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Forging a Tradition: Emily Lawless and the Irish Literary Canon

by JAMES M. CAHALAN

EMILY LAWLESS (1845–1913) was a pioneer among Irish women writers. The work of twentieth-century writers such as Kate O’Brien and Jennifer Johnston would be unimaginable if Lawless had not come before. Yet during her time Lawless was the victim of critical neglect and scorn. Only recently has there been seen a flickering of interest in her work, and a feminist study of her work has never before appeared. An important part of opening up the Irish literary canon is recognition of the valuable contributions of a writer such as Lawless, especially in her novel *Grania* (1892), a study of a strong, victimized peasant woman of the Aran Islands. In this essay I shall outline the cultural and critical difficulties that Lawless faced, survey the role of gender (as often linked to a strong interest in the natural world) in several of her works, advance a close reading of *Grania*, and conclude with some thoughts about Lawless’ place in Irish literary tradition.

Lawless struggled to establish a voice and a name as an Irish fiction writer during one of the most difficult periods for any Irish writer—the late nineteenth century. This period came after the Great Hunger (1845–51), which was nearly as devastating for Irish culture as it was for the Irish people; it was before the rise to fame of W. B. Yeats and his Irish Renaissance, and squarely in the midst of the Victorian era, when the novels of Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and other celebrated English writers cast the efforts of Irish fiction writers into deep, debilitating shadows. As a writer of fiction, other prose, and poetry, Lawless operated at a disadvantage not only as a Victorian Irishwoman but also as a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy who was neither sought out nor accepted by Yeats or the other members of the (mostly Ascendancy) Irish Literary Revival movement. Yeats held up the Irish peasant William Carleton as his romanticized model of what an Irish fiction writer should be, and his pronouncements were tremendously influential. It was therefore devastating to Lawless’ reputation when Yeats declared in 1895 that she was “in imperfect sympathy with the Celtic nature” (qtd. in Brewer 121), even though as a matter of fact her best fiction portrayed the Irish peasantry much more realistically than Yeats was ever able to do. Yeats did include Lawless’ historical novels *With Essex in Ireland* (1890) and *Maelcho* (1894) in his listing of the “Best Irish Books”; however, his selection of these books suggests that his treatment and that of other early critics of Lawless was similar to their abuse of her fellow Irish Victorian, Charles Lever.

“They got hold of the wrong Lever” (104), A. Norman Jeffares concludes in view of the stereotyping of Lever as narrowly Anglo-Irish despite the wide range of his work. They also got hold of the wrong Lawless, regarding her as a “mere historian” rather than a fiction writer of any importance. As far as we can tell, Yeats ignored *Grania*, the sketches in *Traits and Confidences* (1897), and most of her other prose, focusing only on her historical novels and her history, *The Story of Ireland* (1887).

Lawless was condescended to much as were the great turn-of-the-century fiction-writing duo, Somerville and Ross (the cousins Edith Somerville and Violet Martin), who, like Lawless, stood aloof from the Literary Revival movement and instead modelled themselves on precursors such as Maria Edgeworth. Very much enamored of Yeats’s cultural and literary views as well as his writing, Ernest Boyd subtitled his chapter on prose fiction in his influential book *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance* (1922) “The Weak Point of the Revival,” grudgingly surveying Lawless’ work but finding it of negligible significance. As Janet Madden-Simpson stresses, too often “Ireland is thought of as a country with an impressive literary tradition from which come great male artists” (1). Madden-Simpson argues that Daniel Corkery’s well-known phrase describing the forgotten Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century, “the hidden Ireland,” could just as well be applied to Irish women writers (4). This is largely true even of John Wilson Foster’s otherwise innovative recent study of Lawless’ period, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (1987), which seeks to overcome Boyd’s dismissal of the supposed “Weak Point of the Revival” and open up the canon well beyond Yeats and Synge. Highlighted in its table of contents are twenty-two male fiction writers, including at least eight lesser known talents, but Foster treats in detail only two women—the already well-known Lady Gregory along with Eleanor Hull as the only noncanonical woman. Foster mentions Lawless only in passing, seeming to accept Synge’s dismissal of her work (104).

