

## Maria Edgeworth - A biographical note.

### Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849).

#### A Biographical Note

Maria Edgeworth was the third child and eldest daughter of Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817) and his first wife, Anna Maria Elers (1743-1777). Richard Lovell Edgeworth was an Anglo-Irish politician, writer and inventor and a leading light of the Birmingham Lunar Society (founded in the 1770s). Maria was born at Black Bourton, Oxfordshire on 1 January 1768. Her mother died of puerperal fever following the birth of a fifth child in March 1773 and her father swiftly remarried only three months later to Honora Sneyd of Lichfield (1751-1780). Maria went with her surviving brother and two sisters to live with her father at the family estate at Edgeworthstown, County Longford briefly before she was sent away to a boarding school in England. She returned to Edgeworthstown in the summer of 1782 by which time her stepmother had died (1780) and her father married again, this time to Elizabeth Sneyd, the sister of his late wife. Maria now formed a strong bond with her father and participated in educating his ever growing family of children as well as managing the estate.

Her first published works were *Letters for Literary Ladies* in 1795 ? which made a vigorous case for female rationality and skills as writers and a collection of children's stories (*The Parent's Assistant*, 1796, but it was *Practical Education* of 1798, co-authored with her father, that propelled Maria Edgeworth to international fame. This 2 volume work drew on the method of education she had herself applied in helping to raise between 1782 and 1797, 13 children at Edgeworthstown. Richard's fourth and last marriage after the death of Elizabeth in 1797 ? to Frances Beaufort in May 1798 - brought a further six children into the family. Maria travelled in England, Scotland and France in the 1790s and the first decade of the nineteenth century and she turned down a marriage proposal while in Paris in 1802 from a Swedish scientist and diplomat, Abram Niclas van Clewberg-Edelcrantz.

Maria Edgeworth wrote novels, children's literature, works of education and plays. She is now best known for her fiction, the majority of which was published in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Her first work of fiction set in Ireland, *Castle Rackrent* , was published in January 1800, an ironic ?national tale? delivered in the voice of a long-standing Irish servant of a family of Anglo-Irish gentry. Thady Quirk, the narrator, was based on the Edgeworths' steward, John Langan, and the short novel describing the ineffective landowners he serves drew on family and local stories. Two further Irish tales, *Ennui* (1809) and *The Absentee* (1812) were the works that received the best critical reception. She was equally at home in the form of the novel of metropolitan intrigue and fashion. *Belinda* (1801) is a comic masterpiece with a tragic tone in the story of the brittle society hostess, Lady Delacour, hostess to the eponymous heroine who learns to chart her way to true love through London's choppy social scene. *Leonora* (1806) is an experiment in letter fiction contrasting a virtuous wife with her husband's charismatic mistress, and responding in part to Germaine de Staël's *Delphine*. *Patronage* (1814) offers a critique of political chicanery through telling the story of the contrasting fortunes of two families. Two novels, *Harrington* and *Ormond*, concerned themselves with the growth to mature responsibility of male heroes, and appeared together on 21 June 1817 just before the death of her father. Thereafter, she completed her memoir of Richard Lovell Edgeworth's life

for publication in 1820. Although she claimed to have lost her enthusiasm for fiction, her last novel, *Helen* (1834), shows her powers of storytelling and ethical nuance undiminished. Maria Edgeworth was probably the most successful writer of her day. Jane Austen, who admired Maria Edgeworth's novels, made just £684 during her lifetime from her books. A manuscript held in the Bodleian with 'Copyrights to Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth' (1842) (Bodleian MS. Eng. lett. c. 722, fol.57-9) records literary copyrights worth £11062, 8 Shillings and 10 pence.

## Sources

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Maria Edgeworth: *Letters from England 1813-1844*, ed. Christina Colvin (Oxford University Press, 1971)  
Maria Edgeworth in France and Switzerland: *Selections from the Edgeworth Family Letters*, ed. Christina Colvin (Oxford University Press, 1979)  
Maria Edgeworth's *Letters from Ireland*, ed. Valerie Pakenham (Liliput Press, 2017)  
*The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, general editors Marilyn Butler & Mitzi Myers, 12 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999, 2003)

## Major Works by Maria Edgeworth

*Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795)  
*The Parent's Assistant: or Stories for Children* (1796)  
--- and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2 vols (1798)  
*Castle Rackrent*, an Hibernian tale (1800)  
*Early Lessons* (1801)  
*Moral Tales for Young People*, 5 vols (1801)  
*Belinda*, 3 vols (1801)  
*Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802)  
*Popular Tales* 3 vols (1804)  
*Leonora*, 2 vols (1806)  
--- and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Essays on Professional Education* (1809)  
*Tales of Fashionable Life*, 6 vols (1809-12)  
*Patronage*, 4 vols (1814)  
*Harrington and Ormond*, 3 vols (1817)  
*Comic Dramas* (1817)  
*Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq.*, 2 vols (1820)  
*Harry and Lucy Concluded: being the last part of Early Lessons* (1825)  
*Helen*, 3 vols (1834)

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