

Elizabeth's "beauty, abilities, and polished manners," he did not think her a likely marriage companion for himself--a sentiment equally shared by Elizabeth. In the course of a few months time, they both changed their minds, and it seems that Honora's request that they marry influenced their decision. Existing law prohibited marriage between a man and his deceased wife's sister, but this difficulty was circumvented and the couple was married in 1780.²²

Elizabeth followed her sister in death after seventeen years of domestic tranquility;²³ Edgeworth took a fourth wife during the following year. This lady, Francis Anne Beaufort, was several years younger than her stepdaughter, Maria,²⁴ and outlived both her husband and stepdaughter.²⁵

With the exception of his first wife, Edgeworth was exceedingly fortunate in marriage. His last three wives were accomplished women whose intellectual capacities were equal to the genius of their husband.²⁶ Furthermore, Edgeworth was peculiarly suited to the state of

²²Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 377-80.

²³Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 179.

²⁴Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 27-28.

²⁵For the dates of Francis Ann Beaufort and Maria, see Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, p. 42. Mr. Edgeworth died in 1817. Percy Howard Newby, Maria Edgeworth, English Novelists Series (London: Arthur Barker, Ltd., 1950), p. 79.

²⁶Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, p. 3. Some examples of Edgeworth's specific inventions and intellectual pursuits are mentioned in his Memoirs, I, 146-49, 172, 381, 384.

matrimony, a fact he was quick to acknowledge.²⁷ Of his four wives, he said:

I am not a man of prejudice: I have had four wives; the second and third were sisters, and I was in love with the second in the lifetime of the first.²⁸

Nor did Maria harbor any resentment against the stepmothers who entered her life in steady succession.²⁹ She did express concern when her father announced his intention of marrying the fourth Mrs. Edgeworth, but she, like the others before her, quickly won Maria's affection.³⁰ These women were both mother and intimate friend to Maria. Edgeworth's four wives bore him a total of twenty-two children, eighteen of whom grew to maturity.³¹ Each new wife took up the role of dedicated mother to the ever-increasing brood of children.

Maria's own mother appears to have played the least significant role in her life, perhaps because she died when Maria was only six years old. Maria was born January 1, 1767, at the home of her maternal grandparents at Black Bourton, near Oxford in England. She

²⁷Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 376.

²⁸Grace A. Oliver, A Study of Maria Edgeworth, with Notices of Her Father and Friends (3rd ed.; Boston: A. Williams and Company, 1882), p. 42. Hereafter cited as Oliver, A Study of Maria.

²⁹Emily Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, English Men of Letters Series, ed. by John Morley (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), p. 4.

³⁰Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 196, 202-204.

³¹For a listing of the eighteen children who grew to maturity, see Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, p. 42.

retained few memories of her early childhood, or of her mother, who was a "rather depressed and sickly woman."³² Mrs. Edgeworth and her daughters were staying at the home of two "dignified" old aunts at Great Russell Street, London, when Maria's mother died. Maria remained there until her father married Honora Sneyd and moved the family to the Edgeworth estate in Ireland.³³ The family spent the next three years in Ireland, but then Honora's failing health prompted Mr. Edgeworth to make some changes. He placed his daughter Maria in school, possibly because the child was too active for her frail stepmother. Maria's formal education began at Derby; and as it was necessary to remove the ailing Mrs. Edgeworth from the damp Irish climate, the family soon followed her to England. Maria was then able to spend holidays with her family.³⁴

In 1780, Edgeworth decided to remove Maria from the school in Derby and enter her in a boarding school in London. The curriculum of this fashionable school included physical as well as academic pursuits. In addition to her studies, in which Maria excelled, she was subjected to rigorous exercises designed to improve the "figure and carriage" of a young lady. In Maria's case, an extra measure was added to the routine. She was "swung by the neck, to draw out

³²Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 3-4.

³³Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, p. 6.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 8-9.

the muscles and increase the growth," for she was very small of stature. The treatment was in vain.³⁵ Maria remained "small of stature," and occasionally jested about her size. In one instance, Maria told her Aunt Ruxton she could "sleep in a drawer," and on another occasion she compared herself to a "dwarf."³⁶

Edgeworth became aware of his daughter's exceptional talents while she was very young. The tone of the letters Edgeworth wrote to Maria while she was away at school indicated his desire to communicate with her on an adult level. Maria was an imaginative youngster who entertained her family and classmates by telling stories--and these stories were frequently original. Her "enlightened" father urged his daughter to write these "imaginings" on paper, an unusual circumstance when one considers the age in which Maria lived. Women authors were not, as a rule, applauded for their literary efforts, but were more likely to be viewed with suspicion because they had overstepped the limited boundaries of a woman's world.³⁷ Maria became a renowned novelist during her lifetime, proving herself worthy of her father's confidence.

Her formal education was terminated when, in 1782, she and her younger brothers and sisters returned to Ireland with their father

³⁵Oliver, A Study of Maria, pp. 65-66.

³⁶Barry, in Introduction to Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, p. 31.

³⁷Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 9-11.

and his third bride, Elizabeth Sneyd.³⁸ Edgeworth was now filled with determination. He intended to spend the rest of his life improving the dilapidated Edgeworth estate, seeking to alleviate the misery of the Irish lower classes, and educating his own children.³⁹ One can safely say Edgeworth attained measures of success in these areas as well as in the areas of invention, authorship, and education.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he excelled in his role as a father.

Life in the Edgeworth family virtually centered around this energetic man as he conducted all of his affairs in their midst, usually in the family sitting room. In this manner, Edgeworth's knowledge and experience were made available to his children at first hand. Maria, however, was permitted to become more involved in her father's business affairs. For many years, she assisted him in copying business letters and collecting the rents from the tenants on their estate. Edgeworth lived on the Irish estate for the remainder of his life, a period of approximately thirty-five years. With the exception of three or four months, Maria was never absent from his side during these years.⁴¹

³⁸Oliver, A Study of Maria, p. 74.

³⁹Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 1-2.

⁴⁰The two volumes of Edgeworth's Memoirs abound with examples of his accomplishments. Edgeworth was considered a forward-looking innovator in the field of education in Ireland. For a discussion of his views on this subject, see Butler, Black Book, Chapter XV.

⁴¹Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 14-15.

Among Maria's sisters and brothers, several are interesting because of their special relationship to her or because their lives did not follow the serene course of the majority of their large family. Anna, Emmaline, and Richard were Maria's full blood sisters and brother. Anna married Dr. Beddoes and she became the mother of the poet, Thomas Lovell Beddoes.⁴² Emmaline married a Mr. King who was a surgeon.⁴³ Both of these women led commonplace lives, but Richard's life followed a different course entirely.

Richard's father was impressed with the principles of child rearing expressed by Rousseau in Emile. He determined to educate his first son, Richard, in accordance with Rousseau's system. Consequently, between the years of three and eight he left "the body and mind" of his son "as much as possible to the education of nature and of accident." As a result, Richard was "remarkably hardy," fearless of danger, and "capable of bearing privation of every sort." The child had sufficient knowledge of "things," of "mechanics," and of their application. His senses were alert, his judgment sound. Unfortunately, in Richard's case, all of the results of Rousseau's system were not favorable. His knowledge of books fell short of that of boys of a comparable age. The child was also disobedient, indifferent to other people, and strongly opposed to any discipline or "control."⁴⁴

⁴²Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, p. 23.

⁴³Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, p. 102.

⁴⁴Edgeworth and his young son, Richard, had an interview with Rousseau in France. This meeting is discussed in the Memoirs, I, 258. The results of Rousseau's experiment, Edgeworth, Memoirs, I, 177-79.

The unruly child continued to be a problem to his father. By the time Richard was nine years old, Edgeworth realized the full impact of Rousseau's "mistaken principles" of education. Edgeworth then sought to remedy the deficiencies in the child's knowledge and the defects of his character by engaging tutors for him, and by enrolling him in a Catholic seminary in Lyons, France.⁴⁵ Later, after Edgeworth returned to England and married a second wife, he again sent Richard away to school. While ingenuity and a pleasant disposition made Richard an engaging classmate, his lack of application and self-discipline doomed him to failure as a student. Therefore, when Richard expressed a desire to go to sea, Edgeworth thought it more prudent to acquiesce than to oppose his strong-willed son.⁴⁶

Richard's hardy, fearless nature made him an able adversary to the dangerous sea. Some years later, he gave up the life of a sailor and came to America where he married Elizabeth Knight and raised a family of three boys.⁴⁷ The fact that Edgeworth disinherited this "foolish" and "extravagant" son did not disrupt the family ties.⁴⁸ Richard returned to Ireland to visit his family about 1792 and again in 1795.⁴⁹ Even though Maria never spent much time with her brother,

⁴⁵Ibid., I, 273-78. ⁴⁶Ibid., I, 353-54. ⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Butler, Black Book, p. 152.

⁴⁹Oliver, A Study of Maria, pp. 92-93, 101.

she was fond of him and regretted his return to America.⁵⁰

Maria's eldest half-brother, Lovell Edgeworth, replaced Richard as intended heir to the Edgeworth estate. His life was extraordinary in that he was held captive in France for eleven years during the Napoleonic wars.⁵¹ Communication between Lovell and his family during this long period was rarely permitted. When the war ended, he returned to England. There he was informed that his father was gravely ill; Lovell hastened to Edgeworth's sickbed in Ireland where his appearance contributed to the rapid recovery of the patient. Edgeworth feared that Lovell's long absence from the bosom of the family could have alienated his affections or altered his overall view of life. A few moments of conversation between father and son dispelled these fears.⁵²

Three years later, as Edgeworth lay on his deathbed, he called several of his children to his side. He spoke to them, extolling the virtue of prudence evident in his daughter Fanny's nature, praising Lovell for his wisdom and economy, but singling out Maria as the one of his children who might give in to a weakness and consequently be guilty of wasting her fortune. Edgeworth warned her against

⁵⁰Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Miss Sophy Ruxton," August 14, 1792, in The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth, ed. by A. J. C. Hare (2 vols.; Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895), I, 25-27. Hereafter cited as Hare, Life and Letters.

⁵¹Butler, Black Book, p. 192.

⁵²Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 384-85.

over-generosity, against giving her fortune to friends or relatives who "wanted" this or "needed" that. In this instance, Edgeworth's appraisal of his children's characters was in error,⁵³ for the one successful venture of Lovell's career led to a disaster that affected Maria and proved her father wrong.

Like his father, Lovell was interested in improving the educational system in Ireland. Furthermore, he was a "born teacher." After Edgeworth's death, Lovell opened a unique boarding school, one in which students of all religions and of all ranks of society were educated in the same classroom. Outside of the classroom, however, social intercourse between students of diverse religions and backgrounds remained a taboo. Strict stipulations also continued to segregate the students for their individual religious instructions. Even so, for a time the "eternal divisions of Irish life" were, in this school, blended into a workable, peaceful unity. Lovell's school continued as a monumental success in education from 1818 until 1828; but, as a financial venture, the school was a fiasco.⁵⁴

The "wise and economic" Lovell⁵⁵ fell victim to the practice of over-generosity which Edgeworth had warned Maria against. Lovell could not find it in his heart to refuse admittance to boys who could not pay the school fees. Consequently, the school lacked funds. Lovell then drew against the family estate until it was in jeopardy.

⁵³Butler, Black Book, pp. 209-10. ⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 219-22.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 210.

Finally, he was forced to close the school. The task of extricating Lovell from his difficulties and saving the family fortune fell to Maria. She accomplished this feat by careful application of the business principles she had learned as her father's assistant.⁵⁶ Maria successfully managed the estate and used her private earnings to financially bolster the family fortune.⁵⁷

Most of the children born to Edgeworth's second and third wives, Honora and Elizabeth Sneyd, were afflicted with consumption, the inherent disease which claimed the lives of their mothers.⁵⁸ Lovell, Honora, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Henry, and William were all victims of this disease. While Lovell's life span was of a normal length, the others died at an early age.⁵⁹ Death and sorrow were familiar to the Edgeworth family, but these frequent tragedies did not permanently shatter their serenity or halt their diverse activities.

Like the rest of her family, Maria's time was occupied with a variety of activities. She cultivated, for example, an extensive circle of friends. Some of these people were both members of her family and intimate friends, such as her father's eldest sister, Margaret Ruxton. "Aunt Ruxton" was confidante and mentor to Maria

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 219-22.

⁵⁷Barry, in Introduction to Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, p. 23.

⁵⁸Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, p. 59.

⁵⁹Lovell Edgeworth's illness is discussed in Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, p. 22. The birth and death dates of the family are listed in Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, p. 42.

until they were separated by Mrs. Ruxton's death in 1830.⁶⁰ The bonds of their friendship were strengthened through visits and through numerous letters which passed between the two women. Major and minor family events, casual and distinguished visitors, current literature, political events, and Maria's novels were but a few of the topics they discussed in their letters. In fact, the course of Maria's life could be followed through her correspondence with her beloved Aunt Ruxton.⁶¹

Outside of the family circle, Maria's friends were people with diverse interests, backgrounds, and occupations. A brief survey of a few of these people will serve to exemplify the wide scope of knowledge Maria had access to through her friendships alone.

Two families who were among Maria's earliest friends were the families of Lord Granard and Lord Longford (the Pakenham Family). These two families lived in the neighborhood of Edgeworthstown, and included Maria's family in their social activities soon after the Edgeworths moved to Ireland. These occasions were Maria's first introduction into society. She met and mingled with many distinguished political and literary figures at these affairs. Maria also became

⁶⁰Francis Ann Beaufort Edgeworth, A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth with a Selection from Her Letters, edited by Mrs. Edgeworth's children (3 vols.; printed, not published; at London: Printed by Joseph Masters and Son, 1867), III, 38. Hereafter cited as Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs.

⁶¹A survey of Maria's published letters reveal that she corresponded more frequently with her "Aunt Ruxton" than any other one person among her friends. She also revealed more of herself, of her character, and of her activities to her Aunt than to other correspondents.

friends with one of the Pakenham girls--"Kitty"⁶²--who later married Sir Arthur Wellesley and eventually became the Duchess of Wellington.⁶³ She, too, remained Maria's lifelong friend and correspondent.⁶⁴

Kitty was a rather colorless person, and if the present Lady Elizabeth Longford's evaluation of her character is correct, she was an unhappy, ineffective wife to the great Duke.⁶⁵ Implicit in Lady Longford's comments on the friendship between Maria and the Duchess is a broad hint that Maria tried to improve Kitty's image by creating an illusion of depth in her character. Maria failed, for as Lady Longford said, Maria became "defensive in her praise" of Kitty.⁶⁶

During the early period of her life, Maria was more inclined to be a silent observer than an active participant in the sparkling conversation going on about her. In later years, however, Maria entered the conversational "arena" and held her own with the "first rate talkers of French and English society."⁶⁷ She became friends with Thomas Day, the eccentric author of Sandford and Merton.⁶⁸ Pierre Étienne Louis

⁶²Oliver, A Study of Maria, pp. 82-83.

⁶³Ibid., p. 217.

⁶⁴In a letter written to Mrs. Edgeworth in 1831, Maria told her that she had gone to call on the Duchess, only to find she had died two days earlier. Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, III, 57.

⁶⁵Elizabeth Longford, Wellington: The Years of the Sword (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), pp. 122, 292-93. Hereafter cited as Longford, Wellington. ⁶⁶Ibid., p. 305.

⁶⁷Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, I, 13.

⁶⁸Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, p. 10.

Dumont, a prominent French literary figure, became Maria's close friend and critic.⁶⁹ Maria also established a lasting friendship with the French woman, Madame Delessart, who was the benefactress of the famed Jean Jacques Rousseau, and an impressive figure in fashionable French society.⁷⁰ The Edgeworths were made a part of this agreeable society when they traveled in France.⁷¹

A mutual admiration based on their literary talents led to permanent bonds of friendship between Maria and Sir Walter Scott.⁷² In fact, Scott paid tribute to Maria's genius by stating in the preface to his Waverly novels that he sought to "emulate the admirable Irish portraits drawn by Miss Edgeworth."⁷³ On the other hand, Maria knew the poet Lord Byron, but she was not impressed by him nor did she find his poetry particularly agreeable.⁷⁴

Maria's circle included such notable figures as the historian and

⁶⁹Among his other literary accomplishments, Dumont helped organize the works of Jeremy Bentham for publication. Oliver, A Study of Maria, pp. 165-67.

⁷⁰Constance Hill, Maria Edgeworth and Her Circle in the Days of Buonaparte and Bourbon (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1910), pp. 29-30. Hereafter cited as Hill, Maria and Her Circle.

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 8-10.

⁷²Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to the Author of Waverly," in Life and Letters, ed. by A. J. C. Hare, I, 239-44; Oliver, A Study of Maria, p. 425.

⁷³Hill, Maria and Her Circle, pp. 96-97.

⁷⁴Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to C. Sneyd Edgeworth," April, 1810, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, I, 233-34.

utilitarian thinker, James Mills,⁷⁵ and George Ticknor, an American professor of literature at Harvard University. Ticknor went to visit Maria at Edgeworthstown in 1835,⁷⁶ and exchanged letters with her after he returned to America.⁷⁷ The naturalist, Dr. Erasmus Darwin,⁷⁸ Sir Humphrey Davy, the then head of the Royal Society,⁷⁹ William Wilberforce, the dedicated Englishman who worked to eliminate slave trade,⁸⁰ David Ricardo, "eminent political economist,"⁸¹ and Thomas Spring-Rice, a political figure whom Maria "liked very much"⁸²--these and many other notable persons who moved in the mainstream of life were Maria's friends. Maria maintained her friendships through visitations and through correspondence as distances and circumstances dictated. If one can use the available volumes of her letters and their contents as a measuring stick, Maria's friends played a significant role in her life.

Of course, Maria attended the customary dinner parties and grand

⁷⁵Oliver, A Study of Maria, p. 328.

⁷⁶Hare, Life and Letters, II, 619.

⁷⁷Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mr. Ticknor," November 19, 1840, in Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, pp. 433-34.

⁷⁸Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, p. 103.

⁷⁹Oliver, A Study of Maria, p. 426.

⁸⁰Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Ruxton," November 2, 1821, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, II, 147-48.

⁸¹Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Edgeworth," November 9, 1821, in Life and Letters, ed. by A. J. C. Hare, II, 379-81.

