Lady Gregory’s ‘Emigrant’s Notebook’:
Autobiography, Oral Narrative, and the Anglo-Irish Book Trade

Le « Carnet d’une émigrante » de Lady Gregory : autobiographie, oralité et le commerce du livre anglo-irlandais

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Résumé
Entre son mariage en 1880 et le départ de Sir William Gregory pour Ceylan où il allait occuper le poste de gouverneur de la colonie, Lady Augusta Gregory commença à rédiger un texte auquel elle donna le titre mystérieux de « Carnet d’une émigrante ». À cette époque, elle avait environ trente ans, âge certes précoce pour entreprendre une rétrospective de sa vie : mais l’œuvre qu’elle produisit constitue un mélange remarquable de réminiscences, de portraits et de vision poétique de l’existence, qui reste cependant imprégné d’une grande sincérité et d’un désir de révéler la vérité. Bien qu’elle n’ait pas été publiée et n’ait reçu qu’une faible attention critique, l’œuvre fournit la base de ce qui devint le moyen d’expression privilégié de Lady Gregory : elle allait en tirer les œuvres dramatiques et en prose pour lesquelles elle devint célèbre. Lady Gregory intitula son récit “Carnet d’une émigrante” peut-être parce que le second volume (l’essai, écrit à la main, occupe trois cahiers) raconte ses séjours en Italie, en France et en Égypte avant son mariage ; et parce qu’elle quitta l’Irlande pour l’Angleterre et l’Europe pendant un certain temps après son mariage. Mais le titre pourrait aussi faire référence à un exil permanent de l’âme, loin du lieu et de l’époque qui apparaissent dans le récit. James Pethica suggère aussi que le « Carnet » fut commencé presque immédiatement après sa liaison avec W.S. Blunt et que son titre suggère un exil psychologique et sexuel par rapport à son existence passée.
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The environment that fostered the work to be explored in this essay was created by a specific moment of cultural instability. The increasing political and social chaos of late nineteenth-century Ireland fomented two opposing cultural milieux: the challenging of the Protestant Ascendancy whose land holdings since the fourteenth century were being threatened by the indigenous population, and the increasing incidence of education in women of the Ascendancy class.1 These daughters of the Anglo-Irish gentry, as they continued to discover areas of artistic and intellectual interest in which they were not specifically educated, were beginning to receive an intellectual training similar to men’s. As a result, they began to acquire proficiency in methods of thought and expression previously available only to their brothers.2 Although it would take almost a hundred years for the majority of the ‘big houses’ of the Ascendancy to be demolished, the artistic and literary tradition that Ascendancy women engendered at the close of this historical phase illustrated the tensions between losing one’s home and historical background and the dawning realization that the origins of both were ethically dubious.

2 Idem.
Maria Edgeworth, probably the most famous female Irish writer before the twentieth century, portrayed as early as 1800 the Ascendancy ideal that she hoped her class to embody. But her most famous novel, Castle Rackrent, published in 1800, not only examines the status of the Anglo-Irish landlord, it also scorns the absurd position of Irish and English women. Edgeworth’s assumption of a male narrative voice, that of the servant Thady Quirk, enacts a reversal of her own gender and social status, as if to suggest the grotesquerie of a situation in which men of the ruling class are incapable of informed narration while women are constrained to remain silent, leaving the interpretation of their circumstances to a servant.

Lady Augusta Gregory, born 85 years after Edgeworth into the Anglo-Irish Persse family of County Galway, gained literary recognition when she began writing short plays on Irish subjects for the Irish Literary Theatre, which she co-founded with W.B. Yeats and John Millington Synge. She had produced editorial essays and articles in her youth; her first publication was a pamphlet on Egyptian politics, Arabi and His Household, when she was thirty, shortly after her marriage to Sir William Gregory, also of County Galway, a favorite of Queen Victoria and 34 years Augusta Persse’s senior. In the intervening period, she had co-founded the Abbey Theatre, helped instigate the Irish Renaissance, and supported the careers of many of the artistic luminaries of early twentieth-century Ireland. But long before any of these events had transpired, Lady Gregory had produced a self-narrative that is a prototypical model for her later plays and other works of fiction, her biographies, and her autobiographies, while being in and of itself an important component of her literary repertoire.

