

ANCESTRY AND
NARRATIVE IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
BRITISH LITERATURE

Blood Relations from Edgeworth to Hardy

SOPHIE GILMARTIN



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Sophie Gilmartin 1998

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1998

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 11 on 12.5 Baskerville [vN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Gilmartin, Sophie.

Ancestry and narrative in nineteenth-century British literature: blood relations from
Edgeworth to Hardy / Sophie Gilmartin.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in nineteenth-century literature and culture: 18)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 56094 2 (hardback)

1. English fiction – 19th century – History and criticism.
2. Genealogy in literature.
3. Edgeworth, Maria, 1767–1849 – Knowledge – Genealogy.
4. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870 – Knowledge – Genealogy.
5. Domestic fiction, English – History and criticism.
6. Family in literature. & Narration (Rhetoric) I. Title. II. Series.

PR868.G354G55 1998
823'.809355 – dc21 CIP

ISBN 0 521 56094 2 hardback

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Textual note: the novels</i>	xii
Introduction	I
1 Oral and written genealogies in Edgeworth's <i>The Absentee</i>	23
2 A mirror for matriarchs: the cult of Mary Queen of Scots in nineteenth-century literature	54
3 Pedigree, nation, race: the case of Disraeli's <i>Sybil</i> and <i>Tancred</i>	102
4 'A sort of Royal Family': Alternative pedigrees in Meredith's <i>Evan Harrington</i>	130
5 Pedigree, sati and the widow in Meredith's <i>The Egoist</i>	163
6 Pedigree and forgetting in Hardy	195
7 Geology and genealogy: Hardy's <i>The Well-Beloved</i>	226
Conclusion	246
<i>Notes</i>	252
<i>Bibliography</i>	267
<i>Index</i>	276

Illustrations

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. Daniel Maclise, <i>The Marriage of Eva and Strongbow</i> (c. 1854).
Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland. | page 26 |
| 2. Frontispiece to the 1812 edition of Maria Edgeworth,
<i>The Absentee</i> . | 49 |
| 3. Joseph Severn, <i>The Abdication of Mary, Queen of Scots</i> ,
c. 1831. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. | 79 |
| 4. Richard Westall, <i>The Departure of Mary Queen of Scots to France
When a Child</i> , probably c. 1794. Courtesy of the Victoria and
Albert Museum. | 84 |
| 5. Richard Westall, <i>The Flight of Mary Queen of Scots into England</i> ,
probably c. 1794. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. | 84 |
| 6. William Hennessy, illustration to Charlotte M. Yonge's
<i>Unknown to History</i> , c. 1892. | 95 |
| 7. 'New Crowns for Old Ones!' cartoon from <i>Punch</i> , 15 April
1876. | 116 |
| 8. 'Empress and Earl, or One Good Turn Deserves Another',
cartoon from <i>Punch</i> , 26 August 1876. | 117 |
| 9. Edwin Longsdon Long, <i>The Babylonian Marriage Market</i> , exhibited
at the Royal Academy, 1875. Courtesy of Royal Holloway
College. | 176 |
| 10. Richard Redgrave, <i>Preparing to Throw Off her Weeds</i> , exhibited
at the Royal Academy 1846. Courtesy of the Victoria and
Albert Museum. | 183 |
| 11. E. K. Johnson, <i>A Young Widow</i> , 1877. Courtesy of the Print
Room, the Victoria and Albert Museum. | 191 |
| 12. Henry Alexander Bowler, <i>The Doubt: 'Can These Dry Bones
Live?'</i> , exhibited at the Royal Academy 1855. Courtesy of the
Tate Gallery, London. | 208 |

*Oral and written genealogies in Edgeworth's
'The Absentee'*

George Meredith opens his unfinished novel, *Celt and Saxon* (published posthumously in 1910) with the chapter 'Excursion in a Celtic Mind' – in the mind, that is, of Patrick O'Donnell, a young Irishman travelling in England. Patrick muses on the English attitude which holds that Irish noble blood is inferior to that of the English:

a question of blood would have fired his veins to rival heat of self-assertion, very loftily towering: there were kings in Ireland: cry for one of them in Uladh and you will hear his name, and he has descendants yet! But the youth was not disposed unnecessarily to blazon his princeliness. He kept it in modest reserve, as common gentlemen keep their physical strength.¹

A century before, ten years after the 1800 Act of Union of Ireland and England, William Playfair's immense *British Family Antiquity* included a 'Baronetage of Ireland', and a 'Conclusion to the Irish Peerage'. An English genealogist, Playfair dedicated his work to the King – for him, the only possible king – of England. Those 'kings of Ireland' are to him an 'absurdity':

The history, short as it is given here of Ireland, subsequent to its invasion by Henry II will enable the reader to understand better the situation of individual families than he otherwise would do; but as some of the families have a sort of traditional pedigree previous to the time of Henry, it is necessary to say something of that subject, and to speak of the fabulous history of that country, to which, notwithstanding its complete absurdity, some persons very bravely pretend to give credit.²

The language of the Act of Union of 1800 reveals no consciousness of these 'traditional pedigrees'. Its First Article states:

that the said Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland shall, upon the First Day of January which shall be in the Year of Our Lord One Thousand eight hundred

and one, and for ever after, be united into One Kingdom, by the Name of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland; and that the Royal Stile and Titles appertaining to the Imperial Crown of the said United Kingdom and its Dependencies . . . shall be such as His Majesty, by his Royal Proclamation under the Great Seal of the United Kingdom, shall be pleased to appoint.³

The First Article refers to two 'kingdoms', one of Great Britain and one of Ireland. They will be united to form 'One Kingdom' bearing the seals, armorial bearings, etc. that 'His Majesty . . . shall be pleased to appoint.' Before the Union, the peoples of the separate 'kingdoms' had been aware of only one king, His Majesty of England. The kings of Ireland had been conquered in the twelfth century, although their descendants continued to wield influence over their territories long after that. Centuries of invasion, conquest and plantation under Norman, Elizabethan and Cromwellian rule had intervened since the Irish kings had held any great power, and it is perhaps understandable (and certainly politically expedient) that the language of the Act contains no trace of awareness that the 'kingdom of Ireland' pertains to any other king than the English one. The language of the Act has no memory, no resonance, of any other royal dynasty.

