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Maria Edgeworth, Ireland  
and Castle Rackrent

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*Ai miei genitori,  
per il sostegno e i preziosi insegnamenti.*

*Ad Andrea,  
senza cui tutto sarebbe stato più difficile.*

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# **Introduction**

This dissertation deals with the analysis of the novel *Castle Rackrent* and the investigation about some of the issues that relate the book to what really happened in the period of its publication. Maria Edgeworth is the author of *Castle Rackrent* and she consciously decided to publish her novel in 1800. That year was crucial not only for the publication of her masterpiece, the first one that she wrote without the supervision of her father, but also because in that year the Union between Ireland and England was taking place; so, as the book possesses many references to the life of the Irish inhabitants, its publication did not happen by chance. The reason why she wrote this kind of book was based on the hope that English people might succeed in eliminating their prejudices and in learning something more about their neighbours.

The first chapter gives some information about the life of Maria Edgeworth, her family and her qualities as a writer. She was born at Black Bourton in Oxfordshire in the early years of George III's reign and remained alive till the opening of Parliament by Queen Victoria. After the death of her mother she moved to Ireland, at Edgeworthstown with her family because her father married another time. She spent her life in writing essays and novels, but she also taught children the importance of knowledge. She did this with a variety of different genres as moral tales, novels, educational treatises, and children's stories. Linked with her father by a feeling of affection, she started to nurture her passions for writing and education thanks to him because he was the first one who believed in her and who gave her the opportunity to write and take care of her siblings. The thing that marked her career as a writer was a total devotion to the reformation of the educational system of her time.

Since the basis of the novel is the correct understanding of the Irish way of life, the second chapter is devoted to a discussion of Irish manners and the relationships between the Irish and the English people. Considering the historical moment and what happened, the intent of the author with her novel was to let English people know the characteristics of their neighbours, trying to eliminate their prejudices. Maria was in favour of the Union, so she thought about a solution that made this Union happy and as calm as possible because the time was already characterized by internal dissents and rebellions that contributed to increase the problems and the hate among the citizens of the two countries. She composed *Castle Rackrent* with the aim of bringing peace and calmness among the people

who lived in England and Ireland. Although it was a difficult moment, her brave spirit supported her and contributed to the creation of such an important novel. However, all the good intentions and the positive thoughts regarding the Union did not manage in avoiding its collapse, and then the final Irish independence.

The third chapter is devoted to the analysis of *Castle Rackrent* and of the characteristics of the narrator. The novel is not based on fictitious elements, but on real facts and the behaviour of people that lived in Ireland in that period. Maria Edgeworth was able to write such an important novel thanks to the knowledge she possessed. Her strong points are her English identity as she was born and brought up in that island and her moving to Ireland that offered to her the possibility to know the culture and manners of Irish people. Again her father was the person who helped her to understand a different world as he decided not to remain in England but to move to Ireland. So, Maria's great knowledge and her capacities to mix together all the real elements had as a result the creation of an emblematic novel. Moreover, these aspects were the reasons that transformed Edgeworth into a symbolic model. The success that the novel reached, contributed to transform Maria into a motive of inspiration for famous writers, the most important was Sir Walter Scott. Scott was very much impressed by the techniques she uses in her novel, for instance her faithful portrayal of the society of that time, the references to the *Essay on Irish Bulls*, (a typical Irish expression), the use of the Irish vernacular and last but not least the contribution she gave to the invention of a new genre, the national/regional novel.

As she paid much attention to the role of women, the fourth chapter is dedicated to the comparison between the role of women in the Irish life during the Union and in *Castle Rackrent*. The Irish women were not so much considered by the society and by the men; they had to stay at home and take care of their children. In many cases, if a woman had a job with which she supported the family, the man could be seen as weak and without any kind of power, it was a sort of defeat for the man. Fortunately during the eighteenth century the consideration of women changed and they could work and help the family with the money they earned without outrages. Although their role in society was not so important as that of the men, women's nature was stronger and ready to deal with everyday problems. Maria Edgeworth shows this aspect in *Castle Rackrent*, as she saw the novel also as a way to improve the women's situation. All the ladies of the novel try to

remove numerous obstacles, solve many difficulties and at the end they are able to succeed in reaching freedom. The author wants to give voice to that female part of the society discriminated by laws, politics and also by the men. Maria considers the speaking about women as a possibility to deal with their problems, promote their emergence in society and smooth their difficulties in the real life.

During her career, there are some novels that specifically talk about women, as *Belinda*, published in 1801, a year after the publication of *Castle Rackrent*. However, the themes of her writings are different and regard many sectors. She writes about religion, Ireland and its problems, invents stories for children, finds ways to teach parents how to instruct a child and writes about her father's life. From the beginning of the nineteenth century till 1834, Maria published many novels; the third novel she published was *Leonora* in 1806, then *Tales of Fashionable Life* and *Ennui* in 1809, *The Absentee* in 1812, *Patronage* in 1814, *Harrington* and *Ormond* in 1817 and the last was *Helen* in 1834, while she was ill. Apart from the novels, she also writes many essays that saw the light of the publication during the last years of the eighteenth century; for example in 1795 she published *Letters for Literary Ladies*, the subsequent year was dedicated to her first collection of children's stories titled *The Parent's Assistant*, then in 1798 she collaborated with her father and subsequently with her first step-mother for the writing of *Practical Education*.

Although during the period of her life she received little critical notice and she was not so much considered by the novelists who wrote in the same years, she started to be well known by the critics and the readers of the nineteenth century thanks to her friendship with Sir Walter Scott. Her ideas became famous because of her association with him, a man that was considered by everyone a brilliant author. Scott's wide popularity started with his writings of historical novels and it was possible thanks to his capacities to reproduce what characterized the common life of people belonging to a specific part and age of the world. He always said that his muse was Maria Edgeworth, the novelist who firstly invented the national/regional novel and had the capacity to transform *Castle Rackrent* into a masterpiece because of the themes and the aim with which it was written.

# **Chapter one**

*Maria Edgeworth*

## 1.1 Her family and friends

The Edgeworth family settled at Edgeworthstown in the early eighteenth century. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Maria's father, was the second of four children and he was born in 1744 in Bath and was educated at Drogheda where he was laughed at for his English accent. After having finished the school, he went to Trinity College in Dublin where he was not a good student. During his sister's wedding, he caused a series of troubles and his father convinced himself to send his son to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Here, he was acquainted with the Elers family— old friends of his father's— who lived at Black Bourton, almost fourteen miles from Oxford. Soon, Richard fell in love with Anna Maria Elers, a penniless, illiterate daughter of a gone-to-seed lawyer of German extraction and in 1763 he married her. From this union he had four children, the second child was Maria Edgeworth, who was born the 1st of January 1768 at Black Bourton in Oxfordshire.

The marriage was unhappy and for the following ten years Richard was a disappointed man. Anna was domestic, affectionate and prudent, her husband tried to relieve the sadness of their marriage by a series of inventions such as a velocipede or a sailing-carriage. Despite all these strategies, time passed without improvements or pleasure in being together. For this reason, Anna stayed in England and Maria spent her early years with her mother's family until Anna's death in 1773. She died few days after giving birth to a third daughter, Anna. Only four months after the death of his first wife, Richard married Honora Sneyd, a woman of legendary beauty and merit he had met in 1770, the year in which his second daughter Emmeline was born. He saw in her "a woman that equalled the picture of perfection existing in his imagination".<sup>1</sup> At that time, he was twenty-six and unhappily married. Honora taught Maria the obedience, the scrupulous neatness and the orderliness in whatever she did. After the marriage in 1773, she went with him to his estate, Edgeworthstown, in County Longford in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> That wife gave him another two children: a daughter Honora and a son Lovell. Maria spent five years at Mrs. Latuffière's school at Derby and here she acquired

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in C. I. Clarke, *Maria Edgeworth: Her Family and Friends*, London, Hutchinson, 1949, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> See E. A. Baker, *Edgeworth, Austen, Scott*, in *The History of the English Novel*, ed. Baker, E. A., L. Stevenson, 11 vols, New York, Barnes and Noble Inc., 1929, vol. VI, pp. 29-32.

perfect French, almost at the same level as English and learnt Italian, she became a skilled needlewoman. The first letter Maria wrote was for Honora, she called her 'mamma'. In the letter, Maria talked about school and explained all the improvements she made.

However, the correct use of words was taught by her father's friend, the philosopher Thomas Day. She was brought up by Mr. Edgeworth who admonished her in long letters to control her temper and regulate her conduct so that according to her father, Maria might become "a very excellent and highly improved woman".<sup>3</sup> She used to listen to her father's conversation with his friends and she had to argue and debate some ethical or scientific problems with them. Richard also encouraged his daughter's gift for inventing stories and when she was thirteen he wrote to her:

It would be very agreeable to me my dear Maria to have letters from you familiarly — I wish to know what you like and what you dislike — I wish to communicate to you what little knowledge I have acquired, that you may have a tincture of every species of Literature and that you may form your taste by choice and not by chance.<sup>4</sup>

The father, with these words, reveals that Maria had capacities and qualities of a high order. On the other side, the daughter wanted to do everything to please her father and to be as he wished because she was devoted to him. From the moment in which Maria started writing, her stories were subjected to his constant supervision; he had to judge them and see if they suited his purpose or not. Only after that, the stories and the novels could be read to the rest of the family and then published. After seven years of marriage, Honora died but while she was in her death-bed, she urged her husband to marry again and she mentioned her sister Elizabeth because according to her, she was the most likely woman to suit him and she would be a kindly mother to their children.

In 1780, the same year of Honora's death, Richard married Elizabeth Sneyd, a less beautiful and less graceful woman than Honora, even if she was her sister. Elizabeth gave birth to six children, most of whom died young. After the third marriage, Maria moved to Mrs. Devis's school in London. Her father's attention

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in E. Iglisch-Jones, *The Great Maria: A Portrait of Maria Edgeworth*, London, Faber and Faber, 1959, pp. 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in E. Iglisch-Jones, *The Great Maria: A Portrait of Maria Edgeworth*, cit., p. 21.

became fully focused on her when in 1781 she had been badly disfigured by an inflammation of the eyes that distorted her whole face. Fortunately, she could continue to read and write. In 1782 when Maria was fifteen, Richard decided to move to Ireland with all his family and settle at Edgeworthstown. That year was characterized by the end of Maria's schooling and of her childhood because she started taking care of her siblings with maternal love and acted both as a nurse and a governess. It was one of their father's theories that a child should never be left to the servants. Moreover, she also became the secretary and accountant of her father because he was a fairly rich landlord who wanted to improve the management of the estate. Richard trained her into the complicated business habits and made her copy all his letters; these efforts acquainted her with the duties and the cares of a strict Irish landlord. This work gave her the idea for one of her novels, *The Absentee*, which talked about the injustices caused by absentee landlords who left their rents to be collected by middlemen and drivers.

With her stories, Maria was used to amuse and teach her little siblings because according to her a story for children had to entertain and instruct. First of all, these writings were composed on a slate and only if they passed the severe scrutiny of her father they could be read aloud to that excited audience. Her aim was to impress upon them the best knowledge and she managed to maintain the interest of the children because she was a great and unique story-teller. It formed the background of *Patronage*. Seen all her success with stories, her father proposed her to translate Madame de Genlis' *Adele et Theodore*, but at the end it was never published as another writer had already published it. So she wrote an essay about women, entitled *Letters for Literary Ladies* with the aim of encourage learning among women.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Edgeworth's marriage with Elizabeth proceeded very well, they had a happy home life and she was less severe in her discipline than Honora; she payed attention to the care of children but also Richard never neglected his duties as a father. He had evolved a system of education, which he later depicted in a book entitled *Practical Education*, written with the contribution of Maria who had experienced the way of training and teaching with her little siblings. Her father wrote:

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<sup>5</sup> For further description see C. O' Gallchoir, *Maria Edgeworth: Women, Enlightenment and Nation*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2005, pp. 26-27.

Children must be treated as rational beings. Sermons must be short, toys instructive, learning gradual, and the mode of teaching was to be chiefly conversational. Only the multiplication table was to be learned by rote. Ball-playing, gough [*sic*] cricket and all manly sports that could develop physical dexterity were to be encouraged.<sup>6</sup>

In her education, there was no place for music, art, poetry and religion; she had never learnt anything about the history of Ireland, such as legends of fairies, folklore, or tales. She acquired these information when she was a teenager thank to one of her father's close friend, Lord Longford. Concerning education, she thought boys and girls should be educated equally and together, drawing upon Rousseau's ideas; she also believed a woman should only marry someone who suited her in character, temper, and understanding. Maria had also an intimate friend to whom she talked about everything, her aunt Margaret Edgeworth known as Mrs. Ruxton. Her niece was a frequent visitor at her home and her cousin Sophie was a special friend for her. Maria wrote many letters to them because she wanted them to know everything about herself, her private life, her work as a writer and her friends around the world. Thanks to Maria's letters, critics were able to reconstruct her life in Ireland with its problems and perplexities. She wrote them freely, frankly and above all without thinking that one day they would be public or that they could be a matter of interest for anybody outside of her family. In 1791 Richard moved to Clifton with his pregnant wife and their little child because the only remaining child of Honora was ill and the father was anxious for the life of his wife.<sup>7</sup> They could leave without any preoccupations because they trusted Maria; she remained at Edgeworthstown with the other little children and in the autumn of 1793 she wrote an essay about the experiments with telegraph because her brother Dick studied this subject. Three years after, she started to publish her books: *Letters for Literary Ladies* in 1796 and *Parent's Assistant* the following year. The majority of her stories were written in disturbance because she had to take care of children and keep them quiet and amused, so only when she could, did she write something. She worked under two outstanding disadvantages: Maria was used to write in a crowded room with the children

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in C. I. Clarke, *Maria Edgeworth: Her Family and Friends*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> See E. Iglisch-Jones, *The Great Maria: A Portrait of Maria Edgeworth*, cit., pp. 35-39.

laughing or speaking aloud and there was the constant presence of her father who spoke and criticized every one of her works. These working conditions were considered as obstacles by most modern authors such as Virginia Woolf, who in *A Room of One's Own* asserted the importance for a woman to have money and a room: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction".<sup>8</sup>

At the end of the year she finished *Toys and Tales* and planned *Moral Tales* for older children; she also continued to collaborate with her father in the work *Practical Education*, published in two volumes in 1798 and enriching the fame of both authors. A year before, Richard had remained a widower for the third time, but again he did not wait for long time before seeking another wife. He chose Frances Beaufort, the daughter of the Vicar of Collon, an old friend of the Ruxton family; she was a special friend of Sophy Ruxton's. Frances was thirty years younger than Richard and gave him six more children. She had many of the qualities that were desirable in a wife. It was the first time Mr. Edgeworth had an Irish wife, born and bred in his own country, accustomed to its life. Even though Maria was against this marriage, she accepted it because she understood that her father would not be happy without a wife. Maria used to write many letters, most of which were to Frances; they were in contact both in the period when Maria was around the world and when they both lived at Edgeworthstown. Maria told all her adventures to the fourth wife of her father and soon they became friends. Frances seemed stronger and more robust than his previous wives and she educated her children in a different way: she gave them a normal public school education and introduced new disciplines as music, poetry, religion and art due to the fact that she was an artist; in this way the children were able to paint and draw. The thing that was strange was the changing in Mr. Edgeworth's behaviour, she influenced him and he compiled a book of poetry for young people.

The year 1800 was very important because Ireland and England were united and Maria made her successful debut as a novelist. She published a novel anonymously, entitled *Castle Rackrent*; it was the first book where her father had no part. Mrs. Ruxton wrote a letter to Maria where she begged the author to send her a copy of it. The short novel is narrated by Thady Quirk, the old, faithful and loyal steward who talked about an Irish estate under four generation of heirs. The

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<sup>8</sup> V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own & The voyage Out*, London, Wordsworth, 2012, p. 29.

success of the author was recognized by Sir Walter Scott who was inspired by her and acknowledged Maria as a model in the Postscript to *Waverley*:

It has been my object to describe these persons, not by a caricatured and exaggerated use of the national dialect, but by their habits, manners and feelings; so as in some distant degree to emulate the admirable Irish portraits drawn by Miss Edgeworth, so different from the 'Teagues' and 'dear joys' who so long, with the most perfect family resemblance to each other, occupied the drama and the novel.<sup>9</sup>

As Maria had done, Scott published *Waverley* anonymously because he was not sure about the success of the book.

The next year Maria published another novel, *Belinda*, a book that was frequently borrowed in the circulating libraries. In 1802 Maria planned a journey with her father and his wife to Belgium and Paris, she wished to go there because years ago M. Pictet, a famous Swiss scientist from Geneva, had interested her during his visit to Edgeworthstown. In Paris Maria met many important artists among whom there was the young Comte de Segur who had translated *Belinda* into French. At that moment, Edgeworth realized that she was well known in France and not only through *Practical Education*. Madame de Genlis was also pleased to see her, but the impression she gave Maria was not so good and in a letter to Mrs. Ruxton she wrote: "there was something of malignity in her countenance and conversation that repelled love, and of hypocrisy which annihilated esteem".<sup>10</sup> The French lady had only read *Belinda* and heard of *Practical Education* upon which she gave some astonishing hints, but the only thing that Maria felt was pity for that woman. When she came back from Paris, Maria met a man who frequently visited the Edgeworths, he was M. Edelcractz, a Swedish gentleman who acted as private secretary to his King. He fell in love with Maria but she refused him because he was not willing to renounce his career and to leave his country. Even Maria did not want to abandon Ireland and her family and friends, so he went back to Sweden alone. M. Edelcractz had been originally attracted to her by reading *Knapsack*, a story where the plot took place in Sweden. Subsequently, her following works were the preparation for *Popular Tales* for the press and the writing of the two novels *Ennui* and *Leonora* with the hope of pleasing

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<sup>9</sup> W. Scott, *Waverley*, London, Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 493.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in C. I. Clarke, *Maria Edgeworth: Her Family and Friends*, cit., p. 72.

Edelcractz, but after a short period of letters, there was no more communication between them.

In the following years Maria composed *Griselda* without saying a word to her father because she wanted to test her capacities without the support of Mr. Edgeworth. In the meantime, Lady Canard sent her the *Lay of the Last Minstrel* that was her first introduction to Scott. Poetry was no longer a tab since the coming of Frances at Edgeworthstown. In 1808 Mrs. Barbauld introduced Maria to *Marmion*, the new poem by Scott. In the next year she published her *Tales of Fashionable Life* with a great success. In the spring of the following year the two Sneyd aunts returned to Edgeworthstown, as Mr. Edgeworth third daughter Anna with all her children. Maria was not frightened about the number of children in the house because she was accustomed to take care of many children. She wrote a play for them called *The Absentee*; she chose the same title of one of her most famous novels about Irish life because this short play was set in Ireland. Maria was also working on *Patronage*, which derived from her father's story of the Freeman family. The room where she worked was the general sitting-room, and as noisy as ever.

