Abstract and Keywords
This chapter discusses *Castle Rackrent*, an Irish novel by Maria Edgeworth which illustrates the history of Anglo-Irish fiction and the reflective qualities of a literary history. Besides disclosing the literary history of Ireland, the novel as well serves as a glimpse into the genealogy of the Rackrents and a mirror of the discontinuities and crises of an emergent literary form in the age of revolution.

Keywords: Castle Rackrent, Maria Edgeworth, Edgeworth, Anglo-Irish fiction, literary history, Anglo-Irish fiction history

1. The Genesis of Fiction

1. Certain of our [Dublin] corporate body talk of ancestors as if they had a regular list of them framed and glazed in the family mansion, but we request some of them to point out who their fathers were—we will not trouble them to go back farther than merely to tell us where and when begotten—whether on a cobler's stall, a butcher's block, or within the purlieus of Smock-alley—*Qui capit ille facit*.

*(Morning Post, 1792)*

References
Castle Rackrent (1800) is not the first Irish novel, but with it the history of Anglo-Irish fiction begins. Diligent though hardly arcane research will reveal scores of earlier novels either set in Ireland, written by Irish authors, or (by virtue of the status of the Dublin book trade) published in Ireland. Yet that material remains the stuff of a cultural archaeology, so to speak, and it is to Maria Edgeworth that we look for the reflective qualities of a literary history.

With the exception of Joyce's oeuvre to which it bears some resemblance in its ironic totality, no Irish novel has attracted more attention than Castle Rackrent. Of course it earned (together with the Tales of Fashionable Life, 1809, etc.) its authoress a place in the salons of London during her occasional descents upon the capital, earned her the respect of Byron and the friendship of Walter Scott. We will see how Waverley is strictly indebted to The Absentee (1812) rather than to the formally more adventurous Castle Rackrent, and yet the entire canon of Scott's fiction might legitimately (p. 98) claim a relationship to the little anonymous fiction of 1800. On these grounds Maria Edgeworth gains a place in histories of English literature as one of the lesser women writers of Jane Austen's period. The apparent coincidence of her first novel with the passing of the Act of Union ensures her the attention of Irish commentators. Here, the behaviour of her father in relation to the proposed Union has stimulated interest in his attentive and dutiful daughter. Sincere in his support of the Union initially, Richard Lovell Edgeworth voted against it in the crucial debates of 1799 and 1800. It has been customary to accept this as a good man's refusal to side with bribery, and the Edgeworths saw their conduct in this light. However, the explanation itself requires explanation: the substitution of personal honour for political integrity deserves more comment than simple commendation, and in The Absentee Maria Edgeworth's hero will work out some of the consequences of that altered notion of responsibility. The complexity of R. L. Edgeworth's position in relation to the Union had earlier affinities to the historical complexities of Castle Rackrent and its composition.
The full title is instructive—*Castle Rackrent, an Hibernian Tale: taken from the Facts, and from the Manners of the Irish Squires, before the Year 1782*. Given at length, the title Reveals a series of hiatuses, of disjunctions and rhythmic shifts which the short-title *Castle Rackrent* tends to disguise. The architectural unity conveyed in the short title is part of a persistent reading of the novel within an ‘Anglo-Irish tradition of “Big House” fiction’, according to which tradition is uncomplicated continuity. *Castle Rackrent* advances a focal point at once social and geographical, but ‘an Hibernian Tale’ implies a narrator (in this case a highly personalized one) who necessarily introduces the possibility of various points of view upon that place. ‘Taken from the Facts’ ostentatiously assures the reader, but then is rhythmically shaken by ‘from the Manners …’. Finally, the historical focus of the tale is revealed in ‘of the Irish Squires before the Year 1782’. Thus, the immediacy and seeming oneness of *Castle Rackrent* is (p.99) gradually shown to involve a series of qualifications, lapses, and retreats. To readers of the first edition, 1782 promptly called to mind the legislative independence which the Dublin parliament won from Westminster, and the dignity and prosperity associated with Grattan’s Parliament. Hence, the novel’s full title apparently exempted the contemporary squires of 1800 from the critique issuing through Thady Quirk’s narration. But 1782 had also seen the return of R. L. Edgeworth to his Irish estates, and travelling with him on that occasion was his daughter Maria: thus the novel takes the inauguration of her Irish residence as its historical frontier. Does the sub-title therefore act also as an authorial self-exculpation, coyly hidden behind a suspect anonymity?
Such a conspiratorial reading of the title does not allow for the complex interaction of genesis and setting in a work of fiction, especially a work of fiction written anonymously by a woman. The problem is complicated by the timetable of the novel's composition, by the incompleteness of our knowledge of that timetable, and by the structure of the novel itself. *Castle Rackrent* is a historical novel, but its historical aspect does not lie inert in its temporal setting. As with all such fiction, its historical dimension is the dynamic relationship between that setting and the historical moment of its composition: and beyond that, it involves also that relationship in interaction with a historically defined readership. Not all of these aspects can be summoned before the eye on the instant, but a brief chronology may help:

['the events of *Castle Rackrent*']

1782 M. E. returns to Ireland. Legislative independence.

1792 (January) The first Protestant Ascendancy debates. (September) Energetic Protestant Ascendancy campaign.

According to one late source, *Castle Rackrent* was written ‘8 years before it was published’, i.e. early in 1792; M. E. out of Ireland for much of the year.

1793-1795 Some time during this period M. E. regaled her aunt Mrs Ruxton with imitations of John Langan’s behaviour—the ‘original’ of Thady Quirk.

(p.100) 1793 (autumn)-1796 The first Part of *Castle Rackrent* written, probably early in the period rather than late.

1795 (4 January) Earl Fitzwilliam arrives in Dublin as Lord-Lieutenant.

