

## 'Green World': The Mock-Pastoral of The Irish R.M.

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**Abstract.** As the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy's hold on the land of Ireland was being loosened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Somerville and Ross turned to the mode of comic pastoral. William Empson defines the literary mode of pastoral as writing 'about' the common people, but not 'by' or 'for' them. The popular short stories about the experiences of Major Sinclair Yeates, 'the Irish R.M.', depict for a modern readership his encounter with a pre-modern society in rural Ireland which is wild and uncouth compared to the metropolitan world, but at the same time more open, generous, and free from moral strictures. The stories conform to a number of pastoral conventions, including nostalgia for a rural 'golden age' in the recent past, and a thorough-going mixture of high and low elements (e.g., nobility and crudity, kindness and knavery, etc.).

**Key words.** Somerville, Ross, pastoral, Irish R.M. (Resident Magistrate), mock-pastoral, William Empson.

**Resumen.** Cuando a finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX, la ascendencia anglo-irlandesa sobre Irlanda se atemperó, Somerville y Ross optaron por lo cómico-pastoral. William Empson define lo pastoral como escribir 'sobre' la gente común y corriente, pero no 'por' ni 'para' ella. Los populares relatos breves sobre las experiencias del Mayor Sinclair Yeates, 'el Juez Titular irlandés', describen para el lector moderno su encuentro con un sociedad pre-moderna en la Irlanda rural que, comparada con el mundo de la ciudad, es salvaje y burda, al tiempo que abierta, generosa y libre de restricciones morales. Estas historias se ajustan a una serie de convenciones pastorales, que incluyen la nostalgia por una 'edad de oro' rural en el pasado reciente, y una profunda mezcla de nobles y mezquinos elementos (por ej. nobleza y ordinariéz, benevolencia y bellaquería, etc.).

**Palabras clave.** Somerville, Ross, pastoral, R.M. (Juez Titular) irlandés, parodia de pastoral, William Empson.

"That extraordinary book, which simply sets out coarsely and commercially to please" (O'Connor 1950, 180): thus Frank O'Connor refers to *The Irish R.M.*, and these stories by Edith Somerville and Martin Ross [Violet Martin] have indeed enjoyed more than one hundred years of popularity, remaining in print from 1899 up to the present day. While they probably would have objected to "coarsely", the cousins freely admitted that a principal motive for taking up their pens was to make money: a recurrent subject in their correspondence is the financial pressure of

keeping up the family estates. "That extraordinary book, which simply sets out coarsely and commercially to please" (O'Connor 1950, 180): thus Frank O'Connor refers to *The Irish R.M.*, and these stories by Edith Somerville and Martin Ross [Violet Martin] have indeed enjoyed more than one hundred years of popularity, remaining in print from 1899 up to the present day. While they probably would have objected to "coarsely", the cousins freely admitted that a principal motive for taking up their pens was to make money: a recurrent subject in their

correspondence is the financial pressure of keeping up the family estates. At least part of the reason for the public success of *The Irish R.M.* (with a far greater readership outside of Ireland than within it) is its skillful mixture of high and low elements, and how the authors exploit both the comical and poignant elements of a representative of modernity encountering a traditional society. In the stories (published as *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* [1899], *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* [1908], and *In Mr. Knox's Country* [1915]), we see through the eyes of a newcomer, Major Sinclair Yeates, who has obtained a position as Resident Magistrate (“R.M.”) in rural Ireland. As Somerville notes, Yeates has “left his Regiment and England ‘equipped’ (as we have elsewhere said) ‘with a feeling heart, and the belief that two and two inevitably make four, whereas in Ireland two and two are just as likely to make five, or three, and are still more likely to make nothing at all’” (Somerville and Ross 1962: 7). While he describes himself as “of Irish extraction” and as “an Irishman”, the exact nature of his Irish connection is left vague, and other than the fact that he is a graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford and of Sandhurst, we are told almost nothing of his background or experiences before his arrival in the neighborhood of Skebawn (Somerville and Ross 1962: “Great-Uncle McCarthy”, 9, 19). In a way, the most important thing about Yeates is that he is a stranger in this place: unfamiliar with its people and their ways and – though often bemused – rarely, if ever, without his fundamental openness and good humour. He has a predilection for organisation and routine, but is also tolerant toward the very un-British attitudes and conditions to be found in this remote corner of the United Kingdom. The comic possibilities of the stories arise from the clash of English and Irish, system and spontaneity, law and personality, metropolitan and rural, modern and traditional.

