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Forging History: 
Emily Lawless’s With Essex in Ireland

by LIA MILLS

In 1890, THE HONOURABLE EMILY LAWLESS (1845–1913), a member of the largely Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class, published her historical novel, With Essex in Ireland. The publication of the text coincided with the nascent cultural revival in Ireland which gathered momentum throughout the 1890s and aimed to develop, among other things, a specifically Irish, as distinct from English, literature.

Nineteenth-century Irish cultural debates were fraught with tension and disagreement. Arguments as to what material was appropriate for inclusion in a canon of national literature were particularly heated (Eglinton et al., Kiberd). While Emily Lawless’s Irish fiction was enthusiastically received in England, where it is known to have influenced Gladstone while he was drafting a series of Home Rule Bills aimed at allowing a degree of political autonomy to Ireland (Gladstone), Irish commentators were less appreciative. Ernest Boyd, for example, dismissed her work as being “intended for foreign consumption” (375), while W.B. Yeats stated that Lawless was “only able to observe Irish character from without and not to create it from within” (Collected Letters 1:442).

Despite the fact that he consistently included Lawless in lists of the most interesting and important contributions to the Irish fiction of the 1890s, Yeats complained that she was “in imperfect sympathy with the Celtic nature” (Uncollected Prose 368) and accused her of:

a habit of mind which would compress a complex, incalculable, undecipherable nation into the mould of a theory invented by political journalists and forensic historians. (Uncollected Prose 370)

In effect, Yeats found Lawless guilty of anti-Irish sentiment because her fiction did not accord with his view of what a properly national literature should be. The problem lay in the hyphenated nature of her Anglo-Irish identity, which he shared. This denunciation of Lawless’s work by her Irish contemporaries persisted and contributed to her dismissal from the emerging canon of national literature.

1. For analyses of the aims and scope of the literary revival, see Boyd, MacDonagh, Foster and Kiberd.
Lawless was not given, as Yeats was, to public argument. But two years later, in “A Note on the Ethics of Literary Forgery”, she challenged the right of any individual or group to lay claim to an essentially “Celtic” nature:

A good deal of talk goes on in these days about the Celtic spirit, but does anyone really know what that spirit is? Has any one ever tracked it to its secret home; ascertained where it was born, and of what elements it was originally composed? ... it is certainly not the property of any one creed, age or condition of life, any more than it is of any one set of political convictions.... There is no necessary connection between it and the Clan-na-Gael, any more than there is between it and the Landlords' Conferences or Diocesan Synod. (92)

She goes on to argue against attributing “Celtic” or “Saxon” characteristics to any one race, because environment and circumstance also influence and determine character.

Writing at a time when the cultural revival had gained considerable momentum, Lawless demonstrates her familiarity and sympathy with some of the fundamental texts, issues and writers of that movement before entering into a discussion of the legitimacy of historical fiction. In response to criticism of her work, she asks whether a writer who is incautious enough to create a credible fictional world is guilty of a moral failing:

For to write badly is after all only to prove oneself human; but to go about telling—worse, printing—lies is surely the very superfluity of naughtiness. (90-91)

Her protestations about the ethics of what she terms “literary forgery” are evasive. In admitting that she has “deceived” the reading public, she is laying claim to her success as a writer. Here, as in her fiction, she uses irony and a complex system of double negatives to demonstrate that the original proposition is flawed.

This point is crucial to a reading of With Essex in Ireland, an account of the unsuccessful Irish campaign of Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex. The successful illusion of reality which Lawless achieves in the novel ensured its negative reception in Ireland. The attempt at verisimilitude is deliberate: the novel is structured in a manner which is calculated to suggest authenticity. The title page indicates the following provenance for the text:

With Essex in Ireland
Being extracts from a diary kept in Ireland during the year 1599 by Mr. Henry Harvey
Sometime Secretary to Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.
With a Preface by John Oliver Maddox, M.A.
Introduced and Edited by Hon. Emily Lawless
Author of “Hurrish, a study” etc.

The complex origins suggested for the novel are echoed within the narrative by multiple layers of perception, which in turn allow for many possible readings of the political and ethical questions which it raises.
With Essex in Ireland is by no means the first historical novel to be framed within a preface and afterword by an “authority” who comments on the veracity of the text. Yet when it first came out, some, like Gladstone, mistook it for an authentic historical document, others read it as a convincing imitation of an Elizabethan history, while others again assumed that its representations of the Irish coincided with Lawless’s own views, as Yeats appears to have done.

