

“I shall never forget it to him”: Personal and Public Memory in Somerville and Ross’s *Irish R. M. Stories*.

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Between 1899 and 1915, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross published their most successful works: three books which together contain 34 stories narrated by an Irish R. M.¹ After retiring from the British Army, Major Sinclair Yeates returns to his native Ireland and settles in a house called Shreelane, close to a town called Skebawn in the south-west of Ireland, as Resident Magistrate. The R. M. represented the British government in Ireland in a role which combined aspects of the salaried civil servant and district administrator, as well as of the investigating officer, judicial officer, and magistrate.² These stories date from an important period of redefinition for Irish nationalism but of relative peace and stability in Ireland: between the political tensions and violence of the Land War (1880–92), and the passing of the never-implemented third Home Rule Bill in 1914. As successive Land Acts were passed by the British Parliament, the Ascendancy Irish, the social class to which Somerville and Ross belonged, had lost ownership of their tenanted land and, with it, their incomes.³ Both of their families were short of money: their writing collaboration was focused on the London market, and *The Irish R. M.* first appeared as separate short stories in London magazines.⁴

The potential readership of the *Irish R. M.* tales, then, was mixed, both in its knowledge of Ireland and in its political understanding of and attitudes towards that nation. The critical reception of the tales has also been mixed.⁵ In her recent substantial work on the tales, Julie

¹ The three volumes now published together under the title *The Irish R. M.* were originally produced by Longmans Green and Co. The first, *Some Experiences of an Irish R. M.* (1899), contained 12 tales previously published in *The Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* between October 1898 and December 1899, and *Further Experiences of an Irish R. M.* (1908) contained 11 tales previously published in various London magazines. Claire Cowart says that the 11 tales in *Mr Knox’s Country* (1915) “seem to have been written specifically for that volume” (135). That a popular general-interest and family magazine like *The Strand Magazine* took up these tales, initially produced as fox-hunting tales for a sports magazine, indicates their success with a wide readership.

² See Crossman for a discussion of this role and its fictional representation. Also relevant to the position of Major Yeates as an Irish R. M. in southern Ireland is the passing of the *Local Government Act* in 1898. Under this Act, power passed to elected bodies: county councils, rural district councils, and boards of guardians. Portrayals of these relatively new local officials by Somerville and Ross tend to be satirical and draw attention to their shortcomings, as in the case of Mr Canty in “The Holy Island.”

³ The transfer of land from landlords to their tenant farmers had largely already occurred before 1909, when the 1903 *Wyndham Land Act* became compulsory. See Devlin 23–26 for an account of this particular aspect of the contemporary Irish social context within which *The Irish R. M.* was produced.

⁴ My references in this paper are to *The Irish R. M.* (London: Abacus, an imprint of Little, Brown, 1989). This complete paperback edition of the tales was produced in 1989 after *The Irish R. M.* appeared as a television series on RTÉ One in 1983, shown subsequently on Channel Four and S4C (the predominantly Welsh-language television broadcaster) in Britain: also “in the United States on *Masterpiece Theatre*” in 1984 (Cowart 135). The Abacus text has some faults, including an error in Edith Somerville’s initials on the front cover of the book, but I assume this edition is most likely to be used by my readers. To assist readers of other editions, I source each tale discussed to its original volume with the initials SE, FE and MKC, followed by the number of the tale in that volume (see note 1; also, for an exception to this rule, note 20).

⁵ A range of critical reactions to the always “wildly popular” *Irish R.M.* tales is briefly reviewed by Claire Cowart in her biographical essay (339).

Anne Stevens sees Somerville and Ross as engaged with, rather than in retreat from, contemporary Irish politics:⁶ her essay “Political Animals” points out that despite advice from their London publishers to avoid politics, Somerville and Ross “included subtle observations on Irish politics in their material” (107). But views on the position these tales take towards contemporary Irish political issues will probably continue to differ. Joseph Devlin’s 1998 “The End of the Hunt: Somerville and Ross’s Irish R. M.” takes the position that these stories “exhibit a form of comic denial . . . where the ascendancy remains ascendant and women within that class control their own destinies through . . . strength of character . . .” (23).⁷ In seeking answers to questions about the representation of memories, public and private, in these stories, this essay contributes to the ongoing discussion of issues raised in the past by nationalist critiques of *The Irish R. M.*, and to the recent further broadening of the range of critical approaches outlined by Stevens (8–10).

A part of my approach is to see the tales as symbolic and as, at one level, offering an allegorised commentary on Irish society and public affairs.⁸ This commentary is acute, varied, well-informed, and surprisingly even-handed, given the Ascendancy origins of the authors. To write about memory, however, is also to write about subjective experiences which can take infinitely various forms, and which bring into play other aspects of mental life, such as dream, fantasy, and narrative formation; mental processes which are also closely allied to remembering. Somerville and Ross bring many aspects of memory into play in these tales, including the famous Irish tenacity in remembering historic events from the past, a tenacity which actively contributes to Irish politics in the present.