In her time Emily Lawless was well enough known that, as he prepared his arguments in favor of Irish Home Rule, the British prime minister William Gladstone praised her novel *Hurrish* (1886), the story of a peasant family feud set amidst the Land League struggles in County Clare. Gladstone stated that Lawless had presented to her readers “not as an abstract proposition, but as a living reality, the estrangement of the people of Ireland from the law.” Yet Irish nationalists were much less hospitable. *The Nation* accused her of grossly exaggerating the violence of peasants, on whom she looked down from “the pinnacle of her three-generation nobility,” and called *Hurrish* “slandorous and lying from cover to cover.” Even though Lawless had painted her peasant hero Hurrish O’Brien and his sister-in-law Ally as saintly, the nationalist reviewers attacked her more negative characterizations of Hurrish’s bloodthirsty mother and his foolish, bigoted neighbors, the Bradys—thereby condemning the same kind of vivid, realistic portrayals of peasant life in Lawless that they had earlier praised in the peasant writer Carleton (Brewer 122–23).

Lawless’ reputation has been a long time recovering or even emerging from such early dismissals and attacks. The reprinting of several of her books at the

end of the 1970s in the nineteenth-century Irish fiction series edited by Robert Lee Wolff and published by Garland, together with a few dissertations and useful and appreciative articles in the 1980s by Betty Webb Brewer and Elizabeth Grubgeld, suggest that a slight revival of interest in Lawless may be underway. Still applicable today is Madden-Simpson's point that at the turn of the century, "The urgent problem of national identity at this crucial period of Irish history swamped the 'woman question' and sapped its vitality" (12). In the best available survey of her career, Brewer's main concern is to show that Lawless made a valuable contribution to Irish literary nationalism, and Grubgeld's article on *Grania* focuses on Lawless' reputedly bleak Victorian treatment of the land. Lawless' lifelong interest in the geology and plant life of County Clare (where she spent summers from childhood on), the Aran Islands, and the west of Ireland in general has been rightly noted by the few commentators on her work. *Grania* is a novel that closely links the barren setting of the island of Inis Meáin (or Inishmaan) with the tragic victimization of its female protagonist. The connection between the novel's setting and its clear feminism, however, seems to have escaped critics. It is surprising that there has been no previous feminist study of Lawless' work, especially given that *Grania* was the most clearly feminist nineteenth-century Irish novel since those of Sydney Owenson at the beginning of the century, and given that Lawless published a biography of Maria Edgeworth (1904) in which she attacked her oppression at the hands of her patriarchal father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth.¹ In *Anglo-Irish Literature: A Review of Research* (1976), James Kilroy noted the irony that this study of one Irish novelist by another was published in an "English Men of Letters" series—completely missing or ignoring the equal if not greater irony that the two women were thereby classified as "*Men of Letters*."

II

HER FATHER having died when she fourteen, Lawless was raised by her mother (to whom she was very close) along with her eight siblings. The fact that her father and two of her sisters committed suicide suggests perhaps that a partly genetic melancholy was yet another obstacle that Lawless had to overcome.² Wolff notes that she "began to write in the early 1880s under friendly prompting from the successful and enormously prolific Scottish novelist, Mrs. Oliphant" (vi). Raised by her mother, prompted by Oliphant to write, and inspired throughout her career by the example of Edgeworth, Lawless clearly experi-

1. I have found only two glimmers of feminism in previous criticism on Lawless. One is Brewer's mention that the key to *Grania* is "the complex psychology of its heroine. . . . Though rooted in nature, the context in which *Grania* struggles to understand herself—particularly herself as a woman—is relational" (124). The other is Grubgeld's remark in her article on Lawless' poetry that "another reason for her obscurity may lie in the unfortunate disregard for women's writing which has characterized much study of Irish literature" (35). Curiously, in her article on *Grania* Grubgeld does not consider at all the feminist nature of *Grania*'s characterization or her particular plight as a victimized woman.

