

Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849)

by Susan Manly

Maria Edgeworth was born in Black Bourton, Oxfordshire, on 1 January 1768, the third child and eldest daughter of Richard Lovell Edgeworth (henceforth RLE) and the first of his four wives, Anna Maria Elers (1743-73). After the death of her mother from puerperal fever in March 1773 when Edgeworth was five years old, and the scandalously swift remarriage of her father to Honora Sneyd of Lichfield (with whom he had fallen in love well before Anna Maria's death) in July 1773, the family moved back to Edgeworthstown in County Longford. The loss of Anna Maria and the rapidity with which she was supplanted in RLE's affections by Honora affected the young Maria Edgeworth deeply, especially as she had seen little of her father in her first five years – he had spent much time away from home, some of it abroad in France, pursuing various engineering projects, and absorbed in the experiment of educating his eldest son, Richard, along the lines advocated by Rousseau in *Emile* (the attempt was a failure: Richard grew up wild). Disturbed and unhappy, Edgeworth's behaviour worsened – she threw tea in someone's face, cut up an aunt's sofa cover, and smashed glass – and in 1775, proving too much of a handful for her young step-mother, she was sent away to school in England, where she remained for the next seven years. In the meantime, Honora gave birth to two children, and began to keep 'child registers', noting the responses of her charges as she strove to educate them. Edgeworth would later revive this idea, making her own observations in registers kept between 1796 and 1797 – the empirical basis for her *Practical Education* (1798).

After Honora's death from tuberculosis in April 1780, RLE was emotionally shattered, but at the dying Honora's own insistence, quickly remarried – this time to her sister, Elizabeth Sneyd, in December 1780. Although this third marriage initially outraged family on both sides, it was a great success, and added another nine children to the Edgeworth brood. Honora had been cool and strict with her children and step-children; Elizabeth was far warmer, and helped to transform RLE's relationship with his daughter. She remained at school in England for a further two years, but from 1780 RLE was more demonstrative and encouraging towards the child who would become his intellectual partner. It is, in fact, difficult to understand Maria Edgeworth's later work fully unless RLE's influence – his intellectual milieu and philosophy – is taken into account. Many of Edgeworth's children's stories and her educational writing reflect critically on Rousseauvian ideas about early associations and formative influences, and – as Marilyn Butler and Mitzi Myers have noted – her difficult childhood and later rôle in educating her younger siblings provided Edgeworth with valuable resources of imaginative empathy and acute psychological insight into the thought-processes of children and young people.[1] RLE's interest in science and invention, his involvement in the progressive Lunar Men circle, his cosmopolitan reading, his anti-sectarianism and secularism, and his commitment to the well-being of his Irish tenants all made their mark, as a glance at Edgeworth's sources in her richly allusive writings reveals.[2] RLE was pro-revolutionary, in 1795 declaring that 'When peace permits if it ever will permit everybody who can speak French & who loves Freedom will go there'; in 1792, he had foreseen the Gagging Acts designed by the government to crush the radical reform movement, and identified the real enemy to liberty in Britain as the aristocracy: 'The monied & landed Interest are Whipped in with the old Cry of Church & State, and ten to one but in the bustle a leg or arm of the Liberty of the Press may be pulled off as if by

accident.’[3] It is also significant that the radical Joseph Johnson was Maria Edgeworth’s publisher until his death in 1809 – he was the friend of Paine, Horne Tooke, Blake and Wordsworth, and also published most of the responses to Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in addition to works by Godwin, Priestley, Darwin, and Wollstonecraft.

In the summer of 1782 RLE, Elizabeth and all the children, except Richard, settled at Edgeworthstown, now Edgeworth’s home for the rest of her life. She quickly became her father’s assistant in the management of his estate, for which he prepared her by requiring her to make a study of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776). She had already begun to write stories while still at school, but at fifteen she embarked on what was intended to be her first book, a translation of Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis’ lightly fictionalized educational work, *Adèle et Théodore* (1782) – much to the chagrin of her father’s best friend, Thomas Day (eccentric republican and author of *Sandford and Merton*). He disapproved of women writers, and was duly delighted when the printing of the translation was abandoned upon the discovery that a rival had just appeared. Five years later, in 1787, Edgeworth drafted the first version of *Letters for Literary Ladies*, which wittily demolished Day’s arguments against female authorship and the encouragement of women’s rational faculties, and which appeared in 1795 – her first publication.