The quotation which heads this essay, “I shall never forget it to him,” comes from the final page (321) of *The Irish R. M.* tale “A Conspiracy of Silence” (FE 5). In this story Mr Jeremiah Flynn, the former owner of a fine yellow-and-white foxhound called Playboy, “with the old Irish breed” in him (303), succeeds in stealing this dog, once his favourite, back from Skebawn’s local hunt, Mr Knox’s Foxhounds, which had bought Playboy from Mr Flynn some time ago. It falls to Major Yeates, with some assistance, to reclaim the hound by stealth while he is a guest in Mr Flynn’s own home. He succeeds only because Slipper, an occasional employee of the Major’s and of the hunt – also a heavy drinker, a notable local narrator and talker, and one of the principal comic characters in *The Irish R. M.* – has, unusually, chosen not to attend a local wake. Sober and ready to assist the conspirators, Slipper smuggles Playboy away at dead of night while the Major remains to play the innocent guest.

The Major’s words acknowledging Slipper’s help might be translated into non-Irish English as “I’ll always owe him a favour in return.” But the saying “I shall never forget it to him” refers to an emotion as well as to the incurring of an obligation: his feelings of gratitude henceforth tie the Major to Slipper. As one of the relatively infrequent moments when the

⁶ In her 2012 book chapter “Political Animals,” Stevens notes that Somerville and Ross used animal characters as “a means of including allegorical comment” (107); she also regards these tales as designed to reach “different kinds of audiences” (106) and as working “on different levels” (109).

⁷ Devlin also suggests that the tales show “indigenous Ireland’s inability to rule itself” (26), a view with which I disagree. Nevertheless, in the later pages (34–47) of his essay, Devlin locates and discusses a more varied and nuanced idea of Ireland in the stories. His article is especially useful in giving contemporary social class and gender differences their due weight in assessing textual attitudes to the indigenous Irish in *The Irish R. M.*

⁸ For another allegorical reading, see Bi-Ling Chen, whose essay “From Britishness to Irishness: Fox Hunting as a Metaphor for Irish Cultural Identity in the Writing of Somerville and Ross” draws on *The Silver Fox* as well as tales from *The Irish R. M.*

culturally English R. M. falls into a colloquial Irish turn of phrase,⁹ this moment also supports those readers of *The Irish R. M.* who do not see it as belittling its “comic Irish” characters. Slipper is not always the predictable stereotype of the garrulous drunk, and Major Yeates more than once expresses respect for him. Stevens reads Playboy’s rescue as a political allegory, the hound representing the rebellious spirit of old Ireland, which is, the tale implies, more aptly entrusted to Mr Florence McCarthy (Flurry) Knox and his friend the R. M. than it is to Playboy’s original owner, the cattle-farming, profiteering Mr Flynn (107). But my point here is that although the Major remains, ostensibly, a reluctant conspirator, it is the formation of Yeates’s *memory* at this moment, the word “memory” implying both the ability to recall a complex event in the past and the content of that memory, which has most to contribute to our understanding of the overall trajectory of these tales. The word “content” in this case covers an act of cognitive recognition, an emotional state, and the accepting of a lasting obligation. Taken together, these show the Major to have been acting in this tale in accord with local, indigenous–Irish values. That these have on this occasion over-ruled his allegiance to British law as R. M. should be understood to have made Yeates more, not less, suited to hold public office in south-west Ireland.

This essay, then, will focus on the particular insights into memory and its workings offered by these tales, which represent a time and place in Ireland when power was exercised and exchanged by and within two often opposed but often overlapping societies: one largely oral, local, and customary in its ways of understanding, narrating, and controlling social behaviours; and the other – in these tales represented mainly by the Major – largely, but not invariably, more literate and bureaucratic, more socially connected to a wider world, and more respectful of British law. I will argue that these tales show the first kind of Irish society constructing and using memory differently from the second, a phenomenon closely associated with the ways in which narration and conversation function differently in each society. I will also show how the friendship of the Major and Flurry Knox, itself an allegorical representation of the possibility of progress towards a more cohesive and peaceable Ireland, represents the differences separating these two social systems as by no means stable or impermeable. Social mixing, reciprocated understanding, versatility in “crossing over,” and amicably negotiated relationships between these two social systems offer a way forward for Ireland.

Before turning my attention to the construction of the personal faculties of memory in the differing identities of Major Yeates and Flurry Knox, I first investigate two ghost stories in which Shreelane, the Major’s (and Flurry’s) house, becomes a haunted house. Ghost stories tend, of course, to be involved with memories of the past, both public and private. Tales of haunted houses in my own country, New Zealand, often obscure original Maori ownership of

⁹ The odd use of “to” in this phrase sounds as if it might be a translation from an Irish Gaelic dative. My colleagues Ross Clark and Jan Cronin, the latter raised in south-west Ireland, agree with me that the usage is probably a calque, but the only two pieces of evidence so far unearthed to this effect by Ross Clark are: an OED example of a similar usage from the works of Thomas Moore, where it carries a negative rather than positive connotation: see “s.v. *forget*_, sense 1. c. const. *to* a person = as a matter of reproach against him. *rare*. 1822 T. Moore *Diary* 31 Jan. The thing has never been forgotten to Etienne since”; and, from another dictionary: “remember something to someone: bear in mind to repay someone; literally remind someone of something; pay someone back for an injury.” (Caroline Macafee, *Concise Ulster Dictionary*). Hilary Robinson concludes her lengthy account of Somerville and Ross’s use of and respect for Irish-English language thus: “Much of the speech of the country folk was a translation not just of Irish names but of Irish *thought* into English, and to change that almost literal translation was to change the thought. Any falsification of idiom and twist of phrase meant changing the way of thought that lay within the words” (56).

the land by foregrounding an early settler as the “ghost”; such hauntings thus tend to legitimate one family’s history while also fitting within the category of post-colonial Gothic described by Melanie Otto as inquiring into “the legitimacy of Europe’s imperial expansion” (172). As in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*, his 1910 study of the condition of England, in *The Irish R. M.* a house becomes a symbol of the nation as a whole. In both studies, the haunting of that house offers a connection with the past which is allied with questions about ownership, true inheritance, and the future. A ghost which haunts Shreelane just after a new R. M.’s arrival to live there suggests just such a haunting, and these two tales can thereby be expected to offer post-colonial Gothic reflections on the contemporary condition of Ireland.