2. Grubgeld takes the fact that Lawless contended in her later years with her mother's unexpected death in 1895 as well as her own worsening health, resultant exile to England, and heroin addiction as crucial to her experience, arguing that disillusionment and the contrast between happy childhood and unhappy maturity are central themes in her work.

enced female tradition and mentorship as central, shaping influences. A chronological survey of her works indicates that she became more attentive to gender as she went along. It also suggests that her abiding interest in the natural world—the chief aspect of her work, along with her pursuit of Irish history, which has been critically noted previously—is not separate or divergent from her attention to gender but rather closely intertwined with it. We can therefore identify aspects of her work that look ahead to ecofeminism, which opposes patriarchal domination of the natural world as well as male oppression of women.³

From the beginning of her career Lawless insisted that the natural world should be understood on its own terms, scientifically, rather than romantically misperceived from the outside. As she wrote in her early essay on the west of Ireland, “Iar-Connaught: A Sketch” (1882), “all acquaintanceship with scenery may be said to come under one or other of two heads: to be either extrinsic or intrinsic—the point of view . . . of the tourist and that of the native” (319). Clearly she felt herself to be a native rather than a tourist. Lawless’ story in *Traits and Confidences* entitled “An Entomological Adventure” is an undoubtedly autobiographical account of a young girl’s bug-hunt in the middle of the night, capturing simultaneously the sensitivity and imagination of girlhood and her own early desire to be a naturalist: “The very sonorousness of the name was worth anything; a name which you secretly rolled round and round in your mouth, and applied to yourself as you walked about the house. What dignity, what majesty lay in its syllables—En-to-mo-lo-gist! Could anything be more entrancing?” (11–12). In an Irish literary canon much celebrated for stories of boyhood—by Carleton, Joyce, Frank O’Connor, and others—but not much known for stories of girlhood, this one is interesting and valuable.

Lawless’ most in-depth scrutiny of nature from her particularly female perspective comes in *A Garden Diary* (1901). Exiled for health reasons to Surrey in England by this time of her life, “a tall, almost angular” woman in an “almost, shapeless gardening hat” (qtd. in Wolff xiv), Lawless found solace in her garden. Concerning this work she remarked that “a good deal of it . . . is an attempt to lift the small natural history problem into a region where all Nature and Life (including our own) become, as it were, one” (qtd. in Brewer 127)—thus joining her interest in the natural world with her own inner life. She sought to memorialize the rocky Burren region of her beloved County Clare in her English garden “by three or four tiers of stones . . . pretend[ing] that fragments of lime rubbish are slabs of limestone” (126). Interweaving descriptions of her garden and her own private thoughts, in *A Garden Diary* Lawless attacks the patriarchal notion that the natural world can be owned:

How slight an excrescence this whole business that we call ownership really is; how strong, how deeply rooted the state of things which it has momentarily superseded. Let the so-called owner relax his self-assertiveness for ever so short a period. . . . Let him saunter along in the woods after dusk.

3. I am thankful to Lea Masiello for encouraging me to consider this link in Lawless’ work and for reading early drafts of this essay. This aspect of my discussion is also indebted to Patrick Murphy and his interest in ecofeminist literary criticism. As Murphy argues in his introduction to the 1988 special issue of *Studies in the Humanities* on “Feminism, Ecology and the Future of the Humanities” (and elsewhere), feminist and ecological perspectives have in the past been kept separate, especially in literary criticism, but in fact have much to offer each other.