But the kings of Ireland and their noble lineages were not so utterly eradicated from memory or the popular imagination as the Act of Union would seem to imply, as is clear from Meredith's 'Excursion in a Celtic Mind' above. Eighteenth-century plays and novels, for example, often included the stock Celtic character who would enter, reeling off a long royal pedigree. In Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), the fiery Irishman introduces himself:

'My name (said he) is Master Macloughlin – but it should be Leighlin Oneale, for I am come from Ter-Owen the Great; and so I am as good a gentleman as any in Ireland.'⁴

The MacLochlainns and O'Neills were the ruling families of Ulster and Tyrone, and the heads of these ruling families had once been entitled 'kings of Ireland'. Smollett's Welshman in *Humphry Clinker*, Squire Matthew Bramble, is a great-nephew of "Matthew ap Madoc ap Meredith, esquire, of Llanwysthir in Montgomeryshire . . . a gentleman of great worth and property descended in a straight line by the female side from Llewellyn prince of Wales."⁵ (In chapter Three I discuss another Meredith's claim to a royal Celtic pedigree when I focus upon George Meredith's ambivalence over his own Welsh 'princely' family tree.) These ancient Celtic pedigrees had been a popular joke of long tradi-

tion, certainly since Shakespeare's characterization of the Welsh captain Fluellen in *Henry V*.⁶ But this alternative royalty was not always treated as a merely humorous matter; the 'Celtic Revival' in literature, which began about 1750, saw a great interest in the bardic poetry, and the history and customs of the Celtic peoples.⁷ This revival, which continued well into the nineteenth century, rediscovered and sometimes invented a national history and literature for the Celt. Numerous poems about Celtic kings, princely heroes and heroines were inspired by or translated from Celtic examples, the former being the case in, for example, Thomas Gray's Pindaric ode, 'The Bard'. In Gray's poem, the bard, traditionally the figure who transmitted through memory and song the oral history and genealogy of the family and tribe, curses the English conquerors of his people, and prophesies the reinstatement of a Celtic royal lineage (in this poem, the House of Tudor!). Gray's poem in turn inspired other poets and painters within a Romantic tradition such as William Blake who produced engravings to illustrate Gray's poem, and John Martin with his famous painting of *The Bard* which depicts a powerful figure of the last of a dying 'race' lamenting under a lowering, suitably sublime sky.

The Celtic Revival of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was both influenced by and influential upon the Romantic movement. However, literature and painting which took ancient Celtic themes as subjects did not go out of fashion with the ebbing of interest in the sublime. More than fifty years after the Act of Union, the Irish painter Daniel Maclise was asked by the Fine Arts Commissioners for the Painted Chamber at Westminster to paint one of the set subjects for the chamber, *The Marriage of Eva and Strongbow* (c. 1854, see fig. 1). This large canvas belongs less to Romantic tradition than to a Victorian school of painting which strove for historical realism and authenticity. In theme, however, it has a kinship with eighteenth-century poems and paintings of the bard; Maclise's bard, though defeated, sympathetically represents a noble culture of compelling aesthetic power. The historical subject concerns the marriage of the daughter of the King of Leinster to Richard de Clare, the Norman conqueror of Ireland in the twelfth century. Such a subject, destined for a chamber in the English centre of power and rule, could not fail to underline Ireland's position as conquered nation, subsumed into 'One Kingdom'. The marriage union symbolizes the Union of England and Ireland, but as Richard Ormond and John Turpin write, Maclise's painting depicts a marriage brought about by force rather than inclination:



Figure 1 Daniel Maclise, *The Marriage of Eva and Stronghow* (c. 1854).

Maclise chose to depict the marriage as a sacrificial event, illustrating . . . the subjugation of a free people and the destruction of an ancient culture. In the centre, Strongbow, garlanded like a Roman general, tramples a cross underfoot, after his successful siege of Waterford . . . Dermot MacMurrough, the treacherous King of Leinster, gives away his daughter Aoife or Eva, as part of his pact with Strongbow. She is attended by maidens in white carrying palms, like a row of virgin martyrs.⁸

Apart from the central figure of Eva, depicted as a sacrificial bride, the viewer's eye is drawn to the other figures upon which the light of the composition is concentrated: Eva's virgin train and, moving diagonally from these figures towards the left foreground, the group comprising the mother weeping over her dead child (as John Turpin notes, her stance is reminiscent of depictions of the massacre of the Innocents)⁹, the woman mourning over the body of her lover, and the aged, defeated bard leaning on his harp. The portrayal of grief and love in the woman's embrace of her dead Celtic warrior is placed directly below the figures of Eva and Strongbow. Eva's unwilling stance before the conqueror (her father's hand pushing her toward him) is contrasted strikingly with the union of love in the figures of the native Irish below. Maclise's painting is weighted heavily towards sympathy for the conquered Celts.

Those who saw Maclise's painting exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1854 would have remembered the Irish MP Daniel O'Connell's agitations for repeal of the Act of Union which were concentrated in 1830 and again in 1841-6. O'Connell's work for repeal gave way later in the century to agitation for Home Rule, led by Parnell. The Union of England and Ireland was the source of political and popular debate throughout the nineteenth century. *The Marriage of Eva and Strongbow* presents a forced union, and this painting was proposed for the halls of the English Parliament. Within those halls and without there were many Irishmen who wished for a divorce from that centre of political power.

