CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Formations and deformations of Empire: Maria Edgeworth and the West Indies
Authors	Connolly, Claire
Publication date	2023-02-01
Original Citation	Connolly, C. (2023) 'Formations and Deformations of Empire: Maria Edgeworth and the West Indies', in: O'Kane, F. and O'Neill, C. (eds)., Ireland, Slavery and the Caribbean, Manchester: Manchester University Press (Studies in Imperialism), pp. 302-320. isbn: 978-1-5261-5099-8
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526150998/
Download date	2026-11-03 15:19:53
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13868



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Formations and Deformations of Empire: Maria Edgeworth and the West Indies

Claire Connolly

Chapter for Finola O'Kane and Ciaran O'Neill, Ireland, Slavery and the Caribbean: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Manchester University Press 'Studies in Imperialism' series, due out December 2022)

Abstract

This chapter trace the threads of scattered details, repeated images and occasional plot twists found in the fiction and letters of Maria Edgeworth in order to consider the scope and extent of her engagement with the West Indies across a long career. The topic of slavery makes an uncomfortable home within Edgeworth's broader intellectual interests contexts, not least because she does not set the ownership, sale and exchange of people apart from the trade in ideas, books and goods. Furthermore, the kinds of violent improbabilities that help to form the particular texture of Edgeworth's realism often concern seeds and plants. Within the specific scenes that flow from Edgeworth's thinking about slavery in the context of improving debates about education and domesticity, she allows seeds, plants and gardens to sharpen and define lines of imperial connection.

When I began to research the writings of Maria Edgeworth in the 1980s, the question of her place within Irish literary history was a vexed one. Edgeworth was an Anglo-Irish writer whose family were beneficiaries of the Cromwellian plantation of Ireland. Some of her novels were set in Ireland, including the widely admired *Castle Rackrent* (1800), but she also wrote books that were far removed from the realities of pre-Famine Ireland: courtship fictions set in England, plots of British public life, tales addressed to children and young adults. Postcolonial and feminist criticism offered a way of integrating her work into our understanding of Irish literature while also revising and renewing some of its founding assumptions. Edgeworth is now more widely taught and read, and the richness and complexity of her writing is recognized. But there remains a need to investigate and understand the relationship of her writing to empire. While postcolonial criticism (in different modes) denounced her privilege or admired her inscription of hybridity,[1] it did not engage with her own writings on empire nor offer any reckoning with her views on race. Feminist scholarship proved better prepared to investigate her writings on the West Indies, especially in relation to her novel *Belinda,* but such work has tended to conflate Ireland with Britain or invoke Irish history in fairly loose ways.[2]

The present volume presents a welcome opportunity to consider Maria Edgeworth's views on the Caribbean and to develop our understanding of themes of race, slavery and empire in her writing. In this chapter, I trace the threads of scattered details, repeated images and occasional plot twists found in the fiction and letters in order to consider the scope and extent of Edgeworth's engagement with the West Indies across her career. In doing so, I take up Anne Mulhall's challenge to rethink invocations of politics within Irish Studies under the

[1] See Seamus Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Colin Graham, 'History, gender and the colonial moment: *Castle Rackrent*', *Irish Studies Review*, 4:14 (1996), 21–4.
[2] See for example Kathryn Kirkpatrick, '"Gentlemen have horrors upon this subject": West Indian suitors in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 5:4 (1993), 331–48; Susan C. Greenfield, '"Abroad and at home": sexual ambiguity, miscegenation, and colonial boundaries in Edgeworth's *Belinda*', *PMLA*, 112:2 (1997): 214–28.

sign of race.[3] A consideration of Maria Edgeworth's whiteness may feel like a return to an earlier critical dynamics that excluded her work on the basis of her colonial background and class privilege, but a closer investigation of her imperial investments is a necessary step as we open up Irish romanticism to the 'ineradicable antagonisms' of literature and empire.[4]

The Ireland of Edgeworth's day was closely bound into the Atlantic economy and played its part in the formation of an imperial Englishness within the crucible of Britain's second empire. For Maria Edgeworth, to write about the West Indies was to inscribe the global interconnections wrought via that empire, especially in relation to questions of work, education and domestic life. Edgeworth was also interested in the function of imaginative writing within the empire, including the profession of literature itself. She often used scenes and stories from the West Indies to question the utility of literature as it travels between times and places, part of a larger commitment to a culture of experiment. But the threat of violent revolution forms a kind of threshold in her thinking. Her ability to imagine slave societies was affected by her own planter history, as well as by a close encounter with the 1798 rebellion at home in Edgeworthstown.

If Edgeworth's writing produces many moments of conflict between what Clíona Ó Gallchoir calls 'the limits of strict probability' and 'her desire to produce stories of transformation', then these tensions are particularly acute in her representations of the West Indies.[5] The topic of slavery makes an uncomfortable home within Edgeworth's broader intellectual interests contexts, not least because Edgeworth does not set the ownership, sale and exchange of people apart from the trade in ideas, books and goods. In what follows I show how, in particular West Indian contexts, the kinds of violent improbabilities that help to

---

[3] Anne Mulhall, 'The Ends of Irish Studies? On whiteness, academia, and activism', *Irish University Review*, 50:1 (2020), 94–111.
[4] Manu Samriti Chander, *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Bucknell: Bucknell University Press, 2017), p. 3.
[5] Clíona Ó Gallchoir, 'Maria Edgeworth's revolutionary morality and the limits of realism', *Colby Quarterly*, 36:2 (2000), 87–97, p. 97.

form the particular texture of Edgeworth's realism often concern seeds and plants. Within the specific scenes that flow from Edgeworth's thinking about slavery in the context of improving debates about education and domesticity, she draws on 'the overlapping languages of botanical transplantation and plantation slavery'[6] so that seeds, plants and gardens shape lines of imperial connections across her plots. It might even be argued that, just as colonial bioprospecting carved out new contours of nature, so too the modes of exchange imagined within Edgeworth's improving narratives are not only formed but also deformed by their imperial horizon.