In the summer of 1812 she published a second series of *Tales of Fashionable Life*, which included *The Absentee*, a novel with a purpose, that described the bitter hardships suffered by the peasant population of a large Irish estate when left to the mercy of a cruel agent; *Vivian* and *Emilie de Coulanges*. Even if she had a period of illness, she was always at her best when she had to write about Ireland and its problems. During a visit to London the following year, she tasted her fame for the first time because everyone wanted to meet her and visit Edgeworthstown. There she met Sir Humphry Davy and Lord Byron at Lady Davy's breakfast. She wrote to her cousin Sophy that the encounter with Byron was not at all remarkable. He also described her as the worst kind of bore.

When she came back, she prepared a new series of *Early Lessons* for which many mothers in London had assured her there was a demand. Many of her books started to be translated into French. In the last months of 1814 Maria read Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, according to her it was an interesting book even though the first few chapters resulted tedious. She was not even convinced about Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. However, she had a far more exciting publication in her hands: *Waverley*. Scott sent her an anonymous copy but she guessed it was written by Sir

Walter Scott. Reading it, Maria was proud of seeing that he was inspired by her admirable Irish portraits. The following year she published *Patronage* and Byron commented: "I thought it very bad for her".<sup>11</sup>

In the spring of 1817 Maria worked hard at her novel *Ormond* (published with another novel *Harrington*) because she wanted to read it to her father, whose health condition were deteriorating. A week after his seventy-third birthday, the 15th of June 1817, Mr. Edgeworth died after a night of sickness and agony. His death cut his daughter's life into two. Maria was fifty years old and was finally free, but also too old to appreciate that freedom. She spent a period at Black Castle with Mrs. Ruxton and was interested in Madame de Stael's *Memoirs* of her father, so she had the idea to enrich Mr. Edgeworth's biography. Writing it, he had had in mind the famous *Confessions* by Rousseau of whom he had been a disciple. The book revealed a man full of egotism, vanity, heartlessness and lack of sympathy toward his first wife. Maria showed the manuscript to Lady Lansdowne and after her positive reaction, she published it in 1820 under the title of *Memoirs*. The following period is characterized by travels and meetings with new friends. Maria went to Birmingham and visited the Mollies; then stayed in London with Lady Elizabeth Whitbread, the Duke and the Duchess of Wellington. Then she moved to Paris and she was there when her *Memoirs* appeared; it was a fortune because in Ireland the book was highly criticized because of its lack of religiosity, while when she went to London and Paris, nobody expressed negative opinions on the book. The same problem characterized *Quarterly* where the absence of religious devotion was clear to everyone. In France she renewed many contacts and she was welcomed by her old friends as Lady Granary, Harriet de Salis, Madame Récamier, Madame de Pastoret and Madame Gautier. At a dinner at Madame de Pastoret's she met Albertine de Broglie, daughter of Madame de Stael, who had died three years before. She saw Madame de Boigne, Louise Swanton, Irish by descent and French by education, Maria also visited Voltaire's house with Madame de Villette. Another important visit was to schools because she was very interested in education. There she heard lectures from her book *Practical Education* and she was very proud of it. In Paris she met the famous artist Madame Vigée - le Brun, who showed her some of her paintings but Maria had little feeling for art. These visits gratified the author and were a remarkable

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in C. I. Clarke, *Maria Edgeworth: Her Family and Friends*, cit., p. 94.

success.<sup>12</sup> In August she went to Switzerland and there she met new friends and made an excursion to Chamonix, she received many compliments for her novels, in particular for *Patronage*. She visited Copper, now the home of Auguste de Stael, then went to Lucerne and Lausanne to visit Madame de Montolieu, author of *Caroline de Lichfield*.

After having published the second volume of *Frank* and her last novel *Helen* in 1825, she dedicated only to herself and to her friendships so she decided to visit Scott and went to Scotland at Abbotsford where he lived.<sup>13</sup> It was a memorable meeting and at the end of the day she said:

The impression left on my mind this night was, that Sir Walter Scott is one of the best-bred men I ever saw, with all the exquisite politeness which he knows so well how to describe, which is of no particular school or country, but which is of all countries, the politeness which arises from good and quick sense and feeling, which seems to know by instinct the character of others, to see what will please and put all his guests at their ease. As I sat beside him at supper I could not believe he was a stranger and forgot he was a great man.<sup>14</sup>

In the morning he showed her the the sight of Edinburgh, enjoying the Parliament House, the Advocates' Library, the Castle and Holyrood Palace. She was amazed by the places and the anecdotes Scott told her. The simplicity of his manner was an impression that remained long with her.

In 1823 her sister Anna died and Maria remained the only surviving member of Mr. Edgeworth's first family. In August Scott decided to go to Edgeworthstown to meet Maria and she showed him the place where she lived. After Scott, Maria received Sir Humphry Davy, then the world-famous inventor of the safety-lamp. In such a large family visits of friends, marriages, births and deaths were the norm: during the summer of 1829 Maria was affected by a severe illness, maybe caused by the death of her half-brother William and the loss of her beloved half-sister Fanny through marriage. Through her long sickness, she was not able to write, but in 1830 she thought about the possibility of writing another novel after

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<sup>12</sup> For further details see M. Hurst, *Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene*, London, Macmillan, 1969, pp. 39-43.

<sup>13</sup> See E. Iglisch-Jones, *The Great Maria: A Portrait of Maria Edgeworth*, cit., pp. 210-214.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in C. I. Clarke, *Maria Edgeworth: Her Family and Friends*, cit., p. 130.

a period of pause. She went to stay at Black Castle with Mrs. Ruxton but then she moved to London with Fanny before her aunt's death. This was another shock for Maria after her father's death.

In 1831 she returned to Edgeworthstown and worked on *Helen*, the only book she wrote after her father's death and her last one; it contained advice given by Scott. The next year was characterized by Scott's death and the event caused Maria profound sadness. He was sixty-one and had been in failing health for some time. In 1834 she published *Helen* and almost forty years had passed since Maria first published her *Letters for Literary Ladies*. In those days, another generation of writers emerged in the literary context. Maria herself had been conscious of a change in the last two decades and the main fact that contributed to that mutation was her intimate friendship with Sir Walter Scott.

In 1835 a general election took place but for Maria and other people the situation was embarrassing because the priests forbade to vote for the candidate favoured by Barry Fox which meant voting against the landlord. Fox was the virtual owner of Edgeworthstown and threatened to revenge himself upon anyone who voted against him. In autumn she was very ill and moved to Trim with Harriet Butler; she wrote a letter to Mrs. Edgeworth to thank her about everything she did for her. During the following months she went to London to stay with Fanny Wilson and accepted to meet some friends despite her wish for privacy. After five months she returned home and in January 1843 she was seized by a severe illness with fever and a pulse of over a hundred and twenty. She was forced to stay inside even though outside there was a crowd of people waiting for her. Maria spent a lot of time reading, Lord Mahon sent her a copy of his book *La Vie du Grand Condeé* and she was also delighted with the *Life and Letters* of Francis Horner.

In the autumn of the same year she paid her last visit to London and in February of 1844 she received the tickets for the opening of Parliament by Queen Victoria. Maria was accompanied by Fanny and Lord Lovelace, they drove to Westminster but when they entered there were no seats, so they squeezed themselves into other people's bodies and observed the scene with attention. She was recognized by people when the Queen went out. In the summer she was affected by the same malady that had affected her in Scotland many years before — erysipelas, but at the end she recovered from this severe attack and went to stay with her friend

Lucy at Armagh. Then Maria resumed her pen and wrote a story called *Orlandino*, the first of a series edited by Chambers for the Irish Poor Relief Fund.

In 1848 her favourite beloved half-sister, Fanny Wilson, died and on the 22nd of May 1849 at the age of eighty-one Maria Edgeworth died in the arms of her beloved stepmother Frances after a day of relatively good health. Her single wish to die at home had been realized.

After Maria's death, Frances wrote the *Memoir* of Maria's life, inspired by her love and long friendship for her step-daughter.

## 1.2 Her language and style

Maria started writing with the encouragement of her father, he trusted his daughter but Mr. Edgeworth was also a strict figure in Maria's work because he acted as a supervisor and wanted to control all her writings before they were published. She was one of the few authors who espoused the educator's role; she was happy teaching and educating children and it was possible because she had already practiced this job considering the fact that she used to take care of her numerous siblings. Despite all her commitments with her father's children and with his estate, she found time to dedicate herself to writing. During her life, Maria wrote fiction for different audiences as she composed novels for adults and short stories for children of different ages.<sup>15</sup> She was used to read them to her family so that she could obtain an immediate reaction either positive or negative, but before reading the tales, they needed to gain her father's approval. Moreover, with her books she helped the parents who wanted to teach at home. This could be realized also thanks to the father who did not want his children to be left to servants, he preferred to entrust them to Maria who consequently went through the experience of entertaining children and this knowledge was then transported into her books. Apart from the interest in education, Maria and her father shared the idea of a monolithic and hierarchical view of the language, so with the help of Richard she was able to recognize the correct and good use of the language that was opposed to the vulgar one, which was typical of common conversations, which were characterized by colloquialism, provincialism and inaccuracy. In the first volume of *Practical Education* Maria and her father expressed a clear idea of what was a 'good' and a 'correct' language and they said that it was also determined by the type of readings. However, this unity was ruined by the contact with vernacular speakers and Richard Edgeworth argued:

The language of children, who have heard no language but what is good, must be correct. On the contrary, children who heard a mixture of low and high vulgarity before their own habits are fixed, must, whenever they speak, continually blunder; they have no rule to guide their judgement in their recollection from the variety of dialects which they hear; probably they may often be reproved for their mistakes, but these reproofs will be

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<sup>15</sup> See J. Newcomer, *Maria Edgeworth*, New Jersey, Associated University Presses, 1973, pp. 33-37.

of no avail, whilst the pupils continue to be puzzled between the example of the nursery and the drawing room.<sup>16</sup>

They promoted a strict censorship of children's reading, also cutting off offending passages; but these forbidden passages concerned the language of children's book and not the content, and to support her thesis Maria said: "A book written in a bad language should never be put into the hands of a child who speaks correctly".<sup>17</sup> In addition to it, as Maria wrote taking inspiration from her father's works, she neither introduced fairies nor magic in her novels because Mr. Edgeworth did not use these kinds of subjects in his books. Richard thought:

It is not necessary to make every thing marvelous and magical, to fix the attention of young people; if they are properly educated, they will find more amusement in discovering, or in searching for the cause of the effects which they see, than in a blind admiration of the juggler's tricks.<sup>18</sup>

Mr. Edgeworth continued saying that young children needed to be sent to school if at home there was not a properly instructed person who taught them how to behave, talk, read and write. It was not a right decision to leave young people with servants because according to him, servants cannot educate children due to the fact that they did not have the capacities, were associated with ignorance, vices and above all because they spoke dialects and vernacular languages, which was considered a sign of moral inferiority. Maria shared the same thoughts of her father's and they were used to think of vernacular as a code to be avoided by educated classes and it had to be banned by children's mouth, as they should take distance from vernacular speakers and they did not read books containing vernacular expressions.

Maria started writing books with the total supervision of her father and in a clear and properly English language, as for example in *Letters for Literary Ladies*, *The Parent's Assistant* and *Practical Education*. Even when she wrote Irish tales, Maria had limitations in developing the local language. For instance in *Rosanna*,

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in B. Hollingworth, *Maria Edgeworth's Irish Writing: Language, History, Politics*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in B. Hollingworth, *Maria Edgeworth's Irish Writing: Language, History, Politics*, cit. p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in O. E. McWhorter Harden, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, The Netherlands, Mouton & Co., 1971, p.35.

one of her first Irish tales, the protagonists, the Gray's family spoke an unrealistic 'standard' English, rather unconvincing and belonging to an unrealistic nature considering the fact that their syntax and grammar were very precise, maybe too much. With most of Edgeworth's Irish tales, the use of dialect was reduced to a minimum and in many cases it utterly disappeared. This way of writing was dictated by her assumed role of an educator: she wanted to instruct the readers providing useful knowledge about self improvement. In her writings the use of italics was very common and it was a symbol of a detached view of her approach to vernacular language, it had the aim of associate vernacular speakers with moral inferiority. On the other side, all her heroes and protagonists spoke a standard English even though their social background would impose the use of the provincial speech.

When her father put his daughter in touch with members of the Lunar Society, she changed her way of seeing and interpreting the language, in particular because of their approach to vernacular. This society was a dinner club and an informal group (without constitution, membership lists and publications) of well-known figures of industrialists, philosophers and intellectuals who met in Matthew Boulton's house in Birmingham between 1765 and 1813. The name was chosen because the society used to meet during the full moon or on Mondays, and because the members happily referred to themselves as 'lunatics' that meant lunatics. The club was composed by people like Matthew Boulton, Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Day, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Joseph Priestley, William Small, Jonathan Stokes, James Watt, Josiah Wedgwood and John Whitehurst. They shared a common interest in experiments and inventions and they visited each other to conduct investigations into scientific subjects such as electricity, meteorology and geology; they were sure that their discoveries would make the world a better place. But this group was not simply interested in science itself, but above all in the application of science to different fields, such as manufacturing, transportation, education, language, mining and medicine.

However, science and its experiments were only a part of their interests: the members also discussed social, political and economic issues and promoted wide-ranging debates about the social impact of the Industrial Revolution and the general revolutionary climate of that period. Politics and religion were not part of their debates, and as Mr. Edgeworth belonged to that group, he did not write about

these two issues in his writings. As for language, they talked about the concrete aspect of it because according to them it was not necessary to write with artificial or sophisticated terms, but they had to conform to the different audience that read the books. They were used to prefer the language of common people, which they considered spontaneous and without archaism, they were against slavery and the idea of servants as synonyms of ignorance. In their numerous letters, the reader could easily understand the colloquial tone, and employed personal pronouns with the aim of reducing the distance among people.

Mr. Edgeworth's relationships with the members of the Lunar Society became less frequent when he moved to Ireland but the interest in science and inventions remained in his life so he bequeathed these passions to his sons who did researches and made experiments. To Maria he transmitted the interest in local languages and consequently the importance of using the vernacular in the Irish tales to make her writing more practical and common; with these encouragements and her curiosity and delight for the world and new things, she was less defensive about the changes in language, and her English became more practical. She understood that the subjects of her novels and the language could be modified depending on the expectations and the needs of the audiences she had to satisfy. She acknowledged the existence of variety in languages, she felt not threatened by the expanding desire for the vernacular and sympathized with social changes; Maria wrote self-consciously and the composition of *Popular Tales*<sup>19</sup> was dedicated to members of the Lunar Society and not to children.

With these changes of perspective about popular culture and dialects, Maria started writing a novel, *Castle Rackrent*, where she used a fluent and spontaneous style. Even though Maria considered education as the foundation of the well-governed estate and nation, not only did she write about education, she also composed some novels to describe the history of Irish families and their behaviour and one of the books where she seemed to have escaped the role of educator was actually *Castle Rackrent*, published in 1800. This book signed a change in the life of Maria because on the one hand it was the first novel she composed alone, without the interference and the control of her father, and on the other hand with this novel she explored other kinds of writing that could be associated with the

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<sup>19</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harder, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., pp. 124-127.

lower classes, with their common language, dialects and above all the vernacular, a typical Irish style. Considering the fact that the novel appeared in 1800 and it was the year of the Union between Ireland and England, another important feature that gave even more importance to the book was the reason why Maria Edgeworth wrote the novel. She was in favour of the Union, but English people were not willing to mix with such a rude community. In that period Maria lived in Ireland with her father and all her siblings, she considered herself an Anglo-Irish writer because she was born in England but now she also felt part of the Irish population due to the fact that she had experienced the daily life of Ireland and she started appreciating that part of the world even though when she was in England everyone considered it as a heck ward country without any possibility of improvement. With these premises, she wrote the book with the aim to let England know something more about their neighbours and she also wanted to make English people aware that there were not so many differences between Irish and English citizens.

Composing the novel, she revealed her capacity for social observations, her gift in reproducing characters, sketches and authentic dialogues. Another important element that characterized *Castle Rackrent* was the fact that the novel established new genre of the 'regional novel'. *Castle Rackrent* exercised an enormous influences on the literary environment, and her description of Irish people became a source of inspiration for famous writers as Sir Walter Scott who considered Maria Edgeworth his model for the way she described characters and acknowledged his debt to Maria while he was writing *Waverley*.

Her attitude to Irish vernacular, and her capacity to describe people emerged in the *Essay on Irish Bulls*, published two years after the appearance of *Castle Rackrent* and written at the same time as the second part of her first Irish novel. In that non-fictional work she had the aim of removing English prejudices and to promote the Union between the two neighbouring countries.

### 1.3 Her relation with Ireland

Both Maria and her father were born in England but their association with Ireland allowed them to be accepted as Irish by native-born. When at the age of fourteen she settled in Ireland, Maria was old enough to have ideas about life and understand how to face everyday problems, but she was also young enough to learn from the experiences of her new and strange environment. So she arrived at Edgeworthstown, her new home, from England, she had many prejudices against Irish people, the same she had heard from the English when she lived in England. Maria who had never visited Ireland, believed in these prejudices and she expected to find them confirmed after her experience and relationships with Irish population.<sup>20</sup>

Despite her initial doubts regarding the country, she grew to love and to affirm her faith in Ireland and in its people. For instance during the famine of the 1840s, she suffered deprivation and hunger along with Irish people and the inhabitants on her estate in order to express gratitude for Maria's help, went to her house thanking her for her friendship. She started writing novels about Irish people because she wanted to defeat English prejudices and those entertained by Anglo-Irish protestants in Ireland.

This identification with Ireland and its problems allowed her to become a sort of mediator between Ireland and the British public, whom Maria addressed as an apologist and interpreter of the Irish situation. She introduced the English citizens to the Irish problems and in order to do this, she added in her masterpiece *Castle Rackrent* some notes to the text, as she explained in the Preface to the novel:

For the information of the *ignorant* English reader, a few notes have been subjoined by the editor, and he had it once in contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain English; but Thady's idiom is incapable of translation, and, besides, the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See the point of view of E. Wohlgenut, Maria Edgeworth and the Question of National Identity, "Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900", Vol. 39. No.4, (Autumn, 1999) , pp. 645-658.

