

# Lady Gregory's 'Emigrant's Notebook': Autobiography, Narrative, and the Irish Dramatic Voice

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The environment that fostered Lady Gregory's early autobiography 'An Emigrant's Notebook' was created by a specific moment of cultural instability. The increasing political and social chaos of late nineteenth-century Ireland had created two opposing cultural milieux: the challenging of the Protestant Ascendancy whose land holdings since the fourteenth century had begun to be threatened overtly by the indigenous population, and the increasing incidence of education in women of the Ascendancy class.[1] Although it would take almost a hundred years for the majority of the Anglo-Irish 'big houses' to be demolished, the artistic and literary endeavours of Ascendancy women at the close of this historical phase illustrated the tensions between losing one's home and historical foundation, and the growing realization that the origins of both were ethically dubious.

Maria Edgeworth, probably the most famous female Irish writer before the twentieth century, portrayed in *Castle Rackrent* (1800) the Ascendancy ideal that she hoped her class to embody. But her most famous novel not only examines the status of the Anglo-Irish landlord, it also scorns the absurd position of his women. Edgeworth's assumption of a male narrative voice, that of the servant Thady Quirk, enacts a reversal of her own gender and social status, as if to suggest the grotesquerie of a situation in which men of the ruling class are incapable of informed narration while women are constrained to remain silent, leaving the interpretation of their circumstances to a servant.

Lady Augusta Gregory, born eighty-five years after Edgeworth into the Anglo-Irish Perse family of County Galway, gained literary recognition when she began writing short plays for the Irish Literary Theatre, with she co-founded with W.B. Yeats and John Millington Synge. She had produced editorial essays in her youth; her first publication was an article in the *Times* on the Egyptian nationalist leader Arabi Pasha when she was thirty, shortly after her marriage to Sir William Gregory. Also of County Galway, a favourite of Queen Victoria and thirty-four years Augusta Perse's senior,[2] Sir William tolerated his young wife's sympathy for the Egyptian rebel, although he gave and withdrew his permission for her to publish *Arabi and His Household* twice before it appeared in the *Times*. Once it appeared, however, the article garnered sympathy for Arabi among British officials and prevented the rebel leader from being hanged. Its portrait of his home and family life, as a friend of Sir William's commented, 'made every woman in England Arabi's friend.'[3]

As the woman behind the Irish Renaissance,[4] Lady Gregory went on to co-found the Abbey Theatre, write notable short plays on Irish life, and—most famously—foster the careers of Yeats, Synge, and other literary luminaries of early twentieth-century Ireland. But long before any of these endeavours, she had produced a self-narrative that is a prototypical model for her later plays, her biographies, and her autobiographies, while being in itself an important component of her literary oeuvre.

Sometime between her marriage in 1880 and Sir William Gregory's departure for Ceylon in 1883 to fulfil his post as Governor of the colony, Lady Gregory began writing a series of narratives she cryptically titled 'An Emigrant's Notebook.'[5] James Pethica argues that

'the winter of 1883-84 is a certainty for Augusta Gregory's work [on the Notebook] as a

complete literary entity. She may have written some parts sooner after marrying, but winter 1883 is the moment she returns to Ireland [after travelling with her husband throughout Europe and the Middle East] and more particularly to Roxborough, her family's estate, for the first time as an "emigrant." [6]

In *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance*, Mary Lou Kohfeldt observes that after Sir William left Coole in December 1883 to fulfil his duties as Governor of Ceylon, Lady Gregory 'stopped writing in her diary. She did not write to know herself, but to record how well she was doing her duty; with Sir William away, she was off duty' (70). Yet it seems apparent that Lady Gregory's work on the Notebook was completed specifically while her husband was away and she was alone at Coole with her son Richard, who would have been two years old, during January and February 1884.

At the time, Lady Gregory was thirty-one, an early enough age to begin writing a retrospective on life. But what she produced is an exemplary work of memory, portraiture, and life made poetic while remaining grounded in self-honesty and the desire for truth. Although this work has remained unpublished and has received little more than passing critical attention, it provided the foundation for Lady Gregory's later means of expression: she would produce from it the literature for which she is known. Moreover, 'An Emigrant's Notebook' is an understated political text in the tradition of Edgeworth's novels; its auto-biographical viewpoint illuminates concerns and self-conflicts within the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy during the height of the Irish land wars of the 1880s.

