September 2001

Redefining Coole: Lady Gregory, Class Politics, and the Land War

Greg Winston

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 37, no.3, September 2001, p. 205-222

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Redefining Coole:
Lady Gregory, Class Politics,
and the Land War

By GREG WINSTON

"Whatever I myself have written that is, as our people would say, 'worth while' has come from my own surroundings, my own parish, my own home."
Lady Gregory, Seventy Years 316

LADY AUGUSTA GREGORY knew the Anglo-Irish manor culture as well as anyone in late colonial Ireland. She lived most of her eighty years (1852-1932) on two estates set just seven miles apart in the Mayo-Galway border country. She was born and spent her girlhood at Roxborough House, home to the Persse family since the seventeenth century; her marriage and widowed life brought her to Coole, ancestral manor of her husband William Gregory. Both houses, and the social position they afforded her, exerted tremendous influence on her personality and writings, and, by extension, on Ireland's literary revival. Coole became the locus genii when Lady Gregory, in reshaping the Ascendancy environment that made her, elected to remake the Protestant big house into a literary workshop and cultural center of Ireland. This essay examines the refashioning of the Anglo-Irish estate as a significant substratum in Lady Gregory's earliest literary projects—the editions of the autobiography of her late husband and the correspondence of his grandfather. Consideration of her role in the production of these works challenges traditional assumptions that Coole's place in the revival began only with Lady Gregory's introduction to W. B. Yeats and his ensuing summer visits to the Gregory demesne.1

Most readers know Lady Gregory’s last work, Coole (1931), as an enduring record of her famous house and surroundings. In preserving select rooms and characteristics of the estate, Coole effected a literary renovation of the house and its meaning in post-independence Ireland, even though the house itself was torn down a decade later and sold to a Galway builder for stone, a fact Frank O’Connor laments in his travelogue, Irish Miles.2 But Lady

1. M. J. MacManus, in his 1952 work Adventures of an Irish Bookman (129), and Sir Charles Petrie, in Scenes from Edwardian Life (169-70), published 1975, both claim Lady Gregory’s meeting Yeats as the starting point of Coole’s transformation into a center of literary nationalism, a position subsequent writing has upheld and established as something of a critical axiom.
2. As O’Connor recalls: “In Gort we went to see Lady Gregory’s house for old time’s sake, and it was well we did, for a few months after the Land Commission of the Irish Government sold it to a Galway builder for 500 pounds as scrap. I was always terrified out of my wits by the old lady, but somehow I feel she deserved rather better than that of the country to which she had given a theatre” (142).
Gregory’s conceptual transformation of Coole began not with the last writing of her career but with her earliest literary projects some four decades before: her editing of the memoirs and correspondence of the Gregory family. In the 1890s, before her introduction to William Butler Yeats and her involvement in the folklore and drama of the Irish Literary Revival, she edited two books: the autobiography of her late husband, Sir William Gregory (1894), and selected correspondence of his grandfather, a former government official, in *Mr. Gregory's Letter-Box 1813-35* (1898). It is on these books, and the first years of her return to Coole, that the remainder of this essay will concentrate.

The two books are significant first in that they convey Lady Gregory’s growing attachment to Coole, as she gradually made herself more at home there in the years immediately following Sir William’s death in 1892. A strong desire to record and legitimate the history of the Gregory family and estate underlies both editions. But more than just documenting family history, the books betray a remarkable level of concern and uncertainty about the social and political fallout of the Land War and the inevitable decline of the gentry in late colonial Ireland. In this way, they are a valuable record of Lady Gregory’s own state of mind while alone at Coole during her first years of widowhood. While not so overtly nationalistic as her literary translations and drama were to become, the two editions nonetheless indicate that a significant shift was taking place in Lady Gregory’s class politics: a move toward a more sympathetic understanding of the Land Question, landlord-tenant relations, and the role of the estate in Ireland.

Lady Gregory’s transformation of Coole was of course all the more remarkable for her never having been the owner of the estate. Like many women of her time, she held a title in name only, while being denied the privileges of enfranchisement and property that title suggests. Regardless, she eventually took an imaginative possession of Coole that endures well beyond the existence of the house itself. She achieved de facto ownership through an ongoing refashioning of Coole, one that allowed her to boast accurately and assuredly of the estate as the “workshop of Ireland.” Before this refashioning is discussed, some remarks about the causes and consequences of the Irish Land War will provide a context for understanding Lady Gregory’s literary renovation of the Gregories and Coole.

**Gardens and Fighting Men**

*When Lady Gregory* returned to Coole after Sir William’s death, Ireland and Galway were reeling from more than twelve years of agrarian unrest. Poor harvests in 1877 and 1878, and the reappearance of potato blight in the south-west in 1879, had created an agricultural crisis, which, in conjunction with increased support for tenants’ rights, had led to the popular growth of the Na-
tional Land League. Founded on the alliance of former political rivals Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt, the Land League set the stage in the rural west for “what looked to many like revolution” (Foster 403). The League’s very organization was revolutionary in that it based membership branches on townlands or parishes instead of estates. On the fundamental level of a political unit divorced from the gentry, it redrew the national map. This presented a direct challenge to Lady Gregory’s landed Ascendancy class whose way of life made the estate the social and economic focus of rural Ireland.