<sup>21</sup> M. Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, (1800), ed. G. Watson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 4. Hereafter referred to as *Castle Rackrent*.

Also in her *Essay on Irish Bulls* Maria wanted to let English readers know the talents of Irish population, promoting and explaining her position in favour of the Union between the two countries, England and Ireland. Maria and her father saw the Union as useful necessity because they believed in an economic improvement for Ireland and they hoped that the newly-formed United Kingdom would promote the equality among Catholics and Protestants, as between Irish and English. Her purpose was to “improve Ireland’s image with the English public”<sup>22</sup> and she continued siding against English preconceptions that the Irish incarnated ignorance in their language. As part of Maria’s role as an educator, either with English or with Irish people, she affirmed that Irish citizens needed a proper justice and a trustworthy government in order to be at the same level as modern, industrialized English citizens so that they might have a chance to appear more ‘civil’ to English people’s eyes rather being continually evaluated as the odd remains of an outmoded past. However, she tended to use the stereotyped view of the lively Irish in order to arouse sympathy on their behalf; she had also to persuade an incredulous English audience about true Irish conditions through the representation of their daily life.

In her Irish novels as *Castle Rackrent*, *Ennui* and *The Absentee*, Maria’s goals was to show Irish people as equal to the English and struggle with English stereotypes of Irishmen portraying them in realistic and everyday settings; she did the same also in *Essay on Irish Bulls*. In her works Maria also focused on the linguistic differences between Irish and English societies, as a foil to how dynamic and intricate Irish society was in spite of English stereotypes. Edgeworth used her writings to reconsider the meaning of the term Anglo-Irish and through her questions she reinterpreted the cosmopolitan and the national definitions of belonging interpreting them in the light of a mediation between two countries.<sup>23</sup> Her attachment to Ireland emerged with force during her meeting with M. Edelcractz. He wanted to marry her and live in Sweden but she realized she would

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in B. Hollingworth, *Maria Edgeworth’s Irish Writing: Language, History, Politics*, cit., p. 52.

<sup>23</sup> See the strong points of view of J. Pearson, *Arts of Appropriation: Language, Circulation, and Appropriation in the Work of Maria Edgeworth*, “The Yearbook of English Studies”, Vol. 28, 1998, pp. 212-234 and J. Altieri, *Style and Purpose in Maria Edgeworth’s Fiction*, “Nineteenth Century Fiction”, Vol. 23, No. 3, (December, 1968) , pp. 265-278.

never abandon her country for any reason, because according to her, Ireland and her own family were the two most important things in her life. Maria Edgeworth was a fixed star in the Edgeworth family firmament; there was no other person that could be able to replace her: she helped her father with the estate, took care of her numerous siblings and she was also fundamental for her friends, as Sir Walter Scott who considered her his muse. Her decision to write about Ireland started because she was a great novelist and she was occupying a new territory for the novel: Maria had always had a sense of place other novelists did not possess. The majority of contemporary writers lived in London or in other cities, so consequently they set their novels in cultural areas of Britain and talked about English urban characters, choosing them as protagonists for their stories.

Maria Edgeworth, who lived instead in the countryside and in the Irish periphery of Britain, had the capacity to reproduce in fiction the real characteristics of a place, but was also able to perceive and describe the relationships between the native population and the English more civilized who had inhabited Ireland since many years. Because of this, she was the inventor of the so-called regional novel. The nation she discovered was Ireland and with it also the Irish peasants and their humours. Her ability to faithfully portray Irish people became a source of inspiration for Sir Walter Scott. She acquired an insight into the lives and behaviour of the poor and humble peasants on her father's estate and then she tried to transcribe these characteristics onto the pages of her Irish novels. While she was composing her tales, she could not ignore the conditions in which Irish people lived; Ireland had long suffered from economic, political and religious problems. However, at the time of the Union between Ireland and England, Maria was one of the people who had faith that this Union could become the reason for a new prosperity for Ireland.

Maria Edgeworth's reason for her support to the Union was the starting point of her novel *Castle Rackrent* where she also meant to celebrate the ancient culture that the progress she expected from the Union of the two nations, was going to cancel. Through the description of the history of an ancient Irish family, the reader was made to know the way of living of Irish people before the 1800 Union, their culture and above all the characteristics that distinguished them from English people.<sup>24</sup> In the subsequent years, and in particular between 1809 and 1817, she

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<sup>24</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harder, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., p. 44.

published three more novels about Ireland: *Ennui*, *The Absentee* and *Ormond*, but even though all these books had been written with ample recourse to the Irish vernacular, its use was very different from the language and the dialect she used in *Castle Rackrent*.

In her well celebrated masterpiece Maria had used the Irish vernacular add to the reality of her story of three generations of an ancient Irish family. Its truthfulness was intensified by the many and precise details based on facts given by Thady, whose spontaneity was explained by Maria Edgeworth in a letter to Mrs. Stark:

When, for mere amusement, without any idea of publishing, I began to write a family history as Thady would tell it, he seemed to stand beside me and dictate; and I wrote as fast as my pen could go, the characters all imaginary.<sup>25</sup>

Besides, the use of the vernacular was unsuitable for too serious discourses, and this was the reason why there was no message in the book and consequently a lack of moral didacticism. The novel avoided contemporary political allusions, except for the purpose that was common to Edgeworth's Irish writings: she wanted to increase understanding between the two kingdoms, trying to fight English prejudices against Irish people. According to her, an improvement in the relations between the two countries would benefit both nations in the forthcoming Union. The text appeared with a certain innocent intention, even though the year of its publication was considered a political act and as not accidental.<sup>26</sup>

In *Ennui*, she described instead the conditions of life of the Irish landlords. The plot was divided into two parts which corresponded to the two countries because at the beginning of the book the characters live in England due to the fact that they preferred English life but soon they have to return to their Irish estates interrupting life in England. The protagonist is a spoiled and bored aristocrat, Lord Glenthorn, who had seen the common problems of Irish life and then he decides to give up the useless life of an absentee gentleman for a useful one of a professional man. Here Maria followed the didactic purpose of freeing the protagonist from his condition of lethargy, while in *Castle Rackrent* she only

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<sup>25</sup> G. Watson, *Introduction to Castle Rackrent*, (1800), ed. G. Watson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. xxvi.

<sup>26</sup> See M. Butler, *Edgeworth's Ireland: History, Popular Culture, and Secret Codes*, "A Forum on Fiction", Vol. 34, No. 2, (Spring, 2001) , pp. 267-292.

searched for the faithful representation of Irish manners. Moreover in her masterpiece *Maria* centered her interests both on the characters and on the world recreated for the readers, while in *Ennui* the evil of ennui was much more emphasized than the full characterization of the protagonist.

*The Absentee* tells instead the story of an absent landowner, Lord Clonbrony, whose indifference to the tenants' welfare produced much suffering to his peasants. He lives in England with his family but soon his son Lord Colambre goes incognito to the estates in Ireland because he wants to know how the situation is and there he meets many people who tell him what is going on in Ireland. Fortunately he saves his father from ruin and at the end they return to live in Ireland resuming Lord Clonbrony's status of landlords. Maria wrote this novel inspired by her own experience because her father had been an absentee owner so she learnt many things from that experience. In this novel the use of the dialect helped to distinguish the different social classes, more than characterize a precise linguistic community as in *Castle Rackrent*. Moreover it was highlighted in italics to keep a distant and objective point of view with a particular didactic purpose. It was clearly aimed at readers who were not familiar with Irish life and customs. In *The Absentee* neither the narrator nor the characters act as mediators to give information about people in Ireland, whereas in *Castle Rackrent* this role was dominant, as also exemplified by the glossary.<sup>27</sup>

Her last Irish novel *Ormond* takes the title from the name of the protagonist, Harry Ormond, who rises from poverty to wealth during the period around 1798. He travels a lot and the book develops through different places as Ireland and France with the aim to represent the different paths and political ideologies Ormond might assume. In the end Ormond decided to serve in Britain's military profession and this fact intensifies Ireland's ties with England. It is a novel of character, of realism, morals and manners. The use of the Irish dialect was the emblem of the protagonist's loyalty to Irish tradition and culture. Apart from *Castle Rackrent*, each of her three novels was motivated by a didactic purpose: *Ennui* was meant to condemn the vice of lethargy, *The Absentee* described the evils of absentees ownership in Ireland, *Ormond* celebrated the varieties of national loyalty in the growth of a young man and its education.

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<sup>27</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harder, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., pp. 161-180.

Maria's relation with Ireland was very strong and important, she learnt to know Irish people and their way of behaving only living among them, she enriched her background of information and when she decided to write about Ireland, she already possessed all the necessary elements to compose an Irish novel. Maria Edgeworth wanted to let readers know some characteristics of Irish people, in particular through the writing of *Castle Rackrent* she attacked English prejudices, tried to remove negative images about her country and at the end she hoped to engage sympathies emphasizing the positive qualities of Ireland, even because she understood that to form a Union the inhabitants had to agree with one another.

## **Chapter two**

### ***Ireland before the Union***

## 2.1 Ireland and England before the Union

The year 1800 was crucial for the history of the two countries because in that year Ireland and England were united. During the previous years, the situation in the two nations was very different. On the one side Ireland was a country full of problems, where its inhabitants suffered famine and were seen as rude and ignorant by their neighbours; on the other side there was England, a prosperous and modern country where everyone had a job and used to work with the purpose of fostering the importance of the country in all the world.

During the first years of the eighteenth century Ireland was characterized by a period of internal peace, even though there were agrarian disturbances along the whole century; however this initial peace did not contribute to a more prosperous country because Ireland remained a place where there was scarcity of profitable employment, lack of capital and swarms of beggars in towns. Although at the end of the century there were some improvement, Ireland remained very poor if compared to prosperous England. Ireland was a fertile country with some economic progresses, as the reforms in agriculture, manufacture and trade, but after that period the situation remained fixed because of the act of 1699, issued by the English Parliament that prohibited the export of any goods from Ireland to any country except England. However the Irish were excluded also from exportation to England due to heavy duties, so the Irish manufacture was destroyed. This tactic contributed to raise the poverty among Irish inhabitants because the population was increasing and they could depend only on agriculture. Moreover, Ireland was not at the forefront of agricultural methods and the economic and social conditions were not in favour of any improvement.

Behind this inefficiency there were the causes of Ireland's poverty. Many of the Irish landlords were absentees because they moved to England where they had their main estates and an active life, since especially in towns like London or Bath the life was much more interesting if compared to that in Dublin or the Irish countryside. Among them there were also people who formed the "Dublin Society" in 1731 with the aim of experimenting new methods, providing better implements, offering funds for planting trees and generally to encourage a more profitable use of the land. This society did much work but the Irish problems were always linked with the poverty and the insecurity of the tenant farmers who due to

economic factors, could not benefit from the encouragements and the advice of the “Dublin Society”. Even landlords could not escape from this pressure and they limited the bad situation by securing a steady income with little trouble by letting out their estates in large tracts, on long leases and at moderate rents. The ‘middlemen’ who took up these leases were often people who in England might have invested their money in commerce, but in Ireland they had to make a living out of land.<sup>28</sup> With the passing of time, they sub-let the lands for shorter period and higher rents and above all with the help of agents, but in many cases the sub-lettings were so exorbitant that soon the state of affairs was made worse and nobody managed to cultivate the areas.

In the first years of 1700 Irish population survived only with potatoes and buttermilk because eggs, butter, pigs and poultry were sold to earn something more. The families continued to grow due to the fact that they hoped in an improvement of the standard of living, but around 1727 there was a serious scarcity and in 1740 and 1741 the Irish Famine cost the country 400.000 lives. Even in normal times there were many people who died because of the wretched conditions in which the population lived but in this situation famine contributed to raise the rate of mortality. The poorest lived in mud cabins containing only a single room that the family shared with animals and in many cases this kind of buildings could not keep out rain and cold. In the north of the country, people lived better because the presence of the linen industry increased the amount of money, but it was not sufficient to stop the emigration of Irish people to America in search of better condition. Even though the north of Ireland was better than the rest of the country, it was not prosperous or happy.

The year 1759 was the turning point because England removed the restrictions about Irish importations so the pasture expanded faster. From that moment the expansion became rapid, the towns increased in importance, for example Dublin was the second city of the British Isles and was equal to any other smaller European capital for what concerned its architecture and the social life. New roads were constructed, but the wealth was in the landlords’ hands so they decided to come home from England or they chose to better organize their properties with the help of an agent. Despite the fact that the people belonging to the middle class as

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<sup>28</sup> See J. C. Beckett, *A Short History of Ireland*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1958, p. 114.

merchants and lawyers were growing in wealth and influence, the radical weakness remained strong in all the country especially among the poor inhabitants. The Irish traditions and also the survival of Irish language itself became confined to peasantry, scholars, musicians and poets. The conditions of life, the illiteracy and above all the number of people who were recruited in France for the French service and others that migrated to the United States in search of better conditions of life contributed to destroy the possibility of establishing an independent Ireland which became an unattainable dream.<sup>29</sup> The Irishmen realized how precarious were the basis upon which the structure of the society stood and the discontent found expression in the Irishmen's protests caused by two main factors. The first was that between 1714 and 1760 when the country did not have a serious political history and a responsible government; actually it was controlled by Westminster for a double interest. England was interested in controlling Ireland and for this reason they imposed the presence of the Lord Lieutenant with the purpose of maintaining a protestant constitution. The second was linked with the first and concerned a Protestant ascendancy in Church, law, parliament, government and industry. England wanted to create a Protestant country similar to England but they had not taken into consideration that while in England the Anglican aristocracy was the majority and had the support of the whole nation, in Ireland it represented the minority because of the Catholicism that characterized the country; however the catholics were excluded from the political life. The situation contributed to consolidate Ireland as a country deprived of a national authority, but in 1768 the Parliament became more expressive of the public opinion because it passed the Octennial bill providing a general election every eight years.

At the end of the eighteenth century the Irish Protestant elite started to see Ireland as their native country and the Patriots were satisfied by a more favourable trading relationship with England because of the abolition of the Navigation Acts. It increased the duties on Irish goods destined to English markets and allowed no tariffs for English goods that were sold in Ireland. From the first years of the century, Irish parliamentarians campaigned for legislative independence of the

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<sup>29</sup> See P. J. Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century*, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. L. William Roger, 5 vols, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998-1999, vol. II, pp. 28-41.

Parliament of Ireland and after a period of subordination to the English and consequently to British Parliaments, many of their demands were satisfied in 1782, when Free Trade was granted between the two countries with the duty of the government to protect and encourage the industry. Also the agriculture was taken into consideration, especially the corn that was no longer protected by the Irish Corn laws created to exclude foreign grain except on necessity. Ireland enjoyed a period of apparent prosperity that ended in patriotic feeling and in a form of Irish self-government; the country began to be well known in many fields such as poetry, literature, scholarship and fashion, there was abundant employment for population, new farms were available and more lands were cultivated.<sup>30</sup> However the situation of the upper and middle class among Roman Catholics did not change because they could not sit in parliament or vote at elections; the situation became difficult to maintain because many protestants were in favour of the removal of these restrictions. Thanks to the Constitution of 1782, the Parliament of Ireland gained much of its independence from England but many of its members, who belonged to a small minority, the so-called Anglo-Irish of the Protestant Ascendancy,<sup>31</sup> were not satisfied and others had a total lack of confidence and abhorred the new laws.

Another reform was the formation of the Irish Volunteers movement, founded in Belfast in 1778. This militia had the aim of defending Ireland from foreign invasion. With the starting of the French revolution, the situation in Ireland became difficult because there was the threat of a possible invasion by French troops and England considered Ireland as the weak point in the line of defence; the situation was much more complicated due to the existence of an independent Irish Parliament England could not control. These two problems were the two factors that led to the legislative union of Parliaments.

Based on the militant example of the French Revolution, a small group of Protestant radicals guided by a young Dublin barrister Wolfe Tone, formed the Society of the United Irishmen in Belfast and Dublin in 1791, to campaign for the end of religious discrimination and the widening of the right to vote. But soon, the group radicalised its aims and tried to overthrow British rule and establish a non-sectarian republic. The Society spread quickly in every part of the country and it

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<sup>30</sup> See E. Curtis, *A History of Ireland*, London, Methuen, 1950, pp. 317-327.

<sup>31</sup> See J. C. Beckett, *A Short History of Ireland*, cit., p. 131.

was supported by the Ulster Presbyterian community, the Methodists, the Scots-Irish American emigrants and the Roman Catholics leaders; this last alliance alarmed the Parliament that decided to support the government in repressive measures, so a campaign of repression against the United Irishmen began, which included executions, use of tortures, transportation to penal colonies and house burnings. The United Irishmen decided to continue with an insurrection that culminated in the bloodshed of the Irish Rebellion of 1798, lasting from May to September 1798; it was based on the ideas of the French Revolution and was considered an uprising against British rule in Ireland, including the attempt at the total independence from England. When the rebellion was over and defeated, the only thing that remained was a disordered country that needed a government. What had happened was useful to understand that the Kingdom of Ireland would not have survived without British aid, so the solution was a union between Ireland and England. The majority of the members of the Parliament, the Roman Catholic bishops and landlords wanted the union with England but the population were unenthusiastic.<sup>32</sup>

However, as the majority of the members of parliament voted in favour of it, the Act of Union passed in August 1800 but it came into effect on 1 January 1801 and removed the measures of autonomy granted to the Ireland's Protestant Ascendancy. It was passed in response to the rebellion and was supported by the awareness that the rebellion had been provoked by a misrule. Ireland and England formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland with one Parliament, where Ireland was represented by four spiritual and twenty-eight temporal lords in the House of Lords and one hundred members in the House of Commons. This union allowed Ireland to freely commercialise with England and with temporary protective duties in favour of their goods. Besides the English and Irish churches formed the United Church of England and Ireland because that was considered "an essential and fundamental part of the union".<sup>33</sup> So the religious and economic discriminations against Catholics continued because they were not allowed to hold public office and there was no Catholic emancipation.

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<sup>32</sup> See M. Creighton, *Epochs of English History: a Complete Edition in One Volume*, London, Longmans Green, 1889, pp. 615-621.

<sup>33</sup> J. C. Beckett, *A Short History of Ireland*, cit., p. 140.