Ironically, this last response is a mark of the success of the novel, which is steeped in an Elizabethan worldview which views the Irish as a subhuman people, alternately demonic and bestial. Irish rebels are described, for example, as “Satan’s brood, the very sight and hellish noises whereof were enough to scare any Christian man!” Essex proclaims the country to be “bewitched, so that it exhales treason as a marsh exhales vapours” (172).

The language, imagery and ideology which infuse the novel are drawn from Lawless’s two principal sources, Lives and Letters of the Devereux, and Edmund Spenser’s A View of the Present State of Ireland, a quintessential colonial document, first published in 1633. Although not yet in print at the time of Essex’s campaign, the View had been entered in the Stationer’s Register in 1598. It was circulated widely in manuscript form and its contents would have been familiar to Essex, who moved in circles which are frequently alluded to within the novel, including poets and political writers, such as the Sidneys, Ralegh, Francis Bacon, and “poor Ned Spenser” himself. Set in the context of an ongoing debate between Essex and Hal about the nature of chivalry and the politics of representation, these references are highly charged and serve to implicate cultural mechanisms in the sixteenth-century (and, by extension, nineteenth-century) subjugation of Ireland.

Essex is not an especially benign figure in Irish history. The details of his campaign are as follows: Sent to Ireland as Lord Lieutenant by Elizabeth I in 1599 to subdue the Earl of Tyrone, he postponed the confrontation between their forces by detouring through other parts of the country, conducting skirmishes here and there before eventually turning north. Against Elizabeth’s orders, he held a private meeting with Tyrone, during which a truce was agreed. Meanwhile, court intrigue in England was diminishing Elizabeth’s regard for him. In the end, Essex left Ireland abruptly, in order to present himself in person and try to regain Elizabeth’s favour. He failed and was imprisoned and tried for treason. Transferred to house arrest, Essex led a coup d’état and was ultimately executed (Devereux).

While Essex was not pro-Irish, the short duration and abortiveness of his campaign in Ireland and the ambiguity of the truce he negotiated with Tyrone leave room for interpretation. Lawless exploits these points of irresolution to the full in her novel. In her historical study, Ireland, she suggests that Essex’s “failure”, according to the perspective of English history, was at least in part due to a latent sympathy for the Irish and:
His natural chivalrousness, his keen perception of injustice, a certain elevation of mind which debared him from taking the stereotyped English official view of the intricate Irish problem; an independence of vulgar motives which made him prone to see two sides of a question... (209)

Within the novel, Lawless uses Essex’s independence of mind to foreground questions about the intersections of literature and politics, ethics and aesthetics, loyalty and betrayal. But her narrative can also be read as an attempt to negotiate complicated issues such as the clash between individual sympathies and a broader loyalty to a group or political ideal and as an exploration of the compromises, shifts and adjustments that have to be made at every level to accommodate, while not resolving, those tensions. Residual layers of identity and tribal memory emerge at crucial moments, while history is in conflict with deeper, more primitive and often unrepresentable levels of experience. Reason cannot always explain, or even fully engage with, aspects of allegiance or identity.

For Lawless, as for many of her contemporaries, notions of national affiliation and identity were acute and complex. Against the political backdrop of a succession of Land Acts which made it possible for tenant farmers to purchase the land they farmed and attempts to devise a form of Home Rule for Ireland, the Anglo-Irish as a class faced extinction. By virtue of religion, class and property they were not easily identifiable with their tenants. Yet they were not English either, even if many of them were titled, as Lawless was.

Lawless’s title, as some of her critics liked to point out, was only of three generations’ standing. It masked her family’s own microcosmic history of vacillation, compromise, division, and shifting loyalties. Her great-grandfather, the first Lord Cloncurry, converted to Protestantism at a time when it was politically and economically expedient to do so. But the second Lord Cloncurry, Emily Lawless’s grandfather, was a friend of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, supported the United Irishmen, and spent a period of time imprisoned in the Tower of London as a result. He also supported Catholic Emancipation. Lawless’s own father committed suicide when she was fourteen years old, an event which doubtless undermined any sense of familial security which she might otherwise have had. Lawless grew up as witness to a succession of devastating famines and continuing waves of emigration, and also to the land wars which threatened the economic interests and stability of her class.