While the New Departure nationalism most often relied on boycotts, rent withholding, and “implicit violence” rather than violent action, the first phase of the Land War (1879-1883) offered more than a few brutal or threatening scenes. “Assassinations did happen, as well as ‘warning’ shots into people’s houses, and mutilations like ear-clipping. Animals were horribly tortured. Bands of young men imposed a kind of gang rule in certain areas” (Foster 408). Lady Gregory’s Galway, along with County Kerry, was home to the greatest number of agrarian outrages (50-60 per 10,000 people) during those years, and many western landlords feared they would be the next victims. Writing to his friend Henry Layard from Coole in October 1881, Sir William Gregory describes the Land League’s hold on the populace as a “reign of terror.” “I have very little to write to you of interest,” he says, “though it may be of interest to you to know that I am in the land of the living, albeit the landlord shooting season has set in with great briskness in my county” (Autobiography 369).

While he never mentions a direct physical threat from the Coole tenantry, by 5 December Sir William begins to sense and make small concessions to the political pressure of Land League activism: “My tenants have behaved splendidly; they have paid all their rents, and I have not 100 pounds arrears. So I gave them back ten per cent. They said they did not belong to the League, and would not belong to it. Since then they have been so persecuted and abused they have almost all joined within one week” (Autobiography 370-71). The Gregories were probably relieved at the prospect of spending that winter in Egypt where, ironically (as their friend Wilfrid Blunt would later note), they came to side with Arabi Bey and the nationalist movement against British occupation.

Ascendancy landholders and their agents were the most obvious and frequent targets of Land League threats and actual violence, which forced even those landlords of a more independent mind-set to seek British constabulary or military protection for their estates. This included the Persses living on the estate of Lady Gregory’s childhood, Roxborough House. On a visit to “my old home” in the summer of 1882, Lady Gregory describes her alarm at finding “Seven soldiers in the harness room drinking whiskey out of teacups.” She notes as well how her brother Algernon “loads his revolver and carries it

in his hand when walking in the garden, and when he and Fanny go out for a stroll they have five soldiers after them" (Seventy Years 44). Having become involved the previous year on the side of the nationalist struggle in Egypt, Lady Gregory now regarded Ireland as "another disturbed country." She did not stay long at Roxborough, though her reasons probably had more to do with missing London society than with any serious concern for personal safety. After two weeks, she returned to England, where social and philanthropic activities held her interest. Besides supporting Egyptian nationalism, Lady Gregory was involved in charitable work for the poor parish of Southwark. Home, for at least another decade, would still mean London, not Galway.

Meanwhile, other resident Galway landlords struck back with more offensive measures than the garden stand of Algernon Persse. Many countered rent resistance and boycott with their old standby, the eviction. An estimated 14,600 tenants were evicted during the first five years of the Land War, a greater number than in the previous three decades combined (Foster 498). Things would remain volatile for another decade, eventually requiring the continual presence of the military, legislative measures of reform, and the gradual erosion of the Land League and Parnellism to defuse the situation. Throughout the Land War, the Ascendancy class, though challenged, stood its ground, clinging to a deep-seated belief in itself and its values as the necessary, civilizing remedy in a wild and restless territory.

In The Land War in Ireland (1912), Wilfrid Scawen Blunt offers a first-hand account of Lady Gregory's views on the Land Question in the mid-1880s. Already well known (along with Lady Gregory) for his support of the Egyptian struggle against British occupation, Blunt directly involved himself in Land League activity during a visit to Ireland in the spring of 1886. His account of a June 10 visit with the Gregorys in London voices frustration at her unsympathetic stance on Irish land reform, to him hypocritical in light of her recent opposition to the British presence in Egypt (146). Blunt attributes Lady Gregory's unyielding conservatism to her Anglo-Irish background and social milieu: "She comes of a family, too, who are 'bitter Protestants,' and has surrounded herself with people of her class from Ireland, so that there is no longer room for me in her house" (146). Later that summer, following the loss of power of the Gladstone government,6 he finds Lady Gregory "softened in her Irish ideas now that the Government is out" (165). She shows more sympathy but in a political climate when it seems safer to do so.

Lady Gregory would never come to favor the notions practiced by Blunt, Maud Gonne,7 or other advocates of radical land redistribution or violent tenant insurrection. In general, she eschewed nationalist politics—whether of

5. In 1881 Blunt first met Lady Gregory in Cairo. For an account of Gregory and Blunt in Egypt see Declan Kiberd's “Lady Gregory and the Empire Boys” in Inventing Ireland (83-95).
6. R. F. Foster notes that Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule for Ireland split his party and lost the 1886 election (395).
7. Lady Gregory's diary entry of 14 February 1898 voices her disapproval of Maud Gonne's land politics in the West of Ireland that year.
the constitutional or physical-force variety. But with respect to the landlord-tenant relations that became an unavoidable and immediate concern, she would experience a gradual change of mind. As she spent more time at Coole and entered into the activities of cultural and literary nationalism, Lady Gregory came eventually to support such progressive land reform measures as extension of purchase for Irish farmers.\(^8\)

Her changed sympathies might be attributed to several factors. First, William’s passing had freed her from a direct involvement in the political circles of London and Westminster. No longer was it necessary to rein in a potentially disagreeable opinion for the sake of acceptance in London society. Second, as already suggested, when the major and direct political challenges to the Ascendancy class—namely Home Rule and the Land League—subsided, it was safer for members of that class to adopt middle-ground or reformative positions on tenants’ rights issues. By the 1890s, with the end of Parnellite politics, the cessation of the Land War, and the collapse of the Gladstone government, the threat to the Ascendancy was less immediate if not altogether diminished. Landlords no longer required armed guards or police protection. Still, the real or possible violence of a disgruntled tenantry that was now in league with a growing nationalist movement left many landlords with a sense that change would take place, whether they acquiesced or resisted.

