

Troubling Journey: Elite Women Travellers of Ireland and the Irish Question, 1834-1852

Joel Scherer
Colorado State University

It is difficult to discuss Irish history without mentioning the Great Irish Famine of 1845-52. Considering the event's magnitude—nearly 8 million deaths and a population that has yet to recover to pre-famine levels—it deservedly commands attention of both scholars and non-academics alike.¹ As such, its impact casts a large shadow on Irish historiography and creates a framework around which to analyze other periods of the nation's history. The post-famine period in particular marks a rich historical era where many economic, environmental, and social components were in flux.

The famine reveals insight into Irish and English women's relationship to the land and people. Women during this period played a greater role as agricultural workers and represented a substantial number of emigrants. Female migrants actually achieved parity with men during this time while the rest of Europe sent its men abroad almost exclusively. As such, gender studies in famine-related scholarship either focus on women as farm wives or as emigrants.² Yet within these two branches of Irish post-famine gender history, little coverage exists of perspectives outside those of agricultural and working class women. A class-based focus emphasizes the commercial and social at the expense of the environmental and cultural. This paper seeks to correct these imbalances by analyzing elite women's viewpoints. Their voices provided both the environmental and cultural component lacking in scholarship and brought a broader, more comprehensive perspective to the Irish famine studies that could not be found in data-driven economic analyses.

Using travelogues and letters by a variety of elite Irish and English women writers who traveled across Ireland's countryside during the famine and post-famine years, I show that elite Irish and English women were greatly distressed at what they saw during this period. I argue that rather than being optimistic concerning Ireland's future, as many of them are usually portrayed in the historiography, these women were perplexed when they actually traveled through the Irish

¹ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3. Ó Gráda argues against historians who attempt to relegate Ireland to serving as merely another case study in the universal phenomenon of famine and hunger. His work historicizes the Famine and distinguishes between the Irish example and developing world issues such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa.

² Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change, and Housework in Ireland, 1890-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jonathan Bell and Mervyn Watson, *A History of Irish Farming 1750-1950* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2008); Enda Delaney, "Gender and Twentieth-century Irish Migration, 1921-1971," in Pamela Sharpe (ed.), *Women, Gender and Labour Migration: Historical and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2001); David Fitzpatrick, "Women and the Great Famine," in Margaret Kelleher and James H. Murphy (eds.), *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres* (Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 1997).

countryside.³ What troubled them was a version of the Irish Question: how could a nation so environmentally blessed be so disadvantaged socially and economically? They expressed these mixed feelings often quite frankly in their travelling diaries and letters as they moved across the landscape.

While earlier bodies of literature on Irish lower classes and emigrants commonly portray famine-related trauma, elites struggled in a different sense. They sought to answer larger questions: how best to situate themselves and Ireland within a post-famine milieu? What solutions could be proffered to such a troubled island? Many of these writers saw Ireland's ecology and environment in positive terms, but they often found fault with its societal and economic structures. Although much of their criticism appeared to stem from the frustrations of nineteenth century travel—changing environmental conditions, weather, logistics—stress and rudimentary transport cannot be all to blame. Particularly, the act of travelling opened a new occasion for Irish and English women to comprehend the Irish nation. By examining these sources, this essay seeks to expand the concept of Irish and English women by placing female elites in their historical context and uncovering their perspectives on Ireland's environment and culture. Ultimately, such a study not only contributes to an underrepresented area, but provides a key social perspective for how powerful women saw Ireland during and after the ravages of the famine.

Elite women travelers conveyed varying levels of awareness and interest in the mid-nineteenth century Irish milieu. Some, like Harriet Martineau, immersed themselves in what today we would refer to as social observation, describing their travels in near academic terms. These writers expressed an awareness of the Irish situation—the famine and the suffering—perceiving a role for themselves as cross-cultural observers amidst the country's troubles. This group wrote for an elite audience of urban reformers.

For other women, like Lydia Jane Leadbeater Fisher or even Queen Victoria, travelling was a means to an end, or was remembered and recorded as a solely personal enterprise. These latter travelers saw their journeys in terms of how it related to them, not as much in its relation to Ireland. While they may have ultimately recorded valuable information and impressions concerning how they felt about the Irish Question or drew comparisons to home countries, these writers did not intend to employ their diaries, letters, or travelogues as musings on issues relating to Ireland as a national entity. They wrote in self-reflection—an existential exercise for either personal or close familial consumption.

Trying to understand the cause of Ireland's singular misfortune and how these actors saw themselves in relation to it may be rooted in a belief that the Irish situation was *not* entirely unusual. Many scholars argued for this perspective by showing how Ireland suffered in ways that had little to do with uniquely Irish phenomena. Ireland had more in common with British influence and universal problems of demography and economics. One of these academics, Timothy Guinnane, warned of the dangers of viewing the Irish situation as extraordinary. He showed in his study of depopulation in post-famine Ireland that neither emigration, large families, nor low marriage rates were particular to Ireland. Perhaps taking a jab at nationalist projects, he noted that “much of the

³ Scholars often describe two prominent travellers—Harriet Martineau and Lady Gregory—as confident in Ireland's prospects (Gregory in terms of nationalism; Martineau in the stability and benefit provided by the Union). See Colm Tóibín, *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); Deborah A. Logan (ed.), *Harriet Martineau and the Irish Question: Condition of Post-famine Ireland* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2012); James Pethica (ed.), *Lady Gregory's Diaries 1892-1902* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

historiography tries to find specifically Irish reason for behaviors that were widespread.”⁴ Although acknowledging that Ireland has a “distinctive demographic regime” Guinnane nevertheless held that the famine played a much more reduced role in that regime than what has been posited thus far. Likewise, Donald MacRaild, in his studies of the Irish Diaspora in the modern period, noted the continuity of Irish troubles through the famine and into the late nineteenth century. Like Guinnane, he argued that post-famine depopulation could not be accounted for solely by emigration. Rather than a break with the past, the famine greatly exacerbated trends that were already in place—he argued that the event “actually enhanced demographic and economic patterns that were already noticeable.”⁵

Outsiders ultimately viewed Ireland as troubled, but whether transnational phenomena like worldwide emigration remained entirely without precedent weighed little in the minds of those writing about Ireland from provincial vantage points. For the most part, these writers focused inward; Martineau, Fisher, and Edgeworth expressed more concern with activities occurring on the British Isles and less with political, especially continental, European comparisons. This is important to keep in mind, as the local—meaning the Anglo-Irish island region—remained paramount in these authors’ minds. Their understandings of Irish history, the struggle of peasant tenant farmers, the context of Catholic-Protestant conflicts, and England’s dominance in the Anglo-Irish relationship meant more to them and their prescriptions for Irish wellbeing than how they felt about Ireland’s place in the world. In this sense, the following history is less transcontinental than *transregional*. Non-Anglo-Irish intercontinental connections are absent because these women saw the Irish Question only within the context of England and Ireland.