(25 February) Fitzwilliam recalled to London.

1795 (autumn)-1798 Second Part written two years after the first—see above.

1796 (January/February) R. L. Edgeworth involved in electioneering in Longford—unsuccessfully.

1798 R. L. Edgeworth elected for St Johnstown, a rotten borough.
(summer) Insurrection in Ulster and Leinster.

(8 September) Invading French army defeated at Ballinamuck, Co. Longford, a few miles from Edgeworthstown.

(October) M. E. preparing to send MS of *Castle Rackrent* to London publishers.

1799 (January) Union proposal defeated in Dublin parliament.

(April) R. L. E. has conversations in Birmingham, which impress him with the advantages for trade resulting from Union.

(late) Glossary for *Castle Rackrent* compiled.

1800 (January) *Castle Rackrent* published anonymously in London by Joseph Johnson, a radical whom M. E. had visited in prison the previous year. (June) Union bill passed in Dublin parliament.\(^3\)

In time, this chronology can shed a great deal of light on the structure of *Castle Rackrent*; first of all, however, some comment on the political events encapsulated in it is unavoidable.
Of the Protestant Ascendancy debates enough has been said: suffice it to note here that the earliest possible date for the commencement of *Castle Rackrent* is also 1792, though the authoress was admittedly out of Ireland for much (p.101) of the year. The excitement of Catholic hopes in 1792/3 was revived with the news that the Earl Fitzwilliam was to be appointed Lord-Lieutenant at the beginning of 1795. Fitzwilliam was Burke's patron, a liberal Whig and known adversary of the Dublin Castle junto. His attempts to eliminate the corruption associated with the Beresford faction were curtailed by his recall to London, but a sense of the possible termination of the old ways was strongly felt by Irish liberals. R. L. Edgeworth sought to interest the new Lord-Lieutenant in his telegraph scheme, but the suddenness of Fitzwilliam's fall brought all to naught and underlined the fragility of such enlightened hopes. From 1795 onwards disturbances in the Longford countryside complicated the family's experience of politics. Their distance from ultra-Protestant feeling cut them off from the magistrates and squireens, while the Catholic body lacked political weight and organization. Thus, the by-election of 1796 led R. L. Edgeworth to summarize the influence of money and jobbery in verse:

> Can Poverty from Gold withdraw his hand?

> A Gauger's rod what voter can with stand?[^4]
Far from being an upstart liberal opposed by aristocratic power, Edgeworth was a landowner frustrated by the operations of a chicanery with modest, but fully adequate, patronage at its disposal. The gauger, an exciseman or one responsible for hiring men and controlling materials on public works, was symbolic of that area of social pressure where the Orange Order was at that time sending down its roots: John Giffard, of Protestant Ascendancy fame in 1792, was a gauger on the Dublin Custom-house building site. Given these growing pressures and tensions, Edgeworth's election to parliament for a rotten borough is understandable, if not entirely reconcilable with his latter-day reputation. Such ambiguity also characterizes Edgeworth experience in 1798: when the invading French troops came within sight of Edgeworthstown the family was doubly vulnerable—distrusted by the Orange yeomanry, and unaligned to this new radicalism from the Continent. That Maria Edgeworth's family had to flee their home and take refuge in Longford town where they were assailed physically by Protestant militia must colour our reading of the last pages of Castle Rackrent with its allusions to the mob in full cry. As for the Union debates, the most important feature is their number and variety—there was no one dramatic moment either of honour or betrayal.

All of these details help us to put in perspective one persistent image of the composition of Castle Rackrent. In The Irish Novelists Thomas Flanagan has popularized a notion of the relationship between politics and literature in this context which is lamentable both in its factual inaccuracy and theatrical bankruptcy:

One unambiguous ‘no!’ to the motion in support of Union was spoken in the harsh, commanding tones of Richard Lovell Edgeworth. At that moment his daughter Maria was sitting at the long table in the crowded Edgeworthstown drawing room, scribbling furiously at the first Irish novel.5

Literary history struggles to recover the less dramatic and more extensive links between social co-ordinates which Flanagan isolates in Senate and drawing-room.
The composition of *Castle Rackrent* may have begun as early as 1792 and a completed version (not necessarily the first or the final one) was ready late in 1798. One way to characterize those years refers to the gradually diminished hopes of reform after the limited successes of 1793; another would point to the increasingly subversive methods employed by opponents of the Government from the suppression of the United Irishmen in 1794 onwards. Whether one regards Fitzwilliam as a crusader or an incompetent, the United Irishmen as idealists or incendiaries, the 1790s is a decade intimately characterized as *split*. The hiatus does not occur with the rebellion or the French invasion, or even the Union; it lies more centrally in the network of fears and hopes which tied the Catholic question to the course of the French revolution. Maria Edgeworth’s own political experience, as a woman and simply as the daughter of an isolated and (to a (p.103) degree) disorientated liberal, reflected that division as an insight into the history of her class.