⁸²Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Edgeworth," May 22, 1822, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, II, 199-200.

balls given by members of fashionable society. She describes one of these memorable occasions in a letter to her Aunt Ruxton. The evening began with a dinner party at Pakenham Hall which was attended by thirty-two guests. After dinner, twenty of the guests moved on to a grand ball given by one Mrs. Pollard. If Maria danced at the ball, she did not mention it in the letter, but she did say that she was "much entertained" and she remained at the ball until after three o'clock in the morning.⁸³

Edgeworthstown was frequently the site of social events of a different nature. The upper classes of Irish society followed the practice of paying tribute to their friends and neighbors in the form of impromptu, daytime visitations. The Edgeworths received their share of these tributes. Maria wrote of one particular day in which they entertained fifteen such guests. The first visitor, a Judge Daly, arrived in time for breakfast at eight o'clock in the morning. The last arrivals were "Mrs. O'Beirne of Newry, and a Miss West." It was four o'clock in the afternoon before the last guest departed.⁸⁴

Maria found riding horseback with her father an especially pleasurable pastime. She, herself, was not an accomplished horsewoman, but Edgeworth's expertise in this field seemed to give her confidence when they rode together. Time passed quickly when father

⁸³Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Ruxton," January, 1809, in Life and Letters, ed. by A. J. C. Hare, I, 167-69.

⁸⁴Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Ruxton," July, 1811, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, I, 241-42.

and daughter rode over the Edgeworth estate, with Maria so engrossed in her father's conversation that she forgot her fear of riding.⁸⁵

They were both interested in any event which took place wherever they happened to be. One time, while Maria and her father were visiting in Edinburgh, they joined a crushing mob which flocked to see a man named Mr. Sadler go up in a balloon.⁸⁶ Upon another occasion, she visited the English House of Commons and stood on a chair in the garrett to watch the proceedings on the floor beneath her.⁸⁷ Maria was also interested in Newgate Prison and toured the institution while in London in 1822. She met Mrs. Fry, a dedicated social worker of sorts, who sought to administer to the spiritual needs of the women prisoners.⁸⁸

Maria did not neglect the ordinary pursuits common to the ladies of her day. While still in boarding school, Maria became adept at needle work. She was artistic in her embroidery, and frequently sent gifts which were products of her own making to friends and relatives.⁸⁹ She was also an "enthusiastic gardner," an occupation Maria found both

⁸⁵Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, I, 16.

⁸⁶Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Edgeworth," October, 1812, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, I, 253-58.

⁸⁷Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Ruxton," March 9, 1822, in Life and Letters, ed. by A. J. C. Hare, II, 408-10.

⁸⁸Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Edgeworth," March, 1822, in Life and Letters, ed. by A. J. C. Hare, II, 411-14.

⁸⁹Oliver, A Study of Maria, p. 63.

pleasurable and beneficial to her health.⁹⁰

Journeys of varying lengths and distances made up another part of Maria's active life. Members of her family were always her traveling companions, and wherever they went, the Edgeworth family reputation preceded them. They were sought after by the literary element of fashionable society both at home and abroad. Aside from short trips within Ireland, Maria made several trips to England and Scotland, and two lengthier visits to the continent.⁹¹

Travel between Great Britain and the European continent had been impossible for nearly ten years due to the French wars, but the temporary Peace of Amiens, ratified in 1802, made Europe once again accessible to travelers. Mr. and Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria, and her half-sister, Charlotte, were among the many Englishmen who took advantage of the opportunity to visit Paris, the center of the "revolutionary storm." Besides, Maria had many contacts with interesting French persons, some with whom she merely corresponded and others who had occasionally visited her in Ireland. Therefore, the Edgeworths made ready and eagerly departed from Ireland in September of 1802; and after a leisurely, round-about trip through the countryside, they reached Paris on October 29, 1802.⁹²

⁹⁰Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 77-78.

⁹¹Discussions of Maria's travels in England can be found in Oliver, A Study of Maria, pp. 267, 328, 365; her travels in Scotland, Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 113, 162.

⁹²Hill, Maria and Her Circle, pp. 1-4.

The Edgeworths were immediately welcomed by their French friends who enhanced their visit with numerous invitations to dine, visit the ballet, attend the opera, see the art galleries, and meet the intellectually elite members of French society.⁹³ This pleasant trip ended abruptly when the threat of open warfare between England and France placed the Edgeworths in imminent danger. Fearing for the safety of his family, Mr. Edgeworth made hasty preparations for their departure. On the sixth of March, 1803, they crossed the channel and landed safely at Dover.⁹⁴

Maria returned to the continent again in 1819, this time accompanied by two of her younger half-sisters. She found many of her old friends still alive and well. The warmth and hospitality of French society were still extended to the Edgeworth family.⁹⁵ One feels, however, that she must have retained her most poignant memories from her initial trip to France because she was accompanied by her beloved father and because she experienced a touching affair of the heart.⁹⁶

The man who fell in love with Maria Edgeworth was a Mr. Edlecrantz,

⁹³Hill's book contains a detailed account of Maria's travels on the continent, with excerpts of Maria's letters as the main source of information.

⁹⁴Hill, Maria and Her Circle, pp. 67-69. It is at this time that Lovell was detained by the French, and remained captive until the war ended. Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 291-93.

⁹⁵Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, p. 155.

⁹⁶Maria's father died June 13, 1817. This was the greatest sorrow of Maria's life, a sorrow which she never completely conquered. Ibid., pp. 145-46.

a Swedish gentleman who had spent his life in the service of the King of Sweden. She met him in Paris, and he proposed marriage to her in December of 1802.⁹⁷ Maria made light of the proposal, saying she felt nothing for him except "esteem and gratitude." In truth, marriage between the two would have demanded a great sacrifice on the part of one or the other; either Maria or Monsieur Edlecrantz would have had to forsake his homeland. Because neither of them was able to take such a dramatic step, they parted.⁹⁸

Even though Maria maintained she was not emotionally involved with Edlecrantz, her stepmother believed she was in love with him. After Maria rejected her suitor, Mrs. Edgeworth noticed that she periodically fell into pensive moods, or found it difficult to join in the festive attitude of her traveling companions. It was not until long after the family returned to Ireland that Maria was able to free herself of a pervading sadness and turn her attention to her various works.⁹⁹ Needless to say, all of her time was not spent in pursuit of pleasure.

One of the unusual tasks which fell to Maria was that of assistant manager of the Edgeworth estate. It has already been noted that she began the practice of copying her father's business letters and

⁹⁷ Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Ruxton," December, 1802, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, I, 141.

⁹⁸ Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Sophia Ruxton," December 8, 1802, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, I, 141-42.

⁹⁹ Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, I, 142-44.

collecting the rents from the tenants while still a young girl.¹⁰⁰ She continued to work side by side with her father for many years. Therefore, it was natural for his ideas and beliefs to become Maria's guiding principles, especially when years of application of these principles produced remarkable results on the Edgeworth estate.¹⁰¹ In later years, the Edgeworths were able to withstand economic depressions which forced many Irish proprietors to sell part or all of their estates.¹⁰² In the second volume of her father's Memoirs, Maria devoted a chapter to some of the age-old practices carried out in the Irish landlord-tenants relationship that her father recognized as evils which were destroying the peasantry, and in turn, the landlord.

The opening statement of this chapter stressed the advantage of a proprietor living on his estate.¹⁰³ Both the absentee landlord and his tenants were left to the mercy of agents who frequently bled the estate and seldom maintained any degree of repair.¹⁰⁴ It was true that a landlord who was present could also fall victim to the same practice if he delegated too much authority to agents or

¹⁰⁰ See supra, p. 7, n. 41.

¹⁰¹ Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 15-16.

¹⁰² Zimmern, Maria Edgeworth, passim.

¹⁰³ Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 14-15.

¹⁰⁴ The depreciation and ultimate destruction of Irish estates owned by absentee landlords is one of the themes of Castle Rackrent, and the major theme of The Absentee.

sub-agents. Thus, Edgeworth restricted the duties of the person known as the "driver." It was the usual duty of this man to impound the cattle of tenants whose rents were in arrears. Edgeworth forbade him to act without explicit orders or to accept any money on account. All moneys were to be paid to Edgeworth in person, or to someone in the Edgeworth household. In this manner, Edgeworth protected his tenants from dishonest drivers who might collect rents twice, and he also became personally acquainted with his tenants.¹⁰⁵

Likewise, Edgeworth thwarted the evil practices of "middlemen" by inserting a clause in his leases which imposed a fine on tenants who relet their land. These men were frequently of a fraudulent nature. They rented land at a reasonable rate, then immediately relet it in smaller lots to poor tenants at the highest possible rent. This was a source of misery to the under tenants, for in many cases, they were forced to pay rents twice--once to the middleman who pocketed the money, and a second time to the landlord. If they had no money, their cattle was rounded up by the driver and handed over to the proprietor in payment for their rent.¹⁰⁶

"Oppressive claim" of "duty fowl" and "duty work of man and beast" were prevalent in Irish leases in Edgeworth's lifetime. He was one of the first proprietors to remove these offensive duties from his leases. He never sought to raise or lower the wages of labor on

¹⁰⁵Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 15-16.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., II, 21-22.

his estate, nor did he force his tenants to grind their corn at a specific mill.¹⁰⁷ Edgeworth also shunned the practice of protecting lawbreakers among his tenants who ran afoul of the law, although many proprietors did so in exchange for support in an election or for other petty motives.¹⁰⁸

These and many other inequities were struck from Edgeworth's leases, but improvements were not always accomplished without unfavorable reaction. In the matter of the removal of the work duty, for example, landlords were placed at a definite disadvantage. When this practice became widespread in Ireland, the landlords found it difficult to get labor at those crucial times of the year when the tenants wished to harvest their own crops and cut their own turf. Proprietors were forced to turn to a new form of work duty whereby the cottagers on the estate provided a labor market, but this system soon became injurious to cottagers.¹⁰⁹

Maria was an apt pupil, and as she worked with her father and accompanied him on his visits among the tenantry, she gained an intricate knowledge of what constituted sound management of the estate. She profited in another manner because she also developed a keen insight into the character and life style of the peasantry and the problems which beset the lower classes of Irish society. Indeed, the tenants on the Edgeworth estate provided Maria with a "workshop"

¹⁰⁷Ibid., II, 20. ¹⁰⁸Ibid., II, 34.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., II, 27-28.

and the necessary "tools" with which she constructed her Irish novels.

Her sympathies were frequently with these poor, downtrodden Irishmen. In 1822, during a period of acute economic stress, Maria donated money to the Irish Poor Subscriptions. Thomas Spring-Rice, who was in charge of dispensing the fund, consulted with Maria as to what would be the most just and beneficial application of the money.¹¹⁰

While Maria sympathized with the lower classes, and worked to alleviate their miseries, she did not reject the aristocratic tenets of a society of classes and restricted political responsibility. Rather, she seems to argue against the methods used to assure that this power would remain in the hands of the aristocracy. Here again, Maria seems to have been affected by her father's experience and principles.

Foreseeing that the question of the Union would probably arise in the Irish Parliament, Edgeworth stood for and was elected to Parliament, by the borough of St. John's Town, County of Longford, in 1798. This was the last parliament to sit in Ireland before the Act of Union became a reality.¹¹¹ He took part in the heated debates on the issue, first arguing for the Union, but finally voting against it because he realized the Union was being forced on an unwilling majority. While he believed a union between England and Ireland would be beneficial to Ireland, he was unwilling to see Irishmen forced to submit to coercion

¹¹⁰ Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Edgeworth," May 22, 1822, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, II, 199-200.

¹¹¹ Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 200.

even if his own goals were at stake.

In this instance, Edgeworth was offered bribes of "every possible form" if he would but change his vote.¹¹² The practice of bribery was evidently commonplace in parliament, just as bribery and coercion were determining factors in elections. Maria and her father firmly believed "elections should be free, that landlords should not force their tenants to vote." But, they also upheld the landlord's right to exert whatever "influence" he could over the voters. In this manner, they believed property would be fairly represented, thereby maintaining the "real balance" of the constitution. If, however, Edgeworth found a tenant had voted against him, he did not seek any revenge against the man other than to withdraw his favor from that tenant who opposed him.¹¹³ Many proprietors took stronger reprisal against their tenants in such cases.¹¹⁴

Maria's father did not attach any significance to a man's religious affiliation, be he a tenant, a political aspirant, or a voter.¹¹⁵ In all these attitudes, Maria's opinions coincided with those of her father. Injustices such as those imposed by the wretched

¹¹²Ibid., II, 253-55.

¹¹³In the usual landlord-tenant arrangement, it would appear to this author that the withdrawal of the landlord's favor could have an equally devastating effect on the poor tenant.

¹¹⁴Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to C. Sneyd Edgeworth," February 12, 1835, in Maria's Memoirs, III, 168-71.

¹¹⁵Edgeworth, "Letter to Roman Catholics of the County of Longford," November 1, 1792, in Edgeworth's Memoirs, II, 147-48.

leases needed to be abolished, but Maria never sanctioned any revolutionary change which would place real power in the hands of the people. In 1828, she stated this opinion of democracy in a letter to a friend:

I am as adverse, from reason and from aristocratic taste, as you can be to democracy; I feel as keenly as you do the monstrous, the disgusting absurdity of letting the many-headed, the greasy many-headed monster rule. The French Revolution gave us enough of the majesty of the people. . . .¹¹⁶

She did desire the aristocracy to be an enlightened ruling class which "deserved its powers and privileges through devotion to what she considered its obvious duties toward the rest of the community."¹¹⁷ She undoubtedly saw her father in this elevated role.¹¹⁸

As a writer, Maria was naturally interested in the literary works of her contemporaries. She kept abreast with current literature, a pastime she obviously enjoyed. Her interests were not confined to the genre of fiction alone. Maria's letters to friends and family abound with references to what she was presently reading; frequently, Maria passed judgment on these literary offerings of her peers. Her reading selections ranged from children's books of fiction, such as Mrs. Barbauld's

¹¹⁶Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Captain Basil Hall," October 12, 1828, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, III, 16-23.

¹¹⁷Michael Hurst, Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene, Intellect, Fine Feeling and Landlordism in the Age of Reform (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 15. Hereafter cited as Hurst, Maria and the Public Scene.

¹¹⁸One need only examine the second volume of Edgeworth's Memoirs to comprehend the high regard in which Maria held her father and his actions in respect to running his estate. Edgeworth died before the second volume was finished. Maria edited his notes and wrote the second volume herself.

Evenings at Home, to informative literature such as a travelogue, "Modern Voyages and Travels," to more weighty volumes such as Fleury's Memoirs of Napoleon, Madame de Staël's Dix Annee's d'Exile, Hannah Moore's Letters, and Charles Darwin's Voyage.¹¹⁹

Maria was, then, a woman of the "world," an educated, intelligent woman. She had easy access to first-hand knowledge of the social, political, and economic conditions of Ireland. Born to the ruling class, yet closely associated with the lower class tenants on the Edgeworth estate, Maria was in an advantageous position to view both the best and the worst of her world. Yet, in her own literary endeavors, Maria chose to ignore the controversial, political issues of her own time.¹²⁰ Instead, she used her talents to tell stories with morals, and to point up those areas in which the aristocracy fell short of fulfilling the ideals of an enlightened ruling class as she envisioned it.

Mr. Edgeworth was a partner to his daughter's authorship, just as he was in every other venture of her life. Whether his contributions enhanced or stifled Maria's creative ability is open to question.¹²¹ In any event, his close supervision and criticisms of her works were

¹¹⁹Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, I, 50; II, 43; II, 140; II, 148; III, 164-65; III, 201.

¹²⁰Ernest A. Baker, Edgeworth, Austen, Scott, Vol. VI of The History of the English Novel (11 vols.; London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1935), pp. 14-15. Hereafter cited as Baker, Edgeworth.

¹²¹Newby, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 50-51.

factors which influenced Maria. She apparently welcomed, and indeed, took heed to any suggestions he made. She began each story with a sketch--a "bare skeleton"--and rarely proceeded beyond this point without her father's approval. After she submitted the sketch to Edgeworth, he then "filled it out" orally, by painting verbal descriptions and delineating the characters indicated in the sketch. After these discussions, after many seeds of thought were planted in Maria's mind, she then "wrote on" until the story was completed. Even then, the stories were subjected to being cut and revised again on Edgeworth's command.¹²²

One of her novels, however, was written under different circumstances. Castle Rackrent is entirely Maria's own work. She wrote it during her father's absence, had it published anonymously, and presented it to her family for observation as though it were the work of another. It is a curious fact that Castle Rackrent received the most favorable criticism, and it is admittedly the most original of Maria's stories.¹²³ Thus, the question arises as to the nature of Edgeworth's influence on Maria's creativity.¹²⁴ For Maria, there was no uncertainty as to the benefit she derived from her father's guidance, for

¹²²Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 344-46.

¹²³Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, pp. 91-92.

¹²⁴When Maria's novel, Patronage, was published, it was attacked by critics. Maria said that the parts of the novel which they disliked were hers and not her father's. She offers this explanation to dispel any notion that her father's assistance was detrimental to her writing. Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 343-44.

she firmly believed she "should not have written or finished anything without his support."¹²⁵

Maria's earliest stories were written for the amusement and instruction of her younger brothers and sisters. These were witty, didactic, stories embodying simple moral lessons comprehensible to children.¹²⁶ Maria's favorite device in these stories was contrast. She pitted the human characteristics of industry against indolence, "modesty and integrity" against "pride and arrogance," ill temper against "sensibility," and thrift against extravagance in such a manner that even a child's mind could grasp the implications of the comparisons.¹²⁷ Even though these stories were the first ones Maria wrote, they were not the first of her stories to be published.

The first volume of Maria's stories to be published was Letters for Literary Ladies. This book, a collection of stories written in letter or essay form, and intended for adult readers, was published in 1795. Encouraged by the success of this book, Maria then published her first volume of children's stories, Parent's Assistant, during the following year.¹²⁸ Once she was safely launched into the literary world, Maria became a prolific writer. Her collected works fill twelve volumes, the bulk of which were written before her father's

¹²⁵Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 346, 352.

¹²⁶Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, p. 47; Butler, Black Book, p. 165.

¹²⁷Baker, Edgeworth, pp. 24-26.

¹²⁸Oliver, A Study of Maria, p. 102.

death in 1817.¹²⁹ Among her writings, there are five pieces of literature which are specifically "Irish" in character. One of these is entitled, "Essay on Irish Bulls;" the other four are novels: Castle Rackrent, Ennui, The Absentee, and Ormond.

The "Essay on Irish Bulls" is an interesting and entertaining piece of literature written with a dual purpose.¹³⁰ On one hand, it is a series of humorous stories, a good-natured exposition of grammatical blunders attributed to the Irish which produced confusing or contradictory statements. In a step-by-step procedure, Maria denies Irish authorship of these blunders, or "bulls," and proves that each initial misstatement originated with men of other than Irish extraction. In many instances, these men were renowned Englishmen such as William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Alexander Pope; their "bulls" appear in their famous literature. In such cases, the blunders were acceptable and passed into history without comment.¹³¹ Maria was led to the conclusion that what the English termed "Irish bulls" are, in truth, "often imputable to their English neighbors, or that they are justifiable by ancient precedents, or that they are produced by their

¹²⁹Newby, Maria Edgeworth, p. 86.

