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Author(s): John McDonagh

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## ‘I KNOW SOMETHING NOW OF MY IRISH SUBJECTS’ - *Castle Rackrent* and Maria Edgeworth’s Imagined Communities

John McDonagh

In one of the final paragraphs of her novel *Castle Rackrent*, Maria Edgeworth’s ‘Editor’ identifies the defining characteristics of the Irish people for the benefit of the ‘English reader’ as ‘quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness and blunder’<sup>1</sup>. However, in typical side-stepping Edgeworth fashion, she blurs this categorisation by attributing these perceived national idiosyncrasies to Sir Arthur Young and his famous tour of Ireland, thereby confusing the identity of the author of these supposed iconic features. This shifting narrative position typifies Edgeworth’s novel with the story of the Rackrent family sandwiched between compatible, framing and ideologically driven editorial constructs. If, as Kathryn Kirkpatrick claims, the book is the ‘first Irish novel’<sup>2</sup> then it certainly has played a significant role in the fictional creation of the Irish narrative voice, and an unreliable one at that. The pseudo-anthropological nature of not only the in-text footnotes but also the expanded glossary that accompanies the text further removes Thady Quirk’s persona from the arena of rationality and an overtly implied cool English-bred logic. While his voice is articulated by an outside presence, an editorial and authorial<sup>3</sup> eye is cast over his account of the Rackrent family and its gradual decline. Indeed, not only is Thady’s account footnoted and glossaried, but the account itself is physically framed with an editorial preface and an appended note in which the reflections of Thady, personalised and idiomatic as they are, are presented securely with the context of an outside interpretation, an impression reinforced by Walter Allen: ‘Miss Edgeworth was essentially a didactic writer for whom the virtue of the novel was that it was a particularly graphic form of tract’<sup>4</sup>. While Declan Kiberd rightly claims that ‘a single mind drives the entire production’<sup>5</sup>; the tale of the Rackrents unfolds against a narrative backdrop that employs a variety of devices that cements the image of the unpredictable, occasionally unreliable and ultimately untrustworthy Irish narrative voice.

This image is not, however, undermined by an interpretation of Thady as the archetypal ironic insider, surreptitiously pouring scorn on the real dissipaters, namely the profligate Rackrent family. Indeed, his inherent unreliability is underscored by his frequent verbal swipes at ‘*the family*’(p.9) to whom he continually expresses unshakeable loyalty and his unacknowledged role in the usurpation of the Rackrent estates by his son,

Jason. While he overtly attends to his master's every whim, Sir Condy's final and spectacular demise as the last of the Rackrents results from drinking from 'Sir Patrick's horn' (p.94), filled to the brim by his loyal Thady. Indeed, Thady's covert support for Jason's ultimate goal of acquiring the Rackrent estate places his emotional bouts of familial loyalty in their proper context. Jason is admired by Thady as 'a very cute lad' (p.23) and it is this very quality that allows him to succeed Sir Condy as the master of the Rackrent estate. However, Marylin Butler claims that it is difficult to see Thady as an 'archetypal colonial man' <sup>6</sup> because his literal role of serving man 'has stronger ideological connotations in the eighteenth century' than contemporary interpretations. This somewhat shies away from the application of a post-colonial perspective on all of Edgeworth's characters in which both landed gentry and native tenant are seen to manifest the worst traits of Irishness, which have to be explained for the sensibilities of the English reader. Butler also fails to delineate clearly the exact 'ideological connotations' that apparently define Thady's social position, thereby portraying the complex and often individually negotiated role of 'serving man' as a cultural given, an ideological stance that ignores the inherently duplicitous nature of Thady's relationship with the Rackrents, and it is in the liminal spaces of this relationship that the text begins, cleverly or unwittingly, to undermine itself. There are, however, indications as to Edgeworth's unambiguous attitude towards the lower order Irish in her treatise *Practical Education*, published in conjunction with her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, in 1798, when they declare that 'If children pass one hour in a day with servants, it will be in vain to attempt their education' <sup>7</sup>, given that the major traits transmitted by the servant classes are 'cunning, falsehood and envy' (p.122-3), traits that interestingly echo those identified by the editor in the suffix to *Castle Rackrent*. Whatever fictive irony may be interpreted in Thady's narrative is absent in this work concerning the ideal constituent elements of children's education in which, according to Carol Strauss-Sotiropoulos, the Edgeworths feared that 'reason - the ability to measure, compare and deliberate' could be severely damaged by 'false associations between ideas and words' <sup>8</sup>. Given the many codal slips that appear in her novel, it would seem that Maria Edgeworth used the genre, and Thady in particular, to highlight the dangers of inter-class discourse to the more perceptive 'English reader'.

