

insatiable curiosity as to the dubious/ probably criminal lifestyle of St. Giles, of Seven Dials, and, later, of the enigmatic Soho – all deemed to be foci of criminal behaviour, and so the obvious subjects for much literary investigation and complex societal and explicatory interpretation.

Accordingly Joyce gives much space to the increasingly ambiguous Soho, which was, very appropriately, made the home of the evil double figures in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and of Adolphe Verloc in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), about the Russian embassy's spy who, in 1884, had sought to blow up the Greenwich observatory, in order to rouse public opinion against the Anarchists and so goad the police into greater public activity. Perhaps this is the most fluent part of the whole, closely followed by the Oscar-Wilde-focused sections of the fourth long essay, "Lords of the Street, and Terrors of the Way': The Privileged Offender in Late-Victorian Fiction."

The value of this deeply reflective book is much enhanced by its long gestation, its patterns of thought and a methodology that is much strengthened by the writer's use of concepts from history, geography and from the slowly developing adult education schemes of the great metropolis.

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***An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts*, edited by Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2004. 290. ISBN 87413-878-7. US\$50 (hardcover).**

Recently I searched the MLA database (my search was about *The Heart of Midlothian*) and was struck by the handy little compendium of recent critical fashions that resulted. From "Wo/Man" to "the Masculinization of Fiction," from "Frame Narrative" to "Narrating the (Gendered) Nation," from "Scott's Apparatus" to his "Portable Monuments," from the "Uneasy Marriage of London and Edinburgh" to the "End(s) of Sympathetic Britishness," it seemed that most of the touchstones had been touched, most of the milestones passed, by academic readers. Given that Walter Scott, as Edgeworth's much grander contemporary, more than once acknowledged his debt to *Castle Rackrent*, it is unsurprising to find that she occupies a similar cultural slot and attracts similar kinds of readings to Scott, to find that *An Uncomfortable Authority* stands on ground predicted by the MLA's pocket history of critical trends. This collection of essays presents Maria Edgeworth as a writer about, or inventor of, a nation, about Ireland and Irishness, above all, and mainly discusses her in terms of the Irish novels (*Castle Rackrent*, *Ennui*, *The Absentee*, *Ormond*). Many of the contributors also pay attention to *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, jointly authored with her father in 1802, two years after *Rackrent* appeared.

Thus, though other Edgeworths – the educationalist, the writer for and about women, the novelist of manners and critic of fashionable English society – are not entirely lost sight of in this collection, *Helen*, which I personally think her finest novel and the best 1830s British novel, is barely mentioned, and nor is there much mention of all that ground-breaking work for child and adolescent readers.

The strength of this collection, then, is to be found in its focus area, the idea of the nation, and the contextualisation of the Irish novels to be found here lacks neither interest nor “authority.” This is a very useful book, its variety of approaches to ideas of nationhood barely contained by the editors’ division of the essays into sections covering topics like “History and Mythology,” “Fiction, Realism, and Authority” and “Education, Empire, and the Anglo-Irish Dilemma.” Heidi Thomson’s discussion of “Fashion and Moral Authority” is noteworthy for drawing some different sides of Edgeworth’s career together rather than isolating a particular area, and Kit Kincade’s discussion of Edgeworth’s influence on Scott deals with an important area that badly needed updating.

The most significant addition to Edgeworth scholarship here, though, is Marilyn Butler’s opening essay about Edgeworth, the United Irishmen, and those various aspects of Irish culture referred to by a contemporary, Lord Clare, in 1797, when he described popular opinion in Leinster and Ulster as encompassing “an ignorant and deluded populace, misled by more intelligent treason” (qtd. on 43). Arguing that *An Essay on Irish Bulls* “came into being as a gesture of solidarity with the United Irish cause” (33) Butler does not neglect that populace (nor did Edgeworth) and she pursues the celebration of its “folk tradition, low comedy and regional dialect” (44) in *Irish Bulls* and its presence in Edgeworth’s later writing, noting a surprising level of oblique and subtle reference to popular and patriotic songs and songwriters, and to the inventive folklore that flourished in vernacular tongues, in Edgeworth’s later novels. Most interestingly, Butler identifies a “new Gaelic-Irish subplot,” (50) working by allegory and under cover, in *Ennui*, *The Absentee*, and *Ormond*, expressed in reference to “Gaelic legend, myth and ritual” and through other allusive configurations. Thus the figures of the “three supernatural women” in *Ennui*, Grace Nugent in *The Absentee*, and Florence Annaly of *Ormond*, are connected by Butler with the various allegorical figurations of a female Ireland coming into being at the time. The rational, didactic, rather dull and programmatic older Edgeworth – “Ascendancy, Protestant, Unionist, Big House, decorous, conservative, didactic” (47) who is often perceived to have eclipsed the author of *Rackrent*’s decentered, “uncomfortable,” narrative, is therefore augmented in Butler’s readings by an intriguingly open-minded and, indeed, authoritative older writer who has moved on from a popular but non-Gaelic idea of Ireland in the *Essay* to three novels where an allusive web of “placenames, family names, allusions to mythology, song and story” (52) incorporates Catholic, Gaelic Ireland into a kind of Edgeworthian secret society of readers, never identified with “its own or any nation state,” (48) but rooted in locality, village, land, province and region.

The recovery of such readerships is one of the important benefits of contextual study. An essay on "Edgeworth's Critique of Rousseau's Educational Theory" by Catherine Toal evokes a different – and more accessible – Edgeworth readership but an equally complex one. Rousseau's *Emile*, the Edgeworths' *Practical Education* and *Belinda* are Toal's texts, three books which stand in a complicated relation to each other. Each of them – as is equally the case with the Irish tales – is difficult to characterise as either conservative or innovative, especially as another factor enters this "practical" yet literary conversation, the Edgeworths' attitude to Thomas Day's educational experiments.

Susan Manly's argument implies a similarly complex positioning of the reader in *Harrington*, which she recently edited for the Broadview Press. This essay, produced about the same time, has some of the same things to say as her Broadview introduction but the focus here is mainly on the figure of Moses Mendelssohn. In an illuminating comparison of an extract from the heavily edited 1825 version of this novel with the original, 1817, edition, Manly shows how eliminating Edgeworth's detail about Mendelssohn's early life weakened her novel and its radicalism, for "much of *Harrington's* impact is located in subtle, seemingly insignificant details," (241). Manly, then, like Butler, points to the importance in Edgeworth's technique of details which achieve sly thefts of authority from under the noses of potentially disapproving readers. From many of these readers, we must assume, the connection between "fearful fantasies, and society at large" (242), between *Harrington's* and Mendelssohn's youthful psychological difficulties, and the disease of the body politic manifested in superstition, prejudice, persecution, riots and disorders against the "othered" Roman Catholic or Jew, remained well hidden. Manly's claim, for example, that the title-name *Harrington* probably refers to the melancholy republican thinker of the seventeenth century proffers a radical Edgeworthian idea of the nation-state as republic which was perhaps always so unobtrusive as to be almost imperceptible. Thus the question Butler asks of herself, "How many readers, and which readers, would follow the clue?" (54) is very pertinent to Manly's discussion as well. Edgeworth paraded before her readers a sequence of ostentatiously improving scenes, stitched together with stout and visible thread. But her liking for stagey plots like *Harrington's*, of trickery, treachery, thefts involving betrayal of trust, is possibly self-reflexive. The title of this book is very apposite, for the overall impression left by these essays is of a mature, but cautious and self-protective, fictional technique at work.

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