Sometime between her marriage in 1880 and Sir William Gregory’s departure for Ceylon in 1883 to fulfill his post as Governor of the colony, Lady Gregory began writing a series of narratives she cryptically titled “An Emigrant’s Notebook”. Lady Gregory’s biographer James Pethica argues that

4 Elizabeth Coxhead tentatively dates the Notebook around 1884, “when Lady Gregory would have been very much alone,” a statement that she takes from vol. 2 of Lady Gregory’s diaries in the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection: “Spent January, February, March & April at Coole while W. was in Ceylon—I was very much alone.” But in the Notebook and her diaries in the Berg Collection, Lady Gregory refers to a brief visit to Roxborough that she made in 1882 as having taken place “last summer.” Ann Saddlemeyer, in a conversation with the author, has hypothesized that the Notebook was produced closer to the time of Lady Gregory’s marriage. James Pethica, on the other hand, argues that “the winter of 1883-84 is a certainty for Augusta Gregory’s work on [the Notebook] as a complete literary entity. She may have written some parts sooner after marrying, but winter 1883 is the moment she returns to Ireland and more particularly Roxborough for the first time as an ‘emigrant’” (Letter to author, 4 July 1995). The inner cover of the first volume of the Notebook is signed with Lady Gregory’s early signature, “IA Gregory, Coole,” so it is certain that the work was produced at Coole.
the winter of 1883-84 is a certainty for Augusta Gregory’s work on [the Notebook] as a complete literary entity. She may have written some parts sooner after marrying, but winter 1883 is the moment she returns to Ireland [after traveling with her husband] and more particularly to Roxborough, her family’s estate, for the first time as an ‘emigrant’ (Letter to author, 4 July 1995).

At the time of writing, Lady Gregory was in her late twenties or early thirties, an early enough age to begin writing a retrospective on life. But what she produced is an exemplary work of memory, portraiture, and life made poetic while remaining rooted in self-honesty and the desire for truth. Although this work has remained unpublished and has received little more than passing critical attention, it provided the foundation for Lady Gregory’s later means of expression: she would produce from it the literature for which she is known. Moreover, “An Emigrant’s Notebook” is an understated political text in the tradition of Edgeworth’s novels; its autobiographical viewpoint illuminates concerns and self-conflicts within the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy during the height of the Irish land wars of the 1880s.

This work is certainly the earliest of Lady Gregory’s autobiographies; though unpublished, it is distinct from her diaries and journal entries and provides a significant interface for Lady Gregory’s dramatic, historical, and autobiographical writings. It is also an interface between the relative tranquility of the 1850s to 70s in Ireland, and the beginnings of the dissolution of the Anglo-Irish class during the early twentieth century.

In the first section of the Notebook, Lady Gregory writes of Roxborough, her childhood home, as a memorial. This section, which begins the notebook, reads,

Our home was not beautiful—quite the reverse. They say it was the first slated house in the county, & this may well have been, for the little dim slates look rather experimental. One generation after another had talked of rebuilding it, and yet it stands intact, & it is likely to remain so, for who would build marble halls now to be inhabited by a possible Land Leaguer of the near future? I remember the time when the windows were left open all night—as we sat in the drawing room after dinner the light streamed out on the lawn, and when the boys & girls went to one of the rare County balls at L. the hall door was left unlocked until day break that they might let themselves in & not disturb the dreams of the drowsy old butler...(1)

The section on Roxborough was composed, she explains,

after my last visit to Ireland, and in consequence of finding all so changed even within the last year or two that I wrote down these recollections of my old home—of the time when we lived in peace and charity with all men and loved our people and they loved us.
This nostalgic view of her youth characterizes its depiction in the Notebook, though its somewhat saccharine aspect does not; her descriptions in this original autobiographical text are much more cohesive than in the later works into which it was partially absorbed.

In the final version of Seventy Years, Lady Gregory’s posthumously-published autobiography, which she completed just before her death, she toned down the bitterness of recollections of her early childhood in previous versions, preferring to convey these more subtly in the final text by a continual substitution of the phrase “the Mistress” wherever she had used “my mother” in earlier versions. A singular instance of the former title is found in a section on Lady Gregory’s marriage that she later edited out: “My mother [was] never quite sure he [Sir William] had not married me as a compliment to her”.

Lady Gregory’s voice in these final revisions of Seventy Years—less bitter, more nostalgic—is closer to that in the Notebook than the earlier versions of the published autobiography. In the Notebook, Lady Gregory’s mother is “the Mistress” and her father “the Master;” her older brother Richard with whose care she was entrusted in her mid-twenties is simply “my invalid”. While the descriptions of her family in the Notebook convey no sense of resentment, they do express, significantly, a profound feeling of distance from her family members. There are fewer overt references to her mother’s and sisters’ religious proselytizing in the Notebook, and more humorous anecdotes focusing on members of the community. The fact that Lady Gregory ultimately returns to the more discreet style employed in the Notebook to deal with family members in Seventy Years attests to her intention of publishing her earlier self-narrative, an important consideration in light of her unwillingness to publish Seventy Years during her lifetime. It is also worth noting that Seventy Years is written in third person, while Emigrant’s Notebook consistently uses first.