When Maria Edgeworth visited a ship that carried enslaved Africans berthed on the London docks in October 1792, she wrote home to her cousin Sophy Ruxton in County Meath with an account of 'the dreadfully small Hold in which the poor slaves are stowed together so that they cannot stir – Some of the slaves are sent every morning to scour the decks with brine & the ship, we were told, was daily fumigated with vinegar &c – But probably you know all this –.'[7] That final phrase is telling: Edgeworth assumes that Sophy Ruxton was aware of the horrific trade that saw African people transported across the Atlantic as chattel to the sugar islands of the Caribbean. But what did Edgeworth herself know of the Caribbean – and how did she react and respond? In the 1790s, she was just beginning a long and successful career as a writer, over the course of which she thought seriously about the ways in which society and economy of the British empire were shaped by and through the exploitation of Atlantic and Caribbean worlds. Like Jane Austen, she mentions slavery from time to time in her letters and fictions and included short, passing references to plantation wealth as a backdrop to some of her novels and tales. Unlike Austen,

[6] Michelle Burnham, *Transoceanic America: Risk, Writing, and Revolution in the Global Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 153.
[7] ME to Sophy Ruxton, October 1792; quoted in Susan Manly, 'Intertextuality, slavery and abolition in Maria Edgeworth's "The Good Aunt" and "The Grateful Negro"', *Essays in Romanticism*, 20:1 (2013), 19–36, p. 21.

however, Edgeworth wrote about slavery in relatively direct ways. She did not practise the kinds of narrative evasion that make the discussion of West Indian slavery in *Mansfield Park* (1814) so enigmatic and went so far as to situate one of her tales on a Jamaican plantation: 'The Grateful Negro', written in March 1802 and published as one of Edgeworth's *Popular Tales* in 1804, gives us her most direct and troubling representation of the brutal slave society of Jamaica and is discussed below.

Although none of the Edgeworth family appears to have benefitted directly from Jamaican wealth, her older brother Richard left home in 1779 and settled in South Carolina, founding a settlement named Sneedsborough (named after his stepmother) on the farthest reach of the Pee Dee River as it flowed South to Charleston. He became a farmer and returned only once, in 1792, meeting the family in London, receiving money from his father and visiting a slave ship together. Family correspondence from the period wonders whether Richard will spend his father's money on preparing 'land for a plantation either of rice or indian corn or for planting peach orchards for peach brandy'. Maria Edgeworth wrote to her aunt Margaret Ruxton wishing for 'a telescope that could reach to the Backwoods of America'.[8] Richard Edgeworth died in South Carolina in 1796 at the age of thirty-two. Susan Kroeg suggests that the relatively small plantation that he owned (two hundred acres more or less) 'probably would not have supported a significant slave labor force' and no enslaved people are mentioned in the will.[9]

It is rather easier to trace lines of connection between the Edgeworths and the abolitionists. The family was closely connected with liberal and radical circles in Britain and Ireland, for whom slavery was an urgent issue. Her friend and correspondent Anna Letitia

[8] Letters quoted in Rachel Hewitt, *A Revolution of Feeling: the Decade that Forged the Modern Mind* (London: Granta, 2017), p. 128.
[9] Susan M. Kroeg, '"The transmigrated soul of some West Indian planter": absenteeism, slavery, and the Irish national tale', in David T. Gleeson (ed.), *The Irish in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), p .

Barbauld published her 'Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade' in 1791. Other classics of anti-abolitionist writing included poems by Richard Lovell Edgeworth's friends Erasmus Darwin and Thomas Day, *The Botanic Garden* and *The Dying Nego* respectively. Edgeworth met Darwin in 1799 (he died in 1802) and later in Liverpool in 1813 she discussed Darwin with William Roscoe.[10] Edgeworth used an abolitionist quotation from *The Botanic Garden* in 'The Good Aunt', a story with a West Indian subplot, discussed below*: 'Hear him*, ye Senates! Hear this truth sublime, / "HE, WHO ALLOWS OPPRESSION, SHARES THE CRIME."'[11]

But such connections did not always mean an alignment of views: in the summer of 1799, when Barbauld and her husband called to visit the Edgeworths in Clifton, near Bristol, they brought their own 'East India sugar' to sweeten their tea, so that they 'might not share our wickedness in eating that made by the negro slave'.[12] So the Edgeworths did not necessarily share the views of their abolitionist friends. In another 1792 letter sent to Sophy Ruxton, Edgeworth asked her cousin if she had read 'the things that have been lately published about the Negroes', referring to 'a very small pamphlet of about ten pages, merely an account of the facts stated to the House of Commons'.[13] Based on Nini Rodgers's research into the Irish history of anti-slavery, it is possible to identify the pamphlet as the *Address to the People of Great Britain (respectfully offered to the People of Ireland on the utility of refraining from the use of West Indian sugar and rum* (published in London in 1791 and Dublin in 1792).[14] The Quaker diarist Mary Leadbeater read this 'little book', and she asked

---

[10] *The Quarterly Review* picked out Roscoe as a target in its vicious review of Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*.

[11] Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*. *Part Two. Containing The Loves of the Plants* (London, 3rd edn, 1791), p. 127.

[12] Augustus J. C. Hare (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, 2 vols (Publisher: Boston and New York, 1895), vol. 1, p. 69.

[13] Augustus J. C. Hare, *The Life*, p. 23.