... Let him . . . merely lean out of his window after dusk, amid the thickening shadows, and he must be of a remarkably unimpressible turn of mind if the sense of his own shadowiness, his own inherent transitoriness, is not the clearest, strongest, and most convincing of all his sensations. (42, 43)

The fact that Lawless' earliest novels seem comparatively conventional and conservative in their portraits of women suggests that she came only slowly to the feminist insights of *Grania* and that she did so partly by attending to the natural world, as reflected in some of her other works. In *A Chelsea Householder* (1882) and *A Millionaire's Cousin* (1885), Lawless seems out of her depth in the milieu of polite English society. Both are conventional romances with the obligatory happy ending of the genteel marriage. It was a radical departure for Lawless to write about peasant life in County Clare in *Hurrish* (1886). Yet her stereotyped, mostly male, characters in that novel are quite conventional. The women in *Hurrish* linger mostly at the margins of the novel. One thought put into the mind of the villainous Maurice Brady about his fiancée, however, clearly foreshadows *Grania*: "That *Ally* should also have espoused that side of the quarrel had not even occurred to him. She was *his* property, not *Hurrish's*; what he did, she must think right; what he thought, she must think also; were they not all but man and wife?" (II:133). The story "Namesakes" in *Plain Frances Mowbray, and Other Tales* (1889) looks ahead even more clearly to *Grania*. It concerns the visit of a middle-class Irishman raised in England, Maurice O'Sullivan, to his family home in County Kerry, where he meets a beautiful young mother who has been abandoned by her husband. Maurice is struck not only by the fact that she is also named O'Sullivan but by the desperate nature of her plight. He interviews another peasant about the young woman's missing husband:

"And where do you suppose he is now?"

"The Lard knows! Traped off t' England for the harvestin', most loike."

"Gone to England! Leaving her here all alone?"

"Trath, yes, sor; 'tis little they think of that." (305)

The young woman disappears before Maurice can speak to her a second time. Her plight is viewed from the outside, whereas in *Grania* Lawless sought to expose the plight of a peasant woman from her own point of view.

III

Grania—which was ignored by Yeats, Gladstone, and other well-known early commentators in favor of *Hurrish*, the historical novels, and other male-centered works—is now regarded by Brewer and other recent commentators as Lawless' best novel.⁴ One of its strengths is that Lawless consciously abandoned in it the heavy-handed Hiberno-English dialogue typical of nineteenth-century Irish fiction and exemplified in the passage above from "Namesakes." She explained this decision in the novel's opening note of dedication "To M. C.," "who helped

4. Swinburne did praise *Grania* as "unique in pathos, humor . . . and truthfulness" (qtd. in Brewer 125).

out its meagre scraps of Gaelic”: The brogue “might surely be dispensed with, as we both agreed, in a case where no single actor of the tiny stage is supposed to utter a word of English” (n.p.). Since Inis Meáin was (and still is) Irish-speaking, there was no point in trying to write in any of the varieties of English as spoken in rural Ireland. Douglas Hyde and John Synge wrote in an Irish English that sought to be a direct translation from the Irish language; since she did not know Irish, in *Grania* Lawless wrote mostly in standard English. In addition to allowing Lawless to avoid an awkward and inaccurate Hiberno-English, it appears that her use of standard English also helped her to enter sympathetically the mind of her female protagonist. Rather than get caught up in the trappings of Hiberno-English speech as in “Namesakes,” in which the victimized peasant woman and indeed peasant life in general seem much more remote, Lawless is able to imagine Grania’s reactions to her experiences through the medium of her own standard English language.