An understanding or at least a contextualisation of Thady's social position is essential if his potentially subversive role is to be understood to any degree. Butler's definition of his social position as that of 'serving man' fails to capture the complex and ambivalent relationship that he enjoyed with the Rackrents <sup>9</sup>. Interestingly, his tale is told retrospectively, a paradoxical

*Posing as a sociological observer of national types, Edgeworth uses her protagonist as a peg for "Irish" characteristics. Commented King George III: "I know something now of my Irish subjects".*

position in that, as David O’Shaughnessy claims, ‘it is only after the death of the family and the removal of an omerta-style restraint that he gains his freedom’<sup>10</sup>. However, the extent to which Thady can ever gain his freedom, or indeed the extent to which he aspires towards an illusive self-identity, is open to question because the very nature of his role in the novel is so ambiguous. The preface merely describes him as ‘an illiterate old steward’ (p.3), a position defined as ‘an official who controls the domestic affairs of a household, supervising the service of his master’s table, directing the domestics, and regulating household expenditure’<sup>11</sup>. This definition clearly places the role of a steward as an important social and economic conduit between the ‘master’ and the ‘domestics’ and there are many incidents in the novel when Thady performs this precise role. However, earlier 18<sup>th</sup> century references to the position of the steward place different cultural contexts on attempts at prescribing the role. In England, for example, a reference from 1759 refers to a steward as ‘a person appointed to supervise the arrangements or maintain order at a race meeting, exhibition, dinner, ball, concert, public gathering’<sup>12</sup>, a social functionary that contrasts sharply with the estate-managing functions of many stewards. Therefore, the term ‘steward’ does not proscribe Thady’s relationship with the family, but its very social elasticity enables him to move easily between the class he serves and the class to which he belongs, thereby providing the novel with one of its most important and effective ironic devices.

In fact, it can be argued that the ambiguity on which the novel thrives extends to the names of the characters themselves. For example, Sir Conolly (Condy) Rackrent is described by Thady as ‘my great favourite’ (p.37) and his story as the last of the Rackrents takes up the bulk of the narrative and is a far more subtle and in-depth portrayal than that afforded to Sir Patrick, Sir Murtagh or Sir Kit. Given Edgeworth’s stated admiration for Arthur Young’s *Tour of Ireland* (1780), she could not but have noticed Young’s glowing reference to Castletown House in Celbridge as ‘the finest house in Ireland, and not exceeded by many in England’<sup>13</sup>. This house was built by William Conolly<sup>14</sup>, the son of an impoverished Donegal farmer, who rose rapidly through the social and economic ranks of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to become one of the wealthiest and best-known landowners in the country and Speaker of the Irish House of Commons from 1715 to 1729. While Edgeworth’s Sir Conolly shares the unusual spelling of his name with Speaker Conolly, there the similarity ends and if Speaker Conolly is to be regarded as a model for any character in the novel then it must be Jason, the canny son of a lowly steward who acquires the estate through the buying up of mortgages that fund the short term excesses of the Rackrents. The fictional Jason parallels the historical Speaker Conolly in his meteoric social and economic rise, both epitomising what Roy Foster refers to as ‘an aristocracy of self-made men’<sup>15</sup> that characterised the changing socio-political landscape in 18<sup>th</sup> century

Ireland. Jason uses his legal training<sup>16</sup> and his father's access to the Rackrents to place himself stealthily in a position of capital supremacy, based on personal ability and dedication. However, while Sir Conolly himself is described by Edgeworth as a man 'born to little or no fortune of his own' (p.38) who is remembered by Thady 'barefooted and headed running through the street of O'Shaughlin's town', the clear implication in his early life is that he will inherit the Rackrent estate. Indeed, the difference between Sir Conolly and Jason is exemplified by the fact that while anonymous 'friends' (p.40) fund the most expensive possible education for Conolly, 'he neglected to apply to the law as much as was expected' (p.40) and consequently was clearly the author of his own downfall. His acquired habit of drinking 'a glass of burnt whiskey out of an egg-shell' (p.39) whilst still 'a slip of a lad' portrays Sir Conolly as a contemporary Nero, sipping whiskey while all collapses around him, an exemplar of a benign, incompetent and doomed landowning class. In contrast with Jason's mono-focal drive and ruthless pursuit of the estate clearly the conclusion to be drawn is that Jason is the representative of the self-made aristocracy personified by Speaker William Conolly and the name sharing only serves to highlight ironically the transfer of power that is ostensibly so lamented by Thady but which is directly facilitated by his actions. It is entirely possible that Edgeworth chose this name for her last Rackrent incumbent to indicate the passing of a class whose demise is only heightened by the ironic sharing of a name that in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was a byword for social and economic progression. Indeed, all Sir Conolly Rackrent and Sir William Conolly share is a name and an oppositional position at the cusp of change, the two sides of a Janus-faced century in which individual endeavour and enterprise were to inexorably rise at the expense of inherited and landed wealth.