[14] Nini Rodgers, 'Two Quakers and a Utilitarian: the reaction of three Irish women writers to the problem of slavery, 1798–1807', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 100C:4 (2000): 137–57, p. 153. Susan Manly speculates that the pamphlet 'might well have been the anonymously authored Short Sketch of the Evidence, for

her friend Molly Bewley to help get it reprinted in Dublin while other Quaker women helped to circulate it across the country via chapmen.[15] Edgeworth then was well aware of the power of public opinion in Britain and Ireland to shape public debate. But she was cautious in her assessment of abolitionist calls for ethical eating:

> 25,000 families in England have absolutely entirely left off eating West india sugar in any thing – from the hope that when there is no longer any demand for sugar the slaves will not be so cruelly treated to force them to rear the cane. Children in several schools have given up their taste for sweet things, which is surely very benevolent – Tho' whether it will at all conduce to the end proposed is perhaps wholly uncertain – and in the meantime we go on eating applepie sweetened with sugar instead of applepie sweetened with honey. At Mr Keir's, however, my father avers that he ate excellent custards sweetened with honey. Will it not be rather hard upon the poor bees in the end?[16]

The Edgeworths' sympathy stopped at the bees and they did not change their shopping habits. But the trade in sugar and sweet things forms a backdrop to a short fiction by Edgeworth, 'The Good Aunt'. The story was written in March and April of 1797 and published just after *Belinda* (1801), a novel also occupied with the question of a West Indian fortune.

The 'good aunt' of Edgeworth's tale is Frances Howard, a woman who spent her youth in the West Indies and returns to England as the beneficiary of plantation wealth. Her

---

the Abolition of the Slave Trade', but the pamphlet discussed by Rodgers seems more likely. Manly, 'Intertextuality, slavery and abolition', p. 21.

[15] Rodgers, 'Two Quakers and a Utilitarian', p. 144.

[16] The text of the letter comes from Susan Manly, 'Intertextuality, slavery and abolition', pp. 20-21. Manly notes that other widely reproduced versions of the letter contain inaccuracies, usually drawn from the version transcribed by Augustus Hare. Manly's transcription omits the final two sentences, which I quote here from Hare (ed.), *Life and Letters*, vol. 1, p. 23.

nephew, Charles, has been in her care since a child, and the tale as a whole advocates for a broad and tolerant approach to education, seeking to hold in balance arguments between domestic and institutional education and a classical syllabus versus a modern one. Charles learns the value of reading choice selections from Shakespeare and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* over and above rote learning; meanwhile his interest in natural history is fostered via curious cases drawn from across the imperial domain of natural history: the hummingbird, the tailor bird, the hermit crab and the Jamaican trap-door spider.[17]

'The Good Aunt' spells out the moral consequences of possessing a fortune by enslaving others : Mrs Howard 'did not particularly wish to be the proprietor of slaves; and from the time that she came to the management of her own affairs, she had been desirous to sell her West India property'.[18] Though Mrs Howard sells her estate and effects the manumission of her enslaved people , her goods and money are lost in a shipwreck, meaning that she has to undertake a new mode of life. Recognising the need for boys to engage in public education while also economising as she must, Mrs Howard arranges for Charles, now thirteen, to attend Westminster School as a day pupil while she buys a small house nearby. At the great public school, Charles Howard befriends a miserable Creole boy named Oliver, whose previous education has not prepared him for such practices as fagging and bullying, the former compared to being made into 'a negro-slave'.[19] Charles protects Oliver from Augustus Holloway, an older boy who is the son of Mrs Howard's attorney. Just before Mrs Howard's fortune was lost at sea, Augustus had been working on some trite lines in Latin celebrating the freeing of the people formerly enslaved on her estates, showing how

[17] Maria Edgeworth, 'The Good Aunt', in *Tales and Novels by Maria Edgeworth*, 18 vols (London, 1832–3), vol. 2, p. 223.
[18] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt,'p. 228.
[19] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt,'p. 245.

Edgeworth connects her dislike of prejudice in favour of the ancient languages with a suspicion of glib abolitionist verse.

A further West Indian thread in the story concerns the appearance in London of a former enslaved woman named Cuba. Her appearance in the tale is the result of an accident: Augustus overturns a coach during a schoolboy escapade and a 'mulatto woman' is left behind 'in great pain', speaking only in broken English.[20] Augustus would abandon her there, but the postillion feels sorry for the 'poor copper-coloured soul' and helps her to find the house of an old gardener named Paul, the only address known to the woman. She ends up lodging next door to the home of Mrs Howard, who is in turn revealed to be her former owner. Because the new owner of Mrs Howard's West Indian property has not respected her rights to her provision ground, Cuba has travelled to London in search of Mrs Howard, bearing seeds and sweets from Jamaica as gifts for her former mistress.

The plot threads these lines of connection together via its commitment to Enlightenment science and the value of observation: when Charles Howard notices how cold and smoky the room in which Cuba is housed by the kindly gardener is, he turns to Benjamin Franklin's *Observations on Smoky Chimneys, their Causes and Cure* (1793) and applies its remedies. In the newly bright and clean room, the sharp-eyed Oliver in turn notices a distinctive thimble made from old gold worn by Cuba as she sews. On discovering that the thimble originated in Jamaica as a gift from a former mistress, Oliver deduces a connection with his friend's good aunt. Cuba was one of the enslaved people whom Mrs Howard had 'set at liberty' and who, because the promise to give over to her 'some little *provision ground*, upon the plantation' was broken, has travelled to England in search of Mrs Howard.[21]

[20] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt,'p. 259.
[21] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt,' p. 297.