Grania’s experiences are the difficult ones of a woman living on the small, bleak, rocky, poor island of Inis Meáin, the most “primitive” of the three Aran Islands. Crisscrossed everywhere by makeshift but centuries-old stone walls that appear to have been constructed mostly to get the rocks off the ground, Inis Meáin has very little arable land; even today the islanders depend for their existence primarily on fishing and public welfare (“the dole”). Only about three hundred people live there year-round, and most children are forced to emigrate to Dublin, England, or America. Marriage opportunities are obviously rare and often unromantic. During the time described by Lawless, the harsh matrimonial practices of rural Ireland examined by the anthropologist Conrad Arensberg certainly applied on Inis Meáin. Arensberg described the Irish countryman’s willingness to send a wife who did not have children back to her parents and allow his brother to marry and live on the family farm (in exchange for a “large fortune”) so that children could be produced and “the identity of land and family . . . preserved for another generation” (91). As Lawless herself stresses in *Grania*, love is “seldom talked of there, and apparently in consequence seldom felt. Marriage being largely matters of barter. . . . The topic loses that predominance which it possesses in nearly every other community in the world” (78). Even today under the best of circumstances, a woman’s life on Inis Meáin is not an easy one, as I myself witnessed during two summers on the island—a romantic place for the visitor but a difficult one for its proud, hard-working natives. The middle-aged “woman of the house” (or *bean an tí*) where I first stayed looked twenty years older than she actually was; she worked hard from dawn to bedtime, cooking and cleaning with the aid of no electricity until a few years ago and with only very spartan supplies available at the shop, and those shipped intermittently from the “mainland.” Hard rural housework was no one’s province in her large family but her own, except for some summer help from her daughters who lived and worked in Dublin for most of the year.

As Peggy O’Dowd, the noted storyteller and oldest inhabitant of the island, tells her friends about Grania’s planned marriage, “ ’Tis eight days in the week she’ll find herself working for all her money if she means to keep a roof over her

head and Murdough Blake under it. . . . Mark my words, women, so she will, so she will!" (93–94). Grania's sister similarly warns her, "Men is a terrible trouble, Grania, first and last. What with the drink and the fighting and one thing and another, a woman's life is no better than an old garron's down by the sea shore once she's got one of them over her driving her the way he chooses" (133). Grania later observes an old, broken-down *bean an tí* on fair day outside Galway, in one of the central epiphanies in the novel:

Staring at her in the dusk of that miserable hearth Grania seemed to see herself a dozen years later; broken down in spirit; broken down in health; grown prematurely old; her capacity for work diminished; with a brood of squalid, ill-fed children clamouring for what she had not to give them; with no help; with Honor long dead; without a soul left who had known her and cared for her when she was young; with shame and a workhouse on the mainland—deepest of all degradation to an islander—coming hourly nearer and nearer. (243)

Lawless devotes close attention to Grania's consciousness and to physical descriptions of the island in a novel whose plot is very simple and spare. As a young girl, Grania O'Malley is happy to be taken fishing on her father's boat and looks up to Murdough Blake as both a big-brother figure and future husband; following her mother's early death, and after her father becomes a drunkard and then dies himself, she is raised by her half-sister Honor. Grania grows into a strong young woman, then has to take care of Honor who gets consumption, and the conclusion of the novel comes when she tries to go by boat in a storm to the neighboring big island of Inis Mór for a priest for the dying Honor and dies in the attempt. Murdough has refused to go with her. The novel is dominated by the character of Grania and the setting of the bleak island on which she lives, with the two directly linked: "This tall, red-petticoated, fiercely handsome girl was decidedly a very isolated and rather craggy and unapproachable sort of island" (64). The full title of the novel is *Grania (The Story of an Island)*, underscoring the identification of protagonist with place. As closely identified as Grania is with the island, it seems symbolically appropriate that her death comes when she tries to leave the island, perhaps suggesting that in doing so she loses her self. A cultural reading of the novel, however, is more compelling than a symbolic one, for Grania's destruction finally seems inevitable given the economic, patriarchal, and physical forces against which she must struggle throughout the book.