The first *Irish R. M.* story, “Great-Uncle McCarthy,” introduces Major Yeates as he is settling into his new job at Skebawn. He acquires a house on a “repairing lease” – a phrase in itself suggestive of the task that lies before him – but soon finds that his house is not and never has been entirely his house. He and his are not its only inhabitants, and things happen there independently of his desires or knowledge. The ownership of his house, then, is in dispute, but, significantly, although that dispute is conducted furtively, the secret of the haunting is never a secret from his indigenous Irish servants.

This tale also establishes the important “mixed” and “crossover” roles of Flurry Knox,¹⁰ the Major’s youthful landlord. Flurry, as his “mixed” name, his more, and his less, respectable activities, and his fluid social position indicate, combines aspects of both coloniser and colonised and contrives to win the respect of both the indigenous Catholic Irish and the Ascendancy Protestant Irish. As such, he is to Major Yeates an invaluable ally and model. His visit to the Major in order to sell him an unwanted new horse on his first day in residence, a very wet, rainy day, also creates an occasion for Flurry to tell the story of the death of his Great-Uncle McCarthy and so to implant in the Major’s memory a possibility that the house is haunted by Great-Uncle McCarthy’s ghost.

Flurry is a small landowner, Master of the local foxhunt, and one of a widespread clan of “Black Protestants” (11) who, as the Major has already discovered, occupy every possible social class across the countryside.¹¹ However, in this comic tale of a false haunting, Flurry only *appears* to be in the know about the mysterious noises which disturb the Major’s nights in his new home, nor is he in control of the situation. An often-quoted initial description of Flurry emphasises his mixed and versatile social position: he “looked like a stableboy among gentlemen, and a gentleman among stableboys” (10). Indeed, the fact that his main income seems to come from neither rents nor farming, but from horse-dealing, puts Flurry in a social

¹⁰ The word “mixed” has a certain resonance in the study of Irish history, because of Ireland’s long colonisation by a near neighbour and much larger economy. The result, as Virginia Crossman puts it, was that “The ‘indigenous population’ supplied much of the manpower for the British imperial enterprise and, as such, formed part of the colonial élite. Ireland occupied a unique position within the empire, being both imperial and colonial; both subject and object of the imperial project” (Crossman 23). Crossman also quotes Declan Kiberd to the effect that it is “precisely the ‘mixed’ nature of the experience of the Irish people, as both exponents and victims of British Imperialism, which makes them so representative of the underlying process” (Kiberd, 4, quoted by Crossman, 23). For Flurry’s three names, see Richard Tillinghast, who remarks that Flurry’s “last name is emphatically British and Protestant, while his middle name is that of the ancient kings of Munster” (74); see also Stevens, who takes four pages to scrupulously unpack a further complex of meaningful allusions in all three of Flurry’s names (*Irish Scene* 172–76).

¹¹ Cowart considers that the point of this tale is to demonstrate the variety of social positions which may be occupied by a single family (341). Her point is convincing, but only addresses one of the many kinds of expository work being done in this opening tale.

category akin to classlessness: anybody in Ireland capable of making money by this trade could enter its social freemasonry.¹² So Flurry's ambiguous position in relation to the mysterious night-time activities at Shreelane adds to the intriguing, mixed and unsettling effect he has on the reader. (Note that Flurry, a descendant of invaders and settlers of Ireland and so himself "Ascendancy Irish," also perhaps only in appearance "owns" the Major's house.) Readers may suspect that Flurry has been lying to the Major by preparing him for nightly noises of a "haunting" – a suspicion given some textual support by a reference to one of Flurry's relations, a local auctioneer known as Larry the Liar, as well as by Flurry's warning Yeates to avoid the top-floor rooms as they might not be safe. But misunderstandings then proliferate on both sides. After unwisely attempting to jest with Flurry on the sacred subject of foxhunting Major Yeates finds himself boycotted because he is accused by public opinion of selling his own foxes, a rural crime so serious that it is hard to exaggerate its unpopularity.

All is finally revealed and resolved in the first of the many hunting scenes in *The Irish R.M.* in which hounds get *inside* a house – a recurrent *Irish R. M.* image of inappropriate and uproarious but eventually felicitous carnival, a desirable overturning of decorum and order. In this particular invasion, hounds discover secret inhabitants in the Major's house: an elderly couple, the once-respectable McCarthy Gannons, relations of Flurry's. Living unbeknownst in a high room above the stable attics of Shreelane, they have been stealing and sharing the Major's Scotch whiskey with the Major's conniving servants, and associating with the Major's gamekeeper, Tim Connor, in the less forgivable crime of stealing and selling foxes. Surely this tale asks to be read as a parable or allegory of the vexed – and "mixed" – nature of social relations in a long-colonised and long-settled nation. When the tale concludes, the impoverished "mixed" Catholic/Ascendancy couple have been evicted from Shreelane. But the Major's local Catholic employees, despite their complicity, remain in their jobs, an instance of generosity on the Major's part which also gives him some assurance of their future loyalty – though never of their decorum or servility.

