

Maria Edgeworth's child heroes, Irish education and 'the spirit of revenge'

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In April 1799, a few months after the United Irishmen uprising in which her father was nearly lynched by an ultra-Protestant crowd as a suspected revolutionary and secret agent for the French invaders, Maria Edgeworth wrote to her aunt about her newest tale for children, 'Forgive and Forget'. It would be one of a series featuring resourceful, persevering and inventive working-class child heroes:

Some time ago my dear Aunt Charlotte amongst some hints to the Chairman of the Committee of Education, you sent one which I have pursued – you said that the early lessons for the poor should speak with detestation of the spirit of revenge – I have just finished a little story called Forgive & Forget – upon this idea –¹

The 'Chairman of the Committee of Education' is Edgeworth's humorous term for Richard Lovell Edgeworth, her father. Together they were hard at work in the first half of 1799 on a plan for mass education, which they hoped would be taken up by the Irish government. Earlier in the letter to her aunt Charlotte, Edgeworth mentions her father's speech on the Education Bill in the Irish House of Commons, and expresses anger (a rare emotion in her correspondence) that no assistance would be given to enact the Bill.² The plan for mass education was one that Maria Edgeworth felt strongly about; but it made no progress at this time, perhaps partly because of a suspicion at the heart of the Protestant Ascendancy régime that an educated people would be an ever more seditious people, a conviction that Edgeworth expressly counters in an unpublished fragment, 'On the Education of the Poor', written at

¹ Letter from Maria Edgeworth to Charlotte Sneyd, 2 April 1799: National Library of Ireland Edgeworth Papers, MS 10,166/7: 224.

² Richard Lovell Edgeworth made a speech on 22 February 1799 about a plan to introduce mass education, and followed this with a Bill 'for the improvement of the education of the lower orders of people in this kingdom', which he introduced in the Irish House of Commons at the beginning of April 1799 (as reported in the *Dublin Evening Post*, 2 April 1799). The Bill was dropped, probably because of its proposal that state-aided schools for Catholic children should have schoolmasters appointed by the local Catholic clergyman. As E. F. Burton comments, it represented 'a bold attempt to obtain for the Catholics of Ireland an education system of which they could approve and the establishment of schools to which they could, in conscience, send their children'. E. F. Burton, *The Contribution to Education of Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817)*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1979, p. 262. See Burton, pp. 256-265, for a lucid summary of R. L. Edgeworth's proposals and their controversial aspects.

roughly the same time as, or shortly before, the letter.³ In this manuscript essay, she asserts that

those who would govern must instruct the people – I am well aware that there are persons who avow themselves totally averse to these ideas “Education for the Poor! They will exclaim “the more you educate them ... the worse they become – ... They will be idle, and good for nothing [and ten to one they will be seditious & riotous]”.⁴

Maria Edgeworth’s response in the essay to those who worried that mass education might lead to mass insurrection was that education and the access it allowed to sources of information and to evidence was essential for a more unified and stable social order. Banning newspapers, for example, would have meant that the labouring poor

would not have heard of the crimes of Robespierre, Marat &c and they would be now perhaps persuaded that these were the best of men – Facts speak for themselves & provided the whole truth be known, a just conclusion will be formed by the [whole] mass of a nation.⁵

The Edgeworths’ desire to make education accessible to all classes in Ireland was closely connected with their conviction that it was a means by which violent uprising and vengeance for unjust policies could be avoided, if combined with reformed government and the redress of justified grievances, such as the penal laws. This emphasis on creating ‘tranquillity’ among the wider population of Ireland is certainly a theme of Maria Edgeworth’s manuscript essay on education, as it is of Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s parliamentary speech in April 1799. But Maria Edgeworth also argued in her essay for the right of the Irish poor to feel that they

³ The essay is undated, but was clearly written in early 1799, at about the same time as Maria Edgeworth was writing to her aunt Charlotte about the project of creating a mass education system in Ireland and the substance of ‘early lessons for the poor’. She had been reflecting on this subject since reading Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1782, at the age of fourteen. Edgeworth’s essay has strong echoes of Smith’s arguments in Book V, Chapter I of *Wealth of Nations*: see Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Gen. editors R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, Textual editor W. B. Todd, 2 vols (Oxford, 1976), II, pp. 781-88, especially Smith’s discussion of the relationship between the provision of education and the avoidance of ‘dreadful disorders’ (788). Richard Lovell Edgeworth also echoes Smith’s language in his speech of 2 April 1799, referring to the need for ‘the minds of the people’ to be ‘medicined to repose’ by ‘proper instruction’ (Burton, p. 263).

⁴ Bodleian Edgeworth Papers, MS Eng misc e 1461, fols 10-11. The essay runs to around 100 pages of manuscript. The text in square brackets here is struck through with a line, but I have retained it, since it shows that Edgeworth is focused on questions of government and social order, and explicitly links them with education and the growth of a literate public invested in debating and circulating ideas.

⁵ Bodleian MS Eng misc e 1461, fol. 58. Again, ‘whole’ is struck out in the manuscript.

might raise themselves through education, and suggested that the ‘pleasurable mental feelings’ associated with the circulation of ideas and the realization of ambition should be recognized and accommodated within an educational system, as well as respected as crucial for the ‘real felicity of the people’.⁶ Accordingly, she recommends ‘[h]istories of men of perseverance & ingenuity who born in a low rank of life have raised themselves by their talents & exertions [as] peculiarly fit for the early perusal of young people in the lower classes of society’, and comments that ‘a man who can read & write may make his way to the first offices of the state’.⁷ Her ‘Notes for Edgeworth on Education of the Poor’ in another undated notebook, presumably summarizing what her father might discuss as part of his April 1799 speech in the Irish House of Commons, clearly relate to these arguments in the manuscript essay: ‘How to prevent them [the poor] from loving Revolutions ... Equality – Rights of man to be explained – ...– Any man may rise to a superior rank ... Lives of real people – good reading for poor’.⁸ What Maria Edgeworth is thinking through in her essay on education and in these notes about alternatives to mass violent insurgency is echoed in the stories that this article analyses, which represent fictional explorations of the individual and social transformations possible through a diffusion of knowledge.

Gary Kelly has suggested that Edgeworthian education ‘defined membership in the political nation according to a hierarchy of educationally produced merit rather than of inherited rank or wealth’. In place of the rigidly divided class society that permitted no real development of individual talents, the education that Maria Edgeworth was theorizing, Kelly argues, was focused on ‘the creation of a new investment mentality, or ideology, of accumulating moral and intellectual capital, based on interchangeability of merit and money, among all social classes and peoples’.⁹ I would modify Kelly’s terms here to stress circulation rather than ‘accumulation’. Maria Edgeworth sought to create opportunities for self-improvement and aspiration in Ireland through the Edgeworth family plan for mass education, a programme of social reform that would not entail violent ruptures in the existing social order. Her approach to the disenfranchisement, anger and suffering that had caused the events of 1798 was based on the lessons that she felt had been offered by the spectacle of revolutionary violence in France: ‘that gradual improvements are better than insurrection, and

⁶ Bodleian MS Eng misc e 1461, fols 73-4, 67.

⁷ Bodleian MS Eng misc e 1461, fols 64, 52.

⁸ Bodleian Edgeworth Papers, MS Eng misc c 897, fol. 1.