"To her Inishmaan was much more than home," Lawless tells us, "much more than a place she lived in, it was practically the world. . . . It was not merely her own little holding and cabin, but every inch of it that was in this peculiar sense hers. It belonged to her as the rock on which it has been born belongs to the young seamew. She had grown to it, and it had grown to her" (63). The island and the ocean can be sunny and life-giving when young Grania goes fishing with her father or experiences early happiness with Murdough, but later "the rain came down in sheets, and in sheets it swept over the surface" (171), and Grania declares to her sister, "God help us! What are we brought into it for at all, at all, I sometimes wonder, if there's to be nothing for us but trouble and trouble and trouble? 'Tis bad enough for the men, but, it's worse a hundred times for the women!" (179). The pious Honor's answer is that Inis Meáin is merely a testing

ground for heaven: "What were any of us, and women specially, sent into the world for, except to save our souls and learn to bear what's given to us to bear? . . . To bear and bear, that's all she's got to do, so she has, till God sends her rest—nothing else" (179–80).

As developed through such exchanges, Grania's relationship with her sister is the most important one in the novel. Honor's patience and piety contrast with Grania's more worldly passions. Grania loves Honor but does disagree with her stoic attitude: "It is all very well for you, Honor, a saint born, wanting nothing and caring for nothing, only just the bit to keep you alive and the spot to pray on. But all women are not made like that" (180). Throughout her works Lawless herself appears torn between religious belief and naturalistic despair, and in this novel she seems to play out her ambivalence through Grania and Honor. On the one hand Grania tells Honor, "The priests may tell all they will of heaven, but what is it to me? just *gosther!*" [empty talk] (181). On the other hand, Lawless ends the novel by suggesting that after the sisters' deaths, "upon that threshold, perhaps—Who knows?—Who can tell?—they met" (355). It is tempting to hypothesize to what extent Lawless injected her feelings about her own dead sisters (not to mention her own disastrous and early departed father), and to wonder about her acquaintance with Aran women based not only on this novel but also on the several poems addressed to Honor and to an "old friend" in her volume *With the Wild Geese* (1902). Unfortunately, however, there is no biography of Lawless available to support or clarify these connections.

What remains clear is that the woman-to-woman relationship remains more important and more rewarding to Grania than the marriage to Murdough that she had desired. She desires love, but as for Murdough,

He wanted to marry her it is true, but why? because she was strong, because she owned the farm, because she owned [the cow] Moonyeen, and the pigs, and the little bit of money; because she could keep him in idleness: could keep him, above all, in drink; because he could get more out of her perhaps than he could out of another! (242)

Murdough never grows beyond his original patronizing acquaintance with her as a little girl and is unable to deal with Grania as a mature, strong woman:

That he had liked her better in the old days when she was still the little Grania of the hooker, before she had shot up into this rather formidable woman she had so suddenly become, there is no denying. The little Grania had admired him without criticism; the little Grania had no sombre moods; the little Grania never gazed at him with those big, menacing eyes—eyes such as a lioness might turn upon someone whom she loves, but who displeases her—the little Grania was natural, was comprehensible, was just like any other little *girsha* in the place, not at all like this new Grania, who was quite out of his range and ken; an unaccountable product, one that made him feel vaguely uneasy; who seemed to belong to a region in which he had never travelled; who was "queer," in short; the last word summing up concisely the worst and most damning thing that could be said of anyone in Inishmaan. (289)

It is not surprising that eventually Grania finds "death on her own terms preferable to becoming his wife" (Brewer 125).

The pious Honor may be a sentimentalized, conventional portrait of a woman,

but Grania is unconventional both in her strength and in her growing unrest, which is perceived as “madness.” Early on we are told that “for sheer muscular strength and endurance she had hardly her match amongst the young men of the three islands” (68). Pitted against the difficulties of her life, however, strength and endurance are not enough, and the result is the depression found by Nancy Scheper-Hughes among women in rural Ireland and described (in her interesting if controversial book *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland*) as deepening particularly in the winter months (56). Grania asks herself, “Could she really be going crazy? . . . It seemed to be literally like some disease that had got into her bones—this strange unrest, this disturbance—a disease, too, of which she had never heard; which nobody else so far as she knew had ever had; a disease which had no name, and therefore was the more mysterious and horrible” (254).