Edgeworth's citing of Arthur Young's *A Tour of Ireland*<sup>17</sup> as 'the first faithful portrait of its inhabitants' (p.97), in the appended editorial suffix of the novel, is the pretext on which her eight aforementioned Irish characteristics are formed. Young's exhaustive treatise on the state of the Irish economy in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century contains many examples of the curious admixture of contempt and sympathy that also characterises Edgeworth's text. While Young laments the restrictions placed on free trade by the penal laws, he notes that the 'common people are remarkably given to thieving'<sup>18</sup> and 'all the lower ranks in this city (Dublin) have no idea of english (sic) cleanliness'<sup>19</sup>. He states in his pseudo-scientific treatise on the 'Manners and Customs' of the Irish people that they are 'lazy to an excess at work but so spiritedly active at play' (Appendix, p.75), referring to hurling as the 'cricket of savages'! He notes the classic Orientalist traits of unreliability and humbleness when he comments that the Irish are 'great liars, but civil,

*The denouement only confounds all the stereotypes. "The high and the low", says Edgeworth, "are not always dissimilar in their habits".*

submissive and obedient'. The value of Thady's narrative relies almost entirely on this volatile mix of loyalty and subversion despite the fact that Young acknowledges only two social divisions in Ireland, namely 'people of considerable fortune' and the 'mob', of which neither group could Thady claim absolute membership. Indeed, Edgeworth's reading of Young's account, as recalled in the suffix to the novel, is certainly selective and requires examination. While she casually reduces the Irish character to eight negative traits, ranging from 'dissipation' to 'simplicity', Young at least acknowledges, however gratuitously that acknowledgement is offered, that education is a valued aspect of life and that the Irish are 'a brave, polite and liberal people'. Young's journal, when read closely, paints a marginally more complex portrait of Ireland in the 1780's than Edgeworth is prepared to acknowledge. However, it certainly provides an interesting economic background to the financial mismanagement and profligacy that characterises the latter years of the Rackrents.

The intrinsic unreliability and fecklessness of the Irish peasant class is immediately contextualised by the commencement of Thady's narrative on 'Monday Morning' (p.7), an oxymoronic event if the explanation proffered by the appended glossary is to be believed. 'Monday Morning' is described in the glossary as an Irish euphemism for the non-commencement of work, a never-never time in which all practical duties and responsibilities can be safely prorogued. However, the ever-practical Editor provides an example of a 'gentleman' who undermined this laziness by making 'his workmen and labourers begin all new pieces of work upon a Saturday' (p.99), thereby offsetting the pathological inactivity of the peasants by dint of his superior social and economic position. Therefore, the very first temporal setting of the narrative is constructed around the conflict between the progressive, economically advanced 'gentleman' and the ineffective, unproductive and untrustworthy 'workmen', the former clearly indicated as an exemplar to the 'English' reader of the progressive land owning classes while the latter can be interpreted as the epitome of what the Editor refers to as 'the lower Irish' (p.103). This editorial contextualisation of the behaviour of the Irish peasant class finds an uncanny parallel in Edward Said's examination of Oriental-European relations in *Orientalism*<sup>20</sup> in which the very nature and manifestation of the Oriental world is bound and articulated by a Western hermeneutical tradition based on an *apriori* knowledge of the colonised other. Said argues convincingly that "what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West"<sup>21</sup>. This code of signification is clearly delineated in *Castle Rackrent*, not only by the editorial notes and glossary but by the 'Advertisement to the English Reader' which appears as a prefix to the glossary. In this brief codicil, the Editor, on the advice of 'some friends'

(p.98), declares that because ‘many of the terms and idiomatic phrases’ used in Thady’s narrative ‘could not be intelligible to the English reader without further explanation’, the glossary is intended to clear up any confusion. Clearly then, Thady’s narrative has to be doubly reconstructed, firstly through its initial retelling by the editor and subsequently through the glossarial reinterpretation of exotic Irish characteristics, such as pathological disregard of time and motion, funereal debauchery and legal shenanigans. The ‘lower Irish’ and their idiosyncratic ‘general mode of reasoning respecting *rights* (Editor’s italics)’ (p.103) are codified and categorised in a series of anecdotal accounts which are transformed into inexorable and intrinsic national characteristics which are consistent only in their unarticulated opposition to the norms and social patterns of ‘the English reader’. No wonder, therefore, that, in response to the publication of the text in 1800, the then King, George III, is reported to have said that ‘I know now something of my Irish subjects’<sup>22</sup>. However, given that monarch’s somewhat tenuous grip on his intellectual faculties, he would certainly appear to have fallen for the fallacy described by Said, namely ‘that to apply what one learns out of a book literally to reality is to risk folly or ruin’<sup>23</sup>.

