THE WILD IRISH GIRL

LADY MORGAN

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Introduced by Brigid Brophy

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INTRODUCTION

Many novels are deplorably bad. *The Wild Irish Girl* is one of a few to be delightfully so.

First published in 1806, it was the author's third novel. Her previous books, including the collection of verse she began with, were not ignored. One of the novels was said to have consoled the former prime minister, William Pitt the younger, during his last illness. Yet it was the *Irish Girl* that made her name – which was at the time Sydney Owenson.

A new literary lioness both in her native Ireland and in England, she was invited to join the household of the Marquis of Abercorn, who had seats in both countries and who in the pattern of many noblemen of the period, assembled an entourage part way between an extended family and a minor princely court. There she met the marquis's surgeon, Thomas Charles Morgan, a widower of scholarly disposition for whom the Abercorns secured a knighthood. Morgan fell in love with her, and in 1812 she married him at the insistence of Lady Abercorn, who, given that the marriage turned out extremely happy, seems to have understood her protégée better than she herself did.

Miss Owenson was transformed into Lady Morgan. Except when they dodge behind a pseudonym, present-day writers seldom risk changing an already established professional name. Lady Morgan obeyed the more stringent decorum of the reign of George III. For her readers the change must have been virtually painless, because the *Irish Girl* early began, long kept up and passed to much of her other fiction and non-fiction the habit of going into repeated new editions. Under her married name and style she pursued the remaining more than four decades of her busy career. She was awarded, during the

premiership of Melbourne, the first pension for services to literature given to a woman. She still holds her niche in biographical dictionaries; and in 1971 she posthumously resumed her publishing habits with the reissue of the bulk of the text of her two books about her travels and encounters in France.

She died in London, where she had set up residence, in 1859. She was born in Dublin in nobody knows which year. The Dictionary of National Biography settles for '1783?', finds that she deliberately hid her age and dismisses Croker's date of 1776 as slander, along with his tale that she was born aboard the Dublin packet. John Wilson Croker, reviewer and Tory politician, did indeed belabour her books, for political reasons, from the *Irish Girl* onward, but his mail-boat invention is rather an inspired metaphor of her mid-Irish-Sea condition. She was the daughter (the elder of two) of an English Methodist from Shrewsbury and the Irish comedic actor Robert Owenson.

After her mother's death she attended a Huguenot school near Dublin, where she acquired her fluent French. Her father, whom she adored, became debt-ridden. When he was declared bankrupt, she declared her intention of earning her own living. The high income of Fanny Burney allured her to literature and after a spell of governessing, where her socially useful gifts of ebullience and harp-playing made her the pet of the families she worked for, she plunged into professional writing.

In *The Wild Irish Girl* she undertook a task seemingly wished on her by destiny: the introduction of Ireland to British readers. Despite the ignorance of many present-day academics, who put its genesis a thousand years later than it was, prose fiction in Europe has a more or less continuous history since the second or third century AD, when Longus added a masterpiece, *Daphnis and Chloe*, to an already highly sophisticated form. The *Irish Girl*, however, has no truck with sophistication and little with the techniques of novel-writing. The epistolary convention, which in the course of the eighteenth century Samuel Richardson had used with extreme emotional power and Choderlos de Laclos had made into an ironic gallery where correspondent flashes ironic light on correspondent, is here flattened into a ribbon of first-person narrative chopped into roughly letter lengths. All the letters are from the son of an English peer as he makes his first visit to his father's property in Ireland, and, in transparent token of the author's politically propagandist purpose,

they are all to an English MP. The events are set back to '17—'. I surmise the author was wishing away the Act of Union, which Pitt and Castlereagh put through in 1800 and which she, as an Irish patriot, deplored, although it was an attempt to give economic and political reality to the mystical marriage of the two islands which the end of her novel adumbrates. At the same time, I imagine, she thought that liberal sympathies would be more easily engaged for Irish rebellion if she suggested a date when the help Irish rebels regularly expected, and regularly failed to get, from the French was sought from revolutionary France rather than from the emperor Napoleon.

As he explores Ireland, the hero-narrator is obliged to discard his English prejudices. London's architecture he finds surpassed by Dublin's, English landscape by Irish – a comparison he makes by way of comparing two seventeenth-century painters, Claude Lorraine and the 'superior genius' of Salvator Rosa, thereby presaging that Lady Morgan was to write a famous biography of Rosa.

