

1971

Maria Edgeworth

Mary Whiteley Degner
University of Northern Iowa

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Recommended Citation

Degner, Mary Whiteley, "Maria Edgeworth" (1971). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1953.
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Abstract

At the height of her career Maria Edgeworth's reading audience spanned a wide area. Even though her name is not widely known today, she is an outstanding figure in the field of children's literature. This descriptive research paper includes her biography, emphasizing the influence of her father and that of Thomas Day. The paper concentrates chiefly on her contribution to children's literature although her novels are used. to show the range of her work.

MARIA EDGEWORTH

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Department of Library Science
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

Accepted
7-6-71
C. L. Greve

by
Mary Whiteley Degner

June 1971

At the height of her career Maria Edgeworth's reading audience spanned a wide area. Even though her name is not widely known today, she is an outstanding figure in the field of children's literature.

This descriptive research paper includes her biography, emphasizing the influence of her father and that of Thomas Day. The paper concentrates chiefly on her contribution to children's literature although her novels are used to show the range of her work.

We cannot get a clear picture of Maria Edgeworth unless we understand something of her father. Biographers agree that Maria's life and writings were influenced by her father. The only conflict of opinion comes in the degree of that influence.

Richard Lovell Edgeworth was born in Bath in 1744. Because his mother had been a cripple and could not physically discipline him, she used reason and persuasion to control him. This may partially account for his later philosophy. He came from a family of "men of talent, marrying early and often."¹ His first marriage took place when Richard was eighteen and still a student at college. Judging from comments made by her parents, the home into which Maria was born on January 1, 1767, at Black Bourton, Oxfordshire, England, was not an especially happy one. Her mother lamented that "she had rushed into an imprudent marriage,"² and her father arrived at the conclusion "that the lamenting of a female we live with does not render life delightful."³ Her father

¹Rowland Grey, "Heavy Fathers," The Fortnightly Review, 92 (July, 1909), p. 82.

²Mark D. Hawthorne, Doubt and Dogma in Maria Edgeworth (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1967), p. 7.

³Grey, loc. cit.

was seldom home, for he was busy with his older son's education. Maria began attending boarding schools following her mother's death. Here she entertained her schoolmates with tales that had vivid imaginative characters.

In 1782 she went to Edgeworthstown in Ireland to spend the rest of her life at the family estate. This was a happy and busy home with her father, three stepmothers at various times, brother, half-brothers, sisters, and half-sisters. In a letter Edgeworth wrote of his family, "I do not think one tear per month is shed in this house, nor the voice of reproof heard, nor the hand of restraint felt."⁴ This is somewhat amazing considering there were eighteen living children. Four other children had died in infancy.

It is to Maria's credit that she survived childhood. Her father felt that Maria was small for her age. By using an ingenious device of ropes and pulleys, he hanged her every morning in a vain attempt to make her taller. It was about this time also that she was given "Bishop Berkeley's tar-water" by Thomas Day to cure the weakness of her eyes.⁵

Their home contained many gadgets and inventions of Mr. Edgeworth's which included a signaling device, sailing carriage, clocks, and a phaeton or carriage. He almost invented the caterpillar track while trying to construct a wooden horse that would go over stone

⁴Florence V. Barry, "Miss Edgeworth's Tales for Children," A Century of Children's Books (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1922), p. 176.

⁵Grey, op. cit., p. 83.

walls.⁶ Another source credits Edgeworth with coming near to being the inventor of the telephone and the velocipede.⁷

In the field of education Richard Edgeworth was an amateur scientist. He turned the nursery into a laboratory using his children as guinea pigs. To understand Mr. Edgeworth's method of teaching, we must look at Rousseau's philosophy. Putting it simply for the purposes of this paper, Rousseau urged a return to nature. He wrote a book entitled *Émile* in which he applied this to education. He felt that discipline would take care of itself and that life must be simple. "Youth and white paper take all impressions," was the basis of Edgeworth's theory. He believed that a child could and would become what the educationist chose to make it.⁸

With the help of his friend Thomas Day, Edgeworth set about rearing his oldest child Richard as a second *Émile*. Although Richard was generous and good natured, he began to show a dislike for control. He would not teach himself, and he would not learn from others.⁹ As young Richard grew more uncontrollable, Edgeworth began to lose faith in Rousseau's system although Day continued to be a follower. The boy eventually left England and settled in America. Edgeworth modified his educational theories for the rest of the children.¹⁰

⁶P. H. Newby, Maria Edgeworth (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1950), p. 12.