Perhaps inevitably, she inherited, to some extent, the reservations of the Anglo-Irish about political separation of Ireland from England. In the 1892 edition of Ireland, for example, she anticipates the uncertainties and divisions of Ireland’s political future with a “not altogether unnatural alarm” (415). But the 1912 edition takes a far more optimistic view, particularly on cultural grounds, and argues that:

... some of the most hopeful and encouraging auguries for coming days in Ireland are not by any means wholly political ones, in fact, [they] may be said to be largely non-political... (433)
Recent readings of Lawless’s Irish fiction have attempted to place them within a spectrum of nationalist (Brewer), feminist (Cahalan, Matthews-Kane), or colonial (Patten) writing. It is tempting to categorise her work as sympathetic to the literary ideals of cultural nationalism while aloof from its more political aims, but With Essex in Ireland may be read more profitably as an interrogation of the political nature of culture and of cultural politics.

With Essex in Ireland tries to give an objective view of colonial politics while questioning the aesthetics of colonial representation. The preface does more than create a fictional genealogy for the novel. It also establishes an inextricable link between Lawless’s fiction and Spenser’s View. John Oliver Maddox’s description of Lawless’s narrator, Hal, echoes Ware’s preface to the 1633 edition of Spenser’s View so directly as to paraphrase that text. Like Spenser, Hal is a poet. But Hal is a bad poet, a fact which allows Lawless to exercise her considerable gift for irony at his expense, while underscoring his unreliability as a narrator. Echoing Ware, Maddox expresses a wish that Hal’s account of his experiences in Ireland:

...had been tempered throughout with a nicer Discretion, more especially in those Portions which relate to what took place in the Castle of Askeaton in Munster, and at the passage of the Lagan in Ulster, which portions be, I must plainly avow, contrary in my Opinion both to Religion and Firm Reason. (6)

In a similar fashion, Ware highlights the extremity of Spenser’s beliefs:

As for his worke now published, although it sufficiently testifieth his learning and deepe judgement, yet we may wish that in some passages it had been tempered with more moderation. (Spenser 6)

But Spenser’s views on Ireland and the Irish were entirely in keeping with the political ideology of his time, if expressed with somewhat more vehemence than polite society would allow (Coughlan). Maddox’s disapproval is reserved for those parts of Lawless’s text which are not part of the historical record and relate incidents where the supernatural and the irrational spill over into the visible world and refuse to be denied. Irish culture and folk memory emerge as ultimately irrepressible forces which question the basis and authority of historical narrative.

As a narrator, Hal is reluctant as well as unreliable. Repeatedly, and usually when the narrative approaches these collisions between the rational and the irrational, between the historical and the supernatural, he asserts his reluctance to “tell” what happens. His natural inclination is to turn away and keep silent. For example, he introduces his account of the ghostly scene at Askeaton referred to in Maddox’s Preface in this way:

Now what I have at present to relate is of so strange and unnatural a character that were it in a tale all would cry out upon its improbability. Nay, even I, who am witness of the same, would scarce dare to relate it, but that, before leaving Ireland, his Excellency strictly charged me to write down everything that occurred upon this our journey.... (126-27)

The instability of the narrator seems to affirm that Ireland and Irish history
are unknowable, or even, at times, beyond representation. Moreover, Lawless’s continual emphasis on Hal’s reluctance, in combination with Maddox’s repugnance, has the effect of suggesting that those parts of the story to which they are both averse have the force of unpalatable truth.

Hal serves another function in the novel. Spenser’s View takes the form of a classical dialogue, in the course of which, through a series of questions and answers, a seemingly irrefutable worldview is teased out and confirmed. An exchange takes place between Eudoxus, who is moderate, rational and humane but knows little about Ireland, and Irenius, who uses his knowledge of the country to win his interlocutor around to his extreme point of view. In With Essex in Ireland, Hal functions as Eudoxus to the collective Irenius of various seasoned Irish campaigners, i.e. English soldiers fighting in Ireland. As witness to atrocity, he recoils from the implications of what he sees, but in conversation with more experienced soldiers, he is persuaded to accept the necessity for the evils of war, famine, and repression in Ireland. Only Essex, as represented by Lawless, and the women in the novel deviate from this perspective. It is significant that the only Irish people who speak directly to Hal within the text are women, and that their social position corresponds to Lawless’s own.

