

Foreword

In March 1895, less than a year after the publication of *The Real Charlotte* by Somerville and Ross – the names used by co-authors Edith Somerville (1858-1949) and Violet Martin (1862-1915) – Henry James visited Ireland, where he stayed at Dublin Castle with the Viceroy, and at the Royal Hospital with the commander of Her Majesty's Forces. James wrote a number of letters making clear his distaste for what he found in Dublin. The 'little viceregal "court"', was, he wrote, 'a gorgeous bore' and 'a weariness alike to flesh and spirit'. He felt keenly, as he wrote to his brother, 'the sense of lavish extravagance of the castle, with the beggary and squalor of Ireland at the very gates'. James squirmed at this 'grandeur in a void'. He found Dublin Castle 'tarnished and ghost-haunted', and thought the Viceroy was leading 'a strange and monstrous life of demoralization and frivolity'. He was appalled by 'the tragic shabbiness of this sinister country'.

This sinister country had been, for more than a century, producing oddly sinister fiction. From the work of Jonathan Swift, with its mischievous mixture of allegory and waking nightmare, to the deeply unreliable narrator of Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, to the menacing dramas and picaresque romances of William Carleton, to the Gothic horrors on display in the work of Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, Oscar Wilde and, within a couple of years, Bram Stoker, in *Dracula*, Irish fiction had come to mirror what James found in Ireland. There was something extravagant and alarming in its style and content, and oddly open-ended and tricky in its structure.

Just as Ireland did not have a tradition of slow reform or social stability, of possessions and manners alike being handed down in a style both brisk and natural from one generation to the next, so Irish fiction did not have a tradition of stable narrative, of characters fulfilling their destiny against a backdrop of peaceful social mores and easy gatherings. Ireland did not have a tradition of life watched over with irony, grace and insight by a novelist who understood what readers would need on the path to a happy or a satisfying conclusion.

In these years, a number of Irish novelists sought to rectify this lack, most notably George Moore in his first novel, *A Drama in*

Muslin, published in 1886 (and set in County Galway, as is *The Real Charlotte*), which dramatized the marriage market within the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. Moore's novel, however, used the backdrop not of gentility, civility or continuity, but of poverty, violence and conflict between the landowners and the peasant class. He attempted to write a novel of romance as though he were Jane Austen, allowing his female characters hope and disappointment, and making sense and sensibility, beauty and grace, as dominant as he could. But the backdrop nonetheless was Ireland, and there was nothing Moore could do to prevent Ireland, in all its shabbiness, its squalor, its 'tarnished and ghost-haunted' politics, from entering into the spirit of the novel and dictating the fate of his characters.

The Real Charlotte by Somerville and Ross stands out in the Irish 19th-century for the intelligence with which it allowed character, in all its drama, its shading, its ambiguity, its variety, its force and power, to dominate, for the way it reduced the national question to mere deep background. Its authors were too interested in the state of their characters, the twists and turns of life within the small graded world of the landed gentry in a single neighbourhood, to allow the state of the larger nation to interfere with the story they wished to tell.

Their novel is filled with tricks from earlier fiction – it uses letters opened and objects falling from pockets by mistake as vehicles for plot movement, for example. But it also has echoes of characters and dramas that had appeared in novels by figures such as Jane Austen, George Eliot and Henry James. The genius of Somerville and Ross lay in how they adapted these characters and dramas to local conditions without allowing local conditions to take over or warp the narrative, or without trying to tame or distort the gnarled social and political world in which the novel's story was to unfold.

Francie Fitzpatrick, who is to some extent the heroine of the novel, has the same thoughtless allure, the same sexual energy, the same vivacious, unselfconscious charm and petulance, the same dynamic untempered life force, as Gwendolyn Harleth in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Also, she shares a lack of interest in the rules and mores of a tight community with Henry James's Daisy Miller. Francie has mood swings rather than thoughts, flashes of desire rather than intelligence, flights of fancy rather than strategies. And, like James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, she is pursued by three men, one who is interested in money and another, like Ralph

Touchett in James's novel, who is sad and sickly (and also, like Lord Warburton, the local landlord). Like Isabel, Francie turns down the richest of them because she is too interested in other things to be bothered with mere rank. Like Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, she goes for a man in uniform. And, like many women in the 19th-century novel, such as Lady Laura Standish in Trollope's *Phineas Finn*, Gwendolyn in *Daniel Deronda* and Isabel in *Portrait of a Lady*, there is something too unsettled, too oddly generous and open in her nature, for her to be happy in marriage.

Opposite her in every way is her older, plainer cousin, Charlotte Mullen, who has inherited money from her aunt. The genius of the novel lives in the very title, because it would take a great deal of work to fathom all the depths of the real Charlotte. She is, as Conor Cruise O'Brien has suggested, 'evil'; she is, as Anthony Cronin has written, 'graceless, greedy, unscrupulous, secretive and ambitious'. She is also fascinating. Her ways of being are rendered in interesting and telling detail; her speech patterns, her alertness, her making sure that nothing is lost on her, her reading habits, her sheer intelligence, her vile temper, all offer immense life to the book.

Like Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove*, Charlotte is capable of scheming, of attempting to improve her lot by allowing for, or planning, the destruction of others. But Somerville and Ross, like James, had no interest in inventing a character who is solely or purely evil. They were too talented as novelists to be any use as moralists. What distinguishes Charlotte Mullen is the quality of her pain, which is dramatized in the book with all the greater force because it is constantly suggested and implied, rather than repeatedly stated. It underpins her actions, it becomes the arena in which these actions take place, rather than being the sole and simple motive for what she does.