Rather than end the story with this reunion, though, Edgeworth continues to build on her themes of observation, discrimination and empire, returning to the topic of literature via a debate in Mrs Howard's house about art and taste: from a discussion of Joseph Warton's 'Ode to Fancy', the company move 'to the never-ending debate upon original genius; including also the doctrine of hereditary temper and dispositions'.[22] Oliver meanwhile sits apart from the group, reading Bryan Edwards's *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* while 'his left arm embraced a thick china jar, against which he leaned his head'.[23] He emits a 'groan' that disturbs the group, who find him so absorbed in Edwards's book that he fails to notice the danger of a candle wick about to burn out. A note directs readers to the particular scene that draws the boy's attention: Edwards's gruesome description of the horrific punishment and execution of the enslaved people who took part in the Tacky rebellion of 1760, an account that inspired Edgeworth's tale 'The Grateful Negro'. At the same moment, narrative attention falls on the china jar which Oliver believes contains Jamaican sweetmeats sent by his father, and which he refuses to relinquish to the adults. A tussle ensues, and it emerges that the jar contains not sweets (as expected by all, including the boy) but rather 'pieces of crumpled paper' that testify to a school lottery in which both Charles and Oliver have refused to participate in principle.[24] The discovery of the lottery results in the summoning of a Jewish jeweller to the house; his ill-gotten treasure hoard includes a sewing needle that matches the Jamaican thimble and other items that had once been the property of Mrs Howard, and which were supposed to be lost at sea. As the consequences of this 'disquieting, mysterious scene'[25] play out, Mrs Howard is reunited with her property and her fortune. Charles Howard retains his 'love for literature', now

[22] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt,' p. 310.
[23] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt,' p. 311.
[24] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt,' p. 313.
[25] Manly, 'Intertextuality, slavery and abolition', p. 24.

supplemented with his aunt's fortune while Oliver grows in understanding and 'affection' for his first friend.[26]

A strange detail in 'The Good Aunt' is that the young Creole boy, Oliver, cannot be seen to blush because of his skin colour. He is ridiculed and disgraced in public school but the effects of bullying don't show on his skin: 'his cheek burned with blushes, … but his dark complexion … prevented those blushes from being noticed by his companions'.[27] A few of Edgeworth's early stories make reference to colour and skin complexion, starting with *Belinda.* In *Belinda,* the heroine chooses between two men, one an upright Englishman who has lost his way and the other a West Indian Creole planter named Mr Vincent whose gambling habit proves an insurmountable obstacle to his prospects. Connected to Mr Vincent is his black servant Juba (after whom he has also named his dog), who, in the first edition of the novel, marries an English country girl named Lucy. In the novel, Lady Anne Percival playfully draws attention to Lucy's 'fear of poor Juba's black face' and is answered with reassurances: 'The girl reddened, smiled, and looked at her grandmother, who answered for her in an arch tone, "O, yes, my lady! We are not afraid of Juba's black face *now*; we are grown very great friends … our Lucy takes no offence at his black face now, my lady, I can assure you'.[28] This characteristically monitorial scene seems to educate readers away from racist assumptions about colour and yet leaves in place the image of the silent, blushing white woman. The novel further frames that image via an item of jewellery given by Juba to Lucy, a 'necklace of Angola pease' that she wears about her neck.[29] Edgeworth may have taken the image of the necklace from Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's primitivist romance, *Paul et Virginie,* from which she drew other aspects of *Belinda's* plot. Within the frame of

[26] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt', pp. 332–3.
[27] Edgeworth, 'Good Aunt', p. 239.
[28] Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, ed. Linda Bree (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 223.
[29] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, p. 223.

the imagined possibilities of cross-racial romance within the first edition of her novel, this humble object stands in for the Afro-Caribbean entanglements wrought by the colonial trade in seeds, plants and people; connections that Edgeworth apprehends but whose contexts cannot be fully expressed within the genre of the courtship novel. Indeed, such was the burden of the West Indian material that Edgeworth removed the reference to inter-racial marriage in a revised edition published in 1810, reporting to Anna Letitia Barbauld that 'My father says that gentlemen have horrors upon this subject, and would draw conclusions very unfavorable to a female writer who appeared to recommend such unions; as I do not understand the subject, I trust to his better judgement.'[30]

References to skin colour recur in the writings, often in seemingly slight ways. In 'Mademoiselle Panache' from *Moral Tales* (1801), the French governess cannot bear the sight of negroes and also fears the sight of a black horse while in a tale from 1804, 'To-Morrow', a child starts for fear of a dark negro servant. In contrast to the reasonable position outlined by Lady Anne Percival, these tales contain echoes of Edmund Burke's account of the sublime as connected to the terrifying power of darkness and what he calls the 'effects of blackness'.[31] The example that Burke gives concerns a blind boy who regains sight: 'the first time the boy saw a black object, it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight.'[32] In W. J. T. Mitchell's reading of Burke's text, the black woman represents the 'doubled figure of slavery, of both sexual and racial servitude' made to appear in 'the natural colors of power and sublimity'.[33] For Edgeworth as perhaps for Burke, those natural colours are further

[30] Quoted in Kirkpatrick, '"Gentlemen have horrors", p. 342.
[31] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 135.
[32] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 131.
[33] See Meg Armstrong, '"The effects of blackness": gender, race, and the sublime in aesthetic theories of Burke and Kant', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54:3 (1996), 213–36.

shaded by a knowledge of violence in Ireland. A letter to Edgeworth's aunt Mrs Ruxton about Defenderism in Longford in January 1796 suggests the connection:

> All that I crave for my own part is, that if I am to have my throat cut, it may not be by a man with his face blackened with charcoal. I shall look at every person that comes here very closely, to see if there be any marks of charcoal upon their visages. Old wrinkled offenders I should suppose would never be able to wash out the stains; but in others a *very* clean face will in my mind be a strong symptom of guilt, clean hands proof positive, and clean nails ought to hang a man.[34]