Hal’s first encounter with Ireland takes place within the Pale, the small area around the city of Dublin most consistently loyal to the crown. Billeted with the Usher family, he meets two young women, Agatha, the daughter of the house, and Bridget, a ward of the household. When he discovers that Bridget’s lover, Phelim, is imprisoned in Dublin Castle, a building “unfit for habitation” (18), Hal waxes eloquent on the subject of loyalty and justice. Agatha, however, challenges his certainties in the first of a series of encounters which begin his education in the complexities of Irish affairs.

Agatha’s position in many ways is akin to that of the author. The privileged daughter of a wealthy family who enjoys a degree of physical freedom and independence of mind, Agatha’s allegiances are divided. She recognises the conflicting claims of loyalty to the crown and devotion to the place where she lives, and the pressure of sympathy for people who are destroyed by repressive policies. As an inhabitant of the walled city of Dublin and daughter of the Pale who loves her country, Agatha has an identity as divided and precarious as later generations of Anglo-Irish women, including that of Lawless herself.

Agatha, however, is not developed as a character. She exists primarily as a target for Hal’s lugubrious poetry. Although Lawless’s descriptions of Agatha and her cousin Bridget conform to racial and class stereotypes, they are not merely cyphers. When Hal, newly arrived in Dublin and a guest in her father’s house, gives Agatha the benefit of his wisdom in relation to politics and justice, her response is markedly ironic. Her convoluted sentences are overtly submissive, while suggesting something very different. She appears to defer to the superior insight of Hal, but also questions it:

*Verily, sir ... I am not wise enough nor learned enough in such matters to dispute with one who*
is my better, not merely in years but also in understanding. Natheless it seemeth to my poor rea­
son that if the Queen’s Majesty was but half ware of all that of this kind is done in her name in
this realm of Ireland, she would give commandment to those that are set to execute her will and
pleasure that they exercise a nicer discernment. (30)

It is clear, even to Hal, who is not the most acute of observers, that Agatha’s
argument is valid.

In this way, Lawless uses an interplay of perspectives simultaneously to
mimic and to undermine Spenser’s View. Hal has enough of a sense of justice
to question the severity with which the Irish are treated. But, official chroni­
cler that he is, he is easily persuaded to accept the status quo. But for the
reader, the reservations of Agatha and Essex have more authority, a circum­
stance made possible through Lawless’s characterisation of Hal.

Besides Essex, Lawless uses minor female figures to raise questions about
the justice of British rule. Furthermore, as Patten has observed, when the sol­
diers experience doubt or compassion, they associate it with some “woman­
ish” quality in themselves, or attribute their moment of weakness to a passing
recollection of their womenfolk at home. Captain Warren, for example, a rea­
sonable man and a brave soldier, tells Hal that he has learned to steel himself
against his compunction. At first, he tells Hal, he used to ask himself:

What fashion is this to treat men, who, if they are savages and rebels, are still of flesh and blood
like ourselves, created in the self-same image of Almighty God? And if they are papists, marry,
why so were our own fathers or grandfathers.... (67-68)

Warren describes how he had to harden himself when he saw an old woman,
who reminded him of his mother, being executed for stealing bread. But he
has learned that the only way for the English to subdue Ireland is to kill
everyone they can and terrify the rest into submission.

Women are largely absent from the action of the novel, while Hal, who
also perceives his doubts to be “womanish” and the result of maternal influ­
ence, is essentially passive. His role is to observe and record, not to initiate. It
is left to Essex, characterised by Lawless as a man of honour and authority,
to formulate the crux of the issues of power at work within representation as
much as within the field of action. When Hal brings him a translation of an
Irish lament which they have just heard, Essex speculates that it is as well
that the Irish do not speak English. Hal argues piously that “the best hope of
their ceasing from their savagery lies in the learning of them our own
tongue” (150), but Essex explains that he meant it would be better for the
English if this were not to happen:

Think you if such a tale as you have just read to me were put into some language current among
men of letters ’twould produce no effect upon those who heard it? (150)