It has often been noted that Edgeworth family lore contains anecdotes which may have been models for some of the more extravagant behaviour of the earlier generations of Rackrent. Maria Edgeworth's biographer, Marilyn Butler, simply accepts that ‘the Edgeworths of earlier times are beyond question the real models for the four generations of the Rackrent family’, and adds that their careers ‘could be paralleled in dozens of anecdotes about the Anglo-Irish squirearchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’. Mrs Butler is certainly right in observing that ‘tracing the history of the direct line gives an inadequate idea’ of the novelist's borrowings; what is of interest to the literary historian is the bearing upon *form* of the interactions of method and source in the fiction. Here, the biographer leads us to—but does not exploit—a vital element in the composition of *Castle Rackrent*:

In her grandfather's narrative in the *Black Book* Maria had an outline which strongly resembled the plot of *Castle Rackrent*—a family saga compounded of debts and prosperous marriages; successive landlords who were selfishly oblivious of their tenants, and yet were strikingly endowed with personal charm, humour, and finally pathos.⁶
Far from confirming any sturdy sense of succession in Maria Edgeworth's exploitation of family history, the presence of a ‘black book’ of Edgeworth tradition is an indicator of the novelist's nervous reliance on the privacy of a written text as well as on the publicly recognizable narrative skills of a Thady Quirk. The imposition of that short title, *Castle Rackrent*, upon so complex a narrative is an example of the romantic insistence upon a unity which is no more than a (usually degraded) longing for unity. If we note the as yet crudely transcribed material of family history together with the ironies of Thady's narrative, then we have discovered in the backwaters of Anglo-Irish literature a prime example of Walter Benjamin's analysis of romantic symbolism. Illegitimate talk of the symbolic, Benjamin argues, leads to a (p.104) neglect of a proper discussion of ‘content in formal analysis’ and of ‘form in the aesthetics of content’. Resisting the orthodox pleas to assimilate content and form, we may find in *Castle Rackrent* the origins of an allegorical mode of writing and interpretation which will take us through to the late work of Yeats and Joyce as a characteristic of Anglo-Irish literature.
There is no doubt that *The Black Book of Edgeworthstown*, even in the synthetic edition available to the public, is of compelling relevance to any reading of *Castle Rackrent*. Casually, one reads of Sir John Edgeworth (1638–1696) that, having gambled away his wife’s most valuable jewels and won them back again ‘some time afterwards he was found in a hay yard with a friend, drawing straws out of the hayrick, and betting upon which should be the longest.’ Having read the story, Sir Condy’s mode of choosing a wife attaches itself to a sequence of such stories. Yet resemblances between the family chronicle and the novel are less significant than silent divergences. *Castle Rackrent* is almost innocent of sectarian allusion, whereas in *The Black Book* the intermarriage of Protestant and Catholic is the marriage of Francis Edgeworth and Jane Tuite sometime around 1590. Their son, John Edgeworth, left his wife and son in their house at Crannelagh ‘some days before the fatal 23rd of October, 1641’. In keeping with the long-standing tradition of Papist treachery, rebels suddenly seized the house, humiliated the wife, and made to murder the child: they were prevailed upon to spare the property because ‘there was the picture of that pious Catholic, Jane Tuite, painted on the wainscot with her beads and crucifix …’. A loyal servant had meantime saved the infant heir by pretending to reserve the privilege of murdering him to himself. Not only are these diverse details of the potency of an image, an illusion in preserving the endangered line of the Edgeworths in Ireland but, the chronicler records:

\[(p.105)\] This event was told me ... by an eye-witness of the fact, one Simpson, who was a little foot-boy in Captain Edgeworth's family in 1641, being then eleven years old. He came at my request to my house in 1737. He was then a hundred and seven years old; his understanding and memory seemed perfect, though he was not quite sincere in all his relations. His eyes were very dim, his voice a little hollow, but he was strong and walked from his house to mine, upward of a mile, the day I saw him, and refused to ride. He smelt like new-digged earth.
The value of a narrator, less than ingenuous, in holding together the details of a family's varied generations, was evident to Maria Edgeworth whenever she consulted The Black Book. And it is the mode of narrative, the semblance of history together with the discreet silences, which is significant rather than the reportage of betting coups and drinking bouts. Compared to Professor Flanagan’s little scenario—and we may call it so—the image of Maria Edgeworth seated at a drawing room table between Simpson and Quirk, looking back to those murderous Jacobites (so to speak) of 1641 and looking forward (so to speak) to the Jacobins of the year of the French, seems plausible.

The issue of sect in Castle Rackrent will arise again, but for the moment it is necessary to stress that the novel does not have any one moment of composition like that envisaged above. Yet recalling the prolonged period—perhaps six or more years—during which it was composed, we see also the shifting significance of that saving Catholicism in the family's history. Like the decade of its composition the novel too is split—though it would be rash to argue for any homology between the two. The difference between Part I and Part II—there are no such titles to the sections, the second being headed ‘Continuation of the Memoirs of the Rackrent Family: history of Sir Conolly Rackrent’, and the first having no comparable heading—the difference between the two lies in the aesthetic significance of their content. The first traces the careers of, successively Sir Patrick (the hard-liver), Sir Murtagh (the litigious miser), and Sir Kit (absentee, gambler and ‘improver’); the second concentrates on one figure, Sir Condy, and a more complex network of attitudes.

(p.106) In moving from the first to the second part of the novel, the reader is moved from the aesthetics of sequence to the less linear and meditative narrative of the fall of the Rackrents. By dividing Sir Condy's career Off from the others, the novelist marks the redundancy of that old, sequential notion of history and opts for a mode closer to that of her own age. And here too we finally encounter the real significance of Mrs Butler's observation that the order in which Maria Edgeworth read her ancestors' vices into her fiction is irrelevant—she reserves until the climactic second part of the novel all her attention to politics. The romanticization of Sir Condy's eighteenth-century 'origins' is one strategy in which form and content are merged.
From the timetable of Castle Rackrent's genesis we know that the history of Sir Conolly Rackrent was written some two years after the earlier chronicle. The details of electioneering suggest that R. L. Edgeworth's experience in 1796 (or again in 1798) was drawn upon, though the most colourful detail—the transportation of a sod of turf upon which oaths might be taken—derives from an earlier generation of Edgeworth lore. The illusory grandeur and scale of the Castle is accompanied in the novel by the exploitation of pretence as a means of reaching truth. Foolishly anxious to know how his companions regard him, Sir Condy feigns death only to discover as he lies shamming death at his own wake that he is held in no high regard. This interpolated 'fiction' on the part of a fictional character underlines the importance of Condy's actual death some pages later. Having sold for cash a jointure upon the lands, Condy resorts to drinking 'with the exciseman and the gauger', and the latter challenges him to drain the drinking horn of his ancestors, the result being brain fever and death after six days. So the sequential chronicle of the Rackrent generations is drawn back upon its earlier episodes, for Sir Patrick—the first of his name—had died in the same manner.