A marital union may be seen as both a point of origin for a family, and a continuation of the family line. The union of England and Ireland, symbolized by the marriage of Anglo-Norman and Celtic in Maclise's painting, gave rise to a metaphorical language of family relations to describe the political relations between Ireland and England. Although the language of the Act of Union itself is legalistic and unmetaphorical, the terms in which the debates over Union were couched were tellingly familial. For instance, Edward Cooke, arguing for Union in 1798, depicts Ireland as a difficult son:

If any person has a son uneducated, unimproved, and injured by bad habits, and bad company; in order to remedy these imperfections, would it not be his first endeavour to establish him in the best societies, and introduce him into the most virtuous, the most polished, and the most learned company?¹⁰

The 'best societies' of virtue, polish and learning exist in England, and Ireland will be improved by England's example, according to Cooke. At another point in the same pamphlet, Ireland is no longer a profligate son, but a friendly sister; there will be an amicable 'Union of Sister Kingdoms'. Pemberton Rudd, however, writing in 1799 against Union, sees the 'sisterly' relationship in a different light:

what Irishman would snatch the staff from the hand of Hibernia, scarce yet able to stand erect, or walk alone; to place it in the grasp of a sister, older, richer, greater and stronger?¹¹

Writing in support of Union in 1798, William Johnson also sees Ireland and England as 'sister kingdoms'¹², but Ireland is clearly the younger sister in need of instruction. In his article he describes the Irish people as having, 'all the ardour and inconsiderateness of youth'. According to Johnson, 'moral causes' which are the effects of 'a long continuance of chastisement and affliction', have 'absolutely prolonged Ireland's infancy as a nation.'¹³

These familial metaphors, used to describe the Union of England and Ireland at the time of the Act, continued to be employed throughout the nineteenth century, as Repeal and Home Rule, among other Irish issues, were debated in Parliament and in the press. Popular metaphorical language in favour of Union presented England and Ireland as becoming one family. But it becomes clear from the few examples given here from eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature and painting that tensions existed within this 'family' of the United Kingdom/s. An exchange between Meredith's Irish hero and an Englishwoman in *Celt and Saxon* is evidence that these 'familial' tensions were equally prevalent a century later:

She spoke reproachfully: 'Have you no pride in the title of Englishman?'

'I'm an Irishman.'

'We are one nation.'

'And it's one family where the dog is pulled by the collar.'¹⁴

The Union was supposedly intended to promote 'fraternal' relations between Ireland and England, but Ireland was uncertain whether its family position was that of brother, prodigal son, unwilling bride, infant, or the family dog.

After the Union, and throughout the nineteenth century, the language that is most evocative of the tensions existing between Ireland and England is that which describes family relations. Terms of blood relationship could be employed metaphorically, as already indicated, or literally and metaphorically together, as in the opening of Trollope's 1860 Irish novel, *Castle Richmond*, to the English public, Trollope admits, 'Irish cousins are regarded as being decidedly dangerous'.¹⁵ There had been a tradition in eighteenth-century plays and novels of Irish cousins considered dangerous because of their propensity for stealing English heiresses away from needy Englishmen. The Irish fortune-hunter was a stock theatrical and common comic literary type in the eighteenth century; one example is Smollett's 'Master MacLoughlin' quoted above. The playwright Richard Sheridan and playwright/actor Charles Macklin, both expatriate Irishmen, attempted to exculpate the character of the Irish fortune-hunter; 'Sir Lucius O'Trigger' of Sheridan's *The Rivals*, for example, is a comically deluded and quick-tempered fortune-hunter who is nevertheless brave and honest. Maria Edgeworth in her novel, *The Absentee* (1812) takes the defence of the amorous Irishman abroad a step further; the Irish hero of her novel refuses to propose to an English heiress because he is in love with his Irish cousin. Not only is Edgeworth's hero decidedly not a fortune-hunter, but he allies himself with an Irishwoman whom he believes to be penniless. In an Anglo-Irish novel which is very much concerned with the effects of the political union of England and Ireland, it is significant that the marriage foretold at the novel's finale does not represent an amicable political union through the metaphor of a marital union of Irish and English lovers, as the conclusion of Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* published six years earlier had done. Irish absentees return to their estates and Irish hero and heroine are to be married at the close of Edgeworth's novel. Not only does the hero marry his Irish countrywoman, he marries a woman who comes from a branch of his own family tree as well. Such Irish insularity, as opposed to English insularity, reveals that Edgeworth's attitude to the Union of England and Ireland was complex; it should not be as readily assumed as sometimes it has been that she was without reservation pro-Union.

Even those Irish who came to England from within the English Pale of Ireland were eyed warily for their uncouth, 'semi-barbarous' manners which seemed to threaten subversion.¹⁶ Although these alien, foreign Irish cousins may have been related to English families from as far back as Norman settlements in Ireland or from the days of Elizabeth's or

Cromwell's plantations, their claims of kinship with their English cousins were often looked upon unfavourably. By the eighteenth century they had been assimilated, or had even 'gone native' and had regarded themselves as decidedly Irish for centuries. English cousins had trouble acknowledging, despite political Union of 'sister nations', that such foreigners from a 'primitive' land, could belong on their family tree.