⁹ Gary Kelly, ‘Class, Gender, Nation, and Empire: Money and Merit in the Writing of the Edgeworths’, *Wordsworth Circle*, 25:2 (Spring 1994), pp. 89-93: 91, 90.

revolution'. But these improvements were to be produced by 'the [whole] mass of a nation', and were best served, she asserted, by the 'unrestrained circulation of books': 'Arguments should be answered by arguments, & writers should combat with writers'.¹⁰ Edgeworth therefore looked for solutions to violent conflict in clarity, open communication, free expression and the encouragement of aspiration, rather than wholesale and abrupt structural social change. It is precisely this culture of book-reading, thinking and invention that Edgeworth sought to propagate through her writing for and about children, which we should consider an extension of this deeply felt interest in the 'early lessons' that might be communicated through reading if a mass education system along the lines proposed by her father could be established. Yet what is most significant about the fictions in which Edgeworth addresses the responses of wronged children to unmerited hardships and injustices is her representation of *mutual* education and dialogue as the foundation for greater understanding between different social ranks.

Perhaps, then, we should be cautious about assuming that the 'spirit of revenge' that Maria Edgeworth was invoking in her letter of April 1799 was one that she was ascribing solely to the governed, rather than those in government. Eve Walsh Stoddard claims that Edgeworth's writing about the relationship between landlords and tenants is always 'partly motivated by fear that those exploited will seek revenge'.¹¹ Aileen Douglas comments that Edgeworth's fiction frequently focuses uneasily, and ambivalently, on lower-class characters' 'efforts to gain literacy, and the uses to which they subsequently put the skill'; that her writing 'seeks to reconcile the existence of a literate working class with the value [Edgeworth] attached to the "connexion and dependence, which there ought to be between the different ranks"'.¹² Douglas's account of Edgeworth's educational politics suggests that the potential for violent conflict, and the distrust that this threat engenders, troubles Edgeworth's efforts to imagine social mobility, and the security of her progressive vision of the Irish nation's future. This unease is undeniably there, and it is registered in Edgeworth's manuscript essay in her reflections on revolutionary feeling among the poor in Ireland. With Mitzi Myers, however, I would stress Edgeworth's use of the words 'connexion' and

¹⁰ Bodleian MS Eng misc e 1461, fols 53, 55.

¹¹ Eve Walsh Stoddard, *Positioning Gender and Race in (Post)Colonial Plantation Space: Connecting Ireland and the Caribbean* (New York, 2012), p. 58.

¹² Aileen Douglas, *Work in Hand* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 154, 158. Douglas is quoting from Maria Edgeworth's comments on relations between landlords and tenants in *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq., Begun by Himself and Concluded by his Daughter*, 2 vols (London, 1820), II, pp. 26-7.

‘between’ in the phrase from the *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* that Douglas quotes. Myers rightly suggests that in both her novels for adults and her tales for children, Edgeworth’s ‘signature theme’ is ‘interdependence’: a fluid and communicative dynamic rather than a fixed master-servant relationship. As Myers remarks, Edgeworth’s child characters are particularly important in imagining this post-1798 ‘reterritorialization’ of the Irish political landscape, and children typically figure in her post-1798 plots as ‘crucial to affective renewal and to cultural and political regeneration’.¹³ Edgeworth’s letter to her aunt Charlotte implies that she was keen to create fictions for children featuring these model child characters in order to dissuade readers from the kind of ‘spirit of revenge’ that fuelled revolutionary insurrections and that in turn perpetuated the cycle of repression and violent resistance; and this is undoubtedly reflected in two of her children’s tales written in the immediate fallout from the 1798 uprising and the unrest that preceded it in 1796-8: ‘Forgive and Forget’ and ‘The Orphans’. The manuscript essay ‘On the Education of the Poor’ includes a section on the subject of revenge, and comments that ‘the gratification of resentment’ is something that children learn ‘by education and example’: here, Edgeworth suggests that

Children may be taught that to forget & to forgive is more glorious than to remember & revenge ... their parents should never by foolish partiality excite the envy & malevolent passions of either party’.¹⁴

But in the details of the tales that she devises on this subject, Edgeworth’s imagining of the ‘spirit of revenge’ diverges somewhat from her aunt Charlotte’s rather limited and one-sided didactic vision. Just as Myers suggests, it is not generally the *adult* authority figures in

¹³ Mitzi Myers, ‘Canonical “Orphans” and Critical *Ennui*: Re-reading Edgeworth’s Cross-Writing’, *Children’s Literature*, 25 (1997), pp. 116-136: pp. 123, 119. ‘Reterritorialization’ is Myers’ term for the ‘utopian possibilities of group formation and communal living’ that Myers argues are the focus of Edgeworth’s ‘Enlightened protofeminist discourse’ (119) in the wake of the 1798 uprising. Myers’s ‘Canonical “Orphans”’ offers an important account of ‘The Orphans’ in its originary political moment, and shows how much this tale of child heroes for child readers shares with Edgeworth’s 1809 fiction of revolution and overthrow, *Ennui*: ‘in each, [Edgeworth] uses a transformative romance, constructed from ordinary realities, to defiantly reject [Richard] Musgrave’s nightmare of Irish commonality as mass murder in favour of an alternative community that rewrites Rebellion as rejuvenation’ (Myers 125). Myers does not, however, remark on the consonance of the post-1798 tales for children with Edgeworth’s writing about mass education, does not include ‘Forgive and Forget’ in her discussion, and is not focused on the ways in which Edgeworth complicates the educational dynamic of the tales.

¹⁴ Bodleian MS Eng misc e 1461, fols 44-5. Myers notes that ‘The Orphans’ was circulating within the Edgeworth family in 1799, but it was first published in 1800, along with ‘Forgive and Forget’, in the enlarged third edition of Edgeworth’s 1796 collection of tales for children, *The Parent’s Assistant*.

these tales who take the lead in imagining solutions to problems, in managing disagreement well, or in circulating knowledge. In other words, Edgeworth complicates the ‘early lessons for the poor’ contained in both ‘Forgive and Forget’ and in ‘The Orphans’ by representing those who should know better – the adults who guide or govern the child characters – as frequently setting a bad example, struggling to moderate their vengeful or selfish impulses or to behave civilly, while her child heroes have to find creative ways to respond to, or simply to endure, this misgovernment. Although, then, these were tales intended primarily for child readers, to be given by parents or instructors to children, the lessons that they teach had much to say to the socially and politically privileged adults who mainly bought them and read them alongside children. If the tales written by Edgeworth for children in 1798-99 transmitted important ideas about personal conduct for and to a future generation, they were also, through the depiction of very imperfect adult characters, implicitly and instructively critical of adult failures to learn self-control and to acquire an appetite for the kind of information that might foster invention and co-operation in the making of a less divided society. By the same token, I would suggest that Edgeworth’s hard-working child characters in ‘Forgive and Forget’ and ‘The Orphans’ may be read not simply as children, but as representatives of an Irish adult working class that had been infantilized and subjected to unjust repression. As I shall show, Edgeworth was not alone in drawing parallels between the disenfranchised Catholic majority in Ireland and neglected or misgoverned children, and doing so with political reforms in mind: Edmund Burke’s arguments against the penal laws also make use of the analogy. While this identification between the disenfranchised Irish poor and the child heroes of Edgeworth’s post-1798 tales might at first glance appear problematic, risking reproducing the infantilization it was addressing, the character traits that Edgeworth gives her child heroes reflect her optimistic and progressive ideas about childhood and about the possible future of the Irish nation: hence the hope she placed in extending educational opportunities, which she thought would unlock hitherto untapped abilities in the Irish poor. As her manual of early instruction, *Practical Education* (1798), demonstrates, she consistently associated children with an unprejudiced rationality and with powers to invent solutions to problems.¹⁵ Although Perry Nodelman has argued that being a child in Edgeworth’s tales is often synonymous with ‘knowing less’ than adults, this is not borne out in ‘Forgive and Forget’ or ‘The Orphans’.¹⁶

¹⁵ For more on this, see my essay ‘Maria Edgeworth and ‘the light of nature’: artifice, autonomy, and anti-sectarianism in *Practical Education* (1798)’, pp. 140-159 in *Repossessing the Romantic Past*, eds. Heather Glen and Paul Hamilton (Cambridge, 2006).