¹³⁰The title of this essay was misunderstood when it was first published. The Secretary of the Agricultural Society purchased a copy in the hope he would learn something about cattle breeding. Butler, Black Book, p. 185.

¹³¹Maria Edgeworth, Essay on Irish Bulls, in Maria Edgeworth: Tales and Novels, Anglistica & Americana, The Longford Edition (XII vols.; Germany: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969), IV, 121-22. Hereafter cited as Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels.

habits of using figurative and witty language."¹³²

Of more significance, the "Essay" served as a vehicle for Maria's stinging accusation lodged against the English because they consistently underrated the Irish and made them look ridiculous. She pointed to instances where a Frenchman, or an Englishman in a high position, or even the English press committed grammatical blunders, but in accordance with the unspoken rules of polite society, these "bulls" also passed unnoticed. Yet, let an Irishman err or become inventive in his use of the language, and his statements were instantly taken up, repeated, and made the object of derisive laughter.¹³³

The "Essay" was written soon after the Act of Union became a reality in 1801. Maria was calling attention to a very real problem which existed between the English and Irish peoples, and that was the low esteem in which the English held their Irish neighbors. Understanding and appreciation of the Irish were essential factors if a union between the two nations was to succeed. In the conclusion of the "Essay," Maria asked the English people to seek a deeper understanding and appreciation of Irishmen, their talents, and their language.¹³⁴ Needless to say, the separateness created down through the centuries by England's oppressive policies and derogatory attitude towards the Irish could not be solved by a political union alone.

¹³²Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, 184.

¹³³Ibid., IV, 112-15.

¹³⁴Ibid., IV, 187.

Maria found her greatest inspiration in the Irish theme which she developed in the four novels, Castle Rackrent, Ennui, The Absentee, and Ormond. Here, she was able to express herself easily, to bring into play those principles of astute aristocratic leadership she deemed vital to the development of a stable Ireland. Furthermore, she was "the first writer to render the racial peculiarities of the Irish with the charm of perfect comprehension."¹³⁵ A portrayal of the life style and character types found among both the aristocratic and tenant classes of Irish society are woven into these delightful stories. For these reasons, Maria's Irish stories are worthy of closer examination.

¹³⁵Baker, Edgeworth, p. 18.

CHAPTER III

IRELAND'S "FASHIONABLE SOCIETY" AS PORTRAYED IN THE IRISH STORIES

Maria Edgeworth wrote with a single objective in mind, and that was to "instruct" her readers.¹ Her four Irish novels, Castle Rackrent, Ennui, The Absentee, and Ormond, gain in stature and become historically significant because Miss Edgeworth provides the reader with an accurate concept of many facets of Irish life and character. The manners and prejudice, passions and pastimes, life style and idiosyncrasies of early nineteenth century Irishmen are explicated through the character types who "inhabit" Maria's Irish novels. She was, however, particularly intent upon pointing up the failures and weaknesses of Ireland's ruling class. Therefore, Maria used a direct approach to get her message across. In most instances, she created fictional heroes who exemplified a particular ideal and she used them to expose, by contrast, the follies of the aristocracy.

The major theme throughout these four novels is the wasteful lives and irresponsible attitudes of the landed aristocracy in Ireland. The "idealistic" hero of The Absentee is Lord Colambre, son of the Irishman, Lord Clonbrony, who was an absentee living in London. Colambre spent a happy childhood in Ireland among loving family and servants, but he was soon removed from the security of these familiar

¹Baker, Edgeworth, p. 18.

surroundings and sent to school in England. Going on to Cambridge, he received a sound education in "literature and science." Colambre made many English friends at the University, but they were men whose intellect was of such quality that prejudice was beneath them. Thus, Colambre was unaware of the superior attitude with which many fashionable Englishmen viewed their Irish counterparts. He was shocked and saddened when, upon returning to his parents' London home, he chanced to overhear a conversation among some English ladies. They expressed contempt for Colambre's Irish parents, and derisively referred to the Clonbronzys as "Irish absentees."

Colambre was disturbed by the term, "absentee." He was to inherit an Irish estate in the near future and the decision to live either the life of an absentee or that of an Irish landlord who resided in Ireland upon his own estate would then rest with him.² At this point, Colambre could not decide which course to follow. It is apparent from the beginning of the story, however, that Colambre is a man of fine character. He consistently avoided what Maria points up as the usual pitfalls of his class, such as agreeing to a marriage of convenience to solve his parents' financial problems.³ Unlike other young men of the upper class, Colambre also expressed a strong desire to preserve the family honor.⁴

Colambre soon decided to return to Ireland, much to his mother's

²Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, VI, 3-6.

³Ibid., 18-19. ⁴Ibid., 66.

disappointment; and, traveling incognito, the young man paid a visit to the Clonbrony estate.⁵ Here, his eyes were opened to all the evils of the absentee landlord system. After a variety of experiences, Colambre returned to London and found his parents in desperate financial circumstances. They had squandered their fortune and were unable to meet the pressing demands of a hoard of creditors. Colambre, the dutiful son, offered to use a portion of his inheritance to save the Clonbrony estate, but--the offer hinged on an important provision: Lord and Lady Clonbrony must agree to return to Ireland and "cease to be absentees."⁶

Lord Clonbrony was willing, indeed happy to meet this demand; but Lady Clonbrony answered Colambre's offer with a flat refusal to leave her beloved "Lon'on." She, not her husband, was primarily responsible for the Clonbrony's present situation--their residence in London and their lavish entertainments which had reduced them to paupers.⁷ Lady Clonbrony provides a striking contrast to her idealistic son. Maria reinforces her picture of the ideal situation when, in the final analysis, Lady Clonbrony is forced to accept Colambre's terms. The family abandoned their meaningless life in London and returned to attend their own affairs in Ireland.⁸

Maria's next two heroes, the Earl of Glenthorn in Ennui, and Harry Ormond in Ormond, are not prepared to be enlightened landlords

⁵Ibid., 128-29. ⁶Ibid., 184. ⁷Ibid., 198-99.

⁸Ibid., 215-17.

when Maria begins their stories. Neither of them has those obvious qualities of integrity and leadership which were apparent in the young Lord Colambre's character; and neither of them was born to the aristocracy, although the circumstances of Glenthorn's birth are concealed until Maria is midway through his story. Both Glenthorn and Ormond underwent a series of experiences which Maria designed to mold them into "desirable" members of the aristocracy.

The young, arrogant Earl of Glenthorn came into a fortune at an early age. He inherited large holdings in England, and one estate in an Irish maritime province from whence came his title, the Earl of Glenthorn. In his youth, this particular hero cared not at all for the management of his own affairs, but placed the responsibility of the Glenthorn fortune in the hands of agents of doubtful integrity. Having thus escaped his duty, Glenthorn devoted himself to pleasure and became a master of the "art of dissipation." Large sums of money were sacrificed to an endless pursuit of happiness, traveling on the continent, and vacationing at fashionable "watering places" in England. But to no avail, for Glenthorn could not elude the heavy shadow of "ennui," or boredom, which hung about him like a shroud.⁹

At one point, Glenthorn became captivated by the excitement of the "gaming tables," but his available cash ran out. Unable to mortgage or sell his estate because his grandfather's will contained a prohibitive clause, Glenthorn turned to a marriage of convenience

⁹Ibid., IV, 213-17.

with a frivolous young heiress. The marriage agreement also imposed a restriction on Glenthorn: he was forced to forego the pleasures of gambling, a circumstance which caused the young man to hold the lady in contempt.¹⁰

Maria saw this type of marriage as detrimental to society. Marriages of the same nature occur in Ormond and Castle Rackrent; and in each case, Maria presents a bleak picture of a union which was disagreeable to both parties: any attempt at unity of purpose was rendered futile, and the family was destroyed.¹¹ Such was the fate of the young Earl and his wife. Lady Glenthorn eventually ran off with her husband's conniving agent. Glenthorn, relieved of the tension and confinement of an unsatisfactory marriage, settled back into an aimless routine.¹²

A short time later, the young man was again aroused out of his lethargy by a fascination for boxing matches; but he quickly set aside this passion when he overheard "a foreigner of rank and reputation

¹⁰Ibid., 219-22.

¹¹Sir Ulick O'Shane's wife was a good deal older than her husband. She sought to compensate for this age difference by using all the contrivances--"false eyebrows, wigs," etc., which the beautician could provide. These measures were not entirely successful, and the insecure Lady was therefore jealous of younger women. She still loved him, however, in spite of his obvious lack of interest in her. Sir Ulick took over a considerable portion of the Lady's fortune, and when his schemes collapsed, all this was lost.

Sir Kit in Castle Rackrent became bitter when his wife would not place her wealth at his disposal. Therefore, he locked his wife in a room where she remained for seven years, until Sir Kit was killed in a duel. Ibid., IX, 230-34; IV, 17-20.

¹²Ibid., IV, 234-37.

express astonishment at [the Irish] taste for these savage spectacles."¹³ In such empty, extravagant entertainments, Glenthorn passed his life, until the fulfillment of a vague promise to his old "nurse" and a sentimental mission on behalf of a dead pugilist prompted him to go to Ireland.¹⁴ In Ireland, the Earl made a startling discovery: the woman he thought was an old family nurse was, in truth, his natural mother. The Earl was a "changeling;"¹⁵ and the true heir to the Glenthorn fortune, called Christy, lived in a peasant's hut near Glenthorn Castle.¹⁶ Even more significant, the young man became involved with a group of people who represented a microcosm of Irish society.

For the heretofore indolent, disinterested "Earl," involvement proved to be a "cure-all." Maria juxtaposed the shallow, social climbers with the concerned, diligent members of the community. Glenthorn's accurate appraisal of the values of the several aristocratic types completed his education. Bereft of a fortune, he turned to a study of the law as a means of earning a livelihood.¹⁷ Maria rewarded her now-ambitious hero by providing him with a suitable wife and, through a quirk of fate, restoring him as the Earl of Glenthorn.¹⁸

Maria has been called a utilitarian with respect to her views on "what every man owes his fellows." She did not support the revolutionary theory of equitable rights for individuals, but she believed in the

¹³Ibid., 240-41. ¹⁴Ibid., 230-32; 241.

¹⁵Ibid., 352-54. ¹⁶Ibid., 362.

¹⁷Ibid., 394-95. ¹⁸Ibid., 405-07.

doctrine of "the greatest good of the greatest number." It is not surprising that Maria should support this philosophy. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, her father, was a living example of these principles; and Etienne Dumont, the "colleague and expositor" of Jeremy Bentham, was a close friend of the Edgeworth family.¹⁹ Although it is evident to some extent in many of Maria's stories, an obvious expression of the utilitarian doctrine appears in Ennui.

The turning point of Glenthorn's life came when he decided to hand over the Glenthorn fortune to its rightful heir, "Christy," and maintain himself through his own efforts. "I became active, permanently active," Glenthorn relates,²⁰ and in due course he completed his legal training at the Temple in London. As a productive member of society, the Earl acquired that inner peace and satisfaction of life which eluded him while he was "stretched on the rack of a too easy chair."²¹

The "too easy chair" was now occupied by Christy, and from this "exalted" position his fortune took a turn for the worse. Christy was raised as a peasant, eked out a living as a blacksmith, and was content because he had all he desired in a good family, sufficient food and shelter, sound health and a functional duty to perform at the forge.²² The sudden acquisition of wealth destroyed Christy's

¹⁹Baker, Edgeworth, VI, 15-16.

²⁰Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, 388.

²¹Ibid., 406. ²²Ibid., 362.

family as they struggled to obtain a semblance of aristocratic manners and prestige. The end result was that Christy's beloved son, Johnny, became an idle drunkard.

One evening, after he had overindulged in drink, Johnny placed a lighted candle on the head of his bed, a practice he followed with safety in the old mud cottage. But the curtains and woodwork in the castle were flammable and both quickly ignited. Glenthorn Castle burned to the ground. Johnny died in the fire because Christy was unable to rouse him from a deep, liquor-induced slumber.

The bereaved Christy lamented the loss of his only son and the simple peasant life he had known as a commoner. To this life he returned. Christy abandoned his claim to the Glenthorn estate, and the fortune then passed to a distant heir--the current wife of the Earl of Glenthorn!²³ Implicit in the conclusion to the story is the theory that Glenthorn was now capable of reconciling the role of a wealthy landlord with that of a responsible member of society. The reader also feels certain Christy will find solace when his idle, pretentious existence is behind him and he is once again active at the forge. In these respective roles, Glenthorn and Christy became useful members of society.

Harry Ormond of Ormond was more deficient than Glenthorn in his ability to be an effective landlord because he lacked the advantages of a formal education. Born to an army officer and a woman "without

²³Ibid., 405-06.

a fortune," Harry's parents were shunned by the "substantial" elements of society. In debt, and unable to support his family, Harry's father was finally forced to go to India and leave his wife and child behind. Mrs. Ormond died soon after, leaving Harry "at nurse" in an Irish peasant's cabin. Mr. Ormond's old army friend, Sir Ulick O'Shane, stepped in and rescued the baby Harry; thereafter, Harry was the "darling" of Sir Ulick's life.

Oddly enough, Sir Ulick took more pleasure in Harry's company than in that of his own son, Marcus, although Sir Ulick's ambitions were for his aristocratic heir. Even though Sir Ulick shamelessly indulged his young ward, he never saw the necessity of an education for Harry. Consequently, his natural son, Marcus, studied while Harry "ran wild," receiving an education of sorts from the gamekeeper, the huntsman, and Sir Ulick's cousin, King Corny of Black Islands.²⁴

Harry gave little thought to the future until one night after a drinking bout when he and Marcus were involved in a scrap with a peasant. Harry accidentally shot the fellow, a tragedy which caused the grief-stricken young man to examine his conscience and to evaluate the life he lived. Lady Amaly, a woman of quality and a guest in Sir Ulick's house, expressed deep concern for Harry in his tragedy.²⁵ Overwhelmed by the Lady's sympathy, Harry Ormond determined to become worthy of her friendship. Maria contrived a "pilgrimage" for Harry which was geared to form his character and to make

²⁴Ibid., IX, 234-35. ²⁵Ibid., 240-41; 255-57.

the "hero" a productive member of Irish society. Harry learned to speak French, became a frequent reader and acquired an excellent library, traveled on the continent, and learned to differentiate between sincere and frivolous women.²⁶

Occasionally, the young man's good intentions gave way to temptation or vanity; Harry emulated the wrong type of character and became first an "Irish Tom Jones," and later a "driving, dancing, country coxcomb" surrounded by "silly girls."²⁷ In spite of Harry's transgressions, he eventually attained the desired goal: education, wealth, position and an admirable character.²⁸ His long "journey" over, Ormond purchased the deceased King Corny's estate and became a benevolent leader to the backward inhabitants of the Black Islands.²⁹

The key to the fourth novel, Castle Rackrent, lies in the family name of "Rackrent." The name is a corruption of the term rack-rent, a term defined as a "high, extortionate rent which is nearly equal to the full annual value of the land." This "backward," "inefficient," agricultural system, prevalent in Ireland until shortly after the Great Famine occurred, could only function by reducing the cultivator's

²⁶Ibid., 303; 292-95; 466 ff.; 394-98.

²⁷Ibid., 287; 305-06.

²⁸Harry's fortune came from his father's second wife, a woman Mr. Ormond had married in India. Ibid., 384-85.

²⁹Ibid., 527-28.

standard of living to subsistence level.³⁰ Maria indicates that further financial pressure was brought to bear against the peasantry through the selfish and thoughtless attitude of their landlords.

Castle Rackrent is unique among Maria's works because it has a series of anti-heroes in the four generations of the Rackrent family who succeeded in turn as proprietors of the family estate. Their story is told by a servant, "Old Thady," who has been faithful to the family for several generations. Maria's ideal is conversely stated in this novel because, without exception, each Rackrent landlord contributed to the deterioration and ultimate destruction of the family estate. The Castle Rackrent landlords--Sir Patrick, Sir Murtagh, Sir Kit, and Sir Conolly Rackrent--along with Lord Clonbrony in The Absentee, and Sir Ulick O'Shane in Ormond, are representatives of character types which were apparently all too numerous among the Irish landlord class of Maria's day. Some of these landlords were popular with their tenants, others were feared and hated by them; but the tenants' attitude was based solely on the personality--not the action--of their masters. These proprietors were all guilty of rack-renting, and of maintaining a life style and standard of living far in excess of what their estates could support.

Sir Patrick and Sir Conolly were extremely generous to their

³⁰The Oxford English Dictionary, Being a Corrected Re-issue with an Introduction, Supplement, and Bibliography of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, 1st ed., 1933; R. D. Collison Black, Economic Thought and The Irish Question, 1817-1870 (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), p. 20. Hereafter cited as Black, Economic Thought.

friends. Originally, their family name was O'Shaughlin, but Sir Patrick inherited the estate from a distant cousin on condition he legally change the family name to Rackrent. Patrick was reluctant to accept this condition, but with an eye to economic gain, finally agreed. The name Rackrent was a bad omen, and unfortunately all the "new" Rackrents lived up to it. In one way or another, each new proprietor took more and more out of the estate at the expense of their tenants, but did nothing to enhance its value. These two men, the first and fourth owners, "gave away" a substantial portion of the Rackrent fortune.