⁷Grey, loc. cit.

⁸Louisa Frances Field, "To Point a Moral and Adorn a Tale," The Child and His Book (London: Wells, Gardner, Darton and Company, 1892), p. 270.

⁹Barry, loc. cit.

¹⁰Hawthorne, op. cit., p. 6.

Her father advocated reason and judgement and condemned imagination and emotion. Hawthorne felt since Maria got none of this rational education until she was fifteen, that she became a mixture, prudent yet passionate and imaginative.¹¹

Besides helping to manage the estate, Maria helped in the education of the Edgeworth children, especially that of her younger half-brother Henry. Maria recorded their educational experiments. These experiment records formed the basis of Practical Education published in 1798. This was a two-volume work in which Maria's name appeared on the title page along with her father's. This was a pioneer work in the field of education. In fact, Hawthorne believes that it was the "most important work on general education that appeared in eighteenth century England."¹² In the same book Hawthorne brings out the point that it was "the first work that attempted to reduce education to an experimental science."¹³ It was meant to be a practical procedure that parents could follow. Modern educators still follow many of the principles set forth there.

Up to this time there was very little written especially for children. Barry mentions Marmontel and Berquin as predecessors who helped establish the pattern used in children's writings.¹⁴ However it is tales written by Mrs. Barbauld and Day's Sanford and Merton which helped to start Maria writing didactic stories for children. In the years

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 2.

¹³Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴Barry, op. cit., p. 191.

from 1791-1827 she wrote enough children's fiction to give her a lasting place in literature. In some ways her apprenticeship as a children's writer was a family affair. She did her writing in a common sitting room with the family about her. She had a ready-made audience.¹⁵

It was the stories told to her brothers and sisters which became the stories in The Parent's Assistant, Maria's first book for children. These "wee, wee stories"¹⁶ as she called them were first written on a slate, then copied after passing the children's criticism. After making a few changes and additions, Mr. Edgeworth sent them to a publisher with the title The Parent's Friend. The first volume was published in 1796 under the title The Parent's Assistant, a title which Maria disliked. The first volume contained ten stories. A second edition appeared the same year with additional stories. In 1800 a third edition of six volumes with more than twenty stories was published.¹⁷

She then wrote Early Lessons (1800; first edition dated 1801), a primer in four volumes written for her youngest readers who had advanced beyond The Parent's Assistant. Moral Tales for Young People, a collection of stories in four volumes, appeared in 1801. It was slanted toward the teenagers of the upper classes. The Parent's Assistant, Moral Tales, and Popular Tales, written in 1804 to appeal to less elegant society, were all written as narrative illustrations of Practical Education.¹⁸ Besides

¹⁵Hawthorne, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁶Newby, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁷Brian Doyle (ed.), "Maria Edgeworth," The Who's Who of Children's Literature (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 85.

¹⁸Newby, op. cit., pp. 31-35.

these stories and tales, she also wrote sequels to two of her earlier stories: Rosamond - A Sequel to Early Lessons (1821), Frank, A Sequel to Frank in Early Lessons (1822), and Harry and Lucy Continued, Being the Last Part of Early Lessons (1825).¹⁹

Another form of writing for children used by Miss Edgeworth is the play. Little Plays for Children, which was added later as Volume VII of The Parent's Assistant, is a book containing three plays. Even the preface of this book was done in dialogue. Most biographers and critics make few comments about these plays. Barry does say that it is odd that the plays should be the least dramatic of Maria's work. Barry feels this may have been because they were stories dramatized to fit the family, and Maria, intent on the lesson, trusted the actors to create their parts.²⁰

The two main concepts which govern these writings are usefulness and morality not based on religion. Both of these concepts may have come from Rousseau. It is possible, however, that religion is not mentioned because the Edgeworths were Protestants in Catholic Ireland.²¹

It is true that these stories probably would not be a sell-out with the television-oriented children of today. Keeping in mind that the child of that period had grown up with humorless, moralistic and didactic literature, let us examine some of the reasons Miss Edgeworth's writings were popular with the younger set of the early 1800's.

¹⁹Hawthorne, op. cit., p. 23.

²⁰Barry, op. cit., p. 180.

²¹Sylvia W. Patterson, "Maria Edgeworth," Rousseau's Émile and Early Children's Literature (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1971), p. 81.