¹⁶ Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature* (Baltimore MD, 2008), p. 22.

In both of these supposedly ‘didactic’ tales for children, adults’ limitations create the dramas in which Edgeworth’s child protagonists achieve their heroic qualities, often surpassing adults in terms of their moral imagination, sense of justice, and productive uses of what they know, and triumphing by demonstrating what it means to share these resources.

‘Connexion’ of various kinds is in fact, as Myers argues in her emphasis on Edgeworth’s interest in interdependence, central to Edgeworth’s work and educational philosophy. Edgeworth’s style of writing – including in her fiction for children – is designed to enable a productive and potentially transformative circulation, rather than simply a top-down transmission, of ideas. Deeply and fundamentally allusive, her books function as a forum for discussion, and as a source of information, sending her readers – whether adults or children – off in all kinds of directions in quest of the ideas that she cites and invokes, often in footnotes with book titles and page references. Her style and ethic is conversational, bringing in a range of voices and philosophies and allowing conflicting views to come into contact with one another in the dialogues between characters, but also in the encounters between an authorial or narrative voice and those of the people she depicts. Her characters are themselves readers. What they read is the kind of book or journal that Edgeworth herself read and was excited by: Scottish and French enlightenment philosophy; travel-books; accounts of scientific experiments or advances; history, both natural and human; work by the leading thinkers of the day, such as Edmund Burke, Adam Smith and William Godwin; and progressive journals like the *Monthly Magazine*. As Marilyn Butler has commented, ‘to read [Edgeworth] was to tune into the vast, open-ended conversation that was Hume’s and Smith’s metaphor for modern society’.¹⁷ Conversational exchange was for Edgeworth, as it was for David Hume and Adam Smith, a ‘model for civil society itself – quiet, reasoned, bipartisan, the desired modern ideal after the armed factions and fanaticism of seventeenth-century religious wars’.¹⁸

There were several problems, however, in applying this model to Ireland. The anti-sectarianism and dislike of ‘party spirit’ that underpinned Edgeworthian optimism about social and political progress were by no means general within Ireland, where the divisions

¹⁷ Butler, ‘Irish culture and Scottish enlightenment: Maria Edgeworth’s histories of the future’, pp. 158-80, in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (eds), *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750-1950* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 160.

¹⁸ Butler, ‘Irish culture and Scottish enlightenment’, p. 162.

between a largely wealthy and enfranchised Protestant minority and a mostly immiserated and propertyless Catholic majority were profound. Many in the Ascendancy believed that most Irish people, excluded from education and brutalized by often unpaid, unremitting and monotonous labour, were, to use Adam Smith's terms, 'incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, [or] of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgement concerning ... the ordinary duties of private life'.¹⁹ The Irish administration in the years immediately preceding the 1798 uprising was reluctant to accept any major changes to alleviate the legalized inequality of the impoverished Catholic majority, condemning most Irish people, as Edmund Burke argued, to a civil servitude in which they were obliged to defer to their political masters without any hope of being seen as equal citizens or of being represented at the seat of power.²⁰ With no investment in the idea of the 'communion of interests' and 'sympathy of feelings and desires between those who act in the name of any description of people and the people in whose name they act', the Protestant Ascendancy was, Burke alleges, fomenting revolution and its own destruction: the exclusion and silencing of the voices of the majority in this fatally flawed version of virtual representation would inevitably 'ulcerate [the] minds' of the Irish people, and result in violence.²¹ For Burke, as for Edgeworth, conversation was potentially a means of creating this 'communion of interests' and 'sympathy'. Burke suggests, in fact, that one of the reasons for the Ascendancy's fear and mistrust of their Catholic compatriots was that they had made no effort to enter into dialogue with them: 'Sure I am that there have been thousands in Ireland who have never conversed with a Roman Catholic in their whole lives, unless they happened to talk to their gardener's workmen ... or, at best, had known them only as footmen, or other domestics'.²²

In the stories I examine in this article, Edgeworth focuses precisely on conversations between those who, like working-class Irish Catholics, had been regarded with suspicion and

¹⁹ Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, II, p. 782. Edgeworth's assertion of the 'just conclusion' of judgments made by a literate and informed working class in 'On the Education of the Poor' is a deliberate, subversive echo of Smith's formulation here.

²⁰ Richard Bourke offers a cogent account of Burke's attempts to put pressure on the Irish government to address legal and civic inequalities through the publication of his *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* and the *Letter to Richard Burke* (both published in 1792): see Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton & Oxford, 2015), pp. 789-800. Edgeworth greatly admired Burke: her manuscript notes for an essay on Burke's style survive, and it is likely that, as a supporter of Catholic emancipation and an advocate for governmental reform, she was familiar with Burke's comments on the penal laws.

²¹ *A Letter from the Right Hon. Edmund Burke ... to Sir Hercules Langrishe* (London, 1792), pp. 69-70, 72.

²² *Letter ... to Sir Hercules Langrishe*, p. 71.

condescension, and those who had power over them. She shows the misjudgements and miscarriages of justice that result from the failure to understand or to listen. Challenging the prejudices of those who pride themselves on being well informed, Edgeworth's ingenious, resourceful, and generous child heroes demonstrate their capacity for forming unprejudiced, just judgements of the situations in which they are placed and of other people's motivations – showing a sympathetic and imaginative ability to conceive of the lives of others which facilitates their search for solutions to injustice and exclusion. Her protagonists pursue a self-chosen enlightenment in place of an acceptance of unchangeable social destiny or of bad luck. They are enabled by an active curiosity, and a commitment to enquiry. In all of the tales discussed here, Edgeworth's child heroes effect a transition from dependence to independence: an exchange that Edgeworth depicts as both intellectual and economic.

How difficult this emergence into enlightenment and independence could be is understood and registered in the plot-turns of the stories. The odds are realistically stacked against Edgeworth's child heroes. They are beset by hostile opinion, prejudice, and adults fixated on monopolizing resources and maximizing private profit at the expense of their neighbours. One of the main obstacles to progress that Edgeworth identified was existing representations of the Irish poor, a problem exacerbated in the distrustful and brutal aftermath of the popular uprising in 1798, itself a consequence of legal disadvantage as well as of the disinheritation and disparagement to which most of the Irish population had been made subject. In his *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe*, Edmund Burke summarizes the effects of the 'popery laws' in Ireland, by which Catholics were disinherited and stripped of civic equality with Protestants. The declared object of these laws, Burke asserts,

was to reduce the Catholics of Ireland to a miserable populace, without property, without estimation, without education ... They divided the nation into two distinct bodies, without common interest, sympathy or connexion; one of which bodies was to possess *all* the franchises, *all* the property, *all* the education. The others were to be drawers of water and cutters of turf for them.²³

As Edgeworth reflects in her *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), along with this policy of judicial and legislative disadvantage, and economic and political disenfranchisement, a systematic

²³ *Letter ... to Sir Hercules Langrishe*, p. 8.

derogation of Irish intelligence had convinced many unable to conceive of a ‘communion of interests’ between Catholics and Protestants of Ireland’s inability to make progress:

It is a refinement of this sort of policy, to instil into a nation the belief, that they are superior in intellectual abilities to their neighbours. Impute a peculiar incurable mental disease to a given people, show that it incapacitates them from speaking or acting with common sense, expose their infirmities continually to public ridicule, and in time probably this people, let their constitutional boldness be ever so great, may be subjugated to that sense of inferiority, and to that acquiescence in a state of dependence, which is the necessary consequence of the conviction of imbecility.²⁴

Edgeworth’s legalized language here emphasises the interconnectedness of structural, legalized disadvantage with the discredit and denigration that leads to a loss of hope. Those made subject to this harmful national stereotype find themselves unjustly judged as lacking all valuable knowledge or talent in ‘the conviction of imbecility’.

