A critical exploration of irish society at the end of the 19th century

“ The Real Charlotte” is a novel which contains a wealth of information regarding Irish society at the end of the 19th century. The authors Edith Somerville (1858-1949) and Violet Martin (1862-1915) – who adopted the pseudonym of Martin Ross – lived in Ireland during this period and belonged to the landed Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class. Not only did they have an inherent knowledge of their own class but they also had a deep understanding of the Irish peasantry.

This stemmed from their keen observations of the native Irish people and Martin in particular had an intimate knowledge of their lives, having observed and interacted with the tenants of her father’s estate. Likewise, she spent sixteen years living in the north of Dublin which enabled her to acquire knowledge of the middle classes. As John Bayley points out in the Listener :” Edith Somerville and Martin Ross knew Irish manners through and through: they were connoisseurs not only of the Ireland of the Ascendancy, with its ramifications of cousinage high and low, but also of the Ireland of turf-cabins and of genteel poverty in the back streets of Bray and Dublin. They knew their world as well as Jane Austen knew hers”. Throughout the novel we are also presented with a range of characters and through the depiction of them and their relationships we gain immense insight into the hierarchical society present in Ireland at the time.

I will now discuss and analyse in more detail the ways in which Somerville and Ross have explored late 19th century Irish society. First of all, let us consider the upper class of society presented within the novel. In late 19th century Ireland, this was a class of Anglo-Irish Protestant landowners who had dominated Irish society since the 17th century plantations of Ireland.

These families were collectively known as the Irish Big House and Somerville and Ross were born into this class at a time when its social, political and financial influence was in decline.

This was due to a number of factors among them the Irish Famine of 1845-48, the Land War of 1879-82 and the passing of the Irish Land Acts. We see evidence of this decline in ‘ The Real Charlotte’ as we get to know the novel’s Big House family: the Dysarts of Bruff. They live in the splendid luxury and opulence of the Bruff estate (which is modeled on the Martin family’s estate at Ross, Co. Galway) and are at the top of the Lismoyle social hierarchy.

We are first made aware of this position in society during Lady Dysart’s lawn-tennis party. Here Lady Dysart fulfills her “ sense of duty” towards her “ vulgar” neighbours by holding one of her “ catholic and comprehensive entertainments”. This suggests that the Anglo-Irish landowning families may have felt they had a social obligation to host this sort of event for their tenants. Lady Dysart does not always enjoy these parties as she considers the ladies to be dull and cannot have interesting conversations with them. However, she displays a tolerance of social inferiority when she converses with Charlotte Mullen, whose social background means “ less than nothing” to her because she is a “ woman who could talk to her on spiritualism, or books, or indeed any current topic”.

We equally note the social divide present in Lismoyle society when we learn that Lady Dysart, being an Englishwoman, is unable to discern the “ subtle grades of Irish vulgarity”. This conveys to us the disparity prevalent in late

19th century Ireland between the Anglo-Irish landowning families and the native Irish people. Furthermore, it is worth noting Lady Dysart's position in life. We learn that she married Sir Benjamin Dysart, thirty years her senior, with a " little judicious coercion" and has endured an " extremely unpleasant period of matrimony". Consequently, it is evident that she has married for money and social status, rather than for love.

This sort of situation would not have been uncommon in late 19th century Ireland as women would have been strongly encouraged to marry into a wealthy family. In addition, we observe Lady Dysart's concern over her children Pamela and Christopher finding suitable spouses. In fact, Lady Dysart is to a certain extent alarmed by their lack of interest in romantic matters. Pamela, who speaks with a " pleasant, anxious voice" and is always unbelievably polite and friendly to everyone, seems doomed to spinsterhood because of her " hopeless friendliness" towards men.

Moreover, to her mother's dismay she does not make an effort to encourage Captain Cursiter to propose to her. In fact, upper class women like Pamela in late 19th century Ireland would have been deemed a ' failure' by society on account of their inability to acquire a husband. On one hand, Pamela represents the virtues of the Big House Ascendancy families yet, on the other, she embodies the foreshadowing of their demise. This is equally the case with Pamela's brother Christopher, the heir and the eventual landlord of the Bruff estate. As with Pamela, Lady Dysart overtly expresses her consternation over her son's lack of interest in getting married as she considers it " quite hopeless to expect anything from him" in the company of Miss.

