"Tales of Other Times"
Maria Edgeworth and the Anglo-Irish Novel

"Miss Edgeworth was essentially a didactic writer for whom the virtue of the novel was that it was a particularly graphic form of tract. Fiction was an aid to education, and Miss Edgeworth's theories of human nature and right behavior trip her up as a novelist. This is most apparent in her English novels. In the Irish ones, she is writing more of what she knows at first hand..."

- Walter Allen, The English Novel

"The English tend to think of paintings first and farms second—just as Jane Austen tends to look at a piece of land and see its price and proprietor but nobody actually working there."

- Terry Eagleton, Heathcliff & The Great Hunger

The term "Irish novel" could only have been seen as an oxymoron in the 19th Century, in England or in Ireland. Whether or not nationalist arguments are true that the Act of Union of 1800, which laid claim of copyright upon British novel reprints, was hazardous to the Irish economy as a whole, one thing is for certain; it was the Irish printing industry which paid dearly for the law's enactment. Prior to 1800, Irish Print Culture was exclusively dependent on reprinting British literature. The Copyright Act, passed by the Union, restricted Irish print companies, who had previously been rendered exempt from British Copyright laws. Deprived of its key economic base, and with no "national literature" of its own to turn to, the Irish print business inevitably "went under." The Irish Famine of 1845 would only compound the economic struggle the Irish printing enterprise would experience, and it would take a century for the print business to make any sign of recovery. According to Charles Benson, as late as the span between 1900 and 1969, a single year's worth of published books in England was greater than the complete number of Irish publications during that sixty-nine year span (Eagleton 145). Terry Eagleton, in Heathcliff and the Great Hunger, notes the cruel, almost absurd, irony of the fact that at "the very point when the English novel was entering on its maturity, the Irish literary institution found itself in a lamentable condition" (Eagleton 146). The lack of any national literature in Ireland was evident during this economic struggle; the Irish printing companies not only lacked the financial means to remain
open, but the Irish nation, as a whole, was devoid of its own, unique literary voice. With the advent of the British Novel, Ireland's intellectual luminaries would flock with all possible dispatch to London. The decision could only have been economical in nature, rather than reflective of a disloyalty toward their countrymen. They would have no hope of getting published in their own country, so long as Ireland's book trade was financially bereft. These writers had a passing, however bleak, chance of a career in London during what could only have been termed a "renaissance" of British Print Culture. Eventually, Ireland's canon of literary lions (Wilde, Yeats, Synge, Joyce) would vaguely resemble America's contemporary "Lost Generation" of expatriate modernists who gained notoriety for their writing by working outside their native country (Pound, Eliot, Hemingway, Stein). But, the aforementioned writers would not come to prominence until the second half of the century. For the time being, the circumstance of the Irish writer was only a slight improvement from their circumstance at home. Received with condescending snobbery by the elite literary establishment of London, which refused to take these Irish writers seriously, the running line about Irish fiction was that "the Irish wouldn't buy it because they were too poor, and the English because they were too English" (Eagleton 146). Therefore, the question as to what "national novelist" would claim to voice Ireland's own nationalist sensibilities was open-ended in nature. At first glance, the logical choice for the title of Ireland's first national novelist is Jonathan Swift, the Anglo-Irish satirist whose 1729 essay, "A Modest Proposal," drew attention to the plight of the Irish peasantry with Horatian Satire. But, Swift's body of work precedes the advent of the "19th Century British Novel." And, the closest work of Swift's to the conventional "novel" is *Gulliver's Travels*, which, while great fun, is a satirical fantasy with no direct connection to the Anglo-Irish population.