On the other side there was England, a country that experienced social changes and an incredible economic development during the eighteenth century. It was a century of amazing expansion for Great Britain after the Act of Union in 1707 when England and Wales joined Scotland under a same crown. The United Kingdom became a world power with an empire on which the sun never set.

The first thing to take into consideration was the doubling of the population from five million to more than ten millions between 1688 and 1801, it was helped by the considerable raise of the birth-rate and early marriages. The reasons could be found in an improvement in economic and social life characterized by prosperity and freedom and in a more and more important growth of towns, new industries and foreign trade that brought new wealth, so people were more willing to lend money. There was abundance of good food as meat, fresh vegetables and fruits thank to the great advances in agriculture and the new methods of production and cultivation. Moreover, the majority of the English population were primarily engaged with agriculture, so they found methods to be more efficient. The landowners had the idea of the enclosures that contributed to promote efficient farming, the farms became easier to manage and more compact with the consequence of producing more food, the animals had better cares and a selective breeding. These improvements determined an increase in the profits and a large availability of food. The eighteenth century was considered as “the golden age of the agricultural labourer”<sup>34</sup> because of the revolution and development in agricultural techniques; moreover, foreigners were struck by English liberty and by the good food that also the poorest population could eat. The better conditions of life were the first reason why so many people moved to England, included the Irish absentee landlords.

Another fundamental aspect was the fall in the death-rate; it started slowly because in the first years of the century the deaths exceeded births but around 1750 it fell rapidly. A new spirit of humanitarianism developed among the people and there was also an improvement in new systems of production, medical knowledge, cleanliness in streets and in personal habits, so life became safer. However, the life in that century was characterized also by materialism, cruelty, gin-drinking, early deaths and public hangings. There were also many rebellious

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<sup>34</sup> R. W. Harris, *England in the Eighteenth Century, 1689-1793: a Balanced Constitution and New Horizons*, London, Blandford, 1966, p. 18.

spirits who rejoiced in opposing the government, among them there were merchants with financial interests in maritime and colonial wars, artisans and unemployed.

The greater part of the wealth flowed into London, which was the most important city of England and the largest city in Europe with a population of a million that attracted every day many more people from the countryside. They were stimulated by the prosperity and the different way of life that characterized the city, and the industries saw the problem of feeding such a growing city population as a stimulus to agriculture and workers that arrived in London investing in lands and trade. London became more commercial and less industrial because the business of finance and commerce, especially in the South, became much more important than the steel and textile industries, even though there was an increase also in the demand for manufactures as the wool industry became much more organised and specialised, and consequently the first largest English export till 1800 when it was surpassed by cotton.

The mode of transport over great distances was by sea because the use of carriages was exhausting and hazardous considering the mud tracks which passed for roads before the improvement of 1748. Also the canal transport was taken into consideration but only for internal transports because it was cheap and easier than by carriage. England exported many things, as wool and iron to United States that was the best market for English goods.<sup>35</sup> Apart from jobs, the city offered people different sports and entertainments to enjoy the English life. There were games full-blooded, brutal and degrading as cock-fighting, bull-baiting, but there were also gambling and annual fairs, theatres shows and garden-tees.

Among the population that was not linked with agriculture, there were journeymen and artisans that earned from fifteen to fifty shillings, masters, labourers, casual workers and street-sellers, instrumental-makers that earned four pound a week, silk-workers, stocking-weavers and knitters that were badly paid with no more than nine shilling a week, but the lowest position was for miners who worked in the worst conditions considered primitive and extremely dangerous. These were the incomes in the first half of the century but around 1770 the wages increased along with the economic development. The salary was used to buy expensive food and to improve the standard of living. However, there still

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<sup>35</sup> See P. J. Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century*, cit., pp. 114-119.

was a poor part of the population living in bad conditions, for instance they dwelled in a single room, slept in one bed; they had few clothes and always dirty. The poorest lived around crowded courtyards where the water was contaminated. With the passing of time, the conditions of life of the English people improved. In 1762 the Parliament passed an Act in which it committed itself to street-paving Westminster and reorganize all the streets around the city, including the street-lighting. The new highways helped the growth of economic activity and social contact.

At the basis of all this prosperity in England there was the monarchy with George II, since the first years of his reign were characterized by peace, prosperity and a sense of imperial community. He chose Sir Robert Walpole as Prime Minister, who succeeded in excluding United Kingdom from continental conflicts till 1739 when the king declared war on Spain about colonies and trade against his minister's wishes. The Spanish war extended into the War of Austrian Succession, in which England fought with Austria against Spain and France to prevent French dominance in Europe. The reign of George II was also characterized by a series of rebellions inside his kingdom, the Jacobite Rebellions between 1688 and 1746. The uprisings had the aim of restoring the House of Stuart to the throne of Great Britain, in particular in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715 the pretender was the son of James VII of Scotland and II of England, the last Catholic British monarch; but in 1745 the Jacobites were definitely defeated in their hopes of a Stuart restoration.

When George II died in 1760 his grandson George III inherited the throne. Although his accession was very well welcomed by all politicians, the first years of his reign were characterized by political instability. He was determined to rule personally, as 'King in Parliament'. The life and the reign of George III were longer than any other previous monarch and were marked by a series of military conflicts involving his kingdoms and some places in Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia. During the first years of his reign, England defeated France in the Seven Years' War, the war was called in this way because the main conflict occurred in seven years, between 1756 and 1763. Fundamental was the arrival of William Pitt The Elder, who was a member of the British cabinet from 1756 to 1761. He had a grand vision of the war and, as Prime Minister, Pitt dedicated himself to a grand strategy of seizing the whole French Empire, especially its properties in North

America and India. Britain's strength was the Royal Navy, which could control the seas and bring as many invasion troops as were required. He also thought of using the colonial forces from the thirteen American colonies to help British government to invade French territories and decided to ask his European allies as Prussia and Portugal their help to defeat France. At the end of the war, Pitt's strategies were successful because the United Kingdom became the predominant power in the world and gained territories in North America, Senegal, some Caribbean islands and India.

But after the British success, the European States as Austria, Sweden, The Dutch Republic, Russia, Denmark-Norway and the Ottoman Empire started to see Britain as a greater threat than France and nobody joined English people. For these reasons Great Britain had to fight alone against its colonies that had the support of France and Spain. English people lost thirteen American colonies, which gained the independence in 1776 and from that moment onwards they were no longer under British rule and formed a new nation, called the United States of America.

Between 1760 and 1830 the first<sup>36</sup> Industrial Revolution, which was almost entirely confined to Britain, developed. It was the transition to new manufacturing processes that included hand production methods but also new machines, chemical manufacturing, the processes of iron production, the use of steam power, the development of machine tools, the rise of the general factory system and the idea of mass production. The dominant industry of the Industrial Revolution in terms of employment was the textile and it was also the first one to use modern production methods. The Revolution began in the United Kingdom with the consequence that the majority of the most important technological innovations were British. Moreover, Britain was politically stable, as well as the world's

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<sup>36</sup> It was called first to distinguish from the second Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries when, in terms of materials, the modern industry started to use both natural and synthetic resources that had never been utilized, such as lighter metals, new alloys, new energy sources and plastic. Together with these improvements there were developments in machines, tools, and computers that contributed to the creation of automatic factory. Although some parts of industry were almost completely mechanized in the mid-19th century, other automatic operation, as different from the assembly line, first reached major significance in the second half of the twentieth century. For further discussion on this issue see I. R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815*, in *The New History of England*, eds. A.G. Dickens, and N. Gash, 10 vols, London, Edward Arnold, 1977, vol. VII, p. 11.

leading colonial power, which meant its colonies could serve both as a source for raw materials and as a marketplace for manufactured goods.

Before the Industrial Revolution the majority of English people lived in small and rural communities where their daily existence was linked with farming. The life for aged people was difficult, the incomes were scarce and malnourishment and disease were very common. The poor people were used to produce their own food, clothing, furniture and tools and most manufacturing was done in homes or in small shops, using hands, tools or simple machines. The Industrial Revolution brought about a huge variety of factory-produced goods and contributed to raise the standard of living for many people, in particular for the middle and upper classes. On the other side, the life for poor and working classes continued to be difficult and full of problems, for example there were low wages for those who worked in factories and the working conditions were dangerous and monotonous. Furthermore, unskilled workers did not have job security and were easily replaceable. Also children were employed and very often they were forced to work for many hours a day and in such hazardous tasks like cleaning the machinery due to their small hands.<sup>37</sup>

After a period of difficulties in Parliament, in 1784 William Pitt the Younger was appointed Prime Minister. He had the support of the king and that bond allowed both men to be more appreciated by British citizens, he had also his own ideas and did not have the necessity to follow the majority of the House of Commons. By this time the health of the king started deteriorating. He suffered of a genetic disease called porphyria; he had had a brief episode in 1765 but from that moment the situation worsened, because of recurrent and permanent mental illness and due to a final relapse in 1810, everyone understood that the king was not able to take decisions, so the Parliament established a Prince Regent, in the person of his eldest son George, Prince of Wales.

During that period of illness, the French Revolution started in 1789 and France declared war on Britain, so to gain more money Pitt increased taxes. Soon the allies of Britain were defeated and the United Kingdom was the only one to fight against France. This was the last war during the reign of king George III, which ended with the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Moreover, in

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<sup>37</sup> See S. J. Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760-1815*, in *The Oxford History of England*, ed. G. Clarke, 14 vols, Oxford, Clarendon, 1960, vol. XII, pp. 503-524.

that period the situation for Britain became even more difficult to manage because of the insurrections in Ireland; Pitt had to concentrate his efforts in the island and tried to stop the rebellion.<sup>38</sup> As already mentioned, after these insurrections English and Irish governments started thinking about a possible union between the two countries and each one had its own reasons to join it.

From the point of view of Great Britain, the union was fundamental because of the uncertainties that followed the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and the French Revolution of 1789, whose principles inspired the Irish rebellion. Moreover if Ireland should adopt Catholic Emancipation, a Roman Catholic Parliament could break away from Britain and ally with the French, while if the same emancipation took place in the United Kingdom, it would exclude that possibility. As part of his Irish policy, Pitt wanted to remove certain legal disabilities regarding Roman Catholics, but George III sustained that if he emancipated Catholics, he would violate his coronation promise to maintain Protestantism.

All these considerations led to decide on the Union of the two kingdoms and their Parliaments. In 1801 the British Parliament passed the 'Union with Ireland Act 1800' and the same did Ireland with the 'Act of Union (Ireland) 1800', so the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. After the union George III became king of the united Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

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<sup>38</sup> For further points of view on this issue see J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, London, Macmillan, 1921, pp. 786- 805 and R. W. Harris, *England in the Eighteenth Century, 1689-1793: a Balanced Constitution and New Horizons*, cit., p. 199-209.

## 2.2 The Union

The Act of Union that had as its main characteristic the suppression of the Irish Parliament, represented a change from the policy of 1782 because in that year Britain decided to give the Irish Parliament more freedom and independence, but the recognition did not bring the stability desired by English. The regional Parliaments were abolished and the whole United Kingdom was governed from a centralised London Parliament. For most Irishmen there was not an evident difference, but that change meant the representatives of the Irish government could not pass any laws on their own. It had not been a treaty stipulated with the Irish population because the majority of the people was upset that Ireland should lose its identity and would be submerged under the English control.<sup>39</sup>

However, Englishmen did not take into consideration the preoccupations of the inhabitants and tried to persuade the members of the Irish Parliament by dismissing all those who did not approve the union; they also offered compensation per seat to the owners of pocket-boroughs. This action involved both the supporters and the opponents of the union who as first thing denounced this proposal as a sort of bribery but after nobody refused to accept the compensation. Another reason that brought Irishmen to the union was the hope of economic development with the help of a great flux of English capitals into Ireland.

The union could be considered a sort of failure because despite all the promises, Ireland continued to have a separate Irish executive and also the legislation was treated as a distinct unit. The legislature had been removed from Westminster but the Lord Lieutenant along with the law-courts and the council remained in Dublin. For more than thirty years, the spirit of the Irish administration remained that of the pre-union and English people continued to consider Irishmen sometimes as inferior and dependent on them and other times as an integral part of the United Kingdom. These uncertainties in British statesmen were caused by their ignorance about the country and by the circumstance that they did not want to invest money in Ireland.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See E. Curtis, *A History of Ireland*, cit., pp. 353-355.

<sup>40</sup> See P. J. Marshall, *The Eighteenth Century*, cit., pp. 253-259.

One of the motives why Maria Edgeworth wrote the novel *Castle Rackrent* was because she wanted to destroy the prejudices that Englishmen had; according to her they had no basis. She hoped they could change their ideas and for some aspects she managed; Sir Walter Scott was the first one who understood the aim of Edgeworth and in the *General Preface* to the *Waverley Novels* he wrote:

Two circumstances in particular recalled my recollection of the mislaid manuscript. The first was the extended and well-merited fame of Miss Edgeworth, whose Irish characters have gone so far to make the English familiar with the character of their gay and kind-hearted neighbours of Ireland, that she may be truly said to have done more towards completing the Union than perhaps all the legislative enactments by which it has been followed up. Without being so presumptuous as to hope to emulate the rich humour, pathetic tenderness, and admirable tact, which pervade the works of my accomplished friend, I felt that something might be attempted for my own country of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland — something which might introduce her natives to those of the sister kingdom in a more favourable light than they had been placed hitherto, and tend to procure sympathy for their virtues and indulgence for their foibles.<sup>41</sup>

As for the intents of Maria Edgeworth, her decision to publish her novel in 1800, the year of the Union did not happen by chance, but was a political act. As it had already been mentioned, she was in favour of the union between England and Ireland because she thought that Ireland could improve with the strong English economy, and that the religious discriminations between Catholics and Protestants could be smoothed out.<sup>42</sup> Edgeworth's novel should be seen both as a contribution to the debate about the Union and as a precious help to promote the communication between the two countries with the consequence of increasing the understanding between the two kingdoms. Moreover, if the Irishmen were scared by the possibility they might lose their identity, *Castle Rackrent* would help them to remember:

There is a time, when individuals can bear to be rallied for their past follies and absurdities, after they have acquired new habits, and a new consciousness. Nations as well as individuals gradually lose attachments to their identity, and the present generations is amused rather than

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<sup>41</sup> W. Scott, *The General Preface*, (1829) to the *Waverley Novels*, in W. Scott, *Waverley*, ed. A. Hook, London, Penguin Classics, 1985, pp. 519-533, p. 523.

<sup>42</sup> See J. C. Beckett, *A Short History of Ireland*, cit., pp. 141-143.

offended by the ridicule that is thrown upon its ancestors. Probably we shall soon have it in our power, in a hundred instances, to verify the truth of these observations.

When Ireland loses her identity by an union with Great Britain, she will look back with smile of good-humoured complacency on the Sir Kitts and Sir Condys of her former existence.<sup>43</sup>

The author wrote the novel also because she was sure of her skills; Maria Edgeworth identified herself with the Irish problems and she had also an English heritage that mixed together contributed to make of her a kind of mediator between the two countries. But despite all these good aims, governing Ireland from Westminster solved nothing. The union was only a political expedient in wartime that did not alleviate any of the Irish complaints regarding land, religion, economic and politics; on the contrary the Act contributed to increase the problems of Ireland. Pitt did not see the Act of Union as a solution to the Irish problems; he only thought about how to defend the British interests. He thought the union would help and protect Britain in the war with France; and moreover Pitt hoped that the union would also settle Ireland and transform it into a united nation, thanks to the British intervention to regulate and mitigate the Irish social tensions and conflicts. He knew that social and economic reforms were essential for Ireland, as the one about Catholic emancipation.<sup>44</sup>

Despite all these problems, there were some benefits for the Irish, for instance an improvement in the economic situation, the trade developed and the price of corn continued to increase and its markets grew faster, but these enhancements were only apparent because the rents increased, and brought money in the hands of absentee landlords, who spent their time in England, so at the end the landlords and the money went to England. This lack of capital became much more dangerous because in those years the population of Ireland was increasing in number, there were between four and five million people, so the peasants did not have the possibility to earn something more to feed the numerous families, on the contrary their standard of living sank. However also the Industrial revolution and the Irish Linen industry that expanded suddenly and rapidly in the first half of the century allowed the population to increase noticeably. Many Irish landlords were

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<sup>43</sup> M. Edgeworth, *Preface to Castle Rackrent*, (1800), ed. G. Watson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 1-5, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> See I. R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815*, cit., pp. 181-214.

Protestants because the law prevented Catholics from owning land, while the Irish peasants, who were both Protestant and Catholic, based their survival on potatoes, since the land was scarce and potatoes were an intensive crop.

A different situation was that of the Irish landlords who accepted the union only to maintain their privileges; they controlled the local administration, as policy, magistracy, municipal corporations and grand juries. The landlords governed with measures of repression with the aim of enforcing the law, protecting the rights of property and keeping the country quiet. They managed to do this with the support of the church that needed a strong government to maintain its position. Moreover, the fear of the Roman Catholics along with the increasing economic prosperity in the north-eastern counties made landlords and members of the church conscious that their welfare was linked with the maintenance of the union. However, the legislative union was established according to British's interests and its failure was due to the fact that the Irish problems remained. The economic issues of the majority of the Irish people were the consequence either of the small size of the landholdings they inherited or the large increase in the population that brought Ireland to have more than eight millions people and due to the important number, Irish agriculture had difficulties in supporting and feeding the population. The law and the social tradition provided for the subdivision of land among the members of the family, so that all sons inherited equal shares of a family farm; but this method contributed to reduce the dimensions of farms that became so small that only one crop, potatoes, could be grown sufficiently to feed a family.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, the other problem difficult to be accepted was the management of many estates that the small farmers rented. The properties were managed by absentee landlords who spent their time in England enjoying English life and in many cases the farmers had to face terrible economic conditions. The same situation is described in *Castle Rackrent*, where Sir Kit Stopgap is the owner who best represents the class of the absentees. Even the enclosures of land had worsened the problem and the extensive grazing of cattle had contributed to the reduction in size in the patch of land available to tenants to raise their crops.

Due to all the deaths caused by famine and bad conditions of life, the Irish inhabitants saw no perspectives of life, and consequently decided to migrate to Great Britain or North America. Some critics pointed out that the British

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<sup>45</sup> See J. C. Beckett, *A Short History of Ireland*, cit., pp. 159-166.

government had done as little as it possible to help Ireland. Therefore, they realized that the only people who could help the Irish were the Irish themselves. From their point of view, the Union with England had been a failure, because of the non consideration that England had for Irish problems.