Apart from her writing, these early years from 1782 to 1797 were absorbed by family business: besides helping to manage the Edgeworthstown estate, with nine small children and four others below the age of thirteen in the house, Edgeworth was closely involved in the education of the younger children. A further six children were to follow, the offspring of RLE’s fourth and final marriage to Frances Beaufort in May 1798, not long after Elizabeth’s death from tuberculosis in November 1797. In total, thirteen of RLE’s twenty-one children received all their education at home, without tutors or governesses; only five were sent to school. The family method was to allocate the youngest children to an older sister or adult. All would gather round the big table in the library at Edgeworthstown House, talking, reading and writing, the smallest children playing around the table, the older ones reading or pursuing various projects and experiments alongside their allocated adult, who would make sure that every word and idea was understood. This way of learning *en famille* persisted into Edgeworth’s old age: in 1842, when Mrs S.C. Hall visited the Edgeworths at home, she was startled to see where the famous author wrote: sitting in a corner of the sofa, working at her miniature desk, while children read, talked or played around her: ‘Miss Edgeworth’s abstractedness, and yet power of attention to what was going on, – the one not seeming to interfere with the other, – puzzled us extremely.’[4]

Although her home was in Ireland, Edgeworth spent various periods between 1791 and 1803 abroad, in England, Scotland and on the Continent. From 1791 to 1793, the family lived in Clifton, near Bristol, where they became friendly with Thomas Beddoes, physician, chemist, and democrat (he subsequently married Edgeworth’s sister, Anna); a great favourite with the younger children, Beddoes devised some of the ‘rational toys’ described in the first chapter of *Practical Education*. It was also during this time that Edgeworth had her only experience of London Society life until 1813 – an unhappy one, but fruitful for various of her later novels, including *Belinda* (1801), *Leonora* (1806), the *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809-12), and *Patronage* (1814). In 1796, Edgeworth published *The Parent’s Assistant*, a collection of lively

stories for children and adolescents, among the first fruits of her hands-on experience of reading and conversing with children, and in its Preface she quotes the passage from Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764) which she was to reuse two years later in *Practical Education*: 'If we could obtain a distinct and full history of all that hath passed in the mind of a child from the beginning of life and sensation till it grows up to the use of reason, how its infant faculties began to work, and how they brought forth and ripened all the various notions, opinions, and sentiments, which we find in ourselves when we come to be capable of reflection, this would be a treasure of natural history which would probably give more light into the human faculties, than all the systems of philosophers about them from the beginning of the world.' [5]

She now embarked on an intensive period of writing which would, within the next six years, see her established as an author of international repute, with eight books to her credit by 1802. *Practical Education* (1798) attracted some hostile critical attention for its secularist outlook – it made no mention of religious instruction, but is full of references to books and packed with ideas for experiments and practical puzzles – but its publication marked her emergence as a writer of note, and her reputation quickly spread via translations and liberal journals in Europe and America. 1798 was an awkward time to produce a progressive book: not only was England in the midst of fears of imminent invasion from France and in the throes of anti-Jacobin reaction against radicals and intellectuals, but Ireland was also in turmoil, stirred by the prospect of a reformed, independent Irish Parliament, secession from Britain, and full civil equality for Catholics. In August 1798 the French landed in County Mayo, and inflicted a notable defeat on a large Anglo-Irish army at Castlebar, sparking country-wide agitation as the mainly Catholic peasantry rose in support of the French. The French army then advanced on a course which would take it through County Longford. RLE, whose anti-sectarianism was well known, was nearly lynched by a Protestant mob when the Edgeworths moved for safety to the county town, suspected of being a French spy or United Irishman – a traumatic event which Edgeworth would later revisit in her description of the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots in *Harrington* (1817). RLE subsequently voted against the Act of Union with England in 1800: he had long been critical of the Protestant Ascendancy that dominated the Irish Parliament and legislature, condemning the corruption he saw as ensuing from the 'enormous monopoly of power' in the hands of the Protestant minority, although he believed that Union might help Ireland to develop economically, and thought Pitt would ensure that Catholic emancipation would follow.[6] Late in 1798, Edgeworth wrote a full-dress stage comedy, *Whim for Whim*, satirizing spies and spy-mania and drawing on the diamond necklace scandal involving Marie-Antoinette and the so-called Countess Jeanne de la Motte in 1785, and the swindles of the adventurer, the so-called Count Cagliostro.[7]