Enter Maria Edgeworth. Mrs. Edgeworth, at the turn of the century, commanded a type of commercial popularity which would be enviable in any period. Though an avowed favorite among the English aristocrats, and though well-received in European intellectual circles, her fiction commanded an unusually diverse readership, crossing class and social boundaries. Widely imitated in her own day, her influence was evident in the work of writers as diverse as Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot. With popular novels such as *Castle Rackrent*, *The Absentee*, and *Ormond*, it is Mrs. Edgeworth who is, traditionally, awarded the title of Ireland's first "national" novelist in English scholarly discourse. It is only recently that modern scholars, examining Ireland's own literary history, have begun to push back against this narrative's validity. Mrs. Edgeworth, they argue, neither proposed to speak for the Irish, nor did she center any of her novels on the Irish tenant-class. Scholars have argued that she is too closely situated in the "Anglo Protestant ruling class" camp, prone to reinforcing the pro-Colonial rhetoric of her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. Mary Jean Corbett would go so far as to state that the Edgeworth family was "indebted to and dependent on those 'inhabitants of the country' whom, through the cultivation of paternalism, they sought to constitute ideologically as wholly indebted to and dependent on them" (Kim 5) Indeed, in the last thirty years, literary scholars such as Terry Eagleton, Patrick Joseph Murray, and J.C. Beckett have since suggested the names of William Carleton and John Banim as writers whose fiction is more worthy of the honor of being named Ireland's "national voice," and is more reflective of the Irish experience as a whole, than Maria Edgeworth's work is. In the first half of this paper, I will examine the construction of Edgeworth's identification as Ireland's first "national" writer and how this connotation was formed. In the second half of this paper, I will examine the context of Maria Edgeworth's fiction, in order to determine the validity of the claim that Mrs. Edgeworth is the first "national" novelist of Ireland.
"The title of first 'national' Irish novelist, as we have seen, is usually awarded to Maria Edgeworth," notes Terry Eagleton. "But the word 'national' is ambiguous and itself a bone of political contention. Is it a social term, designating a kind of fiction which totalizes the nation as a distinctive entity, or a political one, meaning a form of writing which represents the nation in a patriotic style," he asks (Eagleton 199). Eagleton's assessment of Edgeworth is leveled squarely on her status as a "popular" novelist. She was not "of the people" nor was she placing "the people" at the center of her fiction, but was rather accepted with open-arms by the aristocracy. However, one would concede that such criteria are far too narrow. Edgeworth, although born in Oxfordshire, was Anglo-Irish, herself. Adamently opposed to the more heavy-handed, abusive tactics commonly exemplified by other landlords, her father had attained a reputation as an English landlord whose benevolence and indulgent treatment of the Irish working class was progressive, at best. Richard Lovell Edgeworth had drawn national speculation in 1782, upon the formation of Grattan's Irish Parliament, for his willful migration from Oxfordshire to County Longford, with young Maria in tow. She would spend her formative years in Longford, Ireland and, although of the ruling class of aristocrats, would develop a keen understanding and empathy for the working class, as a result. Her first novel, Castle Rackrent, was published a mere two years after the Great Rebellion of 1798, which inevitably shaped her fiction. "It was because she occupied a genuinely world-historical moment in Irish affairs that Maria Edgeworth was able to become the first national Irish novelist." Eagleton concludes. To validate Eagleton's initial argument, Edgeworth's fiction, indeed, rarely (if ever) features the Irish tenant-class as central characters. Rather, the tone of her fiction is often nostalgic in nature, looking back to a gentler, less problematic time when Landlord-Tenant disputes were less commonplace. In Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation,
Declan Kiberd would theorize that Edgeworth "imagined a trusting and easy commerce between landlord and tenant which, by the time she wrote the book in the aftermath of the Act of Union, was strictly historical" (Kiberd 71). But, upon closer examination, her fiction succeeds precisely where Eagleton claims that it fails. The short story, "Limerick Gloves," featured in the 1804 publication, *Popular Tales*, is perhaps the most famous example of Edgeworth's emphasis on the prejudice directed towards the Irish population. True, the Irish peasantry does not figure centrally to the story. Rather, the central characters are the aristocratic Hill family. But, the conversational structure of the short story leaves little room for doubt that the subject of the story is the Hills' attitude towards the Irish. This is made most evident by the family's mortified reaction upon the discovery that the daughter, Phoebe, had been given a pair of limerick gloves by an "Irish Glover." It is Phoebe who questions this logic that it is not possible for there to be a decent or well-mannered Irishman, characterizing the snobbery of the English upper-class concerning the Irish.