Even these interconnections between race, property and skin colour do not quite prepare us for 'The Grateful Negro', Edgeworth's most direct and troubling representation of the brutal slave colony of Jamaica, written in March 1802 and published as one of her *Popular Tales* in 1804. As with 'The Good Aunt', she draws on Bryan Edwards's *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* and gives his name to one of her characters. The tale concerns two planters with neighbouring estates, Mr Jeffries and Mr Edwards, each of whom holds people in slavery. Where Mr Jeffries abuses his slaves Mr Edwards is kind and trusting, allowing the enslaved people to keep the goods grown on their own provision grounds. The grateful slave of the title, Cæsar, along with his wife, is purchased by Mr Edwards when Mr Jeffries threatens to split them up and sell them separately. Cæsar's gratitude consists of informing on a rebellion planned by his fellow enslaved people, an event that is closely modelled on the Tacky rebellion of 1760 as described by Edwards but also may borrow from Edgeworth's experience of the Battle of Ballinamuck in September 1798. In the end, the tale suggests, it is better to work on gradual

[34] Hare (ed.), *Life and Letters*, vol. 1, p. 44.

improvements of the conditions in which enslaved people lived rather than abolish the dreadful practice.

Critics within Irish Studies have tended not to write about the tale, uncomfortable with Edgeworth's ameliorationist approach to slavery. Debate about 'The Grateful Negro' was sparked off by George Boulukos's 1999 essay, 'Maria Edgeworth's "Grateful Negro" and the Sentimental Argument for Slavery', which diagnoses the tale in terms of broader problems with 'sentimental humanitarianism'. Where Boulukos reads Edgeworth as an apologist for slavery, however, Susan Manly has made a case for the ways in which Edgeworth sought 'to stimulate her readers' powers of thought through the representation of conflict and debate'.[35] It is difficult, however, to deny Boulukos's case in relation to Edgeworth's advocacy of 'slave gratitude' and her 'reluctance to acknowledge' the 'contradiction between free labor principles and the practice of slavery'.[36] And the context of Caribbean literary history, the tale is remembered as 'a narrative that showcases colonial anxieties surrounding the threat of – and the ability to contain – African-Caribbean insurrection.'[37]

Edgeworth's 'good' planter shares a name with Bryan Edwards, from whose *History* Edgeworth draws, in particular his account of the 1760 Tacky rebellion and his discussion of Obeah, presented by him as a type of incendiary magic responsible for isolated delusions and now understood as 'a network of spiritual, religious, and cultural practices brought by enslaved Africans to, and creolized in, the anglophone Caribbean'.[38] From Edwards,

---

[35] George E. Boulukos, 'Maria Edgeworth's "Grateful Negro" and the sentimental argument for slavery', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 23:1 (1999), 12–29; Manly, 'Intertextuality, slavery and abolition', p. 35.
[36] Boulukos, 'Maria Edgeworth's "Grateful Negro"', p. 19.
[37] Janelle Rodriques, 'Obeah, Religion, and Nineteenth-Century Literature of the Anglophone Caribbean', in Evelyn O'Callaghan and Tim Watson (eds.), *Caribbean Literature in Transition, 1800-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 202.
[38] Janelle Rodriques, 'Obeah, Religion, p. 198.

Edgeworth also takes her focus on the reforming possibilities of so-called slave gardens or provision grounds, already seen in 'The Good Aunt' and inflected here by Edgeworth's ideas about fair treatment of tenant farmers in Ireland. 'The Good Aunt' had already made troubling use of images from Bryan Edwards's *History* while the Edgeworths' *Essay on Irish Bulls* quotes Edwards on 'unfortunate negroes' who 'learn cowardice and cunning after they become slaves'.[39] More broadly, the argument seems to follow Adam Smith's sense of the 'law of slavery' as an 'unfortunate' aspect of progress, implicitly agreeing with him that economic outcomes improved when enslaved people were kindly used.[40]

Though 'The Grateful Negro' is located 'in the island of Jamaica',[41] it yields little by way of topographical specificity. Edgeworth's narrative affords neither a fully realised picturesque landscape nor a historical sense of a colonial settlement characterised by gaols, courthouses and barracks. Instead, she depicts an island whose single and singular reality is a plantation life dedicated to the production of 'rum, sugar, and indigo'.[42] The rebellion begins on the plantation of the idle and profligate Mr Jeffries and spreads to the neighbouring estate of the well-meaning Mr Edwards, before being thwarted by the noble Cæsar, the 'grateful negro' of the title. It concludes with the downfall of Mr Jeffries, an event imagined in specifically economic terms: he loses fifty thousand pounds and is 'obliged to live in obscurity and indigence' as an absentee owner in England.[43] The shame of enforced absenteeism takes its charge from Irish politics while the imagined horrors of Jamaican plantation life in turn lent force to Edgeworth's criticism of Irish estate management in her

---

[39] Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Essay on Irish Bulls*, in vol. 1 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, (ed.) Jane Desmarais, Tim McLoughlin, and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), p. 101.

[40] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations: A Selected Edition*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 349; see Edwin Van De Haar, 'Adam Smith on empire and international relations', in Christopher J. Berry, Maria Pia Paganelli and Craig Smith (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[41] Maria Edgeworth, 'The Grateful Negro', in *Popular Tales*, 3 vols (London, 1804), vol. 3, p. 193.

[42] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro,'p. 202.

[43] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro,'p. 239.