It is indeed arguable that Seventy Years, as a discovered text of autobiography found among family papers some forty years after Lady Gregory’s death, is no more or less a component of her published literary autobiographies than “An Emigrant’s Notebook”, as she intended to have both published but never did.

In her 1961 study of Lady Gregory’s life and work, Elizabeth Coxhead maintains that the presence of an alternative ending in the third and last volume of the Notebook indicates that it was written with a view

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5 In Seventy Years, Lady Gregory also uses the phrase “The Mother,” although with less frequency than “The mistress.” See Seventy Years, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1974) 13. Further references listed in text.
6 Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters write of Seventy Years: “Her unwillingness to publish it herself may be attributed to ambivalence about her private life as well as concern that she might offend her contemporaries.” See Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters, eds., Lady Gregory: Selected Writings (London: Penguin, 1995) 525.
to publication, an idea that is borne out by the second volume of her diaries in the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection, which seem to be a precursory version of the work.\(^7\) She writes in the second volume of these,

> trusting that there will be some few who will be glad to hear of an Ireland neither all rollicking nor all bloodstained—to hear of some Irish people possessing feelings like ourselves I give these leaves to the publishers.

As Coxhead affirms, the characters evoked in the Notebook prefigure those in her plays to come: “When she does become a professional writer, this is the writer she will be, this is the material she will use. She has found it before her meeting with Yeats and Hyde.”\(^8\)

It is not difficult to ascertain, when reading her published autobiographies and plays, including *Spreading the News*, *The Workhouse Ward*, and even *Grania*, that Lady Gregory used the Notebook as a stockpile for material when she became a professional dramatist, and later as a prototype for her autobiographies. Whole sections of the Notebook, especially those that focus on Lady Gregory’s childhood, have been included in *Seventy Years*. The account that the nurse Mary Sheridan, who worked for the Persse family when Lady Gregory was a child, gives of the French landing at Killala in 1798 is reproduced in *Seventy Years* almost verbatim from the Notebook. The Notebook reads:

> Our old nurse was a link with a past generation. Her earliest recollection was of having been taken as a little girl to the play, and its being interrupted by a great shouting and clapping of hands because of the arrival of the news that the French had landed at Killala. After that she had lived as nursemaid in the family of Hamilton Rowan. She would tell us sometimes of his escape from prison in which he was aided by his heroic wife, and of the boatmen from whom he tried to hide his face till one of them said ‘We know you very well W. Rowan and the reward that’s on your head, and there is no fear that we will betray you.’ She used to be afraid of him and remembered him as a stern grave man, striding up and down the room in his dressing gown. A picture of Lord Norbury used to hang on the wall and, irritated by reading a speech he had made, one day he flung a knife at it and slashed it across the face (AEN, Notebook 1).

The butler at Roxborough, other servants, and members of the community who appear in the Notebook translate not only into *Seventy Years*, but directly into her plays, from *Spreading the News* to *The Gaol Gate*.

But “An Emigrant’s Notebook” is more than a practice run. It is a definitive example of the Childhood genre of autobiography and an

\(^7\) The Berg diaries include more explicit critiques of her parents and more details of her home life; in the first volume of the Notebook only stories relating to the Irish countryside and its inhabitants remain, indicating that Lady Gregory intended the Notebook specifically as a work of Irish literature.

unselfconsciously autobiographical version of the *Künstlerroman*, a portal through which the world in which Lady Gregory moved and what she thought of it can be seen. As the ninth of 17 children, and a “little-welcomed girl” as she describes herself in *Seventy Years*, Augusta Persse was taught from an early age to be self-effacing. Her published autobiographies reflect this in their titles, including *The Autobiography of Sir William Gregory* (1894), *Mr. Gregory’s Letter-Box 1813-35* (1898), and *Hugh Lane’s Life and Achievement* (1921). Her more clearly-definable and “declared” self-narratives: *Our Irish Theatre* (1913)—subtitled *A Chapter of Autobiography*; *Coole* (1931); and the posthumously-published *Seventy Years* (1974), are more specifically about Lady Gregory’s own life, although even they do not overtly yield their subject’s story and usually contain details of particular situations or fragmented descriptions of events rather than a cohesive story of the person who participated in them. Additionally, as the wife of one of the most important members of the British parliament, Lady Gregory understood the necessity for subtlety in any writing that involved Irish politics during the 1880s.