### 2.3 Relationship between Irish and English

Relationships between English and Irish people in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were difficult because of religious disagreements, nationalism, different traditions and political struggles in both countries. Ireland wanted to be an independent country and England wanted to keep their own privileges. According to the English people, they had a cultural and political influence over the Irish even before Ireland was a unified country. Ever since Englishmen got an important position in the history of Ireland, they deserved to maintain their properties. On the opposite side, the Irish believed that as they cultivated the lands and lived for them, they deserved independence.

Although Ireland gained, as already discussed, a sort of independence from England in 1782, the situation did not improve because the English continued to discriminate the Irish population. Irish people were exhausted; the prevarication, domination and the control of English people in their territories was difficult to oppose so they started a series of rebellions that continued also after the Act of Union because the behaviour of the English government towards Irish inhabitants remained the same. The most violent rebellion in the eighteenth century was that of 1798, the one that did not give the result hoped by the Irish because it ended in the Union between the two countries. The Society of United Irishmen, formed of popular and powerful men characterized by a profound hatred against English people, could do nothing to avoid it. Anyway it became clear that Ireland did not have the necessary knowledge to govern itself. Yet being governed by a King of a different religion and that lived in another country did not seem a good thing for Ireland.

After many years of rebellions where they had considered all the possibilities, Ireland unified its territories and with the support of the British government they approved the Act of Union in 1801; it sanctioned the Union of Great Britain and Ireland under the name of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. William Pitt had a key role in the Union, he publicly supported the formation of the new kingdom and talked of that as something necessary and good for both countries. He worked hard for the union with free trade, parliamentary reforms that included the presence of some Irish people among the members of the English Parliament at Westminster, and Catholic emancipation. Even though Pitt

convinced Irish with all his best solutions, he continued to be convinced that Ireland must be governed according to English interests and without taking into consideration something that would improve the conditions of life of Irishmen.

The Irish and the English did not tolerate the differences between them, especially the English people that talked about the Irish as rural, illiterate, inferior people. Edgeworth's father was described as having a double role, one was representing the Irish people and the other was showing Ireland in a favourable light to English opinion. The responsibilities that he had were the same imposed on his daughter Maria. Her novels dealt with Ireland and marked an innovation in literature because the stories developed within an Irish setting and reported the speeches and the customs of all levels of the Irish society. Particularly significant was the last passage of *Castle Rackrent* where Maria Edgeworth, through Thady's voice, posed a question for all the readers and invited them to reflect on the relationships between the English and the Irish:

It is a problem of difficult solution to determine, whether an Union will hasten or retard the amelioration of this country. the few gentlemen of education who now reside in tis country will resort to England: they are few, but they are in nothing inferior to men of the same rank in Great Britain. The best that can happen will be the introduction of British manufactures in their places. Did the Warwickshire militia, who were chiefly artisans, teach the Irish to drink beer, or did they learn from the Irish to drink whiskey?<sup>46</sup>

As already said, Edgeworth mainly wrote for the English audience, so her decision to give voice to Irishmen could be seen as her desire to dispel prejudices and sympathetically portray Ireland to the English, especially after the Act of Union. At the end of her book, the author described the Irishmen thus:

All the features in the foregoing sketch were taken from the life, and they are characteristic of that mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness and blunder, which in different forms, and with various success, has been brought upon the stage or delineated in novels.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 97.

<sup>47</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 97.

Englishmen considered Irish as a community without intelligence and with no idea of how to govern a country, incapable of taking the right decisions and with a government that did not pay the right attention to the interest of its own country. So, again, the only possible solution seemed to be the union of the two Parliaments, in this way Ireland would gain the same rights and the same importance as England. For Ireland the Union was based on the rights of liberty, religion and trade, also the law was equal for Irish and English citizens and in this way they would see a chance of prosperity. But soon Irishmen understood that in England the Union was approved for other reasons.<sup>48</sup>

The English government was not wise in Irish matters and limited possible Irish attacks imposing British laws; Englishmen continued to consider the Irish as ill-behaved people, that had to remain in the previous conditions. All the hopes of prosperity Irish people had were destroyed by the English control of trade and manufactures in Ireland: there was a distinction between the Irish and the English ships because the Irish could not trade directly with the colonies and all the export and import needed to pass through England with the consequence that Great Britain continued to grow in industry, economy and trade, while Ireland continued to sink. When the English discovered that there was another thing that continued to flourish in Ireland, agriculture, they searched a way to seize it. The cattle and the rich grass were two interesting things for English farmers and the sale of wool was forbidden to any country except England.

The peasantry were extremely poor and their poverty made them ignorant and brutal. The potatoes were the only food for farmers, since the sheep were bred only for wool and sold together with the crop. The consequences of these situations were continuous rack-rents, which did not leave the tenants any possibility to improve or increase their capitals and the fragmentation of the holdings did not allow the development of new methods of agriculture. The economic subordination to England was damaging for the Irish products, also because English manufacturers were jealous of Irish things and made all they could to try to eliminate their competition both in the commerce with England and with other countries.

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<sup>48</sup> See M. Creighton, *Epochs of English History: a Complete Edition in One Volume*, cit., pp. 610-614.

Therefore, the Irish rebelled many other times, but without reaching any solution. Ireland was considered a Roman Catholic nation and the English government wanted the union also to impose the Protestant religion and avoid the possibility of the spread of the Roman Catholic religion. The same idea was shared by some Irish Protestants who wanted the Act of Union to unify the two countries in a single Protestant nation. As for the Catholics, they believed that sooner or later time would eliminate the hatred of Protestants towards them.

There was another problem that was the consequence of Great Britain's non consideration of the Irish problems, and it was the Irish emigration towards America, Australia and Canada. After the Great Famine many Irish people died and many others decided to migrate in order to avoid death. England did not do anything to control the migrant wave or to improve the conditions of starved Irish inhabitants, bad cleaning and monstrous conditions of life. They were a single kingdom united only on paper because England did not move a finger to help or to improve the conditions of Irishmen. The consequences of the Great Famine and the non help of the English started the activities for the repealing of the union.

Among the people who went to the United States there were some that thought of a possible revolution against British government for their way of acting towards Irish people and the shock that Ireland received. The communities that formed in the United States entertained anti-English feelings and this contributed to fix the idea that England was tyrannical and odious not only to Irishmen but also to the American colonies. The Irish Famine produced an antagonism to England that also produced political effects inside England itself, for example it created troubles in the heart of the English aristocracy, and in the House of Commons.

After the Union some British developed a particular curiosity for what was associated to the periphery, the unfamiliar, the unknown, the different and they started to see Ireland as a place that they could associate with amusement. What seemed ironically strange was that the desire to learn something more about Ireland took place after the union between the two kingdoms, just when Irish people needed to feel part of the United Kingdom and not to be judged as exotic foreigners.

English government thought that there was a better part of Ireland in need of being ruled and another one, the worst, in need of being controlled. But most of the citizens of Ireland thought that the Irish land belonged to them and only to

them, so they had to be the only owners of their territories. The English did not give much importance to Irish people and continued to use Ireland for their own benefits and in this way the Irish did not have the possibility to gain profits.

## **Chapter three**

*Thady, the narrator*

### 3.1 The story

Thady M'Quirk, the narrator of the novel, is an old steward characterized by his qualities of loyalty and truthfulness. In the novel he is supported to be the author of the *Memoirs of the Rackrent* family, one of the most ancient families in the kingdom, whose old family name was O' Shaughlin, related to the Kings of Ireland. Thady knows the family because his grandfather was the driver of Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin's coach and in the novel he tells the story of how the estate became the property of Sir Patrick.

Sir Tallyhoo Rackrent possessed the fine Castle Rackrent estate but when he died, his german cousin Sir Patrick seized the building and took the surname and the emblem of Rackrent. After becoming the owner, the first thing he did was to give the best celebration ever heard of in the country; the party was such a success that during the subsequent years he had the house full of gentlemen and landowners who rather accepted to sleep in the chicken coop than to be excluded from one of his entertainments. As he liked the pomp and the splendour, he squandered all his money doing celebrations where he could sing and enjoy himself with many people but his birthday party was the last occasion he had to have a good time because that night he died. His funeral was the mirror of his life; never did anyone see such a crowded ceremony, there were people belonging to different social classes and coming from the farthest part of the country.<sup>49</sup> The participants sang a whillaluh, the Irish funeral song with the chorus that sighed and groaned, together with Irish music and words. The presence of old women who cried loudly and well was much required because their participation was the sign that the deceased was well beloved during all his life.<sup>50</sup> Suddenly the corpse was seized due to debts but the heir, who was attending the funeral, did not do anything for fear of possible consequences and decided to wait for the resolution of the problem according to the law.

The heir was Sir Murtagh Rackrent, a lawyer that even though famous for paying all the debts of honour of his father, refused to pay even a single shilling to the creditors because of the affront to the body of his father. Sir Murtagh loved the law; once he had sixteen lawsuits pending at the same time regarding different

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<sup>49</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harden, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., pp. 47-49

<sup>50</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 99-102.

things and he was so happy and satisfied for the situation that he enjoyed discovering that he had almost one trial for each letter of the alphabet. Of all his forty-nine trials, he lost seventeen and the others were gained with double or triple costs that finally he never paid. These suits cost him so much that he was forced to sell parts of his estate to support all those expenses. His most important trial was with the Nugents of Carrickashaughlin, everyone thought Sir Murtagh would win but the things developed in another way because he let a special hill to be excavated notwithstanding Thady advised him of a Banshee, a kind of aristocratic fairy tale, known through an hideous old woman, who sang in a mournful supernatural voice to warn the family that some of its members would die soon,<sup>51</sup> so finally the situation worsened.

Thady, surnamed by Sir Murtagh 'old Thady', decides to blame lady Murtagh for the terrible economic situation of his master because she is not liked by anyone as she is an unpleasant Scottish widowed woman who came from the Skinflints family. Sir Murtagh had married her because he desired the properties of her family, but at the end he did not have any benefits because he died before her. She was careful, attentive, much devoted and also charitable but in her own way because she opened a charity school for poor children where they could learn how to read and write without paying but in return for it they had to sew for her. Also the workers of a bleach yard close to the estate were employed without being paid and in this way, Lady Murtagh obtained everything at a low cost. As for food, things went much in the same way because everything was given to her as a duty and due to the fear of a possible increase in the rents, everyone brought something to her when they passed near the castle.

Since the majority of the tenants left the estate due to their bad conditions of life, Sir Murtagh accused Sir Patrick's way of managing the estate because he had given too much liberty to them. Sir Murtagh acted in a different way because he squeezed and exploited the workers, auctioned everything and avoided the reparation of the fences so that the animals that trespassed became his own property. In this way he obtained all that was necessary to improve his estate without spending nothing and no one tried to rebel because in each of the tenancy agreements he had put strict clauses and heavy penalties. This master was very different from Sir Patrick because with Sir Murtagh there were no parties, no

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<sup>51</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 17.

receptions, no filled cellars, no whiskey for the tenants, nothing that had to do with Sir Patrick's ways. Although both the masters racked rents, there was a clear distinction between the two. Sir Patrick squandered the money to transform the estate into a realm full of adornments, lights, precious possessions and food of every kind; moreover he liked inviting many friends and important people with whom he enjoyed himself. The other master, Sir Murtagh, did not like parties and receptions, and for these reasons his house was always empty and bare. He was also considered stingy and he did not give any importance to the care of the estate, in fact he sold parts of the house to cover his numerous expenses with the law.

Sir Murtagh and his wife were the best couple for taking care of their affairs, money and interests, but it was not enough because they continued to argue about the management of the estate. Both wanted to be right and during a dispute Sir Murtagh lost control and died because of the breaking of a blood vessel. After his funeral, his wife stripped Castle Rackrent of its treasures and went to Dublin; Thady is very happy in seeing her get in the carriage. The servant had never expressed any feeling in favour or against her and also when she leaves, he limits himself to bow for the sake of the family. The estate was a mess and all the people were preparing things for the arrival of the new owner.

As Sir Murtagh did not have any children, the castle was inherited by his young brother, Sir Kit Stopgap, a wild and carefree officer. He arrives earlier than expected with a little calash, some horses, dogs and many servants, for whom it was difficult to find a place to sleep because the previous mistress had taken everything away. The house is empty but Sir Kit does not care because he thinks those things had to be furnished by the servants. One morning he talks to Thady, addressing him as 'old Thady', gives him a guinea and from that moment onwards Thady never stops loving his new master. Soon, Sir Kit decides to move to England to spend a better life and he leaves an agent in Ireland who had the duty of managing the estate. This agent belongs to the middle class and spends his time oppressing the poor people and exploiting the tenants; every day he asks for money and all the rents had to be paid in advance without any exception or favour. Thady does not say a single word out of his respect for the family, but he tries to understand why Sir Kit needed money even though Thady is not able to understand the reason.

Thady's son, Jason, is a good student and the best accountant in the country; he bought the farm close to the estate when Sir Kit decided to sell it. In the meantime the agent explains the reason why the master wanted to sell the farm and asked for money: Sir Kit likes gambling. After this episode Sir Kit asks more money but the agent does not know how to procure it so he writes to him. He replies that the agent had to be removed and replaced by Jason and that the situation will improve because within two weeks he would marry the biggest heiress in England.

For his return Sir Kit orders fires, the painting anew of the house and the tidiness in all the rooms. There were bonfires in all the country, everyone wanted to celebrate the master, especially the servants. But the night when Sir Kit and his wife arrive Thady is shocked due to the dark colour of the lady's skin. He tries to talk to her but she never replies, even his master seems very different from when he left the estate some time before. Before going to bed Thady discovers something about the new lady. She is Jewish, an unknown race in his eyes, she does not speak English very well, can not eat pork or sausages and does not go to Protestant or Catholic churches. The servant is worried about the situation but he never expresses any of his thoughts, especially when Sir Kit and his wife argue. One evening during the dinner Sir Kit orders pig meat and she is so disgusted that she retires to her room where her husband locks her in.<sup>52</sup> From that moment onward he lives peacefully and quietly, enjoying himself a lot with his friends.

After some years from her confinement, she becomes very ill and seems to be dying, so Sir Kit tries to convince his wife to leave all her jewels to him but she did not accept. Having heard of her health conditions, three ladies in the neighbourhood hope to become the next lady Rackrent and do everything to catch the attention of Sir Kit. One day by mistake, the untrue news that lady Rackrent had died spread about the country; the three women are so angry because they are expected become the next Lady Rackrent that Sir Kit decides to meet the relatives of the three women and dispute three duels but during the last Sir Kit is shot and dies. When his wife is informed, she miraculously recovers from her illness and returns to Bath. Sir Kit is much pitied and in every part of the country the people damned his killer and sang a song that had been composed for him.

The next master is Sir Connolly Rackrent, called Sir Condy among his friends, he surnamed the servant 'honest and old Thady' and he is Thady's favourite member

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<sup>52</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harden, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., pp. 50-52.

of the family and the most beloved man he has ever seen or heard of, including Sir Patrick. Sir Condry belongs to a distant branch of the family, has no fortune and studied in the college of Dublin, then he went to university because he was supposed to become a lawyer but his lack of ability to speak in public and the certainty he was going to inherit the estate stopped his career. When he was young he lived in a small house and played with other children, among whom there was Jason. Thady went to his house and told him the story of his family, and for this reason Sir Condry thinks highly of him. All the people love Sir Condry and think he looks like Sir Patrick.

Jason informs Sir Condry about the debts of the estate but he makes not many attempts to improve the condition of his holdings, so Jason buys part of the Rackrent properties that “got two hundred a year profit rent”<sup>53</sup> to ease Sir Condry’s financial difficulties. Moreover, to earn more money Sir Condry decides to sell the hunting lodge to a stranger, Captain Moneygawl of Mount Juliet’s town. They become friends, go hunting and shooting together and Sir Condry is invited to Mount Juliet’s town where he meets the youngest daughter of the captain, Miss Isabella, who falls in love with him but her father is against a relationship between his daughter and the owner of Castle Rackrent. Also Sir Condry was contrary because he really loves Judy M’Quirk, Thady’s niece. But after seeing Miss Isabella, he starts thinking about the possibility of bringing her to Scotland with him. He is very confused and with the help of a coin he decides which woman he has to marry. His heart is for poor Judy but the destiny indicated Miss Isabella, so she is the new lady. They marry and Captain Moneygawl pays all Sir Condry’s debts so that the castle sees again its old glory.

The master is involved in politics and he wins the general election becoming a member of the Parliament. However, after the appointment, the voters came to Sir Condry claiming that he had obliged them to vote for him and now he has to respect his promises, but he decides to move to Dublin with his wife. Also Jason is very angry with him because he had promised and never given him a new job, as a consequence Thady’s son chooses to end his job as an agent. After a short period the master comes back alone because his wife had returned to live with her family with the conviction that he had married her only to pay his numerous debts. Seen the situation, Jason proposes Sir Condry to buy many of the lands

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<sup>53</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 41.

belonging to him, he accepts and thus Jason becomes the new owner of Castle Rackrent. Sir Condry abandons the estate and goes to the Lodge to safeguard his precarious health, there he receives the visit of Judy who takes care of him and informs him about Miss Isabella's accident and her health conditions. Also Jason comes to see him to give him three hundred guineas in exchange for Sir Condry's signing in the document that proved the transfer of the title, the rights and the lands from Sir Condry Rackrent to Jason M'Quirk. Suddenly, in an unexpected way, Sir Condry dies and is honoured with a poor funeral because some days before dying he had organized a rich false ceremony only to see if he was as beloved as Sir Patrick. Lady Rackrent survives and Jason does not marry anyone.

### 3.2 Thady's family and ideas

In a letter to Mrs. Stark, Maria Edgeworth writes of Thady as a person she had met and listened to when she came to Ireland and she immediately understood that he was the right person to become *Castle Rackrent's* narrator and to give voice to the Irish world. Thady is the central figure of the novel and even if he is often an unreliable narrator he expresses Edgeworth's ideas about Ireland.<sup>54</sup>

Thady starts the novel presenting himself but during the story the reader discovers that Thady's kin is composed of his son Jason, his niece Judy and his grandfather who worked for Sir Patrick. All the other characters, as the members of the Rackrent family, are not his family but Thady considers himself as part of the Rackrent family because he has been working for them since he was young. Thady never criticizes the Rackrents, their dynasty and their declining fortunes but he unconsciously concentrates his narration on the decline of that family he loves, and to the rise of his own family with his son. This process of narration creates a sort of ambiguity between his feudal loyalty and the exposure of a landowner class with all their abuses of power because Thady defends his masters at any cost and does not disapprove any of their lines of conduct. Thady tells the story from an emotional, blind and faithful perspective and the words, the dialogues and the anecdotes he uses belong to the common Irish people.<sup>55</sup>

Each of the four masters of castle Rackrent has its own vices and weakness; for instance Sir Patrick is an entertainer, loves parties and drinks a lot, Sir Murtagh is a miser so much attached to money that he marries a woman only for her inheritance, Sir Kit is an absentee landlord, likes gambling and married a Jewish woman for her money. The last owner Sir Condy looks like carefree Sir Patrick, and he chooses to marry by tossing a coin. No one of them is able to manage the estate, so some of them decide to marry rich women in order to solve their problems, but no one succeeds in the intent. The only person who is able to

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<sup>54</sup> See S. Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature*, London, Hutchinson, 1986, pp. 90-97.