Raymond Williams observes that “the contrast of the country with the city and the court: here nature, there worldliness”, is characteristic of pastoral and neo-pastoral poetry (Williams 1983: 46). A yearning for bygone days as well as for a rustic life typifies the pastoral mode, which displays a nostalgia for the past, for some hypothetical state of love and peace which has somehow been lost. The dominating idea and theme of most pastoral is the search for the simple life away from the court and town, away from corruption, war,

strife, the love of gain, away from ‘getting and spending’. In a way it reveals a yearning for a lost innocence, for a pre-Fall paradisaical life in which man existed in harmony with nature. It is thus a form of primitivism and a potent longing for things past. (Cuddon 1992: 689)

With their celebration of a kind of Irish country life that was rapidly fading from the scene in the wake of the Land League and various land reform acts, these stories can be read as a kind of pastoral, the anachronism of which is seen in the very title: the post of Resident Magistrate was already in decline in southern Ireland when the stories first appeared – it survived longer in the North – and had disappeared entirely just a few years later.

William Empson defines pastoral as writing ‘about’ common people, but not ‘by’ or ‘for’ them. (Empson 1968: 6) What he says of the genre in his discussion of *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay might equally apply to *The Irish R.M.*: it “describes the lives of ‘simple’ low people to an audience of refined wealthy people”; within the work itself, the “clash and identification of the refined, the universal, and the low ... is the whole point of pastoral”. (Empson 1968: 195, 249) Empson cites Samuel Johnson to the effect that today, “genuine pastoral could ... only be reached through burlesque”, hence the term ‘mock-pastoral’. (Empson 1968: 224) In modern times, “The only way to use the heroic convention was to turn it onto the mock-hero, the rogue, the man half-justified by pastoral”. (Empson 1968: 200) As Jonathan Swift is said to have conceived of *The Beggar's Opera*, it is “the pastoral method applied to Newgate”, the London prison. (Empson 1968: 196) The refined and the low meet in the highwayman Macheath and other roguish figures who inhabit a demotic milieu, but are “aristocrats no doubt in their own world”. (Empson 1968: 198) Similarly, Flurry Knox, Yeates's landlord, like other rogues, is of indeterminate, even fluid, status:

[he] looked like a stableboy among gentlemen, a gentleman among stableboys. He belonged to a clan that cropped up in every grade of society in the county, from Sir Valentine Knox of Castle Knox down to the auctioneer Knox, who bore the attractive title of Larry the Liar. So far as I could judge, Florence McCarthy of that ilk occupied a shifting position about midway in the tribe. (Somerville and Ross 1962: “Great-Uncle McCarthy,” 11)

Another aspect of the mock-pastoral is role-reversal, sometimes manifested in the fool or rogue becoming a judge or other authority figure (as in Gogol's *The Inspector General*); in the "Irish R.M." stories, the sometime lawbreaker Flurry sits on the bench beside Yeates as magistrate. (See Empson 1968: 196)

In a letter, Somerville criticizes a reader for judging the local manners and mores too harshly: "[he] regards the characters from a mistakenly serious-drama point of view. The Book was *pour rire* ... no one before has ever taken Flurry seriously as a degenerate and immoral horse-thief ... I must say I think all that is very far-fetched on G.B. Shaw's part". (Rachbauer 1995: 196) The playwright, related to Somerville through marriage to her cousin, Charlotte Payne Townshend, had called the result of Edith's attempt to adapt some of the stories for the stage "abominably immoral at root", and referred to "the shameless goodfornothingness of the whole crew". (Rachbauer 1995: 194) Some of what Shaw objected to can be found in this episode, in which Flurry Knox inveigles Major Yeates into helping him steal a horse:

An infant in arms could scarcely have failed to discern the fishiness of the transaction, and I begged Mr. Knox not to put himself to this trouble on my account, as I had no doubt I could find a horse for my friend elsewhere. Mr. Knox assured me that it was no trouble at all, quite the contrary, and that, since his grandmother had given him the colt, he saw no reason why he should not take him when he wanted him ...