It was precisely to address these structures of dependence and inferiority that Richard Lovell Edgeworth had made reforms to his own estate, seeking to encourage his tenants to improve their portions of land, rewarding them for their efforts, and abolishing the unpaid labour which many other Anglo-Irish landowners demanded of their tenants.²⁵ Campaigning for Irish parliamentary reform in the 1780s, he had predicted national changes arising out of local improvements, arguing that once a tenant is no longer subjugated to ‘a blind dependence on the owner of his farm[,] a yeomanry will by degrees arise, which will diffuse Liberty and Industry through every Class of the Inhabitants of Ireland’.²⁶ Likewise, his and Maria Edgeworth’s commitment to a universally available education system was aimed at liberating the potential that both father and daughter saw around them. We can see this faith in a very different Irish future in the *Letter on the Tellograph* (1797), written by Maria

²⁴ *Irish Bulls* (1802), eds Marilyn Butler and Jane Desmarais, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, Gen. editors: Marilyn Butler and Mitzi Myers, Consulting editor: W. J. Mc Cormack, 12 vols (London, 1999/2003), I, p. 376.

²⁵ See Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, II, pp. 14-42; Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 85-6.

²⁶ Printed handbill, ‘To the Associated Corps of the County of Longford’ (1782). Richard Lovell Edgeworth calls for a ‘fundamental Reformation of the Irish House of Commons’, and urges his readers to claim the rights of ‘a Man and a Citizen’, including political and civil rights for Catholics, to counter the concentration of power in ‘the hands of a few, who influence the Boroughs which return the Majority of Parliament’. NLI MS 11,132 (1): 16.

Edgeworth, using ‘solid materials’ contributed by her father.²⁷ Although this begins as a fairly humdrum account of her father’s attempt to create a telegraphic network across Ireland as part of its national defences, it broadens into a manifesto for Irish ingenuity. Ireland is represented as being on the brink of important progress, the telegraph not primarily the result of an act of individual invention, but of a national spirit of inventiveness that is new:

In this country, objects of science have not been much attended to, but the genius of the nation is now awake; and the necessity of employing every resource of art must soon be acknowledged.²⁸

Science, art (by which Edgeworth means an ability to invent and make things) and intelligence had become urgently necessary to advance the fortunes of the country. In contrast with an administration in Dublin that seemed, in obedience to its English overlords, to want to keep Ireland in a state of helpless infancy – ‘tutelage’ is the word that Edgeworth uses – Edgeworth urges a recognition of the nation’s desire for enlightenment:

Ireland is no petty province ... I judge of her importance from her natural and acquired resources – from her position in Europe – her peculiar sufficiency to her own subsistence – her obvious increase in industry and knowledge – and above all by her sudden transition from apathy to exertion. – Old prejudices in nations, as well as in individuals, remain in the mind, and influence the conduct, long after the circumstances in which they originated are changed. A century ago Ireland was a burthen to England, now she is her most useful ally.²⁹

This description of Ireland’s importance suggests that this is not a nation that should be kept in ‘tutelage’ or viewed as a ‘dependant’, relying for sustenance and protection on British charity and condescension. The awakened ‘genius of the nation’ has, according to Edgeworth, sprung from an ‘increase in industry and knowledge’, a ‘transition from apathy to exertion’, with the potential, if recognised, to remove the English prejudice against Ireland as

²⁷ *A Letter to the Right Hon. the Earl of Charlemont, on the Tellograph, and on the Defence of Ireland* (Dublin/London, 1797). In a letter to Mrs Margaret Ruxton, dated 11 April 1795, Edgeworth tells her aunt that she is writing about the ‘tellograph’, her father ‘furnishing the solid materials and I spinning them’ (NLI Edgeworth Papers MS 10,166/7: 125); see also Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 122.

²⁸ *Letter ... on the Tellograph*, p. 31.

²⁹ *Letter ... on the Tellograph*, p. 34; pp. 40-41.

a burdensome dependant. In the *Letter on the Tellograph*, Edgeworth links this awakened potential to the emergence of an appetite for reading among the people. She uses a striking phrase to describe this newly emergent power: ‘the invisible union of enlightened minds’, recalling the ‘communion of interests’ and ‘sympathies’ that Burke argued was crucial in a healthy constitution and functioning state.³⁰

The Edgeworths did not change their minds about the desirability of an enlightened reading public after the 1798 uprising; rather the opposite. ‘On the Education of the Poor’ criticizes the ‘enemies of liberty’ who ‘insinuate that all political power should be taken from the people & that they should be kept in ignorance that they may be held in subjection’. For Maria Edgeworth, this is a ‘system of mental coercion’ that is outmoded, no longer tenable in an age of rising working-class literacy and advances in printing that made reading matter ever more accessible and cheap.³¹ Political division or conflict is not to be resolved, she argues, by a restriction of the circulation of intelligence; instead she advises embracing this new enlightened age of accessible print culture, whilst acknowledging that it constitutes a challenge to established privilege:

The operations of thought are invisible to the eye of power, & no force can counteract them but that of reason – ... all attempts to restrain the freedom of opinion will only endanger instead of preserving public tranquility ...³²

While both Edgeworth and Burke expose the injustice of the Anglo-Irish establishment’s treatment of the majority of the Irish people, the Edgeworthian model of political progress and ‘public tranquility’, intimately connected with the free circulation and exchange of ideas, strongly differentiates her political philosophy from Burke’s. Edgeworth’s emphasis on the flow of information and its importance for the ‘just’ judgement of ‘the mass of a nation’ is a fundamentally democratic view of popular political and intellectual lives. In contrast with this enlightened model of a future social order, constructed through access to print culture, Burke’s *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* figures the legal disadvantages and political inequalities of the Irish Catholic majority as a rupture of a naturalized, ancient and familial

³⁰ *Letter ... on the Tellograph*, p. 47. Edgeworth argues that ‘[e]ven those, who do not call themselves politicians, may find some advantage in looking into public measures. The habit of considering, and judging of affairs improves the sagacity of *the people*... plain common sense is competent to discuss and decide’ (p. 47).

³¹ ‘On the Education of the Poor’ [c.1799], Bodleian MS Eng misc e 1461, fols 53, 54.