2. The weight of this question may carry the force of family memory for Lawless, whose own great­
grandfather was a Catholic.
When Hal complains that the Irish lament follows no recognisable formal rules, Essex answers that the effect to which he refers is not aesthetic, but moral and political:

... 'twere as well for our credit that we alone had the exposition of our quarrel with this people and not they theirs also. (150)

Lawless is clearly arguing for the need for the expression of the previously untold Irish perspective on history and for the value of Irish culture in its own terms. Although Hal is uneasily contemptuous of the Irish, he recognises signs of humanity in their response to this lament and this awakens him to the possibility that they may not be as inferior as he has hitherto supposed. While not officially able or willing to acknowledge the falsity of his position, he is forced to record his deepening uncertainty.

Despite this wavering, Hal retains his officially sanctioned Spenserian attitude. Essex explains to him that the only weapon likely to destroy the Irish, and one from which he recoils, is Famine:

Famine! Famine with the gristly face, the clattering bones, the hollow eye sockets! Famine which eats up, not the fighting men alone, but the women and the children too, till there be not one of them left. (221)

Hal retorts that the rebels deserve no less, but Essex replies:

For a soft spoken poet thou art, it seems to me, about as bloody-minded a man as I have often encountered. (221)

This is an ironic reflection on the interplay of politics and literature, and on the co-existence of notions of chivalry with brutality and repression, and raises points which Lawless revisits throughout the novel. At a turning point in the narrative, for example, Essex describes Ralegh as:

... the illustrious poet, incomparable knight, and flower of all chivalry, Sir Walter Raleigh, who, an he be not greatly maligned, did such deeds in this very forest in which we be standing, that 'tis marvel the trees carry not his sign-manual written in blood upon their trunks as a memorial forever! (167)

The irony here is subtle but unmistakable. It is a matter of historical record, although outside of the time-frame and action of Lawless’s novel, that Ralegh was later to write a letter recommending Essex’s execution to the Queen. Similarly, Bacon, for whom Essex professes admiration and whom he recommends to Hal as a moral guide, was to act as chief prosecutor at his trial.

The structure of the novel is not only fractured by such allusive means, but also by a constant dialectic between those events which it depicts and episodes which occur outside the narrative frame. Hal is acutely aware, and frequently reminds the reader, that other versions of the story of Essex’s campaign in Ireland are being constructed and circulated within the Irish council and at Elizabeth’s court. He anticipates, rightly, that historical accounts will not favour the leader to whom he is devoted.

The “Afterword” provides a self-reflexive commentary on the arbitrary nature of political narratives:
Uncomfortable! Uncommendable! Thus suddenly, with so bald an ending, (or rather plainly a no-ending,) closeth the Narrative of Mr. Harvey. (269)

To Maddox, Essex’s story as told by Hal is incomplete. However, Lawless has no interest in pursuing Essex’s career beyond the Irish context, as she states unequivocally in Ireland (210). In this way the “Afterword” draws attention to the partial construction of Lawless’s fiction, which attempts to be read as No(n)-fiction. The plot does not respect fictional conventions, just as Hal does not observe the niceties of “civilised” reticence. Eruptions of the supernatural disrupt the plot in the same way that Hal’s questions disrupt the comfortable worldview which justifies repression. Although Hal is persuaded to something close to acceptance, his questions, and the dissent from colonial perspectives which they evoke, remain.

Just as the novel’s linguistic and ideological mannerisms obscure its nineteenth-century concerns and preoccupations, and its mimicry of historical veracity obscures its constructedness, so within the text natural phenomena, such as fog and the forests, conspire to render the Irish countryside elusive, mysterious, obscure, and threatening:

... whenever I tried to distinguish anything clearly, all at once it seemed to melt away into that fog out of which it came. (134-35)

The fog creates a supernatural atmosphere which makes the soldiers nervous and susceptible to taking sudden flight when under attack. On one occasion, they flee, terrified, from a herd of cattle which they mistake for a band of Irish rebels. In the context of representations of the Irish as bestial and subhuman, this mistake is less arbitrary than it appears, a point in which Lawless is assisted by the evocative mist. The Irish forest is often portrayed as animate, intelligent, and actively protective of the native forces while impeding the perceptions and progress of the English. In this way, Lawless conveys the magical and supernatural dimensions of Ireland, of which both Hal and Maddox disapprove. Ireland is a region where established colonial rules do not apply. Hal observes that:

... of all lands that ever I heard of [this] seems the one most difficult for a stranger to understand ... in which all rules elsewhere laid down for a man’s guidance seem to be as it were reversed and made invalid. (57)

Even time comes into question. The fluidity of events apparently separated by time is a central theme in Lawless’s nonfiction as well as in her historical fiction and here the ultimate fate of Essex and of the forests (later to be razed by Elizabethan and Cromwellian armies) overshadows the text. An unearthly vision of a harbinger of death familiar in Irish folklore, the Washerwoman at the Ford, to which Maddox alludes in the preface, is a reminder of the fate awaiting Essex beyond the narrative. At one point, Essex imagines that he is followed by “a train of the Dead ... and I their Ghostly King” (123). The boundaries between past and present, rational and irrational, the living and the dead fluctuate to such an extent that Hal loses all certainty.
In one scene in which Hal is separated from his companions, he hears an unearthly music:

... a sound as of singing, which at first I wondered at, asking myself whether it could be magical, it seeming to proceed less from a level with ourselves than to be rising up out of the ground below. (104)

He traces the sound to a vast hollow in the ground which “might have been dug by enchantment” (105). Watching a “savage woman” play with her child and listening to her sing to him, Hal is strangely moved, and later finds that images of this woman blend—“as even in my sleep I was aware somewhat improperly!”—with those of gentlewomen he has known (111). This idyllic vision of a mother playing with her baby is a corrective to Spenser’s negative representation of Irish women. It is significant that this feminine image offers a symbolic connection, beyond conscious control, with other women both within and beyond the narrative, in much the same way as Captain Warren was moved to pity by a reminiscence of his mother. Hal’s only direct action in the novel takes place in this context, when he prevents a soldier from killing the woman and her child. Here he passes from halfhearted questioning to direct intervention. The soldier spitefully abandons him in the inimical forest but, as if in recognition of his relative enlightenment, Hal is allowed to find his way back to his companions unharmed.

When the forest clears and the fog lifts, Ireland is revealed as a place of seductive beauty. But just as the fog obscures a landscape of real and persuasive beauty, so too the country enshrouds the memory of its own past. At the Castle of Askeaton, a haunting scene is described in which the dead arise and walk in a silent reproachful formation towards Essex’s company, who are watching from the battlements:

Below us the ground was deep with fog ... so thick and solid that it seemed as if one might walk thereon.

Then, as we stood looking out over it, lo! that fog seemed to cleave into two parts, as we read in Holy Writ that the Red Sea was cleft, and a passage appeared down the midst thereof.... (133)

The ghostly procession approaches the castle, where Essex, Hal and their company stand watching in horrified silence:

... only a small portion of them were full-grown men, the rest being women or children ... [and] aged people, both men and women, some of these so old and feeble that I was amazed at the sight of their skinny faces, which seemed to be those of skeletons rather than of living men or women. (134)

The function of these apparitions appears to be to confront the perpetrators of injustice with their personal culpability (in this case Colonel Sethcock, who loses his mind as a result of this vision). The dead are unanswerable, and have the ability to evoke both a sympathy and a recognition which the living clearly cannot arouse. Alternatively, this scene suggests that the horrors inflicted on the Irish people cannot be contained or silenced, and that the landscape itself retains the memory of injustice, symbolised in much of Lawless’s fiction by the ruins of colonial buildings. Irrational disturbances of
the surface of reality allow feelings to emerge which are repressed elsewhere under the weight of duty, conformity, loyalty, much as the irrepressible Irish emerge suddenly from the hills, trees, and mists to wreak havoc and disappear again before they can be directly engaged with in standard warfare. At Askeaton, the sight of the massed dead is enough to awaken Colonel Sethcock’s conscience but, ironically, he loses his reason as a result.