[M]y colleagues glided like spectres into the shadow of the shed, leaving me to meditate on my duties as Resident Magistrate, and on the questions that would be asked in the House by our local member when Slipper had given away the adventure in his cups. (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Trinket's Colt," 52-53)

In *The Irish R.M.*, though the character of the lovable Irish rogue plays on English prejudices about the lawlessness of the "wild Irish", the rascality of Flurry and his minion, Slipper, are to be delighted in as much as that of Falstaff and Pistol, and are hardly subject to the kind of morality Shaw seems to have had in mind. In her reply to Shaw, Somerville speaks of "the matter of your strictures upon my characters. We may be very immoral Irish people, but we are all very much attached to Flurry & think he would make an excellent husband!" (Rauchbauer 1995: 196) This is related to the

demand that mock-pastoral makes for the kind of "ironical generosity – a feeling that life is fresh among these people – [which] lies behind Gay's whole attitude to his characters". (Empson 1968: 224) Though Yeates is a representative of the Crown and of that far-off House of Commons, he often finds himself manipulated into subverting the standards he has ostensibly been sent to uphold, and comes to learn that being a magistrate in West Cork involves a good deal of winking at the letter of the law. In speaking of Sir Walter Scott, whom Somerville and Ross admired, Donald Davie notes his "refusal to point or labour a moral, his trust that whatever was lively to his imagination would have a wholesome moral bearing, just for that reason". (Davie 1961: 82) Similarly, Somerville and Ross celebrate whatever is peculiar or transgressive (and therefore un-English) in local society. More important, however, is what one story calls "the magnificent superiority of the Irish mind to the trammels of officialdom, and the inveterate supremacy in Ireland of the Personal Element". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Poisson d'Avril", 196) As the stories illustrate repeatedly, this "Personal Element" is a pre-modern code of behavior depending on mutual familiarity and trust (and sometimes mistrust) rather than on any mere economic or legal basis. For example, in the incident noted above, Flurry involves the Major in his theft under the rubric of friendship and of keeping one's word. On arriving in the district, Yeates must learn the local code of behaviour when he is suspected of ruining the hunting for the rest of the neighbourhood, as well as making a profit, by selling the foxes on his property to an agent in Cork: "That is to say, I was in a worse position than if I had stolen a horse, or murdered Mrs. Cadogan [the cook], or got drunk three times a week in Skebawn." He is innocent, in fact, but also "aware that it was rather a bad business to let a lie of this kind get a start": such an egregious breach of honour would effectively render him useless as a magistrate or anything else. (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Great-Uncle McCarthy", 18)

As Davie further points out, one of Scott's primary themes was the transition from a traditional to a modern society, as was also true for a writer both he and Somerville and Ross regarded as a predecessor, Maria Edgeworth: "Miss Edgeworth's pathetic hero, Sir Condy [in *Castle Rackrent*], is a historical as well as a national type; like the Baron Bradwardine in

Scott's novel [*Waverley*], he is the man who lives by the barbaric standard of honour in a commercial society where that standard can no longer apply." (Davie 1961: 66) Though a number of elements of modernity (automobiles, for example), assert themselves, *The Irish R.M.* essentially takes place in a world unfamiliar to most readers of *The Badminton Magazine* (where the stories originally appeared). Yeates not only comes to another country, he in a sense travels back in time: "the man who accepts a resident magistracy in the south-west of Ireland voluntarily retires into the pre-historic age". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Great-Uncle McCarthy", 11) This is one of several passages to assert that Ireland as a whole, and West Cork in particular, is – more or less agreeably – behind the times. The surviving elements of an earlier Ireland are sometimes yoked with a rejection of, or disregard for, modern law and convention: an outing takes the Major to "Hare Island ... a place where the Irish language was still spoken with a purity worthy of the Isles of Aran. Its folk-lore was an unworked mine, and it was moreover the home of one Shemus Ruadth, a singer and poet (and, I may add, a smuggler of tobacco) of high local renown". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Last Day of Shraft", 244) Yeates's growing latitude toward legal niceties brings to mind Somerville's description of her grandfather, Thomas Somerville,