Important symbolic functions in this tale are also conferred on the chimney sweep, who arrives early, in the morning darkness of this significant day, and while initially scattering unreadable black marks over the interior of the house, ultimately becomes a source of enlightenment, sweeping away "black" residues of Shreelane's past. The sweep also invites the Major up onto the roof of the house, thus helping him acquire a wider view of things. The Major learns, for instance, that the sweep regards him as a social equal (the apparently destitute Mrs McCarthy Gannon also claims social equality with Flurry) and is naturally courteous towards him. He also invites the Major to admire the view, and here the Major first recognises his home's setting to be beautiful – in marked contrast to the "tall, ugly house" with "windows staring, narrow and vacant" and "ash heaps, and nettles, and broken bottles" (8), which he had mainly noticed on his first arrival. The view also culminates in a glimpse of the Atlantic lying in "immense plains of sunlight" (21), in contrast to the constant rain and domestic damp noteworthy in the Major's early experience of living at Shreelane. But as well as recognising wider horizons, warmth, light, and beauty in his new home, the Major now first sees his own gamekeeper, Tim Connor, smuggling a captured fox out of the Shreelane woods. Though it will be some time before he realises what he has seen, this clarifying

¹² See Olga Pyne Clarke's *She Came of Decent People* for an autobiographical account of a young Irishwoman's successful career in the freemasonry of horse trading from the 1920s through to after the Second World War. The rural Irish economy was oriented towards the sale of live pigs, sheep, cattle and horses to Britain. Somerville herself bought, trained, and sold on young horses to make money, in this resembling the *Irish R. M.* character Bobby Bennett.

moment advances the Major's education and, because he forgives their depredations, lays down the basis for a better relationship with his own employees; it also introduces the tale's final *dénouement*, which will re-establish friendship between Flurry and the Major. Stevens's comment on the Irish picturesque seems remarkably apt to one side of the mixed effect of this story: "To be Irish and aware of the contested nature of the land being portrayed as charming – and the question of who owns that land being debatable – gives additional irony to the solely aesthetic appeal of the picturesque" (*Irish Scene* 93). Similarly, the echo of an eviction scene implicit in the departure of the McCarthy Gannons also evokes past social conflict over the land with a humorous and ironic effect. The overall effect is that Ireland's past is not forgotten, but an optimistic looking forward to the future is encouraged.

The second Shreelane ghost story, "Major Apollo Riggs" (MKC 6), appeared in 1915 in a volume generally regarded as darker in mood than the earlier two *Irish R. M* collections. "Great-Uncle McCarthy" taught us that at that time neither Flurry nor the Major really knew the extent of their own house. In this tale a more problematic and less humorous extension to the interior spaces of Shreelane is opened up by another discovery: a deep dark well, long sealed shut and forgotten, in Shreelane's extensive cellars. Flurry's aged grandmother, Mrs Knox, knows the tale behind the sealed-over well. It is believed to conceal the remains of a visitor to the house, a Major Apollo Riggs, who died because his host, her great-grandfather, had discovered that the Major and his own wife, also a Riggs and a cousin of the Major's, were lovers. The well has been opened only once since then, at the time of the Famine, in connection with setting up a soup kitchen. But it was re-sealed by Mrs Knox's father, because after the opening of the well "the servants flew in a body out of the house, like wild geese" (517). The phrase "wild geese" commonly referred to the many Irish emigrants who, over the centuries, made their livings by serving as mercenaries overseas. Here, it is a reminder of the long-standing necessity for Irishmen and women to seek a living by departing their own country.

The darker themes of this tale, however, as evoked by these references to the past, are associated with an apparently comic housekeeping concern in the present – the replacement of Shreelane's old chimneys. Captain Andrew Larpent, the cousin of the Major's wife Philippa, is young, English, arrogant, and an army engineer by profession; he has persuaded the Major that the cracked chimneys of Shreelane must come down before they fall down. But the task (and it is hard not to see another political allegory here) turns out to be long-drawn-out and difficult. The chimneys were built strongly, with cement, and are remarkably hard to remove.

The Captain provides the comic love-interest, which is one side of this tale. Yet he suffers two accidents: the first, a near fall into the newly opened well, which could have caused his death; the second, a fall from a horse onto the rubble of one of the fallen chimneys, which could also have been fatal, and does dislocate his shoulder. This ghost, then, is no false ghost like Great-Uncle McCarthy. Once released by the opening of the well, it makes its presence felt in various disturbing ways, and the story produces an uneasy feeling of something both dead and active, a subterranean presence that is uncanny, vengeful, and malign.

Hints towards a reading of this story are provided by the discovery of an old box of letters beside the well. These having been torn up to be used in a paper chase, the name Apollo written on a fragment of paper ends up "stuck on to [the injured Andrew] like a label" (525). The implication appears to be that the malign spirit in this tale – Major Riggs's ghost – resents the more fortunate lover, and has played some spiteful tricks as a result. But the tale is difficult to read. Although the Captain suffers, his injury helps to bring him and his future

wife together. And his opening of the well might equally have been resented by the ghost of Mrs Knox's ancestor, who presumably murdered Major Riggs or killed him in a duel, and who also has an interest in keeping the well closed.