In 1799 Edgeworth was once again in England, visiting the industrial Midlands, meeting James Keir, chemist, democrat, and friend of Priestley and Darwin, and then London, where she met and afterwards corresponded with Anna Letitia Barbauld. She also visited her publisher, Joseph Johnson, in the King's Bench prison, where he had been incarcerated for selling Gilbert Wakefield's reformist *Address to the People of Great Britain* (1798). In January 1800, Edgeworth published the first of her novels set in Ireland, *Castle Rackrent*, supposedly the memoirs of the Irish servant of a family of feckless Anglo-Irish gentry, and received very positively. The Rackrent dynasty resembles her own forebears, while the narrator, Thady Quirk, is based on the

Edgeworths' steward, John Langan, whose accent, phrases and gestures she could mimic perfectly, amusing her aunt, Mrs Ruxton, with stories about him in 1793-5. In 1801, a second edition of *Practical Education* appeared, but in defiance of those critics who had identified its lack of religious content as seditious, Edgeworth steadfastly refused to introduce any reference to God or the Bible. Three other new works were published in the same year: *Early Lessons*, a series of stories designed to be used as a programme of education, featuring engaging and gently didactic scenarios and dialogues and focused on four children of diverse ages from four upwards, including Rosamond, one of Edgeworth's best-loved characters; *Moral Tales*, a collection of stories for older children and adolescents; and *Belinda*, a lively comic novel in the tradition of Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, following the adventures of an inexperienced but prudent young woman in high society as she strives to think for herself amid the perils of the marriage market, but also a witty response to Wollstonecraftian feminism. Edgeworth herself, as she makes clear in her 'Advertisement' to the first edition, thought of *Belinda* as a 'Moral Tale' for adult readers – a potentially misleading term, but when Edgeworth refers to 'moral tales', she has in mind the '*contes moraux*' of the French Enlightenment writers, Voltaire and J.-F. Marmontel; far from being didactic or heavy-handed, the French-style tale aims at lightness, wit, intellectual provocation, subversiveness and surprise.[8] Edgeworth's *Essay on Irish Bulls*, a complex and witty anatomy of post-Rebellion Ireland, appeared the following year, in 1802. This was written partly in apology for *Castle Rackrent*, which had been taken by some readers as a satire on Irish manners, and aimed to combat the dismissal of the Irish as comical simpletons by making an argument for the creativity and eloquence of Irish speech patterns, and implicitly indicting the English denigration of Ireland and its people.

In October 1802, Edgeworth set off with RLE and other family members for the Continent, taking advantage of the lull in hostilities instigated by the Peace of Amiens. In Paris she met Benjamin Delessert, a friend of their Genevan acquaintance, Marc-Auguste Pictet (one of the early translators of *Practical Education*, as well as of extracts from *Castle Rackrent* and *Irish Bulls*); the Abbé Morellet, who had known Diderot, d'Alembert and other Enlightenment writers and *philosophes*; Etienne Dumont, assistant to Mirabeau and later the translator of Bentham, with whom Edgeworth would later enjoy a stimulating correspondence; and a Swedish courtier of scientific pursuits, Abram Niclas van Clewberg-Edelcrantz. Edelcrantz asked her to marry him just a few weeks after their first meeting; it seems from family letters written at the time that she may have been genuinely attached in return, and that she longed for marriage and children of her own; but after reflecting, she decided to refuse the offer. She was never to receive another one. While she was still reeling from the experience, she paid a visit to an impoverished and embittered Madame de Genlis. With growing evidence that France was preparing to resume war, the Edgeworth family party left Paris in early March 1803, returning to Edgeworthstown via Edinburgh, where they met and socialized with Dugald Stewart, one of the Scottish empiricists, and Elizabeth Hamilton, satirist, novelist, and educational thinker.