Thus the novel becomes a drama of ambiguity, with an acute awareness of what money and lack of money can do to motive and character and action. There is something glittering and glinting and exciting about Charlotte's need for money and power, which is made all the more emphatic by the mildness, peculiarity and gracious ease that the Dysarts, who are the landlords, exude. Charlotte is exact and exacting, relentless in her self-interest and her cruelty, but she also has an inner life that, the novel suggests, is rich and dark. What has created her personality is loss of love, lack of love; this loss and lack have made her spirit brittle, made her

scheming more effective. The wonder of her presence in the novel is the suggestion that she could have easily been otherwise. She is not a stable character; she is presented as a set of needs, then as a set of actions. The reader follows her actions while feeling her needs. It is the gap between the two that makes her one of the greatest creations in 19th-century fiction.

Just as Somerville and Ross were ready to put the literary tradition of the neighbouring island to their own uses, they were also fully alert to conditions all around them as they wrote. The shadow of Thady Quirke, the unreliable narrator of *Castle Rackrent*, whose family collect the rents for the landlord, is fully apparent in the pages of *The Real Charlotte*. Roddy Lambert, the man whom Charlotte loves and seeks to destroy, is, as her father was, land agent for the Dysarts; he also collects the rent. Charlotte herself lends money at exorbitant rates of interest to the poor of the locality. Miss Julia Duffy, once from a family higher in status than the Mullens, lives in isolated squalor and dies in the workhouse.

All of these people are Protestants and mix as a beleaguered minority in an isolated place, protected by the British army from their Catholic neighbours. Halfway through the book, almost casually, we are told that ‘one of Charlotte’s most genuine feelings was a detestation of Roman Catholics’.

Yet all around in the body of the novel is Catholic Ireland. Emigration, famine, the Land League, the Irish language, the belief in the supernatural, are rendered in *The Real Charlotte* as normal, everyday, so fundamental to life that they need not be explained, as Edgeworth felt a need to explain Irish habits and customs in *Castle Rackrent*. But there are times in the novel when the authors come up with a real and sharp explanatory insight into conditions in John Bull’s Other Island that would must have been hard to leave out. When Charlotte lends money to the very poor, for example, the novel tells us: ‘She and her clients were firmly equipped with the absolutely accurate business memory of the Irish peasant, a memory that in few cases survives education, but, where it exists, may be relied upon more than all the generations of ledgers and account books.’

The insights into conditions in Ireland in the last decade of the 19th-century, however, pale in the novel besides the insights into character and motive and scene: Lambert’s knowledge, for example, that despite Charlotte’s hardness he can still, with a few flattering

words, make a fool of her; or Francie trying to copy the way Pamela Dysart arranged flowers; or Lambert, alone in his house, finding that he misses the wife whom he despised; or Charlotte wondering if she would give her old dressing gown to her maid or use it as a bed for one of her beloved cats.

The decline of a big house and all who sail in it has been a theme in Irish fiction for almost two centuries. Many novelists enjoyed burning such houses in novels or stories such as Carleton's *Wildgoose Lodge*, Molly Keane's *Two Days in Aragon* and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*. (Or perhaps they saw it as a necessary, if distasteful, task.) Others, such as Edgeworth, Jennifer Johnston, J.G. Farrell, Aidan Higgins and John Banville, seemed merely to enjoy the drama of the slow, sad decline, or the gradual comic decay of Irish houses that once stood alone and proud in the landscape.

What is interesting about *The Real Charlotte* is how little the characters, or even the novel itself, seem aware of what is to come in Ireland. Within 20 years of the novel's appearance, a new world would arrive into being that would make the Dysarts and their rent-collecting middlemen into shadows, and would also indeed, destroy or diminish the Protestant class to which Charlotte Mullen and Francie Fitzpatrick belong. The novel seems not too bothered about this; there is no sense of twilight, except in the general ineffectualness and niceness of the fastidious Christopher Dysart, who comes to inherit the estate. The amount of felt life and ambiguous passion that is handed to Charlotte and Francie makes the idea of Irish history seem pale.

Nonetheless, it is hard not to look at the name of the British soldier to whom Francie gives her heart throughout the book, even after her marriage. He is called Hawkins. His name will appear again in an Irish story written less than 35 years later. Hawkins will be 'the little Englishman' in Frank O'Connor's *Guests of the Nation*. Once more, he is a British soldier in Ireland. But this will not be a story of love and longing; it will be a story of captivity and violence, as Hawkins and his comrade are captured and held by the IRA. He will not talk of love, as he did in *The Real Charlotte*, but will rant against religion. He will stagger to his knees and lie out flat at the end of the story, having been shot dead by those whom he had come to see as his friends.

The Real Charlotte has no sense in its aura that this will happen soon; it has none of the deep anxiety that seeps through Russian

fiction in the same years. Instead, it has a strange jaunty confidence that resides in the sheer brilliance of the detail, the refusal to make easy judgements on the characters. At the core of the book is the idea of love as something that will fail most people and lead to disappointment or, worse, to a poisoning of the spirit. And all around, as the humans make their fierce marks on the pages of the narrative, the low clouds gather and then lift, the land yields rents or changes hands, there are animals to be bought or sold or domesticated. Although the novel is set in a precise place, it could also take place anywhere. Ireland, for once, has moved into the background.

Colm Tóibín
July 2010