By considering the domestic Anglo-Irish perspective of elite women’s writings during this period, a few non-textual sources can add to our understanding of this post-famine milieu. Folk memory, while often denigrated for its biases and nationalist sentimentality, can serve as a useful point of view that shows immediacy and feeling—the “semipublic attitudes” that are sometimes lost with conventional sources.⁶ The emotions specific to Ireland also drive the travelogues and these contain important sources when attempting to understand memory of the famine. Integrating these stories with our elite women’s perspectives reveals the power of immediacy. Famine-related historiography acknowledges the usefulness of folk memory to this era.

Elite women’s travelogues acknowledge what Enda Delaney called for in a recent essay on Irish women’s migration. In it she argued that historians have abandoned the most recent century to sociologists and geographers. While her study lays within what could be considered a post-famine time period, her sociocultural approach to Irish migration revealed some interesting historical and methodological observations. Delaney argued that historians cannot understand larger functions like migration by looking only at political or economic events: “sociological change,” she argued, is “as important in determining migration flows [as economy].” Her conclusion advocated for analysis “not only of those determinants that could be regarded as economic in nature, but also social and cultural variables.”⁷

Understanding the traumatic social context is critical when looking at the environment surrounding these women travelers as they journeyed across the towns and fields of Ireland.

⁴ Timothy W. Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7.

⁵ Donald M. MacRaild, *The Irish Diaspora in Britain, 1750-1939*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 10.

⁶ Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 195.

⁷ Delaney, “Gender and Twentieth-century Irish Migration,” 220.

Women writers heard stories, folk tales, and, as highly literate individuals for their day, read the news. As such, they carried with them an understanding of how to articulate what they observed as they travelled. Martineau, for example, in one of her journeys across the province Connacht revealed her understanding of the famine's ravages, but quickly reminded herself to stay on topic and not digress into descriptions of its "horrors."⁸

Some of these "horrors" included the spectacle of suffering and death, and several folk tales remember the omnipresence of death. One of these tales, cataloged by Lady Gregory in 1926, recalled how many local graveyards ran out of coffins and resorted to bags. Most of these would be dumped without any rites or mourning—in many cases dogs "brought the bodies out of the houses."⁹ Other tales told of people carried away to be buried still living. One local citizen observed: "[T]here was a man hired [in Muí Mór] to carry the people who died to the graveyard, and he never closed it, nor did he put the dead in there more than once a week, since they used to die of hunger lying on the roadside by the gate in the hopes of getting something to eat." The same story describes those "who were not dead at all but close to it, [the man] would put them in his wheelbarrow and carry them to the trench. He would let them down among the corpses and allow them to die there."¹⁰

Yet folk stories during the time of famine also tell of triumph. One such story gathered by the American scholar of folklore Henry Glassie originated from around Fermanagh, near Ulster. It told the story of a man named McBrien and his desperation to feed his wife and five children, all in "starving condition." He traveled to the Arney River to fish where his endeavor succeeded, catching one fish for each family member.¹¹ Although the river helped provide for his needs, the fisherman was an active participant in his and his family's redemption. While such tales reveal Irish peasants as not just victims, but agents, they also show the crucial intersection between nature and culture in Anglo-Irish consciousness.

This understanding of Ireland's natural bounty and its potential to provide for its inhabitants expressed itself across women's travelogues. Women travelers often devoted great sections of prose to the glories and beauty of the Irish landscape, reveling in the fertility of its fields and soil: "[r]ich are the means which Nature has laid there, ready to the hand of man"—wrote Martineau.¹² As a proto-sociologist and disciple of Auguste Comte—the nineteenth century French philosopher, Martineau paralleled forerunners of the positivist movement—a belief infused with the desire to rationalize and quantify the social disciplines in a manner similar to the physical and natural sciences. Her religious dissent and status as an unmarried female intellectual propelled her to seek social reform over theological doctrine or political maneuvering. For her, understanding the causes of poverty remained insufficient—she wished to craft solutions to fix them.¹³ Of all the women writer-travelers in this study, Martineau said the least about religion. Nominally Protestant (although many believed her to be agnostic, even an atheist), anti-Catholicism played little if any role in Martineau's writings—unlike both Fisher and Edgeworth, whose anti-papal biases were obvious to readers. It is important to note Martineau's positivism, because even with its emphasis

⁸ Harriet Martineau, Letter XVI, in *Letters From Ireland*, in the British and Irish Women's Letters and Diaries, 1500-1950, (hereafter cited as BIWLD) <http://solomon.bwld.alexanderstreet.com/> (accessed on November 2, 2013).

⁹ Henry Glassie (ed.), *Irish Folktales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 231.

¹⁰ Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 202.

¹¹ Glassie, *Irish Folktales*, 232.

¹² Martineau, Letter XVI.