*The modern reader is left to ask: How much of all social difference is simply “construct” ? And is even nationhood itself, just so much imagi-nationhood - an imagined political community ?*

If one accepts this position, then the entirety of Thady’s narrative becomes unreliable, not only physically framed by the notes and glossary but mediated through the not so hidden voice of the Editor. This unreliability does not refer to the veracity or otherwise of his account but rather to the extra-narrative forces that are, with varying degrees of subtlety and effectiveness, seeking to shape the overall context within which the narrative is expressed. The intellectual hypocrisy of the claim made in the preface that ‘a plain unvarnished tale is preferable to the most highly ornamented narrative’ (p.2) belies the carefully constructed framework within which Thady’s tale is actually expressed, further distancing him from his narrative and indeed the very framing of his story calls into question his often expressed declarations of loyalty.

Thady’s narrative includes quite a few unacknowledged editorial intrusions designed to emphasise its apparent authenticity. While certain idioms and cultural references are explained by the glossary, Thady reverts to what is obviously an Irish inflection at odd moments in the narrative. His syntax, grammar and vocabulary, as recounted by the editor, maintain a high level of linguistic accuracy and consistency throughout the bulk of his story. At times his narrative and the linguistic constructions of the glossary appear indistinguishable, Thady’s confident and accurate description mirroring the cool, pseudo-sociological detached air of the glossary. However, at times his language sharply diverges from a linguistic design that would be readily

accessible to the often-mentioned target audience of the 'English reader'. These divergences have to be laid squarely at the construct of the editor as Thady's narrative is, after all, a secondary account. For example, after the somewhat pathetic scene of Sir Condy's fake death, Thady refers to his 'shister' (p.83), a mis-spelling that escapes or rather is ignored by an editor who at other times is quick to contextualise the specifically Irish setting of much of Thady's narrative, as in the detailed explanation of the word 'kilt' (p.85). This phonetic spelling jars with the accurate spelling of the rest of the scene and it serves as a reminder of the ultimate differences that underpin the relationship between Thady and the Editor. The latter's decision to spell the word phonetically immediately identifies Thady's narrative as native, his oral pronunciation providing some local colour in the Editor's controlled structure. However, the text is inconsistent in its attempts at capturing whatever Irish inflection Thady is supposed to exemplify. For example, when Sir Kit issues a challenge to the brother of a lady he had apparently offered to marry, whilst he was still married, Thady refers to the brother's attempt 'to re-establish his sister's injured reputation' (p.33). The phonetic spelling of 'shister' later in the text interestingly occurs when Thady is in direct conversation with his own sister and he appears to slip into what the Editor clearly wants the reader to assume is his natural brogue. The correct spelling of sister occurs in the context of an engagement between 'gentlemen' while Thady's 'shister' is clearly the linguistic interplay of the lower orders. The Editor's clear decision to delineate these two exchanges increases the perception that the language and figures of speech utilised by Thady, at least amongst his own people, is categorised by what Said would refer to as 'its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness'<sup>24</sup>. Jason, however, because of his education and legal training, escapes this vernacular portrayal and his language maintains a syntactical integrity throughout.

What is consistent about *Castle Rackrent* is the fact that the Rackrent family, the clan to whom Thady extends his ostensible loyalty, are presented as the quintessential, wholly unreliable Irish family, a collection of spendthrifts, alcoholics and charming dimwits. Whatever perceived ironic triumph occurs at the end of the novel, what Kathryn Kirkpatrick refers to as 'the restoration of Irish land to the Irish native'<sup>25</sup>, the Rackrents gambling, drinking and lack of attention to their estate ultimately ends in their demise.