Under Sir Patrick's ownership, Castle Rackrent became the center of the social activity of "three counties." The house teemed with visitors from "one year's end to another." To accommodate the overflow of guests, Patrick "fitted up the chicken coop" as sleeping quarters. This was a distasteful arrangement, but one which Thady indicates late comers accepted graciously when the alternative was to be excluded from Sir Patrick's festivities. The host provided abundant food and drink and accepted the lavish praise of his guests as adequate compensation for his hospitality.³¹

Sir Conolly, or "Condy" as Thady fondly called him, was the fourth and final Rackrent to own the family estate. Before Condy's death, the entire estate fell into the grasping hands of the agent, Jason M'Quirk. (Jason is Old Thady's son, but Thady severed all ties

³¹Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, 2-4.

with him rather than to condone his "unscrupulous" actions.) Condy came from a poor branch of the family, had trained at the bar, but had failed in his attempt to become a lawyer. The indolent lad was pleasant, and therefore a great favorite with the Rackrent tenants; however, he took advantage of their friendship. Frequently finding himself short of money, Condy borrowed from the tenants against the day he would own Castle Rackrent.³² As proprietor of the debt-ridden estate, Condy was continually harrassed by creditors. To escape this pressure, he began the practice of giving Jason more land and power in exchange for his services as agent. Sir Condy "hated trouble" and "could never be brought to hear talk of business." He chose to ignore the numerous letters and creditors' accounts which were sent to the Castle.³³

The Conolly's also entertained frequently but Thady said it was done to suit Lady Isabella Rackrent. Condy had married her in hopes of stabilizing the Rackrent fortune, but her family withheld financial assistance because they vehemently disapproved of Condy's character. Nor were they happy with the underhanded manner in which Condy engineered the runaway marriage of their daughter. The few thousand pounds "Bella" brought to Condy from an inheritance was frittered away by that extravagant young lady on fancy clothing, coaches, and redecorating the Castle.³⁴ As for Condy, hunting with friends was more to his taste, an occupation he fervently carried on

³²Ibid., 23-25. ³³Ibid., 32-33. ³⁴Ibid., 30.

at every possible opportunity.³⁵

When a vacancy occurred in parliament, Condry succumbed to the flattery of his friends and "stood for the election," although his only merit was his social status. This was Condry's most outrageous and costly venture. Relying on friends who pledged financial support which never materialized, Condry was soon plunged further into debt. Nevertheless, he continued to entertain these "supporters" lavishly throughout the campaign. He won the election, but sacrificed the balance of the estate to the cause. Condry and Bella, claiming immunity because of Condry's newly acquired political position, escaped their creditors and fled to Dublin. Another obligation Condry escaped was the overwhelming number of demands by people from "all parts" who claimed to have "obliged" Condry with their votes. They came to "put him in mind of promises" made, but forgotten by the now successful candidate.³⁶

Old Thady approved of both of these landlords because they were generous even though their generosity placed a heavy burden on all those who lived on the Rackrent estate. When Condry ran out of candles in the midst of a lavish party, and could no longer purchase them on credit, he "borrowed" from people on the estate. Lacking cut turf for the fire, Condry ordered the trees cut down for burning, a practice which would soon denude the estate of its timber.³⁷

These things were insignificant to Thady. Condry and Sir Patrick were "good" to the peasants in the sense that they were friendly with

³⁵Ibid., 25-26. ³⁶Ibid., 34-38. ³⁷Ibid., 33.

them, and the shortsighted peasants reciprocated with fondness for their masters. Thady was more interested in Sir Patrick's and Condy's ability to live as gentlemen, or as he had grown accustomed to expect the aristocracy to live. Thady attached far more importance to these gentlemen's drinking capacities than he did to their financial attainments. Maria didn't share his views--both these gentlemen died of "drink;" Sir Patrick collapsed at the high point of one of his "galas,"³⁸ and Condy died as the result of a wager that he could drink a huntsman's horn full of liquor. Condy drank the horn full of whiskey, collected the reward of one hundred guineas, and then drank a second portion to prove his mettle.³⁹ Death was slow in coming, but "faithful Thady" remained at Condy's side until the end.

Sir Murtagh and Sir Kit were not popular with the Rackrent tenants. Murtagh and his wife were stingy, and took advantage of every possible occasion to cheat the tenants of their historic rights and to press to the fullest measure their claims of "duties" from the tenants. Indeed, Murtagh was so stingy that Thady was ashamed for him when he refused to offer the tenants their customary draught of whiskey when they paid their rents. Furthermore, Lady Murtagh furnished the entire Rackrent household with linens made from "duty yarn." The spinners provided the yarn as a duty; the weavers handled the yarn "gratis" because Lady Murtagh had connections with the Linen Board and could distribute looms to those weavers who accommodated her; the tenant who ran the bleach

³⁸Ibid., 3-4. ³⁹Ibid., 61-62.

house could refuse her nothing as Sir Murtagh held the threat of a lawsuit "hanging over him about the water-course."⁴⁰

Lady Murtagh set a bountiful table. This, too, was done at the expense of the tenants because she kept a "sharp look-out and knew to the tub of butter everything the tenants had, all around." Knowing the Lady's "way," the tenants never came near the Castle without an offering, for they feared she would set the "driver" against them or encourage her husband to involve them in a lawsuit.

Through an excessive claim of duty work, Sir Murtagh's turf was cut, "potatoes set and dug," hay brought in, and "in short, all the work about his house done for nothing." Murtagh discouraged the mending of fences on the estate, however, because he had a right to the tenants' cattle if they chanced to stray into the landlord's fields.⁴¹ Obviously, the peasants could not prosper under these circumstances, but one would expect Sir Murtagh's personal fortune to take a turn for the better. This was not the case. Like the rest of the Rackrents, Sir Murtagh was representative of another type of Irishman--the type who became excessively involved with the law and lawsuits.

It has been stated that most Irish stories of this period indicate a "prevalence of lawlessness in Irish life," and suggested that this situation arose because of too stringent law codes. The situation was further complicated when the gentry who established

⁴⁰Ibid., 5-6. ⁴¹Ibid., 6-7.

the severe penalties for criminal offenses were then revolted by their handiwork and compensated for the oppressive measures by refusing to enforce compliance with the law.⁴² The law became every man's "game," and Maria was no exception when it came to exposing the breakdown and misuse of the Irish legal system.

While Sir Condy used the law to elude his creditors while he sat in parliament, Sir Murtagh used the law in an effort to make a profit. Thady was overwhelmed at the amount of paperwork and the variety of lawsuits with which his master was involved: ". . . roads, lanes, bogs, wells, ponds, eel-wires, orchards, trees, tithes, vagrants, gravelpits, sandpits, dunghills, and nuisances, every thing upon the face of the earth furnished him good matter for a suit." Thady was perplexed, though, because of the forty-one lawsuits Sir Murtagh initiated, he won all but seventeen. While the successful suits all paid well--some of them as much as "three times the cost"--the burden of the remaining suits kept Murtagh financially distressed. However, always confident the next suit would bring him a fortune, Murtagh continued to sell off pieces of the Rackrent estate so he could "carry on" his legal ventures. Thady, too, believed Murtagh might have succeeded had he not stepped on a "fairy mount" (an ant hill). Among the Irish peasantry, this was a bad omen. Consequently, Thady was not

⁴²Horatio Sheafe Krans, Irish Life in Irish Fiction (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966), pp. 228-29.

surprised when Murtagh died a short time later.⁴³

The unfortunate Murtagh died without heirs, and the estate then passed to his brother, Sir Kit. As a second son, Sir Kit's hope of succeeding to the family estate was doubtful: he chose an alternative course and became an army officer. The tenants and house servants were impressed with the dashing young officer when he first took over the Rackrent estate, for as Thady noted, "He valued a guinea as little as any man; money to him was no more than dirt. . . ." Failing to consider how the debts were to be paid, Sir Kit immediately began to repair the dilapidated estate, hiring "an architect for the house, and an improver for the grounds." Unfortunately, Sir Kit's generosity and improvements were short-lived: when the "sporting" season ended, he abandoned Ireland for the exciting life of England's fashionable resorts.⁴⁴

With Sir Kit's departure, the woes of the tenantry began anew under an agent, one of those middlemen who "grind the face of the poor:" not a week passed "without a call for money."

In the beginning, Thady blamed the agents for the misery that now attended the daily lives of the tenants:

Rents must be all paid up to the day, and afore; no allowance for improving tenants, no consideration for those who had built upon their farms: no sooner was a lease out, but the land was advertised to the highest bidder, all the old tenants turned out, when

⁴³Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, 7-8.

⁴⁴Ibid., 10.

they spent their substance in the hope and trust of a renewal from the landlord. All was now let at the highest penny to a parcel of poor wretches, who meant to run away, and did so, after taking two crops out of the ground.⁴⁵

It soon became evident, however, that Sir Kit's urgent need of money stemmed from an inordinate love of "play," undoubtedly gambling, during his sojourn to Bath.

The agent, unable to meet Sir Kit's demands for money, resigned, and the inept landlord made a marriage of convenience to a Jewish heiress and returned to Ireland. Ironically, Sir Kit was unable to persuade his bride to sacrifice her wealth (in this case, jewels), to bolster the Rackrent fortune.⁴⁶ Sir Kit was forced to live out the remainder of his life in the country, which he did in great style, and to forego those pleasures found in England's exciting cities.

Sir Kit bears a resemblance to Lord Clonbrony of The Absentee. In both cases, Irish estates fell into ruin while Irish money was carried out of the country and spent where it helped to expand the English economy. But Maria indicates Lord Clonbrony is an Irishman of a different type from Sir Kit. Having the potential to be a successful Irish landlord, but lacking the courage to defy his wife, Clonbrony allows himself to be persuaded that Irish society is in no way comparable to the glittering company found in London.⁴⁷ Clonbrony, a respected man in Ireland, was in London society a "mere cipher," a man who could never command the respect of those condescending social

⁴⁵Ibid., 10-11. ⁴⁶Ibid., 12-13; 16. ⁴⁷Ibid., VI, 198-99.

climbers who frequented his home at Lady Clonbrony's behest. Distaste for these people caused Clonbrony to shun London's fashionable society and to seek out friends among men of a lower rank. In these circles, Clonbrony had the satisfaction of being a person of stature, even though he became "less of a gentleman" in the eyes of his peers.⁴⁸

Sir Kit and Lord Clonbrony were sad, weak men. Nevertheless, Maria leveled an accusing finger at all absentees, and especially the Clonbrony's. One season alone in London had cost them a significant part of their timber, and brought untold misery to their tenants under a cruel, grasping agent.⁴⁹ But, as ill-suited to the role of responsible landlords as these men are, they are outdone in their weakness, greed, and laxity by Sir Ulick O'Shane of Ormond.

Sir Ulick was an Irish schemer, a type Maria did not limit to the aristocracy, but one which she found prevalent in all classes of Irish society. Along with the practice of indulging in the despicable rack-renting agricultural system, and in lavish entertainments, he also made two marriages of convenience. His first marriage was for love, but the second one was to gain position and the third was to increase his wealth.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Sir Ulick used underhanded methods to secure a "baronetcy," took advantage of his political position to engage in "jobbing" and pocketed public funds, and protected his criminal tenants only as long as it was to his advantage. When circumstances altered, Sir Ulick handed the renegades over to the law in a last-minute attempt

⁴⁸Ibid., 21-22. ⁴⁹Ibid., 199. ⁵⁰Ibid., IX, 432; 231; 229.

to preserve his public image.⁵¹

In short, Sir Ulick O'Shane was guilty of every practice Maria abhorred in the landlord class. Sir Ulick defended his position, saying he had "very good prospects in life," but his cousin scornfully noted that Ulick had "been always living on prospects."⁵² Ultimately, Sir Ulick was destroyed, and at his death a secret funeral was necessary to protect his body from the angry public.⁵³

Sir Ulick was a crooked politician, one who used his dubious talents to his personal advantage. However, Maria did not see him as any greater threat to society than his son, Marcus, or Condy of Castle Rackrent, or the "Earl" of Glenthorn of Ennui. Marcus held all the lower classes in contempt, considering them "slaves" or "savages." Even though Marcus said he was a "government man" in his political leanings, he was, in truth, ignorant of politics. Maria characterized this arrogant youth as one of those men "who make their politics an excuse to their conscience for the indulgence of a violent temper."⁵⁴

The good-natured Condy, on the other hand, was not an intentionally malicious politician. He was deceived by his friends when they flattered the reluctant candidate into believing he was capable of contributing to the administration of Ireland's government. But, perhaps Maria respected his type more than the type of landlord characterized by the intelligent, but bored, young Earl of Glenthorn.

⁵¹Ibid., 273; 277; 409-10; 457. ⁵²Ibid., 276. ⁵³Ibid., 519.

⁵⁴Ibid., 425-26.

He remained uninformed on political matters because, lacking ambition for advancement of any kind, he saw no further reason to become involved.⁵⁵ If Glenthorn was ill-informed, it was far better for society that he also remain detached from the Irish political system. One thing is certain. The aristocracy of the early nineteenth century as depicted in Maria's Irish novels was over-ambitious, disinterested, or otherwise unqualified in the field of politics to such an extent that they made extremely poor public servants.

Irishmen of this period were also guilty of racial and religious prejudice, notably against the Scots and Jews who happened to reside in their country. Several instances of such prejudice are found in these novels. Lady Murtagh, the wife of one of the Rackrent proprietors, was notorious for her frugal handling of any aspect of the business of the estate which could turn a profit. Maria further emphasized her stingy nature by giving her an appropriate maiden name: Skinflint. The gentle and generous Thady could not abide this woman. Uncertain as to why he was repulsed by Lady Murtagh, he instinctively attributed his hatred to her Scottish blood because "anything else [he] could have looked over in her from a regard to the family."⁵⁶

Maria treated M'Leod, the Scottish agent in Ennui, with a great deal more respect, although the Earl of Glenthorn viewed him with deep-seated suspicion. M'Leod was a man of few words, a man who conducted

⁵⁵Ibid., IV, 295-96. ⁵⁶Ibid., 5.

himself with the utmost dignity, and one who never acted hastily or unwisely.⁵⁷ He was concerned for the Irish poor, and attempted to educate those who lived on his private farm.⁵⁸ Still, Glenthorn was not convinced of his sincerity until M'Leod continued to befriend him in his adversity.⁵⁹ He was a sincere, honest man, just as he had represented himself. Therefore, Maria herself cannot be accused of prejudice against the Scots because she did not consistently characterize them as an inferior race.

Miss Edgeworth was not as open-minded about Jews. Both the Jewish wife of Sir Kit in Castle Rackrent and a Jew named Mordicai in The Absentee were intensely disliked by all the people who came in contact with them. Thady particularly disliked Sir Kit's wife, or "The Jewish" as he called her. Her ways were strange and consequently she was rejected by all of the Castle Rackrent population: she ate no pork, attended neither mass nor church, and could not communicate with them in English. In the old servant's opinion, she was sorely amiss and unfaithful in withholding her fortune from Sir Kit. Thady was in despair; nothing but evil could come to the Castle Rackrent inhabitants with a "heretic blackamoor" as Lady of the estate.⁶⁰ Thady's forebodings materialized, and "The Jewish" left the estate just as unpopular as she had been upon her arrival.

Mordicai, the money lender and coach maker in The Absentee, is a thoroughly despicable character. He is either present or active behind

⁵⁷Ibid., 263-65. ⁵⁸Ibid., 290-93. ⁵⁹Ibid., 368. ⁶⁰Ibid., 14.

the scenes in nearly every unpleasant experience which concerns the Glenbrony's financial status.⁶¹ Maria never exonerates the sly con-
niving Mordicai, and she implies to the end that he is a parasite who
exists on the follies of unwise men. She also makes occasional un-
pleasant references to Jews in Ennui.⁶²

Maria, herself, occasionally upheld the prudery which was attri-
buted to her class. One instance was her attitude toward marriage.
Lord Colambre of The Absentee was repulsed by marriages of convenience.⁶³
In this matter, Maria's opinion was possibly based on example because
she probably had seen the end result of these unions. However, when
she subjected Colambre to torment and misery because unfounded scandal
had touched the woman he loved, and had made marriage between them
unthinkable, Maria was falling back on the snobbish attitude of her
class.⁶⁴ A comparable situation exists with regard to her attitude
toward the Jews in Ireland.

Maria's unfavorable portrayal of Jews was obvious; and in 1816
she received a letter of protest from a Jewish woman living in Rich-
mond, Virginia. Ironically, this woman's name was Miss Rachael
Mordecai, and she "reproached" Maria for making the Jews in her stories
look "ridiculous." Miss Mordecai asked the author to write a story

⁶¹Ibid., VI, 7-10; 60-61; passim.

⁶²In his extreme financial stress, Glenthorn states that he would
rather deal with his guardian who has already cheated him, "than with
Jews." Ibid., IV, 213-14.

⁶³Ibid., VI, 18-19. ⁶⁴Ibid., 110-11.

with a "good Jew." Maria fulfilled this request in the novel Harrington; and, through continued correspondence, she became a great friend of her critic.⁶⁵

A variety of other Irish types appear in these stories, but two unique types are exemplified by Terence O'Fay of The Absentee and Cornelius O'Shane of Ormond. Terence O'Fay is interesting because his characterization coincides with the present-day concept of a glib Irishman who can talk his way out of any unpleasant situation. "Sir Terry" was one of the "lesser" men Lord Clonbrony associated with in an attempt to bolster his own ego. Maria describes his type effectively when she says:

No one could tell a good story, or sing a good song, better than Sir Terence; he exaggerated his native brogue, and his natural propensity to blunder, caring little whether the company laughed at him or with him, provided they laughed--"Live and laugh--laugh and live," was his motto; and certainly he lived on laughing, as well as many better men can contrive to live on a thousand a-year.⁶⁶

Sir Terry was akin to the "wise fools" that abound in Shakespeare's plays. He sometimes uttered statements which, on the surface, seemed meaningless and foolish but which contained, in reality, profound wisdoms gleaned from the daily experience of life. Terry's garbled comments on the part gold plays in the life of mankind is one such example. He supports his initial statement with a confused discourse on the gods and

⁶⁵Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, I, 319.

⁶⁶Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, VI, 22.

goddesses of mythical fame, and their use of gold. However, the underlying truth of Terry's original statement is not obscured, and the import of the comment instills the reader with respect for the speaker.⁶⁷

Lord Clonbrony was attached to Sir Terry because of his good-natured and pragmatic approach to any crisis which might arise. Terry further ingratiated himself to Clonbrony by being willing to go to any lengths for his friends. In fact, the rascal delighted in revealing the crafty exploits he employed to extricate people from their troubles. When the delicate and proper Lady Nugent expressed surprise that Terry thought nothing of the "swindles" he had manipulated, Terry corrected her: "Its not called swindling amongst gentlemen who know the world--it's only jockeying--fine sport--and very honourable to help a friend at a dead lift." And "friend" Sir Terry remained, sometimes placing himself in a precarious position, but in so doing, releasing others from the clutches of their creditors.⁶⁸

Cornelius O'Shane of the Black Islands is a man of a more serious nature than Terence O'Fay. He is unique because he is the one Catholic landlord of any significance in the four Irish novels. This fact alone isolates "King Corny," as his tenants fondly called him, from the bulk of the Irish landed aristocracy. This isolation is further signified by the location of Corny's estate, the Black Islands, which is separated from the Irish mainland by a narrow strip of water.

⁶⁷Ibid., 23. ⁶⁸Ibid., 63-65.

The farming methods employed on the Black Islands were by no means "modern," but they were methods by which the poor tenants could make a living. King Corny shunned the modern farming contraptions employed by farmers on the mainland because he believed the cost of the new equipment would exceed the amount of profit its use would yield. King Corny took a paternalistic approach to the welfare of his beloved tenants. He also staunchly upheld and obeyed the acts of parliament and actively engaged in the management of the estate.⁶⁹ Corny's leisure time was not spent in pursuit of frivolous pleasures. The old gentleman passed long hours in a workshop which he had equipped with the best of tools.⁷⁰

The habitants of the Black Islands, all Roman Catholic, were self-sufficient. The life they led was traditional, and while it appeared loathesome to the grasping Sir Ulick O'Shane, it was a life which was untouched by the misery and disaster taking place daily on the mainland. As previously noted, Maria and her father prided themselves in the broadminded approach to the Protestant-Catholic religious controversy of their day.⁷¹ By favorably contrasting King Corny and his life style with that of his cousin, the dishonest Sir Ulick, Maria was subtly encouraging the Protestant aristocracy to recognize the worth of their Catholic peers.