When he meets and falls in love with his wild Irish girl, the hero finds her, far from wild, polite and patrician. Indeed, though she uses a conventional name on conventional social occasions, she is by birth an Irish princess. She diplomatically disciplines the peasant boys into humane habits. She deploys the author's own skills of singing and playing the harp. And she is, like her author, a thorough pedant. Through her conversation the novel establishes the greater antiquity of the Irish than of the Welsh harp and indeed of most Irish than of most other things. Through thickets of footnotes the author entices readers by plucking on the voguish concerns of the period, classical antiquity, ethnic tradition and lineage. The far from wild princess bears the exotic first name Glorvina, which a footnote explains: 'Glor-bhin (pronounced vin) is literally "sweet voice".' The name stuck to the author, whose friends addressed her as Glorvina.

The professional world Sydney Owenson knew from childhood on was the theatre. By theatrical habit, I surmise, she began obscuring her age before she was old enough for anyone to care, and it was no doubt by theatrical usage that she published as 'Miss Owenson' instead of (like her contemporary, Jane Austen, for instance) as 'a lady'. Needing to string her nuggets of antiquarianism on a plot, she again borrowed from the theatre. From time to time she freezes the action on a visually impressive tableau such as might close a scene. The hero learns of the seeming failure of his love-suit by overhearing

an aside spoken by Glorvina. When he dashes into the final tableau, the resolution of the story is achieved by the device Aristotle's *Poetics* calls the 'discovery', wherein one character (plus the audience) discovers the true identity of another. Aristotle analyses its use in ancient Greek tragedies like Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. Thence it was transferred to comedy and is most winningly used by Beaumarchais and, in his wake, by Mozart and da Ponte in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. It may have been from the last station on its journey, popular melodrama, that Sydney Owenson borrowed it for her *Irish Girl*, where the disclosure of the true identity of the hero's rival is unlikely to deeply surprise readers, because, like a careless plotter of detective stories, she has failed to strew her book with potential suspects.

She collected Irish tunes and published them with words of her own, an example said to have been followed in 1807-8 by Sir John Stevenson, as music arranger, and Sydney Owenson's friend and compatriot Thomas Moore, as poet, in their still often poignant *Irish Melodies*. In 1807 the Theatre Royal in Dublin put on a comic opera by Miss Owenson, and on the author's benefit night the women of the Lord Lieutenant's retinue wore gold Irish bodkins of the kind she ascribes to her wild Irish heroine. Her essential talent, I think, and the one that still scents her most famous book is that of a performer and an inspirer of performances, a talent that is fifty per cent courage.

The wing of great literature brushed her more than once. In 1821 Byron wrote to their friend in common, Thomas Moore, bidding him convey to her Byron's approval of her book about Italy, which he called 'fearless'. Anthony Trollope, who worked for the Post Office in Ireland and married an Irish woman, and who surely modelled the title of his early Irish novel, *The Kellys and the O'Kellys*, on Lady Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flaherties*, published one of his greatest novels, *Castle Richmond*, which is also set in Ireland, in the year after Lady Morgan's death. He must have had her in mind when he plaited into the authorial discourse of his story a lament that Irish novels, once popular, are now 'drugs in the market'. During her lifetime, another English novelist with an Irish wife commemorated Lady Morgan's fame in his greatest novel. *Vanity Fair* is an historical novel. The Battle of Waterloo which constitutes its climax was fought when Thackeray was three. With his perfect-pitch historical novelist's ear, Thackeray gives the marriage-hungry sister of the Irish wife of

the Irish Major O'Dowd the name Glorvina. Thackeray is a novelist Homeric enough to nod. I notice that when he brings her back towards the end of the book he muddles her into the sister not, now, of the wife but of the husband and distorts her surname accordingly. But Glorvina she remains.

The original Glorvina did not charm Jane Austen. In January 1809 Jane Austen reported by letter to her sister: 'We have got *Ida of Athens* by Miss Owenson. . . . We have only read the Preface yet; but her Irish Girl does not make me expect much.– If the warmth of her Language could affect the Body it might be worth reading in this weather.' Five years later Jane Austen published *Mansfield Park*, a novel of triumphant technique whose subject-matter is morality and charm. Henry Crawford and his sister Mary exercise as compelling a charm as Jane Austen, a specialist in the matter, ever created: it is only the action of the book that exposes them as superficial and rubbishy. I suspect that the book's judgment on them echoes Jane Austen's on Lady Morgan as a writer. I have nothing but intuition to vouch for my speculation, but I believe it was thanks to the accomplishment shared by the wild Irish Glorvina and her author that the instrument on which Mary Crawford displays her seductive and socially destructive charm is the harp.

Brigid Brophy

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LETTER I

To J.D., ESQ., M.P.

Dublin, March —, 17 —.