Grania’s “madness” is to try to be strong and independent in the face of a desolate environment and a patriarchal culture. The hopelessness of life on the island, not only for Grania but for others, is suggested from the beginning of the novel: For the islanders “their dreams . . . clung limpet-fashion, to these naked rocks, these melancholy dots of land set in the midst of an inhospitable sea, which Nature does not seem to have constructed with an eye to the convenience of so much as a goat” (29). As Lawless wrote to her friend in the dedication, “They are melancholy places, these Aran Islands of ours, as you and I know well, and the following pages have caught their full share . . . of that gloom” (n.p.). The hopelessness of life on the island, particularly for a woman such as Grania, makes her death in a seastorm seem naturalistic in both climatic and cultural terms. She is presented as a strong woman vitally linked to her island environment, but the poverty and bad weather of Inis Meáin as well as the patriarchy of its culture (as embodied in the exploitative, do-nothing Murdough) overwhelm her in the end.

IV

Maria Edgeworth (1904) was Lawless’ other major feminist or proto-feminist work. It sheds light not only on Lawless’ views of gender but also on her own place in Irish literary history, for clearly she saw Edgeworth as her literary mother. Both were Ascendancy Irishwomen who identified strongly with their country, writing about its history and its people, especially the peasantry. Both of their mothers died when they were young and both of them chose not to marry, devoting themselves instead to their roles as writers and caretakers of the land (Edgeworth on her County Longford family estate and Lawless in her garden). Both had a strong didactic streak. Even more than any of her novels, Lawless’ sketches in *Traits and Confidences* are clearly indebted to Edgeworth; this is particularly clear in “Mrs. O’Donnell’s Report,” an anecdotal account of Ascendancy family fortunes narrated by a female Thady Quirk. Neither Edgeworth nor Lawless has been examined much in a feminist light; such an approach to their work seems overdue. The historian of women’s literature in Ireland will

undoubtedly return to Lawless' biography of Edgeworth as a key source for the reconstruction of this tradition.⁵

Lawless asserts at the end of *Maria Edgeworth* that "It has been the woman that has been . . . shown . . . rather than the author" (213). She portrays Richard Lovell Edgeworth, her father, as the chief impediment to Edgeworth's success. He subjected her to a succession of three stepmothers, two of whom were sisters and the last of whom was younger than Maria herself. When he moved his family back to his estate in Ireland in 1782, Lawless tells us,

Mr. Edgeworth arrived on this occasion preceded or accompanied, in true patriarchal fashion, by menservants and by maidservants, by a brand-new wife, by two quite separate sets of children by two previous wives, and—a detail which even the patriarchs themselves do not seem to have found necessary—his circle was further enlarged by two unmarried sisters of his late and of his present wife, two Miss Sneyds, who from that time forward until after his own death, thirty-five years later, were to find their permanent home under his roof. . . . An autocrat he was, and had every intention of being. Wives, sisters-in-law, daughters, tenants, and the like, were all regarded by him as so many satellites, revolving gently, as by a law of nature, around the pedestal upon which he stood alone, in a graceful or commanding attitude. (37–38)

Far from having a room of her own in which to write, "All Maria Edgeworth's books were written at her own corner of the table in the library—which was the common living room of the house—amid the talk of the family and the lessons of the children" (116). Nonetheless she persisted and became the first great Irish novelist, serving as a model for later writers such as Lawless and Somerville and Ross.

At one point in *Maria Edgeworth*, writing a decade after *Grania*, Lawless offers an aside that seems relevant to her two novels about peasant life, *Grania* and *Hurriah*:

All peasants are difficult and elusive creatures to portray, but perhaps an Irish peasant . . . is the most elusive and the most difficult upon the face of the earth. Any one who has ever tried to fling a net over him knows perfectly well in his or her own secret soul that the attempt has been a failure—at best that entire realms and regimens of the subject have escaped observation. (88)

The description and celebration of Irish peasant life became one of the chief goals of Anglo-Irish Literary Revival writers such as Yeats, Lady Gregory, John Synge, and Douglas Hyde. Lawless, modest and self-critical in the remark cited above, wrote as realistically as she could of Irish peasant life a decade or more before the Revival writers, who tended to ignore or even scorn her work.