¹³ Logan, *Harriet Martineau and the Irish Question*, xi.

on material causality and finding determinants to general hypotheses, Ireland's natural environment distracted Martineau in both its fertility and aesthetic. Even though she tried hard to avoid emotional rhetoric (at one point she declared—"[o]ur business is to tell of things as they are, and not to sentimentalize about how they might be expected to be") she remained affected by the beauty she found in her travels, expressing an element of pathos in her writings.¹⁴

For example, in a journey across Ulster near Coleraine, Martineau expressed her passion for Nature. Observing the "noble crowning precipices" that stretch out greenery "which melts into the white sand of the beach," she declared that the beauty of this scene and the surrounding region "[was] so extreme that the stranger thinks little of anything else." Flowers nearby turned this slope into "one gigantic primrose bank" filled with blue-bells and roses, all surrounded by a "perfect wilderness of bushes and trails."¹⁵ Myrtle "flourishes here" she noted, and "in every chasm of the cliffs is a feathery waterfall, whose spray is taken up and scattered in the sunlight by every passing breeze."¹⁶ A journey one month later found her in an entirely different part of Ireland, this time in its far northwest corner in an area called Erris—a remote district, even today. She noted that it was an area particularly devastated by the famine but that a little valley called Glencastle was "pretty," with its sides "bristling with wood, and its slopes carpeted with green."¹⁷ Here Martineau noticed the juxtaposition between impoverishment and nature's beauty, revealing her struggle to answer the Irish Question.

Other women travelers also noted the beauty of Ireland's landscape. Queen Victoria, in the first of her two trips to Ireland during her reign, observed that the banks of the River Liffey in Dublin contained some of the "most splendid beeches I have ever seen—feathering down quite to the ground."¹⁸ The far side of Ireland, near Cork, also received favorable reviews from the Queen in terms of natural beauty. Here she recalled docking in the cove at the nearby River Lee which was "extremely pretty and wooded."¹⁹ Victoria's opinions on other aspects of Ireland were not as flattering, but she reserved high praise for the natural aesthetics of the landscape.²⁰

English women were not the only ones travelling across Ireland. A well-to-do Irish woman named Lydia Jane Leadbeater Fisher wrote one of the best travelogues. Fisher took a long journey across Munster during the beginning of the famine. Of the three primary women in this study, Fisher was the only Irish-born. Like both Martineau and Edgeworth, she expressed a nominal Protestant faith, but unlike Martineau, Fisher's Protestantism revealed an anti-Catholic bias. Irish Protestants, as a minority in most of Ireland generally defined themselves against the "popery" of their Catholic Irish counterparts, thus mixing in easily when they emigrated to America or England; as one scholar put it, they lacked "visibility" in their new countries.²¹ What set Fisher

¹⁴ Martineau, Letter XVI.

¹⁵ Martineau, Letter III.

¹⁶ Martineau, Letter III.

¹⁷ Martineau, Letter XVI.

¹⁸ Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands, from 1848-1861*, "Tours in England and Ireland, and Yachting Excursions," August 2-12, 1849, in BIWLD <http://solomon.bwld.alexanderstreet.com/> (accessed on November 2, 2013).

¹⁹ Victoria, "Tours in England and Ireland."

²⁰ Although the Romantic period placed great value on experiencing the sublime in nature, not all who visited Ireland during this time were aesthetically wowed. The American Frederick Douglass described his arrival to the Emerald Isle in 1845 in less than favorable terms: "worn and rent with the uncounted ages of conflict." See Patricia Ferreira, "All But 'A Black Skin and Woolly Hair': Fredrick Douglass's Witness of the Irish Famine," *American Studies International* 37, 2 (June 1999): 69.

²¹ MacRaild, *The Irish Diaspora in Britain*, 90, 91.

most apart from the other two women was her distinct sense of patriotism—such national pride is not present in the writings of the other women. Throughout her work she fondly recalled “Old Ireland” or expressed her proud feelings for her “native land.”²² Her patriotism, however, did not mean she represented a majority of Irish. Notwithstanding her elite economic position, she also maintained minority status within a significant part of her homeland both for her Protestant beliefs and her inability to speak Gaelic.²³

Unlike Martineau and Edgeworth, Fisher’s travel seemed to be solely for pleasure. She traveled with a group and mentioned various barons and affluent, well-connected patrons who wielded their influence throughout their journey to gain their party better accommodations. She directed her writing not to an international or regional audience but to her family: namely, “the best sister, the best aunt, the best wife in the whole world.”²⁴ Whereas Martineau sought to gather data and to understand Ireland rationally, Fisher approached her travels from a purely aesthetic and existential motive; she wished to experience the best of her country, revel in its literature and history, engage in dialog with its intellectual denizens, and muse at the verdant landscapes. Indeed, she filled large portions (sometimes even the bulk) of her letters with extensive quotes from folktales, literature, and histories. Her travelogues continually connected what she observed with various, often obscure, Irish cultural references to which she felt were applicable. Given the rambling and personal quality of these letters, none were intended to be cogent documents or distributed to a non-family audience: Fisher seemed determined to not only enjoy herself but document an enriching experience.

Yet Fisher should not be seen as entirely ignorant of her historical context or as indifferent to the ravages of the famine because of her elite status. Like Martineau, she made social and economic observations, admitting that during her travels she saw that “[Irish peasants’] wants were many and their privations great...we deemed them sunk in the lowest depth of poverty.” However, Fisher qualified this statement by cautioning the reader not to “expect to find, in the following pages, any reference to the present distressed state of those parts of Ireland which they attempt to describe.”²⁵ But the famine situation deteriorated further once Fisher departed, suggesting that even though she may have exercised a bit of censorship, she would have provided better coverage of its effects had she been better informed. She revealed her awareness of the dire situation in her introductory remarks to her first letter—“[m]y heart sinks within me as I picture their present situation, encompassed by their desolate mountains, buried in their barren wilds [...] Famine, Disease, and Death stalk through the country, and how can the means of life be carried in sufficient quantities into those rugged and dreary wastes?”²⁶ Yet she qualified to her reader why she devoted so little space to the horrors: “[I]t was far from entering into my mind that such aggravation of their poverty and misery impended...Alas! [L]ower deeps still were to be fathomed by them.”²⁷ Overall, like Martineau, Fisher revealed some awareness of her situation, but differed from the former’s rationalized and deliberate approach to Ireland by both her suggestions that she was

²² Lydia Jane Leadbeater Fisher, Letter II, Letter XII, in *Letters from the Kingdom of Kerry, in the Year 1845*, in BIWLD, <http://solomon.bwld.alexanderstreet.com/> (accessed on November 2, 2013).