³² Bodleian MS Eng misc e 1461, fols 54, 58. I follow Edgeworth’s spelling here.

social order. He sees the laws governing the Catholic majority's rights to the ownership of land and education as a contravention of natural justice because they destroy family connections and allegiances, estrange parents from children, and wives from husbands, and disrupt local loyalties to ancestral culture. Accordingly, Burke represents Irish Catholics as political orphans: despite being nominally part of the British patriarchal 'family', they have never known the 'profit of the protection of a common father', excluded from the benefits enjoyed by English subjects of the Crown.³³

Burke's turn to the figure of the excluded and orphaned child as an emotive metaphor for the disenfranchisement of the majority of Irish people is an effective means of focusing attention on an injustice that undermines the stability of the political system that he wishes to sustain; but Burke's Irish orphans require paternal protection, absorption into a stable patriarchal familial order, to be rescued from this exclusion and deprivation. Edgeworth's political vision, as it plays out in her fictional depictions of Irish orphans, I would suggest, is quite different. She takes up Burke's idea of the Irish as political orphans; but her imagining of a more unified Ireland and a more harmonious relationship with Britain is markedly fraternal and non-patriarchal. It challenges existing power dynamics and existing prejudice, and counters the stereotype of Ireland as inferior, dependent; a burden, troublesome and unenlightened. Teresa Michals has recently asserted that Edgeworth's child characters epitomize an English and Anglo-Irish perception of Ireland as 'childish', and that Edgeworth 'urges the country to grow up by becoming a rational commercial society such as England'.³⁴ According to Michals, Edgeworth's fiction for and about children shows that she regards Ireland as characterized by 'irrationality, impulsiveness, and violence'; Edgeworth is therefore, Michals argues, principally intent upon her fictional Irish children's evolution into a 'polite and commercial' people. This interpretation means that Michals misses the significance of Edgeworth's imaginative investment in the inventiveness of her child protagonists, and their full participation in what we might call a market in knowledge, originating ideas rather than simply being represented as the passive recipients of lessons, or as economic units.³⁵ As Marilyn Butler comments, Edgeworth's 'poor children learn that economic society works by exchanging benefits: interactive, productive, energised, they

³³ *Letter ... to Sir Hercules Langrishe*, p. 72.

³⁴ Teresa Michals, *Books for Children, Books for Adults: Age and the Novel from Defoe to James* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 104, 108.

³⁵ Michals, *Books for Children*, pp. 105, 100.

teach themselves to survive and prosper'.³⁶ Edgeworth's fictions centring on child heroes do not model the reciprocal duties of children to parents, or focus on commercial transactions or identities, but rather pivot on the ideas of friendship and the sharing of resources. Her child heroes and heroines work transformations via relationships, in and through which the Irish resourcefulness, inventive potential, and latent industrial strengths that Edgeworth believed really characterised the nation would be able to flourish. In the fictions to which I now turn, Edgeworth implies that Ireland could, if no longer structurally and deliberately disadvantaged through a conspiracy of the powerful, become a prosperous nation and a beneficial trading partner. Exchange on the basis of equality, in other words, could, in Edgeworth's vision, take the place of violent conflict and habitual disparagement.

First published in 1796, Edgeworth's collection of tales for children, *The Parent's Assistant*, was reprinted in an enlarged third edition in 1800. To the original 1796 selection of tales, Edgeworth added a number of stories focused on working-class child characters who extricate themselves from conflicts and difficult circumstances through their own exertions – including the mental exertion and capacity for energetic problem-solving that she tends to associate with their fresh and unprejudiced ways of seeing the world.³⁷ Suggestively for the relationship between Edgeworth's plans for mass education in Ireland and this new expanded edition of her first collection of tales for children that I have been establishing, many of the child characters in the 1800 edition of *The Parent's Assistant* show the 'perseverance & ingenuity' that Edgeworth recommends in the material she identifies as 'peculiarly fit for the early perusal of young people in the lower classes of society'.³⁸ 'The Orphans' was one of the tales that she added to this third edition. Its titular heroes are a family of children, headed by a twelve-year-old girl, Mary. When their one surviving parent dies, and the orphaned children are evicted from their cabin by the unsympathetic agent of their absentee landlord, they are forced to take up residence in the ruins of the nearby castle of Rossmore. All of the children from the youngest at seven years old to twelve-year-old Mary find work to support

³⁶ Butler, 'General Introduction', in *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, I, p. XXI.

³⁷ In a letter to her cousin Letty Ruxton, dated 29 January 1800, Edgeworth mentions that two separate printings of the expanded *Parent's Assistant* have been produced, 'one Democratic the other aristocratic' – one expensive version, with illustrations, another more affordable (NLI 10,166/7). Readers of both the 'aristocratic' illustrated version and the 'democratic' one would have found many more working-class child heroes in the 1800 edition, which added seven new tales, focused on poor children. As Marilyn Butler points out, Edgeworth's poorer child heroes 'set the more heroic example: they have to, because they are either alone in the world, or the sole support of younger siblings ... or elderly dependants' (*Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, I, p. XX).

³⁸ Bodleian Edgeworth Papers, Eng misc e 1461, fol 64.

themselves, from sorting rags in a local paper factory to running errands and spinning flax. The child heroes of ‘The Orphans’, like the main protagonist in ‘Forgive and Forget’, are slandered and misrepresented, yet finally triumph through persistent effort, honesty and forbearance, and through their ability to make good use of the knowledge available to them.³⁹

Significantly, the two moments when the orphans begin to glimpse better prospects are both associated with the children’s success in making or inventing things. The first breakthrough in their struggle to survive economically occurs when a local English footman hears about their manufacture of rush dips (candles made from rushes dipped in tallow) and is presented with some rushes by one of the children, Edmund, along with an explanation of how to make them. The second moment comes some time after this, when the castle ruins become unstable just as the children are beginning to do well out of a business making simple rope-soled cotton shoes. These two moments are transformative in terms of the plot and its eventual dénouement, and tell us something about Edgeworth’s imagined future for Ireland and her convictions about its people’s powers of mind. While the dilapidated castle suggests an ancestral past that is no longer useful or sustainable, the rush dips are associated with enlightenment: light to read by, and emancipatory knowledge. The words ‘know’, ‘knowledge’ and their cognates are in fact frequently repeated throughout this tale, alongside many references to thinking, considering, and reasoning.⁴⁰ There is a meta-textual quality to this moment too: when Edgeworth describes the making of the rush dips, she inserts a long and detailed footnote giving a full account of the method of manufacture, taken from a recent English source, Gilbert White’s *Natural History of Selborne* (1789), including a calculation of how many hours of light a rush-dip gives compared to expensive wax candles, thus allowing her poorer child readers to contemplate making their own dips and their own cheap source of reading light. This information, Edgeworth points out, has the potential to ‘save the nation a sum equal to the produce of a burdensome tax’ – in other words, the potential to put money back into the pockets of the poor, and thus to reduce their sense of dependency.⁴¹ Gilbert White is the first of a number of authoritative and knowledgeable figures in ‘The Orphans’ who are linked to small changes with larger consequences: the attention that they pay to what Edgeworth calls ‘seemingly trifling’ problems and the useful knowledge that

³⁹ Myers discusses the ingenuity of the child protagonists in ‘The Orphans’ and notes some of the provocative political resonances of this characterization: see ‘Canonical “Orphans”’, pp. 126-8.

⁴⁰ ‘Know’, ‘known’, ‘knew’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘knowing’ occur a total of 27 times.

⁴¹ ‘The Orphans’, *The Parent’s Assistant*, ed. Elizabeth Eger, in *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, X, p. 134.

they subsequently put into circulation models the freer circulation of resources that Edgeworth links to social improvement.⁴² This kind of general amelioration is rooted in individual self-improvement, since the rush dips that the children make allow all of them to learn and prosper. A cheap source of light means that Edmund can study mathematics, and that Mary can teach her sisters to read and write, and make some extra money by sewing – which connects her more closely with two benevolent local ladies, Isabella and Caroline, who send her plainwork to do. Edmund, Mary’s younger brother, then circulates the information he has: he passes on what he knows about the manufacture of rush-dips to an Englishman who works for Isabella and Caroline’s family, a tip that this English servant recognises as a generously intended gift, for which he remembers Edmund when a job comes up in the house and he is asked for a recommendation. The exchange of information that leads to the improvement of chances for greater prosperity recalls Edgeworth’s definition of ‘conversation’ in the ‘Glossary’ to her *Early Lessons* – another collection of stories for children that emerged out of the late 1790s: ‘Conversation. Answering what people ask; listening to what others say; hearing from others what they know, and telling them what we know’.⁴³ Symbolically, the conversation between Edmund and the Englishman about rush dips communicates knowledge and resources rooted in the Irish countryside, with its peat bogs and wetlands, to the English mainland. Edgeworth thus depicts the excluded orphans as participating fully in the development and circulation of ideas and draws attention to her Irish heroes’ inventive abilities. Far from being passive recipients of a moral and intellectual reformation, the children increasingly demonstrate their capacity as agents of enlightenment.