First of all, they were the first children's stories to have real plots, suspense, surprises, and even excitement.²² She had lived with a large family of children and knew what attracted children. While she followed the practice of early writers and had the moral presented by a character or the author, she was interested in entertaining as well as instructing. Besides, these stories may have satisfied the part of the imagination that craved the possible and actual.²³

Secondly, the clear-cut characters appealed to children. Many liked the idea of the good child contrasted to the bad child. Her characters are distinct enough that the good child of one story could not be confused with the good child of another story. Newby feels that in her stories we meet the first living and breathing children in English literature since Shakespeare.²⁴ Some critics do feel, and perhaps rightly so, that the young people in her books are prigs about matters of knowledge and conscience. Her characters can be happy and gay, however, when it is in keeping with the story. Barry points out that only Miss Edgeworth could make us believe in a boy who would choose a practical overcoat instead of a bright green-and-white uniform and would untie the string of a package rather than cut or break the knots.²⁵

Thirdly, she has a story to tell and tells it well. "When the boy brings back the lamb to the little girl, there is nothing for it

²²Doyle, loc. cit.

²³Newby, op. cit., p. 37.

²⁴Newby, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁵Barry, op. cit., pp. 179-182.

but to put down the book and cry." This comment was made by Sir Walter Scott about Maria's story of "Simple Susan."²⁶

Lastly, a good deal of information is woven into her stories. To Maria everything in nature became an object lesson. If the writings had contained some stories of elves and fairies, they would probably have been more appealing to some. However, the importance she placed on the practical or useful things kept her from including them. In the Introduction to The Parent's Assistant, Mr. Edgeworth explains, "Why should the mind be filled with fantastic visions instead of useful knowledge?"²⁷ It does make one wonder how children's literature would have been changed if Maria had not been so concerned with instructing.

Hawthorne, in his book Doubt and Dogma in Maria Edgeworth, brings out an interesting point although one evidently not shared by other biographers and critics. He feels that in Moral Tales for Young People Maria began to develop her skill of writing on two levels. The surface level is didactic and advocates reason. This level presents her father's dogma. Hawthorne feels the second level is a skillful probing and questioning of the philosophy of reason. He feels that Maria believed in both reason and passion. On the surface she wrote what was expected of her, but on the second level she led her readers toward the Romantic literature.²⁸

Her children's literature was a step toward her more mature novels, the form of writing for which Maria Edgeworth is probably best

²⁶Field, op. cit., p. 271.

²⁷Maria Edgeworth, Stories for Children; or The Parent's Assistant (London: George Bell & Sons, 1890), p. xvi.

²⁸Hawthorne, op. cit., p. 24.

known. She began her novels in 1800 with Castle Rackrent. Following this were Belinda (1801), The Modern Griselda (1804), Leonora (1806), Tales of Fashionable Life (First series 1809; Second series in 1812), Patronage (1814), Harrington published together with Ormond (1817), and Helen (1834).

Of course, many of the points mentioned in reference to her children's writing carry into her novels. Like her children's stories, her novels are didactic. She is sometimes criticized for this, but the tone of all literature of the period was moralistic. Maria took over the novel of manners and gave it new life and a fresh realistic approach.²⁹ Howells agrees without question that she did preach, but that she also pictured life faithfully. Because of the picture we get, her novels have a historical value.³⁰

As in her writings for children, characterization is a strong point in her novels. A book critic in Nation feels the characterization of Lady Delacour in Belinda "takes ranks with the best portraits of a woman in our fiction."³¹ Sir Walter Scott recognized her talent with characterization when he said that he "could wish for nothing greater than Miss Edgeworth's wonderful power of vivifying all her persons, and making them live as beings in your mind."³²

²⁹Newby, op. cit., p. 10.

³⁰William Dean Howells, "Heroines of Nineteenth-Century Fiction," Harper's Bazar, 33 (May 26, 1900), p. 196.

³¹"Maria Edgeworth," The Nation, 79 (October 13, 1904), p. 300.

³²Howells, loc. cit.

The novels more than her children's stories contain local color, much of it showing the peasants of rural Ireland. Besides writing of Ireland, she also wrote of fashionable London. Besides these novels and children's writings, Miss Edgeworth also wrote Letters to Literary Ladies. This was her first work and a defense of education for women. Essay on English Bulls, written with her father and published in 1802, was a collection of anecdotes for a study of Irish humor. After her father's death in 1817, she published his Memoirs in 1820.