<sup>55</sup> See the points of view of S. Glover, *Glossing the Unvarnished Tale: Contra-Dicting Possession in "Castle Rackrent"*, "Studies in Philology", Vol. 99, No. 3, (Summer, 2002), pp. 295-311 and G. H. Brookes, *The Didacticism of Edgeworth's "Castle Rackrent"*, "Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900", Vol. 17, No. 4, (Autumn, 1977), pp. 593-605.

control the estate is Jason , Thady's son, because he has managerial capacities. The destruction of the Rackrent family represents the end of the old aristocratic order that is exposed as obsolete and full of problems.

Even though the Rackrent family is associated with incapacity and exploitation, Thady has a strong relation and devotion to the members of the Rackrent family and in the first lines of the novel he says:

Having out of friendship for the family, upon whose estate, praised be Heaven! I and mine have lived rent free time out of mind, voluntarily undertaken to publish the Memoirs of the Rackrent family, I think it my duty to say a few words, in the first place, concerning myself. <sup>56</sup>

The novel starts with the description of Sir Patrick's management. He is much beloved by Thady and by all the people on the estate. In the narration of Sir Patrick's life, Thady's ideas of loyalty and devotion start to be outlined. In particular during one of the numerous parties on the estate the narrator uses words like: "Long life to him!"<sup>57</sup>, to express his loyalty to his master and consequently to all the Rackrent family.

Furthermore, in the text there are many phrases that can be interpreted as Thady's apologies to the Rackrent family since the story he narrates marks the end of their dynasty and the beginning of Jason's management. Thady regularly punctuates his non-involvement in the way of acting towards his masters throughout all the novel, employing words like: "I said nothing"<sup>58</sup>, "I never said anything"<sup>59</sup>, "kept my mind to myself"<sup>60</sup>, "I said not a word"<sup>61</sup>, "I'll say nothing"<sup>62</sup>. All these statements also outline Thady's many other qualities, for instance he prefers the silence instead of possible quarrels with his masters and with the other servants.

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<sup>56</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 12, 21, 27, 45, 55, 62, 87.

<sup>59</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p.18.

<sup>60</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 96.

The story of *Castle Rackrent* goes on with the arrival of Sir Murtagh, very well known for his love for law and law-suits. During the detailed descriptions of the new master, Thady uses different words to express, again, his loyalty to the Rackrent family: “He was a very learned man in the law, and I know nothing of the matter except having a great regard for the family”.<sup>63</sup> Even though Thady does not approve of Sir Murtagh’s way of behaving with the gentlemen and with the tenants, he says:

I was ashamed myself, and knew not what to say for the honor of the family —But I made the best of a bad case, and laid it all at my lady’s door, for I did not like her any how, nor any body else.<sup>64</sup>

Apart from the criticism Thady moves to his masters, there are also some appreciations. As for Sir Murtagh, Thady says:

He was the best of husbands, as to looking into his affairs, and making money for his family; yet I don’t know how it was, they had a great deal of sparring and jarring between them.<sup>65</sup>

Thady’s love for the family does not contribute to confuse his ideas because if he sees something wrong, he exposes it in the novel. In this way the reader both knows Thady’s thoughts and all the necessary elements for the correct understanding of the situation.

The most important thing for Thady is the unity and solidarity among the members of the family, and for this reason he limits his activity in analysing what the other characters do, without talking to them about his own impressions. The narrator never openly expresses any inner thought about his masters’ ways of acting and managing the estate, about the behaviour of his mistresses and of the agent because according to Thady the well-being and the peace of the family must be preserved even though they cost many sacrifices.<sup>66</sup> Another emblematic

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<sup>63</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> For further description see J. Nash, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*, in M. Jenkins ed., “Journal of British Studies”, Vol. 48, No. 2, (April, 2009) , pp. 546-547 and T. Michals, *Commerce and Character in Maria Edgeworth*, “Nineteenth-Century Literature”, Vol. 49, No. 1, (June, 1994) , pp. 1-20.

element that helps to understand Thady's values and ideas is his way of behaving with his mistresses, but his approach to them will be examined in depth in the following chapter.

One of the examples of Thady's conduct is his approach to the agent, "who grind the face of the poor".<sup>67</sup> The agent squeezes the tenants with the aim of receiving more and more money and Thady is not happy about the situation, especially for the people who live on the lands and have to endure his oppressions, but he says:

I said nothing, for I had a regard for the family, but I walked about, thinking if his honour Sir Kit, (long may he live to reign over us!) knew all this, it would go hard with him, but he'd see us righted — not that I had any thing for my own share to complain of, for the agent was always very civil to me, when he came down into the country, and took a great deal of notice of my son Jason".<sup>68</sup>

The first impression Sir Kit gives to Thady is very positive because the narrator says: "A fine life we should have led, had he stayed among us, God bless him!"<sup>69</sup> but then Sir Kit decides to leave Ireland and employ the agent. As a consequence Thady considers Sir Kit's behaviour as a mistake for going away and leaving the estate to an agent that brings it to a complete ruin. Thady comments that the castle is:

All mortgaged, and bonds out against him, for he was never cured of his gaming tricks — but that was the only fault he had, God bless him!<sup>70</sup>

However, seeing the situation Thady refuses to blame Sir Kit and convinces himself that it is all the agent's fault, but when the agent confesses that the money was required by the master, Thady remains shocked and speechless.

Regarding Thady's explicit appreciations of the Rackrent's dynasty, the most important words are for Sir Condy that Thady enthusiastically describes:

I had a great regard for every member of the family, yet without compare Sir Conolly, commonly called Sir Condy Rackrent, was ever my great

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<sup>67</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 20

<sup>68</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>69</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 32.

favorite, and indeed the most universally beloved man I had ever seen or heard of, not excepting his great ancestor Sir Patrick, to whose memory he, amongst other instances of generosity, erected a handsome marble stone in the church of Castle Rackrent”.<sup>71</sup>

Sir Condry is very well known by Thady because when he was young, he used to play with Jason and Thady went to his house to tell him the stories of the family. Yet there are some episodes that make Thady side against Sir Condry. The first thing Sir Condry does is selling the hunting lodge to Captain Moneygawl and Jason is jealous of it because he wanted to buy it. Then the master meets Miss Isabella and his feelings for Thady's niece, Judy M'Quirk, start to waver, and at the end he marries the daughter of Captain Moneygawl and Thady is very sad because between his master and his niece it was all over, but he continues to think that his niece was by far worthier than Sir Condry's wife. Thady's narration of the behaviour of his master continues with Sir Condry's election as a member of the Parliament thanks to the votes of the people and to a promise he made to Jason but he has not respected.

Thady's son Jason is a very intelligent man and also the best to cover the position of the agent, but after Sir Condry's not maintaining his promise, he says to him that it is time to search for another man to do his work. Apart from that, Sir Condry has also other problems because there are people who wanted to arrest him, his wife returns to live with her father and the estate is again full of debts. Thady does not say his own opinion and does not do anything to change the situation. He only tries to stay close to Sir Condry with his presence and some words full of pity and compassion: “I'm sorry to see your honour so low this morning, but you'll be better after taking your breakfast”.<sup>72</sup> All the facts described in *Castle Rackrent* have the aim of provoking both pity for the predicament of the Irish landlords and their tenants, and the readers' awareness of the Irish situation.

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<sup>71</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 69.

### 3.3 The Irish Bulls and the irony

By just reading the first lines of the novel the reader understands the confusion and the disorientation of the narrator. After presenting himself, Thady describes the pleasure with which he tells the story of the Rackrent family and begins with the illustration of a portrait of Sir Patrick:

I'm sure I love to look upon his picture, now opposite to me; though I never saw him, he must have been a portly gentleman — his neck something short, and remarkable for the largest pimple on his nose, which, by his particular desire, is still extant in his picture.<sup>73</sup>

The humorous contradiction between what the picture shows and what Thady says about Sir Patrick regarding his manners is clear since the beginning of the story. The same comic effect emerges at the end when there is the passage of the property of the estate from the Rackrent family to Jason. Throughout the whole text, the irony is employed as a filter of protection for the writer so that Maria Edgeworth could write freely and avoid directly deal with awkward issues. Considering the arguments of Maria Edgeworth's writing, she also uses the irony to ingratiate the readers, especially the skeptical English readership.

Thady is a delightful character characterized by enchantment and unconsciousness, rich in his Irish humour. One example is his comment on the death of Sir Patrick:

Then such a fine whillaluh! you might have heard it to the farthest end of the county, and happy the man who could but get a sight of the hearse! But who'd have thought it? Just as all was going on right, through his own town they were passing, when the body was seized for debt.<sup>74</sup>

The irony in the novel is a movement that involves the sensibility of Thady, the narrator, but the matter is complicated by a double rhetorical strategy. On the one side, Thady describes things as they are; on the other side he behaves as a faithful servant, whose life was entirely dedicated and devoted to the service of the decayed Irish aristocratic family. In his role as the friendly chronicler of the

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<sup>73</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 10.

<sup>74</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 11.

history of the Rackrent family, Thady tells the decline of that family and the parallel rise of his family with Jason. The Rackrents are less competent in the management of the estate if compared to Jason. The aspect of the irony is not limited to Jason's rising fortunes and the Rackrents' fall, but it is also directed at Thady's economically contradictory attitude.<sup>75</sup>

The confused perspective of old Thady clearly emerges in his narration of his masters' way of managing the estate. Here Thady does not want to go against any member of the family, but since he says how things really are the non-contradiction principle reveals many comic effects.<sup>76</sup> Thady pretends to remain faithful to the family without creating unpleasant situations even though the masters act in wrong ways. One of the moments in the novel that better exemplifies this principle is when Sir Kit gives orders to his agents and Thady acts as a spectator. This is his description of what happens:

Rents must be all paid up to the day, and afore — no allowance for improving tenants — no consideration for those who had built upon their farms — No sooner was a lease out, but the land was advertised to the highest bidder — all the old tenants turned out, when they had spent their substance in the hope and trust of a renewal from the landlord. — All was now set at the highest penny to a parcel of poor wretches who meant to run away, and did so, after taking two crops out of the ground. Then fining down the year's rent came into fashion — any thing for the ready penny, and with all this, and presents to the agent and the driver, there was no such thing as standing it — I said nothing, for I had a regard for the family.<sup>77</sup>

The confusion and the contradictory attitude that belong to Thady contribute also to hide the avidity and the rapacity with which Jason takes possession of the estate. Many critics sustain the idea that Thady secretly supported and approved the achievements of his son. However, as Enrica Villari argues, there is a book by Edgeworth that helps the reader to interpret in the right way the confusion of the narrator, it was the *Essay on Irish Bulls* and was published two years after *Castle Rackrent*. As the title shows, the essay is linked with bulls, a term which does not

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<sup>75</sup> See S. J. Solomon, *Ironic Perspective in Maria Edgeworth's "Castle Rackrent"*, "The Journal of Narrative Technique", Vol. 2, No. 1, (January, 1972), pp. 68-73.

<sup>76</sup> See A. Yahav, *Is There a Bull in This Nation? On Maria Edgeworth's Nationalism*, "Studies in Romanticism", Vol. 49, No. 1, (Spring 2010), pp. 79-104.

<sup>77</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 21.

refer to a species of animal but to a typical Irish “phenomenon”. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a bull as:

A self-contradictory proposition; in modern use, an expression containing a manifest contradiction in terms or involving a ludicrous inconsistency unperceived by the speaker. Now often with the epithet Irish; but the word had been long in use before it came to be associated with Irishmen.<sup>78</sup>

The main purpose of the essay is to hit the behaviour of superiority of the English people. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, with the *Essay on Irish Bulls* Maria wants to remove the English prejudices and promote, in a psychological way, the Union that at the time had become a political reality. She also wants to show that the Irish people do not express ignorance while they are speaking. The thing that emerges from the essay is the clear illustration of Maria Edgeworth’s attitude to the Irish vernacular language. Through the description of that kind of dialect, she hopes to eliminate the stereotypical adjectives like dumb and foolish, with which the Englishmen addressed the Irish. The Irish people used to commit ‘bulls’ or blunders and this contributed to associate them with the ridiculous.<sup>79</sup>

The Irish ingenuity and the fact that the Irishmen committed bulls is linked with their use of a more figurative language full of images, symbols and allegories. In the *Essay on Irish Bulls* Edgeworth describes the reason why Irishmen implied that kind of language:

At all events, the phlegmatic temper of Englonde secures her from making bulls. The propensity to this species of blunder exists in minds of a totally different cast; in those who are quick and enthusiastic, who are confounded by the rapidity and force with which undisciplined multitudes of ideas crowd for utterance. Persons of such intellectual characters are apt to make elisions in speaking, which, they trust, the capacities of their audience will supply; passing rapidly over a long chain of thought, they

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in E. Villari, *Straniamento romantico e autorità romanzesca in “Castle Rackrent”*, in L. Innocenti ed., *L’Invenzione del Vero: forme dell’autenticazione nel romanzo inglese del ‘700*, Pisa, Pacini, 1999, pp. 211-244.

<sup>79</sup> For further details see S. B. Egenolf, *Maria Edgeworth in Blackface: “Castle Rackrent” and the Irish Rebellion of 1798*, “ELH”, Vol. 72, No. 4, (Winter, 2005) , pp. 845-869 and M. Neill, *Mantles, Quirks, and Irish Bulls. Ironic Guise and Colonial Subjectivity in Maria Edgeworth’s “Castle Rackrent”*, “The Review of English Studies”, Vol. 52, No. 205, (February, 2001) , pp. 76-90.

sometimes forget the intermediate links and no one but those of equally rapid habits can follow them successfully.<sup>80</sup>

Maria Edgeworth continues her essay describing the association the Irishmen establish with words. They often use as a figure of speech the oxymoron because it allows to illustrate the co-existence of two opposite things. Knowing this, the reader is enabled to avoid the mistakes regarding the Irish people that were common to the Englishmen. The fundamental tract of the oxymoron is the pleasure of the Irish wit in neutralizing the contradictions and consequently opposite ideas can live side by side ignoring the inconsistencies. This ‘neutralizing of contradictions’ is the dominant element of the narration of Thady M’Quirk. His tale is a proper Irish bull and along the whole text there are a lot of elements that support it. When Thady talks about the generosity of Sir Murtagh’s wife, in a subsequent paragraph he gives a detailed story of how she exploits the job of many people on the estate:

I must say for her, she made him the best of wives, being a very notable stirring woman, and looking close to every thing. [...] However, my lady was very charitable in her own way. She had a charity school for poor children, where they were taught to read and write gratis, and where they were kept well to spinning gratis for my lady in return; for she had always heaps of duty yarn from the tenants, and got all her household linen out of the estate from first to last; for after the spinning, the weavers on the estate took it in hand for nothing, because of the looms my lady’s interest could get from the Linen Board to distribute gratis [...].<sup>81</sup>

As for Sir Murtagh, the narrator inserts a bull while he tells about the various law-suits the master had. With the intent of praising the legal capacities of Sir Murtagh, Thady adds that all these suits brought him to ruin:

Out of forty-nine suits which he had, he never lost one but seventeen; the rest he gained with costs, double costs, treble costs sometimes — but even that did not pay. He was a very learned man in the law, and had the character of it; but how it was I can’t tell, these suits that he carried cost him a power of money — in the end he sold some hundreds a year of the family estate.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> M. Edgeworth, *Essay on Irish Bulls*, e-text: <https://archive.org/stream/essayonirishbul00edgegoog#page/n28/mode/2up>, p. 144.

<sup>81</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>82</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 15-16.

The bull clearly emerges because a man who knows the law better than anyone else, should not have any kind of problem with it. And a sort of linguistic bull appears when Thady refers that Sir Murtagh has not lost none of the forty-nine suits, but he immediately corrects the sentence adding that the causes he lost were seventeen. The contradiction between the two separate parts of the same sentence is emblematic of the Irish way of talking. The Irish people are not able to lie without adding the truth in the next sentences; it is also the characteristic of the Irish bull. From the point of view of the reader, Thady appears as a person who does not manage to express his ideas without saying also the truth that clearly contradict them.

Again, just when Thady celebrates the nobility of Sir Kit, he continues describing the ways in which he segregated his wife in a room for seven years because she refused to give him her diamond jewel:

He had the spirit of a Prince, and lived away to the honour of his country abroad, which I was proud to hear of, what were we the better for that at home? [...] upon which my lady shut herself up in her own room, and my master said she might stay there, with an oath; and to make sure of her, he turned the key in the door, and kept it ever after in his pocket — We none of us ever saw or heard her speak for seven years after that.<sup>83</sup>

After many protestations of the generosity of Sir Condy, Thady adds the description of the numerous debts of his master and examples of his economic incompetence:

By these means he became well acquainted and popular amongst the poor in the neighbourhood early, for there was not a cabin at which he had not stopped some morning or other along with the huntsman, to drink a glass of burnt whiskey out of an egg-shell, to do him good, and warm his heart, and drive the cold out of his stomach. — The old people always told him he was a great likeness of Sir Patrick, which made him first have an ambition to take after him, as far as his fortune should allow. [...] He could not command a penny of his first year's income, which, and keeping no accounts, and the great sight of company he did, with many other causes too numerous to mention, was the origin of his distresses. — My son Jason, who was now established agent, and knew every thing, explained matters out of the face to Sir Conolly, and made him sensible of his embarrassed situation. With a great nominal rent-roll, it was almost all

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<sup>83</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 20-29.

paid away in interest, which being for convenience suffered to run on, soon doubled the principal, and Sir Condry was obligated to pass new bonds for the interest, now grown principal, and so on. Whilst this was going on, my son requiring to be paid for his trouble, and many years service in the family gratis, and Sir Condry not willing to take his affairs into his own hands, or to look them even in the face.<sup>84</sup>

Thady offers many other important examples of Irish bulls in his narration, and of the perfect use of the oxymoron, for instance when he explains how Jason succeeds to Sir Condry in the management of the estate notwithstanding the desperate and rebellious reactions of the people of the estate when they discover the situation. Thady writes:

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, and they cried, No Jason! No Jason! — Sir Condry! Sir Condry! Sir Condry Rackrent for ever! 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.<sup>85</sup>

Thady is an ingenuous narrator in which two opposite points of view coexist. While he is composing the apologetic chronicles of his masters, he is not shrewd enough to omit the details that incriminate them in the readers' eyes. Thady's role combines the characteristics of a process with both the defence of, and the accusation against, the old Irish world that the Union was going to cancel.