Back at home, Edgeworth was not immediately productive, but began to plan another adult fiction in epistolary form, *Leonora* (1806), conceived as a witty riposte to Germaine de Staël's *Delphine*, which had been much discussed in Paris during the Edgeworths' stay. *Delphine* centres on a love-triangle, and allegorizes the French

Revolution as an event in the domestic sphere which signalled an abrupt change of direction on women's behalf; *Leonora* too focuses on the rivalry of two women, one a Frenchified coquette, the other a rational, somewhat Wollstonecraftian woman of deep but undemonstrative feeling, for the love of a man, and subtly reflects on the politics of marriage, divorce and sexual liberation. Edgeworth's mind seemed to be much on the subject of women as authors and as independent beings: in July 1804 she wrote to Barbauld suggesting that a periodical by and for 'literary ladies' might be a joint project; Barbauld was sceptical, and although they corresponded on the subject until early in 1805, the scheme never took off.[9] 1804 also saw the publication of another collection of stories for young people, *Popular Tales*.

For much of 1805 and 1806, Edgeworth's health was poor, and she spent nearly two years until April 1808 working mainly on a project instigated by RLE, *Professional Education*, a study of vocational education for boys; but she eventually recovered her interest in writing fiction, beginning work on a long, ambitious fashionable tale, *Patronage*, in May 1809, and in 1809-12 producing the *Tales of Fashionable Life*; these include *Ennui*, an Irish novel about an aristocrat caught up in the events of 1798, written in 1803-5, and *Manoeuvring* in the first issue (1809); and *Vivian, Emilie de Coulanges* and *The Absentee* in the second issue (1812). After 1805, Edgeworth frequently exchanged letters with Etienne Dumont; he was an important link between Edgeworthstown and intellectual circles in London, thought highly of her work, and encouraged her to address more ambitious public themes in her fictions – he suggested, for instance, that she write a tale 'sur chacun des fausses manières de raisonner en morale et en legislature sur les causes d'antipathie etc'[10], an idea she pursued in *Harrington*, which deals with anti-semitism in 1770s London. For a while Edgeworth's family thought that Dumont might propose marriage, but when the two met in London in 1813, she quelled the hopeful speculation with the news that he was 'very plain, very fat, and as far from sentimental as any human being can be.'[11] The following year, Edgeworth began a correspondence with Sir Walter Scott, who later claimed that he owed his own successful career as a novelist about Scotland to her Irish example.

On 13 June 1817, RLE died; his health had begun to break down in 1814, and such was Edgeworth's preoccupation with his illness that her productivity slowed, although she did, at his urging, complete two novels, *Harrington* and *Ormond*, which appeared on 21 June 1817 – just too late for her father to see them. These were the last fictional works she wrote for adults for sixteen years. After 1817 she published only two more full-length books, declaring that her motive for writing sustained fiction was gone. She did, however, honour the promise she made to RLE on his death-bed that she would complete and publish his *Memoirs*. Although Edgeworth's previous works had been singled out for very full and favourable reviews in the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*, the reception of the *Memoirs* in 1820 was hostile. John Wilson Croker's savage review in the *Quarterly* and the piece in the *Eclectic* implied that Edgeworth's own writing and reputation were polluted by association with her father, whose 'irreligion' was evident from the *Memoirs*; the *Eclectic* referred to 'a corrupt morality that taints the whole of their instructive and valuable writings', condemning the daughter alongside the father, while Croker in the *Quarterly* accused RLE of paganism and Edgeworth of perjuring herself by trying to defend his moral and religious outlook.[12] The Reviews' campaign against RLE made Edgeworth shy of publishing new work for adults, but she did publish *Harry and Lucy Concluded*

(1825), which followed two of the characters from *Early Lessons* into late adolescence, and much later, the novel *Helen* (1834), which revisits some of the themes of *Leonora* (1806), exploring women's friendships, the dangers of capitulation to male authority, and women's influence in public life. In her last thirty years she travelled in Ireland, England, Scotland and the Continent, recording her social encounters in witty, lively letters, while at home she showed resourcefulness in helping her surviving step-mother to run the Edgeworthstown estate.