It was already pointed out that Thomas Day and Richard Edgeworth influenced Maria's life and her writing. However, a discussion of Maria Edgeworth would hardly be complete without a closer look at the unique and colorful personalities of these men.

Day, as has been noted, was a strong advocate of Rousseau. While his friend Edgeworth modified Rousseau's theories, Day followed them with devotion through every phase of his whole life. He was a wealthy man, but his appearance did nothing to make him popular with the ladies. Along with a proposal of marriage went a set of specifications as to the kind of life they would lead. A proposal went to Honora Sneyd, but she chose to marry Edgeworth when Maria's mother died. Day proposed to Elizabeth, Honora's sister, but she also chose to marry Edgeworth when Honora died. Day also tried rearing two girls in the best Rousseau tradition. These were to make perfect wives for him, but this experiment did not succeed, and he married them off to other men. Day did marry, and his life was happy. He and his wife visited the Edgeworths in Ireland where they found Richard and Honora beginning a collection of stories. Day decided to write a story of his own to add to their collection. He was concerned with the lack of proper books for young children while they were learning to read. The result of his

writing was Sandford and Merton which as might be expected followed the principles set forth in Emile. This story served as a model book for the young and influenced future writing. It influenced Maria as did the personal help that Day gave Edgeworth in rearing her. His only other writing for children was History of Little Jack. The Edgeworth's disagreed with his ideas in the story.³³

We have already seen Richard Edgeworth's efforts in the fields of education, inventions, and matrimony. There seems to be no question that Edgeworth dominated his family. Grey in his article "Heavy Feathers" refers to Edgeworth as a "sort of Pope in his own adoring circle."³⁴

Critics can only speculate on what Maria's writings might have been if her father had not tried to regulate them according to his own ideas. Her father frequently not only cut and corrected, but inserted material of his own. While Maria was away he wrote her, "Your critic, partner, father, friend has finished your Leonora."³⁵ He felt his reflections and moral comments were the best of her tales.³⁶

However, Field in writing about her father says, "His writings are comically pompous and bombastic." Another critic quoted by Field says "that her best work was always what he had least hand in."³⁷ Byron felt that there ought to have been a "society for the Suppression of Mr. Edgeworth."³⁸

³³Cornelia Meigs and others, "Rousseau and His Companions," A Critical History of Children's Literature (Rev. ed.; London: The MacMillan Company, 1969), pp. 90-92.

³⁴Grey, "Heavy Fathers," p. 83.

³⁵Meigs, op. cit., p. 93.

³⁶Grey, op. cit., p. 83.

³⁷Field, The Child and His Book, p. 270.

³⁸Barry, A Century of Children's Books, p. 183.

On the other hand Newby defends Edgeworth by saying that some writers do not give him the credit he deserves. There does not seem to be any question that he was an exceptional husband and father, and that all his wives and children were devoted to him. Newby also feels that Edgeworth did not really insert sermons into Maria's writings. His criticisms were sprightly and not didactic. It was just the fact that she loved him and adopted all his ideas.³⁹ Maria did not seem to mind the changes her father made in her writings. She accepted him as her advisor as he accepted her as his confidential friend.

Just as there are those who say Maria was stifled by her father's censorship, there are others who say Maria would never have written at all without encouragement from her father. There does not seem to be any doubt that he had traveled extensively and supplied Maria with background for her imagination.⁴⁰

We have seen Maria's background and have seen the people who probably influenced her most. But what of Maria herself? What sort of person was she? She was evidently not beautiful, but charming in her simplicity, judging from Byron's comment, "A nice little unassuming 'Jeanie Deans' looking body, as we Scotch say, and if not handsome, certainly not ill-looking. Her conversation was as quiet as herself."⁴¹

She was a person overshadowed by her father. Even in conversation he interrupted her whenever she attempted to show her real powers.

³⁹Newby, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 51-52.

⁴¹F. V. Barry (ed.), Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company [1931], p. 18.

