



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

‘The narrowest of narrow bridges’



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In October 1833, the author Maria Edgeworth and a couple of companions set out on a journey by carriage from Edgeworthstown to Connemara, via Athlone, a journey she recounted a few months later in a series of letters to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, her half-brother.

To Connemara

Although born in England, Maria Edgeworth moved permanently to the family estate in Edgeworthstown, County Longford, in 1782 when she was about fourteen years old. By that stage, Maria had lost her mother Anna Maria Elers, who died in 1773 and her stepmother Honora Sneyd, who died in 1780. Although still a teenager, Maria assisted her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, with the management of the estate. He continued her education, providing instruction in topics such as law, economics, politics, science, history and literature.

It is through literature that Edgeworth made her name, writing novels such as *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Belinda* (1801), *The absentee* (1812) and *Ormond* (1817), among others. Of course, those aspects of her life and career are well-known. In this article, we will instead focus on her journey through Athlone in 1833. In late September of that year, while chatting with friends, Edgeworth decided to visit Connemara, an area of Ireland that she associated with childhood tales of ‘smugglers and caves, and murders and mermaids, and duels, and banshees, and fairies’. So, on 3 October 1833, she set off in a travelling carriage pulled by four horses. Her companions on this westbound expedition were Sir Culling Smith, a British politician and campaigner, and his wife Lady Isabella Smith (formerly Isabella Carr).

Their journey from Edgeworthstown to Ballymahon and then to Athlone was ‘all prosperous

and sunshine’. Of Athlone, Edgeworth had little to say, although she uncovered one treasure in the otherwise ‘antiquated inn’ of which she was a guest. While the carriage horses were being changed, she ‘espied a print hanging smoked over the chimney-piece’, which to her ‘connoisseur eyes seemed marvellously good’. Edgeworth suggested to the landlady that she would buy the print and a deal was struck for five shillings. On more closely examining her new acquisition, Edgeworth, as she put it, ‘found my taste and judgment gloriously justified’ since it was a print of a work by Anthony van Dyck, the renowned Flemish artist. Edgeworth later had the print, whose subject was a scene from the early years of the Byzantine Empire, ‘framed in satin wood’, and exhibited in her library, where it won ‘the admiration of all beholders’.

Cursing and bleating

Once the carriage was ready, her party resumed their journey but ‘it was’, as Edgeworth described, ‘no easy matter to get out of Athlone’. Like so many visitors during the first half of the 19th century she discovered that the town’s bridge was quite often an impediment to progress. One such visitor was Leitch Ritchie, a Scottish travel writer, who stayed in Athlone during the 1830s and whose journey we followed in an earlier edition. He described the bridge on market days as presenting a ‘scene of confusion’ that was ‘without parallel in Ireland, or, I believe, in Europe’.

A similar scene greeted Edgeworth as she and her companions approached ‘the entrance to the old-fashioned, narrowest of narrow bridges’. They were soon ‘wedged and blocked by drays and sheep, reaching at least a mile’. All around Edgeworth’s carriage were ‘men cursing and swearing in Irish and English; sheep baaing, and so terrified, that the shepherds were ... brandishing their crooks at our postillions (who were mounted on the horses attached to the carriage), and the postillions in turn brandishing their whips on the impassive backs of the sheep.’

Out of this tumult, the ‘cocked gold-

edged hat of an officer appeared’. This officer, presumably stationed in the town’s barracks, managed to quieten the crowd and, for a few moments, there ‘was silence from all but the baaing sheep’. The officer bowed to Edgeworth’s party, saying that he would see them safely through the town but ‘that it would be a work of time.’ It was indeed a work of time as Edgeworth’s carriage was stuck by the bridge for a few hours. Nevertheless, they seem to have been relatively pleasant hours despite the throng of scared sheep and exasperated humans that were massed in the centre of the town.

Counting sheep

Edgeworth’s carriage eventually made its way over the bridge but her next destination, Ballinasloe, was at the other side of an unusual obstacle. As she later recalled: ‘I cannot tell you – and if I could you would think I exaggerated – how many hours we were in getting through the next ten miles; the road being continually covered with sheep, thick as wool could pack... all coming from the sheep-fair of Ballinasloe, which ... we now found had taken place the previous day.’ In her estimation, the fair must have contained ‘thousands and tens of thousands’ of sheep.

Edgeworth was entertained more than upset by the slow progress of her carriage as it navigated against the woolly waves. She took the time to admire the manner in which the vast flocks of sheep were herded from one point to another: a feat she compared to a military operation: ‘This retreat of the ten thousand never could have been effected without the generalship of these wonderfully skilled shepherds, who, in case of any disorder among their troops, know how dexterously to take the offender by the left leg or the right leg with their crooks, pulling them back without ever breaking a limb, and keeping them continually in their ranks on the weary, long march.’ Edgeworth’s readers would likely have been amused by the reference to the ‘retreat of the ten thousand’, a historical event in which a Greek mercenary army escaped from Persian territory over two millennia earlier. The story of that retreat, as composed by one its participants,



In 1833, Maria Edgeworth travelled through Athlone on the way to Connemara

the historian and general Xenophon, was well-known across Europe at the time Edgeworth was writing.

Her description of the immense procession of sheep between Athlone and Ballinasloe is backed by contemporary sources such as the 1837 publication, ‘A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland’. Compiled by Samuel Lewis, the Dictionary provides much information on Ireland before the Great Famine. According to the entry for Ballinasloe, numerous marts were held in the town each year during the 1830s, drawing interest from across the midlands and west of Ireland. For example, the Dictionary claims that the October 1835 edition of the ‘celebrated fair of Ballinasloe’

saw 61,632 sheep exhibited, of which around 55,000 were sold.

It was ‘almost dark’ when Edgeworth and her companions reached Ballinasloe, where they found lodgings at the local vicarage. After a short stay, Edgeworth’s party made an effort to ‘see certain ruins by going a few miles out of our way’. By so doing, they observed in the distance ‘the beautiful ruins of Clonmacnoise’, a location that was becoming better known through its description in tourist guides and travelogues. Edgeworth and her companions then continued their journey westwards, leaving the midlands behind them as they travelled to Loughrea, Galway and on to Connemara.