I REMEMBER, when I was a boy, meeting somewhere with the quaintly-written travels of *Moryson* through Ireland, and being particularly struck with his assertion, that so late as the days of Elizabeth, an Irish chieftain and his family were frequently seen round their domestic fire in a state of perfect nudity. This singular anecdote (so illustrative of the barbarity of the Irish at a period when civilization had made such a wonderful progress even in its sister countries,) fastened so strongly on my boyish imagination, that whenever the *Irish* were mentioned in my presence, an *Esquimaux* group circling round the fire blazing to dress a dinner or broil an enemy, was the image which presented itself to my mind; and in this trivial source, I believe, originated, that early-formed opinion of Irish ferocity, which has since been nurtured into a *confirmed prejudice.* So true it is, that almost all errors which influence our later life, are to be traced to some fatal and early association. But, whatever may be the *cause*, I feel the strongest objection to becoming a resident in the remote part of a country, which, for ever shaken by the convulsions of an anarchial spirit, – where for a series of ages the olive of peace has not been suffered to shoot forth *one* sweet blossom of national concord, which the sword of civil dissension has not cropt almost in the germ; and the natural character of whose factious sons, as we are still taught to believe, is turbulent; faithless, intemperate, and cruel; formerly destitute of arts, with all their boasted learning, or civilization, and still but slowly submitting to their salutary and ennobling influence.

To confess the truth, I had so far suffered prejudice to get the start of inquiry that I had almost assigned to these rude people, scenes

appropriately barbarous; and never was I more pleasantly astonished, than when the morning's dawn gave to my view one of the most splendid spectacles in the scene of picturesque creation I had ever beheld, or indeed even conceived – the bay of Dublin.

A foreigner on board the packet, compared the view to that which the Bay of Naples presents; I cannot judge of the justness of the comparison, though I am told one very general and commonplace; but if the scenic beauties of the Irish bay are exceeded by those of the Neopolitan, my fancy falls short in a just conception of its charms. The springing-up of a contrary wind kept us for a considerable time beating about the coast: the weather suddenly changed, the rain poured in torrents, a storm arose, and the beautiful prospect, which had fascinated our gaze, vanished in mists of impenetrable obscurity.

As we had the mail on board, a boat was sent out to receive it, the oars of which were plied by six men, whose stature, limbs, and features declared them the lingering progeny of the once formidable race of Irish giants. Bareheaded, with no other barrier to the fury of the storm than what tattered check trowsers and shirts open at the neck, tucked above the elbows, afforded.

A few of the passengers proposing to venture in the boat, I listlessly followed, and found myself seated by one of these sea-monsters, who, in an accent and voice that made me startle, addressed me in English, at least as pure and correct as a Thames boatman would use; and with so much courtesy, cheerfulness, and respect, that I was at a loss how to reconcile the civilization of his manner with such ferocity of appearance; while his companions, as they stemmed the mountainous waves, or plied their heavy oars, displayed a vein of low humour and quaint drollery, and in a language so curiously expressive and original, that I expressed my surprise to a gentleman who sat near me. He assured me that this species of colloquial wit was peculiar to the lower classes of the Irish, who borrowed much of their curious phraseology from the peculiar idioms of their own tongue, and the cheeriness of their temperament; 'and as for their courteousness', he continued, 'you will find them, on a further intercourse, obsequious even to *adulation*, as long as you treat them with apparent kindness; but an opposite conduct will prove their manner proportionably uncivilized.'

'It is very excusable,' said I; 'they are of a class in society to which a controul over the feelings is unknown, and to be sensibly alive to *kindness or to unkindness* is, in my opinion, a noble trait in the national

character of an unsophisticated people.'

While we spoke, we landed; and for the something like pleasurable emotion, which the first on my list of Irish acquaintance produced in my mind, I distributed among these 'sons of the waves' more silver than I believe they expected. Had I bestowed a principality on an Englishman of the same rank, he would have been less lavish of the *eloquence* of gratitude on his benefactor, though he might equally have felt the *sentiment*. So much for my voyage *across the Channel*.

This city is to London like a small temple of the Ionic order, whose proportions are delicate, whose character is elegance, compared to a vast palace whose Corinthian pillars at once denote strength and magnificence.

The wondrous extent of London excites our amazement; the compact uniformity of Dublin our admiration. But, as dispersion is less within the *coup d'œil* of observance, than aggregation, the harmonious architecture of Dublin at once arrests the eye, while the scattered splendours of London excite a less immediate and more progressive admiration, which is often lost in the intervals that occur between those objects that are calculated to excite it.

In London, the miserable shop of a ginseller, and the magnificent palace of a duke, alternately create disgust, or awaken approbation.

