



Classics in Short No. 121: Maria Edgeworth

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Brian Alderson on Maria Edgeworth

Brian Alderson on 'the great Maria' and the birth of the first living character in children's literature.

Jane Austen

was demonstrably influenced by her writing and Walter Scott, who admired her Irish setting for **Castle Rackrent**, called her 'the great Maria'. Nowadays though Maria Edgeworth's greatness is manifest chiefly in the jolt that she gave to the composing of stories for children. She brought a new and unfamiliar humanity to a genre which, at the end of the eighteenth century, was dominated by a bevy of mostly female writers who, whatever their tenderness, were manufacturing their fictions in the pill-sugaring department.

Unmarried,

she might be thought no better qualified than most of these spinsters and didactic mammas for entertaining the young, but that would be to discount both her parentage and her experience. Born in 1767 she was the daughter of the enlightened and polyphiloprogenitive Richard Lovell Edgeworth, scion of the Edgeworths of Edgeworthstown in County Longford and ultimately the father of twenty-two children by four successive wives. Being an early member of this brood Maria found herself, from adolescence onward, both a step-sister and a nurse to them and since both she and her father were keenly interested in new ideas on education (they would jointly write the intelligent and influential **Practical Education** of 1798) she both taught her siblings and learned from them.

School slates

were said to be a key factor in the composition of Maria's earliest stories, for a story might be written on them, read to whatever company of children might be present and then revised in the light of their reactions. Such an oral origin gave some of the tales from the first a natural speaking rhythm while talk within the family (and she and her father often noted children's turns of speech) would give an authenticity to the words on the page. Take this reply of a bullying housemaid, telling a little lacemaker to come back later for her payment:

'Lord bless my stars! What makes people so poor, Iwonders! ...Call again ! Yes to be sure.

I believe that you'd call, call, call twenty times for twopence.'

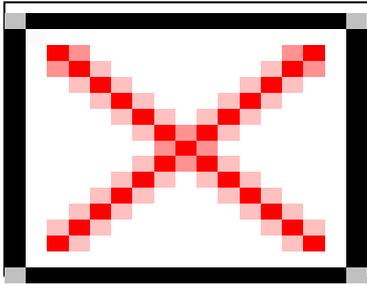
That's from 'The Birth-Day Present'

one of the stories in the three volumes of Maria's first publication: the unappealingly-titled **Parent's Assistant** of 1796. Its publication history is complicated but by the time a third edition appeared, in six volumes, in 1800, twenty stories in all had been printed. (Three very short tales for younger children were transferred to a new series of ten volumes called,

also unappealingly, **Early Lessons**.) In choice of subject and in length they make up a varied bunch ('Old Poz' is actually a play) and their two longest: 'Lazy Lawrence' and 'Simple Susan' take something of the form of a novella rather than a single-incident tale.

'Lazy Lawrence'

is set in the vicinity of Bristol, where the Edgeworths had lived for a couple of years, and works on the contrast between



Jem, a poor fatherless boy, whose purposeful energies fend off financial calamity, and the indolent Lawrence whose directionless existence brings him to disaster and the Bridewell. Formulaic though it be as a moral tale, it is saved from crassness by Maria's eye for details of daily life, for the more than formulaic depiction of character, and by the sheer readability of her storytelling

These virtues

are yet more prominent in 'Simple Susan' which runs to two chapters and has a wider spread of characters. Once again we are in the countryside ? this time 'on the borders of Wales' ? and among village folk. Destitution is not now at issue so much as rescuing Susan's father, a tenant farmer, first from his being balloted as a militiaman and second as a victim of unscrupulous actions on the part of a vindictive local lawyer. The tensions of that small drama are mirrored in the bad feeling that exists between the lawyer's daughter and the village children and her jealousy of 'Simple Susan' in particular. All would surely have gone ill were it not for the arrival of a new and beneficent squire and his family who take the role of *dei ex machina*. Susan is, of course, simple only in her unassuming demeanour, for she shows great determination and self-sacrifice in bringing about a happy conclusion, at one point of which Walter Scott was left able 'to do nothing but cry'.

The Parent's Assistant

also saw the early arrival of little Rosamond in the famous story of 'The Purple Jar' with several tiny, insightful adjunct tales, including the wonderfully-crafted 'Birth-Day Present [1] [3]'. But Rosamond, reckoned to be based on Maria herself, would not go away and found herself growing up in episodes interspersed through later story collections down to 1821 when she is on the brink of adolescence. (Victorian publishers sensibly brought the earlier chunks of her biography together in compendia.) The educational content remains ? after all, the stories were intended to assist parents in guiding their children - but Rosamond never loses an attractiveness that makes her the first living character in children's literature.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

The Parents' Assistant, Or, Stories for Children by Maria Edgeworth is published by Leopold Classic Library, £11.95.

[1] [4] Barbara Willard chose it for her fine racketty anthology *Hullabaloo*, with jolly headpieces by Fritz Wegner (Hamish Hamilton, 1969)

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