Synge owed a particular debt to *Grania*, which was published six years before his first trip to Inis Meáin in 1898. He recorded his debt only in a footnote in a long-unpublished notebook that he kept in conjunction with his book *The Aran Islands*, linking it immediately to a pointed criticism of Lawless' novel: "I read *Grania* before I came here [to Inis Meáin] and enjoyed it, but the real Aran spirit is not there. . . . To write a real novel of the island life one would require to pass several years among the people, but Miss Lawless does not appear to have lived here. Indeed it would be hardly possible perhaps for a lady [to stay] longer than

5. Another such connection may be found in *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) by Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), whose peasant heroine Glorvina (though much more romanticized than the more realistically portrayed Grania) is in some ways a precursor of *Grania*.

a few days" (102–3 n.1). He went on to fault the accuracy of her description of the burning of kelp in the novel. Yet the most interesting facet of Synge's criticism here is his focus on her status as "a lady." One source for Synge's own play about the drowning of Inis Meáin islanders, *Riders to the Sea*, could very well be *Grania*. The differences are more striking, however. Synge's heroine, Maurya, is a romanticized, remote emblem of the tragedy of the sea that takes her men from her—a symbol more than a life-and-blood character, despite the realistic trappings of Synge's stage scenery and speeches. In contrast, we get close to Grania, entering her consciousness in a way that we have come to associate with twentieth-century novels. Moreover, she is strong and active and goes to sea herself rather than passively awaiting news of her seagoing men as does Maurya. It is worth remembering that Synge's chief friend and correspondent on Inis Meáin was Máirtín MacDonagh, whereas Lawless' contacts there appear to have been female. Both the debt owed in Synge's work to Lawless and her own distinct contribution have gone unrecognized.

It would be well worth comparing *Grania* to the fiction of the most famous literary Aran Islander, Liam O'Flaherty, as well as twentieth-century Irish women fiction writers. Grania's moment of foreknowledge of the hardships that she will endure as a woman, for example, calls to mind a very similar epiphany in O'Flaherty's story "Spring Sowing": "The next day and the next and all their lives, when spring came they would have to bend their backs and do it until their hands and bones got twisted with rheumatism" (6). Somewhat like Peadar O'Donnell in his Donegal novel *Islanders* (1928), O'Flaherty similarly links the lives of people and animals to their natural island environment, though feminist or ecofeminist impulses are only rarely found in his work.

Lawless' daring entry into the mind of a female protagonist in *Grania* has been followed up by her twentieth-century successors, some of them, also Anglo-Irishwomen such as Elizabeth Bowen and Jennifer Johnston, who focus on upper-class rather than peasant women. For a return to Irish peasant girlhood and young womanhood, one can consider works such as Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls*, which advances different, much franker portraits: O'Brien's County Clare protagonists escape the confines of rural Irish marriage by leaving their homes in favor of life and extra-marital affairs in Dublin and London. An even sharper comparison and contrast is provided by Julia O'Faolain's novel *No Country for Young Men* (1980). The name of its protagonist—Grainne O'Malley—is borrowed from Lawless, and Ann Weekes points out that O'Faolain's plot is a retelling of the old Diarmuid and Grainne myth, in which Fionn kills Diarmuid following his elopement with Grainne and she agrees to return to live with the Fianna for the sake of her children. Unlike the mythological heroine or Lawless' protagonist, however, O'Faolain's Grainne O'Malley "does not capitulate," Weekes notes, "in order to restore the 'order' derived from male principles" (91). Indeed, in some respects it is a long way from Lawless to contemporary Irish women writers, but in another important sense, it is hard to imagine Edna O'Brien or Julia O'Faolain with the freedom to speak their own fictional truths if a pioneer such as Emily Lawless had not gone before them.

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