Through a discussion of the failures of these landlords, Maria

⁶⁹Ibid., IX, 275-76. ⁷⁰Ibid., 360.

⁷¹Supra, Chap. ii, n. 115.

also reveals the shallow, contemptible character of fashionable Irish ladies. The male fortune-hunters had a parallel in the women who were wealthy, but lacked that comforting status symbol--rank. For these women, the sole object of matrimony was the coveted title. The male rack-renters were no more despicable than their ladies because both capitalized on the fear and ignorance of their tenants. And, the absentee landlord was generally influenced by his wife in his decision to move the family residence to London.

Miss Edgeworth further categorized the women in her stories according to their pride, or lack of pride, in their country and their Irishness. The women Maria admired were, of course, the true Irish aristocracy--those who gloried in their heritage. Lady Annaly of Ormond was a woman beyond the middle years of life who had the necessary dignity to qualify for this high honor. Early in her life she became a widow; and, although the Lady was extremely beautiful and desirable, scandal never touched her life. Lady Annaly devoted the remainder of her life to rearing and educating her children. When her son attained his majority, she graciously handed over the Annaly estate, prosperous and intact, to a worthy son. The serious and sincere members of Irish society paid homage to this Lady who possessed true "noble qualities."⁷²

Among the "great Ladies" in Maria's stories, there is one who perfectly expresses Maria's sentiments of national pride: the Lady Geraldine of Ennui.⁷³ Angered because her foolish friends emulate the

⁷²Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IX, 232. ⁷³Ibid., IV, 300.

fashions and manners of two visiting English women, the reticent Lady Geraldine is moved to speak out with scorn:

Go on, my friends; go on, and prosper; beg and borrow all the patterns and precedents you can collect of the newest fashions of folly and vice. Make haste, make haste; they don't reach our remote island fast enough. We Irish might live in innocence half a century longer, if you didn't expedite the progress of profligacy; we might escape the plague that rages in neighboring countries, if we didn't, without any quarantine, and with open arms, welcome every suspected stranger; if we didn't encourage the importation of whole bales of tainted fineries, that will spread the contagion from Dublin to Cork, and from Cork to Galway!⁷⁴

The offensive English women, the Dashforts, who prompted Lady Geraldine's outburst, had misrepresented themselves. Far from being accepted into the elite society of London, they were unknown in these circles and consequently not admitted to the drawing rooms of fashionable London.⁷⁵ Maria resented these women who came to her country, availed themselves of Irish hospitality, and then made their hosts writhe with a sense of inferiority. The Lady Dashfort of The Absentee was such a woman. She imposed herself and her daughter on the Kilpatrick family for a lengthy visit, but her entire conversation was aimed at making the Kilpatricks look foolish to their other guests.⁷⁶

Yet, she and her ill-natured daughter were able to dominate and manipulate Dublin's society. Lady Dashfort, aware of her power over these Irish ladies, boasted to her intimate English companions: "Now see what follies I can lead these fools into. Hear the nonsense I can

⁷⁴Ibid. ⁷⁵Ibid., 302. ⁷⁶Ibid., VI, 103-04.

make them repeat as wit."⁷⁷ Fortunately, the sensibilities of all Irishmen were not dulled by these dreadful women. Speaking through Sir James Brooke, Maria took a firm stand against English visitors of this type:

I hope to Heaven they may never land again in Ireland! . . . one worthless woman, especially one worthless Englishwoman of rank, does incalculable mischief in a country like this, which looks up to the sister country for fashion. For my own part, as a warm friend to Ireland, I would rather see all the toads and serpents, and venomous reptiles, that St. Patrick carried off in his bag, come back to this island, than these two dashers.⁷⁸

The disgust Miss Edgeworth felt for these women was exceeded only by the repulsion she experienced when Irish women denied their nationality and proclaimed themselves "English-born." The feigned Englishwoman is epitomized in Lady Clonbrony in The Absentee. The Lady's claim to English nationality lay in the fact that she was born in Oxfordshire, regardless of the fact that she was of Irish parents. The native Londoners mimicked her speech: "Yes, and you cawnt conceive the peens she teekes to talk of the teebles and cheers, and to thank Q, and with so much teeste to speak pure English."⁷⁹

Occasionally, Lady Clonbrony was caught off guard, and she would slip back into her native brogue.⁸⁰ Try as she would, Lady Clonbrony could not successfully conceal her background. Nor could she win acceptance among Londoners of significant rank, although occasionally they were moved to pity her: "If you knew all she endures, to look, speak,

⁷⁷Ibid., 99. ⁷⁸Ibid., 92. ⁷⁹Ibid., 2. ⁸⁰Ibid., 16-17.

move, breathe, like an Englishwoman, you would pity her."⁸¹ But more often than not, the Lady was the object of unpleasant jests and sarcastic remarks.

Miss Edgeworth wrote of Ireland's decayed and reckless fashionable society because she hoped these men and women would recognize their conduct and life style as factors which were largely responsible for Ireland's economic failures. While this was true in part, Maria may have oversimplified the solution to an extremely complex problem. In a country where industry was scant, the bulk of the population obtained its living from the land. But, the amount of productive land in Ireland had an excessive burden to support in a rapidly increasing population.⁸²

The classical economists of the early nineteenth century wrestled with the problem,⁸³ but it took a disaster of overwhelming proportions--the Great Famine of 1846--to force a solution from the theorists' pages and transform it into a course of action. A temporary solution came with the passage of the Incumbered Estates Act of 1849, which provided that properties of insolvent landlords be sold by a special tribunal, and that the purchaser receive a "clear guaranteed title" to the land. Consequently, a new class of proprietor did come forward, one which had

⁸¹Ibid., 2.

⁸²Black, Economic Thought, pp. 3-4.

⁸³Black discusses the theories of several economists on the subject of the Irish land system. Ibid., passim, chap. ii.

a "sounder knowledge of business and estate management," but this change was also temporary. These businessmen were interested solely in profit, and thus less inclined to tolerate arrears in rents than their predecessors.⁸⁴

For the peasant in the post-1846 Famine period, there remained but one escape from the extreme misery of his life; and that escape was emigration. The mass of emigrants who left their homeland mitigated, for a time, the discomfort of those who stayed behind; and the country momentarily took on a look of prosperity. The failure of these solutions became evident when, in the 1860's, Ireland again experienced several severe crop failures. The "healing" factors of government intervention, intelligent landlords, and emigration were found wanting. The country was once again plunged into disaster.⁸⁵ However, these events did not take place in the lifetime of the tenants and peasants in Maria's Irish stories.

In pre-Famine Ireland, the agricultural system was one in which the economic and social factors were intricately interwoven. Following the pattern of centuries, the lower classes lived on in misery and ignorance, without hope for the future and without the foresight to realize that the age-old patterns of their life could change. Furthermore, Maria indicated that her father's attempts to institute improvements in the existing system were resisted by the tenants,⁸⁶ a

⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 10-11. ⁸⁵Ibid., p. 11.

⁸⁶Edgeworth, Memoirs, II, 40-41.

fact supported by the economist, R. D. C. Black.⁸⁷ Since any substantial economic improvements would necessarily be accompanied by a social upheaval, one wonders how long the placid peasantry would have remained rooted in the past had not the tragic Famine occurred.

⁸⁷Black, Economic Thought, p. 23.

CHAPTER IV

IRISH COMMONERS, IRISH PEASANTS, AND IRISH SCENES

The contrast between the gay, extravagant life of the gentry and the extreme misery of the peasants' existence was, in early nineteenth century Ireland, far greater than between comparable classes of other countries. This situation was created by England's subjugation of the Irish people, and it was intensified by England's passage of penal laws against Catholics in a country with a predominately Roman Catholic population.¹ The hated penal codes, first enacted during the reign of King William, financially and politically elevated the Irish Protestant gentry to a superior position; the same codes brought the native Catholic population to its knees. Parliament was said to have passed the laws with the intention of disinheriting the "old Irish" from their soil, and crushing out the Roman Catholic faith--or at least rendering politically impotent those who adhered to this creed.²

The Catholic gentry suffered greatly under the conditions created by the penal codes. In the matter of the land, the laws were effective in divesting the "old gentry" of their estates, for many of the more ambitious ones left Ireland and sought their fortunes elsewhere. Others bowed before their oppressors and embraced the Protestant faith in an effort to save their estates. But those among the Catholic gentry

¹Krans, Irish Life In Irish Fiction, pp. 21-22.

²Ibid., pp. 6-9.

who rejected both of these alternatives were powerless, and "often sank down through enforced apathy and ignorance to a condition not far above the peasantry about them;" and the peasantry of eighteenth century Ireland lived a life of extreme poverty which was also brought on by the legal tyranny of the code.

Not only was the standard of living of the peasantry determined by the penal codes, but their national character was also marked by these repugnant laws.³ Contrary to the desire of the conquerors, the persecution of the Irish Roman Catholics resulted in an entrenchment, rather than an annihilation, of the creed among the vast majority of the lower class. The prevalent lawlessness of the Irish people in general, and the peasantry in particular, was brought about by a hatred of the legal code that persecuted their faith.

Both the peasant class, and the gentry, had a fondness for "breaking the King's peace." While gentlemen defended their honor by dueling, peasants armed themselves with clubs, and indulged in fighting as a form of amusement. "Party" fights took place between Catholics and Protestants, and "faction" fights, or feuds, were carried on between hostile groups in a village. But, whether the fights were initiated over religious or local disagreements, they were fought with gusto and sometimes resulted in death for some of the combatants.⁴

These barbaric attacks on their neighbors were not likely to subside in a country where education was denied the major portion of

³Ibid., p. 9. ⁴Ibid., pp. 22-23.

society. Lacking the wherewithal to send their children to the continent for an education, the peasants' only resource was to avail themselves of the services of illegal "hedge-schoolmasters." These were men who managed to operate a few schools scattered over the countryside in spite of the code and despite informers. For the most part, however, the lower class remained ignorant.⁵

As a result of the penal code, the Irish peasantry remained staunchly Catholic in its faith, and was poverty-stricken, pugnacious, ignorant, and devoted to circumventing or evading the laws of their Protestant masters. Along with these characteristics, which developed from the political circumstances of their lives, Miss Edgeworth indicates that the peasantry was also passionate, devoted, warm-hearted, and extremely clever. Within the lower-class characters in Maria's Irish stories, there existed a social stratification, with the agent or middleman at the top of the scale.

Although they occasionally came from the small, urban middle class,⁶ the agents employed by the proprietors were frequently drawn from the peasant class. They were generally ambitious men who had the good fortune to learn to read, to write, and to do simple arithmetic. They took advantage of every opportunity to ingratiate themselves with their masters, and thus further advance their positions. If these men were extremely successful in their conniving, they also managed to get

⁵Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁶Black, Economic Thought, p. 9.

hold of enough of their masters' lands to set themselves up as middlemen. By subletting the land at excessive rents, the middleman could become wealthy enough to hire an agent of his own and become an absentee himself, moving on to the "fascinating" life of a metropolitan English city. All too often, this process was repeated over and over again, with each successive subtenant paying higher rent than the last, until there were sometimes as many as "six persons between the landlord and the cultivator of the soil."⁷

Using her favorite device, contrast, to expose these grasping agents as she did to reveal the irresponsible attitude of the landlord class, Maria juxtaposed the dishonest agents with the honest men who served in this capacity. M'Leod, the Scottish employee of Glenthorn in Ennui, was an excellent agent, as was Mr. Burke in The Absentee. While M'Leod serves a dual purpose, that of vindicating the Scottish people and of being a wise and benevolent agent, Mr. Burke is clearly Irish, and exists solely to exemplify Maria's ideal.

When Colambre visited his father's (Lord Clonbrony's) estates in Ireland, disguised as an Englishman, he was surprised to find that the town of Colambre, named for him, bore all the marks of prosperity. The houses were in good repair, both neat and clean, and the street was bordered by a "paved footway" which was also free of debris. Colambre took a room at the town's inn, which was small, but nevertheless excellent in the services it provided. By engaging the innkeeper in

⁷Krans, Irish Life In Irish Fiction, pp. 180-81.

conversation, Colambre was able to ascertain the man's opinion of both the absentee, Clonbrony, and the agent, Mr. Burke. The innkeeper lamented the conduct of the landlord, who seemed to care nothing for the condition of the estate and the tenantry because he had not set foot in Ireland for years. Therefore, he attributed the prosperity of the village inhabitants entirely to Burke, explaining that the agent and his wife taught them everything they knew. The cutlets, salad, and wine Colambre enjoyed with his meal at the inn were delicacies the innkeeper could not have provided had not the Burkes taken the time to teach him how to grow and prepare these items. Further questioning proved to Colambre that the innkeeper's success was not due to "favoritism" on the agent's part, for he extended the same assistance to all--"from the brogue to the boot"--who lived on the estate.⁸

Pressing the innkeeper further, Colambre asked him what was "meant in Ireland by a good agent," and his answer can be found as the embodiment of Maria's concept of a "good agent:"

Why, he is the man that will encourage the improving tenant; and show no favor or affection, but justice, which comes even to all, and does best for all at the long run; and, residing always in the country, like Mr. Burke, and understanding country business, and going about continually among the tenantry, he knows when to press for the rent, and when to leave the money to lay out upon the land; and, according as they would want it, can give a tenant a help or a check properly. Then no duty work called for, no presents, no glove money, nor sealing money even, taken or offered; no underhand hints about proposals, when land would be out of lease; but a

⁸Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, VI, 129-32.

considerable preference, if deserved to the old tenant, and if not, a fair advertisement, and best offer and tenant accepted: no screwing of the land to the highest penny, just to please the head landlord for the minute, and ruin him at the end, by the tenant's racking the land, and running off with the year's rent; nor no bargains to his own relations or friends did Mr. Burke ever give or grant, but all fair between landlord and tenant; and that's the thing that will last; and that's what I call the good agent.⁹

Colambre confirmed the innkeeper's avowal that Burke was, indeed, a good agent by visiting with others in the village. From shopkeepers to cottagers, all agreed that Burke was a unique and an ideal agent. One must, however, give credit to both the Burkes, husband and wife, because Mrs. Burke was also the teacher in the village school. Colambre's visit to the classroom showed him that "it was just what it ought to be--neither too much nor too little had been attempted." Being herself free of "party prejudices," Mrs. Burke was able to teach both the Protestant and Catholic children in the same school without the slightest disruption.¹⁰ This, and much more, was revealed to Colambre, the "traveling Englishman," as he visited just one part of his father's Irish estate.

A visit to the major portion of the Clonbrony estate, under the control of Mr. Nicholas Garraghty, revealed the usual circumstances of cruelty and poverty that prevailed under most agents during Maria's day. As Colambre's coach, driven by the postilion Larry Brady, approached this part of the estate, Colambre was aghast at the devastated appearance

⁹Ibid., 131. ¹⁰Ibid., 132.

of his father's land. Larry explained the ruin in this particular area by saying that even though "plantings" of trees had been supplied by the landlord and set in by the tenants, they had not long survived as "Old Nick," and his partner and brother, Dennis, had turned the goats and cattle in among the young stands of timber. The trees were "barked" by the goats and the soil ruined by the cattle, reducing large tracts of ground to wasteland. At this point, the wicked agents wrote to Clonbrony, informing him that no one would rent or "bid anything at all for the land," so that it fell to the crafty agents "at a cheap bargain."¹¹ Once the land had been renovated, they would re-let it at a high rent.

These "enterprising" agents also engaged in jobbing. When tenants were unable to pay their rents, Dennis would go to the county and with the assistance of a friend, secure a "presentment" or a contract to build a road at twice the amount it would actually cost. Employing the oppressed tenants at a substantially lower wage, the agents permitted them to work off, or "pound out," their rent by crushing stone for the roadbed. Consequently, "Old Nick" and Dennis managed to increase their material worth by a substantial amount.¹²

The appearance of Clonbrony village, itself, was no less a disappointment to Colambre. The houses, originally built in "a better style of architecture" than was customary, were in a "ruinous condition." Roofs, walls, and windows were in a state of disrepair, and the town

¹¹Ibid., 141-42. ¹²Ibid., 140-41.

seemed deserted. Colambre stopped at the inn, only to find the waiter drunk and the mistress and cook absent.

Walking to the church in search of the villagers, Colambre found the church vacant and the doors locked; the churchyard was occupied, though, with "a calf, two pigs, and an ass." Several small boys played on a tombstone erected to a member of Colambre's family. The urchins told him services were no longer held in the church because, since the landlords did not live near, there was no curate and the parson spent his time elsewhere.¹³

The agents responsible for this ruin perpetrated other frauds against the tenants by failing to honor leases, to recognize improving tenants, and by collecting excessive rents.¹⁴ If Colambre had not appeared on the scene to save his father's inheritance, the entire estate probably would have fallen into their hands, just as the Rackrent estate gradually passed to Jason Quirk in Castle Rackrent.¹⁵

Obviously, Maria opted for a landlord who averted these conditions by being enlightened as to his duties, and present in Ireland on his own estate. Then, she believed, both landlord and tenant would prosper. Unfortunately, the landlords didn't live in Ireland; and agents of M'Leod's and Burke's character were seldom found. The bulk of the lower class--the small farmers, cottagers, and servants--were forced to contend with the wicked agents as well as the disinterested proprietors. This they did, and while poverty was ever-present in

¹³Ibid., 157. ¹⁴Ibid., 160-61. ¹⁵Supra., Ch. II, pp. 73-74.

their lives, those in Maria's stories entered into the contest with alacrity and cunning.

Those Irishmen who served the gentry in the capacity of stewards or maids lived closer to their masters and were in a better position to glean favors from them than were the majority of the tenants. By the same token, they were also in a position to observe the corrupt practices of their "betters" and to learn from their example. In some instances, this worked to the disadvantage of the landlord; and in other cases, the closeness of these associations stimulated the unflinching loyalty of the servant to his overlord. Maria portrayed both of these extremes in Castle Rackrent in the characters of Jason and Thady Quirk.

Jason displayed an aptitude for learning in infancy, and Thady had hoped to enter his son into the priesthood. Jason, however, had other ambitions. He began early to win the confidence of the Rackrent agent by copying the rent accounts for him free gratis. Jason was in a position to know when land fell vacant, and a good farm was vacated at an opportune moment. Jason made a proposal for the farm--"why shouldn't he, as well as another?" asks Thady; and the old steward "gave out in the country that nobody need bid against us." Both the agent and Thady put in a good word to the landlord on Jason's behalf, and because of Sir Kit's extreme need of money, he readily agreed to the proposal.