So Thady's narration has also another function, that of the representation of the historical conflict. The story talks about the decline of a family through the lives of four generations and thanks to the point of view of an individual memory. It means that the representation of the past is limited to a period in which there are many possibilities to have eyewitnesses' accounts as sources, for instance Thady talks about Sir Patrick because the narrator can reconstruct his story through the direct narration he had from his grandfather who had worked for him. Despite all the enjoyable and unpleasant events that happened during the four generations, the only thing Thady does never lose is his loyalty to the Rackrent family as he

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<sup>84</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>85</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 79.

declares at the beginning of the novel: “As I have lived so will I die, true and loyal to the family”.<sup>86</sup>

To conclude, in the novel there is not only the perspective of the aristocrats and of the middle-class men, but another important point of view is that of Thady who does not have to capacity to choose and consequently he cannot be considered as the protagonist of the novel but only as a witness. He neither chooses a position nor sides with one or another of the protagonists of the historical conflict.

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<sup>86</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 8.

**Chapter four**  
*Men and Women,*  
*Old Ireland,*  
*and “Castle Rackrent”*

#### 4.1 Irish family life in *Castle Rackrent*

The Rackrent family in the novel is not one of the typical Irish family of that period because the numerous presence of children in the traditional Irish families is not shared by their members as none of the owners has a child. Moreover the family differs from the common Irish family because it is not so numerous, extended and composed of parents, grandparents, many children and grandchildren, who were used to live all together in the same house in traditional Irish families. Since there are no children, the people who take care of the majors are the servants, for example in the novel the narrator is the designated person to take care of the masters when they grow old. As the majority of the masters died without the necessity of being assisted, the only episode that shows Thady's affection is when Sir Condy goes to the Lodge to cure himself and Thady stays with him all the necessary time, trying to satisfy all his desires as a loyal servant was expected to do.

However there are also typical features of the old Irish families, one of them being typical of the Irish landlords that during the period of the Union were considered absentees because they left their county with the intent of leading a better and richer life in England, as it offered many more possibilities of entertainment and economic business. This aspect is represented in the novel by Sir Kit, who moves to England with the idea of earning lots of money but soon, things not going as he expected, is forced to come back because of the very bad economic conditions of the estate, but not before marrying a rich Jewish woman in order to be able to pay all his debts. The general custom of marriage was to have only one wife, and this is the reason why in the novel all the women hope Lady Kit would die (they could not date the master if his wife was still alive).

As far as the management of the estate in old Ireland was concerned, only men could govern the house and all the elements related to it as economy, commerce, agriculture and so on. In this situation the role of the women was secondary and they were not evaluated if compared to men, even though at the end of seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth century some improvements regarding women's social condition of life started to be introduced. The condition of women in the period before the Union was starting to change and also in the novel society has to cope with this mutation. The free women, i.e. those

not considered as slaves, started to have social rights and properties, and if they had something they had to contribute with it to the marriage economy.

The eighteenth century was a starting point for female freedom, many things improved as the repositioning of women in politics that could be directly linked to the new role of the Parliament as a center of debates. For much of the period the economic position of women depended on the good will of the head of their families. However, the significant urban growth and the demographic expansion contributed to employ the women and the widows in the burgeoning service industry as domestic servants. So, for the first time, women could achieve financial independence and married women could contribute with the money they earned to the household economy. But soon, some years before the Union, the decline in the textile manufacture and the increase in population contributed to destroy many women's economic opportunities and also their personal economies. For these reasons, the only way they had to contribute to the economy of the house was begging, with the consequence that many women returned to economic precariousness.

The situations of real life are well represented in the novel. As already stated women started to economically contribute to the wealth of the family, for example helping their husbands with the management of the estate as Lady Murtagh who is a great economist and the one who better exemplifies this situation because with the excuse of instructing the poor children on the estate, she freely gains all the necessary furniture for the estate. Moreover with all her knowledge in how to benefit from the other people's work, she succeeds in obtaining many favours and she consequently enriches her patrimony without spending a single shilling. So through Lady Murtagh Edgeworth describes a rich female who does not need the support of the male to decide and live her life. In the common imaginary men were stronger than women, but the novel reveals that the powerful human beings are instead the women, who assert themselves against male oppression.

The temporary women's economic independence is at the basis of the description of the mistresses of *Castle Rackrent*. They are chosen by their husbands because of their richness and ability to solve some problems linked with the management of the estate. It means that they are fundamental for the resolution of difficulties created by men. Sir Kit is the first who really appears to the reader as an

opportunist because in a letter to Jason he really describes his intention to marry a woman only to solve his problems. Thady writes:

Then, in a private postscript, he condescended to tell us that all would be speedily settled to his satisfaction, and we should turn over a new leaf, for he was going to be married in a fortnight to the grandest heiress in England, and had only immediate occasion at present for £200, as would not choose to touch his lady's fortune for travelling expences home to Castle Rackrent.<sup>87</sup>

Also Sir Condy decides to marry Miss Isabella even though he knows his heart belongs to Judy M'Quirk and he consoles himself with the money that the family of her wife possesses. Her father accepts to pay all the debts of the estate because now it is the house where his daughter lives.

During the marriage, if a woman possessed something, it became her husband's propriety and she also lost her legal identity and the right to own properties, even though in many cases the women had many more capacities to govern an estate, as the novel shows. In a patriarchal society the men were the people who controlled the family and the affairs. Furthermore, if a man had debts and did not have the possibility to pay them, he married a woman that could help him. The payment of the debts is an important part of the financial management of castle Rackrent and many marriages are combined for this reason.<sup>88</sup> The importance of paying all the debts is something immediately emerges from the first lines of the text; Sir Murtagh, during the funeral of his predecessor shows the importance of paying them and describes the debts as a question of honour that he has always respected, but in this situation he does not want to hinder the progress of the law. Thady describes the situation:

Sir Murtagh Rackrent the new heir, in the next place, on account of this affront to the body, refused to pay a shilling of the debts, in which he was countenanced by all the best gentlemen of property, and others of his acquaintance, Sir Murtagh alledging in all companies, that he all along

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<sup>87</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>88</sup> See M. J. Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870: Politics, History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 44-49.

meant to pay his father's debts of honor; but the moment the law was taken of him, there was an end of honor to be sure.<sup>89</sup>

The other master oppressed by numerous debts is Sir Condy. Maria Edgeworth chose the best solution for him to solve his debts, a marriage; at the end he celebrates his union with Miss Isabella, a rich woman whose family has the possibilities to help him with his copious debts.

Since no one of the Rackrent masters has children, Edgeworth describes the moments after the death of a landlord with the passage of propriety from him to a brother or to a close relative. As the women do not possess the estate and do not have any possibility to obtain it, the house passes to the next heir of the Rackrent descendants. But the women, before their departure, bring with them all the things that belonged to them before the marriage. From this, the reader can interpret the behaviour of the women in the novel as inspired by avarice. Both Lady Murtagh and Lady Kit emerge as two women with a strong sense of possession. Thady describes the attitude of the first lady:

For my late lady had sent all the feather-beds off before her, and blankets, and household linen, down to the very knife cloths, on the cars to Dublin, which were all her own, lawfully paid for out of her own money.<sup>90</sup>

Subsequently, the narrator describes the actions of Lady Kit:

She had made up her mind to spend the rest of her days upon her own income and jewels in England. [...] She gave no vails to the servants at Castle Rackrent at parting.<sup>91</sup>

Equality between men and women was an important issue for Maria Edgeworth. She often talked about it and it was a crucial issue in the book she wrote with her father, *Practical Education*, where she describes the importance of educating the children, without making any distinction between schoolgirls or schoolboys.<sup>92</sup> When she worked as teacher, she educated the males and the females in the same

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<sup>89</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 12.

<sup>90</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 19.

<sup>91</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 36.

<sup>92</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harden, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., pp. 35-37.

way, without differences; through her books she devoted her life to the education of her readers, children as well as adults, in a variety of genres. Edgeworth's dedication to reforming the educational system of her time was a way to satisfy her great desire to improve women's status in society.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, she discovered that a better educational system for women would help to achieve an intellectual community based on sound morals and consequently the moral education became the key to improve the social status of women.

In *Castle Rackrent* she gives voice to her thoughts through the behaviour of Lady Murtagh because this mistress is the woman who is linked with education. She creates a charity school for all the children, especially the poor that do not have any possibility to study but want to learn and improve their skills with all their forces. Although at the end the mistress exploits the children, she is an example of generosity regarding the schooling as she took care of the education of many young people. Her charitable spirit can be compared to that of Maria Edgeworth who devoted and spent her life instructing her siblings and many others children without making any distinction about their race, gender or colour of their skin.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See E. Inglis-Jones, *The Great Maria: A Portrait of Maria Edgeworth*, cit., pp. 25-27.

<sup>94</sup> For further details see J. Newcomer, *Maria Edgeworth*, New Jersey, Associated University Presses, 1973, pp. 31-41 and M. Narain, *A Prescription of Letters: Maria Edgeworth's "Letters for Literary Ladies" and the Ideologies of the Public Sphere*, "The Journal of Narrative Technique", Vol. 28, No. 3, (Autumn, 1998), pp. 266-286.

## 4.2 Thady and his mistresses

The relationship that the narrator has with the women of the novel is very troubled apart from the one with his niece Judy M'Quirk.

The first mistress he meets is the wife of Sir Murtagh. She is a widow and a rich woman who belongs to the Skinflint family. From the first time Thady sees her, Thady has a negative opinion of Lady Murtagh and immediately says: "I did not like her any how – she was of the family of the Skinflints, and a widow"<sup>95</sup>, moreover he has the suspicion that she might be Scottish, but he does not examine it in depth because he limits himself describing her characteristics and her way of acting. The thing that Thady cannot stand is the fact that she benefits from the work of the peasants because they have to work free otherwise Sir Murtagh can start a law-suit against them, and everybody is scared by the possibility of being involved in it. The tenants are exhausted and exasperated by that situation, but nobody can do anything, not even the servant because he prefers to avoid any kind of controversy to safeguard the reputation of the family.

Although Lady Murtagh is "the best of wives"<sup>96</sup> for the master because she pays attention to every single detail of the estate and moreover she is a great economist who knows how to earn money and take advantages from the work of the peasants, when Thady learns that his mistress does not want to support the master financially, he becomes a sort of judge and starts seeing her as a foreigner and consequently she is excluded, in his eyes, from the domestic sphere. As Sir Murtagh, she possesses also the capacity to manage the affairs of the estate and she shares with her husband the courage to stand up for herself, for this reason there are many arguments between them regarding different issues but in the majority of the cases their disagreements happen because both of them want to be right. Due to a discussion Sir Murtagh grows so mad that his body 'rebelled' and finally he dies because of the broke of a blood-vessel.

Also after the death of his master, Thady continues to have a kind behaviour towards her, even though he cannot stand her. The first dialogue between Thady and his mistress takes place at the moment in which she is going to leave the estate:

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<sup>95</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 14.

<sup>96</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 13.

I never said any thing, one way or the other, whilst she was part of the family, but got up to see her go at three o'clock in the morning — 'It's a fine morning, honest Thady, says she; good bye to ye' — and into the carriage she stept, without a word more, good or bad, or even half-a-crown, but I made my bow, and stood to see her safe out of sight for the sake of the family.<sup>97</sup>

A thing that marks her being avaricious is the fact that she brings with her all the household-linen because she thinks this stuff belong to her as she has 'bought' them with her money. The relation between Thady and Lady Rackrent is always distant and without any kind of dialogue, except the one before her leaving. Thady limits himself to describe his feelings only to the people who read the novel, so that everyone can understand his annoyance with her. Thady never retorts to the numerous bad things she is used to do but he simply makes a list of all the things she does.

As for the second mistress, from the first time Thady sees her, he is unpleasantly shocked by her physical appearance:

I got the first sight of the bride; for when the carriage door opened, just as she had her foot on the steps, I held the flam full in her face to light her, at which she shuts her eyes, but I had a full view of the rest of her, and greatly shocked I was, for by that light she was little better than a blackamoor, and seemed crippled, but that was only sitting so long in the chariot — 'You're kindly welcome to Castle Rackrent, my lady,' says I, (recollecting who she was).<sup>98</sup>

She is a Jewish woman famous for her great riches who comes from England. Seeing a person of that nationality is something strange for Thady who sides with his master when he argues with his wife and above all he does not accept the Jewish woman as an equal member of the Rackrent family; so he says:

I had never seen any of that tribe or nation before, and could only gather that she spoke a strange kind of English of her own, that she could not abide pork or sausages, and went neither to church nor mass. — Mercy upon his honor's poor soul, thought I, what will become of him and his, and all of us, with this heretic Blackamore at the head of the Castle Rackrent estate. I never slept a wink all night for thinking of it, but before

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<sup>97</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 18.

<sup>98</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 24-25.

the servants I put my pipe in my mouth and kept my mind to myself; for I had a great regard for the family, and after this when strange gentlemen's servants came to the house, and would begin to talk about the bride, I took care to put the best foot foremost, and passed her for a Nabob, in the kitchen, which accounted for her dark complexion, and every thing.<sup>99</sup>

During the next morning, while he is talking to Sir Kit, Thady realises that she is not able to understand a single word that they pronounce also because she continuously asks her husband the meaning of the words, so he convinces himself that she cannot speak English and says: "I saw she was going the way to make his honor mad with her".<sup>100</sup> Just when she learns some words, Lady Kit often talks with Thady and the first thing he explains to her is the importance of the bog of Allyballycarricko'shaughlin as she considers it useless. She is strict in food and she pretends that her husband eats what she wants, but he refuses and locks her in a room. Thady does not search her and is not worried about how she feels. Also the people who live close to the estate are not interested in where she is, as a matter of fact the women start to hope that the mistress is dead so that they have the possibility to become the new Lady Kit. But the Jewish woman is alive and when Sir Kit dies, all the population thinks she is guilty and responsible for the murder of her husband, so she is forced to leave the estate and the county because nobody has the intention to address her.

Lady Kit has a special consideration for Thady, in particular when she discovers he is able to understand the weathercock, she often talks to him to ask about the direction the wind blows. Although he has always tried to respect her and he makes her feel right at home because she is his mistress and the wife of his master, at the moment in which she starts packing her luggage to move to England, Thady changes his opinion and writes:

But when I saw she had made up her own income and jewels in England, I considered her quite as a foreigner, and not at all any longer as part of the family. — She gave no vails to the servants at Castle Rackrent at parting, notwithstanding the old proverb of 'as rich as a Jew,' which, she being a Jewish, they built upon with reason.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 26.

<sup>100</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 27.

<sup>101</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 36.

The Jewish woman does not leave anything to the servants and this behaviour makes Thady so nervous and angry with her that he ends the paragraph dedicated to her with these words:

But from first to last she brought nothing but misfortunes amongst us; and if it had not been all along with her, his honor Sir Kit would have been now alive in all appearance. — Her diamond cross was, they say, at the bottom of it all; and it was a shame for her, being his wife, not to show more duty, and to have given it up when he condescended to ask so often for such a bit of a trifle in his distress, especially when he all along made it no secret he married for money. — But we will not bestow another thought upon her — This much I thought it lay upon my conscience to say, in justice to my poor master's memory.<sup>102</sup>

After Lady Kit's leaving, Thady is ready to receive another mistress; she is Miss Isabella and is the youngest daughter of the neighbour Mr. Moneygawl. She becomes the wife of Sir Condy after the tossing of a coin because when the master sees her, he is uncertain about two women, one is Miss Isabella and the other is Thady's niece, Judy M'Quirk. Just when Sir Condy starts thinking of Miss Isabella, Thady has a strange and negative premonition and says:

'It's all over with our poor Judy!' said I, with a heavy sigh, making bold to speak to him one night when he was a little cheerful, and standing in the servant's hall all alone with me, as was often his custom.<sup>103</sup>

The master decides which woman he has to marry by tossing a coin and when the penny says Isabella, Thady recognizes that the result is the best solution for them and says:

So I saw the affair was as good as settled between him and Miss Isabella, and I had no more to say but to wish her joy, which I did the week afterwards upon her return from Scotland with my poor master.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 36.

<sup>103</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 44.

<sup>104</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 46.

On their return to Castle Rackrent Thady describes her as a beautiful young woman but he has many prejudices against her and he thinks she is mad, so he says:

Well, thought I, to be sure if she's no Jewish like the last, she is a mad woman for certain, which is as bad: it would have been as well for my poor master to have taken up with poor Judy, who is in her right mind any how. She was dressed like a mad woman, moreover, more than like any one I ever saw afore or since, and I could not take my eye off her, but still followed behind her, and 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.<sup>105</sup>

From these lines the reader clearly understands Thady's preference for Judy but although Thady considers his niece superior to Captain Moneygawl's daughter, he recognises Miss Isabella's qualities as a generous woman, very good at furnishing and above all this new mistress does not have nothing in common with Lady Murtagh who was not able to do anything about the tidiness of the estate. When Sir Condy becomes a member of the Parliament and they move to Dublin, Thady does not have many occasions to see his masters and also when they return to Castle Rackrent his mistress immediately moves to Mount Juliet's Town and from that moment onwards she never talks with anyone linked with the estate.

In the novel there is another woman very important to Thady, she is his young and pretty niece Judy and even though she does not become his mistress because Sir Condy marries the other woman, she remains very important for him.<sup>106</sup> After describing the encounter between Sir Condy and his future wife, Thady immediately specifies: "[...] his little Judy M'Quirk, who was daughter to a sister's son of mine, was worth twenty of Miss Isabella".<sup>107</sup> The generosity that characterizes Thady emerges in relation to Judy because when Sir Condy is at the Lodge, she goes there to see him even though he had refused her. With this behaviour Judy expresses all the goodness, the kindness and the generosity that distinguish the M'Quirk's family.