The 'traditional pedigree' of the Irish families which Playfair ridicules in *British Family Antiquity* was based originally upon oral tradition, and of this he comments:

Nothing, in fact, is so absurd and ridiculous as attaching credit to oral tradition, or the songs of bards . . . We all know, from our own experience, that, so far from oral accounts being to be depended upon, a recital varies every time it is repeated; and until a narrative is committed to writing, nothing is so subject to change: it is the very nature of tradition to alter relation as it proceeds . . . We must therefore give very little credit to the accounts respecting Ireland previous to the era of authentic history, which began with the invasion of Henry II.¹⁷

In this chapter I shall consider the way in which the Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth, in her novel *The Absentee*, writes about Irish genealogy based upon oral tradition, as opposed to the English genealogy of the kind to which Playfair, writing at the same time as Edgeworth, gives so much credence.

The tension between oral and written evidence pervades *The Absentee*. When the novel's young Irish hero, Lord Colambre, returns to Ireland after his years of education in England, he seeks to gain a true picture of that country which many English, as well as his Irish absentee mother, have so much maligned. Colambre finds that his parents, who are living as absentees in London and neglecting their Irish estates, are now in debt; his mother, Lady Clonbrony, spares no expense in her parties, equipage and dress, because these are essential weapons in her campaign to be accepted in London society. Colambre returns to Ireland to discover for himself whether his mother's distaste for her native country is founded in reason. Much of the novel is concerned with his attempts to discover a true picture of Ireland; will the evidence he relies upon be oral, written, or based upon the deeds, the actions of the Irish he is among?

In a Dublin coffee house, shortly after arriving in the city, Colambre makes the acquaintance of Sir James Brooke, an enlightened Englishman who advises Colambre that the best way to gain a fair view of the

state of Ireland is first to read the various written accounts of the country which differ in historical context and perspective. Colambre's journey through Ireland, and his journey to a mature assessment of his native country is the dominant theme of the novel; this journey begins with an encouragement to rely upon written evidence. The main plot of the novel, which follows Colambre's travels through Ireland, opens therefore with a list of books that he should read; indeed *The Absentee* is littered with literary references. This chapter maps the tension between oral and written genealogies onto the treatment of oral and written evidence more generally in the novel. This is not to remove the sphere of interest from genealogy; in this moment of Irish and English relations – twelve years after Union, and at the beginning of a century which would feel numerous strains pulling this Union apart – it was important to the dominant, centralizing power of England to invalidate the separate, independent claims to power, government or royalty issuing from its margins. This invalidation was effected partly through a dismissal of oral culture and tradition in general. When Playfair states that, 'until a narrative is committed to writing, nothing is so subject to change', he discounts all oral culture, not only the Irish genealogies which have their foundation in oral tradition. Two years after Playfair's enormous work on the British nobility, Maria Edgeworth makes a connection similar to his; she also places oral genealogies within a wider oral tradition. I would argue, however, that there is submerged in *The Absentee* a conclusion quite different from Playfair's. Edgeworth's narrative is certainly 'committed to writing', but within her novel a pressure is brought to bear upon written evidence which tends to question its reliability, and the assumption of its inevitable validity. This questioning of the written is involved with the question of the validity of Irish oral culture, and of the claims to existence of an inherently Irish nobility (or even royalty), separate from the noble or royal families of England.

One subplot of the novel that is crucial to a questioning of the reliability of written evidence, and which provides a defence of Irish genealogy centres around the attempt to prove legitimate the birth of Grace Nugent, Colambre's orphaned cousin who lives with his parents in London. Colambre has fallen in love with Grace, but must find the marriage certificate which proves her legitimacy before he will consider marrying her. He requires written proof, but in the novel it is the tradition of oral praise represented by the figure of the Celtic bard which is endowed with a power and authority to defend Grace's name; this authority precedes and in a sense, supersedes, the authority of the

written word. By naming Grace after a famous and popular song of the harpist Turlough O'Carolan (1670–1738), Edgeworth seems to suggest that in an oral tradition, Grace's name would have been amply defended: the verses, originally sung in Gaelic, praise the beauty and virtue of 'Grace Nugent'.¹⁸

In this novel, Grace, an unwilling absentee from Ireland, is defended indirectly by the 'songs of the bards' which Playfair, among other English genealogists and historians, either ignored or dismissed. The oral traditions of the bards are given an authority by Edgeworth which is reminiscent of the power bestowed upon the images of defeated bards in paintings such as Daniel Maclise's and John Martin's, discussed earlier. The bards bestow upon Grace an oral genealogy, which far from being unreliable and 'subject to change' proves in fact more reliable than one which is 'committed to writing'. In the novel, oral accounts, given both by bards and by the Irish antiquarian, Count O'Halloran, have always recognized the truth of Grace's character and birth, and Edgeworth gives her sanction to oral traditions and genealogies by proving them to be true of Grace Nugent.

Influenced greatly by her father, a free-thinking landlord of a large estate in County Longford, Maria Edgeworth's education was a combination of Enlightenment rationality and empiricism with vaguely radical enthusiasms. One might expect her to adhere to Playfair's dismissal of the 'absurdity' of Irish oral tradition and the 'mythologies' it produced. Indeed, in her *Essay on Irish Bulls*, which she wrote with her father in 1802, she does mildly ridicule Irish antiquarians and genealogists who trace the Irish people back to the early Scythians and Milesians. But her response to oral tradition is more complicated than a mere dismissal; through the contrast between Irish oral and English written genealogies she is also commenting on topics which range from the political relations of Ireland and England and their differing national sensibilities, to more general issues such as repetition and scandal, varying ideas of truth, and of the spirit versus the letter of the law.