The transaction was not entirely above board because the agent informed Sir Kit that the value of Irish land was falling, and he permitted Jason to rent the farm for just the amount of money Sir Kit needed at the time. With this transaction, Jason was on the way to becoming the owner of the Rackrent property. His next step was to correspond "privately" with the landlord; and soon after, the old agent was turned out: Jason took over his duties.¹⁶ As agent, Jason was eventually able to get control of more land, again at a "bargain," resulting from the distress of the next heir, Sir Condy. With this good fortune, Jason was able to set himself up as a middleman and to realize a substantial profit.¹⁷

Jason's greed increased. He "purchased" a hunting lodge, which he had long coveted, from Sir Condy who was again pressured by his creditors. As the estate became more and more encumbered with debts, Jason gave up the job as agent and began to surreptitiously buy up the creditors' accounts at a price somewhat less than their value. When an execution was finally levied against the Rackrent estate, it was discovered that the bulk of the outstanding debt was now owed to Jason. Poor Condy could do nothing to save himself. He handed the estate over to Jason, who received it without a qualm. The only recompense Jason made was to permit Condy to live out his life in the hunting lodge, and this was not done out of a regard for the man. The Rackrent tenants were angered by Jason's take-over of the estate. They physically

¹⁶ Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, 11-12. ¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

threatened him, and Jason accepted Condy's terms--his protection in exchange for the temporary use of the lodge--under the pressure of the moment.¹⁸

Jason escaped the hopeless misery experienced daily by the peasant class by cheating his employer and by adding to the distress of the tenantry in the capacity of a middleman. A permanent rift occurred between Jason and his old father, Thady, but not, as one would expect, due to the misery Jason brought to the peasants. Thady's passionate sympathy was reserved for the family he had served for several generations, and even though the reader is satisfied that justice has been done to the Rackrent proprietors, Thady grieved to see the family destroyed and displaced by his son.¹⁹ The old man's character and beliefs are a direct contradiction to those of his son, Jason.

Thady, the narrator of Castle Rackrent, is the most interesting character Maria created. John Langan, the Edgeworth family's steward, served as Maria's pattern for Thady's physical appearance. Langan was, "in face and figure the prototype of Thady in Castle Rackrent."²⁰ Perhaps Thady's loyalty to the Rackrent family was a parallel of the faithful services rendered by Kitty Billamore, the Edgeworth's nursemaid. Kitty nursed a "succession" of Edgeworth children through infancy, illness, and even death, often when she herself was in poor health. When she died, Kitty was placed in the family burial vault,

¹⁸Ibid., 34-35; 47-49; 51. ¹⁹Ibid., 50.

²⁰Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, I, 47, n. 2.

because, as Maria wrote to her cousin, Sophy, "she was more a friend than a servant."²¹

The old steward was also a friend to the family he served. Thady is a representative of the loyal Irish servant who lives vicariously through the exploits and life style of his master. In fact, the old man took pride in his staunch loyalty to the family, declaring, ". . . as I have lived so will I die, true and loyal to the family."²² Time and time again, Thady remained silent about questionable actions performed by some of the more unsavory characters out of his "regard for the family." For example, Thady was suspicious of Sir Murtagh's lawsuits, but concluded that he "knew nothing of the matter except having a great regard for the family."²³

The tenantry rejoiced to see the hated, penny-pinching Mrs. Murtagh leave the estate after her husband's death. But Thady refrained from uttering any criticism of that lady so long as she was a "member of the family." He, alone, rose early in the morning to witness her departure and wish her farewell. A distasteful service, in light of Lady Murtagh's treatment of the tenants, but one which Thady gladly performed "for the sake of the family."²⁴ And again, under Sir Kit's proprietorship, Thady acknowledged the impossible conditions imposed upon the tenants when

²¹Maria Edgeworth, "Letter to Miss Ruxton," January 14, 1820, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, II, 45-46.

²²Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, 2.

²³Ibid., 7. ²⁴Ibid., 9.

their leases were not honored, rents were excessive, and "gifts" were demanded by the driver and agent. He knew that Sir Kit's absence was the cause of all this hardship, but he said nothing, for he "had a regard for the family."²⁵

Although he inadvertently revealed the weaknesses of the Rackrent family, Thady never questioned their integrity. Nor did he cry out against the system. He consistently side-stepped the issue and attributed the problems to an ineffective wife, a bad agent, a particularly poor class of tenantry which had rented Rackrent lands, or "insensitive" creditors who expected payment for their services and products. If protecting the family image regardless of its behavior was loyalty, Thady was most assuredly a loyal servant.

Secondly, Thady stressed his honesty: ". . . I have always been known by no other than honest Thady. . . ." ²⁶ This was quite true, for Lady Murtagh, Sir Condy, and others did refer to "honest Thady" as though the two words comprised his name. ²⁷ But, recalling the support Thady gave to Jason's cause in the matter of obtaining the first piece of his master's land, one could challenge Thady's honesty. However, it is more appropriate to qualify Thady's--or, for that matter, the peasantry's--concept of "honesty."

The old steward was not above eavesdropping on the personal conversations of Sir Condy and Bella if the opportunity arose, ²⁸ but he probably regarded this as a privilege of his favored position in the

²⁵Ibid., 11. ²⁶Ibid., 1. ²⁷Ibid., 9; 44. ²⁸Ibid., 41-43.

family. Thady likewise accepted the dishonest tactice of the Rackrent family as a privilege accorded their class. But, in the matter of Jason's actions, Thady drew a line. He upheld Jason's rights to own a small farm at Sir Kit's expense, but he considered his son's take-over of the entire estate as a shamefully dishonorable act. A double standard and a "scale of honesty" seemed to exist among the peasantry, with the higher standard being assigned to the lower class.

In his rambling account of the Rackrent family history, Thady revealed as much of himself as he did of his masters. He was a passionate man, and Thady's emotions fluctuated with the fortunes of those he served. He was in despair over the presence of the Jewish woman at Castle Rackrent: "Mercy upon his honour's poor soul . . . !" he exclaimed, and passed a "sleepless night" thinking the matter over;²⁹ delighted and proud when Sir Condy won the election: "I thought I should have died in the streets for joy when I seed my poor master chaired . . . ;"³⁰ indignant when the writ-bearer, "this base-minded limb of the law," bought up the Rackrent debts and later sold them to Jason;³¹ humiliated when Jason finally accomplished his goal;³² "frightened" at the mob which threatened Jason;³³ and "shocked" when Sir Condy fell into a fit of depression due to his adversities.³⁴

Above all, Thady was compassionate. Nothing would have induced the servant to desert his fallen hero. Knowing the "nature" of Sir

²⁹Ibid., 14. ³⁰Ibid., 35. ³¹Ibid., 37; 46. ³²Ibid., 48.

³³Ibid., 51. ³⁴Ibid., 52.

Condy's character, the old man realized that the flattery of his master's friends would do more to lift his spirits than anything else. He drew his chair close to the fire, lit his pipe, and recounted the complimentary phrases uttered by "rich and poor" alike whose only assistance came in the form of these trite phrases.³⁵ Thady had a depth and warmth of character which had no equal among the fashionable society in Maria's Irish stories.

The reader is better acquainted with Thady than the peasants in the other novels because, as narrator, he is present throughout the Rackrent story. Some of the other figures tend to represent just one or two specific characteristics of the lower classes--or, one aspect of Thady's character. Moriarity Carroll, the peasant wounded by Harry Ormond, in Ormond, is one such character. Maria used him to exemplify at least two aspects of the peasants' character which are also present in old Thady's make-up.

First, Moriarity holds the aristocracy in the same awesome esteem as does Thady. He does not hold them accountable for their reckless conduct, and even though he is lying on what may be his deathbed, Moriarity's only wish is to reassure the man who shot him. To Harry Ormond he says:

Don't be in such trouble about the likes of me--
I'll do very well, you'll see--and even suppose I
wouldn't--not a friend I have shall ever prosecute--
I'll charge 'em not--so be asy--for you're a good
heart--and the pistol went off unknownst to you--

³⁵Ibid., 51-52.

I'm sure there was no malice--let that be your comfort. It might happen to any man, let alone gentleman--don't take on so.³⁶

Moriarity Carroll is also indicative of the shrewdness of mind Maria found among the Irish lower classes. While Thady tried to appear ignorant of the doings of his masters, his protestations, "I know nothing of the matter," often came after his detailed account of a complex legal or business matter.³⁷ Thady's native intelligence led him to understand far more than he wished to admit. Moriarity possessed this same insight, particularly in the complexities of the law. When the earnest fellow sought to explain how one of rank could use the law to his advantage, Harry Ormond stopped him, sullenly asking Moriarity if he were a lawyer--to which the peasant replied, "Only as we all are through the country."³⁸

Apparently, Maria often found the ignorant peasant to be knowledgeable on difficult subjects--so much so that she emphasized this paradox in a statement she made in The Absentee. Colambre, uninformed on the intricacies of jobbing as practiced by the bad agents, was made aware of the details by Larry Brady, the postilion. By way of explanation, Maria inserted the following comment in the narrative:

Lord Colambre was much surprised by Larry's knowledge of the manner in which county business is managed, as well as by his shrewd good sense: he did not know that this is not uncommon in his rank of life in Ireland.³⁹

³⁶Ibid., IX, 244-45. ³⁷Ibid., IV, 7. ³⁸Ibid., IX, 307-08.

³⁹Ibid., VI, 141.

In his capacity to love, Thady had an equal in Ellinor, the presumed "nursemaid" of the Earl of Glenthorn in Ennui. Ellinor travelled on foot, from Ireland to Glenthorn's Sherwood Park estate, that she might visit "the child she nursed" on his twenty-fifth birthday. Her visit touched off a chain of events which led to a serious accident to Glenthorn. Believing him to be dead and herself responsible for the Earl's injuries, Ellinor was overcome by grief.⁴⁰ Upon finding the young man still alive, her expression turned from one of grief to one of love. To this point, Glenthorn's life had been void of emotional experiences, especially sincere affection. To see the look of love that shone in Ellinor's face was a totally new experience for him, and he was touched:

The strong affections of this poor woman touched me more than anything I had ever yet felt in my life; she seemed to be the only person upon earth who really cared for me⁴¹

The fact that Ellinor is, in truth, Glenthorn's natural mother could alter the reader's opinion of the overall quality of her love. But when told she is "little better than a fool" to have made such an arduous trip simply to visit one she loves, Ellinor answered, "Little better, please your honor, but I was always so about them childer that I nursed."⁴² Christy, the child she reared in place of her natural son, corroborated Ellinor's statement: when he counted his blessings, "a good mother" was the first one on Christy's list.⁴³ Ellinor's capacity

⁴⁰Ibid., IV, 226-27. ⁴¹Ibid., 228. ⁴²Ibid., 229. ⁴³Ibid., 362.

to love was as great as Glenthorn perceived it to be when he first encountered his mother. Glenthorn, too, became "conscious" of her willingness to "sacrifice all she had in the world for any body she loved."⁴⁴

Both Thady and Ellinor were very old. Just as Thady was well informed on the history of several generations of the Rackrent family, Ellinor was able to relate to the young Earl the past history of the Glenthorn family.⁴⁵ These two old people are of a different generation than the majority of the peasant types in these novels, and they share another similarity in their characters: Maria hints that Thady and Ellinor are both well versed in the fairy legends and folklore of Ireland.

That the legends exist and play, to this day, a significant part in Irish life is understandable. In countries where the masses lack education, their tendency is to assign mystical causes to "the strange results" they can see, but cannot understand. Furthermore, the Irish population has been particularly noted for having a "vivid sense of relation to a spiritual and invisible world." The effort to endow seemingly illogical occurrences with logical causes, combined with a spiritual creed which is, in itself, a strange mixture of "Christian legend and pagan myth," has produced, in Ireland, a "rich" store of folklore. Superstitions abounded among these simple people, superstitions which involved a host of fairies, goblins, ghosts, and

⁴⁴Ibid., 360. ⁴⁵Ibid., 231-32.

banshees.⁴⁶

Thady and Ellinor are "believers." Thady is quick to tell the reader that Sir Murtagh's fate was sealed when he dug up a fairy-mount, a reckless act which angered the "little people" within.⁴⁷ In Thady's case, Maria made reference to a specific legend or superstition, but she merely hints at Ellinor's knowledge of, and belief in, her native folklore:

Then she had a large assortment of fairies and shadowless witches, and banshees; and besides, she had legions of spirits and ghosts, and haunted castles without end, my own castle of Glenthorn not excepted, in the description of which she was extremely eloquent; she absolutely excited in my mind some desire to see it.⁴⁸

These references to Irish folklore are two among the very few such passages that occur in the Irish novels.

One critic noted that the "fairy that never appears" in Maria's stories revealed her "thoughts and feelings" on this subject. He commented on the "practical" turn of Maria's mind, and indicated that while she understood the "illogical and erratic element" of Irish character, she did not wish to foster superstition among the Irish masses.⁴⁹ It is possible that Maria shared in the opinion expressed by others, that education would bring about the disappearance of Irish

⁴⁶Krans, Irish Life In Irish Fiction, pp. 100-101.

⁴⁷Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, 7-8.

⁴⁸Ibid., 232.

⁴⁹Maria Edgeworth, Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, p. 29.

superstitions. While education has wrought some change, the "fairy race" and "fairy-land" are still real in the Ireland of today.⁵⁰

Aside from the time old Ellinor spent hovering about Glenthorn Castle performing simple duties for the Earl, she was otherwise occupied with her own family and a separate life style. Among the peasantry, there existed a variation in the degree of poverty they suffered and in the type of dwelling they inhabited. While Ellinor's "son," Christy, believed their family circumstances were adequate, Glenthorn was shocked at the manner in which Ellinor and her offspring lived. Viewing the house for the first time, Glenthorn found it to be a "wretched-looking, low, and mud-walled cabin." A pile of stone served as a prop at one end, and the family's goat stood on top of the buttress. From astride his horse, Glenthorn watched the animal eat the grass which grew out of the thatched roof top. Outside the single window, a pile of dung was stacked; and close to the only entrance stood a puddle of dirty water.

To the visitor's surprise, his approach brought the occupants of the dwelling into view. Aside from the pig, calf, lamb, kid, two geese, turkeys, cocks, hens, chickens, a dog, and two cats which scurried from the house to the yard--causing a great commotion--the cabin held a substantial number of human occupants. Ellinor's household at this moment consisted of two sons-in-law and one son, all of whom had to stoop to pass through the door, and a "stout girl," a beggar man and woman,

⁵⁰Krans, Irish Life In Irish Fiction, p. 100.

children too numerous to count, and the old woman herself. Glenthorn could never "possibly have supposed the mansion capable of containing" so many occupants.

There was no great display of activity among this motley group, although the girl held a pitchfork as if in readiness to perform some job or other; and Ellinor, herself, was occupied with the potato crop. Christy, the "son" Ellinor raised in place of the Earl, was at work at the forge; but her other natural son, Owen, had never learned a trade because his mother could not part with him. Owen and the sons-in-law passed their time lounging in the cabin, smoking their pipes. All in all, they were an amiable group, but ambition was not one of their strong points, and they did not apologize for their laziness.⁵¹

Glenthorn's reaction was to immediately promise Ellinor new living quarters. The promise was fulfilled, but the end result of Glenthorn's generosity supported Maria's theory that "change" was difficult to bring about among the lower classes. The author also opposed favoritism of any sort because she believed advantages bestowed, but not earned, encouraged laziness and were therefore detrimental to the lower classes.

Before Ellinor's cottage was completed, the Irishman's habit of procrastination had forestalled the project time and again, and vexed the impatient Glenthorn. Various activities interrupted the workmen: the "pratees" (potatoes) must be set and the turf dug. Then, funerals

⁵¹ Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, pp. 260-61.

and holidays intervened, and the masons, mortars, carpenters, sawyers, and painters all found excuses why they must wait for one group or another to perform its task first. Glenthorn was elated with the finished cottage--one built on the "English style"--and he ordered a "rural feast" in honor of Ellinor's installation in her new home.

Glenthorn enjoyed being the benevolent landlord and urged the silent agent, M'Leod, to acknowledge his humanitarian deed. When thus forced to comment, M'Leod simply said, " . . . I doubt whether the best way of encouraging the industrious is to give premiums to the idle." Glenthorn further encouraged the "idle" by indiscriminately bestowing money on those among his tenants who appeared to be in the most miserable circumstances (and who were undoubtedly the least diligent) without investigating the "merits of the claimants."⁵²

In the matter of the new cottage, Glenthorn was soon forced to admit his folly, and to recognize in Ellinor a reluctance to improve herself or her way of life. The pretty cottage became "a source of mortification" to the Earl. Finding the mud cabin inconvenient, Glenthorn had ordered the cottage equipped with luxuries. Unaccustomed to the proper furnishings, Ellinor found these conveniences to be "encumbrances" which hindered her in carrying out the few daily tasks she performed. It was beyond her capabilities, and consequently a "torment" for the old woman to keep the house "neat and clean." Hasty workmanship had resulted in peeling paint and decayed wood; wet plaster and

⁵²Ibid., 262-63.

mouldy wallpaper; loose slates and a leaky roof. In short, the lovely, clean cottage and all its furnishings rapidly fell into ruin. The end results of Glenthorn's generosity were predictable; and by Maria's standards, Glenthorn had learned a valuable lesson: he acknowledged that it takes "time to change local and national habits and prejudices; and that it is necessary to raise a taste for comforts before they can be properly enjoyed."⁵³

The Noonans, father and daughter, lived on the Glenthorn estate in an old hut similar to the one Ellinor and her brood had originally occupied. The girl's "bachelor," Jemmy Riley, was as hard-pressed economically as the Noonans for they were all cotters, the lowest class among the peasants. The Noonans differed from other cotters because their miserable circumstances were brought about by an unfortunate alliance with a farmer who became a drunkard. The farm they operated as co-partners was a good one, but the fellow made a hasty marriage and unwise expenditures. Unable to pay his share of the rent, the man eventually ran off, leaving Mr. Noonan to face an unscrupulous agent. This unsympathetic man confiscated the farm, and the Noonans' only means of support came from the son--who was, incidentally, the pugilist Glenthorn had met in England. The task of telling the old man how his son died fell to Glenthorn.

Impressed with the filial love and loyalty displayed by both the son and daughter to their now-paralyzed father, Glenthorn determined to

⁵³Ibid., 274-75.

improve their condition. The Earl provided them with a good farm, the girl married her "bachelor," and the affair ended satisfactorily with Jemmy Riley operating the farm. The difference between Ellinor and the Noonans is obvious. The industrious Noonans were already accustomed to a level of existence far in advance of what Ellinor knew.⁵⁴ There were, of course, some tenants on Irish estates who managed to live comfortably so long as they did not run afoul of a bad agent or a rack-renting landlord.