In 1895, during her third year back at Coole, Lady Gregory could write with surety that “Our people are paying rents and paying very well” and note how a policeman from Gort at last had enough time on his hands to give haircuts to some of the local boys. But the twelve-year struggle had planted in the national consciousness the seeds of debate regarding class relations and land ownership in Ireland. For a woman from a landed gentry background with a developing interest in tenant folk culture, those seeds germinated as complex, entangled weeds in the neatly tended garden of Ascendancy life.

The garden image is intended here as more than just a neat completion of the metaphor. Indeed, throughout late nineteenth-century Ireland, local culture and national political leadership still depended on the Anglo-Irish manor. The garden of cultural nationalism was quite literally the garden of the Protestant Big House. Many leaders in the struggle for land tenure reform—including Parnell, the Home Ruler elected president of the new National Land League of Mayo in 1879—came themselves from landed backgrounds; many of these lived with the paradoxical fear that they might meet a violent end at the hands of those very people whose best interests they had thought to serve. Lady Gregory’s brother Algemon, ready to defend at all costs the garden at Roxborough, was representative of an entire class of individuals whose wealth and way of life had come under serious scrutiny and threat of extirpation by the new nationalism.

---

8. Her diary entry for 21 March 1897 shows her discussing the benefits of land purchase with Yeats and William O’Brien.
Meanwhile, a vast number of Ascendancy landlords had arrived at terms of conciliation on the land question. Following the rent-reduction policies of the 1880s Land Courts, and the introduction of several Land Acts outlining state-subsidized land purchase by tenant farmers, many landlords found it either profitable or simply necessary to divide and sell off lands to their tenant farmers. Some kept only the manor house and demesne; others sold everything. The Yeats family, for instance, sold off the remainder of their holdings at Thomastown, County Kildare, in 1888 under the terms of the recent Ashbourne Act.

Lady Gregory’s friend William Smith O’Brien, who headed the United Irish League, was among the chief spokesmen for tenant interests during the Land Conference that took place in Dublin’s Mansion House over five days in late December 1902 and early January 1903. It was, as O’Brien (quoted in Petrie 139) noted, “To the joy and amazement of the country” that the Conference resulted in the Wyndham Act, a unanimous report allowing for extension of purchase of estate lands by resident tenantry. R. F. Foster suggests the possibility that the meeting was “probably inspired from Dublin Castle but work[ed] through enlightened and ostensibly ‘unpolitical’ landlords” (435). Whatever the case, the Conference achieved a significant political compromise that sought to restructure Irish landowning practices while preserving the century-old Act of Union.

Back at Coole, Lady Gregory must have been well aware of these developments and their pressing relevance to her own circumstances. Amid potential agrarian unrest on one side and judicial compromise on the other, she would opt for a very different course of action. She did not follow the defensive stance of Algernon, carrying a gun through the Roxborough garden to fend off the “midnight legislators” of the Land War; nor, like Countess Markiewicz, did she join or support violent insurrection. And not being the legal inheritor of the Coole estate, she could not ally herself with the Land Conference hierarchy of landlords who agreed to implement the extension of purchase for which she voiced approval nearly five years earlier. Instead, she adopted a personal policy by which she neither entrenched herself in the Ascendancy position nor forsook it altogether. As she would later say, she was “not working for Home Rule but preparing for it” (Seventy Years 54). As a crucial part of this preparation, she reinvented Coole and its role in Irish society, a process commencing with her editorial revision of Gregory family history.

**Editing the Gregorys**

LADY GREGORY’S first major literary project was editing the memoir of her late husband. Sir William penned his *Autobiography* from 1884 to 1891, during the final years of his life and of the Land War. While Lady Gregory’s work consisted mainly of transcribing Sir William’s words, her own introductory and concluding sections, as well as some general issues of editorial selection, display a concern with presenting Coole as an exemplary estate and
the Gregorys as perennially good landlords in otherwise tumultuous times.

As might be expected, much of the Autobiography deals with William Gregory’s upbringing, education, parliamentary career, and governorship of Ceylon. Coole is mentioned now and again as a temporary backdrop to a life spent mostly off the estate. It was not until 1841, when he was twenty-four years old, that William came to live there. Education in England and employment overseas kept him away for long stretches of time. This was certainly not a new phenomenon for the family. Unlike Roxborough, which was the focus of life for the Persses, Coole was merely one of several properties owned by the Gregorys, purchased by William’s great-grandfather on his return from India. Compared with estates in Essex, and Cheshire, and a house in London’s fashionable quarter of Berners Street, it was hardly the most important holding. Life in Ireland for the Gregorys mainly revolved around two Dublin residences—one in Phoenix Park, the other in Dublin Castle—provided for William’s grandfather in his post as Under-Secretary of Ireland. Although neither William nor Lady Gregory employs the term, the Gregorys were apparently absentee landlords throughout the nineteenth century.