Irish novel of 1812, *The Absentee*, where a peasant character remarks of his landlord that 'He might as well be a West India planter, and we negroes, for any thing he knows to the contrary — has no more care, nor thought about us, than if we were in Jamaica, or the other world'.[44]

The Grateful Negro has a fable-like quality that it shares with *Murad the Unlucky*, an Orientalist story in the same collection of *Popular Tales*, in which the stories are all aimed at ordinary middle-class readers. The simple style, though, comes under strain as Edgeworth incorporates details from political economy into the narrative. She describes how Mr Edwards treats his enslaved people with 'all possible humanity', fearing their 'sudden emancipation' and working instead towards 'amelioration' and a 'reasonable' form of plantation proprietorship.[45] In discussion with Mr Jeffries, Edwards admits that labour is needed to cater for the European appetite for 'rum, sugar, and indigo' but asks 'If we hired negroes for labourers, instead of purchasing them for slaves, do you think they would not work as well as they do now? Does any negro, under the fear of the overseer, work harder than a Birmingham journeyman, or a Newcastle collier; who toil for themselves and their families?'[46] Ashley Cohen discusses the political and geographic 'capaciousness' of Edgeworth's definition of slavery and understands the *Popular Tales* as imagining a 'global Jacobin crisis' that 'threw into relief the ease with which processes of exploitation, dispossession, and political and economic oppression subverted boundaries between the domestic and the imperial, free and unfree labor.'[47] Yet the naturalisation of enslavement within a global world of work is challenged not only by contrasting scenes from Mr Jeffries' estate (an enslaved person whipped in the boiling room, rebels that set fire to the cane in

[44] Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, in vol. 5 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, (ed.) Heidi Van de Veire, Kim Walker, and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), p. 101.
[45] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro', p. 195.
[46] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro'., p. 202.
[47] Ashley L. Cohen, 'Wage slavery, oriental despotism, and global labor management in Maria Edgeworth's *Popular Tales*', *The Eighteenth Century*, 55:2–3 (2014), 193–215, p. 195.

order to 'extirpate every white man, woman, and child')[48] but also by the wider historical context that Edgeworth seeks to capture.

Edgeworth's choice of a largely domestic setting for a tale that represents the brutal plunder colony of Jamaica results in some striking contrasts. The wife of Mr Jeffries, a 'languid fine lady', is depicted 'reclining on a couch' or 'extended on a sofa', fanned by enslaved people.[49] The image draws on abolitionist writing by Anna Letitia Barbauld and William Cowper, in particular Barbauld's depiction of the idle planter's wife in her *Epistle to William Wilberforce.* Meanwhile what Cohen calls Mr Edwards's 'Progressive labor management techniques'[50] are framed by the particularities of the plantation landscape: huts, the cottage and cultivated 'provision ground' of the enslaved Caesar, Mr Jeffries' dining-room and drawing-room and the sofa on which his wife languishes; the sound of the conch shell calling the enslaved people to their labours; the sugar boiler over which they toil; the 'spreading palm-tree' under which Mr Edwards gathers his 'well clad' slaves for a holiday;[51] the woods in which the rebels hide; the burned-out house of Jeffries' overseer, Mr Durant. This constellation of images form part of a larger cultural process by which 'the different, disruptive and dangerous landscape of Jamaica – a place of death, disease and disorder for all who found themselves there – is brought to order through the conventions of European landscape depiction'.[52] The 'holiday' scene on the estate is particularly noteworthy in this respect: 'the pleasing spectacle of this negro festival' is framed by trees, with enslaved people 'bringing baskets of avocado pears, grapes, and pine-apples, the produce of their own provision grounds'.[53] The mention of these and other plants such as banana and tamarind in

[48] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro', p. 207.
[49] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro'., p. 228.
[50] Cohen, 'Wage slavery', p. 196.
[51] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro', p. 255.
[52] Miles Ogborn, 'Slavery, freedom and the Jamaican landscape', *British Library*, www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/slavery-freedom-and-the-jamaican-landscape. Accessed 19 February 2021.
[53] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro', p. 232.

the tale (as with the earlier reference to Angola peas in *Belinda*) are reminders of 'Africa's botanical legacy in the Americas'.[54]

Scholars including Jill Casid and Vincent Brown have written about contradictions inherent in depictions of flourishing plant life within West Indian landscapes deadly to the enslaved populations.[55] Edgeworth pursues these links in her discussion of Obeah, a form of Afro-Caribbean religion that she describes in a long footnote that quotes from Edwards's *History*. In the tale, 'an old Koromantyn negress' named Esther uses 'poisonous herbs' to induce a coma in Cæsar's wife, threatening Cæsar that Clara will never recover life as long as he fails to support the rebellion.[56] Instead, he warns his master Mr Edwards of the danger and suffers a knife attack from his friend, Hector. Both Cæsar and Clara regain life and Mr Edwards's 'eloquence' and humanity sees an end to the rebellion.[57]

References to the West Indies in Edgeworth's fiction thin out after the second series of *Tales of Fashionable Life* in 1812. In *Patronage* (1814) she turns her attention to the East India company though when Godfrey Percy's ship is sent to the West Indies as a punishment (Mr Falconer hopefully predicts that Godfrey will die of plague), there is a passing reference to the fear of 'yellow fever' and the challenges of the climate: 'temperance and spice are the best preservative in that climate; so you need not fear for me, for you know I love pepper better than port'.[58]

A lasting and important line of connection between Edgeworth, the West Indies and the politics of slavery is found in her correspondence with Rachel Mordecai Lazarus. Their

---

[54] Miles Ogborn, 'Discriminating evidence: closeness and distance in natural and civil histories of the Caribbean', *Modern Intellectual History*, 11:3 (2014), 631–53. See Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
[55] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
[56] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro', pp. 216–7.
[57] Edgeworth, 'Grateful Negro',., p. 239.
[58] Maria Edgeworth, *Patronage*, 4 vols (London, 2nd edn, 1814), vol. 1, p. 260.

correspondence began in 1815, when Mordecai Lazarus addressed an admiring letter to Edgeworth from her home in Virgina. She all but regarded the Edgeworth family as 'individual friends', such was her admiration of *Practical Education,* but wrote that her reading of the fiction was marred by the representation of Jewish characters as 'mean, avaricious and unprincipled'[59] (examples would include the 'extremely cunning, profoundly ignorant'[60] Jewish jeweller in *The Good Aunt*). A long correspondence ensued, through which are threaded the topics of education, literature and family, with regular reports on births, marriages and deaths. Topics also include slavery, government, botany, prison reform, sea bathing, lace making, cholera, British rule in India and steam trains. The letters span from 1815 to Lazarus's death in 1838, taking in such milestones as the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, the British Reform Act of 1832 and the 1833 abolition of slavery in the British sugar colonies.