²³ Fisher, Letter VI. At one point in her travels Fisher arrives at a Protestant children’s school—designed to convert Catholics of course—and is flummoxed by her inability to speak “Irish” with one of the young converts, who in turn, knew no English.

²⁴ Fisher, Preface.

²⁵ Fisher, Preface.

²⁶ Fisher, Introduction, Letter I.

²⁷ Fisher, Preface.

unconscious of the seriousness of developments and by her attempts to partially sanitize her narrative.

Fisher, like Martineau, rhapsodized about Ireland's natural wonders. During her travels near Erris she wrote that "no language can convey the slightest idea" of the beauty of the region which is "adorned with the most soothing and tender loveliness."²⁸ Declaring that her "heart" was indelibly struck with the impression of the scene she suggested that here "one might contented live, contented die!"

Wealth facilitated both Fisher and Martineau's ability to appreciate these aesthetic pleasures. Fisher seems to have been conducted around the countryside at the indulgence of affluent and powerful friends—a luxury, needless to say, not afforded the vast majority of her fellow citizens. During a description of the beginning of a new day's excursion, she declared that it "only adds to our ever new delight, and to the grateful sense we have of Mr. Hickson's polite kindness." Later she acknowledged a "Baron von W — —."²⁹ Her experiences (and those of Queen Victoria, Martineau, and Edgeworth), retained historical value. Fisher's effusions over Ireland's natural beauty suggested that perhaps she felt the need to compensate for the famine's devastation amongst a large party (many of who might have been English) by expressing herself in dramatic, emotional terms.

Fisher often imbibed these aesthetic pleasures through religious prejudice. During her party's visit to the ruins of a cathedral near Kilmelkedar, Fisher expounded on the beauty and loneliness of the scene. Conjuring a certain exoticism, Fisher described (with poorly disguised contempt) a "legend" that the locals believed concerning the church's origins. Drawing parallels to *Arabian Nights* and Aladdin's magical lamp, she revealed her condescension towards Catholicism by conflating it with folktales about an Eastern "other."³⁰ Later, she continued to express her belief in the inferiority of the strange religion as she observed the goings-on around the construction of a Catholic monument—after all, she mused, Ireland contained a "primitive people."³¹

Women travelers of the period noted more than just the aesthetic beauty of the natural environment. One of the most important aspects of these writers' observations of Ireland was the discussion of the rich agricultural potential and robust natural resources on display for the wandering migrant. During her trip to Erris, Martineau observed the bounty of the region's riparian areas, noting snipe and trout in the waters (providing a bit of confirmation to the folk tale of the fisherman who sustained his family on the river's catch) and grouse scattered across the heather. She noted that the rich soil along the Mullet Peninsula where the land was "covered with harvests" and "bristling" with sheaves of oats. Further she described the surrounding bay, admiring how it remained "always alive with fish." Yet Martineau observed that she only saw a single fisherman and that some of the fertile fields surrounding the area were returning fallow.³²

North, in the region of Ulster, she found another conundrum: a field of blighted potatoes in the midst of a riotous array of color—wild marigold, ragwort, and violet. Martineau was disgusted by the tubers, which she pronounced "wretched...black, withering, and offensive" and blamed them for having "poisoned and annihilated every growth within their boundaries." What was interesting she noted, was the presence of the ragwort and marigold. The wild growth of these

²⁸ Fisher, Letter XII.

²⁹ Fisher, Letter XII.

³⁰ Fisher, Letter VI.

³¹ Fisher, Preface, Letter VI.

³² Martineau, Letter XVI.

flowers, she claimed, showed that the land was fundamentally sound—its fertility affirmed. She observed two men in the vicinity actually taking the ragwort—which she asserted relieves the soil of potash—and mixing the wildflower into a pile of manure to reuse and scatter across the cropland.³³ The puzzle she wrestled with was embodied in this scene: how can a land so fertile and containing such agricultural and natural potential be cursed with such festering blights? From the historian's perspective, Martineau's struggle with Ireland's conundrum related back to its over-dependence on a few varieties of the potato and its resulting susceptibility to the bacteria *Phytophthora infestans*. The potato also contributed little as a cash crop; its primary benefit was the stabilizing effect it had on hunger and nutrition.³⁴ Thus, the potato's failure meant that Ireland's poor tenant farmers—operating as always on the margins of both starvation and financial disaster—became even more vulnerable to the effects of its decay.

Two days later, near Coleraine, Martineau observed a similar bounty amid destruction and biological chaos. Speculating that it would be possible to double or triple the output of agricultural produce she observed around her—based on the facts and figures she recorded—she wrote an emotional but meticulous and vivid description. One can almost picture her standing next to a dray or carriage, muttering to herself:

The absurd gate-posts, like little round tents—the rusty iron, or broken wooden gates—the fences which fence out nothing, but nourish thistles, ragwort, and all seeds that can fly abroad for mischief—the over-ripe oats, shedding their grain for want of cutting, while the hay is still making—the barley so cut as to shake it all manner of ways—the stinking potato fields—the men coming home from the weekly market tipsy and shouting,—the cabin with windows that will not open, and doors that apparently will not shut,—these are mischiefs for which nobody in particular may be exactly responsible, but which makes us ask of how much use railways and harbours and reclamation of land can be, so long as people cannot bring its wealth from the soil which is actually under their feet and hands.³⁵

Ireland, she declared, was blessed with natural fecundity and agricultural fertility but seemed to be unable to capitalize on its resources. The fact that the soils grew a plethora of ragwort and marigold, and that fish abounded in the rivers and streams supported her belief that Ireland's environment was not to blame. Touring Ulster later in the week she compared the effectiveness of flax as a crop in Ireland with the data she obtained elsewhere, observing that linen manufacturing was already a proven Irish industry: “there seems to be no reason why Ireland should not yield all that is wanted, except some very few of the finest sorts from Belgium.”³⁶ Here, she asserted that flax held double potency to rescue Ireland from its domestic troubles—not only could it deliver a great crop yield but it could provide a critical source of manufacturing, the lifeblood of the new industrial age. In short, Ireland's ecology held the capability to supply robust population growth.