This is not to say that they were ruthless or repressive ones. On the contrary, when William writes about Coole or his tenants, he does so with a tone of consistent concern for the well-being of both. He portrays himself as arguing on behalf of Irish tenants in Parliament (124-25), and meeting former Coole tenants and servants during his trip to America (188-89), or discussing tenants’ rights with an “indifferent” Prime Minister Gladstone and Lord Palmerston (242). Of the latter context Sir William writes:

I have always said and felt that there was no question connected with Ireland to be compared with the importance of that of the position of the tenants ... no man acquainted with Ireland but must have felt it as a burning question ready at any moment to burst into conflagration. Agricultural prosperity had retarded it, but I was convinced that if bad times for the farmers came on there would be a most serious, disastrous, and just agitation. How could it be otherwise? The good landlords were no doubt fair in their dealings, and considerate, but there was a leaven of bad landlords to leaven the lump, and to produce feelings of general insecurity and general indignation. (242)

A landowner who sees not only the inevitability but also the justice of escalated agrarian unrest was indeed sympathetic and something of an anomaly in nineteenth-century Ireland.

At times though, William’s sympathy seems rather contrived or overwrought, as in the following recollection of his first conversation (as a young Tory MP for Dublin) with Daniel O’Connell, hero of Catholic emancipation. O’Connell remarks to the Protestant estate owner:

“I have heard a good account of your family as landlords, and they say your tenants are attached to you and you to them?”
“How could I not be attached to them?” I exclaimed. “I think them the most lovable and loving people in the world.” (67-68)

In her editorial procedures, Lady Gregory finds more subtle ways to show Coole and its owners in a favorable light with respect to landlord-tenant
issues. She appends a number of letters from Sir William to his friend Henry Layard. One of these offers perhaps the most immediate, and least postured, account of William Gregory as Galway landlord. From Coole on 27 August 1880, he writes, not without a touch of sarcasm, of “doing my duty as a country gentleman,” which consists of attending to local judicial matters, chairing meetings of the Poor Law Union, and giving an all-night dinner and dancing party for the tenants of Coole: “Nothing can be better than the spirit apparently of the people about here, but I dread that all may be changed in a day by some of these violent agitators, who lash the tenant classes into fury even against the best landlords” (369).

Even if they were the “best landlords” in the troubled county (and they very likely were), the social tensions of agrarian unrest in 1880s Galway made Sir William and Lady Gregory both concerned to prove themselves such in order to justify the continued existence of their estate. The Land War raging just beyond the demesne walls was very likely a strong motivator for these and other passages relating to Coole and its tenantry.

In her own conclusion to the book, Lady Gregory allows herself the final say on her husband as landlord. As she recalls:

He had been, when in Parliament, so earnest and advanced an advocate of the tenants that he grieved that at the end of life, while their well-being was as warmly desired by him as before, he was cut away from the possibility of serving them. He felt that landlords ought not to live in a fool’s paradise, with their eyes shut and not marking the signs of the times, and was ready to welcome any reform which he could recognize as such. (359)

She goes on to relate her husband’s most progressive idea for such reform: the extension of land purchase to the end that most Irish tenants could become landowners in a society to be re-founded on Home Rule.

The question arises as to why exactly William Gregory himself would have refrained from outlining this bold political stance in his memoir. Possibly it seemed too policy-oriented a digression to place in a book written for family and friends. Or maybe he would have added this and many other opinions had illness and death not cut short his time of writing. Whatever the case, Lady Gregory takes it upon herself to use the Autobiography as a context for proclaiming a liberal politics of land tenure reform. Soon after, she would suggest—to William O’Brien, Yeats, and others in nationalist circles—extension of purchase as a viable policy. The moment shows her at once restating the terms of her family history and shaping the future of landlord-tenant relations at Coole.

Such editorial choices belong to a subtle strain of Ascendancy apology writing that runs through the Autobiography. Even with William as its author, the book still tells us quite a lot about Lady Gregory. Sir William had never intended to publish the work or show it to anyone but his second wife and their son, and “one or two old and dear friends.” It was Lady Gregory who, in preparing the final edition and getting the work in the hands of a publisher, widened its audience from familial to public. As she states in the preface, she did so for two reasons: (1) to carry on Sir William’s reputation,
at home and abroad and (2) to ensure "that for his sake a friendly hand may sometimes in the future be held out to his boy." And while Lady Gregory admits to her omission of certain passages for their being "too personal" or potentially slighting, the fact she produced a book at all attests to a strong desire to publicize the Gregory name and household at a time when good public relations had become a necessity for landlords. As Edward Kopper correctly points out, "Since she stresses her selectivity, what she includes affords some suggestions about her own personality" (28). That personality is not at all difficult to reconstruct. It is that of a lone mother and widow who, newly returned from London in the wake of local violence and incivilities directed expressly at her class, shows a predominant concern for the peaceable existence of her family, class, and home.

This same concern would motivate her next project, the editing and publication of *Mr. Gregory's Letter Box* 1813-35. The work sprang from the discovery at Coole of a collection of early nineteenth-century correspondences from high-ranking governmental officials to William Gregory, grandfather of Sir William and Under-Secretary for Ireland (1813-1831). The *Letter Box* continues the positive portrayal (begun in the *Autobiography*) of Coole and of the Gregories as landlords. It also shows Lady Gregory becoming a more hands-on editor.

One early reviewer called the *Letter Box* "a delightful book," while characterizing Lady Gregory's editing as "brilliantly unorthodox ... She has paid little attention to dates, as her title-page shows, and she scorns foot-notes" (*Athenaeum* 365). Apart from these few remarks, however, the reviewer's general focus remains on Mr. Gregory and his correspondents as an inside look at "the class that really rules the British Empire—the permanent official" (*Athenaeum* 365); nothing further is said of Lady Gregory or of her own motivations for bringing out the book. Subsequent criticism has never sought to remedy the oversight.