Pieces of paper, whether leases, marriage certificates or written genealogies, are materials which may fall subject to misconstruction, loss, or erasure. It is dangerous to rely upon them absolutely, and Maria Edgeworth, living in a troubled and unsettled Ireland, knew this at first hand. Although she wrote in the *Essay on Irish Bulls* that she was 'more interested in the present race of [Ireland's] inhabitants, than in the historian of St. Patrick', and the speculations of 'rusty antiquaries',¹⁹ she was herself a good genealogist who took great care of the book of her

family history written by her grandfather, which the family referred to as 'The Black Book of Edgeworthstown'. This book traces the history of the family from the close of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth century. Two of Maria's twentieth-century descendants, Harriet Jessie Butler and Harold Edgeworth Butler, edited the 'Black Book' and other family memoirs for publication in 1927. They attest that Maria, who had written a continuation to the family history, 'regarded [the 'Black Book'] with something like veneration' and that she 'records that it had proved of great value in establishing the title of the family to various portions of the estate.'²⁰ A reliance upon written evidence for land title proves hazardous in the case of the poorer Irish, however, as *The Absentee* demonstrates: the Widow O'Neil trusts that a pencilled memorandum from Colambre's father, entitling her to a renewal of the lease on her cottage, will be upheld. But this memorandum has been erased by the villainous land-agent Raffarty in the lord's absence, and this negates the truth of the written document and puts the poor widow on the street. Like the Widow O'Neil's lease, Maria's coveted 'Black Book' both told stories of, and became itself involved in situations where written evidence was at risk of destruction or misconstruction. It includes an account of how Maria and her family were forced to flee from their estate to the protection of Longford gaol during the rebellion of 1798. In haste to escape before the rebels arrived they buried the 'Black Book' in a box in the garden; presumably the Edgeworths felt it needed safe-keeping because it was in part the written record of their English ancestor's appropriation of Irish land to which the rebels would claim they had no right. On the six mile journey to Longford Richard Edgeworth, who was the captain of a small corps of local men, realized that he had left,

on his table a paper containing a list of his corps, and that, if this should come into the hands of the rebels, it might be of dangerous consequence to his men. He turned his horse instantly and galloped back to the house. His absence seemed immeasurably long, but he returned safely, after having destroyed the dangerous paper.²¹

Returning home after the rebellion, the precious 'Black Book' was unearthed from the garden, already showing signs of disintegration from the damp. Thus the family history was in danger of being stolen, and then of destruction through natural causes, and Richard Edgeworth effectively risked his life for another paper which, had it fallen into the wrong hands, could have been positively life-endangering to his men.

The English genealogist Playfair may have written that oral accounts cannot be depended upon, and ‘until a narrative is committed to writing, nothing is so subject to change’, but Maria’s own experiences at this time in Ireland were evidence of the possible unreliability of written documents. The damp-marks on the pages of the ‘Black Book’, her father’s return at a crisis point to destroy a dangerous paper; whether or not these facts consciously inform her writing in *The Absentee*, they serve to underline the possibility of misconstruction or abuse and the potential mutability of the written document. Although Maria Edgeworth has often been compared with her contemporary Jane Austen, the immediacy of Maria’s experiences of rebellion, danger and instability in Ireland are an important reminder that the environments from which these writers came were very different. Austen’s family papers were probably lodged quietly in the family lawyer’s safe or in her father’s library; it is difficult to imagine her wielding a spade in the back garden at Steventon. Perhaps the often unsettled political environment from which Edgeworth wrote influenced the representation of the written document in *The Absentee* as frequently subject to unstable and arbitrary conditions.

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY: MARIA EDGEWORTH
AND LADY MORGAN

Nevertheless, the instability of the text remains a subtext in *The Absentee* in the same way that political instability and rebellion are never as overtly present as they are, for example, in her contemporary Walter Scott’s Scottish novels. The extent to which Edgeworth represses the instability of the text as synecdochic of national instability is evident upon comparison with Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan’s novel *The Wild Irish Girl*, published six years before *The Absentee*. Mortimer, the hero of Morgan’s novel is, like Colambre, the son of an absentee lord travelling incognito in Ireland. The guest of an impoverished Irish Catholic prince in a Romantic crumbling castle on the edge of the sea, Mortimer studies Irish language, antiquities and history. But, unlike Edgeworth, Morgan directly addresses the instability of the written document in Ireland through her hero’s question to his Irish hosts. It is a question which Edgeworth’s novel represses: ‘“how is it that so few monuments of your ancient learning and genius remain? Where are your manuscripts, your records, your annals, stamped with the seal of antiquity to be found?”’.

A priest, loyal to the prince and his daughter, replies to Mortimer;

'Manuscripts, annals, and records, are not the treasures of a colonized or a conquered country . . . it is always the policy of the conqueror, (or the invader) to destroy those mementi of ancient national splendour which keep alive the spirit of the conquered or the invaded.'²²

As Maria Edgeworth knew from her own experience in 1798 it is the restless and violent state of a country in rebellion against conqueror or invader which leads to situations in which the written documentation of the nation's past is destroyed. Ironically, in Edgeworth's case it was the 'Black Book' – a genealogical, historical record of her conquering or invading ancestors – which was at risk. Her own Ascendancy family experienced the difficulty of holding on to the records of the past, which would have documented their property rights to the land which their ancestors had conquered and invaded, while Lady Morgan stresses that this was precisely the problem facing the native Irish.