Herself someone who held people as property (as well as a Jew who converted to Christianity shortly before her death), Lazarus lived in Wilmingon, Virginia, a place that she described to Edgeworth as being 'situated thirty miles up the Cape Fear river, which is navigable to this town, its principal commerce with the West Indies, direct communication with Europe unfrequent'.[61] There is no reference to 'The Grateful Negro' nor to any of Edgeworth's writing about the West Indies in the correspondence, but as in the fiction itself, discussions of literary taste often serves to draw in wider political contexts. The first mention of slavery came in 1824 when, in discussing 'an American novel which had then just appeared' (Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Redwood*), Lazarus assured Edgeworth that 'The condition of our slaves both in this and the sister states is far less miserable than that of the poorer classes of white people. They are comfortably maintained and with very few

[59] Edgar E. MacDonald (ed.), *The Education of the Heart: The Correspondence of Rachel Mordecai Lazarus and Maria Edgeworth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 4, 6.
[60] Edgeworth, 'The Good Aunt', p. 232.
[61] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*, p 132.

exceptions kindly treated. So long as the benefits of education are denied them, their state must be abject, and the necessity of retaining them is by all admitted to be an evil tho' at present an unavoidable one; but their usual cheerful demeanour argues well for the humanity of their masters'.[62] In 1825, Edgeworth turned from Lady Blessington's *Conversations with Byron* to 'the Greeks, the West Indian slaves, the Irish "poor slave"'; the connections animated by 'the subject of *Catholic emancipation* which has occupied these countries and the English parliament for some months past'.[63]

Writing again about 'the unfortunate Irish' in 1831, Lazarus described their condition as the result of a British 'system' akin to slavery:

> The more I learn of the actual state of Ireland, the more am I inclined to wonder at the mistaken policy of a wise and enlightened government in pursuing a system so glaringly oppressive, and, I should say, injurious to their own interests. Much has been humanely urged in the British Parliament on the subject of Negro slavery; yet is the condition of the Irish poor incomparably worse than that of the slave, either here, or as far as I am informed, in the Islands? I do not mean to defend the Slave System, of which I feel and acknowledge all the evils; but where is the consistency of practising, without even a similar shadow of apology, a system which wants but the name to render it more than equally odious?[64]

Lazarus's account of the Nat Turner rebellion is often quoted in histories of that conflict and the event loomed large in her life. In August of 1831, enslaved spiritual leader Nat Turner led between fifty and sixty people to rebellion; fifty-five people were killed across eleven

---

[62] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart,.*, p. 69.
[63] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart,.*, p. 80.
[64] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart,.*, p. 111.

plantations in Virginia. The militia put the rebellion down quickly, but fear was wide spread throughout the region afterwards. The letter that Lazarus wrote to Edgeworth about the events is missing but, in early October, she expressed her continuing fears of rebellion to her brother, even speculating that African-Americans might be repatriated from the Southern states:

> To be necessarily surrounded by those in whom we cannot permit ourselves to feel confidence, to know that unremitted vigilance is our only safeguard, and that soon or late we or our descendants will become the certain victims of a band of lawless wretches who will deem murder and outrage just retribution is deplorable in the extreme. The United States government might possibly find a remedy by rendering some equivalent to slave owners and exporting the slaves in as large numbers as practicable to Africa.[65]

The rebellion broke apart the fiction of good or paternalist enslavement, the very prevalence of which was part of a result of the popularity of Edgeworth's often-reprinted tale, *The Grateful Negro*: 'an ur text for the representation of blacks in nineteenth-century US childrens' fiction', according to Boulukos, 'and hence a shaping influence on white Antebellum citizens' concepts of race'.[66]

The letters from the early 1830s discuss and compare English mobs, Irish Repealers and the prospect of the abolition of slavery, with the two women often returning to their shared belief in education and the view that, as Edgeworth put it, the 'slaves must be

---

[65] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*,, p. 212.

[66] George Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 237–8. Boulukos describes Edgeworth as the key figure in the dissemination of "the grateful slave" in nineteenth-century England and America'. He draws on Sarah N. Roth, 'The mind of a child: images of African Americans in early juvenile fiction', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 25:1 (2005), 79–109.

prepared by education to be free and to provide for themselves before they can be set free without danger to others and destruction and misery to themselves and society.'[67] Lazarus meanwhile wondered 'what can be said of men who blindly, madly urge the slave to seek his freedom through a sea of blood, who promise to aid him in the commission of a crime, without even glancing at the too-certain consequences, and who, while pledging themselves to the cause of suffering humanity, would spread horror and devastation among their brethren and over one half of their mother land?'.[68] In 1835, Edgeworth received a gift from the Scottish writer Mrs Carmichael of her pro-slavery book, *Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies*, a title that she subsequently recommended to Lazarus's attention for its discussion of 'Trinidad and St Vincent's specially'.[69] Edgeworth's copy of the book contains marginal notes in her own hand, sometimes noting curiosities of natural history (a type of toad called a 'crappaud' and 'parasol' or leaf-cutter ants) but also a correction to Carmichael's blithe account of the comforts enjoyed by restrained and humiliated slaves: 'Nonsense. They often have pillows when in stocks — but never mosquito nets — & all feel it a punishment.'[70]