But, Edgeworth's awareness of the Irish situation went beyond the conventional "not all Irish are bad" sentiment which is put forth by Phoebe. Edgeworth also understood the politics of the situation. "The Grateful Negro," a short story published in *Tales and Novels*, has historically attracted scholarly attention for what has been termed an anti-Colonial message. Discourse around the text so often is focused on Edgeworth's stance on African slavery, that to entertain the notion that the short story's focus is not about slavery, at all, is at first unthinkable. This time, the Irish are completely absent, even as secondary characters. The main setting is the island of Jamaica, and the central characters are Hector and Caesar, African slaves who take part in a slave rebellion. But, both Tom Dunne and Mitzi Meyers have argued that "The Grateful Negro" is an allegory for Catholic and dissenter insurgency against the Anglo English landlord class. As has previously been
noted, Ireland's Great Rebellion of 1798 would inevitably have shaped Edgeworth's fiction, as the Rebellion elicited responses from writers on both sides of the debate, and "The Grateful Negro," written in 1802 (but published in 1804), is no exception. Allegory would explain the unusually benevolent nature of the slave-owning Mr. Edwards, who allots both land and wages for Caesar and his fellow slaves, in the same manner as the English landlords with their Irish tenants. And, while Caesar ultimately quells a slave rebellion by saving Mr. Edwards' life (the reward being the resurrection of his dead wife, Clara), Edgeworth makes the distinction clear. The barbaric qualities of the overseer Durant and Mr. and Mrs. Jeffries, the slave owners whose actions ferment rebellion, are illustrated, and each of them pay for their abuse of power. So, while Edgeworth seems to imply that gratitude would serve the Irish tenantry well, she also implies that this is only in the case of Landlords who are deserving of such loyalty. "The Grateful Negro," with this in mind, appeared to be a rationalization process for both Maria Edgeworth, and her father. Marilyn Butler, in *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography*, observes that, in the aftermath of the 1798 Rebellion, "Edgeworth removed his family next morning to their home, which, as though to confirm Protestant suspicions, had indeed been deliberately spared by the Catholic rebels," in the same manner that Mr. Edwards is spared by Caesar, out of gratitude (Butler 139). Nonetheless, Elizabeth Kim is unimpressed with Edgeworth's symbolic advocacy, which she claims is characterized by "understatement, masking, and containment to rewrite the events of 1798" (Kim 1). "Edgeworth's indirect responses," she argues, "are rooted in her status as a member of the ruling Anglo-Irish landed minority, which she also relies on" (Kim 2).

The argument that Edgeworth's intention was "containment" in the aftermath of the 1798 Rebellion is an educated one, based on an understanding of her socioeconomic background, and
explains the contemporary hostility she now experiences with post-modern scholars. But to reduce Mrs. Edgeworth's celebrated Irish novels to mere collaborative "face-saving" for Richard Lovell diminishes Edgeworth's craft. David Daiches, in *A Critical History of English Literature*, approaches her Irish writings from an objective standpoint. "Maria Edgeworth," he begins, "wrote of the Irish social scene and was one of the first to treat the Irish character seriously and not in the tradition of comic caricature" (Newcomer 5). Those who assail Edgeworth as a sell-out fail to account for the reality that Edgeworth's familiarity with the aristocracy was precisely what enabled her to secure a broad readership, as opposed to writers who tackled the struggles of the Irish peasantry in a direct fashion, such as John Banim. They also fail to account for the fact that, in their own time, the progressive views of the Edgeworths were seen as both "dangerous extremism" and "subversive" in nature, by the British aristocracy (Butler 137). Her most popular and widely printed novels, *Castle Rackrent*, *The Absentee*, and *Ormond* are brutal takedowns of the English Landlord class, utilizing biting mockery that can leave little doubt as to which camp Maria Edgeworth is really in. First-hand familiarity with the English ruling class is what enables Edgeworth to write such effective Horatian satire. Indeed, Mrs. Edgeworth's most beloved creation, *Castle Rackrent*’s Thady Quirk, holds a position not dissimilar to her own. Although only a "faithful family retainer" for the Rackrent estate, his contempt for his employers, concealed with benevolent silliness, is clear. He declines to directly criticize the Rackrents, for all their drunkenness, their gambling, and their dishonesty, even as his son, Jason, now controls the estate. "Every word of praise is actually a perceptive revelation of the Rackrents’ errors and the Quirks’ avid quickness at taking advantage of them," notes James Newcomer, proceeding to say that the Rackrents “play always into Thady’s and Jason’s hands, though, if a reader were inattentive, he might think exactly the opposite” (Newcomer 66). Thady would have been reflective of
Edgeworth's own internal conflict, between the moral obligation she had to the Irish Catholic Insurgency and her social obligation to the Anglo-Irish Protestant ruling class. Thady Quirk would prove invaluable to her ideological rationalization. The raw authenticity of Quirk, a man unlearned in letters, not particularly astute, but in tune with the natural world of the Irish countryside, balances out the reality that he is no longer a subordinate, or the reality that he was never among the exploited Irish tenants.