Lady Morgan's hero learns to appreciate and admire Irish antiquities, poetry and culture mainly through the instruction of Glorvina, a Celtic princess, the beautiful daughter of the Prince of Inismore. While in Edgeworth's novel Colambre learns to understand some of the oral traditions and the dialect of the 'lower Irish', Mortimer takes his study of oral culture much further, learning the Irish language itself – not just its translation into a dialect of English – and debating at great length (and a great many pages) such antiquarian/nationalist issues as whether or not the Irish or the Scots can lay claim to the Gaelic hero Fingal (the epic poem *Fingal* which renewed this debate had been translated/invented by James Macpherson in 1762 and was an important contribution to the Celtic Revival). Lady Morgan 'proves' through oral evidence that Fingal was an Irish epic hero, thus refuting Macpherson's written translations of an ancient Scottish epic: the old nurse at the castle of Inismore can, according to Mortimer, run through 'the whole genealogy of Macpherson's hero which is frequently given as a theme to exercise the memory of the peasant children' (vol. 2, pp. 78–9). In a country where invasion has led to the loss of 'manuscripts, annals and records' of its history and genealogies, the oral genealogy is highly valued, and Macpherson's apparent literary invasion and appropriation for the Scots of an Irish mythological genealogy is therefore particularly unwelcome. Genealogy, memory and oral tradition come together also in the Prince of Inismore's reply to a conciliatory offer of land from Mortimer's father (Lord M—): Lord M—'s ancestor had killed the Prince's ancestor and confiscated his lands during the Cromwellian wars, and ancestral memory is passed along the generations as the Celtic prince responds to the

absentee English lord, ‘“The son of the son of the son’s son of Bryan Prince of Inismore, can receive no favour from the descendant of his ancestor’s murderer”’ (vol. 1, p. 122).

As in Walter Scott’s treatment of the Jacobite cause, Morgan sympathises with the old Gaelic order as represented by the Prince of Inismore, but only to the extent and with the knowledge that his royal line will die out or be rendered innocuous when romantically appropriated (as was the Stuart line) by the English. (Morgan outlines this type of appropriation of Celtic culture and royalty by English royalty: ‘Nor is it now unknown to them [the lower orders of the Irish] that in the veins of his present Majesty, and his ancestors from James I, flows the Royal Blood of the *three* kingdoms united’ (vol. 3, p. 68).) As Terry Eagleton has written of Mortimer’s marriage to Glorvina:

What takes place is a symbolic trade-off: Mortimer . . . ‘restores’ Glorvina’s property by marrying her, thus conveniently retaining it for himself . . . The Anglo-Irish are buying into mythology in order to buy off a disaffected tenantry; and the strategy of Morgan’s novels is to regulate this inequitable exchange between cash and culture, power and prestige.²³

Terry Eagleton’s assessment of Lady Morgan’s description of an Ascendancy ‘tactic’ is persuasive. If the Anglo-Irish are buying/marrying into native Irish mythology, then Lady Morgan regulates the ‘exchange’ by making sure that the problematic areas of Irish culture are fictionally rendered innocuous. Catholicism, for example, will simply fade away. As Glorvina, a Catholic, assures her future husband to his ‘surprise and delight’, ‘all are not devoted to its [the Church’s] errors, or influenced by its superstitions’. She predicts of Irish Catholics that, ‘the limited throb with which their hearts now beat towards each other, under the influence of a kindred fate, will then be animated to the nobler pulsation of universal philanthropy’ and, ‘once incorporated into the great mass of general society, their feelings will become as diffusive as their interests’ (vol. 3, pp. 58–9). Defused through its diffusion into a Rousseauistic ‘universal philanthropy’, Catholicism is just one of the many aspects of Irish culture which are regulated in Morgan’s fiction. Catholic ‘superstitions’ belong to the Irish lower orders, as does the Irish brogue, apparently . . . Glorvina, who is ‘born for Empire!’ according to Mortimer, does not speak with an Irish accent even though she has never left the shores of her country. As he writes to his English correspondent:

You ask me if I am not disgusted with her brogue? If she had one, I doubt not but I should; but the accent to which we English apply that term, is here generally confined to the lower orders of society. (vol. 2, p. 148)

So Mortimer negotiates the difficulty of an unpalatable Irish brogue for his English readership, and one begins to wonder about speech in a novel which stresses the importance of oral tradition in a culture which has lost its written records; what does the oral sound like? The content of Glorvina's speech is a mixture of quotations from French and Italian poetry, Shakespeare and Goethe, and the *sound* of this language of sensibility is apparently free of any trace of that 'disgusting' Irish brogue. While Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels are important to the history of the genre partly because of her careful and attentive rendering of the speech of the 'lower Irish', this brogue is almost unheard in Morgan's novel. Although the priest and Glorvina speak of ancient Irish genealogy and mythology – inheritances from an oral tradition – they do so in a language of Enlightenment rationality or Romantic sensibility, leaving the 'lower Irish' silent. This silence points to a lacuna in Morgan's telling of Irish history and culture: the Irish literally have no voice, no sound: the princess of Inismore sounds like any English or European 'woman of feeling' whose accents have been diffused, like her Catholicism, into a tone of 'universal philanthropy'. Mortimer may take lessons in the Irish language but he had better not speak it with an Irish brogue, and we hardly hear the voices of the lower Irish at all. Paradoxically, it becomes very difficult to hear the oral in a novel which stresses that the few available cultural records were transmitted through oral tradition. The linguistic tree and the family tree, for all the antiquarian etymologies and genealogies discussed in the novel, are under threat from a suppression of the voice. And it is at this juncture of language and genealogy that Lady Morgan's 'strategy', as Eagleton puts it, of exchanging between 'cash and culture' begins to unravel, for if the oral culture is impossible to hear, and if the written culture has been destroyed, then Mortimer may well ask, where is the proof that Ireland ever had a culture or has one now?: "But granting that your island was the *Athens* of a certain age, how is the barbarity of the present day to be reconciled with the civilization of the enlightened past?" (vol. 3, p. 20).