Similarly, when the two ladies, Caroline and Isabella, eventually do the children a material service by providing the proof that clears their name of an allegation of theft, it is in a sense simply a return of the gifts that they have received from the children in the form of their knowledge of rush-dip and shoe manufacture. The children’s knowledge of shoe manufacture is completely self-generated. Mary identifies a problem: how to make sure that her brother Edmund can perform his new duties as a footman in the ladies’ household without getting sore feet. She experiments until she hits upon a perfect formula, plaited hemp soles sewn to a cotton upper, each pair customized for its future wearer. So obviously enjoyable is this inventive work that Mary finds that numerous other children want to work alongside her,

⁴² ‘The Orphans’, p. 134.

⁴³ In *Early Lessons*, ed. Elizabeth Eger, *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, XII, p. 84.

‘each doing but a little at a time’.⁴⁴ Some commentators have seen Edgeworth’s approving representation of industrious children as aligning her ideologically with the conservative moralizing and political indoctrination of Hannah More’s Cheap Repository Tracts.⁴⁵ I would suggest that Edgeworth’s emphasis here is rather on the children’s autonomy: their freedom to work or not as they wish. The happy, playful and free labour that Edgeworth describes, in which children may break off to chase soap bubbles or go off to do a different kind of work, as they see fit, stands in stark contrast to the dull, repetitive work that Adam Smith describes in his attack on the division of labour: in origin, the invention of the shoes is linked to precisely the kind of rational activity, affective bonds and generous sentiments that Smith’s divided labour is incapable of producing. Edgeworth frequently returns to Smith’s critique, in fact, as we can see from a number of manuscript notes and allusions in other stories to this same passage.⁴⁶ One such allusion is in Edgeworth’s notebook entry sketching ideas for her essay on the education of the poor, in which she writes of the intellectual benefits of free labour both for individuals and the nation to whom they belong. Here, she argues for the observational powers and innovative capacity of those who manufacture goods: ‘Artificers have opportunities to observe & would invent if they were not stupefied into mere machines’.⁴⁷ For William Godwin, reflecting on this same passage from Adam Smith in his 1797 work on education, *The Enquirer*, it was vital not only for child workers but for their country that the ‘stupefying’ divided labour Smith describes is seen as inhuman.⁴⁸ Godwin saw ‘genius’, as did Edgeworth, as a learnt rather than an innate capacity to discern and

⁴⁴ ‘The Orphans’, p. 137.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Andrew O’Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children’s Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York & London, 2003), p. 46; and M. O Grenby, *The Child Reader, 1700-1840* (Cambridge, 2011): Grenby describes the ‘reformatory’ bent of much eighteenth-century children’s literature, designed to foster ‘self-discipline’ and to correct children’s resistance to ‘improvement’ (p. 264).

⁴⁶ A notable example is in Edgeworth’s tale about the rebellion of enslaved Africans, ‘The Grateful Negro’, in which the main white protagonist argues for the merits of free, waged labour over forced slave labour, closely echoing Smith’s argument in *Wealth of Nations*. See *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, XII, p. 53; and Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I, pp. 98-99. It is also notable that Edgeworth’s essay ‘On the Education of the Poor’ addresses the harmful effects on the poor of unremitting drudgery and hard labour at a number of points, e.g. fols 4-5, 66-67, 73-76, 97-98.

⁴⁷ Bodleian Edgeworth Papers, MS Eng misc c 897, fol. 1.

⁴⁸ We know that Edgeworth was reading *The Enquirer* with interest and enjoyment at the time she was beginning to write new tales for the third edition of *The Parent’s Assistant*: a letter to her cousin Sophy Ruxton, dated October 1797, invites Sophy to suggest stories and anecdotes that might form sources for the new tales, and continues: ‘I hope we will soon have finished Godwin that he may set out for Black Castle [Sophy’s home] – There are some parts of his book that I think you will like much – on ... all he says about genius & self taught geniuses’. Edgeworth goes on to compare Godwin’s analysis of ‘avarice & profusion’ favourably with Adam Smith’s. NLI Edgeworth Papers, MS 10,166/7: 165.

analyse, and links it to the ‘important reforms’ of which he saw Britain to be in dire need. He asks his readers to

[e]xamine the children of peasants. Nothing is more common than to find in them a promise of understanding, a quickness of observation, an ingenuousness of character, and a delicacy of tact, at the age of seven years, the very traces of which are obliterated at the age of fourteen. The cares of the world fall upon them. They are enlisted at the crimping-house of oppression. They are brutified by immoderate and unintermitted labour. Their hearts are hardened, and their spirits broken, by all that they see, all that they feel, and all that they look forward to.⁴⁹

The ‘promise of understanding’, ‘quickness of observation’, and ‘ingenuousness of character’ that Godwin identifies accurately describes the qualities that Edgeworth’s orphans have; but rather than being broken and ‘brutified’, they emerge in the final part of ‘The Orphans’ into a future life in which they do have something to look forward to, and are respected for their ingenuity and persistence.

In the interim, however, the ‘cares of the world’ do ‘fall on them’, at least for a time: they have to traverse a difficult period in which what seems at first a piece of good luck is transformed into a curse. With the collapse of the castle ruins that makes their hovel almost uninhabitable comes the discovery – in a fairy-tale-like moment – of a pot of gold coins. These are not magical objects; rather, they are relics of a former period in Irish history – coins made at the time of Henry VII, who is associated with an era in which the English monarch tried to impose his authority in Ireland. This is suggestive, but Edgeworth touches only lightly on these historical associations. The value of the coins within the tale lies in their market appeal as antiquarian objects, something that Hopkins, the hostile agent for the children’s absentee landlord, exploits when they hand the gold coins over to him. Hopkins loses no time in selling the most valuable of the coins and then spreading the lie that the children appropriated them, thus destroying their name for honesty in the markets where they sell their produce. But because Isabella and Caroline are knowledgeable and use their

⁴⁹ William Godwin, ‘On the Sources of Genius’, in *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (London, 1797), pp. 16-17. Edgeworth praises Godwin’s *Enquirer* again in a second letter of late 1797 (undated), in which she also discusses the reviews’ treatment of her and her father’s critique of government in the *Letter on the Tellograph*, and an illustration for ‘The Orphans’: see NLI Edgeworth Papers, MS 10,166/7: 170.

knowledge generously and wisely, the children do have proof of their honesty – a proof that eventually forms part of the case that re-establishes their good name. The orphans, on finding the coins, immediately take them to Isabella and Caroline’s house to share their discovery on the way to Hopkins’s house, so that the ladies have the opportunity to examine them carefully and attentively. They use their knowledge of chemistry and history to analyse and document the coins – their material, the period from which they come, their number, as well as the individual distinguishing marks of the most interesting of the coins. To this knowledge they add their social knowledge, their judgement of character, which they use to ascertain the likely untrustworthiness of Hopkins, the agent, leading them to mark some of the coins with a nearly invisible ‘X’ and to ask their father to write to the landlord, a friend of his, with details of the hoard.