In terms of common Irish memories of the past, we might read the tale as showing that while the "house of Ireland" is assailed by arrogant English would-be improvers at its highest levels,¹³ it is also being threatened from below, at its foundations, by bringing to light the deep, dark well of Irish history, along with its accompanying familial and national memories of past rivalries, violence, dispossessions, and deprivations. I suspect that "Major Apollo Riggs" may also have carried some private significance for Somerville and Ross, possibly encoding a shared distrust of male sexuality. The surname "Riggs" may have represented to Somerville and Ross, both horse experts, the meanings of the word "rig" (also "rig" or "rid-gel"), which applies to a male animal, particularly a stallion, bull or ram, which has either been imperfectly castrated or naturally has one undescended testicle.¹⁴ An unrecognised rig is a threat to good herd management, and the name may be taken to imply that Major Riggs once endangered the Knox family line of inheritance by an illicit sexual connection.

The tale's title may therefore even suggest that the continuing British military presence in Ireland has its inbuilt dangers. The Major's military rank, and the way Shreelane is for him, as it was for Mrs Knox's great-grandfather, the house prepared for his bride, also connect the Major, as well as the Captain, back to the haunting. However, while it is Yeates's bloodline which is threatened by, but escapes, a spectral male intruder from the past in the equally enigmatic tale "Harrington's" (MKC 4), where the character endangered by the ghost is one of Yeates's own sons, it is Yeates who ends the haunting in both tales. In "Harrington's" the Major hurls the object which connects past and present, the aneroid barometer, into the ocean, presumably thus quieting the ghost which it awoke. In "Major Apollo Riggs" he is given Mrs Knox's great-grandfather's seal ring and, following her advice, will re-close and re-seal the well. Flurry's secretiveness and diversionary tactics in this tale might be wise, but might merely point to some comic self-consciousness about the legitimacy of his own line of descent.

In general, "Major Apollo Riggs," like "Harrington's," configures the past as always powerful, and as potentially most dangerous when it comes back to life in the present. But the tale also implies that the Major (unlike the rash Captain) has by now acquired sufficient wisdom both to remember the stories bequeathed the present by Ireland's past and to recognise when that past is better left unrecalled. By conferring on him the seal ring, Mrs Knox bestows on the Major a kind of co-heirship or co-authority with Flurry in taking responsibility for the future of their corner of Ireland; note, too, in this connection, Mrs Knox's claim in this tale that Shreelane is a well-built house, which confers on the haunting a wider than familial significance. "In the storm of '39 I remember that my father said that if Shreelane fell not a house in Ireland would stand," she says (507), as if to emphasise Shreelane's representative functions.

¹³ Within the stories of *The Irish R. M.* British efforts to improve and reform Ireland are something of a *leitmotif*, with direct and indirect references made, for example, to the successive Land Acts and the *Local Government Act*, and to their sometimes unlooked-for effects in rural Ireland. "Lisheen Races" also mocks a would-be reformer, Leigh Kelway, a politically ambitious secretary to an English lord who uses a short visit to Ireland to study the "the alcohol problem," but is made to appear ridiculous in the tale.

¹⁴ Other relevant meanings of the word "rig" found in the *OED* include "to romp about" and "to hoax or play tricks on"; a rig may also mean a trick or prank.

I turn now to the question of how individual memories differentiate the characters of Major Yeates and Flurry Knox. The memories of these two men (“memories” encompassing both what they remember and how their memories work) are exemplary of the many profound social differences which separate the orally-oriented, gregarious, well-known and locally-rooted magistrate Flurry Knox from the former British army officer now employed as a British government official cum magistrate, the newcomer and outsider Major Yeates. Memory as created, stored, accessed, used, and understood by these two men operates very differently, as may be seen at significant points in the tales.

In the first paragraph of “Great-Uncle McCarthy,” for example, the Major recalls his own engagement. “There was, on that occasion, a sunset, and a string band playing ‘The Gondoliers,’¹⁵ and there was also an ingenuous belief in the omnipotence of a godfather of Philippa’s – (Philippa was the young lady) who had once been a member of the Government” (7). As this fond memory shows, the Major’s conventionally romantic recall of the night he and Philippa were engaged – his sentence construes memory as personal and private and altogether rather like a valued possession – nevertheless includes his earlier expectations that Philippa’s godfather might help him into a paid position and enable him to marry. Although a more sentimental man, the Major, like his opposite and counterpart Flurry, is perfectly capable of recalling a connection which might be of use to himself.

A few pages later, we glimpse one of Flurry Knox’s less functional memories. When Flurry first visits the Major at Shreelane, he shares his memories of his great-uncle’s death. These are intended to “talk up” the value of his house, to entertain the Major (who has just bought a horse from him), and generally to advance Flurry’s friendship with an important new arrival in the district. But it also emerges that Flurry inherited his great-uncle’s house only after living with and looking after that aged alcoholic through a trying period during which his great-uncle often roamed the house all night, a prey to “the horrors” (11). A complicated impression of Flurry is thereby created: as possibly self-interested (motivated by anticipating inheriting the house) but also as possibly an affectionate and kindly young man with a strong sense of family. It all adds to our impression of Flurry as a “mixed” character with many sides to his projects, social connections and personality.