One solution to the lack of written evidence of an 'enlightened past' in Ireland would be to write it oneself, either in a Macpherson-like invention, or through the genre of historical fiction. Lady Morgan wanted to fill in the gaps in the Irish cultural record by writing historical novels, but for this Ascendancy writer the past was indeed a foreign country – a dangerous territory upon which English ancestors were fighting on Irish ground, fighting those native Irish who would have been the heroes and heroines of her novels, if she had been able to write them. She had

originally set her novel *O'Donnel* in the past but brought the action forward to the present day; Terry Eagleton comments that, 'She had hoped to use history, so she remarks in the Preface to that work [*O'Donnel*], to "extenuate the errors" of the present; instead, she found herself uncovering a grisly sectarian violence which would merely scupper her project of conciliation.'²⁴ Underneath the urbanity of Mortimer's letters to his English correspondent in *The Wild Irish Girl*, there is hidden a desperate need on the part of the author to explain Ireland to the world, to fill in all the gaps in the 'manuscripts, annals and records', and to compensate for the silencing of oral tradition. Morgan's anxiety to get her views across, to be heard, is clear from the very structure of *The Wild Irish Girl*: it is a one-sided epistolary novel; Mortimer writes from Ireland but we never have access to the replies of his English correspondent. If Morgan cannot resort to historical fiction and if the written and oral records of Ireland's past are not available to her, how can she convince her readership that Ireland is not simply 'barbarous' as Mortimer believes? Continuing the long conversation with the priest and the Prince of Inismore on Ireland's culture or lack of it, Mortimer says, 'I have always been taught to look upon the *inferior* Irish as beings forming an humbler link than humanity on the chain of nature' (vol. 3, p. 21). At this point Morgan's need to prove Ireland a civilised nation causes her to overcompensate furiously for those lacunae in the written records: during this conversation Morgan's explanatory footnotes literally invade her own novel for several pages; two or three lines of text are encroached upon by almost full pages of footnotes. These footnotes are evidence of Morgan's frustration; she cannot write of the past through historical fiction so she writes over the lacunae in Ireland's cultural and historical records, patching them over with her own accounts of antiquities and genealogy.

While Lady Morgan tried to compensate for, fill or cover over the gaps in Ireland's historical record, Maria Edgeworth professes to be unconcerned with the researches of 'rusty antiquaries', as she terms them in her *Essay on Irish Bulls*. Like their contemporary Sir Walter Scott, both Edgeworth and Lady Morgan write their own versions of a 'national' novel; unlike him, neither write an historical novel because the past is still too much present in Ireland. Scott heard tales of the Jacobite rising as a child; by the time he writes of them those events have taken on an almost mythical status, distanced by time and change. But killing and rebellion are within living memory for both Edgeworth and Lady Morgan. Morgan attempts to distance sectarian violence in *The*

Wild Irish Girl by giving murder a long genealogy ('The son of the son of the son's son of Bryan Prince of Inismore, can receive no favour from the descendant of his ancestor's murderer' (vol. 1, p. 122)) and Edgeworth's distancing strategy is simply to ignore that violent past and its legacy in the present. To her mind, Ireland is entering upon a newly enlightened age; rationality and progress are therefore her concern. Both writers, however, remember the Fenian rising of 1798. The lacunae in the annals and genealogical records, the silences and evasions about Ireland's past and who is privileged to speak of it, reveal more about the legacy of the past in Ireland's present than any historical novel they may attempt to write; they indicate also the problems that these two Ascendancy novelists faced in their differing strategies of conciliation.

Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan, 'sister' Anglo-Irish novelists, may at first glance resemble another pair of novelistic sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Maria, resembling Elinor in her Enlightenment sense and moderation, looks to a progressive present and future for Ireland, while the more flamboyant Lady Morgan regards Ireland's present and past with the sensibility and Romantic susceptibility of a Marianne Dashwood; Ireland for her is a place full of sublime ruins, poetry and ancient harp music. But, as in Austen's novel, there exists less of an opposition between the sense and sensibility of the two sisters and more of an exchange or dialogue. For instance, W. J. McCormack notes that in Edgeworth's later novel *Ormond* (1817), her fiction posits a 'westward flight' to the imaginary Black Islands on the Irish coast where the Gaelic King Corny represents the ancient Irish order of tribe and oral tradition; like Morgan's Prince of Inismore, Corny is a difficult but sympathetic type of a dying order. But even in *The Absentee*, which is certainly didactic and schematic, there are elements which disrupt the 'deftly symmetrical diagrams of an Edgeworth', as Terry Eagleton calls them. The disruptions of her composed and orderly 'diagrams' for a new Ireland lie, I would argue, in the subtle championing of the oral over the written in *The Absentee*. Lady Morgan wrote that 'manuscripts, annals and records, are not the treasures of a colonized or a conquered country' (vol. 3, p. 16). Maria Edgeworth would have found such a statement too divisive in a novel aimed at conciliation; but her own experience during her family's removal to Longford at the time of the Fenian rising of 1798 is refracted throughout her novel in the various tensions between oral and written evidence. The written text is liable to destruction or misprision and may

be unreliable; oral tradition in her novel does not lead to the 'absurd' stories and 'mythical' genealogies of which William Playfair wrote, but to the truth. Does this subtextual defence of oral over written evidence in *The Absentee* in any way champion native Irish oral culture, its history and genealogies? To further explore this question I now turn to a closer examination of *The Absentee*.