Edgeworth’s comment about the work that the ladies do to support the children is important: ‘It is not only by their superior riches, but it is yet more by their superior knowledge, that persons in the higher ranks of life may assist those in a lower condition’.⁵⁰ Because of Isabella’s and Caroline’s willingness to share what they know with the orphans, to redistribute unevenly distributed knowledge, the situation in which the children find themselves because of the agent’s false accusations can eventually be resolved and the children’s true character re-established – so that the loss of ‘estimation’ that Burke associates with the condition into which the Irish people have been cast by their Anglo-Irish rulers is, in this case, not permanent. But for a while, the account circulated of the orphans is a discreditable one, and they are powerless to restore their credit by themselves. Until the ladies have a chance encounter with a coin collector in Dublin who happens to have bought the stolen coins from a dealer, the orphans are in ‘a worse condition than ever’, still living in a hovel, and unprotected from the slander circulated by the agent, since the ladies who know their true character are away, over-wintering in town.⁵¹ Again, the key to solving this problem comes in the form of someone who is willing to share knowledge: the gentleman-collector who happens to have bought the misappropriated hoard, Edgeworth tells us, ‘took generous and polite pleasure in ... sharing the advantages of his wealth and station with all, who had any pretensions to science or literature’.⁵² Because the ladies have these intellectual interests, he invites them to see his latest acquisitions, and listens sympathetically when they

⁵⁰ ‘The Orphans’, p. 139.

⁵¹ ‘The Orphans’, p. 143.

⁵² ‘The Orphans’, p. 144.

tell him what they know to be the true story of their discovery and real ownership, ‘interested’ by the good account they give of the orphans as much as by the proofs they can give him of the provenance of the coins.⁵³ Although, as Edgeworth tells her reader, ‘these ladies were blamed by many people for continuing to countenance those that were, with great reason, suspected to be thieves’, they persist in circulating the true story.⁵⁴ These conversations are therefore an exchange of what is known in several senses. The knowledgeable gentleman uses the social power that he has – and that the ladies working alone do not – to establish beyond doubt that it was Hopkins, the agent, who had committed theft, rather than the children. Finally, the landlord himself, who for the most part is conspicuous not only by his physical but also by his moral absence, removes Hopkins and rewards the children with a good house, rent-free, so long as they continue to run a ‘useful’ business from it.⁵⁵

The recurrence of terms with economic significance, alongside the repeated references to knowledge, is far from accidental. As we can see from this plot and its details, Edgeworth suggests that the accounts given of these Irish orphans by those with greater economic and political power may, on the one hand, if slander prevails, lead to their total loss of credit and permanent poverty and wretchedness; yet if the truth is publicly known, the circulation of this information may increase their credit, and lead to more ‘interest’ in them, an interest that accrues because of their resourcefulness, inventiveness and industry. How the story ends is chancy, resting on the good-will, impartiality and sympathetic imagination of those with accurate information, who can then make just judgements. Although the orphans’ industry, inventiveness, and patient endurance of the wrongs done to them are clearly exemplary, Edgeworth also signals that public awareness of their integrity and talent within the world evoked in the story is not a given.

The setting of ‘Forgive and Forget’, written shortly after ‘The Orphans’, negotiates similar problems and ideas. Again, the focus is on an inventive and industrious working-class child, Maurice Grant, and his friendship with Arthur Oakly, a less enterprising but good-hearted boy; the setting is adjoining market gardens, divided only by a low wall, on the outskirts of Bristol. Notably, Edgeworth does not set this story in Ireland, despite the letter to

⁵³ ‘The Orphans’, p. 144.

⁵⁴ ‘The Orphans’, p. 143.

⁵⁵ ‘The Orphans’, p. 145.

aunt Charlotte suggesting its origins in her responses to revolutionary violence and Ascendancy reprisals and its relationship to her essay about the potential benefits of mass education in Ireland. One of Edgeworth's repeated manoeuvres in the *Essay on Irish Bulls* – which comprehensively mocks and dismantles post-1798 representations of the Irish as ineducable, irrational and ungovernable – is to show that the Irish stereotypes endlessly reproduced by Ascendancy and English commentators can be just as plausibly applied to them.⁵⁶ In 'Forgive and Forget', Edgeworth depicts the harmful consequences of misunderstandings, prejudices and miscommunications between English, Scottish and Welsh characters, with the implication that the social problems often represented as unique to Ireland were in fact present closer to home than many English readers might have supposed.

The names that Edgeworth gives her characters are seldom meaningless, and 'Forgive and Forget' is no exception. Maurice's surname, Grant, signals not just that he is Scottish, but that he is generous and willing to give freely of his resources – which are prodigious, since he is notable not just for his intellectual ability, but also for his good humour, and capacity to reflect on and find sympathy for others' motives. He also demonstrates his willingness, early in the tale, to share valuables given to him, such as the tulip-root that he presents to Arthur that later wins his friend a prize at a flower-show. Arthur Oakly's name perhaps suggests absorption in a mythical past of chivalric and royalist legends, and an identification with Englishness in particular. Indeed, Arthur's father, we subsequently learn, 'had a prejudice against Scotchmen, all of whom he believed to be cunning and avaricious, because he had once been over-reached by a Scotch pedlar'.⁵⁷ This irrational bias recalls Edgeworth's reference in her *Letter on the Tellograph* to the '[o]ld prejudices in nations, as well as in individuals, [that] remain in the mind and influence the conduct long after the circumstances in which they originated are changed'.⁵⁸ Although Mr Oakly believes that he has 'conquered this prepossession', he still suspects that Maurice's father, Mr Grant, behind the mask of his apparent 'civility', is simply waiting his chance to cheat him: 'that he was not, nor could not, being a Scotchman, be such a hearty friend as a true-born Englishman'. Part of Mr Oakly's suspicion is that Mr Grant reads too much: 'You are always poring over some book or

⁵⁶ For more on this, see Cliona Ó Gallchoir, *Maria Edgeworth: Women, Enlightenment and Nation* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 69-72; and 'Maria Edgeworth and "the Genius of the People"', in my *Language, Custom and Nation in the 1790s: Locke, Tooke, Wordsworth, Edgeworth* (Aldershot/Burlington VT, 2007), especially pp. 162-73.

⁵⁷ 'Forgive and Forget', *The Parent's Assistant*, ed. Elizabeth Eger, in *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, XII, p. 49.

⁵⁸ *Letter ... on the Tellograph*, p. 41.

another, when a man comes to see you, which is not, according to my notions (being a plain, *unlearned* Englishman bred and born) so civil and neighbourly as might be'.⁵⁹ Mr Oakly's suspiciousness about his non-English neighbours, coupled with his tendency to bear grudges about imagined injuries, creates a rift between the two families and a rupture in the boys' friendship from Arthur's side after he is forbidden to talk to Maurice. Significantly, it is Mr Oakly's avaricious wish to have some of Maurice's extraordinarily fruitful raspberry bushes (his 'Brobdignag raspberries') that initially causes the rift.⁶⁰ Rather than approaching Maurice directly, Oakly sends his wife to ask Mr Grant for some of the plants, and is outraged when she returns with a flat refusal – completely misrepresenting, it later emerges, what he really said, largely because of prejudice, but also because of inattention. Edgeworth presents this miscommunication comically, although its effects are serious: 'Grant gave his answer to his wife; she to a Welsh servant girl, who did not perfectly comprehend her mistress's broad Scotch; and she in her turn could not make herself intelligible to Mrs Oakly, who hated the Welsh accent, and whose attention, when the servant-girl delivered the message, was principally engrossed by the management of her own horse'.⁶¹ Oakly's fury, sparked by this communication failure, increases when he notices that Grant's old plum tree has 'forced its way through the wall and gradually had taken possession of the ground which it liked best', in a comical act of hostile invasion; a corrupt lawyer takes advantage of his irrational reaction and encourages him to undertake a costly prosecution against Grant, treating the errant plum-tree as an agent of Grant's illicit land-grab.⁶²