The first section of the Notebook is divided into seven vignettes, from Roxborough House to the family’s church to the hunting lodge where Lady Gregory’s brothers often stayed and where she once spent a week, “a very happy one”. Anecdotes and portraits are interspersed throughout these; older folktales and songs mingle with Lady Gregory’s own narrative to evoke her life of thought and external circumstance. Chronological structuring is almost entirely absent from “An Emigrant’s Notebook”; its framework is based solely on the re-creation of images: persons, scenes, and events. But through her evocation of events through the chronological arrangement of the vignettes, a cumulative order is derived, and Lady Gregory’s development as an adult writer can be ascertained through her role within them.

Subsequently, the narrative of Lady Gregory’s childhood, which occupies the first section of the Notebook, includes detailed descriptions of the garden and gardener, the local church situated on the Persse estate, Lady Gregory’s nurse, the hunting lodge, and various servants and members of the community. The comic interplay between rural villagers and an outsider who encounters them, which figures in both *Seventy Years* and her plays, is distinctly visible in this part of the Notebook. Of a certain worship service she writes:

> On Sunday evenings and on Feast days we had service not at the church but in the village schoolroom, which was over a stable in which any of the congregation who drove put up their horses. I remember a very high church Oxford student of divinity (who has since gone over to Rome) on his first Sunday with us going to “Evensong” there, and coming back in a state of unspeakable horror, first at the unmistakable sounds and smells of the stable beneath—then at the rector’s having preached in a “shooting coat,” and finally
at one of the congregation having responded to the words ‘Let us pray’ with a hearty “Well, let us” (AEN, Notebook 1).

These local anecdotes and the personalities they feature, as Coxhead notes, are the major components of the narrative—those portraits to which Lady Gregory gives the most colorful detail and which appear in her later dramatic works. When reading the Notebook one has a sense that whereas Lady Gregory’s family are at most given a passing glance, the villagers’ personalities are more carefully fashioned:

In Ireland there is a comic side to all things, and we can laugh over the disputes that raged during the last meeting of the “Ladies Land League,” when Miss Kennedy the butcher’s daughter said to Miss Tarpy the draper’s, “If I called myself a lady I would behave as a lady” and Miss Tarpy rejoined with spirit “And if I belonged to a butcher’s shop I would go home and weigh out tripe.” But I must not forget the story of our respectable old butler who used to declaim against the depravity of the younger servants, until one night the Mistress being downstairs and passing his open door saw a tableau of a select card party at the table, while old J. himself, on his knees at a chair—his hands devoutly folded, was looking over his shoulder with the words on his lips ‘You go on dealing out the cards while I say a few prayers’—the Mistress was a discreet woman and quietly withdrew (AEN, Notebook 1).

“An Emigrant’s Notebook” is on one hand a typical product of late Victorian aristocratic feminine writing. But Lady Gregory’s characterization of family, locals, and landscape is intricately interwoven with observations of the political climate in rural western Ireland. The section on the Misses Kennedy and Tarpy, and the Roxborough butler, occurs at the end of the vignette on Roxborough. The house provides a contrast between an idealized portrait of gracious Anglo-Irish living and the political reality facing the ascendancy class.

While it is true that servants and members of the community are presented in a more comic light than Lady Gregory’s family members, these portraits are significant independently of any aristocratic tone Lady Gregory might have used regarding them. They are, as Coxhead observes, the point at which Lady Gregory finds her literary voice, allowing memory and imagination to create the characters that would later make her an Irish dramatist. Their creative importance is also recognized by Kate O’Brien. In an essay written near the end of her life, O’Brien names the major Irish writers since the lifting of the Penal Laws, and pays tribute to the works of Lady Gregory for their characterizations of “what she heard and what she knew of all the shades and classes of people who were her daily acquaintance...”
I think she was a wittier and more odd interpreter of that society she found around her house than were some of those whom she promoted with such generosity. I have always had much respect for her neat and lonely style.⁹