As the earliest of Lady Gregory's autobiographies, 'An Emigrant's Notebook' is distinct from her diaries and journal entries; like the later *Seventy Years*, it was edited with a view to publication and provides a significant interface for Lady Gregory's dramatic, historical, and autobiographical writings. It additionally describes a unique historical interlude between the relative tranquillity of the 1850s and 1870s in Ireland, and the beginnings of the dissolution of the Ascendancy estates during the first half of the twentieth century.

The Notebook begins with a description of Roxborough House, Lady Gregory's childhood home:

Our home was not beautiful—quite the reverse. They say it was the first slated house in the county, & this may well have been, for the little dim slates embedded in mortar look rather experimental. One generation after another had talked of rebuilding it, and yet it stands intact, & it is likely to remain so, for who would build marble halls now to be inhabited by a possible Land Leaguer of the near future?

The section on Roxborough was composed, she explains,

'after my last visit to Ireland, and in consequence of finding all so changed even within the last year or two that I wrote down these recollections of my old home—of the time when we lived in peace and charity with all men and loved our people and they loved us.' This nostalgic view of her youth characterizes its depiction in the Notebook, although its patronising aspect does not; as editorialising is kept to a minimum in the narrative, Lady Gregory's descriptions of places and people in this original autobiographical text are more cohesive than in the later works into which they were absorbed.

In the final version of *Seventy Years*, for example, which she completed just before her death and which was published by Colin Smythe in 1974, Lady Gregory toned down the bitterness of recollections of her early childhood in previous versions, preferring to convey these more subtly in the final text by a continual substitution of the phrase 'the Mistress' wherever she had used 'my mother' in earlier drafts of the manuscript. A singular instance of the former title is found in a section on Lady Gregory's marriage that she ultimately removed: 'My

mother [was] never quite sure he [Sir William] had not married me as a compliment to her.’[7] Lady Gregory’s voice in these final revisions of *Seventy Years*—less bitter, more nostalgic—is closer to that in the Notebook than the earlier versions of the published autobiography. In the Notebook, Lady Gregory’s mother is ‘the Mistress’ and her father ‘the Master;’ her older brother Richard, with whose care she was entrusted in her mid-twenties since her mother never believed she would find a husband, is simply ‘my invalid.’

Yet while the descriptions of her family in the Notebook convey no sense of resentment, they do express a profound feeling of distance from her family members. There are fewer overt references to her mother’s and sisters’ religious proselytizing in the Notebook, and more humorous anecdotes focusing on members of the community. The fact that Lady Gregory ultimately returns to the more discreet style employed in the Notebook to deal with family members in *Seventy Years* attests to her intention of publishing her earlier self-narrative, an important consideration in light of her unwillingness to publish *Seventy Years* during her lifetime.[8] It is worth noting that *Seventy Years* is written in third person, while ‘An Emigrant’s Notebook’ consistently uses first. It is indeed arguable that *Seventy Years*, as a discovered text of autobiography found among family papers some forty years after Lady Gregory’s death, is no more or less a component of her published literary autobiographies than ‘An Emigrant’s Notebook,’ as she intended to have both published but never did.

In *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait*, Elizabeth Coxhead maintains that the presence of an alternative ending in the third and last volume of the Notebook indicates that it was written with a view to publication, an idea that is borne out by the second volume of her diaries in the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection, which seem to be a precursory version of the work.[9] She writes in the second volume of these, ‘trusting that there will be some few who will be glad to hear of an Ireland neither all rollicking nor all bloodstained—to hear of some Irish people possessing feelings like ourselves I give these leaves to the publishers.’ As Coxhead affirms, the characters evoked in the Notebook prefigure those in her plays to come: ‘When she does become a professional writer, this is the writer she will be, this is the material she will use. She has found it before her meeting with Yeats and Hyde.’[10]

It is not difficult to ascertain, when reading her published autobiographies and plays, including *Spreading the News*, *The Workhouse Ward*, and even *Grania*, that Lady Gregory used the Notebook as a resource for material when she became a professional dramatist, and as a prototype for her later autobiographies. Whole sections of the Notebook, especially those that focus on Lady Gregory’s childhood, have been included in *Seventy Years*. The account that the nurse Mary Sheridan, who worked for the Persse family when Lady Gregory was a child, gives of the French landing at Killala in 1798 is reproduced in *Seventy Years* almost verbatim from the Notebook. The butler at Roxborough, other servants, and members of the community who appear in the Notebook translate not only into *Seventy Years*, but directly into her plays, from *Spreading the News* to *The Gaol Gate*.