Flurry’s memory subsequently acquires two further dimensions. Early in their friendship, in “Trinket’s Colt” (SE 4), the two drive to old Mrs Knox’s home, Aussolas, and the Major recounts how “we passed through long tracts of pasture country, fraught, for Flurry, with memories of runs, which were recorded for me, fence by fence, in every one of which the biggest dog-fox in the country had gone to ground . . .” (64). This passage emphasises Flurry’s enthusiasm for the hunt, recalls the pleasures of bragging about one’s hunting exploits (the Major has just been discovering these pleasures) but also, and most strikingly, communicates to us the detailed map of the countryside that Flurry carries in his memory and so impresses on the reader some understanding of how Flurry inhabits, in one sense “owns,” the district he lives in. As, in successive *R. M.* tales all the way through to “Put Down One and Carry Two” (MKC 8) and “The Shooting of Shinroe” (MKC 10),¹⁶ the Major retains an unimpaired ability to get lost when out hunting or shooting in the countryside, it can be

¹⁵ I assume that “The Gondoliers” here would recall to readers the well-known love song “Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes,” and would be understood as evoking the Major’s feelings about Philippa.

¹⁶ These tales take place about 12 years or more after the Major’s arrival in Shreelane. See the opening of “Philippa’s Fox-Hunt” (SE 7), which tells us the Major is two years in Shreelane before his bride Philippa arrives, and “Harrington’s” (MKC 4) where their oldest son, Anthony, has just had his ninth birthday.

assumed that there is more at issue here than the facts that Flurry is a local and the Major a new arrival. According to John Sutton, there are three different kinds of memory: the “procedural, habit, and skill memories [or] remembering *how*,” the propositional or semantic memories which include our “memory for facts [or] remembering *that*,” and the recollective or episodic “memory for experienced events and episodes” (Sutton, 1.1 The Varieties of Remembering). All of these kinds of memory are surely involved in being able to ride across country while fox-hunting without losing one’s way. With regard to their abilities in acquiring and using procedural, semantic and recollective memories, Flurry and the Major appear to be fundamentally different from each other.

We gain a second insight into Flurry’s multi-dimensional memory in an account of the Major’s regular work in the Petty Sessions Courts. In “The Boat’s Share” (FE 6), a witness, Kate Keohane, in a case occasioned by a fight on the beach between two families who jointly own a fishing boat, draws attention to a scar on her forehead which she says dates from the fight. Flurry, in the chair on the magistrates’ bench, immediately responds by enquiring whether the injury was not incurred in Kate Keohane’s earlier fight with the postmistress at Munig, who struck her “with the office stamp! Try now officer, [adds Flurry, addressing the sergeant in court] can you read Munig on her forehead?” – whereupon the court dissolves in laughter, and the witness’s veracity is successfully called into question. In all the above cases, Flurry’s memories function as a means to entertain an audience and, thereby, achieve other goals as well.

Yet, beyond knowing his way through both the countryside and the arcana of local customary law (such as the customary definition of a “boat’s share,” which remains a closed book to the Major), Flurry knows even more about the area he lives in. For instance, when in “Lisheen Races, Second-Hand” (SE 6) the three travellers seek tea and bread and butter at a pub, Flurry already knows that there is a private parlour in this pub and also knows that the hotel maid is called Mary Kate (102). In fact, he seems to be an old friend of hers. This glimpse into Flurry’s extensive social circle contrasts with the nostalgic trip down memory lane which the Major undertakes at the outset of this tale, when he looks through an old album of photographs to locate one taken of his university friend Leigh Kelway while both were at Magdalen College, Oxford (93). On the journey to Lisheen Races subsequently undertaken by Flurry Knox, the Major, and the Major’s guest Leigh Kelway, who has matured into the private secretary of a politically inclined Lord and who is currently researching the Liquor Question in Ireland, we see Flurry also engaged in researching matters of financial importance to himself during one of many delays to that disaster-ridden expedition. While all three travellers watch the slow progress of the smith in mending the broken wheel of their borrowed outside car, Flurry beguiles “the smith into grim and calumnious confidences about every horse in the country” (101). As a horse dealer, to Flurry this knowledge means money, enabling him to cheapen more plausibly any horse he wants to buy. But the text also reveals here that Flurry does not just know pretty well everybody in the country, he also knows every horse.

Another aspect of the broad local knowledge which depends on Flurry’s useful memory appears on a number of occasions when the Major finds himself embarrassed in front of some of the people in the hunt, and becomes the butt of long-enduring jokes on the subject. After the Major’s attempts to tidy Bobby Bennett’s hair for her in the tale set “In the Curranhilty Country” (SE 3), Flurry seems to be especially active in beginning the teasing of the Major and in keeping the joke alive (55, 56). His steady acquisition and retention of memories, which become a source of knowledge to be employed on a range of purposes, construct

Flurry as a man activated by many social obligations, pleasures and ambitions; evidently, these go well beyond his own individual monetary self-interest. The differences between the Major and Flurry might be summed up by saying that the Major has a privately constructed memory and Flurry has a publicly constructed memory. Certainly, in the story “The Holy Island” (SE 8), what the Major does *not* keep in mind after the day of a shipwreck – surely a memorable enough day! – affects our understanding of the entire story and within the tale has significant public consequences.