A discussion of Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (1837) led to a disagreement between the two women. Edgeworth admired the book greatly and was drawn by its discussion of republican government, democracy and slavery: ' I agree with Miss Martineau', she told Lazarus, 'in all she says on the question of Slaves and on the inconsistency of American liberty and slavery'. She went on: 'I know this is a dangerous, a tabooed subject.'[71] Edgeworth's distrust of 'the government by majority of numbers' and democracy itself comes through in the letter (which also touches on the proper care of a 'spotless anenome'

[67] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*, p. 279.
[68] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*,., p. 274.
[69] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*,., p. 280.
[70] Thanks to Karen Ievers of Mount Ievers, Co. Limerick for sharing these pages with me.
[71] Ibid., p. 298.

that is to be sent from Virigina to Edgeworthstown via Liverpool),[72] and Lazarus's response reminded the Irish author that Martineau's 'republican or Democratick opinions' are not what 'I or any of my friends consider reasonable'.[73] On 'the slave question', Lazarus cannot disagree with the incomptability of slavery with liberty but blames the inquities of colonial history: 'it was English Colonies planted in America … who entailed this curse upon our land'.[74] Edgeworth's final letter to her friend recognises the 'indignation' of this response but also insists on Martineau's 'courage',[75] as if to illustrate Marcus Wood's description of Martineau as 'a unique transatlantic cultural barometer' in the imagination of slavery.[76]

A distinct thread running through the Edgeworth–Lazarus correspondence is the women's shared interest in botany. The last paragraph of Edgeworth's final letter, sent in June 1838, moves from Martineau and slavery to family matters, friends and, finally, natural history: 'Pray tell me what is meant by *Broomcorn* and whether it is a common crop in America … Pray enclose in your next one seed of Broomcorn for Ireland in return'.[77] The letters give extensive evidence of regular seed and plant exchanges across the ocean between the two women. The carefully wrapped packages that they shared with extended families include Venus fly-trap seeds, pods of cotton, crocus and primrose bulbs, a humming bird's nest, 'the wings of a rice bird',[78] grasshopper legs and alligator eggs. Seeds from the East Indies, sent to Ireland for Edgeworth's stepmother, in turn were sent on to Lazarus. Edgeworth even requested a live mocking bird who died in transit. To facilitate these transatlantic packages, Edgeworth used the address of her publisher Hunter in London along with other friends in office in Dublin. Botanical curiosities sent on by Lazarus went via

[72] Ibid., p. 299.
[73] Ibid., p. 302.
[74] Ibid., p. 305.
[75] Ibid., pp. 310–1.
[76] Marcus Woods, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 256.
[77] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*, p. 314.
[78] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*,., p. 114.

Edgeworth to her friend Mr Mackay in the Botanical Gardens in Dublin and to Glasgow Botanical Gardens, as well as being shared out among friends and neighbours while Lazarus obtained anemone specimens for Edgeworthstown from the Botanical Garden in New York.

These international public gardens were themselves part of an imperial history that has been discussed by Finola O'Kane. The Dublin Botanical Gardens were inspired by those in Kew, London. The Dublin Society purchased lands at Glasnevin in 1795 and, in May 1800, the public gardens opened as 'the largest publicly supported botanical garden in Europe and the largest in the British Empire apart from a seventy-acre garden near Kingston, Jamaica'.[79] Edgeworth's early writings often mention seeds and exotic plants, always connecting exotic plants to power and sometimes explicitly acknowledging the colonial dimensions of the traffic in seeds. In *Belinda* (1801), two fashionable ladies quarrel over who gets to show a hundred-year-old aloe just about to bloom at their salon; meanwhile, the gardener who has raised this precious plant in his greenhouse (and who had planned to show it for a fee) is deprived of income. A rare geranium is at the centre of a similar plot of cross-class intrigue and deceit in Edgeworth's tale *Forester* from 1801.

The proximity of botany to slave rebellion and political conditions in Ireland and Britain is a striking aspect of Edgeworth and Lazarus's correspondence, not least because of its regular proximity to the topic of what is 'new', 'admirable' and '*valuable*' in the world of literature.[80] These relationships return our attention to the ways in which Edgeworth's fictions realise a recurring set of exchanges – of people, goods and plants – across the empire. Such interconnections have unpredictable effects in Edgeworth's narratives, as in the strange scene in *The Good Aunt* discussed above, where adults tussle with a Creole child absorbed in the details of torture of enslaved people for possession of a jar that does not in the end

[79] Finola O'Kane, 'The Irish botanical garden, for Ireland or for Empire?', *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, 25 (2008), 446–55.
[80] MacDonald (ed.), *Education of the Heart*, p. 199.

contain the West Indian sweets for which he longs. The jagged details somehow fit the shape of this strange tale, with its exploration of the question of what makes a good education in the context of a domesticity made precarious by loss, accidents and the colonial circulation of people and property. And while the narrative of *The Grateful Negro* seems to effect a harmonious arrangement of enslaved people, plants and landscape it can only do so via the effects of violent contrast, including the image of a plantation in flames.

The discussion presented here is intended to unlock Edgeworth's interest in the West Indies across her writing life and to shape further research. Not least of the surprises in Edgeworth's thinking about the West Indies are the strange lines of connection between gardening and 'the attempted conversion of human subjects into extractable, exchangeable, saleable, transplantable 'objects': testament to Edgeworth's grasp of what Jill Casid describes as the 'terrible alchemy' between plantation landscapes and the trade in people.[81] But where the 'narrative alchemy'[82] of Edgeworth's Irish tales can transform the materials of a painful past into the stuff of literary gold, her fictional treatments of the West Indies fail to find the philosopher's stone.

[81] Jill H. Casid, 'Epilogue: Landscape in, around, and under the performative', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 21:1 (2011), 97–116.
[82] Julia Anne Miller, 'Acts of union: family violence and national courtship in Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* and Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*', in Kathryn Kirpatrick (ed.), *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 22.