This circling achieves the silent elimination of politics from the novel, for the episode of the elections is not alluded to in Condy's demise. Indeed, election to parliament has already prefigured the death of the Castle; after the family has set up in Dublin, Thady tells us:

(p.107) There was then a great silence in Castle Rackrent, and I went moping from room to room, hearing the doors clap for want of right locks, and the wind through the broken windows, that the glazier men never would come to mend, and the rain coming through the roof and best ceilings all over the house for want of the slater, whose bill was not paid, besides our having no slates or shingles for that part of the old building which was shingled and burnt when the chimney took fire, and had been open to the weather ever since.12
Condy's engagement in politics exposes his castle to this observation, more pointed than, if not categorically different from, the narrator's other revelations. When Sir Condy signs away virtually all of his interest to Thady's son, Jason, the narrative releases a three-stage chorus of popular response which is at once ironically atavistic and indicative of the new politics of the 1790s:

And when I got to the street-door the neighbours' childer, who were playing at marbles there, seeing me in great trouble, left their play ...

The people in the town, who were the most of them standing at their doors, hearing the childer cry, would know the reason of it ...

And the mob grew so great and so loud, I was frightened, and made my way back to the house to warn my son to make his escape, or hide himself for fear of the consequences.¹³

Irony then sees Sir Condy placate the mob with a few euphemisms about his retiring to the Lodge voluntarily, while the mob takes its last glass of whiskey at the Castle. The presence of a larger population is most powerfully felt in this scene, but it is not without influence elsewhere: Sir Patrick's body had been all but rescued from his debtors at his funeral by the mob, and that emotive eighteenth-century term appearing in the early pages of the novel warns us not to read Castle Rackrent as if its early episodes were prehistoric. Drink, gambling, and nuptial cruelty may constitute the surface of the lives of the three Rackrents of Part One, but Thady's narrative is fully alert to the history in which they are necessarily read. To speak as Thady does of Sir (p.108) Patrick 'accommodating his friends and the public in general' is to acknowledge a social structure far from that feudal aristocracy retrospectively imposed by the Celtic Revival.¹⁴ Politics is an interlude in the Rackrent saga, just as legislative independence was short-lived in Ireland. Far from drawing upon the facts and manner of the era before 1782, Castle Rackrent concentrates upon the illusions of that theatrical period.
More so than any other novel within the Anglo-Irish ambit, *Castle Rackrent* has been turned to serve a Yeatsian purpose. Protestant Ascendancy had come to summarize a venerable and extended past with its heroes from Swift to Burke (or at least Grattan); the Sir Kits and the Sir Murtaghs and Sir Condys were the obverse of that long and distinguished pedigree, antithetical figures to the intellectual line of succession, essential embodiments of full-blooded life. Moreover, the sociology of Big House and Cabin found it easy to place the short-title version of Maria Edgeworth’s novel into a convenient pigeonhole. Finally, few noticed the pseudonymous status of the Rackrents, (*recte* O’Shaughlin), who inherit the estates on condition that they change their name. And the change of name is maybe the mute signal of a change of sectarian allegiance. Thus streamlined the novel had virtually become a unique sport, poised delicately on the date-line of the Act of Union, surveying a century and inaugurating a tradition. Instead of accepting as history the apparently extensive genealogy of the Rackrents, we discover in the genesis of the novel itself the intenser discontinuities and crises of an emergent literary form in an age of revolution.