Even Edgeworth's post-modern critics, for all their reservations with her work, cannot help but sing the praises of "honest Thady"; to marvel at the didactic effectiveness of this Irish Falstaff. "No figure could hover more ambiguously between inside and outside than the faithful old family retainer, at once privy to his master's intimate affairs yet humbly peripheral," Terry Eagleton notes, "Such is the doubleness of one of Irish fiction's most intriguingly enigmatic characters" (Eagleton 161). True, some in the English Aristocracy would likely read into Quirk's wordplay. However, as many, in this ruling class, would be prone to mistaking his provincial simplicity as laughable Irish caricature. For the Irish readership, the code would have been unmistakable, so much so that William Butler Yeats would decree it to be "one of the most inspired chronicles ever written in the English language" (Yeats 27). As such, Castle Rackrent emerges as the heart and soul of Maria Edgeworth's reputation as the first national novelist of Ireland. The Absentee and Ormond, which features the Irish as central characters only not as members of the tenant-class, further sharpen Edgeworth's double-edged sword used to subversively challenge Anglo-Protestant authority. The Absentee reflects the consequential harm inflicted upon the Irish peasantry by the negligent patriarchy of the Clonbrony family, Lord and Lady Clonbrony specifically. Lady Clobrony's lavish vanity and obsession with the latest English fashions is further reflective of the intolerable
Mrs. Jeffries in “The Grateful Negro.” In both cases the patriarchal negligence for which the subordinates pay is brought on and inflamed by the silly fancies of the Colonial wife seeking to emulate the ladies of England at any cost. Lord Clonbrony, himself, blames his wife for his recklessness and frequent absenteeism, insisting that “it is all my Lady Clonbrony’s nonsense” (Edgeworth 20). However, Edgeworth’s use of this aristocracy is most in effective in showing that, through education, reconciliation is possible. Lord Colambre, the son of the Clonronies, upon his visit to the estate, develops first hand familiarity with the suffering of the Irish working class. He comes upon not merely victims, but Irish characters with agency, such as Lady Dashfort, who exhibits “wit, satire, poetry, and sentiment” when deliberately describing Ireland in the bleakest of terms to prevent him from moving to Ireland, or Mrs. Rafferty, who soundly observes that “Uniformity and conformity...had their day; but now, thank the stars of the present day, irregularity and deformity bear the bell, and have the majority” (Edgeworth 107). Unable to understand as to why his parents have painted the Irish in such a negative light, the Clonbrony heir emerges from the experience with renewed purpose. By both granting the Irish tenant-class agency, and humanizing the English aristocracy, Edgeworth is able to meet both parties half-way. The novel comes to a fitting conclusion precisely because of Lord Colambre’s understanding of his own responsibilities as an heir. He emerges as willing to assume the responsibilities for the welfare of his Irish tenants, unlike his parents. “This novel is a novel of purpose,” notes James Newcomer. “not the purpose of making good triumphant, but of illustrating the relationship between social conditions on the one hand, and, on the other, the active responsibility or irresponsibility of people who hold the power of government and property” (Newcomer 20).