who was accustomed to act in high-handed, yet conscientious accordance with his own sense of right and wrong, rather than to submit to the abstract rulings laid down by the Law, a distant authority that could not, he felt, know as much as he did of conditions in West Carbery. In his capacity as Magistrate, I have often seen him dispensing justice in the hall at Drishane, dealing out decisions with that variety of equity which is based on common-sense, and is therefore probably illegal. (Somerville and Somerville 1940: 1)

Such independence of social conventions (a mark of the pastoral, according to Empson) presupposes a way of life that, in the modern world, is more possible in remote – or fictional – places such as Skebawn and its environs. (See Empson 1968: 202)

The name 'Skebawn' is undoubtedly taken from Skibbereen, the nearest large place to the Somervilles' home in Castletownshend, and the house Yeates rents from Flurry is called Shreelane, an echo of Drishane, the Somerville

estate. But one of the actual County Cork place-names in the stories is Eyries, near Glengarriff: "There is a bland and peaceful suggestion about the word village that is wholly inapplicable to the village of Eyries, a collection of dismal, slated cabins, grouped round a public house, like a company of shabby little hens round a tawdry and bedraggled cock. The road that had conveyed us to this place of entertainment committed suicide on a weedy beach below, its last moments much embittered by chaotic heaps of timber, stones, and gravel". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Friend of Her Youth," 337) In contrast to such a miserable place, the authors appeal to pastoral associations with the "bland and peaceful" village of the English imagination, and the stories depict all towns and villages negatively. Major Yeates is forced to spend some hours between trains at a dreary place called Carrow Cross Junction (as both Somerville and Martin often had to wait at Limerick Junction when traveling between Cork and Galway): "The town was an unprepossessing affair of two or three streets, white-wash and thatch squeezed between green and gold pubs, like old country-women among fashionable daughters". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "When I first met Dr. Hickey," 30) More than once, the stories comment on the multiplicity of pubs in a given place: "...the long row of public-houses that formed, as far as I could judge, the town of Carrig ..." (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Poisson d'Avril," 197); or, "I showed him Mohona, our champion village, that boasts fifteen public-houses out of twenty buildings of sorts and a railway station". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Lisheen Races, Second-Hand," 70) In common with pastoral, cities and towns (even localities as small as these) are, for Somerville and Ross, repositories of all that is lamentably modern, sources of all that is "tawdry and bedraggled" in Irish life. And their malign influence can be seen creeping into the West, the stronghold of that which is genuinely Irish: "A thatched summer-house completed the spasmodic effort of the hotel to rise to smartness. The West of Ireland cannot be smart, nor should any right-minded person desire that it should be so". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "When I first met Dr. Hickey," 25) Yeates and the other hotel guests sit down after dinner in a summer-house illuminated by "a Chinese lantern, of a somewhat crumpled and rheumatic out-line;" they sit on "rustic" seats

with “aggressive knobs in unexpected places”. (Somerville and Ross 1962: “When I first met Dr. Hickey,” 25, 26) Any designation of something as ‘rustic’ implies a contrast with a cosmopolitan culture and is, therefore, not part of genuine rural life, but rather of a city-dweller’s notion of the country.

A characteristic of mock-pastoral is that it comments on the society of its audience, not merely that of the ‘simple’ characters it depicts. An element of *The Beggar’s Opera* likely to be missed by modern readers is its satire of the great world beyond Newgate, chiefly the government of Sir Robert Walpole (the name of one character, ‘Bob Booty’, is a direct reference to the prime minister). In *The Irish R.M.* there is also an element of satire, though the modern world outside Skebawn is made to appear more ridiculous than corrupt or sinister: e.g., Leigh Kelway, the gullible English cabinet secretary who is appalled at Slipper’s outlandish narrative in “Lisheen Races, Second-hand”, or the McRorys, a *nouveau riche* Dublin coal merchant and his family insinuating their way into local society. Another social aspect of mock-pastoral is, as Empson says, to act as “an art-form that not merely evades but breaks through” a nation’s class-system, “that makes the classes feel part of a larger unity or simply at home with each other. This may be done in odd ways, and as well by mockery as by admiration”. (Empson 1968: 199) That Yeates’s British stolidity and conformity are the subjects of humour along with Irish folly and lack of discipline is a point often overlooked by readers.