2. A Burkean World
An examination of *Wuthering Heights* has produced from that seemingly wild and woolly text a very strict line of transmission for the property involved, the laws of real estate and inheritance being strictly observed behind the strategies of a double narration. It is the work of a moment to apply (p. 109) a similar technique to the story related by the devoted family retainer of the Rackrents. A cumbersome but revealing family ‘tree’ emerges:
Thus, of five proprietors bearing the name Rackrent only one inherits by primogeniture (Sir Patrick’s son Murtagh). The frailty of the main line of Rackrents raises the possibility that only two generations at most separate Sir Tallyhoo Rackrent and the widow Rackrent (nee Moneygawl). The estate changes hands five times, and though only the acquisition by Jason Quirk is effected basically by commercial means (buying up mortgages etc.) there is little prior experience in the family of direct inheritance by a son and heir. Moreover, it is not sufficiently noticed that Jason’s title to the estate is not unchallenged, in that Thady tells us the widow Rackrent disputes his claim. Her own claim would appear on the surface to be virtually hopeless, but her making of it underlines the disputed nature of property transmission throughout the novel.
This concentration on the line of succession conventionally omits the women of the family. As to whether Sir Tallyhoo was married we know not; Sir Patrick had a legitimate son, but the mother is at no point mentioned; Sir Kit's wife was the 'Jewish', an outsider who, after her imprisonment in the Castle, outlived her husband and returned to England. With Sir Condy, we encounter a choice made between two possible wives—Judy M'Quirk 'who was daughter to a sister's son' of the narrator's, and Isabella Moneygawl whom by the toss of a coin he chose as wife. \(^\text{15}\) Lady Rackrent is sent off to her relatives shortly before her husband's demise, and on her way home suffers a near-fatal accident in the carriage. In short, the female line in *Castle Rackrent* endures a repression which is deliberate if arbitrary, and the combined effect of these dual *lacunae* in a pattern of human generation is to render the relation between property and human life peculiarly unstable. And in all this we must bear in mind the relentless pressure of Thady's distinctively human voice in the narrative, the deliberate mimicry in the written word of the narrator's accent. Humour and inhumanity jostle for supremacy, and the result might be aptly described as a dead heat. Yet there is one significant swerve which the narrative takes in its concluding pages. With the news of Lady Rackrent's death expected daily, the narrator has prompted his grand-niece to renew her closeness to Sir Condy; she instead indicates that the Castle will soon be another's and she will look in that direction. Jason, however, does not marry her, and by doing so avoids the faintest suspicion of Quirk family collusion. The new masters of the Castle, if new masters there are to be, will generate a different mode of property transmission. But the Rackrent genealogy will be transferred into the realm of literature where marital introversion and endangered succession will come to provide a potent theme in Anglo-Irish modernism.
The origins of that theme are not exclusively Irish, by any means; they may be traced in European romanticism, in Wordsworth, Goethe, Chateaubriand, Novalis, Burke. In the case of *Castle Rackrent* such exotic names are rarely cited, and yet there is a poignant moment where Thady's artless narrative brings his characters into contact with the heights of European literary fashion. Condy is shaving with an unpaid-for razor; when he asks his wife what she is reading: ‘"The Sorrows of Werter" replies my lady, as well as I could hear’. The intense emotion of Goethe's romance contrasts starkly with the disappointed mercenary base of the Rackrents' marriage. The solitary literary allusion of Maria Edgeworth's novel should not be seen in isolation. The entire fabric of the novel derives from one dominant romantic metaphor, that of the house as temple of the human spirit. (p.111) It is not exclusively a romantic image, for romanticism itself has its own lines of communication with the Renaissance and with neo-classicism. As Burke's *Reflections* amply shows, the image of the house, or the Great House, carries with it every possibility of irony. One consequence of the reduction of Maria Edgeworth's title to *Castle Rackrent* is to minimize the reader's alertness to the question of irony. Within the novel itself there is a body of evidence which casts shadows upon the short title; within the larger area of Irish culture one can find the material for an ironic interpretation even of the short title.
The Great Houses of Ireland are comparatively few in number. There is no equivalent of Castle Howard or Blenheim, and the larger Irish houses—Castletown and Carton west of Dublin, Russborough and Powerscourt in County Wicklow, Mount Stewart in County Down, Florence Court in Fermanagh, or Lissadell in Sligo—would appear well down the lists of houses graded by size in the British Isles. The reasons for the relatively small size of the Irish Great House are complex, but certainly include the prolonged absenteeism of the very great landowners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The result is that the Irish notion of the ‘Big House’—a more familiar term in Ireland—is based on the houses of the county grandees rather than the aristocracy of a nation. Moreover, by reason of the great disturbances in Irish life throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were few surviving old buildings of a purely domestic nature. With the greater stability and prosperity of the country from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, house building expanded and the image of Georgian Ireland generally accepted in the world is based on the architecture of the last half of the eighteenth century and of at least three decades of the nineteenth.

Maurice Craig has demonstrated with a mass of illustration the impact of medium-sized houses upon the Irish landscape in the years after 1750. A large number of these were glebe-houses built for the clergy of the Established Church, designed to accommodate a family and servants but not to adorn an extensive estate. In addition to the limited degree of standardization imposed by the Church’s building programme, Irish house architecture was profoundly affected by the work of professional builders and designers. Two in particular deserve notice: Richard Morrison published his *Useful and Ornamental Designs in Architecture* in 1793 offering five types of houses and villas. The central design, for a ‘Villa or Country House’:

was the plan that would have suited most small country gentlemen. Indeed, apart from the refinements of Morrison’s facade it is the essential arrangement of the mass of box-like Georgian houses that dot the Irish countryside.
The cost was between £1,000 and £1,100; there were seven bedrooms, four living rooms, an entrance hall, and servants' quarters. Much earlier The Reverend John Payne published *Twelve Designs for Country Houses* in 1757 where similar attention is paid to the needs of the middle class.¹⁹

All of this would appear irrelevant to castles, even fictional ones; but Craig's introductory remarks ought to be engraved on the desks of all inquirers into Irish literature:

> the ‘big house’ of Irish traditional ways is not always very large: the term denotes the fact that it was the house of a substantial, and usually resident, landowner, rather than its mere size. As well as these ‘big houses’ there were and are considerable numbers of houses, built by or lived in by minor gentry or prosperous farmers, or by manufacturers and traders, or occupied as dower-houses, agent's houses or as glebe houses. The gulf between the 'big house' and the cottage has perhaps been over-emphasised by historians, and too much has been made of the absence of a middle class.²⁰

In order to approach the aesthetics of the house in *Castle Rackrent* it is necessary to grasp the architectural context in which the language of ‘Big Houses’ and ‘Castles’ operates. If the novel is steered towards its historical moment in the 1790s rather than its fictional setting in some unspecified past, then the proliferation of design-book houses in the late decades of the eighteenth century is at least relevant. Castles, perhaps, can plead exemption from these cheeky considerations. Or can they?
One feature of the cultural history of the eighteenth century which conditions this issue is the Gothic Revival, with its proliferation of mock-ecclesiastical and mock-military architecture. In addition to the larger achievements of the revival architects, the fashion for ‘gothick’ reached down to relatively modest householders, and gothicized cottages and villas became familiar across the landscape. Castle Ward, for example at Strangford in County Down has a Gothic Front and a Classical Front—it was built in 1760/73. Dunsany Castle in Meath is a medieval core, with gothic detail added in the eighteenth century. Lord Belvedere built the largest gothic folly in Ireland, the Jealous Wall, to blot out the sight of his brother’s residence at Rochfort in Westmeath. All of these are substantial houses, ‘big houses’ even by Dr Craig’s exacting standards.