The glossary constantly refers to the 'Irish gentleman' whose habits and behaviour require as much contextualisation as those of Thady and the peasant class, a fact readily attested to by the comment that 'the high and low are not always dissimilar in their habits' (p.103). The Rackrents are not descendants of English planters but rather trace their line from native roots and this explicit exposition of lineage is clearly designed to distinguish the Rackrents from their English planter contemporaries. As a result, given that Thady's narrative is framed by the ideological intervention of the variety of



narrative voices operated by Edgeworth, the Rackrents are portrayed by the Editor with as much simultaneous patronising scorn and affection as are the servants and tenants upon whom they partially rely. Consequently, in much the same way that the Editor operates an Orientalist attitude towards the customs and habits of the 'lower' Irish, so the Rackrents are not spared inclusion in this intellectual positioning. Edgeworth's narrative moves easily between the upstairs of Sir Patrick, Sir Murtagh, Sir Kit, and Sir Connolly and the downstairs of Thady and Jason, ironically juxtaposing their respective decline and rise at the end of the novel. Jason is the natural inheritor of Castle Rackrent, an internal outsider who has carefully manipulated his knowledge of the inherent weaknesses of the Rackrents to buy up their dissipated inheritance. The community members of *Castle Rackrent* are portrayed as entirely deserving of each other, from self-serving landlords to *bourgeois* entrepreneurs, served up in the combined imaginations of Maria Edgeworth's deliberately distancing and obfuscation editorial constructs. If one accepts Benedict Anderson's contention that the nation is 'an imagined political community', then the Ireland presented in *Castle Rackrent* personifies the idea that 'communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'<sup>26</sup>.

**John McDonagh lectures in English at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland.**

Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> ed. George Watson, Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1964), p.97. All subsequent references to the text of *Castle Rackrent* will be from this edition.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.vii.
- <sup>3</sup> The complex narrative presentation of the text involves an editor's recollection of Thady's accounts of the trials and tribulations of the Rackrent family. His narrative contains in-text footnotes which purport to explain certain cultural references and linguistic constructions. Thus is further embellished with a glossary which allows Edgeworth to contextualise further Thady's perspective.
- <sup>4</sup> Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p.107.
- <sup>5</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p.253. The quote is contained within the essay 'Native Informants: Maria Edgeworth and *Castle Rackrent*' (pps. 243-264).
- <sup>6</sup> ed. Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth - Castle Rackrent and Ennui* (Penguin: London, 1992), p. 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Edgeworth, Maria and Richard, *Practical Education* (1798), 2 vols, (New York: Garland, 1974), p.126 (1). For an interesting examination of the Edgeworth's educational philosophy see 'Where Words Fail: Rational Education Unravels in Maria Edgeworth's *The Good French Governess*' by Carol Strauss-Sotiropoulos, on line at <http://new.ufl.edu/los/csotiropoulos/html>
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.1.

- <sup>9</sup> For an interesting and informative analysis of the composition of 18<sup>th</sup> century Irish society, see ‘The Economic Base’, Chapter 4 (pps. 109-143) of David Dickson *New Foundations – Ireland 1660-1800* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1987).
- <sup>10</sup> David O’Shaughnessy, ‘Ambivalence in *Castle Rackrent*’ in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Volume XXV, Numbers 1&2, July/December, 1999, pps., 427-440, p. 431.
- <sup>11</sup> Oxford English Dictionary [on line] at <http://dictionary.oed.com/>
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Arthur Young, *A Tour of Ireland; with General Observations on the State of that Kingdom: made in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778 and brought down to the End of 1779* (London: T. Cadell and J. Dodsley, 1780), p.17.
- <sup>14</sup> For a general examination of the life of William Conolly see Lena Boylan, ‘The Conolly’s of Castletown ; A Family History’ in the *Quarterly Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society* (Oct.-Dec. 1968), pps. 1-46.
- <sup>15</sup> Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.170.
- <sup>16</sup> There is a significant problem within the text because Catholics, like Jason, were barred from the legal profession until Langrishe’s Relief Act of 1792. Consequently, the setting of the text explicitly pre-1782 and the description of Jason as an ‘attorney’ have to be called into question. For other textual anomalies see chapter 5, ‘Good Housekeeping: The Politics of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy’ in Elizabeth Kowalski-Wallace, *Their Father’s Daughters - Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth and Patriarchal Complicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pps.138-172.
- <sup>17</sup> Arthur Young, op.cit. (London: T. Cadell and J. Dodsley, 1780).
- <sup>18</sup> ibid., p.162
- <sup>19</sup> ibid., p.4.
- <sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.41  
<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.40.
- <sup>22</sup> Kiberd, op.cit., p.243
- <sup>23</sup> Said, op.cit., p.93.
- <sup>24</sup> Said, op.cit., p.72.
- <sup>25</sup> Watson, op.cit., p.xxviii.
- <sup>26</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* London: Verso, 1983), p.15.