While her role in the production of Sir William's autobiography had been primarily that of selector, organizer, and indexer, the *Letter Box* displays her growing skills as a writer and social commentator. Introductory sections for the entire work and for many chapters of correspondence show Lady Gregory exerting greater control and taking the history of the family and estate more into her own hands. Undoubtedly, this is due at least in part to the nature of the project itself, which allowed more room than an autobiography for such opinions. But the fact that Lady Gregory takes advantage of the room the project affords, when she could have just left the letters to stand on their own, demonstrates both her growing confidence as a writer and her ongoing interest in producing favorable public relations for her estate.

She writes in her introduction of Mr. Gregory and his circle of Tory correspondents that "they were all honourable men, and not only that, but truly anxious for the welfare of the country, looking with kindly, if somewhat prejudiced eyes through their party-coloured glasses" (2). This diplomatic balancing act continues when Lady Gregory follows her mention of old
William’s stand against Catholic emancipation with the recognition: “But for the material good of the people he was always ready to work, and he speaks indignantly again and again against absenteeism and the carelessness of the country gentleman” (7). William’s grandfather might not have been careless about the people of Coole, but he himself was hardly immune to his own charges of absenteeism. Two residences and a top government position in Dublin made him more a city than a country gentleman.

But the most interesting maneuvering of the introduction comes with Lady Gregory’s remark on old William’s removal in 1831 from the office of Under-Secretary. “It was better,” she writes, “even for his own sake, he should go out with [the] Protestant ascendancy. He would have been old wine in new bottles now the new order had begun” (12). The statement is remarkable for its dissociation of Gregory family members (including herself) from the distinctive class label generally applied to them. To what class did they belong, if not to the Ascendancy? Lady Gregory never quite offers a sufficient alternative answer. Her apparent implication is they belong to the “new order,” but does old William’s old order still exist alongside the new? Lady Gregory’s editing provides an indirect answer.

Two significant passages from the Letter Box, both featuring the interface of letters of the Under-Secretary with the writing of Lady Gregory, demonstrate her general tendency toward rehabilitation that marks her construction of Mr. Gregory’s image. The first of these relates an 1820 “Attack on Roxborough,” as Lady Gregory’s title to the subchapter reads. The passage is interesting first for its early nineteenth-century intersection of the Persse and the Gregory families, longtime neighbors of course prior to the marriage of William and Isabella Augusta Persse. While both her father-in-law’s letter and Lady Gregory’s summary emphasize the defensive posturing of the gentry—including her father, Dudley Persse—the two differ markedly in the language and tone by which they reference the attackers. Mr. Gregory refers to them as “a party of Ribbonmen,” the derogatory term for anti-Orange agitators. He tells Lord Talbot “I have no doubt of the restoration of tranquility, tho’ it may be attended with much trouble and the loss of some excellent Men who will not yield to those Midnight legislators” (20-21).

By contrast, in her own remarks that follow, Lady Gregory is somewhat more objective and restrained, proud of her father’s defense of the estate, but not overtly boastful or exuberant. She does not disparage the attackers or name them as sworn enemies: they are simply “groups of men.” And with the image of her father’s bullet striking the heart of an oak tree, she emphasizes the permanent scars the event left on Roxborough. Her words relate more of the action, but in heroic terms that instead of disparaging the attackers, look merely to celebrate the defense of a great house. Ultimately, she conveys distress at the reported violence and loss of life: “Other shots, however, were more successful, for trails of blood were to be seen in the morning, where the dead or wounded had been carried away” (21). Her final word on the matter achieves a significant revision of the event. Removing Mr. Gregory’s parti-
san labeling, it represents the social volatility of the incident in more regretful, solemn terms.

After a lengthy section of official letters between Mr. Gregory and Lord Whitworth, and Mr. Gregory and Robert Peel, Lady Gregory deems it necessary to qualify the correspondents’ remarks on the rise in agrarian outrages, the placement on duty of a large yeomanry force, and the formation in 1816 of a secret Protestant society, the Defenders—all of which became repeated and familiar circumstances to those living through the Land War some sixty years later. She notes that following Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, the possibility of a nationwide uprising had diminished, “but a black thread of crime and disorder is woven into all the records of these years, and however sorrowful a subject to dwell upon, it cannot be left unnoticed” (91-92). Mr. Gregory, writing to Mr. Peel, attributes such crime to “the bad principles of our Irish leaders,” and, bracing for a fight, resolves “not to get caught sleeping as in 1803” (89).

In contrast, Lady Gregory adopts a progressive position that is most sympathetic to the depressed economic conditions of the Irish: “Poverty, want of work, the land hunger, or as it was more simply put, ‘the want of a bit of ground for potatoes,’ seem to have been the chief causes of or excuses for crime” (92). Yet, she as soon downplays such a bold contrast, adding “Where landlords lived at home, gave work to their people and treated them fairly, trouble was less acute” (92). By still voicing concern over unemployment, the sentence does not form a total contradiction with the previous remark. But it does start to redirect the initial force of her argument by a gradual shift of attention from the poverty of the tenants to the necessary, order-keeping role of landlord. This shift sets up her inclusion of a quotation from an 1818 letter by Mr. Gregory echoing such sentiments: “The whole of that part of the country is destitute of resident gentry, the People are lawless and the middling farmers are afraid to prosecute” (92). “Destitute” suddenly refers not to the material deprivation of the tenant farmers but to the land’s lack of a permanent local aristocracy. In a carefully orchestrated paragraph, Lady Gregory thus manages to offer her own commentary on landlord-tenant relations of the period, while absorbing some of the shock of certain less tolerant opinions that she finds in Mr. Gregory’s letters.