One effect of the gothic movement, and of the antiquarian strand in eighteenth-century sensibility, was to encourage the application of antique terms to latter-day developments. Thus, in the index to Craig's *Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size* we find fifteen houses listed with names of the ‘Castle …’ format: eleven of these were built in the eighteenth century, and one in the nineteenth; all, by definition, fall well below the stature of the Great House. ‘Castle Rackrent’ then resembles Castle Ffrench in County Galway (built 1779) as much as it resembles Castle Carbery which is a fortified Jacobean manor-house in Kildare. The inversion, by which ‘Castle’ precedes the family- or site-name, though it has genuine precedents among ancient buildings, is also typical of the affectations of antiquity practised by gothic revivalists. None of this exploration of Irish architecture in its surviving detail is intended to establish any neat revisionist view of the Rackrent seat as a *bijou* bungalow or gothic folly. It is however intended to indicate the ambiguity of Maria Edgeworth's title, the variety of social and cultural patterns (p.114) suggested by the short title, and the particular implications of an architectural boom in the period of the novel’s genesis. ‘Castle Rackrent’, therefore, does not automatically imply an age-old and rambling pile of essentially military character: it *may* also point to bourgeois expansion, and bourgeois colonization of the past as an ideological bulwark.
Only the recurrent image of the house in *Castle Rackrent* justifies this excursion into architectural history. The novel's portrayal of the house has not gained the attention it deserves, and a methodical tabulation of the evidence reveals greater variety and contradiction than is generally admitted. Our first encounter with the house occurs when Thady recounts the festivities which Sir Patrick (O'Shaughlin) Rackrent provided to mark his inheritance. Men of the first consequence, when there was no further room in the Castle 'made it their choice ... to sleep in the chicken-house, which Sir Patrick had fitted up for the purpose of accommodating his friends ...'.

This colourful detail derives from a period beyond Thady's own experience—he never knew Sir Patrick—and it is assimilable to the conventional notion of Irish hospitality and rackety ingenuity in overcoming problems. Yet the strategic effect of Thady's narration is to uncover the real function of the building commandeered for the guests. Being a chicken-house, it is further seen to be part of a complex of farm buildings (with residence) rather than the outer reaches of a mansion. This style of residence, with farm offices etc. tucked behind the house or behind the (largely decorative) wings, was common among houses of the middle size. Thady's deft exposure is modified by his immediate reference to a family portrait ‘now opposite to me’; the portrait connotes a degree of self-esteem and social status which is itself questioned by Thady's easy access to the picture—where does it hang, *now*?

With Sir Patrick's death and the arrival of the skinflint Murtagh, Thady laments the emptiness of the cellars, and so provides a further architectural detail of the house. With so many Irish houses of all sizes built upon a basement, to which light is admitted by an excavated *area*, the presence of cellars is unremarkable, (p.115) certainly less than a guarantee of castle-like scale in Castle Rackrent.

Murtagh's successor, Sir Kit, arranges ‘a great architect for the house, and an improver for the grounds’ but then departs for Bath.

Before he returns with his Jewish wife, he instructs all concerned to have the house painted ‘and the new building to go on as fast as possible’. It is true that Thady tells us of the couple ‘walking together arm in arm after breakfast, looking at the new building and the improvements’, but the ensuing remarks divert our attention from what these innovations may have been.
Ts the large room damp, Thady' said his honour. ‘Oh, damp, your honour! how should it be but as dry as a bone’, says I, ‘after all the fires we have kept in it day and night? It's the barrack-room your honour's talking on.’ ‘And what is a barrack-room, pray, my dear?’ were the first words I ever heard out of my lady's lips.25

The uncertainty as to the names of rooms underlines Thady's controlling role in the irony; through it we are given access to the turf stack and newly-planted trees or shrubs which constitute the view from Castle Rackrent. Lady Rackrent is locked in her bedroom for refusing to hand over her diamond cross—Jewish fidelity here ironically showing up Christian greed—and her husband is finally shot in a duel which results from a false rumour of the lady's death. Indeed, not only does the woman’s perspective on the house tend to reduce its scale in the reader's eyes, but her falsely reported death—as in the case of her successor—prompts the real death of her husband. Illusion, once again, is a means towards clarification of vision.

Under the rule of Sir Conolly Rackrent all these images of the house are advanced once again, but now in an integrated shape rather than in the discontinuous sequence of allusions which characterized the first part of the history of the Rackrents. Condy had previously lived ‘in a small but slated house, within view of the end of the avenue’. The passage continues directly:

*(p.116)* I remember him, bare footed and headed, running through the street of O'Shaughlin's town, and playing at pitch and toss, ball, marbles, and what not, with the boys of the town, amongst whom my son Jason was a great favourite with him.26

The Castle now is seen to have an avenue, and simultaneously it is seen to be in close contact with other houses—albeit small but slated—and with the town which memorializes the family's abandoned name. The occasion of Lady Isabella's arrival provides a further conjuncture of disagreements as to the style of the house:
her feathers on the top of her hat were broke going in at the low back door, and she pulled out her little bottle out of her pocket to smell to when she found herself in the kitchen, and said, 'I shall faint with the heat of this odious, odious place.' 'My dear, it's only three steps across the kitchen, and there's a fine air if your veil was up', said Sir Condy ...