Although the O'Neils, in The Absentee, would have been destroyed by the hateful agents, Nick and Dennis Garraghty, had not Colambre intervened, they, too, were members of this "elite" farmer class. The appearance of their dwelling was in marked contrast to Ellinor's dirty hovel. Curtains hung at the windows, the walls were whitewashed, and comfortable furnishings adorned the rooms. This family prepared a meal which consisted of eggs, bacon, and milk, besides the dreary potato which was all too frequently the sole repast of the peasant.⁵⁵ The O'Neil family did not throw caution to the wind, but planned for the future. Mrs. O'Neil's son longed to marry his sweetheart, but to him such a step was unthinkable without the security of a renewal of the lease for the O'Neil farm.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid., 270-72.

⁵⁵Arthur Young accepts as "axiomatic" that the laboring poor, especially the cottiers, lived almost exclusively on the potato. Arthur Young, A Tour in Ireland, as quoted by Redcliffe Salaman, in The Potato, p. 259.

⁵⁶Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, VI, 149-50.

In truth, the only similarities between Ellinor and the O'Neils were their great capacity to love and their open generosity.

Miss Edgeworth considered the plight of a peasant woman and her quest for security in the character of Judy M'Quirk, grandneice to old Thady in Castle Rackrent. A woman's opportunities for security were limited, and the only course open to Judy was marriage. She made a career of husband-seeking; and, while this characteristic was also prevalent among aristocratic women, in Judy's case it was more pressing due to the economic factor. As a young girl, she fastened her hopes on Condy. Thady hinted that some type of understanding sprang up between the two before Condy became lord of the manor. After inheriting the estate, Condy found it expedient to make a marriage of convenience, and poor Judy was forced to look elsewhere for a husband.⁵⁷

Judy succeeded in finding a husband, but security was again snatched from her grasp when, after a year or so, he enlisted in the army and was killed in a war. Judy does not appear in Thady's narration again until Sir Condy's wife meets with a serious accident, and it is almost certain the Lady will die. Judy came to the lodge, bearing the news of Lady Rackrent's ill fortune, but she did so in the hope of meeting with Condy and renewing the "understanding" of by-gone years. The perceptive old steward realized there was slight chance of Judy's ever becoming Lady Rackrent but remarked that Judy "did not seem to be clear of it herself." The matter was clearly settled in Thady's mind

⁵⁷Ibid., IV, 26-27.

when Condry noticed that marriage and life in a cabin had altered Judy's appearance--"Being smoke-dried in the cabin, and neglecting herself" had decreased Judy's value in the marriage market.⁵⁸

Circumstances altered, and for a brief time Thady changed his mind: perhaps Sir Condry might succumb to Judy's wiles. Then, Judy's plans were brought to a halt when Jason appeared on the scene. The realization that Jason now controlled the estate opened her eyes to new possibilities, for, as she pointed out, ". . . what signifies it to be Lady Rackrent, and no castle? sure, what good is the car, and no horse to draw it?" Thady scornfully told the scheming Judy that his son Jason was totally "indifferent" to her, and that she was foolish to "trust to him" as a marriage partner.⁵⁹ Thady's prophesy came true. At the conclusion of the story, he said that Jason "did not marry, nor think of marrying" the pathetic widow, and the reader is left to wonder at Judy's future.⁶⁰

Maria's novels are enriched with a variety of scenes, habits, and events which further familiarize the reader with the Ireland of her time. Miss Edgeworth did not dwell on physical descriptions of the Irish countryside in which her characters lived, but she occasionally described a town, an estate, or even a road when she wished to dispel the notion that all Ireland was backward. Anxious to impress her audience with the social and cultural advancements of "modern" Dublin, Maria does give a rather lengthy description of this city.

⁵⁸Ibid., 54-56. ⁵⁹Ibid., 59-60. ⁶⁰Ibid., 63.

Upon arrival in this city, a visitor might be assailed by a "swarm of beggars and harpies, with strange figures and stranger tones." Intent upon earning a pittance in exchange for their services as porters, this unkempt crew is likely to engage in a hand-to-hand struggle for the privilege of carrying the "bag, basket, parcel, or portmanteau." The traveller looks on in amazement, certain he will never see his possessions again. To his surprise, however, when the visitor finally emerged from the customs house, he would find "that he had lost nothing but his patience."⁶¹

In the heart of Dublin, the traveller could rest at an "excellent hotel" in the midst of "positively good company," and enjoy a refined "fashion of hospitality." "A spirit of improvement, a desire of knowledge, and a taste for science and literature" were the rule, not the exception, in most company.⁶² Riding through the streets of Dublin, a visitor would also see buildings which he could "scarcely believe to be Irish." Other prejudices were erased when, upon leaving Dublin, a traveller found that there were trees in Ireland and that roads were "excellent" rather than "impassible" as he had firmly believed.⁶³ This description of Dublin is but a brief synopsis composed of two different scenes in two different novels. Obviously, Maria loved Dublin; and she found it comparable to London in all things that would excite the fancy of fashionable society. With these descriptions, she was appealing to the absentee to seek the culture and society of his own country.

⁶¹Ibid., VI, 80.

⁶²Ibid., 80-82.

⁶³Ibid., IV, 242-43.

Moving into the countryside, the traveller need not expect to find such modernity. Descriptive passages of the open country are generally limited to an occasional mention of the turf and bogs which dotted the landscape on every estate. Therefore, a detailed account of the physical aspects of one particular estate arrests the reader's attention, just as the actual scene must have startled a visitor to Ireland. In this case, the visitor was the proprietor who had spent most of his life in England, and now returned to the family seat. He observed with anticipation the solicitude with which the tenants greeted the landlord who came to "reign over them," and listened to them speak of the estate as though it were a kingdom unto itself. The vision created by these circumstances aroused in the mind of the young man the vision of power associated with "feudal times."⁶⁴ The peasants mentioned the names of as many as a hundred towns which were located within the boundaries of this one estate. Again, the illusion is one of the vast and perhaps even wealthy domains under the control of one man.

Alas, these impressions were misleading. The solicitude^{was} displayed by the peasantry paved the way for the never-ending petitions they would make to their master for favors. And the towns, in reality, were not worthy of the term:

Two or three cabins gathered together were sufficient to constitute a town, and the land adjoining thereto is called a town-land. The

⁶⁴Ibid., 251.

denominations of these town-lands having continued from generation to generation, according to ancient surveys of Ireland, it is sufficient to show the boundaries of a town-land, to prove that there must be a town; and a tradition of a town continues to be satisfactory, even when only a single cabin remains.⁶⁵

The novice in Irish affairs at this time must also learn to attach a new meaning to the word "park." Accustomed to the images of spacious gardens, walks, and trees which come to his mind when recalling a park in England, a traveller would be aghast to find that the "deer park," "horse park," and "cow park" discussed by the tenantry were nothing more than odd "bits or corners" of land: they were usually plots of ground large enough to feed one cow!⁶⁶ The grandiose image of a magnificent feudal overlord in command of great wealth fades away. It is quickly replaced by a picture of a nation retarded in progress and crumbling into decay.

Maria's peasants took a pragmatic and philosophical approach to life and their struggle against encroaching poverty. They seldom came out ahead, but they rarely lamented a lost cause for any length of time. Unfortunately, the lower classes too easily accepted the oppression of their masters and the humdrum ritual of their daily lives. But, there are scenes and events in Maria's Irish stories which indicate that the peasant's life was not entirely without excitement and diversion to mitigate his hardship. Still other scenes further illustrated their habits and customs.

⁶⁵Ibid., 259. ⁶⁶Ibid.

The most exciting social event in the life of the peasant was his participation in the wake and funeral of a deceased master, friend, or in truth, even a mere acquaintance. The funeral ritual signified a great deal more than mourning for the dead: it was a measurement of the deceased's worth and popularity in life, and it was also an occasion for great debauchery. The ingredients for a truly successful funeral, according to custom, were a large number of participants; a spoken eulogy of praise, compliments, and flattery heaped upon the dead by those in attendance; a "whillaluh" of great magnitude, which was nothing more than the wail of grief emitted by the Irish in mourning-- a sound which rose to a din and echoed out across the land; and the "pipes," ale and gossip which were circulated among the mourners who sat up all night with the body.⁶⁷

If all went according to plan, if the people "flocked from far and near" and put their hearts and souls into the flattery and whillaluh, an observer would undoubtedly say, "His funeral was such a one as was never known before or since in the country!"⁶⁸ Occasionally, even though the crowd was large, and the customary pipes and ale served at the wake provided the necessary elements of merriment, the mourners were slow to eulogize the dead. One character in Maria's stories found himself in this circumstance when, longing to see his own funeral, he feigned death, and a sham funeral was held on his behalf. But, the merriment of his friends could not dispel the feeling of sorrow which

⁶⁷Ibid., 67, 79-80. ⁶⁸Ibid., 4.

came over the poor man when he found "there had [not] been such a great talk about himself after his death as he had always expected to hear."⁶⁹ Even so, this man would have had cause to rejoice had he witnessed the funeral of a man who thought himself to be held high in public esteem. It was this poor fellow's fate to have his deceptions made known to the public just before death overtook him. All hopes of the customary funeral were gone. The body was locked away from the horde of creditors who intended to seize it for debts. One of this "great man's" few remaining friends was heard to sadly remark, "Oh! the pitiful funeral" for a man "that was born to better."⁷⁰

Weddings, which invited guests were willing to walk miles to attend, and holidays, were occasions for the lower classes to gather together and break the monotonous thread of tedium in their lives.⁷¹ Diversion of another sort was found in the "public houses" located in the towns and villages. Here, the peasants passed the time drinking whiskey and enjoying the companionship of their neighbors. A public house was required, by law, to be licensed; and nothing added to the excitement of both the proprietors and customers as an opportunity to trick the "gauger" (an exciseman or tax collector) who haunted those houses suspected of operating without a license. Intelligence of an approaching gauger spread swiftly, and the following scene rapidly unfolded:

Brannigan immediately snatched an untasted glass

⁶⁹Ibid., 52-53. ⁷⁰Ibid., IX, 519. ⁷¹Ibid., 54; 262-63.

of whiskey from a customer's lips (who cried, murder!), gave it and the bottle he held in his hand to his wife, who swallowed the spirits, and ran away with the bottle and glass into some back hole; whilst the bystanders laughed, saying, 'Well thought of, Peggy!'

'Clear out all of you at the back door, for the love of Heaven, if you wouldn't be the ruin of me; said the man of the house, setting a ladder to a corner of the shop, 'Phil, hoist me up the keg to the loft,' added he, running up the ladder; 'and one of yees step up street, and give Rose M'Givney notice, for she's selling, too.'

The keg was hoisted up; the ladder removed; the shop cleared of all customers; the shutters shut; the door barred; the counter cleared.⁷²

Needless to say, the gauger was no more popular in this instance than he was in his pursuit of illegal operators of stills. A postilion, driving a carriage and its passenger through the countryside, encountered a peasant--an illegal distiller--fleeing from a gauger. The size of the still he carried made progress difficult, but the man ran on as "if for his life." Catching sight of the carriage, he hesitated, carried on a brief conversation with the driver, refused his offer of a ride, and then disappeared down a lane. Being naive, the passenger inquired about the incident, and he was given a vague and misleading explanation by the postilion. Within moments, another man appeared on the road dressed as a "half kind of a gentleman" and carrying a "silver-handled whip." The second man was a gauger, and he offered the postilion a reward for information as to which direction the distiller had taken in his wild flight.

⁷²Ibid., VI, 158.

The postilion refused the money, but he did advise the lawman to carry on the chase by going in the direction opposite to that taken by the fugitive. Charged by the passenger in his carriage with telling a lie, the postilion denied the charge by saying, "Sure, I told him no lie: I only said, 'If you'll take my advice.' And why was he such a fool as to take my advice, when I wouldn't take his fee?"⁷³ The sly postilion could afford to be pleased; he could continue to assert his honesty--albeit a rather special type of honesty--and he had circumvented the hateful laws of his oppressors, and outsmarted the cruel, whip-carrying agent.

A delightful scene is enacted each time a traveller has an occasion to hire a carriage or hackney chaise to reach a destination of some distance. Elegant coaches exist in Maria's Irish stories; but in all cases, they belong to the gentry, not to the postilions who offer their services and their conveyances for public hire. The daring and reckless nature of the Irish lower classes cannot be questioned when the disreputable carriages they drove came under inspection:

From the inn yard came a hackney chaise, in a most deplorable crazy state; the body mounted up to a prodigious height, on unbending springs, nodding forwards, one door swinging open, three blinds up, because they could not be let down, the perch tied in two places, the iron of the wheels half off, half loose, wooden pegs for linch-pins, and ropes for harness. The horses were worthy of the harness; wretched little dog-tired creatures, that looked as if they had been driven to the last gasp . . . ⁷⁴

⁷³Ibid., 142-43. ⁷⁴Ibid., IV, 243.

The driver himself demanded the traveller's attention:

[He was] a man dressed like a mad beggar, in half of a hat and half a wig, both awry in opposite directions; a long tattered great-coat, tied round his waist by a hay-rope; the jagged rents in the skirts of his coat showing his bare legs marbled of many colours; while something like stockings hung loose about his ankles. The noises he made by way of threatening or encouraging his steeds, I pretend not to describe.⁷⁵

To further attest to the fortitude and courage of the postilion-- and, incidentally, to that of any passenger who hazarded a trip in such a contraption--one need only follow the course of the journey. Amidst the verbal abuse rained down upon the head of the driver by the astonished passengers, the chaise moved out into the road. The "fore-horses" swung right, then left, "everywhere but forward." After a few anxious moments, the trip was underway. There followed a tumultuous, agonizing trip for the passengers who were, incidentally, locked within the chaise for safety. The vehicle plunged crazily down one hill, only to be pushed up the next. On they went, pausing first to mend some broken tackle, and again when the horses balked. Matching wits against the stubborn, worn-out animals, the driver won; and the careening vehicle reached its destination in at least as good condition as it was at the outset.⁷⁶

The above-mentioned "great-coat" which hung on the frame of the untidy postilion is the one item of peasants' clothing that is described in detail, and is periodically called to the reader's attention. One

⁷⁵Ibid., 243-44. ⁷⁶Ibid., 245-47.

owner of such a garment described it as "a long great-coat" which I wear "winter and summer, which is very handy, as I never put my arms into the sleeves; they are as good as new . . . it holds on by a single button round my neck, cloak fashion."⁷⁷ Apparently, the great-coat was such a common piece of wearing apparel that it was a natural choice, for one who wished to lose his identity and to blend into Irish society, to choose the great-coat as his instrument of camouflage.⁷⁸

Between the covers of Maria's books, one also meets with a type of woman known in Ireland as a "Lady Bluemantle," who thrived on the ill-will she created between rich and poor, catholic and protestant, and so on, fostering animosities often more "bitterly expressed than thought, and always exaggerated or distorted in the repetition." Lady Bluemantles did an unestimable amount of damage in Ireland, "where parties in religion and politics run high."⁷⁹

Maria's Ireland was also a country where the potato played a major role in the survival of the lower classes. Whatever the peasant did or did not accomplish in their daily lives, they seemed always to cultivate their potatoes and to prepare them, as a matter of course, for their meals. Old Thady, in Castle Rackrent, pointed up the significance of the potato when he said he was "content to stay in the kitchen and boil his little potatoes." "Little" was not a reference to the size of the potatoes he ate, but the word is used here as a term of fondness for his daily fare.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Ibid., 1-2. ⁷⁸Ibid., VI, 128. ⁷⁹Ibid., IX, 437.

⁸⁰Ibid., IV, 39; n. 2.

And, Maria mischievously notes, in her Ireland, "killing is no murder."⁸¹ The Irish usage of the word "kilt" is misleading to outsiders as it had a variety of meanings. A lady whose jaunting car overturned in an accident was "all kilt and smashed," but she lived.⁸² An old widow, delighted when the family lease was renewed without a raise in the rent, "dropped down dead," but she was "only kilt for joy."⁸³ Another old woman suffering from rheumatism in a damp cabin, declared she was "kilt with the cowl."⁸⁴ Maria herself used the term in a rather playful tone in recounting a story about a man her father thought had been murdered during an uprising. Upon investigating the matter, Edgeworth found that the man was "only kilt," having been "twice robbed and twice cut with a bayonet."⁸⁵

The reader is drawn to the simple Irishmen in Maria's novels. Whether by accident or design, Miss Edgeworth imputed to the lower classes those character traits which make them more human than their aristocratic "betters." They were uneducated, of course, but they had an abundance of native intelligence which served them well. Maria pointed out, in one novel, that the Irish had an uncanny way of seeing into the hearts and minds of the class above them.⁸⁶ Thus, the gentry was vulnerable, at least to a degree, to the flattery and trickery the peasants used as their tools of manipulation.

⁸¹Ibid., 80. ⁸²Ibid., 55. ⁸³Ibid., VI, 262. ⁸⁴Ibid., IV, 275.

⁸⁵Mrs. Edgeworth, "Letter to Mrs. Ruxton," January, 1796, in Maria's Memoirs, ed. by Mrs. Edgeworth, I, 68.

⁸⁶Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IX, 308.

Furthermore, the peasant's weakness became, in a sense, his strength. Accustomed to hardship, and therefore desiring very little in the way of material comfort, the peasantry could and did survive under the strain of an economic disaster, and an outdated system destined to become more severe before it improved. Their flexible personalities, and their equally flexible moral code, enabled the peasant to function within a framework created for them by the whims of their masters. While it is possible to overemphasize the latent ability of Maria's peasants, it is evident in their cleverness and insight. It is also an intriguing fact that a perusal of Maria's Irish stories leaves the reader with a distinct feeling that the peasants, not the gentry, held the key to the secret of life.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Maria Edgeworth's position as a renowned figure in the literary field is secure. Her long life, 1767-1849, spanned the end of one century and the beginning of the next. The old century, or the "old world," had been effectively dealt with in the fiction of the four major novelists of the early eighteenth century--Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, and Lawrence Sterne. After the death of these writers, the creative development of the novel temporarily came to a halt. A new group of writers, contenting themselves with inferior imitations of the more conventional form of the novel, took their place. Some few adventurous novelists experimented with novels of "sensibility" and "terror," but being writers of limited talents, their efforts met with little success.