But ‘An Emigrant’s Notebook’ is more than a rehearsal for Lady Gregory’s later works. It is a definitive example of the childhood autobiography and an autobiographical version of the *Künstlerroman*, a portal through which the world in which Lady Gregory moved and what she thought of it can be seen. As the ninth of sixteen children, and a ‘little-welcomed girl’ considered plain and undistinguished, Augusta Persse was taught from an early age to be self-effacing. Her published autobiographies reflect this in their titles: *The Autobiography of Sir William Gregory* (1894), *Mr. Gregory’s Letter-Box 1813-35* (1898), and *Hugh Lane’s Life and Achievement* (1921). Her more clearly-identified self-narratives: *Our Irish Theatre* (1913)—subtitled *A Chapter of Autobiography; Coole* (1931); and *Seventy Years* (1974), are more specifically about Lady Gregory’s own life, although even they do not overtly yield their subject’s story and usually contain details of particular situations or fragmented descriptions of events rather than a cohesive story of the person who participated in them. As the wife of one of the most important members of the nineteenth-century British establishment, Lady

Gregory indubitably understood the necessity for subtlety in any writing that involved Irish politics during the 1880s.

The first section of the Notebook is divided into seven vignettes, from Roxborough House to the family's church to Chevy Chase, the hunting lodge in Slieve Echtge where Lady Gregory's younger brothers often hosted shooting matches and where she once spent a week, 'a very happy one'. Anecdotes and portraits are interspersed throughout these; older folktales and songs mingle with Lady Gregory's own narrative to evoke her life of thought and external circumstance. Chronological structuring is almost entirely absent from 'An Emigrant's Notebook'; its framework is based solely on the re-creation of images: the personalities and atmosphere that constitute specific scenes. But through her evocation of events through the chronological arrangement of the vignettes, a cumulative order is observed, and Lady Gregory's development as an adult writer can be ascertained through her role within them.

Subsequently, the scenes from Lady Gregory's childhood, which occupy the first section of the Notebook, include detailed descriptions of the garden and gardener, the local church situated on the Persse estate, Lady Gregory's nurse, the hunting lodge, and various servants and members of the community. The comic interplay between rural villagers and an outsider who encounters them, which figures in both *Seventy Years* and her plays, is distinctly visible in this part of the Notebook. Of a worship service on the estate she writes:

On Sunday evenings and on Feast days we had service not at the church but in the village schoolroom, which was over a stable in which any of the congregation who drove put up their horses. I remember a very high church Oxford student of divinity (who has since gone over to Rome) on his first Sunday with us going to "Evensong" there, and coming back in a state of unspeakable horror, first at the unmistakable sounds and smells of the stable beneath—then at the rector's having preached in a "shooting coat," and finally at one of the congregation having responded to the words 'Let us pray' with a hearty "Well, let us".

These local anecdotes and the personalities they feature, as Coxhead notes, are the major components of the narrative—those portraits to which Lady Gregory gives the most colourful detail and which appear in her later dramatic works. When reading the Notebook one has a sense that whereas Lady Gregory's family are at most given a passing glance, the villagers' personalities are more carefully fashioned:

In Ireland there is a comic side to all things, and we can laugh over the disputes that raged during the last meeting of the "Ladies Land League," when Miss Kennedy the butcher's daughter said to Miss Tarcy the drapers, "If I called myself a lady I would behave as a lady" and Miss Tarcy rejoin with spirit "And if I belonged to a butcher[']s shop I would go home and weigh out tripe."

But I must not forget the story of our respectable old butler who used to declaim against the depravity of the younger servants, until one night the Mistress being downstairs and passing his open door saw a tableau of a select card party at the table, while old J. himself, on his knees at a chair—his hands devoutly folded, was looking over his shoulder with the words on his lips 'You go on dealing out the cards while I say a few prayers:—the Mistress was a discreet woman and quietly withdrew.

Certainly 'An Emigrant's Notebook' is in many ways a typical product of late Victorian aristocratic writing: humorously condescending to the indigenous population and carefully obscure on the subject of the writer's peers. But Lady Gregory's characterization of family, locals, and landscape is intricately interwoven with observations of the political climate in rural western Ireland. The section on the Misses Kennedy and Tarcy, and the Roxborough

butler, occurs at the end of the vignette on Roxborough. The house provides a contrast between an idealized portrait of gracious Anglo-Irish living and the political reality facing the Ascendancy class. And while it is true that servants and members of the community are presented in a more comic light than Lady Gregory's family members, these portraits are significant independently of any aristocratic tone Lady Gregory might have used regarding them. They are, as Coxhead observes, the point at which Lady Gregory finds her literary voice, allowing memory and imagination to create the characters that would later make her an Irish dramatist.