“The Holy Island” opens when an American cargo ship is wrecked on the coast. As the ship breaks up, the District Inspector (D. I. Murray) with a small number of Royal Irish Constabulary and other responsible citizens, among them “a noted Member of the Skebawn Board of Guardians” (154), Mr James Canty,¹⁷ work through the night on a nearby beach, trying to stop the food and liquor in the ship from being stolen as it floats ashore on the tide. There are also four or five hundred people, mainly men, on the beach, “all of whom were determined on getting at the rum” (152). The officials’ efforts must therefore also focus on stopping the local poor from drinking themselves to death on the rum, “34 degrees above proof” (152), which is coming ashore. Despite their best efforts, much of the cargo, including barrels of liquor, is stolen.

As befits a local magistrate, Major Yeates shows some awareness of D. I. Murray’s tireless search for the stolen goods in the next three weeks. But the Major’s narrative attention quickly turns to Philippa’s suggestion that he take his gun out to shoot snipe and duck on Corran Lake, after which she will join him on the lake’s Holy Island for a picnic lunch. A lengthy passage here also explores another theme: the many domestic crimes of the family spaniel Maria, and reflects on her severe deficiencies as a gun-dog. During the shooting, Maria’s criminal theft and consumption of a shot snipe becomes a kind of ironic reflection on the limits of the Major’s retributive power. Maria is thoroughly beaten, but readers will already suspect that the food and liquor thieves never will be.

Whether or not his redirecting of the narrative picnic-wards and Maria-wards implies that the Major has forgotten the whole affair of the shipwreck, it certainly means that the first-time reader loses sight of it. And indeed, Major Yeates has a different order of priorities and pleasures in life from the local residents. His pleasures (like trout fishing, duck and snipe shooting, or a picnic lunch with his wife) are often rural and relatively solitary. All unaware, therefore (as is a first-time reader) the Major on the Corran Lake expedition does not put two and two together when Philippa claims to hear strange and inhuman noises on the island and Slipper contrives to get drunk while they are picnicking there. The Major also does not connect these mysteries to meeting Mrs Canty shortly afterwards, although she, too, is crossing the lake by boat to visit the island; he accepts her explanation that she is “going to the island to get some water from the holy well for me daughter that has an impression on her chest” (164).¹⁸ The Major, as we discover later, also does not know that Mr Canty’s brother keeps a public house in Cork. We can safely assume that Flurry automatically knows and recalls such things; the Major, it seems, does not.

¹⁷ Mr Canty’s position as Poor Law Guardian reflects ironically on the still rather new institutions of local government in Ireland, which followed the passing of the *Local Government Act* in 1898; he represents Somerville and Ross’s doubts about the integrity, trustworthiness and independence of the new office-holders.

¹⁸ Somerville and Ross’s Irish characters often produce amusing malapropisms. Occasionally, as here, these cause me to suspect that the speaker can be read as purposefully distracting the Major by a deliberately picturesque misuse of the English language.

The narrative then shifts, three days later, to a third new setting: the departure of a funeral train from Skebawn following the death of the local Roman Catholic bishop. Only after its departure do the Major and D. I. Murray learn from Flurry that contraband liquor, labelled “Fresh Fish, Urgent,” was secretly carried off to Cork in the special train, and that, as Flurry tells them, “by the time the train was in Cork, yourself [the D. I.] and the Major were the only two men in the town that weren’t talking about it” (167). Here, as elsewhere, the Major finds himself in the position of being the last to know, having been made a fool of by those who *are* in the know.

Genuinely joyous social intercourse depends for its success on a basis of at least some shared knowledge, and shared memories make a fine foundation for a flourishing conversation. The Major expects to enjoy such conversations with his chosen few: old companions from university or army days, close friends and family. Flurry, on the other hand, gives every sign of being able to enjoy the pleasures of conversation with almost anybody in “the barony,”¹⁹ and it’s not just the new or the news which is delighted in as a topic of conversation: the Major is well aware how long a joke against himself can last. The shared knowledge of participants in a secret would also, evidently, be a good foundation for pleasurable conversation, such conversation as has flourished in Skebawn and the surrounding countryside since the theft of liquor from the wreck, and which was no doubt added to when Slipper and Mrs Canty recounted how they had fooled the Major.

In an example of another conversational art, an eye-witness’s set-piece narration of recent events, Slipper recounts one entire race from start to finish to a large audience at the pub in “Lisheen Races,” finally telling a monstrous (and easily disproven) lie to provide a fitting climax to his story by claiming that one of the riders was killed (see pp. 106–08).²⁰ Shortly afterwards, the supposedly dead man appears on the scene. Flurry, of course, was never taken in by this lie, and the Major has the sense to remain silent, but the Major’s visitor from England, Leigh Kelway, who set out for the day so anxious to research the drinking problem in Ireland, is completely taken in. While the Anglo-American philosophical tradition assigns validity to a memory according to its truth to what happened in the past, unexpected factors quite other than truth-telling may affect an Irish conversation, even a story told among those with many shared memories of the same event, like Slipper’s tale of Lisheen Races.