Somerville and Martin saw their homes, Castletownshend in Cork and Ross in Galway, as places where – at one time, at least – landlords and tenants knew and respected one another. As Violet Martin portrays the Ross estate in the days before the Famine, all of the tenants

were known to the Master [her father], and he was known and understood by them, as the old Galway people knew and understood; and the subdivisions of the land were permitted, and the arrears of rent were given time, or taken in boat-loads of turf, or worked off by day-labour, and eviction was unheard of. It was give and take, with the personal element always warm in it: as a system it was probably quite uneconomic, but the hand of affection held it together, and the tradition of centuries was at its back. (Somerville and Ross 1925: 4)

(Note the use of the phrase from *The Irish R.M.*, “the personal element”.) Reading this, one is reminded of the ideal relations among the rural classes set out in Ben Jonson’s country house poem, “To Penshurst”: “And though thy walls be of the country stone,/They’re reared with no man’s ruin, no man’s groan;/There’s none that dwell about them wish them down;/But all come in, the farmer, and the clown,/And no one empty-handed to salute/Thy lord and lady, though they have no suit.” (Maclean 1974: 22) Although the era of supposed amity may have passed (if it ever really existed), it is possible for it to continue in fiction. Somerville and Ross locate a point of unity or familiarity between classes in a surprising place: the world of the fox-hunt, a seemingly aristocratic activity. The dissolution of the Ascendancy system of land ownership in Ireland was proceeding apace by the eighteen-eighties, and the hunts were, in some places, being openly attacked or covertly sabotaged. It was not until the comparative tranquility of the eighteen-nineties that fox-hunting in West Carbery was reestablished by Edith Somerville’s brother Aylmer, and it is likely that its members associated the sport with the more settled days before the Land League agitations. (See Collis 1968: 90) Because of the hiatus, Somerville and Martin, like Major Yeates himself, did not take up hunting as a regular activity until they were in their thirties. It is easy to see a kind of ‘last hurrah’ of the Ascendancy in their riding to hounds through a country that was changing so fundamentally, and the cousins were aware of the significant connection between sports and politics in Ireland. In an 1894 letter to Somerville which underlines the peculiarity of the West Carbery district, Martin speaks of the revival of hunting in the area, and whimsically imagines the Master of Fox Hounds as a kind of Lord Lieutenant for recusant Unionists: “I really don’t see or hear of any other part of Ireland where the farmers are so friendly and the rebel paper will back up the gentlemen in improvements and in sport. I see that one day the Skibbereen district will be a fifth province in Ireland – refusing to receive Home Rule, and governed by Aylmer, under a special warrant from the Queen”.

(Lewis 1985: 127) It is clear from *The Irish R.M.* stories and other sources that the hunters were not exclusively from the ranks of the

gentry: there were a number of small farmers, professionals, and others. As Gifford Lewis notes, “Irish town dwellers, who have forgotten their roots, suppose hunting to have been the elitist sport of the detestable landlords only. A hunt could not operate without the support and appreciation of all classes in the countryside through which it operated. Farmers, even small ones, rode out with the West Carbery. We see them in photographs, wearing their working clothes, gaiters and bowlers, riding hairy horses .... Ireland has become urbanized and sophisticated in a very short time. The judgment that hunting was a sport for landlords only is rarely endorsed by country people”. (Lewis 1985: 127) In general, fox-hunting is seen as a leveler of social differences in *The Irish R.M.*, with the ordinary people of the district as enthusiastic spectators and helpful guides to those straggling behind the hunt. And in their own lives, the authors saw the hunt as bridging social classes: in 1921, with Republicans active in the area around Skibbereen, Somerville writes, “We have been assured that we will be unmolested. I was told that I was a nice lady always, with many allusions made to the hounds and the sport”. (Collis 1968: 204-05)