This sterile period at the end of the eighteenth century was brought to an end when Maria Edgeworth, and a little later, Jane Austen, entered the literary field. While Maria's first Irish novel, Castle Rackrent, appeared in print in 1800, she was primarily nineteenth century, or "new world," in her outlook. She portrayed those advancements in civilization and the new order of society which had developed after the death of Fielding and Richardson, but which would have a greater impact on nineteenth century Ireland. Thus, Maria's novels

serve to bridge the gap between two centuries, and between "two worlds."¹

The second factor which gives Maria literary prominence also makes her important to the field of social history: she was the first novelist to write of the "everyday life of average humanity." Maria's Irish stories were also the "first to make a careful study of provincial life and manners." These qualities are the backbone of Maria's Irish novels. She was adept at recognizing the inner feelings, the problems, and the desires of these people without losing sight of their faults and weaknesses. The "average humanity" of Maria's Irish stories were rarely city dwellers. Therefore, their life style and manners were undoubtedly less sophisticated than those Irishmen who lived in or near the towns and cities of Ireland. With these stories about the common people of the countryside, Maria set a precedent for other writers who later wrote the same type of stories about their respective native lands.²

Maria was qualified to be the "social historian" of both the aristocracy and peasantry of Ireland. She was an intelligent woman who moved among the most notable and learned members of society. Scientists, philosophers, and prominent literary figures were among her close associates.³ Maria's talent and her fame as a writer were recognized while she still lived, making her company as much sought after in Paris as it

¹Baker, Edgeworth, p. 11; Earnest A. Baker, The Novel of Sentiment and The Gothic Romance, Vol. V of The History of the English Novel (11 vols.; London; H. F. & G. Witherby, 1934), pp. 11-12.

²Krans, Irish Life In Irish Fiction, pp. 274-75.

³Supra, pp. 41-44.

was in London and Dublin.⁴ Thus Maria's talent, and the knowledge she gleaned from friendships and travels went far beyond the boundaries of the formal education she received as a young girl.

In addition, Maria was very much a member of her own class. The Edgeworth family had owned land in Ireland for two centuries before Maria's birth, and while she spent some of her early years in England, Maria was deeply conscious of her aristocratic Irish heritage. She enjoyed both the comforts and pleasures afforded the Edgeworth family as members of the upper class,⁵ but Maria did not deny--indeed, she emphasized--the responsibility which she believed accompanied this favored position.⁶ It is true, however, that Maria believed the lower classes to be incapable of sharing the responsibilities of government and estate management with the aristocracy.⁷ Perhaps the author was correct in this evaluation, because she repeatedly pointed out in her novels that a great portion of the gentry themselves were not properly educated to these tasks. Through Maria's close association with her father, and as his "partner" in the management of the Edgeworth estate, Maria was undoubtedly as qualified, or at least as knowledgeable, in governmental affairs and estate management as any successful landlord in Ireland.⁸

Finally, Maria was familiar with the problems of Irish tenants as she intimately knew those on the Edgeworth estate. The duties she

⁴Supra, p. 48. ⁵Supra, pp. 44-47. ⁶Supra, pp. 50-52.

⁷Supra, p. 55. ⁸Supra, pp. 49-50; 53-54.

performed daily among these peasants and farmers provided the author with the opportunity to observe their life style, and to know their characters, customs, and habits.⁹ It remained for Maria, the "historian," to use her ingenuity to record the patterns of society in nineteenth century Ireland.

Maria emphasized the social patterns of the aristocracy, or landed gentry, who lived on the once-magnificent Irish estates. Education befitting their position was all too frequently overlooked. These proprietors, men like her characters Sir Patrick, Sir Condy, and Sir Kit in Castle Rackrent, found the concept of "management" alien to and incompatible with the ostentatious lives they led. Therefore, they simply blundered on, from one generation to the next, never fully realizing that their all-important, excessive pleasures (parties, gambling, drinking, and hunting) were among the principle factors which contributed to their failures.¹⁰ None of these men were suited to managing their own affairs, much less taking a paternalistic interest in the affairs of their tenants.

Men of greater ability did exist, of course, but frequently their values and the direction of their efforts were not in the best interest of Ireland. Maria indicated this element of society existed in the characters of Sir Murtagh (Castle Rackrent), Sir Ulick O'Shane (Ormond), and Sir Clonbrony (The Absentee). These men had far greater potential than did many of Maria's Irish proprietors, but their pursuits

⁹Supra, p. 35.

¹⁰Supra, pp. 73, 74, 79-80.

bore no fruit. Murtagh became so embroiled in lawsuits with the hope of expanding his fortune that he lost all perspective with regard to the land he did own. While he dreamed of expansion, Murtagh's estate diminished as piece after piece of land was sold to pay for his lawsuits.¹¹

Ulick O'Shane had a fertile mind which hatched many fanciful schemes. He became enmeshed in the complexities of political patronage and "jobbing" to such an extent that his fate was tied to that of other men. Had Ulick used his abilities in honest endeavors, and had he built his future on merit rather than favor, he undoubtedly could have provided security for both his family and the tenants on his estate. Instead, Ulick lived on "prospects," and he was eventually destroyed by avarice and greed.¹² Clonbrony was an absentee landlord, a man who allowed himself to be persuaded that his native land offered nothing in the way of culture and society to one of his position. In his selfishness, Clonbrony turned his back on the tenantry; the tenants staggered under the wearisome burden of the rack-renting system, and the Clonbrony estate fell into decay and ruin.¹³

The character of the upper class members of nineteenth century Irish society was all too often weak, narrow-minded, and prejudiced. A man was judged by the lavishness of his entertainments and his ability to drink more often than he was judged on the merit of his actions. While the Irish gentry scrambled to ape the culture and fashions of

¹¹Supra, pp. 78-79. ¹²Supra, pp. 81-82. ¹³Supra, pp. 80-81.

their English neighbors, also their oppressors, they were suspicious of the more frugal Scots and Jews.¹⁴ Being generous in the extreme in their wasteful expenditures, the Irish aristocracy might have found better qualities to emulate among these peoples they distrusted. However, the course of a "convenient marriage" was usually open to some member of the family who could thereby "shore up" the family fortune--at least for a time.¹⁵

The "marriage choice" was also open to women, who were no more astute in their value judgments than the men. If a lady was blessed with a fortune, but had none of the other favorable attributes (charm, beauty and intelligence), she was nevertheless secure in the marriage market because "gentlemen" in need of money beat a path to her door.¹⁶ On the other hand, if they possessed all the charm, intelligence, and beauty a man could desire in a woman, but were so unfortunate as to have been touched by scandal or remiss in not being an heiress, their chances of a "good marriage" were sorely limited.¹⁷ Among the members of the upper class of society, the criteria for matrimony rarely included a consideration of companionship between the partners. Most women did not accept defeat easily, however. Hoping to increase their opportunities for marriage, these ladies did everything conceivable to make themselves appear "fashionable" in the best English style.¹⁸

Decadence among the early nineteenth century Irish aristocracy

¹⁴Supra, pp. 83-86. ¹⁵Supra, pp. 65-66. ¹⁶Supra, p. 66, n. 11.

¹⁷Supra, pp. 119-20. ¹⁸Supra, pp. 89-91.

appears to have been the rule rather than the exception. This is not to say that Maria overlooked the responsible members of society, men who were of strong character and who were enlightened as to their duty toward society in general, and their own tenants in particular. They were men like Maria's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who recognized the most obvious evils of the prevailing landlord-tenant system, and who voluntarily terminated some of the more outrageous "duties" and practices of the "rack-renting system."¹⁹ Harry Ormond (Ormond), and the Earl of Glenthorn (Ennui) attain this status, albeit after a training period which enabled Maria to voice her opinion on the proper training, education, and character of the successful landlord.²⁰

Roman Catholic landlords were in the minority, and while Maria and her father did not harbor religious resentments,²¹ many early nineteenth century Anglo-Irish landowners were anti-Catholic. Like King Corny in Ormond, the Catholic proprietors were isolated from the mainstream of life and were unable to participate in governmental affairs. Therefore, they remained traditional in all aspects of life, and they did not readily adapt to new technological advancements. Assuming King Corny's attitude toward his tenantry was the norm among the Catholic proprietors, their tenants had the advantage of more benevolent leadership than did those who lived under the majority of the Protestant landlords.²²

¹⁹Supra, pp. 50-52. ²⁰Supra, pp. 64-67; 69-71.

²¹Supra, p. 54. ²²Supra, pp. 87-88.

Miss Edgeworth indicated that the peasantry suffered more from the corruption and blunders of the landlords than did the landlords themselves. So closely was the tenants' fate tied to that of their overlords that few courses were open to the peasants which permitted them to better their condition. One tends to sympathize with those few who succeeded in gaining the coveted position of agent, or middleman, even though they frequently became the same type of person as the hated landlord.²³ The informer, like the middleman, improved his personal condition at the expense of his own class of society. Distillers were overtaxed and the few schools open to the masses were closed as a result of the informer's attempt to gain favor, or other remuneration, which would alleviate his own misery.²⁴

Although Maria was opposed to "favoritism" shown by landlords toward tenants who did not deserve it, favoritism was woven into the pattern of the peasants' social system, just as patronage was the fiber of the upper class society. In Castle Rackrent, Thady ingratiated himself with his masters in return for the security of retaining his place from one generation to the next; Lady Murtagh's weavers would furnish the Castle with free linens in exchange for looms--looms which were intended for their use anyway.²⁵ In Ennui, Glenthorn's tenants assailed him with endless requests for favors because he built Ellinor a cabin she did not earn.²⁶ Thus the peasants were encouraged to be

²³Supra, pp. 103-05. ²⁴Supra, p. 9. ²⁵Supra, pp. 76-77.

²⁶Supra, pp. 115-16.

indolent.

The peasants' standard of living was restricted by the narrow margin of profit permitted under the rack-rent system. A few of the farmers were able to maintain a semblance of comfort in their homes, but the bulk of the population lived at a subsistence level and occupied hovels or huts which were no better than that of Ellinor in Ennui. Maria pointed out that centuries of oppression had stifled the peasants' ambition, and for the most part, they were willing to continue to live as they had always lived.²⁷

The impact of this mode of life on the Irish peasant may have stifled his ambition, but it did not dilute his character. Contrary to what one might expect, the peasant was not always subservient to his master's will. The lower classes staunchly refused to give up their Catholic faith and to knuckle under to the laws of their Protestant masters. Instead, the peasant compensated by subtly pitting his wits against those of the oppressors, and by establishing a separate moral code which allowed him to function under the existing system. This arrangement demanded some insight into the characters of the landlords themselves, and a fairly detailed knowledge of the Irish legal system. The "uneducated" peasantry had developed an innate intelligence in both these areas.²⁸

The system also caused the peasantry, on the one hand, to be loyal to the extreme (Thady in Castle Rackrent), and cunning and sly

²⁷Supra, pp. 116-17. ²⁸Supra, pp. 108-10.

on the other hand (Jason in Castle Rackrent).²⁹ Furthermore, the peasantry, like the upper class itself, was ignorant of those principles of integrity and intelligence which should have been embodied in the character of "a good landlord." By the standards of the lower class, "good masters" were those who befriended the peasant by speaking pleasantly to him, or by sharing an occasional glass of whiskey with him. Even though the "good landlord" "borrowed" as much from the tenants as a "bad landlord" demanded in excessive duties and gifts, he would nonetheless be dear to the peasant's heart.³⁰ Insight the peasants had, but foresight was out of their reach. Long-range planning was seldom numbered among the peasant's virtues, but perhaps the uncertainty of his existence, and the day-to-day struggle for survival, left little time for conjecture on the morrow.

Lack of education not only hindered the peasant's progress with respect to hygiene and cleanliness in the home, it also tended to make him deeply superstitious. Although Maria tended to play down this aspect of the Irish peasant's character, he was likely to cling tenaciously to a host of absurd misconceptions, and to explain away mysterious occurrences as the doings of goblins and fairies.³¹

Troublemakers and agitators were present in the simple society portrayed by Miss Edgeworth just as they are present in the sophisticated societies of today. "Lady Bluemantle's" did their share in setting neighbor against neighbor in matters of religion and politics. Maria

²⁹Supra, pp. 103-05. ³⁰Supra, pp. 75-76. ³¹Supra, pp. 112-14.

frequently categorized people in key positions, such as politicians or the few schoolteachers of the lower class, by saying they were or were not "party" men. The term "party" implied an overwhelming prejudice in religion or politics which, if passed on and circulated among the people, gave rise to serious confrontations between groups or factions.³²

For the most part, the peasantry was passionate, gentle, generous and lazy. They had an unparalleled devotion to the family group, especially notable in the filial devotion of child to parent. A strong sense of duty prompted them to mourn and honor their dead, just as a healthy sense of social custom and the love of a good time persuaded them to join the revelry of the wake which followed. In truth, the slightest hint of any social event was enough to encourage the indolent peasantry to set aside their tasks until another day. It was, in fact, the habit of the Irish lower classes to begin all new tasks on Monday morning. (Thady began his Rackrent memoirs on Monday morning.) Therefore, a roof which needed mending on Tuesday would remain in disrepair until the following Monday, with all the days in between being wasted. When Monday morning did arrive, the peasant would more than likely have some reason--a holiday, a funeral, etc.--to forestall the project for still another week.³³

Finally, the lower classes, as portrayed in the novels, developed a "devil-may-care" attitude toward life, somewhat akin to the reckless attitude prevalent among the Anglo-Irish upper class. While the aristocracy

³²Supra, p. 129.

³³Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, p. 64; supra, pp. 115-16.

blatantly displayed this attitude in their lavish life style, the peasantry found other ways to throw caution to the winds. The prospect of a ride in a broken-down Irish carriage pulled by worn-out plough horses and driven by wild and reckless Irish postilions aroused both the indignation and consternation of the French and English travelers; to Irishmen, however, the exhilarating trip was simply a daring challenge to fate and caution. The peasant also gave himself over to the pleasures of the bottle. Not only did Maria point up the significance of the public houses in the peasants' society, but here and there, throughout the four novels, she called the readers' attention to the amount of "shebean," or "little beer" the peasants drank at home.³⁴

As an interesting aside, Maria attached a note and a glossary to Thady's history of the Rackrent family. Posing as an editor of Thady's work, Maria explained that she let his manuscript stand without correction because the history, told in the old steward's own words, would better serve to inform the English people of the "manners and characters" of their Irish neighbors. The last paragraph of this note, which consists of but one sentence, is of particular interest: "Did the Warwickshire militia, who were chiefly artisans, teach the Irish to drink beer? or did they learn from the Irish to drink whiskey?"³⁵ Whichever the case may have been, the peasantry did abandon themselves to the power of both these "spirits" whenever the opportunity arose.

³⁴Supra, pp. 125-26; Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, p. 53.

³⁵Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, IV, p. 63.

Maria's Irishmen were not individuals, nor were they intended to be.³⁶ In her effort to record the social patterns and to characterize the nineteenth century society, the author was naturally interested in revealing character types, and the various traits which made up the whole of the national character. Therefore, a study of political and religious issues of her time was not essential to Maria's purpose; and, in the Irish novels, she either merely touched on these areas or ignored them altogether. This omission could explain why Maria has occasionally been judged as a talented and intelligent woman, but not as a "profound thinker."³⁷ This judgment seems to imply a lack of awareness and interest in public affairs, but a study of Maria's voluminous correspondence and manuscripts will dispel this notion. Michael Hurst, in his book, Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene, used these letters and manuscripts to help him understand the public temper of Maria's Ireland. His approach was justifiable since the author expressed an opinion on most of the political issues of her time. In so doing, however, Hurst concluded that Maria, like the rest of her class, was not dissatisfied with the existing political arrangement.³⁸ It was natural, then, for Maria to overlook the oppressive political system when she sought to pinpoint the cause of Ireland's socio-economic problems.

³⁶Maria Edgeworth, Maria Edgeworth: Selections from her Works, with an Introduction by Sir Malcolm Cotter Seton (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1920), p. xli.

³⁷Baker, Edgeworth, p. 15.

³⁸Hurst, Maria and the Public Scene, p. 33.

On the other hand, one may not correctly question the accuracy of Maria's "social history" of nineteenth century Ireland. The length of her life gave Miss Edgeworth ample time to observe the Irish character and to understand the nature of society. She recorded the story of a people arrested in their progress toward civilization by a complex and inequitable political and legal system; yet, the solution she held forth had nothing to do with political reforms. Being a humanitarian, a moralist, and an idealist, Maria believed that basic changes in the human nature and life style of both the ruling class and the peasantry would constitute the reform necessary to cure the ills of Ireland. Here, Maria may have erred, for she reduced the most complex of problems to the simplest terms. However, Maria seemed to have an unwavering faith in her countrymen. A journalist once wrote that Maria " . . . would laugh like an Irishwoman in exuberant enjoyment of any pleasant subject: her warm-hearted benevolence, aided by her warm-hearted love of country, was delightful."³⁹ Perhaps these qualities which were noticed and remarked upon as part of Maria's character were the qualities she recognized in her countrymen which Maria believed would make a simple solution workable.

³⁹Mrs. Edgeworth, Maria's Memoirs, III, 290.

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- Lawless, Emily. Maria Edgeworth. English Men of Letters Series. Edited by John Morley. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905. Emily Lawless writes of Maria's life and literature from an Irish point of view, rather than from the somewhat prejudiced viewpoint taken by Maria's English biographers.
- Longford, Elizabeth. Wellington: The Years of the Sword. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969. Lady Longford's biography merely touches on the Edgeworth family, but her observations are unique and tend to give a different slant on Maria's character than other writers. (Possibly because this book was published recently.)
- McDowell, R. B. Irish Public Opinion: 1750-1800. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1924. Based primarily on newspaper articles and correspondence which were written from 1750-1800. Takes many events into consideration (French and American wars, etc.).
- Newby, P. H. Maria Edgeworth. English Novelists Series. London: Arthur Barker, Ltd., 1950. One of the more recent studies of Maria's life. It is brief--ninety-four pages--but touches on the main points of Maria's life.
- O'Farrell, Patrick. Ireland's English Question: Anglo-Irish Relations 1534-1970. New York: Schocken Books, 1971. As the title implies, the book is written from an unusual point of view. The "question" implied in the title is religion, and the author pursues his study with religion as the main issue.
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- Pakenham, Thomas. The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. Written by a descendent of one of Ireland's most prominent families of late eighteenth, early nineteenth century. Interesting material, readable style.

Salaman, Redcliffe N. The History and Social Influence of the Potato. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949, Reprinted 1970. Even though this is an overall history of the potato, its extensive use in Ireland caused the author to focus on the history of that country. Valuable source of information.

Werkmeister, Lucyle. A Newspaper History of England, 1792-1793. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967. An accepted guide to the newspapers of the period indicated in the title. The author does, however, include some facts about newspapers before and after 1792 and 1793.

Zimmern, Helen. Maria Edgeworth. Eminent Women Series. Edited by John H. Ingram. London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1883. In some instances, failed to see the importance of the purely Irish aspects of Maria's life. Tended to emphasize, instead, those things in Maria's life which deal with England and Maria's "Englishness." Even so, an accurate, useful and interesting source of study.