The creative importance of these personalities would later be recognized by the mid-twentieth century Irish novelist Kate O'Brien. In an essay written near the end of her life, O'Brien names the major Irish writers since the lifting of the Penal Laws, and pays tribute to the works of Lady Gregory for their characterizations of 'what she heard and what she knew of all the shades and classes of people who were her daily acquaintance...

I think she was a wittier and more odd interpreter of that society she found around her house than were some of those whom she promoted with such generosity. I have always had much respect for her neat and lonely style.[11]

It has been suggested to me by Dr. John Manning of Queen's University, that Lady Gregory kept the Notebook for her household, as a series of anecdotes to be read at family gatherings, a typical practice in eighteenth and nineteenth-century aristocratic Britain. But while this may be part of Lady Gregory's intent, the completed narratives, the obvious editing, and the balance of serious and comic, ladylike interests in house, garden and demesne, intricately woven with political observations, indicate that in spite of its somewhat less self-effacing qualities than her other autobiographies, Lady Gregory believed that there would be a public audience for this work.

'The pleasure of reading,' Roland Barthes observes, 'proceeds from certain breaks, in which the language is redistributed...Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge...and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours).' [12] If the collision between these stylistic edges gives texts their energy, Lady Gregory's Emigrant's Notebook shows on several levels how the plurality and conflict of her interests in creating characters enable her text to speak at once from regions of conventional autobiographical prose and in more radical political plays.

Lady Gregory's identity as a child and young adult emerges through the church, the garden, the household servants, her prim older sisters, and her four younger brothers in whose company she was most comfortable. It also appears within the description of her mother, her disapproval of whom is subtly yet consistently discerned. In one vignette, the Mistress is so caught up in her evangelism that she allows the squatter sarcastically dubbed 'Honest John' to settle on the Roxborough estate because of his professed conversion to Protestantism, giving him better food and lodgings than the servants and ignoring his tendency to avoid work in her zeal to proselytize. But throughout the Notebook, Lady Gregory's disapproval remains reserved; she creates her autobiography as she created her own method of protest within her family and later within the proscriptive environment provided for the female intellectual and writer. As Coxhead observes:

Even as a little girl she was a rebel against the family thought and traditions; not a flamboyant rebel, but a quiet, dogged, persistent one, as she was to be all her life against what she considered unjust authority. (5)

The last section of the Notebook presents most directly Lady Gregory's emergent 'I'; its only references outside her personal scope of thought and reflection are reworkings of the previous section. This section begins as she invokes someone she calls 'A.' to come and sit with her by

the fire, on one of the winter evenings while Sir William was in Ceylon and during which she composed the Notebook. It begins as Lady Gregory sits in solitude listening to the rain:

There is no one with me in this large barren inner parlour—I hear rain against the windows & a little way off the waves beating against the rocks—now & then a sound of laughter from the evening gathering of the household round the kitchen fire comes & dies away unechoed....A. will you come & sit by my fire & let me talk to you for a little time? We have not spoken to each other for such a long time—since we were together here & you listened to all I had to say, and I remember still all you said to me, but those days are past.

‘A.’ may indicate Lady Gregory’s brother Algernon or sister Arabella—she was friendliest with these siblings—or even Lady Gregory herself. As an emigrant from Ireland and from her earlier life, Lady Gregory’s separation from and reuniting with self in place and persona is implicitly expressed throughout the Notebook and may become explicit here. Moreover, during this reflection Lady Gregory’s thoughts gradually turn to Cairo, where she had travelled with her husband and where she had first been inspired to embrace revolutionary politics.

Also worth considering is the fact of her eight-month affair with Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a dashing English aristocrat turned revolutionary. Lady Gregory had met Blunt and his wife Lady Anne King-Noel while she and Sir William were in Cairo in 1881; she immediately felt a kinship with his desire to fight for justice within the establishment, and after her article was published in the *Times* they worked together to save Arabi Pasha. Once Arabi’s death sentence was commuted to permanent exile in Ceylon, Lady Gregory and Blunt became lovers in December 1882. Their affair lasted until early August 1883, when the Gregorys returned to Coole to save money, and the Blunts left for India. Lady Gregory would have begun ‘An Emigrant’s Notebook’ less than six months after her affair ended. The story she relates at the end of the manuscript, told by the young steward she and Sir William met on the Nile boat, seems to reflect her own ambivalence regarding the security of socio-economic status versus the fulfilment of romantic love.