In 1825 and 1832-3 two editions of Edgeworth's collected works appeared. In her heyday (1800-14), she was undoubtedly the most commercially successful and prestigious novelist in Britain and Ireland: the £2,100 she earned from *Patronage* (1814) trebles the £700 Scott earned from *Waverley* (1814), which John Gibson Lockhart thought unprecedented, and was seven times what Austen earned from *Emma* (1816). Edgeworth herself calculated that in all she made £11,062.8.10d from her writing.[13] Her reputation has suffered, in part because of her choice of form: the novella or philosophic tale used by Voltaire, Marmontel, and writers of fairy tales and children's stories, suited her purposes, allowing for an intimacy of tone, a free exploration of ideas and of character, and attention to the detail she thought so telling; but it became unfashionable as readers began to expect a more uniform naturalism. Criticism of her work has been, until recently, overwhelmingly biographical, and has sometimes dwelt rather simplistically on her relationship with her father. With the publication of the twelve-volume Pickering & Chatto *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth* (1999, 2003), however, and editions of individual works by Marilyn Butler, W. J. McCormack and Kim Walker, Claire Connolly, and Kathryn Kirkpatrick, as well as fresh insights in essays by Mitzi Myers, and Cliona O Gallchoir's full-length study (2005), Edgeworth's achievements as a writer and novelist of ideas are once again being recognized.

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Helen, a tale 3 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1834)

1 See Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford, 1972), Ch.1, and General Introduction to the *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, vol. 1, pp.xii-xiv; and Mitzi Myers, 'De-Romanticizing the Subject: Maria Edgeworth's "The Bracelets", Mythologies of Origin, and the Daughter's Coming to Writing', in Paula R. Feldman & Theresa M. Kelley (eds.), *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), pp.88-110; and "'Anecdotes from the Nursery" in Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education* (1798): Learning from Children "Abroad and at Home"', *Princeton Library Chronicle*, LX: 2 (Winter 1999), pp.220-50. A select bibliography of Myers' work on Edgeworth can be found in Susan Manly (ed.), *Practical Education*, vol. 11 in the *Novels and Selected Works* (2003), pp.xxiii-xxiv.

2 See Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends who made the Future, 1730-1810* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), and Marilyn Butler, 'Irish culture and Scottish enlightenment: Maria Edgeworth's histories of the future', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore & Brian Young (eds.), *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750-1950*, pp. 150-180.

3 RLE to Erasmus Darwin, 2 March 1795; RLE to his sister, Mrs Ruxton, 13 December 1792. Cited in Butler, pp. 111, 112.

4 For a description of the library and the Edgeworths' way of working and living in it, see *The Black Book of Edgeworthstown and Other Edgeworth Memories, 1585-1817*, eds H.J. and H.E. Butler (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1927), p.251; Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Pilgrimages to English Shrines* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, 1853), p.99, cited by Mitzi Myers in 'Reading Rosamond Reading', as below, p.58. See Myers's suggestive discussions of the Edgeworthian communal work-space and of the representation of this communal educative process in the family portrait painted by Adam Buck in 1789, in 'Reading Rosamond Reading: Maria Edgeworth's "Wee-Wee Stories" Interrogate the Canon', esp. pp.57-9, in Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark A. Heberle, & Naomi Sokoloff (eds), *Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); and "'Anecdotes from the Nursery in Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education*', pp.244-8.

5 Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764; 4th ed., corrected: London, 1785), p.10.

- 6 *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq., begun by himself and concluded by his Daughter, Maria Edgeworth*, 2 vols (London: R. Hunter et al, 1820), vol. 2, p.62.
- 7 *Whim for Whim* was sent to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, but its theme – political subversion in London, based on real episodes involving the French Queen and the parliamentary opposition – was too close to the bone for it to be stageable in late 1798, and was rejected. It remained unpublished until 2003. For more on Jeanne de la Motte and Count Cagliostro, see Iain McCalman, *The Last Alchemist* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
- 8 See Marilyn Butler (ed.), *Castle Rackrent and Ennui* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 6-7.
- 9 See Anna Letitia Le Breton, *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld, including Letters and Notices of her Family and Friends* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1874), pp.84-107.
- 10 *French*: on each of the false ways of arguing in morals and law about the causes of antipathy etc.
- 11 ME to Fanny Edgeworth, 31 May 1813; in Christina Colvin (ed.), *Maria Edgeworth: Letters from England 1813-1844* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p.50.
- 12 *Eclectic Review*, November 1820 (vol. XIV), pp.338-9; *Quarterly Review*, no. XLVI (vol. XXIII), p.544.
- 13 Marilyn Butler, 'Maria Edgeworth', in Janet Todd (ed.), *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800* (London: Methuen & Co., 1987), p.111.