Such passages in the Letter-Box show Lady Gregory not simply editing and annotating the correspondence of a previous generation, but also cleverly rewriting and conveniently reshaping contemporary class relations at Coole. In the wake of the 1880s Land War and the ongoing threat of agrarian crimes by disgruntled groups similar to those about whom Mr. Gregory writes early in the century, it might well be said that Coole and other estates—some with much darker landlord-tenant histories—required a campaign for public relations that could successfully remake their image if they were to survive in the new Ireland then beginning to take shape. Little by little there emerges in Lady Gregory’s editions of the autobiography of her late husband and the correspondence of his grandfather a revised Ascendancy outlook character-
ized by a greater recognition of both the plight of the tenant class and the moral responsibility of the propertied Anglo-Irish, for Mr. Gregory’s time and, by extension, her own.

Rethinking Her Place

During the years of her editing Sir William’s autobiography and Mr. Gregory’s Letter-Box, Lady Gregory’s diary reflects a noticeable change in her attitudes about Coole and in her views of her own landed class. This change appears to be the product of a new connection with the place itself, as well as in her response to prevalent social and political opinions then in circulation about Irish land issues. These factors, as she edited the Gregories, also caused her to revise her own life on the estate.

Entries for the first years back at Coole express a steady adjustment to living there, yet not without some worry over the precarious position of the Ascendancy. Amid the contemporary politics of land agitation and Home Rule, Lady Gregory clearly sees her position of privilege in danger of being lost to the new changes. Referring to major Galway landowner Christopher Talbot Redington, her entry for 17 June 1893 reads,

I hoped Christopher wd have something to say in favour of the terrible Home Rule Bill—but he is as much in fear of the Local Police & the National settlement of the Land Question as myself—The farmers are not at all excited on the subject, rather fearing the tender mercies of their own leaders, but all Loyalists & all possessors of property tremble. (12)

While not a possessor of property herself, Lady Gregory trembled as well, since she of course benefited from a role in estate-owning families. It seems not simply a coincidence that soon after Lady Gregory anonymously published A Phantom’s Pilgrimage, or Home Ruin, a conservative pamphlet arguing against Gladstone’s Home Rule Bill on the grounds of its consequences for Irish landholders. While not wholly unsympathetic to the situation of the rural tenantry and laboring classes, she remained entrenched in status quo economic positions regarding land ownership.

But if her politics appeared unwavering, around this time a growing personal connection to Coole begins to reveal itself and suggests the beginning of change from within. Part of this was no doubt simply a function of her spending more time at the house, and, as she says, “getting things into order and beginning life on a smaller scale” (Diaries 7). By the end of the winter of 1894, remaining at Coole for more than just fortnight or monthly visits, she has begun to feel comfortable enough there to rearrange the house and to follow in the Gregory family tradition of tree-planting. Her diary entry for 24 February lists the planting of “larch, spruce, silver & evergreen oak in the nut wood.” This burgeoning interest would later cause Sean O’Casey to remark of Lady Gregory in 1925 that books were “nearest her mind” and “trees nearest her heart” (quoted in Malins 8). It also led her to write an article on the subject for AE’s agricultural publication The Irish Homestead.9

9. The article, published in the Homestead on 12 and 19 February 1898, might also be one source of the arboreal parody in James Joyce’s mock high-society column of the Ulysses episode “Aeolus.”
Yet even as Lady Gregory began to feel more comfortable there, Coole was still a lonely place in these first years of widowhood. Lady Gregory writes of how she “had found it impossible to pass the winters alone at Coole, the long evenings when it grows dark at 5 or 6 are too trying, and I cannot eat alone, & both appetite & sleep desert me” (Diaries 26). “The London knack of talking,” and a perceived need to maintain social connections—for herself and in the interest of her son Robert—prompted Lady Gregory to keep rooms “in town.” While her years of work among the London poor inspired visits to the Gort workhouse and sympathy for the everyday financial strains of the tenants on her estate, her London social sensibility generally kept her if not absentee, still a seasonal landlord. By the mid-1890s, that mind-set begins to change, so that, while not totally at home on the Gregory estate, Lady Gregory begins to assume a degree of responsibility for it. Sense of place becomes secondary to sense of duty; or, rather, place comes to suggest not just personal location but identification. Thus by 21 December 1894 she concedes in her diary, “Poor Coole looks dreary—but I feel it my right place, & must try to stay on & do my best by it” (Diaries 63). In the next few months, this sense of responsibility increased dramatically with exposure to the ideas of Oxford historian James Anthony Froude.

If Yeats found Froude’s opinions contrary to the aims of nationalism—he would label “Mr. Froude” as among “our bitterest enemies” in an 1891 column written for an Irish-American newspaper (Yeats 48)—Lady Gregory received the same ideas quite differently. On 11 March 1895, she records in her journal, “I have been reading Froude’s ‘English in Ireland’ which has opened my eyes to the failings of landlords, & I may say of all classes in Ireland in the past, & makes me very anxious to do my duty & to bring Robert up to do his—” (Diaries 65). James Anthony Froude published in 1871 the first volume of his history The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century; two more volumes followed in 1874. By 1881 a new edition included a preface and supplementary chapter in which Froude brought his lengthy history of English settlement and government in Ireland into the perspective of contemporary events there.10

The publishing history of English in Ireland alone attests to a great rejuvenation of interest in the book coinciding with the Land War. First published in three volumes between 1872 and 1874, the work was reprinted in January and December 1881, April 1884, May 1886, and January 1887. The book remained popular in the next decades, with republication in an 1894 Silver Library Edition and reprints in 1901 and 1906. If many of Froude’s readers were, like Lady Gregory, of landed gentry background and anxious about what was happening to their estates or those of their neighbors, then his book generally told them what they wanted to hear during these tense

10. Lady Gregory most likely read this edition in its original or in one of its four subsequent reprints made between 1884 and 1894.
years—mainly that the problems of Anglo-Irish history lay not so much in the estate system of land tenure as in the recurring administrative foibles of British government.