Not only were marketable crops and agricultural land available, but red seaweed abounded on the coasts, being “thrown up in vast quantities.” The utility of this weed lay in its potential for quality fertilizer. Yet two-thirds of the weed remained unused, resting on the shore to decay and

³³ Martineau, Letter II.

³⁴ MacRaid, *The Irish Diaspora in Britain*, 12-17.

³⁵ Martineau, Letter III.

³⁶ Martineau, Letter IV.

stink. Martineau cited a chemist who believed that the weed could be burned and iodine and potash extracted from it in the process.

However, much of this land was bog. While it held the potential to be converted into gas, oil, and candles, she noted its current status: “styes of mud, bulging and tottering, grass-grown, half-swamped with bog-water, and the soil around all poached with the tread of bare feet.”³⁷ Again, the natural resources of the land presented hope, yet poverty and squalor existed alongside, confounding her optimism for Ireland. Considering prospects she heard concerning opportunities to transform this resource she felt less than hopeful: “there is more and more hesitation in saying that the conversion will ever be worthwhile.”³⁸

Fisher, like Martineau, also struggled with this element of the Irish Question—contemplating the seemingly contradictory abundance of Ireland’s natural environment alongside the poverty and desolation. She countered her acknowledgement of Ireland’s beauty by recognizing that her homeland suffered from “toil, dirt, and hopeless poverty.” Fisher crafted her first Anglo-Irish comparison, describing a recent trip to England where she remembered “reveling in the soft and verdant wealth of her landscapes, and the glory of her waving woods [...] all speaking of peace, industry, and security! Alas, judge if the contrast between those well-remembered scenes and the terrible and sorrowful poverty of these wastes and wilds does not strike me with a saddening force, akin to envy.”³⁹ Here Fisher broke off from her laments to provide some limited analysis. Her impression of England was that its “peasantry” are surrounded by “decent comforts” such as tea, cookware made of tin and copper, bed-warmers, family heirlooms like clocks, clothing, and quality building materials. Interrupting this dubious description, she declined to “picture the frightful contrast” with Ireland.⁴⁰

Martineau, on the other hand, provided an explicit diagnosis. After describing Galway’s disrepair, broken fisheries, decaying agriculture and college campus, she declared that the problem stemmed from the lack of a middle class. In her view, too many poor and working class farmers struggled to make ends meet. Conversely, she observed a smaller upper class of professors imported from other areas and an old aristocracy—“the proud old families.” Between these two classes she observed a gap; only a minor array of commercial shops and businesses remain. The result: “there is no substantial, abounding middle class, from whom the rise of a place of such capabilities might be confidently expressed.”⁴¹ Again, there is a note of pessimism in her writing—she ends this letter abruptly, offering no solution. Martineau, observing how Ireland’s economy had produced a mass of impoverished primary sector workers and a sliver of elite, affluent families, blamed inefficiencies in environmental and economic relations—good seaports but no fishing infrastructure, good pasturage torn up to produce a blighted potato crop. Working class farmers and fishermen were unable to attain middle class status because several trends contributed to these inefficiencies.

The lack of a middle class can be seen as originating from three events. First, the end of the European continental wars of the late eighteenth century reduced the demand for Irish grains. During this same time the industrial revolution in Britain destroyed the proto-industry of handmade goods produced by rural households. Finally, tenant farmers enjoyed no guaranteed property rights and were exploited under a system of excessive taxes, unfair rents, and neglect. Although

³⁷ Martineau, Letter IV.

³⁸ Martineau, Letter X.

³⁹ Fisher, Letter VIII.

⁴⁰ Fisher, Letter VIII.

⁴¹ Martineau, Letter XI.

undergoing a period of academic revision, quantitative evidence still supports the assertion that landlords in Ireland contributed little, if anything, to farm development (less than 3% of their wealth was invested in agriculture).⁴² In short, before the famine, Ireland's inequalities were already in place.⁴³ What Martineau was observing was the result of a three-pronged assault on any semblance of an Irish middle class.

While women writer-travelers paid close attention to economic and environmental conditions, they also recorded cultural observations. One aspect of this is revealed in their careful documentation of the Irish people themselves—their life in villages, towns, and open spaces. Queen Victoria observed during her first visit to Cork that it “was not at all like an English town, and looks rather foreign.” She based this judgment on the noisy and boisterous nature of the crowd—apparently they were more excited to see a royal figure than she had expected. While noting that “the beauty of the women is very remarkable, and struck us much [...] almost every third woman was pretty, and some remarkably so” she wrote as though if she was surprised, because the men were “very poorly” and often “raggedly dressed.”⁴⁴ As she traveled around the country she continued to observe her pleasant reception, remembering the nation's recent experience under martial law. On the other side of the country, outside of Dublin, she took in a performance of traditional Irish jigs which she found “amusing.” Her first observation of the people noted their unsatisfactory dress—one man in particular “a regular specimen of an Irishman.” Farther up in Belfast, the people transitioned into a “mixture of nations, and the female beauty had almost disappeared.”⁴⁵

Disparaging comments about Ireland's population were not restricted to English authors, nor were they only confined to the famine and post-famine period. Maria Edgeworth, an Irish writer, who differed from many of her peers by expressing sympathy with the plight of the Irish peasant, exuded a particularly unique brand of condescension and paternalism when discussing the Irish. An early developer of the novel format as well as a prominent children's author, she used her stature as a writer to advocate for limited application of women's education (confined to the domestic sphere). Later, her brief excursions across Connacht provided an outlet of expression concerning the peasant population. Particularly in her later life she exercised considerable effort to bring relief to Irish peasants in the wake of the famine, drawing on her writer's celebrity to garner donations from as far away as America and Australia.⁴⁶ Throughout it all Edgeworth played the noble benefactor, seeking to help alleviate the Irish situation even while expressing aversion to much of Ireland itself.

Indeed, what is noteworthy about Edgeworth is that her published writings describe her belief in the equality of both English and Irish—probably reflecting her own situation (being born in England but raised in Ireland)—yet her diaries suggest disgust and frustration with the Irish population she encountered while travelling. Much of her writings concerned characters in liminal cultural states and showed a level of sympathy with the Irish peasantry. However, the notion of living between cultures that she eloquently explored in such famous works as “The Irish

⁴² Bell and Watson, *A History of Irish Farming*, 15-17.