If *Castle Rackrent* emerges as the heart and soul of Edgeworth’s Irish writing, it simultaneously emerges as the premiere 19th Century British novel. *Rackrent* was the first British novel to utilize a form of "non-omniscient," unreliable narration, and also precedes the earliest of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly* novels, now widely regarded as the first "Historical fiction" novels. "The year 1800," beams Walter Allen, "is a date of first importance in the history of English fiction, indeed of world fiction, for in that year Maria Edgeworth published her short novel *Castle Rackrent*" (Allen 55). As such, Maria Edgeworth has become a great many things to a great many people. Historians of British Literature view her as essential to the development of “the novel,” as it is now known. Second and Third-Wave feminists, in reevaluating her body of work, have focused on her progressive novels promoting women’s education, such as *Belinda*. Jane Austen enthusiasts identify Maria Edgeworth, along with Frances Burney, as the primary source of stylistic inspiration for Austen, based on Edgeworth’s “novels of manners.” Scholars in the African American studies field evaluate Edgeworth in a negative light by interpreting “The Grateful Negro” as a validation of African Slavery. And, of course, Edgeworth’s legacy as Ireland’s first “national novelist” is either accepted or denied by contemporary scholars. There is a certain truth, as has been shown, to the logic that Edgeworth is only Ireland’s first “national” novelist in a broad sense. Her fiction may humanize the Irish, but the novels’ trajectory inevitably rotates back to a validation of the colonial system. As a member of the British aristocracy, she benefitted from the Act of Union and Copyright Act, where most Irish writers were placed at a disadvantage. The Irish tenants may be illustrated sympathetically in *The Absentee*, but the novel concludes with Lord Colambre’s decision to conform to the role of the landlord by taking “responsibility” for the Irish peasants, much like children. Even Edgeworth’s preface in *Castle Rackrent* has raised the ire of the scholars who view her intentions critically. “When Ireland loses her identity by and union with
Great Britain,” Edgeworth’s note concludes, “she will look back, with a smile of good-humoured complacency, on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her former existence” (Edgeworth 1). But, while it is understandable that Edgeworth’s motivations would come under fire with modern-day scholars, it appears post-Colonial scholars, such as Elizabeth Kim, are holding Edgeworth to an expectation no writer of her time period would be able to live up to. They seem to want Edgeworth to express a firm denunciation of the British Colonialism, as a whole, and to call for the emancipation of the Irish Catholics on all levels. Expression of such sentiment would have been wholly anachronistic for the period in which Edgeworth lived, and such an expectation is unrealistic. The Rebellion of 1798 had so shocked the whole of England that even the most benevolent of landlords appeared complacent and at a loss for words. What Edgeworth did with her early Historical Fiction was capture that national mood and channel it into a form of literature which would forever modify the scope of English literature. Rather than condemn Maria Edgeworth as a sell-out whose interest in Irish fiction was only rooted in maintaining the status quo, why not appreciate the delicate scenario, the “double bind,” Edgeworth occupied. Never mind the constraints placed on Edgeworth’s narrative voice as a woman occupying a predominately masculine craft. Edgeworth’s indirect complicity in the subjugation of the Irish people, her loyalty to the Aristocratic Protestant ruling class she had been born into, was in direct conflict with her sympathies with the Irish Catholic dissenters, as well as her identity as an Anglo-Irish woman who had grown up in Longford County. Bound by societal constraint, she had no choice but to give characteristic “lip service” to the ruling class to ensure publication and the sale of the books, even if her heart lay with the Irish people. That the result is a series of thoroughly enjoyable novels and short fiction, which capture the Irish character and spirit, is remarkable, given such constraint. James L. Michener, in his introduction to Henri Sienkiewicz’s With Fire and Sword, characterizes
the national novelist, as follows. "The Sienkiewicz Trilogy stands with that handful of novels that not only depict but help to determine the soul and character of a nation they describe," going on to name Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, Murasaki's *Tale of a Genji*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, as other such works that "speak to the nation's heart" (Michener in Sienkiewicz viii-ix). In this sense, then surely Maria Edgeworth must be Ireland's first national novelist. The character of Thady Quirk, with his warmth, humor, spirit, and endurance, he remains humble even as he now lords over the estate once dominated by the thoughtless and cruel Rackrents. A character who speaks to the Irish soul as clearly as he did over two hundred years ago, surely he serves as proof that Maria Edgeworth's fiction, written as Ireland was on the verge of forever changing its relations with England, "not only depict[s] but help[s] determine the soul and character of the nation they describe."
Works Cited