It has been suggested to me by Dr. John Manning of Queen’s University, that Lady Gregory kept the Notebook for her household, as a series of anecdotes to be read at family gatherings, a typical practice in 18th and 19th century aristocratic Britain. But while this may be part of Lady Gregory’s intent, the completed narratives, the obvious editing, and the balance of serious and comic, ladylike interests in house, garden and demesne, intricately woven with political observations, not to mention her letter in the Berg diaries planning for the Notebook to be published, indicate that in spite of its somewhat less self-effacing qualities, Lady Gregory believed that there would be a public audience for this work. “The pleasure of reading”, Roland Barthes observes,

proceeds from certain breaks, in which the language is redistributed... Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge... and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours).¹⁰

If, as Barthes suggests, the collision between these stylistic edges gives texts their energy, Lady Gregory’s Notebook shows on several levels how the plurality and conflict of her interests in creating characters enable her text to speak at once from regions of conventional autobiographical prose and in more radical political plays.

Lady Gregory’s identity as a child and as a young adult emerges through and among the church, the garden, the household servants, her prim older sisters, and her brothers in whose company she was most comfortable. It also appears via the description of her mother, her disapproval of whom is clearly discerned in the narrative. The Mistress is so caught up in her evangelism that she allows the squatter “Honest John” to settle on the Roxborough estate because of his professed conversion, even giving him better food and lodgings than the servants and ignoring his tendency to steal in her zeal to proselytize. But throughout the Notebook, Lady Gregory’s disapproval remains subtle; she creates her autobiography as Coxhead believes she created her own method of protest in her family and later in the proscriptive environment provided for the female intellectual and writer:

Even as a little girl she was a rebel against the family thought and traditions; not a flamboyant rebel, but a quiet, dogged, persistent one, as she was to be all her life against what she considered unjust authority (Coxhead 5).

The last section of the Notebook most saliently features Lady Gregory’s emergent “I”; its only references outside her personal scope of thought and reflection are reworkings of the previous section of the book. This section begins as she invokes someone she calls “A.” to come and sit with her by the fire, on one of the many evenings that Sir William was away and during which she composed the Notebook. It begins in Coole, on a rainy evening as Lady Gregory sits in solitude:

There is no one with me in this large barren inner parlour— I hear rain against the windows & a little way off the waves beating against the rocks—now & then a sound of laughter from the evening gathering of the household round the kitchen fire comes & dies away unechoed….A. will you come & sit by my fire & let me talk to you for a little time? We have not spoken to each other for such a long time—since we were together here & you listened to all I had to say, and I remember still all you said to me, but those days are past (AEN, Notebook 2).

“A.” is perhaps Lady Gregory’s sister Arabella or her brother Algernon— she was friendliest with these siblings—or even Lady Gregory herself. As an emigrant from Ireland and from her earlier life, Lady Gregory’s separation from and reuniting with self in place and persona is a trope which is implicitly expressed throughout the Notebook and which may become explicit here. Coxhead concludes of the Notebook that the manuscript breaks off suddenly; she may have shown it to a publisher, who was discouraging. Like the rest of the Irish Renaissance she was waiting for her market, and in the end it was one they had to create for themselves (32).

But I would contend that there was in fact a market for Anglo-Irish writing and memoir, into which area An Emigrant’s Notebook fits nicely. Why then, was it not published? Perhaps the answer lies somewhere between Lady Gregory’s self-effacing tendencies, her unwillingness to publish a book implicating Irish politics while her husband was alive, and perhaps the obscurity of the work results from Lady Gregory’s putting it aside in the midst of other concerns: her other autobiographies and, later, dramatic writing, not to mention that of her beneficiaries, Yeats, Synge, O’Casey, and Shaw, during the inception and growth of the Irish Literary Revival. Ultimately, she may have forgotten about her Notebook as a work of literature, and simply used it as foundation for other projects.

But long after the Irish literary movement established itself as a pervasive cultural phenomenon, “An Emigrant’s Notebook” can still be recognized as a formative agent of Irish Renaissance literature. It is an autobiography that is at once representatively Anglo-Irish and centered in female narrative, as well as politically observant and astute, and a
recapitulation of autobiographical forms, from Childhood through portraiture to story-telling to the first-person presence of self, which would give rise to Lady Gregory’s later forms of creative expression. The exceptional quality of the work is that it accomplishes these feats of identity and memory without being researched and rewritten, except for a minor revision near its conclusion. In a constellation of diverse styles of memoir, “An Emigrant’s Notebook” remains the purest form of autobiography Lady Gregory wrote: it is at once the story of her past and intimation of her future as a writer, wherein her literary imagination is first revealed. It is an unfortunate accident that it has not been made available as a published work to readers of Irish literature.