In Dublin, the buildings are not arranged upon such democratic principles. The plebeian offers no foil to the patrician edifice, while their splendid and boastful public structures are so closely connected, as with *some* degree of policy to strike *at once* upon the eye in the happiest combination.

In other respects this city appears to me to be the miniature copy of our imperial capital, though minutely imitative in show and glare. Something less observant of life's prime luxuries, order and cleanliness, there is a certain class of wretches who haunt the streets of Dublin, so emblematic of vice, poverty, idleness, and filth, that disgust and pity frequently succeed in the mind of the stranger to sentiments of pleasure, surprise, and admiration. For the origin of this evil, I must refer you to the supreme police[1] of the city; but whatever may be the cause, the effects (to an Englishman especially) are dreadful, and inexpressibly disgusting.

Although my father has a large connexion here, yet he only gave

[1] A rather short cut to information, on causes which have always existed and still exist undiminished. – EDITOR.

me a letter to his banker, who has forced me to make his house my home for the few days I shall remain in Dublin, and whose cordiality and kindness sanction all that has been circulated of Irish hospitality.

In the present state of my feelings, however, a party on the banks of the *Ohio*, with a tribe of Indian hunters, would be more consonant to my inclinations than the refined pleasures of the most polished circles in the world. Yet these warmhearted people, who find in the name of a stranger an irresistible lure to every kind attention, will force me to be happy in despite of myself, and overwhelm me with invitations, some of which it is impossible to resist. My previous prejudices received some mortal strokes, when I observed that the high natives of this barbarous country equal us in every elegant refinement of life and manners; the only difference I can perceive between a London and a Dublin *rout* is, that here, even amongst the first class,[2] there is a warmth and cordiality of address which, though perhaps not more sincere than the cold formality of British ceremony, is certainly more fascinating.[3]

It is not, however, in Dublin I shall expect to find the tone of national character and manner; in the first circles of all great cities (as in courts) the native features of national character are softened into general uniformity, and the genuine feelings of nature are suppressed or exchanged for a political compliance with the reigning modes and customs, which hold their tenure from the sanction and example of the seat of government.

I leave Dublin to-morrow for M— house. It is situated in the county of —, on the north-west coast of Connaught, which I am told is the classic ground of Ireland. The native Irish, pursued by religious and political persecution, made Connaught the asylum of their sufferings, and were thus separated by a provincial barrier from an intercourse with the rest of Ireland until after the Restoration; hence I shall have a fair opportunity of beholding the Irish character in its *primeval* ferocity.

Direct your next to Bally—, which I find is the nearest post town to my *Kamschatkan palace*; where, with no other society than that of

[2] When this observation was made, the author's experience of either English or Irish routs was very limited indeed. – EDIT.

[3] 'Every unprejudiced traveller who visits them (the Irish) will be as much pleased with their cheerfulness as obliged by their hospitality; and will find them a brave, polite, and liberal people.' – *Philosophical Survey through Ireland by* Mr. YOUNG

Blackstone and Co., I shall lead such a life of animal existence, as Prior gives to his Contented Couple –

> 'They ate and drank and slept – what then?
> Why, slept and drank, and ate again.' –

Adieu,

H.M.

LETTER II

To J.D. ESQ. M.P.

M— House.

IN the various modes of penance invented by the various *penance-mongers* of pious austerity, did you ever hear the travelling in an *Irish post-chaise* enumerated as a punishment, which by far exceeds horse-hair shirts and voluntary flagellation? My first day's journey from Dublin being as wet a one as this moist climate and capricious season ever produced, my rough Berlin answered all the purposes of a *shower-bath*, while the ventilating principles on which the windows were constructed gave me all the benefit to be derived from 'the *breathy* influence' of the four cardinal points.

Unable any longer to sit tamely enduring the '*penalty of Adam, the season's changes*,' or to sustain the prospect of some 'hair-breadth 'scapes,' which the most dismantled of vehicles afforded me together with delays and stoppages of every species to be found in the catalogue of procrastination and mischance, I took my seat in the mail-coach, which I met at my third stage, and which was going to a town twenty miles off Bally—. These twenty miles, by far the most agreeable of my journey, I performed as we once (in days of boyish errantry) accomplished a tour of Wales – on foot.

I had previously sent my baggage, and was happily unencumbered with a servant, for the fastidious delicacy of Monsieur Laval would never have been adequate to the fatigues of a pedestrian tour through a country wild and mountainous as his own native *Savoy*. But to me every difficulty was an effort of some good *genius* chasing the demon of lethargy from off my mind. Every obstacle that called for exertion was a temporary revival of energy; and every enforced effort worth an age of indolent indulgence.