⁴³ Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish*, 34-52.

⁴⁴ Victoria, “Tours in England and Ireland.”

⁴⁵ Victoria, “Tours in England and Ireland.”

⁴⁶ Maria Edgeworth, Letter from Maria Edgeworth to Harriet Edgeworth Butler, February 9, 1847, in *Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, vol. 2 in BIWLD, <http://solomon.bwld.alexanderstreet.com/> (accessed on November 2, 2013); Letter from Maria Edgeworth, 1847?.

Incognito,” remained far removed from the blunt observations she employed in her travelogues.⁴⁷ As an Anglo-Protestant, her opinions on Catholics were generally negative and at best patronizing.⁴⁸ In her view, Celtic Irish needed assistance from benevolent Anglo-Irish landlords (probably somewhat of a model of her cherished father, the inventor and educator Richard Lovell Edgeworth) to create a new Irish race. This breed would be an ultimate hybrid—neither English nor tainted with pure “Irishness.” Even when portraying mismanagement by the Anglo-Irish—as she did in her magnum opus *Castle Rackrent*—Edgeworth saw their enlightened support as a necessary influence on the clearly undeveloped and inferior Celtic-Irish stock.⁴⁹ Though known for her sympathy for the Irish peasant—deemed a “subhuman species”⁵⁰ by many Anglos during this time—her paternalism reached limits. Whether or not this perspective remained with Edgeworth for her entire life is debatable, but while she was travelling, her impressions of Ireland’s people were generally negative.

During her travels with a Sir Culling and Lady Smith across Connemara in 1834 in a fine, four-horse touring coach, Edgeworth commented on the wildness and foreignness of the far west of Ireland. This, as we have seen, was not uncommon for those living in other parts of the nation and world. In fact, Edgeworth noted with surprise that at this time a new road—the first road ever in these parts—was being constructed nearby, but expressed dismay that they would not be able to utilize it. As luck would have it, her party shortly fell into a bog where the horses “sank up to their knees.” A “great giant,” whom Edgeworth named Ulick for reference, assisted the group, along with a horde of “men and boys, who, shouting, gathered from all sides, from mountain-paths down which they poured.” Edgeworth recalled her fright—apparently due to the velocity and volume of their assistance—growing angry with a boy who began to laugh during the ordeal. Fuming, she declared how she “could with pleasure have seen him ducked in bog water!” Given her belief in some Irish potential for success given proper paternalistic support, the trial of journeying seemed to have revealed a complexity to her character and some perhaps hidden beliefs.⁵¹ In this instance she referred to the group as a “tribe of wild Connemara” and seemed rattled by the disorderliness of the people and by the harsh environment. Clearly, these “wild” Irish needed the guidance of an enlightened Anglo-Irish Protestant upper class.

Throughout her journey Edgeworth seemed a bit taken aback by Ireland outside of her well-to-do sphere. Mentioning how much she heard about Galway, she “determined” to see sights. Upon arrival she concluded: “Galway, wet or dry, and it was dry when I saw it, is the dirtiest town I ever saw, and the most desolate and idle-looking.”⁵² Later, she refused to stay at an inn that did not meet her standards—the only inn in the village, unfortunately—which led her party to attempt to obtain lodging at a nearby vicarage and chief of police’s house.⁵³ These all failed—the police chief’s house was recently the site of an outbreak of cholera; Edgeworth noted that the inn—“[that]

⁴⁷ “Maria Edgeworth 1768-1849,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, 8th ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt and M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 226-242.

⁴⁸ Jennifer M. Van Vliet, “The Literary Context of Maria Edgeworth’s Jason Quirk,” (master’s thesis, Florida State University, 2006), in Florida State University Electronic Theses, Treatises, and Dissertations, <http://etd.lib.fsu.edu/> (accessed December 9, 2013), 1.

⁴⁹ Van Vliet, “Literary Context,” 3.

⁵⁰ Roger W.H. Savage, “Crisis, Conflict, and the Struggle for Recognition,” *Philosophy Today* 57, 1 (Spring 2013): 72.

⁵¹ Edgeworth, Letter from Maria Edgeworth to Pakenham Edgeworth, February 14, 1834 in *Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, vol. 2.

⁵² Edgeworth, Letter to Pakenham.

⁵³ Edgeworth, Letter to Pakenham.

damp, broken-windowed hole”—was preferable. They were saved by Sir Culling’s keen sighting of a well-to-do house where they were accepted, “as [they] were quality.”⁵⁴ Throughout this adventure Edgeworth appeared well out of her element. Like Fisher, she struggled to cope with the surrounding impoverishment, and questioned the parity of the Irish masses to herself and her party.

Such uncertainty over the worth of the Irish working-class population can also be found in Fisher’s writings. In her travels around Cork, Fisher observed the abundance of sheep herds (due to the healthy turf) but noted that “the men appear to be idle [...] we have met them strolling into market, two attending one donkey, with sixpennyworth of turf—the whole day’s work of two men and the use of the beasts forfeited for the sake of sixpence and a gossip in town!” With disbelief, she concluded that these men are walking approximately twenty miles round trip for one pennyworth of tobacco and “deem his day well spent.” This, she declared, “is indeed a sorrowful state of things when time is so little prized”—yet they are “an able-bodied race.”⁵⁵

During the western portion of her journey, Fisher described the scene in Dingle, in the province of Munster. She found it a pleasant and fertile area but pronounced the populace as inferior after attending a Sunday mass. The residents seemed “primitive”—both in their manners and habits.⁵⁶ A nearby weekend market area revealed a group of “young natives fighting amongst each other, none the cleaner for its being Sunday.” That night, a drunken man led a toast that “he would ‘rather give three cheers for himself than for Dan O’Connell,’ [...] in which he is clamorously joined by [a] surrounding ragged little regiment.” Fisher was disgusted by the scene, which she denounced as “deplorable” for its debauchery and declared that she had “seen more drunken men since [her] arrival, than for twelve months in Limerick—a certain token of want of civilization.”⁵⁷ While her mention of Limerick suggested that she was not just referring to the western Irish, her antipathy was somewhat undefined. At this moment, Fisher’s travelling for the day was over and she was likely fatigued—yet she was confounded by a pleasant town and countryside and what she perceived to be an unruly and unworthy populace.

