

Maria Edgeworth

Born 250th ago, Anglo-Irish writer known for her children's stories and for her novels of Irish life.

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Maria Edgeworth was born on the first day of the year 1768, at the house of her mother's father, Mr. Elers, at Black Bourton, some fourteen miles from Oxford, her father and mother having been married while the former was still an undergraduate, and under nineteen years of age. She died on May 22, 1849, in the arms of her faithful stepmother. She's remembered for her book *Castle Rackrent*.

Castle Rackrent is a book that portrayed as a mea culpa for that hyphenated class that was blamed for most of Ireland's woes, but that showed that all this was wide of the mark. She addressed much wider and deeper questions; gender, identity, education, child rearing, science, revolution, secularism and modernity that were all part of that Eighteenth Century age of reason, and those questions have now resurfaced again in Ireland in today's global age.

Julie Donovan's paper on Maria Edgeworth and Wales's illustrated this point. And her visits to Edinburgh, 'the Athens of the north', brought her into contact with the influential literary critic, Douglas Stewart, and with Adam Smith's, whose *Wealth of Nations*, became the new bible of commercial society, and guide for what Napoleon disparagingly called 'a nation of shopkeepers'. While there, she formed a strong friendship with the historical novelist Walter Scott, in a literary relationship of equal benefit to both writers. Maria demonstrated to him – and to the Russian writer, Turgenev – how the ordinary Irish peasantry could be incorporated into the aristocratic novel, even if the view was only from the great windows of the big house.

But that same reason undermined the old feudal order across Europe, nowhere more than in France, which broke into violent revolution, the shock waves from which affected even distant Ireland. Reason polarized society, the traditional against the modern, the religious and aristocratic land-owning class, against the democratic rentier class, and the men and women who lived off their pens, and it often divided families into factions.

The Edgeworth's themselves were affected by such a division. Henry Essex Edgeworth, a branch of the family, converted from the established Church of Ireland to Catholicism, the bastion of feudalism, and migrated to France, where he was made a priest by the Church, and granted an aristocratic title by the king. When the revolution broke out, he attended Louise XVI on the scaffold in 1789, and in the revolutionary wars in France and Ireland hundreds of thousands were killed.

Richard Lovell, by contrast, believed in gradual improvement and reform, and was the local representative in the old Protestant parliament in Dublin, and to that end he supported Catholic emancipation, and tended to be distrusted by both extremes.

The Act of Union of 1800 ended politics in Ireland, which Edgeworth voted against, was passed and the parliament in which he sat abolished, he turned his attention to composing his Memoirs, with Maria acting as his amanuensis. It is often said that our children only know us in our declining years when the fire has left us, but Maria knew her father before he ever had a public reputation, had an estate, and knew his mistakes as well as his genius. Discussing his early years would in all likelihood have covered the family's origin and history, which gave her that material for her fictional account of an Irish family, *Castle Rackrent* (1800), a work which she never discussed with her father until it appeared in bookshops. She may have been a dutiful daughter, but she was never her father's ventriloquist doll. Rieko Suzuki's paper on: Maria Edgeworth's Sense of History' explores what that novel tells us about her conception of the family

Maria published the second volume of the memoirs after her father's death in 1817, and she devoted herself to the publication of 'improving' novels in the decades that followed, but it was clear that such moral discussions had less effect on a deeply divided Ireland. O'Connellite democracy, the 'devotional revolution' promoted the power of the Catholic Church throughout the 1830s; 'physical-force politics of those nostalgic for the immediacy of the 1798 men, tore the country apart in a culture of irreconcilability, and those who saw no hope in neither side of that choice departed for new lands. Increasingly Ireland was doing its thinking in heaven, while of necessity having to do its living on this earth and found their only political hope in the use of the gun. Maria, a woman treated with contempt by both sides, found herself being marginalized and admitted that there was no place for her or her writing, and put down her great analytical pen. The public and the private world of this writer was deliberately forgotten for the next one hundred and fifty years on the island of Ireland, but not in the wider world.

<https://mariaedgeworthcenter.com/the-edgeworth-encounter-with-modernity-the-trinity-college-maria-edgeworth-conference-8-9-dec-2018/>

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