The notion of the Irish landscape as being structured by the bones of dead generations appears elsewhere in Lawless. In *Rurrish*, for example, the hills of the Burren, a wild and rocky region on the extreme west coast of the country, are described as:

skeletons—rain-worn, time-worn, wind-worn,—starvation made visible and embodied in a landscape. (2)

Eve Patten has noted that images of fog obscuring the countryside are a feature of colonial writing, but, while Lawless’s accounts of mists rolling in and lifting, of the natural density as well as the deliberate plashing of forests, function as a metaphor for the difficulties encountered by inherently inimical strangers in their efforts to win control of Ireland, they also serve as a metaphor for the obstacles faced by the Anglo-Irish novelist who attempts to mediate between different historical ways of representing the country. It is significant that her other two major Irish novels, *Hurrish* and *Grania*, end with the death of the eponymous protagonist, and that both deaths occur as a direct result of a deep, impenetrable fog, at the edge of land, where the distinctions between earth, sea, and sky are blurred.

This fatal fog might just as easily serve as a metaphor for the difficulties facing the reader in deciphering Lawless’s Irish fiction. In the case of *With Essex in Ireland*, she is to an extent the victim of her own success in faithfully recreating Elizabethan colonial attitudes. Her later historical novel, *Maelcho*, carries the mimetic strategy of *With Essex in Ireland* to excess and is far weaker as a result.

Lawless’s contemporaries in Ireland tended to dismiss her contribution to Irish letters, as has been noted. They accused her of a failure of understanding, while they in turn overlooked the real risks, innovations, and complexities of her fiction. Yet she remained interested in and supportive of the Revival and applauded its successes, long after she had moved to live in England. She was, for example, one of the first sponsors of the Irish Literary Theatre founded by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn in 1899 (Yeats, *Collected Letters* II:339, 458).

By 1929, when the political climate had cooled somewhat, Lady Gregory was able to reread *With Essex in Ireland* with a greater degree of detachment:

... reading it afresh ... it seemed a terrible indictment: these armoured men with their cavalry and gunpowder hunting, killing, as if wild beasts, trying to exterminate the natives of the country, not theirs by right, at the bidding of Elizabeth ... I wish she [i.e. Lawless] could have lived to see the comparative freedom of Ireland, its government by those who—though with none too much of goodwill towards the opposition—have all love for it. (220)
The politics of Lawless’s Irish texts are just as problematic today as on their first appearance. Her Irish novels which treat a wide range of themes and adopt numerous linguistic and ideological disguises are confusing. Modern assessments of Anglo-Irish literature such as those of Foster and Kiberd continue to overlook her contribution, with the exception of Margaret Kelleher’s study of representations of famine in nineteenth-century Ireland.

Despite isolated studies which have appeared in recent years, Lawless remains elusive. Her work is uneven and its complex biases are difficult to accept in a twenty-first century context. She acknowledged the difficulties for a woman of her class in representing the Irish-speaking community in her affectionate and personal biography of Maria Edgeworth:

An attempt to catch the spirit of the nation慕 of those whose memories are for the most part unfledged, has been a failure—at best that entire realms and regions of the subject have escaped observation. A whole world of forgotten beliefs, extinct traditions, lost ways of thought, obsolete observances, must be felt, known, understood and realised, before we can even begin to perceive existence as we are expected to see it. (Maria Edgeworth 88)

Significantly, Lawless takes issue, on the basis of nationality, with Edgeworth’s inclusion in the English Men of Letters series for which she wrote this biography. She asserts that Edgeworth is an Irishwoman, that her best books are her Irish ones, and that the influence they exert in Ireland is worth attention. The first two arguments could equally apply to her own work, while the absence of the third merits further study.

Lawless’s experimentations with language are alternately revealing and obscure. But her sense of irony, her innovations, and her humour have never been fully acknowledged, while it is precisely her ambivalence, and the unease with which the colonial and national aspects of her writing come together, causing disruption, instability, and eruptions of violence and supernatural manifestations, which make her fiction so intriguing.

Those interruptions, inconsistencies, and ambivalences are illustrative of a more general malaise in Ireland at the turn of the last century, one that is not confined to Lawless or even, in fact, to the Anglo-Irish. To fail to explore the ways, conscious or unconscious, in which she resisted assimilation to the nationalist politics of the Revival is to ignore a valuable and largely untapped field of study in literary history.

It seems appropriate to give the final argument to Lawless:

To live again in the memory of those who come after them may not—let us sincerely hope that it is not—essential to the happiness of those who are gone, but it is at least a tribute which the living ought to be called upon to pay, and to pay moreover ungrudgingly as they hope to have it paid to them in their turn. (Ireland 418)

**Works Cited**


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