Martineau also experienced puzzlement and frustrations with the people of Ireland. Travelling through Erris in 1852, she observed revelry in an area that was struck particularly hard by the Famine. Passing one unroofed and exposed cottage she spied “romping” and “loud mirth” within. These images, she asserted, “[put] to flight all the traveller’s preconceptions about the melancholy left behind by the famine.” In contrast she noted the industriousness of English-owned businesses. An inn near Valentia in particular—owned for nineteen years by the same English matron—held a reputation for its upkeep and quality. This institution, she noted, was surrounded by English capital—which heavily invested in nearby slateworks—and Irish working class homes. The Irish homes had a “stench” and remained clearly delineated from those of the Anglos. Martineau questioned the English inn owner on how she managed to keep her establishment clean; the woman assured her that she properly trained the Irish girls she took into her service. It was apparent to Martineau that progress and industry required that “Irishness” must be unlearned. Like Fisher and Edgeworth, Martineau was confounded and troubled by such critical Irish deficiencies; yet unlike the former writers, she maintained more emotional distance—her conclusions were less overt, her language more reserved.

⁵⁴ Edgeworth, Letter to Pakenham.

⁵⁵ Fisher, Letter VIII.

⁵⁶ Fisher, Letter IV.

⁵⁷ Fisher, Letter V.

Indeed, a common refrain among these travelling women was the fear or suspicion that Irish people would revert from an industrious state into one of wanton debauchery or ill behavior. Edgeworth, during a poverty relief effort, wrote in an 1847 fundraising letter revealing her pleasure that her organizational efforts to get farmers to sow crops (as opposed to merely relying on charity) succeeded: “The people are now beginning to sow, and I hope they will accordingly reap in due course [...] Mr. Hinds has laid down a good rule, not to give seed to any tenants but those who can produce the receipt for the last half-year's rent.”⁵⁸ Upon receipt of one hundred guineas to buy foodstuffs, Edgeworth noted the efforts of a Mr. Powell who sought to honor the donor’s wishes that such money go only to those parishes which “subscribed towards its own relief.” Affirming this to her audience, she declared approvingly that Powell intended to “lay out in bread and rice and meal -- not all in soup; that he may encourage them to cook at home and not be mere craving beggars.”⁵⁹ Later, her daughter, a Miss Edgeworth, wrote a fundraising letter (one whose recipient has been lost to history) and assured her reader of their capable management of the famine and relief situation according to responsible principles of self-reliance: “for Mrs. Edgeworth's principle and mine is to excite the people to work for good wages, and not, by gratis feeding, to make beggars of them, and ungrateful beggars, as the case might be.”⁶⁰ These efforts to promote self-reliance seemed to stem from a lack of faith in the Irish farmer—that somehow there was something within the Irish that might cause a relapse, trumping the mere threat of hunger or the embarrassment of poverty. Indeed, during this period, the ideology of “moralism” held great popularity; this orthodoxy held that the Irish suffered from essential failings that were moral in origin rather than economic. Upper and middle class Britons of this era saw defects like violence, laziness, irresponsibility, and lack of resourcefulness or ambition as inherent in the Irish “national character.” Besides being a type of racial stereotyping, this ideology saw a moral hazard arising from “gratuitous or overgenerous relief.” In other words, the Irish needed lessons in self-reliance and the only way they could overcome their moral failings was limited philanthropy coupled with paternalistic control.⁶¹

Overall, these travelling women struggled with their feelings about Ireland as both a land and a people. Elite women in the famine and post-famine milieu were not optimistic, but genuinely troubled about the Irish situation. How Ireland could be so naturally bountiful yet also filled with impoverished, seemingly ill-deserving people confounded them. Although divided politically (Martineau remained unconditionally pro-Union, while Edgeworth believed personally in the validity of the Union but regretted its undemocratic procedure) these authors remained united in their belief that the problems they observed in Ireland were not primarily environmental, but cultural.

Since Ireland faced a non-ecological problem, how did travelling women analyze the Irish situation politically? Their evaluations of systemic failures were often outlined in their travelogues. Such observations can provide insight into the trauma of the famine and post-famine years, not just for subjects they are discussing but for what they say about themselves as individuals. These sources also can give us a window into their puzzlement and pessimism about Ireland—how they struggled both intellectually and personally with the Irish Question.

⁵⁸ Edgeworth, Letter to Harriet Edgeworth Butler.

⁵⁹ Edgeworth, Letter to Harriet Edgeworth Butler.

⁶⁰ Edgeworth, Letter from Maria Edgeworth, 1847?.

⁶¹ Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 49; Jim Donnelly, “The Irish Famine,” BBC British History, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/famine_01.shtml (accessed December 13, 2013).

Fisher dealt with the Irish Question by indicting politics—she saw the Irish situation as having its roots in history. For her, its problems were political, and even if she believed disintegration of the Union would do more harm than good, she blamed the English primarily for the negative effects wrought by its hegemonic and unequal relationship with Ireland. Martineau, on the other hand, avoided politics. Her analysis of the Irish Question generally focused on the social and economic. Culture, market mechanisms, and inefficiencies dominated her reasoning—Ireland’s situation had less to do with parliamentary machinations than with capital flows, unskilled labor, economic inequality, and ignorance. Edgeworth brokered a middle way; her analysis was part political, part social. She saw sociocultural inequalities as causing the Irish problems, but advocated political solutions—namely, benevolent Anglo-Protestant oversight—to fix them. For her, an infusion of private beneficence (by food and financial donations) was what was needed to break the Irish out of their economic funk and cultural doldrums.