There are exceptions to this congeniality, however. Tensions between large landowners and tenants or small farmers, which often came to a head over hunting, receive only the most infrequent and oblique mention in the tales, though sometimes reference is made to “the poultry fund”, to which the hunters contributed to compensate farmers for any chickens or geese trampled by the horses. And this passage describing a hunt suggests social and political antagonisms:

Finally, a telegraph-post loomed through the fog upon us, and a gate discovered itself, through which we banged in a bunch onto the high road. A cottage faced us, with a couple of women and an old man standing outside it. To them we put the usual question, with the usual vehemence (always suggestive of the King’s Troopers in romance, hotly demanding information about a flying rebel). (Somerville and Ross 1962: “Put Down One and Carry Two”, 403)

Hunting can be seen as a distinctly non-bourgeois activity, an example of aristocratic prodigality running against the grain of the modern world. As George Moore, another

literary Irish landowner, observed, “Only sport has escaped the thralldom of money .... Lord Harris is not thought less of because he did not make a fortune out of cricket; nor is Lord de Grey reproached with not making pheasant shooting pay; nor was Lord Falmouth considered a fool because he ran his horses to please himself”. (Moore 1900: xix) Although the Castletownshend hunters had to resort to fund-raising events to keep the hounds fed, there is still something of this cavalier spirit in the stories’ concentration on the chase (as we find the hunt serving as a symbol of aristocratic values in some of Yeats’s poems, e.g., “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”).

Perhaps the most characteristic element of mock-pastoral is to be found in its mixing of high and low, as when (to return to *The Beggar’s Opera*) Macheath quotes Shakespeare, or when the thieves and whores speak with “overpoliteness” and “comic primness” (like Damon Runyon’s ‘guys and dolls’). (See Empson 1968: 232) In the novels of Somerville and Ross, the dilapidation of one of the ‘big houses’ symbolizes the passing of the gentry from the scene, whereas in the stories the juxtaposition of high and low, of the cultivated and the tatterdemalion, is used to comic effect, as in the portrait of Flurry’s grandmother, Mrs. Knox, who looks like a “rag bag held together with diamond brooches” (Somerville and Ross 1962: “The Finger of Mrs. Knox”, 320):

I may summarize her attire by saying that she looked as if she had robbed a scarecrow; ... the skinny hand that she extended to me had the grubby tan that bespoke the professional gardener, and was decorated with a magnificent diamond ring ....

Dinner was as incongruous as everything else. Detestable soup in a splendid old silver tureen ...; a perfect salmon, perfectly cooked, on a chipped kitchen dish; such cut glass as is not easy to find nowadays; sherry that, as Flurry subsequently remarked, would burn the shell off an egg; and a bottle of port, draped in immemorial cobwebs, wan with age, and probably priceless. (Somerville and Ross 1962: “Trinket’s Colt,” 50, 51)

The house of another branch of the Knox family is also characterized by this method:

“[M]y wife and Mrs. Flurry Knox swiftly and stealthily circumnavigated the room, and appraised all its contents, from a priceless

Battersea basket filled with dusty bulbs to a Chippendale card-table with a sewing-machine clamped on to it ..." (Somerville and Ross 1962: "A Horse! A Horse!" 258)

The stories make occasional references to the eroding position of the Anglo-Irish landowners, and Mrs. Knox figures in another story in which such pressures make themselves felt. The Wyndham Act of 1903 encouraged landlords to sell their land and tenants to buy it at favourable rates. But instead of empowering the former tenants, this policy succeeded (in the authors' view) in destroying an 'organic' society and replacing it with incipient rural capitalism. Goggin, an unscrupulous publican, has bought land that once belonged to Mrs. Knox, and financed a new pub by cutting down an ancient wood:

The hillsides were set thick with tree stumps, like the crowded headstones of a cemetery ... Here and there a slender, orphaned ash sapling, spared because despised, stood among the havoc, and showed with its handful of yellow leaves what the autumn colours might once have been here. A starkly new, cemented public-house, with 'J. Goggin' on the name board, stood at the fork of the roads. Doubtless into it had flowed the blood-money of the wood; it represented the alternative offered to the community by Mr. Goggin. (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Finger of Mrs. Knox", 324)