She was a gentle, happy person who was wholly unselfish. She spent a good deal of her time and money on her pretty stepsisters.⁴²

She was a person with a quick Irish wit and a keen sense of humor. Field calls it a "hankering after nonsense."⁴³ Though most of her writings are moralistic and didactic, her sense of humor comes through some of her writing. An example of this is the dialogue preface to Little Plays for Young People. Grey in "Heavy Fathers" points out that it can be seen in some of her adult stories such as "The Absentee" and Castle Rackrent.⁴⁴

She was a person who had influential connections and associated with the most famous men and women of this period. A serious proposal of marriage came to Maria from M. Edelcrantz, a Swedish count, who ranked high in the service of the King of Sweden. Evidence in the family letters indicates that Maria loved him, but she would not leave her home to live in Sweden.⁴⁵

She was a person who stayed young at heart. Even at eighty a perfume of wit ran through her conversation. She remained lively, active, and cheerful during her last years. Her death came on May 22, 1849.⁴⁶

⁴²Grey, op. cit., pp. 83-84.

⁴³Field, op. cit., p. 270.

⁴⁴Grey, op. cit., p. 84.

⁴⁵Barry, Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters, pp. 118-122.

⁴⁶Nation, p. 300.

Maria slipped "from her lofty pinnacle of fame" that she had enjoyed during her writing career. A collected works was published shortly after her death in 1849. There was not enough demand for another edition until 1893, and even then the publisher admitted that it did not do well. Her style of writing had lost its popularity. Grey feels that she was "unjustly defrauded of the position she really occupies," but she is "sure of literary immortality."⁴⁷

Part of this immortality may come from the influence she had on the literature to come. Although there were probably many writers whose work was touched by Maria Edgeworth, there is no question that she influenced Sir Walter Scott and perhaps through him reached Alexander Dumas. Scott in the preface to Waverley declares, "I felt that something might be attempted for my own country of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland."⁴⁸ In the postscript to Waverley, Scott wrote that his aim had been "in some distant degree to emulate the admirable Irish portraits drawn by Miss Edgeworth."⁴⁹

The Russian writer Tourguenief (Turgenev) conceived the notion of making like studies of Russian conditions after reading Maria's stories of Ireland. Tourguenief's book eventually came to have an effect on the emancipation of the Russian serfs.⁵⁰ Tourguenief is supposed to

⁴⁷Rowland Grey, "Society According to Maria Edgeworth," The Fortnightly Review, 88 (August, 1907), p. 296.

⁴⁸Grey, op. cit., p. 297.

⁴⁹Newby, Maria Edgeworth, p. 39.

⁵⁰Howells, "Heroines of Nineteenth-Century Fiction," p. 196.

have said that he was "an unconscious disciple of Miss Edgeworth in setting out on his literary career."⁵¹

She also influenced a number of women writers including Alicia Catherine Mant who wrote Tales for Ellen. This was similar to Miss Edgeworth's story of "The Purple Jar." In her writing Mary Robson followed Miss Edgeworth's moral pattern, but not her humor. She dedicated some of her work to Miss Edgeworth.⁵² Not only was her direct influence felt in Europe, but also in America. Catharine Sedgewick also dedicated her first book to Miss Edgeworth. Just as Maria had been interested in the local color of the Irish peasants and in the lively doings of London, Miss Sedgewick was interested in the manners of her own New England.⁵³

Another New Englander who was reported as being a great admirer of Maria Edgeworth and to have read her stories with great attention, was Jacob Abbot. He no longer used the contrast of the good child and the bad, and his stories are much more cheerful in tone.⁵⁴

In conclusion, let us re-examine Maria Edgeworth's contribution to children's literature. She was, first of all, a pioneer in the field of education for her work on Practical Education. Secondly, she was the first to emphasize local color. While we see this more in the novels,

⁵¹Newby, op. cit., p. 40.

⁵²F. J. Darton, "The Moral Tale: Didactic," Children's Books in England (Cambridge: University Press, 1958), p. 171.

⁵³Robert E. Spiller and other, "In New England," Literary History of the United States (Third ed. rev.; New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), p. 290.

⁵⁴Meigs, A Critical History of Children's Literature, p. 96.

she is concerned with the settings in the children's stories. Thirdly, she has good characterization with Rosamond probably the most outstanding. Fourthly, she influenced other writers of children's stories. It was a step in the right direction. Lastly, while her stories are to teach a moral, she was the one to point the way to stories with a plot, written to entertain. She was, according to most critics, the best storyteller of her period, for as Miss Meigs says, "In spite of Richard Edgeworth, in spite of Thomas Day, in spite even of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Maria was too great a writer to suffer herself to be led completely astray."⁵⁵

⁵⁵Meigs, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

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