Martineau was the most systematic of all the writers, and her analysis was often quite cutting and direct. She attributed the Irish troubles largely to the English system of indirect colonization, where English landowners bought large swaths of land, invested in raw materials like cattle grazing, used up the resources without employing labor, accumulated enormous profits, and then sent the wealth back to their banks across the Irish Sea.⁶² She referred to her previous example of the English inn amid the slateworks and added that during her travels in other parts of the region (Munster—southwest Ireland) an English landowner awoke one morning to find the tails sliced off from all his horses. Nearby, an English clergyman found that the ear of his saddle horse had been removed during the night. While attributing the later to theological “hatred,” Martineau admitted that it “appears that the good feeling towards settlers does not always extend to those who make the rearing of stock their object.”⁶³ She argued that this type of colonization (soon to be unleashed on the continent of Africa, a testing ground for this new style of imperialism) was perceived by those suffering around them. According to her they were:

quick to feel to the difference between this method of settling and that of men who come to till the ground and employ labor. Men see cattle growing fat among the enclosures where their neighbour’s homes used to be. Their neighbours are gone—over the sea or into the grave—for want of work and food, and one herd of cattle succeeds another, to be sent away to England, and fill English pockets with wealth, while the Irish peasant remains as poor as ever.⁶⁴

Not all English settlers practiced such colonization, Martineau argued—it was the contrast between two types which was what she believed allowed her to make her comparison. This second group of settlers “employ[ed] all the labour round him” and declared that if the land were tapped to its fullest potential, it would be found wanting for more workers. The problem, Martineau argued, was an outside, stronger nation that exploits the weaker, troubled nation for its natural resources, giving no heed to the vast unemployment and overconsumption of its environmental capital.

Overall, Martineau was pessimistic. While she claimed that she felt that improvement of the land would eventually come, she simultaneously declared “what patience is needed!” She stated that in comparison with the famine years, Ireland *was* indeed improving, but when taking

⁶² Martineau, Letter XVI, *Letters From Ireland*.

⁶³ Martineau, Letter XVI, *Letters From Ireland*.

⁶⁴ Martineau, Letter XVI, *Letters From Ireland*.

the longer perspective before the crisis she admitted that “we have no trade—no resources [...] where is the improvement to come from?”⁶⁵ Ultimately, she indicted social and economic issues—market inefficiencies, under-skilled labor and underemployment, and unidirectional capital flows.

Conversely, Fisher blamed Ireland’s troubles on political phenomena, rather than economic or social issues. For her, the effects of foreign conquests—both militarily and through English colonization—lingered on and continued to drain the lifeblood out of the Irish economy and society. One can observe the defensiveness in her authorial voice:

[I]t is not the fault of my country that she is so different—so widely different—so sorrowfully different—so inferior! What has she been but a conquered nation for ages!—plundered by invader—a perpetual battle-field from the time of the Danes to her complete subjugation under the English yoke, and even still torn asunder by factions and dissensions!⁶⁶

Her tone here is abject and she seemed to be at a loss in determining a solution or projecting a future for Ireland. Yet later, her writing lapsed into patriotic prose: “England may be envied for her wealth, her order, her industry, her peace, and her security—yet, dear, dirty Ireland! We must ever feel for you, pity you, and love you; and dearly do I love you, my beautiful country!”⁶⁷

For Edgeworth, Ireland’s troubles were best approached through dedicated philanthropy. Her travelling experiences convinced her of the benefits of wealth and of the power of moneyed individuals to do good; this in contrast to Martineau, who saw functioning, healthy markets as the answer; or Fisher, who merely hoped political abuses would stop. Riding along with Sir Culling across Connemara, Edgeworth admired his “old family, large fortune, and great philanthropy, extending to poor little Ireland and her bogs [...] these things he was determined to see.”⁶⁸ Edgeworth clearly venerated the wealthy patron—his dedication to “see” and experience the poverty as if his travelling was a munificent act in and of itself. She saw the practice of altruism by the wealthy as Ireland’s panacea, spreading the seeds of largesse across a ravaged island. After returning from her journey with the Cullings, Edgeworth wrote to her brother Pakenham, thanking him for his encouragement, which “put me in mind of what I am called upon to do here continually in a little way.”⁶⁹ For Edgeworth, travelling was both an embodied experience and as a means to an end; she saw travelling, philanthropy, and observation by the beneficent well-to-do as part of what she considered the best solution for Irish problems.

Elite women travelers felt troubled by what they saw and experienced as they journeyed across Ireland. Not only were they confounded by the historical forces—the struggle of peasant tenant farmers, the context of Catholic-Protestant conflict, and England’s dominance in the Anglo-Irish relationship—the act of travelling itself was an unsettling event. Their travels exposed them to weather events, landscapes, poverty, unfamiliar infrastructure, different cultural forms, and famine, in turn shaping their perspectives of both the Irish people and nation. Rather than being optimistic concerning Ireland’s future these women experienced anxiety during and after their travels through the Irish countryside.

⁶⁵ Martineau, Letter XVI, *Letters From Ireland*.

⁶⁶ Fisher, Letter VIII.

⁶⁷ Fisher, Letter VIII.

⁶⁸ Edgeworth, Letter to Pakenham.

⁶⁹ Edgeworth, Letter to Pakenham.

Yet travelling women also crafted provisional solutions after their journeys. As historical actors, they were affected by the biases and the contingencies of their milieu. Often this meant distasteful racial or religious bigotry; sometimes it meant paternalism and condescension. As such their travels were not a self-contained, rationalized, or emotionless endeavor, but an interactive, reciprocal process. As they traveled, their ideas, attitudes, and beliefs not only shaped the social and cultural environment of the Irish landscape, but their attendant observations and experiences in turn transformed and influenced their evolving perspectives on Ireland and the Irish Question. Even though these women writer-travelers remained deeply affected by their journeying experiences and conflicted by what they saw, they fashioned what they professed to be both provisional and compassionate solutions to the Irish Question despite a hostile, anti-Irish regional environment.

By examining elite women's travels, we complicate our understanding of women in Ireland. Irish women were not just emigrants or peasants, farmwives or Catholics; they were also elite Anglo-Irish Protestant hybrids. Uncovering their perspectives reveals larger interactive processes between Ireland's environment and culture and a more complex and robust history. Ultimately, including more voices not only enhances our history but reveals a way forward where we can shed stereotypes and unfounded criticism, showing how the past is often much more than what it seems.