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<sup>105</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 47

<sup>106</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harden, *Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>107</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 43.

Although each of his mistresses has different vices and virtues, their relations with Thady are full of troubles because he finds negative elements in all the women.<sup>108</sup> As already said, he limits himself describing their behaviour and their way of acting and his ideas are clear only to the readers because towards his mistresses he assumes a professional attitude out of regard for the family, as when Lady Murtagh is leaving, and he bows to her but in reality he only hopes she will leave soon. The same situation happens with Lady Kit's departure and in this occasion Thady refers to the Jewish woman saying: "'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody no good".<sup>109</sup> On another occasion the narrator uses words that imply the difficult and conflictual relationship he entertains with his mistresses.

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<sup>108</sup> See K. Oheix, *Women in "Castle Rackrent" by Maria Edgeworth*, Norderstedt Germany, Grin Verlag GmbH, 2013, p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 37.

### 4.3 The role of women in the novel

The women in *Castle Rackrent* are described both as victims of a patriarchal system in which they are used as means to allow men to pay off debts due to their incompetence in managing the estate, and as evolved characters because at the end of the novel they prevail over their husbands.<sup>110</sup> The women in the novel are presented in these two ways because, as in the relationship between servants and masters, both the women and the servants are oppressed in many ways and the situation is very well expressed through Thady's male narrative voice.

The first point to take into consideration is the domestic sphere, linked with the relationship between husband and wife, where the notions of personal independence and richness are key elements. Beginning from the fact that each one of the masters marries a woman only for money, Sir Murtagh's wife is not an exception. She is a sort of instrument for the affairs of the husband and the means for him to possess a huge amount of money. But finally, the situation changes because he dies before the woman, so that she can take her revenge on him and continue her life with all her money. The evolution in the character of the woman emerges with the disappearance of the obstacle represented by the man and with the possibility for her to reach the freedom without anybody that decides what she has to do.<sup>111</sup>

In the domestic sphere women in old Ireland could easily be victims, and to illustrate this point, the best example of victimisation inside the relationship between husband and wife is represented by Thady's second mistress because Sir Kit segregates his rich wife, tries to steal the diamond cross from her and some money for his private business. Sir Kit plans to rob her after losing everything by gambling in Bath, so he decides to marry a rich woman and to use her fortune for his own benefit. Moreover, her ignorance about the Irish country and culture contributes to explain her victimisation; Thady, who witnesses her inexperience, anticipates her confinement saying: "I saw she was going the way to make his

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<sup>110</sup> See M. J. Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870: Politics, History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold*, cit., pp. 44-49.

<sup>111</sup> See K. O'Donnell, *Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture*, University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp. 115-130.

honor mad with her”.<sup>112</sup> In all these episodes, the reader understands her role as a victim both in terms of cultural disconnection due to her Jewish origins and as woman. Even Lady Isabella feels she is a victim, and this feeling emerges in particular after her return from Scotland with her husband, and Thady writes:

Upon my master’s swallowing the last glass of whiskey punch, my lady burst into tears, calling him an ungrateful, base, barbarous wretch! and went off into a fit of hysterics [...] Oh say no more, say no more, every word you say kills me — Oh Sir Condy, Sir Condy! I that had hoped to find in you “my father, brother, husband, friend”.<sup>113</sup>

She feels abandoned, lonely and, due to Sir Condy’s behaviour, she understands he had married her only for convenience. Also Thady can realise that his master is unable to live without a wife, and he marries her even though “he had no liking not he to stage plays, nor to Miss Isabella either”.<sup>114</sup> For these reasons Lady Rackrent is a victim of domesticity and of her husband’s inevitable decision to sell the estate, so she cannot do anything apart from returning to live with her father. The marriage is the emblem of a prison for Miss Isabella and for the previous mistressess because they loose their liberties and have to submit to their husband’s will. The wisest decision is taken by Jason at the end of the novel and Thady describes it in this way: “Jason did not marry, nor think of marrying Judy, as I prophesied, and I am not sorry for it”<sup>115</sup>; the narrator is happy about that because he knows that a union would mean for Judy the loss of her liberty and her dependence on a husband. In this idea of marriage as a union with many obstacles, the reader can find a parallel with the Union between England and Ireland. If Ireland is to ‘marry’ England, it might signify the end of its liberty, its sovereignty and also the Irish Parliament would be dissolved. Ireland and the women are so coupled by the same destiny.

If the main inequality in *Castle Rackrent* is based on gender, yet Edgeworth shows similarities between women’s and catholics’ positions, since both seem to be endangered. The women do not have any possibility to be considered important,

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<sup>112</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 27.

<sup>113</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>114</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 43.

<sup>115</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 96.

for instance in the political sphere they could not be part of it and even in the management of their estates, the men were the only ones who looked after everything.<sup>116</sup> As for religion, women could be related to Catholics for the flouting of their rights because with the Union, Catholic rights were threatened by Protestantism and Catholics lost many possibilities. Also Jews went through similar socio-political difficulties and their discrimination is evoked in the novel by Thady's expression when he sees Lady Kit as a 'strange' woman he had never seen. In a patriarchal attitude typical of England towards the colonized world and Ireland, Irish women were in a double position of weakness. Yet, the female figures of *Castle Rackrent* cannot be considered as weak; there are many episodes that sign a parallel with the Irish and the English history of that time. For instance when Sir Kit's wife refuses to give him her diamond cross, the impression the reader has is that she tries to resist in the same way that Ireland attempts to resist the Union with England but then the mistress is condemned with the isolation because of her stubbornness and resistance. Ireland too was trapped and seemed unable to escape the political Union with England. For these reasons, one way of reading the confinement episode is that women might be used allegorically as a means to explain the cruelty and unfairness of England towards the Irish people. However, the novel shows not only the satirization of men and the fault of women, but also the women's incapacity to notice their involvement in a patriarchal system which seems to subjugate them. But at the end their socio-political evolution reveals a change from victimhood to empowerment. As already said before, the feminine figures suffer both in the public and in the private sphere, yet their assertive and determined voice cannot be neglected. The women grow more and more powerful with the numerous financial distresses of their husbands, in this way male failures regarding the estate management become opportunities for the women. Also the wives' decision to leave their husbands childless and alone, preferring a different life as Lady Kit who decides to move to England or as Miss Isabella who returns to her father's house with her family and friends, are symbols of the beginning of a new life. Sir Condy's wife is influenced by her friends as Thady reports: "you'll allow me to comply with the wishes of all my own friends".<sup>117</sup> Sir Condy contributes to men's failure drinking so much that

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<sup>116</sup> See K. Oheix, *Women in "Castle Rackrent" by Maria Edgeworth*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>117</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 67.

he cannot be considered as a representative of the role of the owner and the leader. These episodes regarding the daily life of a couple, perfectly incarnate the end of a male dominance over domesticity and ownership.

In other words, the men are deprived of their paternal authority since they are not able to rule a family, instead women are able to take advantages from this situation and prosper. Having no children and having squandered all the money, the men of the Rackrent family certainly appear as powerless in the eyes of their women, so the wives do not have any intention to financially support their husbands. Moreover, all the masters are seen as usurpers with the consequence that their credibility as patriarchs is undermined from the beginning of the novel. Their incapacity to govern the estate becomes the reason of the deterioration and the downfall of the castle. Its decadence and collapse contribute to change the symbology of the estate. At the beginning of the novel the estate represents order and strictness but after the succession of the four generations of heirs, the castle became the synonym of disintegration, decline, dissolution of the family unit and extinction of the old Irish world.<sup>118</sup>

As Kathryn Kirkpatrick noticed, “Edgeworth [...] ridicules the excesses of individualism in both sexes”<sup>119</sup> and if on the one side men do not have the necessary money to redress their economic situation, on the other side the feminine figures are painted as characters whose economic interests have a primary importance over their love affairs. For instance, Thady describes the way in which Sir Kit tries to get the diamond cross from his wife while she is ill but even when in poor health, she does not give up. As for Miss Isabella, she complains about her husband’s financial collapse and dishonesty: “And did not you use me basely, Sir Condy, (says she) not to tell me you were ruined before I married you?”<sup>120</sup> For the same reason, Judy refuses to become Sir Condy’s wife at the moment in which she realises he is penniless and when Sir Condy asks her to remain with him, she answers: “Why what signifies it to be my lady Rackrent and no Castle? sure what good is the car and no horse to draw it?”<sup>121</sup> The

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<sup>118</sup> See O. E. McWhorter Harden, *Maria Edgeworth’s Art of Prose Fiction*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in K., Oheix, *Women in “Castle Rackrent” by Maria Edgeworth*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 66.

<sup>121</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 92.

characteristics of the women in the novel are based on feelings of individualism, avarice and ingratitude that do not escape the narrator's critical thought; for example Thady blames his niece for not becoming his master's wife and says: "Oh King of Glory! Hear the pride and ungratitude of her, and he giving his last guineas but a minute ago to her childer".<sup>122</sup> Women's behaviour marks the idea that women as well as Ireland cannot be considered as passive characters because at the end they reveal themselves as more exploitative than their husbands.

Women are considered as individualists who are careful with their money and this is true especially for Lady Murtagh and Lady Kit. The first of them is a "great economist"<sup>123</sup> who manages in exploiting the tenants and emerges as victorious from the virtual conflict with her man with the consequences that she leaves the estate financially secure. Unlike the owner of the castle, her avaricious nature does not prevent her from being successful and succeeding in reaching all her goals. Lady Kit plans "to spend the rest of her days upon her own income and jewels in England".<sup>124</sup> As readers can easily understand women's apparent selfishness and desire for creativity and liberty is the consequence of men's oppressive influence; for instance when the landlords' debts and failures become public, the independent wives start acting powerfully. Women are described as dynamic characters that mutate during all the novel and try to take advantage in order to secure their future lives. They really observe the abuses of rack-renting and absenteeism, typical of Ireland in the period of the Union, which highlight each one of the individual performances and the neglecting of duties of the masters of the Rackrent estate.<sup>125</sup>

As far as their deaths are concerned, there are many aspects that are important to explain the different role of men and women. What immediately emerges from the death of Sir Murtagh, and it is true also for the deaths of the following masters, is that the male death is not considered a trauma, rather, it is seen as a relief and as the removal of the obstacle that obstruct women's life; for instance Lady Kit 'revived' when she heard that her husband had died and Thady writes: "She got

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<sup>122</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 92.

<sup>123</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 17.

<sup>124</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 36.

<sup>125</sup> See M. J. Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870: Politics, History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold*, cit., pp. 44-49, 192-193.

surprisingly well after my master's decease".<sup>126</sup> The women remain alive and at the same time they appear to be stronger if compared to their husband's economic and physical deaths. Thady is shocked to see their reactions, especially Judy's because according to him she is insensitive to Sir Condy's physical and emotional state: "Judy! Judy! have ye no touch of feeling? won't you stay to help us nurse him?".<sup>127</sup> In reality, his niece's behaviour is not so surprising because she had been rejected by Sir Condy. Sir Condy's wife escapes a serious accident also with the 'complicity' of her husband's death because, as for Lady Kit, also Miss Isabella finds the forces after the removal of the obstacle. Women's departures from the estate are to be considered as mirrors to men's deaths in terms of the liberation they provide, no matter if it implies the moving to another country or if it means the return to the family house.

However, the women are seen as having a responsibility in the death of their husbands, and this is a significant element of the novel. Thady chooses to blame the Jewish woman for Sir Kit's death and says: "and if it had not been all along with her, his honor Sir Kit would have been now alive in all appearance".<sup>128</sup> So, women are the designated culprits when a husband dies and the same happens with Lady Murtagh; the narrator describes the fact in this way: "At last, in a dispute about an abatement, my lady would have the last word and Sir Murtagh grew mad"<sup>129</sup> and finally dies. Among the women there is Mrs Jane, a maid who is mentioned only a few times in the novel, but her presence is fundamental because she shows a contrast with Thady since she incarnates a feeling of loyalty to the feminine figures while he remains faithful to his masters. Mrs Jane is the one who leaves the castle with Miss Isabella when she decides to go back to Mount Juliet's Town.

Thady acts as a mediator between the male and female worlds. He is a witness of the demise of Sir Condy who finally is rejected by Judy, and this is the first reversal of the male/female roles in the story. Sir Condy realises how much Judy has changed when she goes to the Lodge to see him and the narrator writes: "it

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<sup>126</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 35.

<sup>127</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 95.

<sup>128</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 36.

<sup>129</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 18.

was hard for Sir Condry himself to know her again till she spoke”<sup>130</sup> but when he understands she is there, Sir Condry regrets his project of marriage with Lady Isabella and Judy comments: “it’s time you should be thinking of her if ever you mean to do it at all”.<sup>131</sup> Then the toss of the coin transforms Sir Condry’s indecision into the decision to marry Miss Isabella.

Some critics argue that the women’s process of empowerment in *Castle Rackrent* is the consequence of men’s failing domination but although women are contending for power, the quarrel between Lady Rackrent and Jason over the ownership of the estate at the end of the novel implies that their power is likely to fail to achieve a complete success in the same way that the rebellion of 1798 by the United Irishmen was crushed.

Other critics argue instead that women are victimised characters who can nevertheless symbolise the emancipation in *Castle Rackrent*. Their condition is compared to that of Catholics as they cannot vote and they cannot own land. With the Union the parallel between them seems clear because women as well as Ireland were considered as rebellious entities, which rendered the idea of union itself unstable and unbearable.<sup>132</sup> Through the representation of women, Maria Edgeworth shows a pessimistic view of future incorporation in *Castle Rackrent* between different cultures and social classes.

A century after the Union between Scotland and England, Ireland was about to follow the same destiny and the women in *Castle Rackrent* personified the tensions between dependence and independence, assimilation and liberation. A union of equals could result in success, but only if men agreed to integrate women into their system without any alterations to their cultural identities and traditions. Women were witnessing these socio-political changes with no signs of fragility and weakness, they were fairly strong and determined. On some points, women and men were similar creatures since they used the land for economic interests, even if the female characters, especially the wives, were those who seemed to have the best of the men. Their departure and final isolation in *Castle Rackrent* predicted a future made of nationalist struggle in which they wished to keep their

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<sup>130</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 83.

<sup>131</sup> *Castle Rackrent*, p. 86.

<sup>132</sup> See K. Oheix, *Women in “Castle Rackrent” by Maria Edgeworth*, cit., p. 11.

money and independence. The British Empire ruled by men and desirous to preserve their prerogative faced an Ireland reluctant to be civilised and subdued. Finally, it can be said that through her novel Maria Edgeworth gave voice to women but also to all those elements of society that were discriminated, such as Irish people or Jews, and this process was possible thanks to her own background full of English and Irish traditions and examples of their real life.

# Conclusion

Maria Edgeworth lived a happy life with all the people who beloved her. After her death her home was visited by a huge number of people; Edgeworthstown attracted everyone with literary tastes that wanted to see which was the place where such an important writer used to live with all her family. Her importance as a writer grew very much after her death because many critics started to be interested in her writings. Her friendship with Sir Walter Scott and the words that he spent for her contributed to enrich her fame in the literary field.

As for her novel *Castle Rackrent*, when she published it, Maria did not expect that it would reach such an incredible success and the proof was that she firstly published the novel anonymously. Also in this case the role of Sir Walter Scott was fundamental because at the moment in which he read the novel, he praised the book as a very important text for the English and the Irish population. While he had the book in his hands, he immediately understood the importance it had and wrote to Maria to communicate the good work she had done. Her ability to reproduce the characters as faithfully as they were in reality was a quality that emerged from the first lines of the novel and was clear to everyone. The thing that could distinguish her from other authors was her capacity to describe the people as if they were in front of her. Apart from this geniality, she had also the right intuition to describe things and facts from a different point of view, which was the one that nobody had never taken into consideration, the Irish point of view.

Her readers were mainly English people and *Castle Rackrent* was written for them with the purpose of making them aware of the conditions of life and the behaviours of their neighbours in a difficult moment for both countries. As the Union was taking place, the numerous tensions between the Irish and the English people did not stop so she thought it was a good idea to make them aware of their different way of behaving, especially the English people had to become conscious of the capacities and the positive characteristics that the Irish inhabitants possessed. The role that this novel had in the history of England and Ireland was fundamental for the theme chosen and the aim with which it was written by Maria.

However, the Act of Union was seen in different ways and was considered both as a positive and a negative thing. Some critics sustained that England could help Ireland with its capital, its public wealth and its organisation, and it was a fortune for the future stability of Ireland. Other critics underlined instead the negative

aspect of the union. According to them, the English government would think of their own interests only and Ireland would suffer for being left to its own destiny without any possibility to improve the situation. Finally, the Irish economic problems remained and at the end they were worsened due to the inadequacy and the incompetence of the English government that only thought to increase its success and improve its economical conditions. Despite the fact that before the Union there were all the necessary conditions to form a country that would be united and strong, at the end the union was a negative act, especially for Ireland because it had never had the support of England, neither when the Irish country needed it as during the Great Famine or when a huge amount of people emigrated to the United States with the aim of searching better conditions of life. The conditions in which Irish people were forced to live in their native country were embarrassing for everyone.

So, the Union was a complete disaster and also in the subsequent years the situation was difficult to bear. Ireland continued to be part of the United Kingdom, and the Irish population had to wait till 1922 when with the Irish War of Independence the Irish citizens gained the independence from England. Seen the total failure and the misfortune of the Union on both sides, even the intention of Maria Edgeworth with her novel *Castle Rackrent* was not successful. The failure was also one of the elements that a reader could find in the novel because at the end of the book the Irish Rackrent dynasty is destroyed by their incapacities in the management of the estate and because of the shrewdness of Jason M'Quirk who is able to benefit from the worst moments in the lives of his previous masters.

The destiny that Maria Edgeworth reserved to the male characters was one of the worst, because they did not have any possibility to solve their problems and also their marriages with rich women were not a solution to their difficulties. For instance Sir Condy lost everything even though Miss Isabella was a wealthy woman because he was not able to cover his numerous debts and Sir Murtagh, whose desire was to become the owner of her wife's patrimony, died before her without having reached his goals.

To conclude, *Castle Rackrent* was not an innocent text because it talks about numerous and different themes linked with the problems that Ireland had during the years around the publication of the novel. The first element that sustains the aspect of no innocence is the year of publication, so crucial for the history of

Ireland and England. It is not a novel that accidentally came to the English and Irish readers during the period of disputes and political mistakes that characterized the first months of 1800, and it is seen as Maria Edgeworth's contribution to the debate about the Union.

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