The gentry are portrayed as the erstwhile preservers of the integrity of the land which is now threatened by the new owners:

'Well, Goggin,' said Mrs. Knox, waving towards the hillside a tiny hand in a mouldy old black kid glove, 'you've done a great work here! You've destroyed in six months what it took the Colonel and the Lord Almighty eighty years to make. That's something to be proud of!' (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Finger of Mrs. Knox", 325)

Despite the fact that men like him, the sons of landless peasants, are gaining control of the land, Goggin is "entirely overweighted ... by Mrs. Knox's traditional prestige [and] by [Major Yeates's] official position", and the old order is still able to carry the day as Mrs. Knox extricates her former tenant, Casey, who is being squeezed by Goggin. (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Finger of Mrs. Knox", 325)

This is the only instance in these stories of the Anglo-Irish giving up their land, but there are other signs that their garrison is besieged.

At dinner one evening the company discusses a neighbor who has emigrated to South Africa, and Yeates's friend Miss Bobbie Bennett remarks, "I suppose we'll all be going there soon ... Uncle says if Home Rule comes there won't be a fox or a Protestant left in Ireland in ten years' time; and he said, what's more, that if *he* had to choose it mightn't be the Protestants he'd keep!" ("The Bosom of the McRorys," 390) A major difference between the novels of Somerville and Ross and the stories is that in the latter the gentry are not really displaced, as they are, for example, in *Mount Music* and *The Big House of Inver*. While the landowners in these books are not able to hold what their ancestors appropriated, such is not the case with Mrs. Knox, at least in one of the early stories:

'There's a nice stretch of demesne for you,' remarked Flurry, pointing downwards with the whip, 'and one little old woman holding it all in the heel of her fist. Well able to hold it she is, too, and always was, and she'll live twenty years yet, if it's only to spite the whole lot of us, and when all's said and done goodness knows how she'll leave it!'" (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Trinket's Colt," 49-50)

Here is a longing for the semi-feudal Ireland which was already disappearing during the authors' childhoods. As Raymond Williams observes, a rural 'golden age' is often fixed in the recent past, either in the author's childhood or a generation or so before. (See Williams 1983: 9-12.) Davie points out analogous desires in the works of Charles Lever: "The world he tried to live in was the vanished world of Ireland before the Union ... a world he knew only at second hand, coloured by the wistful anecdotes of older men"; and in those of Dickens, "who in his early works yearned back similarly towards the recent past, imposing on the Victorian world of the railway train a similarly idealized world, the supposedly more robust and heartily simple England of the stagecoach". (Davie 1961: 87)

The question of who will inherit the land after the Anglo-Irish does not receive the sort of extensive treatment it does in the novels of Somerville and Ross, but it is present all the same. From the authors' viewpoint, the country's future does not look bright with the kind of men who are coming to positions of influence in the district, a state of affairs for which London bears some responsibility:

I remembered [Moriarty] extremely well as one of those representatives of the people with whom a paternal Government had leavened the effete ranks of the Irish magistracy.

'Well,' resumed Flurry, 'that license was as good as a five-pound note in his pocket .... [H]e told me one day when he was half screwed that his Commission of the Peace was worth a hundred and fifty a year to him in turkeys and whisky, and he was telling the truth for once.' (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Occasional Licenses," 148)

Elsewhere, an English officer "discoursed of the accessories that would be necessary for the repair of my eaveshoots, with the large-mindedness of the Government official who has his own spurs and another man's horse". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Harrington's," 348)

The authors, who aggressively insisted on their Irishness, have a complicated relationship with their largely English audience. Yeates's friend, the solicitor M'Cabe, observes, "Ah, these English ... they'd believe anything so long as it wasn't the truth ... [T]elling such as them the truth is wasting what isn't plenty!" (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Shooting of Shinroe", 425) The remoteness of English perceptions of Ireland can be seen in the romanticism of Yeates's wife, Philippa:

She regarded Shreelane and its floundering, foundering *ménage* of incapables in the light of a gigantic picnic in a foreign land; she held long conversations daily with Mrs. Cadogan, in order, as she informed me, to acquire the language; without any ulterior domestic intention she engaged kitchen-maids because of the beauty of their eyes, and housemaids because they had such delightfully picturesque old mothers. (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Philippa's Fox-hunt," 82)

This foreign fascination with the local people and their culture can be condescending, as in this scene in which Philippa surveys the crowd at a horse race (note that the pastoral tradition is invoked explicitly):

We wandered deviously among groups of country people ... Whether we barged into them, or they into us, was a matter of as complete indifference to them as it would have been to a drove of their own bony cattle. 'These are the sort of people I love,' said Philippa, her eyes ranging over the tented field and its throngs ... 'Real Primitives, like a chorus in *Acis and Galatea!*'" (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Maroan Pony", 357)

Having mentioned *The Beggar's Opera*, we should perhaps note that John Gay wrote the libretto of George Frideric Handel's 1720 oratorio, which has been classified as a mock-pastoral. (See Ousby 1992: 387; and Dugaw 2001: 146)

The desire for timelessness can be seen as an attribute of pastoral and despite the impulse to arrest time, it does indeed pass in the "Irish R.M." stories (unlike those of P.G. Wodehouse, for example). Events in the world outside are at least obliquely acknowledged: Major Yeates, who becomes engaged to Philippa in the first story, marries her "but little under five years" later; they have two boys (though we are told little more about them than the bare fact of their existence); as the stories progress, Yeates begins to comment on his advance into middle age; Flurry Knox goes off to the Boer War, and returns; Home Rule and nationalism are mentioned; and, in one of the last stories, "The Comte de Pralines," the World War is brought up (though only to establish that the action of the story takes place before the conflict). But in general the movement of time is cyclical rather than linear. The emphasis on place in the writings of Somerville and Ross is, to some extent, part of a desire for a kind of permanence and stability, and this can be essayed by attending to the rhythms of a given place over an extended period of time, as Skebawn and its environs are described in each of the seasons over a number of years. The cyclical movement found in nature is thus set over against the changes of linear time effected in history. In these stories, a place, or the attachment to a particular locale, can act as a counter to the devastations of time.

The stories as a whole can be read as the chronicle of Yeates and his wife encountering a particular part of Ireland and gradually coming to love it: a process of acclimatization or, as Julian Moynahan puts it, deanglicization, as the strangers adjust to a life in which feelings of "ironical generosity" toward their neighbours take precedence over the efficiency and orderliness to which a British army officer and his wife might be accustomed. (Moynahan 1995: 192) And this comes to pass not through knowing the people alone: it is also from knowledge of the land, and from appreciation of the countryside, usually on horseback, that one comes to feel at home in this place. In the midst of the chase, the Major marvels at "Flurry Knox, going as a man goes who knows his country, who knows his horse, and whose

heart is wholly and absolutely in the right place". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "Philippa's Fox-hunt," 88) Flurry's heart is in the right place because he knows his country and his horse, and familiarity with both goes hand-in-hand: "Since Philippa had taken up residence in Ireland she had discovered a taste for horses that was not to be extinguished". (Somerville and Ross 1962: "A Misdeal," 96) Those who have lived on the land for generations, whether gentry or peasant, have a native love of the land, while others like Yeates and Philippa must acquire and cultivate it: in either case, an experience not on offer in cities or suburbs, in the "great world" beyond Skebawn. "In that part of Ireland in which my lot is cast signposts do not exist. The residents, very reasonably,

consider them to be superfluous, even ridiculous, in view of the fact that everyone knows the way, and as for strangers, 'haven't they tongues in their heads as well as another?' It all tends to conversation and an increased knowledge of human nature." (Somerville and Ross 1962: "The Friend of Her Youth," 336) Finding one's way depends on "the personal element" mentioned above, on a real and possibly memorable human encounter, rather than on anything so dull and systematised as a signpost. Empson terms mock-pastoral "the Cult of Independence" (Empson 1968: 193), and the vivid characters of these stories offer a sharp contrast to what Somerville and Ross regarded as the impersonality, conformity, and blandness of modern life.

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