One of these factors appears to be the conversational art of making the other feel good about him or herself. In *Irish R. M.* tales this art may be practised by either Ascendancy or Catholic Irish, and practitioners of the art extend from a poor and elderly woman in her potato field in “The Pug-Nosed Fox” (FE1, 250–51) to – sometimes – the Major himself. In that same tale

¹⁹ The barony of West Carbery would have been understood by many Irish readers to be the setting on which Skebawn and the surrounding countryside are based, as locals in the *R. M.* stories use the phrase “in the barony” to refer to where they live. Skibbereen, the town generally believed to be the basis for the fictional Skebawn, is in the barony of West Carbery.

²⁰ For another, somewhat different, example of competitive and humorous Irish conversation and story-telling see “When I First Met Dr Hickey,” a tale originally published as No. 7 in *In Mr Knox’s Country*, now generally re-positioned in *The Irish R. M.* closer to its chronological position as No. 2 in the collected tales. I adhere to this new sequencing of the tales in referring to them by number in my text. “When I First Met Dr Hickey” puts Flurry’s habit of keeping up a joke against the Major into context as a particularly Irish form of social enjoyment. Somerville and Ross were assiduous in memorising and recording instances of Irish/English rhetoric, gossip and story-telling and drew on these resources in their writing (Gifford Lewis Chapter 6). See also Chapter 2 on “The Collaboration and the Use of Dialect” in Robinson.

the Major goes to considerable lengths to let Tomsy Flood, a younger man, down gently after rescuing him from a humiliating predicament caused by the young McRory lads' predilection for practical jokes. Another instructive example of courteous sensitivity and goodwill towards the other occurs in the tale "Poisson d'Avril" (FE 3). In this tale, having been told by his wife to arrive from Ireland bearing a fine Irish salmon as a gift for relations in Gloucestershire, at whose home they will be attending a family wedding, the Major, predictably, embarks on his journey having *forgotten* to buy the salmon.

Fortunately, a delayed train gives him a chance to run into town to buy a large salmon. But on his return his carriage is occupied by "seven shawled and cloaked countrywomen" (277) who are all instantly and obviously devoured by intense curiosity as to what he paid for the salmon, but are too polite to ask. When the Major reveals that he paid ten shillings for a salmon known to them to have been taken illegally, the countrywomen co-operate in praising the Major for his weakness and ignorance, and in denigrating the seller, a Mrs Coffey. One remarks, "tis what it is, ye haven't as much roguery in your heart as'd make ye a match for her," to which another responds, "How would the gentleman be a match for her? Sure a Turk itself wouldn't be a match for her! That one has a tongue that'd clip a hedge" (278). These courteous companions depart the carriage leaving in the Major, "after the agreeable manner of their kind, a certain comfortable mental sleekness that reason cannot immediately dispel" (278).

One conclusion suggested by this tale might be that among other local facts of life which the Major has undoubtedly heard, but which he did not bother to remember, is the price of salmon. On the other hand, it seems probable that Flurry would know the local price of salmon, just as he would also know who Mrs Coffey was, and that Mrs Coffey's salmon was stolen. For Flurry appears not to exclude anybody from his potential circle of conversational partners, and he understands that a good companion and good conversationalist must be knowledgeable about the things which are important to those with whom he socialises. Flurry's compendious memory for local detail, then, is not just a potent source of publicly administered justice, personal popularity, income, power, influence, and fun. It is also a function of the highly valued art of conversation, and his ability to *remember* has one of its foundations in true courtesy, resting, as that does, like good conversation, on valuing others and their interests as highly as one's own – or, at least, appearing to do so.

This investigation of ideas about public and private memory in *The Irish R. M.* complicates some aspects of the tales which have proven controversial, such as how the narrator's, and the authors', attitudes to the Catholic characters of various different social classes compare with their attitudes to the Ascendancy characters, and whether, or how far, the political sympathies displayed in the tales undermine or uphold contemporary Irish aspirations to Home Rule. My concluding point is that through the characters of Major Yeates and Flurry Knox the tales offer a vision of the strength in wise governance which might arise from mutual respect, better understanding, and more co-operation between the long-opposed social systems in rural Ireland. Of importance to Somerville and Ross's presentation of this vision is the fact that although Flurry is "local," he is not a Catholic but a Protestant descendant of invaders of Ireland. This "mixed" characterisation of Flurry may perhaps seem to favour the claim of the Ascendancy Irish to govern Ireland. I would argue, to the contrary, that it actually gives the vision of Ireland presented by Somerville and Ross a certain weighting towards the "new" Ireland represented by Flurry. It is because he successfully straddles the differences between two social systems in south-west Ireland that Flurry becomes the dominant force in the novel and its exemplary character, for, after all, the local Catholic Irish

do not need to learn how to be Irish: the Ascendancy Irish do.²¹ Precisely because his versatile and unstable position and personality encompass both his Ascendancy origins and loyalties and his ease in mentally inhabiting an Ireland older than British-colonised Ireland, Somerville and Ross's *Flurry* suggests that the colonist settling in a subject land must acquire an indigenous memory before earning respect and acceptance among the colonised.

²¹ David Marcus, in his introductory overview of the Irish short story, describes George Moore as the father of the modern Irish short story, Somerville and Ross as its joint "mother" (11). He is also inclined to attribute to "the Irish pre-eminence in the field of the short story"(12) the achievement, in the twentieth century, of a coming together in literature, after seven centuries of separate literary development, of "the two widely-opposed cultures" (11) in Ireland so as to form "one native tradition" (12). This intriguing theory would confer considerable literary importance on the figure of *Flurry*.

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