To him who derives gratification from the embellished labours of art rather than the simple but sublime works of nature, *Irish* scenery

will afford little interest; but the bold features of its varying landscape, the stupendous altitude of its 'cloud-capt' mountains, the impervious gloom of its deep-embosomed glens, the savage desolation of its uncultivated heaths and boundless bogs, with those rich veins of a picturesque champagne, thrown at intervals into gay expansion by the hand of nature, awaken, in the mind of the poetic or pictorial traveller, all the pleasures of tasteful enjoyment, all the sublime emotions of a rapt imagination. And if the glowing fancy of Claude Lorraine would have dwelt enraptured on the paradisaical charms of English landscape, the superior genius of Salvator Rosa would have reposed its eagle wing amidst scenes of mysterious sublimity with which the wildly magnificent landscape of Ireland abounds. But the liberality of nature appears to me to be here but frugally assisted by the donations of art. Here *agriculture* appears in the least felicitous of her aspects. The rich treasures of Ceres seldom wave their golden heads over the earth's fertile bosom; the verdant drapery of young plantation rarely skreens out the coarser features of a rigid soil, the cheerless aspect of a gloomy bog; while the unvaried surface of the perpetual pasturage which satisfies the eye of the interested grazier, disappoints the glance of the tasteful spectator.

Within twenty miles of Bally— I was literally dropt by the stage at the foot of a mountain, to which your native *Wrekin* is but a hillock. The dawn was just risen, and had flungs its grey and reserved tints on a scene of which the mountainous region of Capel Cerig will give you the most adequate idea.

Mountain rising over mountain, swelled like an amphitheatre to those clouds which, faintly tinged with the sun's prelusive beams, and rising from the earthly summits where they had reposed, incorporated with the kindling æther of a purer atmosphere.

All was silent and solitary – a tranquillity tinged with terror, a sort of 'delightful horror,' breathed on every side. I was alone, and felt like the presiding genius of desolation!

As I had previously learned my route, after a few minutes contemplation of the scene before me, I pursued my solitary ramble along the steep and trackless path, which wound gradually down towards a great lake, an almost miniature sea, that lay embosomed amidst those stupendous heights, whose ragged forms, now bare, desolate, and barren, now clothed with yellow furze and creeping underwood, or crowned with mimic forests, appeared towering above my head in endless variety. The progress of the sun convinced me

that *mine* must have been slow, as it was perpetually interrupted by pauses of curiosity and admiration, and by long and many lapses of thoughtful reverie: and fearing that I had lost my way (as I had not yet caught a view of the village, in which, seven miles distant from the spot where I had left the stage, I was assured I should find an excellent breakfast), I ascended that part of the mountain where, on one of its vivid points, a something like a human habitation hung suspended, and where I hoped to obtain a *carte du pays*: the exterior of this hut, or *cabin*, as it is called, like the few I had seen which were not built of mud, resembled in one instance the magic palace of Spenser, and was erected with loose stones,

'Which cunningly, were without mortar laid.'[1]

thinly thatched with straw; an aperture in the roof served rather to *admit* the air than *emit* the smoke, a circumstance to which the wretched inhabitants of these wretched hovels seem so perfectly naturalized, that they live in a constant state of fumigation; and a fracture in the side wall (meant I suppose as a substitute for a casement) was stuffed with straw, while the door, off its hinges, was laid across the threshold as a barrier to a little crying boy, who, sitting within, bemoaned his captivity in a tone of voice not quite so mellifluous as that which Mons. de Sanctyon ascribes to the crying children of a certain district in Persia, but perfectly in unison with the vocal exertion of the companion of his imprisonment – a large sow. I approached – removed the barrier: the boy and the animal escaped together, and I found myself alone in the centre of this miserable asylum of human wretchedness – the residence of an *Irish peasant*. To those who have only contemplated this useful class in England, 'where every rood of ground maintains its man,' and where the peasant liberally enjoys the *comforts* as well as the necessaries of life, the wretched picture which the interior of an *Irish* cabin presents, would be at once an object of compassion and disgust.[2]

[1] This description of a Fairy Palace is said to have been borrowed by Spenser from the rural architecture of Ireland, where he obtained such beautiful possessions on the Blackwater.

[2] Sometimes excavated from a hill, sometimes erected with loose stones, but most generally built of mud; the *cabin* is divided into two apartments, the one littered with straw and coarse rugs, and sometimes (but very rarely) furnished with the luxury of a *chaff bed*, serves as a dormitory not only to the family of both sexes, but in general to any animal they are so fortunate as to possess; the other chamber asnswers for every