Coxhead concludes of the Notebook that ‘the manuscript breaks off suddenly; she may have shown it to a publisher, who was discouraging. Like the rest of the Irish Renaissance she was waiting for her market, and in the end it was one they had to create for themselves’ (32). Yet within Lady Gregory’s lifetime there was in fact a market for Anglo-Irish writing and memoir, into which ‘An Emigrant’s Notebook’ would have fit naturally. Why then, was it not published? Perhaps the answer lies somewhere between Lady Gregory’s self-effacing tendencies and her unwillingness to publish a book implicating Irish politics while her husband was alive; the obscurity of the work may indeed result from Lady Gregory’s putting it aside in the midst of other concerns: her other autobiographies and later dramatic writing, not to mention that of her beneficiaries, during the inception and growth of the Irish Literary Revival. Ultimately, she may have forgotten about her Notebook as a work of literature, and simply used it as foundation for other projects.

But long after the Irish literary movement established itself as an international phenomenon, ‘An Emigrant’s Notebook’ can still be recognized as a formative agent of Irish Renaissance literature. It is an autobiography that is at once representatively Anglo-Irish and centred in dramatic narrative, as well as politically observant; through portraiture to story-telling to the first-person presence of self it provides a clear connection to Lady Gregory’s later forms of creative expression. The exceptional quality of the work is that it accomplishes these feats of identity and memory without being researched and rewritten, except for a minor revision near its conclusion. In a constellation of diverse styles of memoir, ‘An Emigrant’s Notebook’ remains the purest form of autobiography Lady Gregory wrote: it is at once the story of her past and intimation of her future as a writer, wherein her literary imagination is first revealed.

## Notes

- [1] See Marilyn Butler, Introduction to Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent and Ennui* (London: Penguin, 1992) pp.1-54.
- [2] Lady Gregory, *Arabi and His Household* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882).
- [3] Lady Gregory, *Seventy Years: 1852-1922* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1974), 46.
- [4] See Mary Lou Kohfeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (London: Andre Deutch, 1984).
- [5] Special Collections, Robert E. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, Manuscript #624, Box 46, Folder 2. Elizabeth Coxhead tentatively dates the Notebook around 1884, “when Lady Gregory would have been very much alone,” a statement that she takes from vol. 2 of Lady Gregory’s diaries in the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection: “Spent January, February, March & April at Coole while W. was in Ceylon — I was very much alone.” But in the Notebook and her diaries in the Berg Collection, Lady Gregory refers to a brief visit to Roxborough that she made in 1882 as having taken place “last summer.” Ann Saddlemyer, in a conversation with the author, has hypothesized that the Notebook was produced closer to the time of Lady Gregory’s marriage. James Pethica, on the other hand, argues that “the winter of 1883-84 is a certainty for Augusta Gregory’s work on [the Notebook] as a complete literary entity. She may have written some parts sooner after marrying, but winter 1883 is the moment she returns to Ireland and more particularly Roxborough for the first time as an ‘emigrant’” (Letter to author, 4 July 1995). The inner cover of the first volume of the Notebook is signed with Lady Gregory’s early signature, “IA Gregory, Coole” so it is certain that the work was produced at Coole.
- [6] James Pethica, Letter to author, 4 July 1995.
- [7] In *Seventy Years*, Lady Gregory also uses the phrase “The Mother,” although with less frequency than “The mistress.” See *Seventy Years*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1974) p.13. Further references listed in text.
- [8] Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters write of *Seventy Years*: “Her unwillingness to publish it herself may be attributed to ambivalence about her private life as well as concern that she might offend her contemporaries.” See Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters, eds., *Lady Gregory: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1995) p.525.
- [9] The Berg diaries include more explicit critiques of her parents and more details of her home life; in the first volume of the Notebook only stories relating to the Irish countryside and its inhabitants remain, indicating that Lady Gregory intended the Notebook specifically as a work of Irish literature.
- [10] Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1961) p.32.
- [11] Kate O’Brien, “Imaginative Prose By the Irish, 1820-1970,” in *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, ed. Joseph Ronsley (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977) p. 311.
- [12] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) p.6.

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