At first glance, much of Froude’s writing is a lengthy restatement of the dominant Tory opinion that the Irish had long required the paternalistic guidance and leadership of a Protestant English aristocracy. He establishes this thesis starting with his preliminary chapters on Anglo-Norman settlement. The Irish, Froude writes:

when the Normans took charge of them, were, with the exception of the clergy, scarcely better than a mob of armed savages. They had no settled industry and no settled habitations, and scarcely a conception of property ... The only occupation considered honourable was fighting and plunder; and each tribe roamed within its limits, supported either by the pillage of its neighbours or the wild cattle which wandered through the forests. (v. I 15-16)

In what seems a rather obvious intellectual debt to the century that is the focus of his study, Froude paints the Irish in the traditional Enlightenment colors of sauvage noble. To be sure, he admits that the earlier, twelfth-century Irish “had some human traits. They were fond of music and ballad-singing. They were devout after a fashion of their own; and among the monks and friars there were persons who had pretensions to learning” (Froude v. I 16). Yet without English influence in later periods, Froude asserts, the human traits and potential of Ireland’s native population could never be brought to fruition.

If one can look beyond its blatant stereotyping and racial essentialism, *English in Ireland* does offer a continual supporting thesis that is relevant to Lady Gregory’s situation at Coole in the mid-1890s. Froude’s thesis links the future success or failure of Irish society to the behavior of its landowners. He sees in the original concept of estate as it was practiced in Ireland a tenable model from which the present system has unfortunately been allowed to stray. “When a tract of land was allotted to a Norman baron, it was not at first an estate out of which to extract rents to spend upon his own pleasures, so much as a fief, over which he was a ruler responsible to the crown” (Froude v. I 15). Froude traces such absenteeism, with its continual draining of rental revenues from the country, to the departure of Anglo-Irish nobility to fight in the War of the Roses and the Hundred Years War. It then became the habit of successive generations, up to and through the eighteenth century, to spend much of their time in England, retaining Irish estates to support a lifestyle centered on London court society. Thus, “Lords and gentleman, who retained most completely the English character, and whose presence in Ireland, therefore, was most indispensable, had learnt to prefer the society of their friends at home to the pain and trouble of coercing banditti in Donegal or Galway” (v. I 28).

While identifying absenteeism as the “deepest root of mischief” in Ireland, *English in Ireland* recognizes the solution to the country’s problems to be in the hands of the propertied Protestant class, which even in the mid-eighteenth century was “making amends for the imbecility of the Government” (v. I 666). Those who remained at home and in touch with their
people, who invested their energies and fortunes in projects to improve the local infrastructure and economy, were clearly those who would maintain their status and power in the changing country. They were the “good people”:

Scattered thinly over the four provinces, the salt of the country, they continued, generation after generation, in brave and honourable execution of a work which brought its own reward with it: they sat enthroned in the imagination of the peasantry as their natural rulers; the Banshees wailed for them when they died. (v. I 666)

Later, Froude describes how these “great families remained objects of affectionate allegiance to the tenantry” (v. II 207). These are quite the opposite of those selfish landlords who merely “regarded their Irish estates as the sources of their income; their only desire was to extract the most out of them which the soil could be made to yield”; Froude previously compares such behavior to the practices of West Indian plantation and slave owners (v. II 23). As if to emphasize a marked and happy contrast, he states that when landlords in Ireland did their best by their tenantry, “their estates became oases in the general wilderness, and they and their families were regarded by the peasantry with a feeling which went beyond allegiance” (Froude v. II 207).

Froude’s ongoing demarcation of the dividing line between just and unjust and moral and immoral landowning practices exerted a strong influence on Lady Gregory. In these first years back in Galway, as she thought a lot about her relation to Irish landlordism, her family’s history and her role as the mistress of the house at Coole, English in Ireland gave a plain portrayal of the impacts of good estate management versus the evil consequences of absenteeism. It offered Lady Gregory a new way to see her present situation and the past history of the Gregories, who were generally well liked, but no less guilty of the sort of absenteeism of which Froude complains.

Meanwhile, Froude’s confidence in the superiority of the English over the Irish character would have enabled Protestant gentry readers to weather the social upheaval of the Land War and political changes of Gladstonian land reform without entirely relinquishing the moral high ground of imperial authority on which their estates had traditionally stood. Employing Benedict Anderson’s terms of imagined national communities, James Knapp has shown how Lady Gregory deployed a paradoxical discourse of cultural nationalism that combined a “genuine nationalism of the people” with the “official nationalism” of her threatened, dominant class (288-89). Froude’s history was a perfect tool for the formation of such a blended discourse. It offered a corrective or cautionary tale for those landholders who might not have always been on the best of terms with tenantry, yet wanted to maintain social and economic influence in late-colonial and postcolonial Ireland. At the same time, it sanctioned and upheld the authority of the landlord system as an ideal that transcended the social crises of Irish history. As such, English

11. Robert Gregory, after making his fortune with the East India Company, had purchased Coole in 1768 and begun collecting £1,000 pounds annual rent from the property, while residing much of the time at properties in England.
in Ireland provided an argument for mild change during the Land War years that was, to landed Protestants, more effective and compelling than any Land League action or Gladstone Land Act could ever be.