What finally breaks down the impasse between the two men is the gift of a book alongside some of the coveted raspberry plants, left by Maurice on the dividing wall. The book is a copy of the *Monthly Magazine* for December 1798 and contains a reader's letter about the use of seaweed on formerly uncultivable land to fertilise crops, citing Jersey strawberries 'of the largeness of a middle-sized apricot'. This is the description that Maurice has used to grow his own 'Brobdignag raspberries', forming a 'just judgment' based on prior facts from which Maurice has been able to invent new solutions. Again, as in the Gilbert White reference in 'The Orphans', Edgeworth gives full publication details, down to page numbers, for the source, so that the story itself is a form of knowledge-sharing; a means of

⁵⁹ 'Forgive and Forget', p. 49.

⁶⁰ 'Forgive and Forget', p. 50.

⁶¹ 'Forgive and Forget', pp. 51-2.

⁶² 'Forgive and Forget', p. 52.

diffusing useful knowledge. In the note that he attaches to the book, Maurice tells Mr Oakly that as Arthur was not allowed to speak to him, he had to use his imagination to reason out the causes of their estrangement himself, and had deduced, from the facts available to him, that Mr Oakly had imagined himself to be injured by a withholding of secret knowledge on the part of Grant and his son. That suspicion is implicitly proved false, since as soon as he realized that there had been a misunderstanding, Maurice makes Oakly a gift of the knowledge that he has gained through his own efforts, reading and experimenting so as to adapt others' ideas to his own purposes. Maurice's generosity of spirit in not only offering resources to which he has access through his own ingenuity and active inventiveness, but also offering sympathy and friendship in the face of irrational hostility, is a kind of allegory for what Edgeworth felt that Ireland had to offer post-1798. In the face of English and Anglo-Irish vindictiveness, vengefulness, violent reprisals and avarice, Edgeworth implies, the Irish people may yet be able to show that their resourcefulness and powers of mind can bring about the 'family union' with which 'Forgive and Forget' ends.⁶³ Again, however, Edgeworth emphasizes that such resolution is not being offered by the powerful, or by a protective father-figure, as it might be if she had pursued Burke's analogy. A spurned child, like the slandered children of 'The Orphans', is the instigator of the alliance.

'Little Dominick', an inset story in Edgeworth's *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), develops this representation of Irish ingenuity and generosity in the context of the debates about the Act of Union between Ireland and Britain.⁶⁴ Although the Act of Union in 1800 had established free trade between Ireland and England, it had also resulted in an export tax on Irish goods that disadvantaged Ireland economically, perpetuating the state of dependence which Edgeworth had, with her father, long argued against. 'Little Dominick' allegorizes the detrimental consequences of this deliberately engineered structural inequality, and imagines a possible future in which an emancipated Ireland might come to the rescue of its British ally. In this story, an orphaned Irish boy at school in England is belittled and humiliated, flogged by his schoolmaster every day for his grammatical errors and mocked by his English schoolmates for his 'vicious constructions' and 'idiomatic absurdities'. He is made into what Edgeworth calls 'a just object of obloquy and derision', using legalized language in the

⁶³ 'Forgive and Forget', p. 57. Notably, this 'family union' is one of friends and equals, not of parents and children, or of marriage partners.

⁶⁴ 'Little Dominick' is not a children's story, but demonstrates how central the figure of the child is to Edgeworth's thinking about possible Irish futures.

satirical reference to ‘justice’ to suggest the unfair laws that have produced this perceived inferiority.⁶⁵ Again, this recalls Burke’s emphasis on the effects of the unjust penal laws in Ireland and the character of the Protestant Ascendancy: Dominick is robbed of ‘estimation’, treated with contempt, and robbed of what little comfort he has (the promise of a summer holiday with his Irish relatives, denied when the schoolmaster makes a bad report on his progress). In 1792, Burke had complained of the misuse of the word ‘ascendancy’ in the Irish context: originally meaning ‘an influence obtained over the mind of some other person by love and reverence’, a bond of affection, in Ireland it has ‘strayed far from its original sense’, signifying a relationship of unjust domination, in truth a continuation of ‘the old mastership’, and entailing the reduction of a majority of the people to a condition of ‘absolute slavery, under a military power’; ‘subserviency and contempt’.⁶⁶ For Burke, the Protestant Ascendancy had offered an education in permanent subordination, one that mutilated the potential of the Irish, a false and oppressive instruction in which there was ‘much of the lash and nothing of the lesson’.⁶⁷ But Edgeworth’s story, while it emphasizes the abuse and suspicion that are directed towards Dominick, turns away from this idea that he is fated to be oppressed, left orphaned and friendless: an English boy, Edwards, stands up for him in class, welcoming Dominick into his own family home for the holidays, and befriending him. This open-hearted and sympathetic act of friendship is amply repaid later when Dominick – now, by his own efforts, a prosperous man, able to ‘live independently of all the world’ – repays a debt for which Edwards has been imprisoned, generously sharing the resources generated by his own hard work.⁶⁸

As in ‘The Orphans’ and ‘Forgive and Forget’, it is Edgeworth’s child heroes who alter the course of the history she recounts. The central relationship of the story of ‘Little Dominick’ is not one between an abandoned child and a fatherly protector, nor indeed between a child victim and an adult tormentor, but a reciprocal friendship between Dominick and an equal, one who does not denigrate him and instead welcomes him as a friend and a brother into his own family, suggesting the potential parity, amity, and bonds of affection between the citizens of Ireland and England that Edgeworth saw as the basis for future

⁶⁵ *Irish Bulls*, I, p. 89.

⁶⁶ *Letter to Richard Burke* (19 February 1792), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Gen. ed. Paul Langford; vol. IX: I: *The Revolutionary War 1794-1797*; II: *Ireland*, eds R. B. McDowell and William B. Todd (Oxford, 1991), pp. 643, 644.

⁶⁷ *Letter to Richard Burke*, p. 645.

⁶⁸ *Irish Bulls*, p. 93.

prosperity. Treated with more generosity, Edgeworth implies, Ireland could transform the fortunes of the British state, becoming, as the 1797 *Letter on the Tellograph* had argued, Britain's greatest ally.

In all of these tales of orphans and spurned children, Edgeworth seeks to restore credit to the Irish people, her active, inventive and hopeful child heroes standing in as representatives of a different, fresh perspective on the realities of Irish political life in the late 1790s. Edgeworth's imagining of economic exchange dwells less on private fortunes than on public benefits: a freer circulation of resources, and a pooling of intellectual as well as literal wealth. In so doing, Edgeworth allegorizes a possible future in which Ireland is respected and granted parity, in which the Irish are permitted equal access to the markets and networks that could grant them financial independence from a Westminster government, and recognized as valuable participants in a modern economy and polity. Her stories seek to 'interest' English readers in Ireland and its people, bringing the English to see the need to rebalance the account, to make up for a deficit of attention and of justice. Her use of child characters to awaken this interest is not indicative of a perception of Ireland as inferior or backward, requiring protection or reformation. Rather, Edgeworth's vision in these hopeful stories is one in which progress often comes from those who are excluded, marginalized, unjustly victimized – but who eventually prove powerfully transformative agents of change.