'THE ABSENTEE'

After a brief stay in Dublin, Lord Colambre sets out upon his tour of Ireland. For a time he travels in the company of the English Lady Dashfort and her daughter, Lady Isabel, both of whom consider Ireland a primitive land, and wish to convince Colambre that it is so. The Dashforts plot to marry Colambre to Isabel, intending that the couple should settle back in England. Part of Lady Dashfort's scheme includes sullyng the name of Colambre's Irish cousin, Grace Nugent; Lady Dashfort has seen that Colambre is secretly in love with Grace, and she uses her own Dashfort genealogy to create a scandal around Grace's name:

One day, Lady Dashfort, who, in fact, was not proud of her family, though she pretended to be so, was herself prevailed on, though with much difficulty, by Lady Killpatrick, to do the very thing she wanted to do, to show her genealogy, which had been beautifully blazoned, and which was to be produced in evidence in the lawsuit that brought her to Ireland. Lord Colambre stood politely looking on and listening, while her ladyship explained the splendid intermarriages of her family, pointing to each medallion that was filled gloriously with noble, and even with royal names, till at last she stopped short, and covering one medallion with her finger, she said, 'Pass over that, dear lady Killpatrick. You are not to see that, lord Colambre – that's a little blot in our scutcheon. You know, Isabel, we never talk of that prudent match of great uncle John's: what could he expect by marrying into *that* family, where, you know, all the men were not *sans peur*, and none of the women *sans reproche*.'²⁵

Lady Dashfort obscures the crest of the St. Omar family, to which Grace's mother belonged. She tells Colambre that Grace's mother took the name of Reynolds, but hints that she had no legal right to do so. (We later learn that Grace's father, a young Captain Reynolds, died in battle before publicly acknowledging his marriage. The marriage certificate lost, Grace's mother was never acknowledged by the Reynolds family.) Lady Dashfort's 'great uncle John' believed in the innocence of Grace's mother, married her and adopted Grace who grew up believing that he was her father, and knowing nothing of the disgrace surrounding her mother, or of her own suspected illegitimacy. After Lady Dashfort's

insinuations, Colambre feels it his duty to repress his love for Grace, because he 'had the greatest dread of marrying any woman whose mother had conducted herself ill' (vol. 9, p. 161).

The 'blot on the scutcheon' to which Lady Dashfort refers occurs not simply because of the alleged reproach upon the St. Omar women, but also because the St. Omars are an old Catholic family. The name St. Omar would have been easily recognizable as Catholic to Edgeworth's readership; St. Omer was a well-known Jesuit college in Northern France, to which many of the Irish Catholic nobility and upper classes went to study since, as Catholics, they were barred from receiving an education in Ireland. To Lady Dashfort, who has no tolerance for Irish traditions, an Irish Catholic family, even if noble, would indeed be a taint or blot on her pedigree. She considers the Irish to be, in a sense, all 'beyond the Pale':

'To say I was rude to them [the Irish], would be to say, that I did not think it worth my while to be otherwise. Barbarians! are not we the civilized English, come to teach them manners and fashions? Whoever does not conform, and swear allegiance too, we shall keep out of the English pale.' (vol. 9, pp. 143-44)

'Pale' which signifies a fence or enclosure, came to mean 'a district or territory within determined bounds, or subject to a particular jurisdiction'.²⁶ In Ireland, the 'English Pale' (known simply as 'the Pale') was an area of English jurisdiction which varied in extent at different times in the country's history of conquest and reconquest. The area that the term most commonly refers to is around Dublin. In a novel which partly concerns the union of the whole of Ireland with England, it is telling (and almost prophetic) that Lady Dashfort refers to a relatively small and delimited area as properly controlled by English rule. She says that those who do not conform will be kept outside the Pale, a plan which implies a certain failure of England's political unity with, and jurisdiction over, Ireland, if most Irish are 'beyond the Pale'.

EDGEWORTH AND THE POETRY OF THE SPOKEN WORD

W. J. McCormack and Kim Walker have written of the novel that, 'at its own level *The Absentee* might be described as an anti-romantic novel [in the tone, plot, morality, etc.] written in favour of romance and romanticism'.²⁷ The mixture of the anti-romantic, didactic strain with the romantic is present in the mixture of written and oral in the novel; the oral tradition represents an old Irish culture with its tradition of oral

poetry, literature and genealogy, while the written signifies England with its emphasis on the validity of the written document. Oral traditions are often associated with 'primitive', backward cultures, and Ireland was no exception. One might expect Edgeworth, as a student of Enlightenment rationality and progress, to ignore Ireland's oral traditions, or to see them as a vestige of the country's backward state. But her attention to the spoken word, to the Irish dialect, demonstrates her appreciation of the 'natural poetry' of the language. The Romantic movement's fascination with the oral tradition, whether in ancient British poetry, or in the 'language really used by men', as Wordsworth phrased it,²⁸ clearly influences the following passage from Edgeworth's *Essay on Irish Bulls*,

The Irish nation, from the highest to the lowest, in daily conversation about the ordinary affairs of life, employ a superfluity of wit, metaphor and ingenuity, which would be astonishing and unintelligible to a majority of the respectable body of English yeomen. Even the cutters of turf and drawers of whisky are orators; even the *cottiers* and *gossoons* [Gaelic *garsun*, from French, *garçon*] speak in trope and figure. Ask an Irish gossoon to go *early* in the morning on an errand, and to express his intention of complying with your wishes; instead of saying as an Englishman in his civil humour might – 'Yes, master, I'll be up by times,' he answers poetically, 'I'll be off at the flight of night.'²⁹

With her friend Sir Walter Scott, Maria shared an interest in the collections of ancient oral or orally-derived poetry, ballads, and medieval poetry made popular by Scott's own *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–3), the poetry of MacPherson's 'Ossian', Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), and Chatterton's forgeries, to name but a few. Edgeworth also shared with Scott a belief in the importance of dialect in her 'regional' or Irish novels. From the age of fourteen, she acted as her father's assistant on the family estate, helping with work that she would take on by herself in later life. She claimed that many of her stories were gleaned from visits to her tenants; reaching home she would write down what she had heard. (One is reminded of a similar aural spying at the other end of the nineteenth century: Synge listening through the floorboards to cottagers' talk in the West of Ireland). The written is dependent upon the oral which has preceded it in these examples.

Recording and disseminating the words of the Irish natives necessitates a fixing of the oral into the written. Maria Edgeworth's purpose in the Irish novels is partly to preserve the oral, and to justify it to English readers as worthy of record, containing its own beauty, poetry, validity.