After reading Froude, Lady Gregory seems even more sympathetic to tenants’ rights. She sounds clearly convinced of the need for the Ascendancy class to mend its ways or else face the inevitable end to its way of life, when in April 1895 she writes:

I feel that this Land Bill is the last of “Dobson’s Three Warnings” & am thankful that we land owners have been given even a little time to prepare & to work while it is day—It is necessary that as democracy gains power our power should go—and God knows many of our ancestors & forerunners have eaten or planted sour grapes & we must not repine if our teeth are set on edge—(Diaries 68)

Her view barely resembles that of the landlord apologist and conservative pamphleteer of just two years earlier.

Lady Gregory would remain so convinced by English in Ireland that, upon meeting agricultural reformer and politician Horace Plunkett in London two years later, she was confident to recommend the book as a source from which he could prepare a synopsis of Irish grievances for his speech in Parliament’s Irish Financial Relations debate two weeks later. She offered to gather some notes of Froude for him and spent the following two days busily selecting and typing (Diaries 136-37).

Along with this new sense of economic fairness and social justice in Ireland, Lady Gregory admits to more individualized hopes for her family and estate: “I would like to leave a good memory & not a ‘monument of champagne bottles’—& with all that, I hope to save the home—the house & woods at least for Robert” (Diaries 68). Her own italics reveal how Coole has changed for her, in just a few years time, from a strange and lonely house to the focus of her life, family, and future concerns.

Diary entries for the ensuing months show her continuing to balance a growing understanding of tenant issues with familial self-interest. She still judges the political climate of the summer of 1895 from the typically conservative stance of her class: “The summer in Ireland went off well—The Tories having swept the country at the elections, Home Rule has disappeared—and the Nationalist leaders when heard of at all, are heard of as fighting with each other—” (Diaries 78). She seems doubly assured by Tory victories and by infighting on the Irish nationalist side. But in domestic affairs, she appears happy at keeping on good terms with the Coole tenantry. The following journal entry bemoans nonpayment of rent by one tenant, a Mr. Hanbury, and some minor (and non-Land League related) boycott activity by two others. Overall, the tone is one of satisfaction and apparent relief that these small frictions are the extent of such problems, compared to the siegelike existence of neighboring landlord (and later cofounder of the National Theatre) Edward Martyn:
Our own people were very nice & amiable, bringing little presents to Robert and paying their rent—tho' Mr. Hanbury has never reappeared!—Edward Martyn however has had some trouble with his people—& his steward was fired at at our gate—& he himself is protected by police and hardly goes out—The Miss Franks attempted to "boycott" me for having gone to see the prisoner who assaulted them in jail! But I wrote an amiable letter of apology—& rather a hollow truce has been patched up between us—(Diaries 78)

As long as Lady Gregory remained in charge of fifteen-year-old Robert, she would continue to set these sympathetic politics behind the best interest of her only child. Thus she writes in December 1896: “The New Year opens with some anxiety, the revision of rents has lead to 25 pc reduction where brought into court—and one cannot blame ours if they follow the example—But with R.’s expensive education still going on—it will make a great difference to us” (Diaries 121).

A spring 1896 visit to Italy gave Lady Gregory an opportunity to compare her life at Coole with that of an Italian country estate. She found her counterpart in Countess Evelina Millingen Pisani (also a widow at this time, and the daughter of Dr. Julius Millingen, one of the doctors who bled Byron to death). Lady Gregory visited her on her 3,000-acre farm at Vescovana, near Padua. The estate, “stocked with five hundred oxen for ploughing,” was of greater size and agricultural output than Coole. Still, it allowed Lady Gregory the chance to observe a woman who had adopted a similar lifestyle of rural aristocrat. After a three-day stay with the Countess, Lady Gregory writes on 16 May: “We have been Sat[urday] to Monday to Vescovana, Ctesse. Pisani’s—an amusing change—a great farm on the plains—fat & fertile—tilled by white oxen—” (Diaries 113-14).

Lady Gregory derives a sense of Vescovana not just from the details of the place itself but from her perceptions of Countess Pisani and her relation to the tenantry: “The Countess full of energy—looking after every detail on the farm—having the ‘bed sores’ of the oxen washed before her eyes—but also full of enthusiasm for art & literature—could not sleep one night because Don Antonio had been reading us the story of Ginevra from Boccacio—A talk with her opens the window of the mind—” (Diaries 114). One senses Lady Gregory felt right at home with Vescovana’s easy blending of the rustic and the intellectual.

But if she approves of the culture of the place, Lady Gregory is downright critical of how Countess Pisani interacts with the local population: “Yet I think love is lacking, she has no good word to say of the people she lives amongst. We are happier at Kiltartan—” (Diaries 114). The final sentence bespeaks a certain confidence in the life she had created for herself in just four years back at Coole and looks ahead as well to her innovative fusion of peasantry voices with upper class materials—the Kiltartanese dialect she would soon invent for her folklore collections and saga translations—drawn from the freer movements of another aristocratic lady among her people.
Works Cited


MALINS, EDWARD. Foreword to Coole. Dublin: Dolmen, 1971.