If Condy's 'three steps' is simply a coaxing reduction of the distance across the smelly kitchen, Thady still confirms that the back door of the house leads into the kitchen, and that the door is low. Lady Isabella's response to the house is to turn the barrack-room into a theatre, to acknowledge the role of pretence and role-playing in the life of Rackrent, as if in unconscious preparation for her husband's sham death. But if her ladyship 'had a fine taste for building, and furniture, and playhouses' and insisted on calling the long passage 'the gallery', Thady's narrative breaks through with references to 'the back stairs' and other details of the architecture as he sees and describes it. The alert reader is obliged to compare these diverging sets of terms, to assess the extent to which each party presents the house within his or her own conventions. There is no objective view of the house, but the pervasive irony of Castle Rackrent lies in Thady's disinclination to accept the 'Big House' view: a servant, dependent on the goodwill of the hereditary masters of Rackrent, he declines to advance a worm's eye perspective.
Just as the mob is shown to converge rapidly on Thady when Jason has finally taken over at the Castle, so the Castle is shown to be vulnerably close to the town. At the beginning of the second Part, Condy comes from a house within view of the avenue, he has played in the street: now that proximity threatens his successor. To be specific, Thady goes to ‘the street door’ of the Castle—without reference to the avenue—where ‘the neighbour’s childer’ gather around him. This topographical exactitude should not tempt us into drawing maps of the battlefield, for the fiction carefully exploits its written, rather than a visual, character to create thematic foci: ‘and when the report was made known, the people one and all gathered in great anger against my son Jason, and terror at the notion of his coming to be landlord over them ...’.

From this recognition of the insurgent Jason's formidable position as master, Thady has to make his way back to the house to warn his son; that is, distance is now exploited to suggest ironic reluctance or difficulty for Thady in his mission to save Jason from the mob. Throughout Castle Rackrent the size or crampedness, the isolation or integration, of the house is exploited for thematic purposes. The Castle shrinks to a low back door; the disguised villa echoes in the absence of its new elected master with vast loneliness; the view is alternately of desolate bogs and crowded streets; the Castle has neighbours and empty cellars. At a time when the ‘Big House’ as museum and tourist attraction all but monopolizes our view of the Irish past, or at least of Irish class imagery of the past, this elusive protean Georgian castle concentrates attention on the complexity of social and cultural dynamics in the age of the French revolution.
The prominence of a sectarian vocabulary in the reporting of violence in Ulster since 1969 has prompted some commentators to engage in wholesale revisionist interpretations of Irish culture, according to which issues previously related to such chimeras as class, economics, and social reality may be rewritten to conform to the ‘Two Nations’ of immemorable glory. Maria Edgeworth has not been immune to such developments, and the context of her writing *Castle Rackrent* certainly requires some attention to the question of Catholic-Protestant antagonism. It is reported that, in 1976, the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature was informed the Rackrents ‘are, in fact, Catholics and that this involves Maria Edgeworth in a significant flight from the historical facts of her period’. John Cronin’s discussion of this theory is itself all rather hypothetical, and the subject is sufficiently important for aesthetic reasons to earn attention here. The heart of the argument is declared to be, in effect, two sentences from Thady’s account of Sir Murtagh’s career; these are:

She was a strict observer, for self and servants, of Lent, and all fast-days, but not holidays. One of the maids having fainted three times the last day of Lent, to keep soul and body together, we put a morsel of roast beef in to her mouth, which came from Sir Murtagh’s dinner, who never fasted, no the; but so me how or other it unfortunately reached my lady’s ears, and the priest of the parish had a complaint made of it the next day, and the poor girl was forced, as soon as she could walk, to do penance for it, before she could get any peace or absolution, in the house or out of it.
This is as close to the terminology of Protestant and Catholic as Maria Edgeworth reaches in the novel. Thomas Flanagan has suggested that Sir Patrick changed his creed with his name in inheriting from Sir Tallyhoo, an inference which is strengthened by the novel’s reference to his doing so ‘by Act of Parliament’.\(^{32}\) The legitimization of a loss of identity, and the acquisition of the descriptive name Rackrent in place of the aboriginal O’Shaughlin, amounts to an imposing change: if it does signify apostasy it is vital to stress that Maria Edgeworth’s method is suggestive allegory, at the most. Beyond this initial allusion to such a change, only the two sentences quoted above specify in words such as ‘Lent’ and \((p.119)\) ‘penance’ religious practices associated with Catholicism rather than Protestantism. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of Irish history will not find the presence of Catholic servants in a Protestant house remarkable—so much for the maid. As to Lady Rackrent’s fasting and her evident contact with the priest of the parish, it is worth noting that mixed marriages between Catholic and Protestant were not unknown, especially where the husband was a Protestant and so able to inherit and bequeath real estate. For what it is worth, then, Lady Rackrent may have been a Catholic, just as Lady Macbeth may have been the mother of dozens.
The point energetically missed by proponents of this argument relates to the novelistic character of the document they are analysing. To argue that, the Rackrents being Catholics, Maria Edgeworth is in ‘significant flight from the historical facts of her period’ is to mistake *Castle Rackrent* for a tract. First, one should note that the traces of a possible Catholicism in the Rackrent family occur very early in the novel, and that such traces are impossible in the era of Sir Condy Rackrent, MP. There is then a reading of *Castle Rackrent* according to which it contains the possible interpretation outlined above, in relation to a specific moment in the family chronicle and including intermarriage as well as apostasy. That the novel should, accordingly, be read as evolving towards a more polarized—and always unspecified—sectarian sociology is in keeping with the altering developments of the period of its genesis (the 1790s) and of late eighteenth-and nineteenth-century history broadly. Personally, Maria Edgeworth’s attitudes towards religious belief were modified along rather similar lines—though at a slower pace: while her father was alive she appears to have shared his Enlightenment views, whereas the demands for Catholic Emancipation and O’Connellite agitation from 1820 onwards hardened her attitudes towards Catholics.33 *Castle Rackrent* has nothing to say of Catholic Relief or Protestant Ascendancy, and it is certainly no simple reflection of the facts of its period. On the contrary, it enacts in its deployment of such traces as we have analysed a resistance to the sectarian sociology embryonic in the ‘90s. Just as the building at the heart of the novel displays the flexible, anxious negotiations between castle and gentleman’s box, so the plot admits both the tensions and bonds of Catholic/Protestant relations.
One of the renowned features of *Castle Rackrent* is its account of money as the base of marriage. The eighteenth century would hardly have found that unusual, and within the novel it is the transition from property as the motive for changes of identity and name (in marriage and otherwise) to the operations of commercial and legal means to acquire property which is significant. Jason is thus the insurgent representative of a money-economy taking over from an older culture in which property ‘in great masses of accumulation’ held a preserving inertia. In Greek mythology, of course, Jason's uncle had usurped the throne of Iolcos, and set the boy the impossible task of recovering the Golden Fleece. If we are to see Jason Quirk's ousting of the Rackrents as a modern retelling of the legend, then he starts with the advantage of a professional education and access to the cash through which he can fleece his fellow-lawyer Condy Rackrent. Again, attempts have been made to argue that Jason is an impossible character in the Ireland of pre-1782, on the grounds that Catholics were not admitted to the legal profession until 1793. Here again, the real historical point is missed: the novel demonstrates the different ways in which membership of the legal profession operated in a society undergoing quite rapid transition; in the case of Condy, being 'bred to the bar' was part of a landowner's education rather than a professional training; in the case of Jason, the law is an instrument fully understood as a means of effecting change. The irony of Jason is that his father, the usurped 'king' of the legend, should benefit nothing from the changes wrought by lawyer Quirk.
The world of Castle Rackrent is small but restless. Its dominant images alter in their import throughout the developing narrative. The Great House is so far from being a Penshurst that the only allusions to literary culture detectable in the (p.121) novel—Goethe's Werter and the fashion of amateur theatricals—reflect on their own credibility.35 As with Burke's employment of the House in the Reflections on the Revolution in France, dilapidation rather than grandeur shines through ironically. So too, money is seen to sustain a way of life ostentatiously condemned but none the less acknowledged by the narratives. The dejected state of Castle Rackrent's narrator at the outset of the novel (dressed in a ragged coat and annotations from Spenser) is one measure of the extent to which social change involves the ironic victimization of those whose sons succeed.36 Borrowing words from Burke again, and alert to the ironies of quoting Burke in the context, we might see Thady 'cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow'.37 The difference is of course that Maria Edgeworth's satire dispenses with any idea of a norm, presents no image however dimmed by time or distance of a world of reason, order, and peace. Castle Rackrent investigates one Burkean world without pretending that the other exists. Its parade of Anglo-Irish follies and vices could be annotated from Burke's writings on the effects of the Penal Laws as well as his scornful comments on the Jobb-ascendants. The Reflections utilizes techniques which will subsequently be associated with the historical novel, and Castle Rackrent purports to be a history of the Rackrent family. Each work stands Janus-like at its historical juncture: Burke is no more a thoroughgoing foe of bourgeois revolution than Maria Edgeworth is a wholehearted supporter of Catholic Relief. The sensibility which directs her activities as a novelist is not a constant position, a fixed star, but a particular openness to the historical quality of contemporary experience.
There is one pervasive metaphor for history which both (p. 122) Burke and Maria Edgeworth allude to, a metaphor which pervades Castle Rackrent. In the Reflections Burke declares that ‘people will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors’ and continues to categorize freedom (in the British sense) as a ‘liberal descent which prevents that upstart insolence it has its gallery of portraits.,’. Posterity, ancestors, descent ... such an invocation of ancient British liberties, gradually drawn into the image of a genealogy legitimizing the present, and illustrated in all its stages, is not unique to Burke: in Castle Rackrent it is sufficiently active to require a telling rebuke. Only by attending to the genesis of the fiction can we recover that critique of genealogy and pride in genealogy which characterizes the short-lived Rackrents. Yet if Castle Rackrent thus appears remarkably ironic in its treatment of genealogy then The Absentee (1812) is its counter-truth. Castle Rackrent manages for the most part to avoid the topic of human generation. In the first part, wives are effectively imported though never to breed: in the ‘continuation’ (a significantly awkward term) even more haphazard arrangements are recorded—Sir Condy (descendant of the O’Shaughlins who are presumed Catholic) decides by the toss of a coin against marrying Judy M’Quirk, his social inferior and a Catholic, only to be succeeded by her brother.

The plot of The Absentee is very different. The hero, Lord Colambre, will resist marriage to one who is tainted with social dependency and (it is hinted) a Catholic background. Yet in ultimately marrying her, he unites himself not only to his own estates but also to his aristocratic cousin; pedigree and property achieve a romantic union. That plot is unfamiliar to readers, and its unfamiliarity facilitates our concentration on the modes of writing—allegoric and schematic, rather than narrative and ironic—by which Maria Edgeworth seeks to establish the doubleness which lies at the heart of Anglo-Irish literature.

Notes:

(1) Morning Post; or, Dublin Courant, 15 September 1792 [p. 4]


(4) Ibid.


(6) op. cit.


(9) Ibid.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Maria Edgeworth *Tales and Novels* (London, 1832–3), vol. i, pp. 56–7

(13) Ibid.

(14) Ibid.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid.


(19) op. cit.

(20) Ibid.

(21) *Tales and Novels*, vol. i, p. 4

(22) Ibid.
(23) Ibid.

(24) Ibid.

(25) Idem.

(26) Ibid.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid.


(31) Tales and Novels, vol. i, p. 7

(32) op. cit.


(34) op. cit.

(35) A performance of Romeo and Juliet is evidently intended at Mount Juliet's own, with the future Lady Rackrent as Juliet, see Tales and Novels, vol. i, p. 38.

(36) Ibid. View of the State of Ireland


(38) Ibid.

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