Hope-Drummond and speaks disapprovingly of his “ platonic philanderings”. He is a polite, reserved and “ humble-minded” young man but is considered by the Lismoyle residents to be “ dull and unprofitable” since he is uninterested in flirting with their daughters and discussing “ matters of local interest”. They do not appreciate the “ strength of his university career” and “ intellectual fastidiousness” and we note that his “ lack of interest in the majority of manly occupations, from hunting to music halls, has little claim to respect or admiration”. In view of Christopher’s position as an heir to a landed estate like Bruff, society demands that he be a sort of playboy character yet he does not conform.

Therefore, Christopher is portrayed as a man atypical of those from the Big House Ascendancy in the late 19th century. Christopher also reveals himself to be a weak character when it comes to dealing with his agent Mr Lambert’s embezzlement of money from the estate accounts. He is all to ready to forgive Lambert and it seems that he will allow him to keep the agency. This sort of benign behavior, while admirable, would not have been beneficial to the Anglo-Irish landlords in the late 19th century as their position in society was already under threat.

It was this sort of benignity which Violet Martin’s father exhibited towards his tenants during the famines in the 1840s and led to the near ruination of the family estate. Nevertheless, Christopher appears to display some strength of character when he falls in love with Francie Fitzpatrick. At the height of his love for Francie we note that “ he had got past the age of reason” and that his “ power of mocking himself was dead”. Moreover, as he looks into Francie’s eyes before he proposes to her we are told that “ his last shred of

common sense sank in their tender depths and was lost there". Although it appears that Christopher has overcome his diffidence and self-critical nature by falling in love with Francie, following her rejection of his marriage proposal his determination quickly wanes. He even resolves that " disillusionment also meant relief".

As Julian Moynahan points out in Anglo-Irish; The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture : " He becomes a living instance of the psychological law – out of Freud by Darwin – which ways that a man who is unable to show aggression will not be able to love". Therefore, as a result of Christopher's inability to woo Francie, it seems that the Dysart family line will not be continued. This is another way in which Somerville and Ross reveal themselves to be, as John Cronin comments in The Anglo-Irish Novel – Volume ?, " perceptive diagnosticians of the decline of their own tribe". Undoubtedly, the authors give us a vivid impression of the circumstances surrounding the Big House Ascendancy class at the end of the 19th century.

However, they equally tell us a great deal about the middle class of Irish society during this period. In particular, Somerville and Ross investigate an " expanding provincial middle class" (Moyhanan) represented in the novel by the characters of Charlotte Mullen and Roddy Lambert. This was comprised of the better off members of the middle class who, under the provisions of the Irish Land Acts, were able to purchase estate land and become landed proprietors for the first time. These people were often contemptuously called ' grabbers' by the peasants who were too poor to be able to buy their own leaseholds. Perhaps Somerville and Ross took an equally dim view of this

new social class as this may explain why Charlotte and Lambert are presented to us as unpleasant and untrustworthy characters.

We especially note the ruthlessly ambitious and powerfully manipulative character of Charlotte Mullen who is motivated by a greed for land and money, a desire for a higher social status and a passionate desire for Lambert. In fact, Somerville and Ross drew on real-life inspiration for the character of Charlotte as we are told by Gifford Lewis in The Real Charlotte (Dublin: A. & A. Farmar) Introduction :" Charlotte Mullen was a study of a cousin [of Edith's] in Castletownshend called Emily Herbert. She was ugly, powerful, intelligent, a bully and capable of under-hand dealings.

Edith thought of her as a sort of New Woman gone to the devil." Emily's offence to Edith was that she cheated the Somerville family out of an inheritance from Edith's great-aunt Fanny. This situation is reflected in the novel by Charlotte's failure to carry out old Mrs. Mullen's wish for her to take care of Francie. We witness Charlotte evicting Francie from Tally-Ho Lodge; her offence being her refusal to Christopher Dysart's marriage proposal.

This highlights how much Charlotte wants to climb the social ladder and reflects the malignity and greed which Edith saw in Emily Herbert. We equally see evidence of Charlotte's social ambitions in the way she has " many tones of voice, according with the many facets of her character". This social adaptability is aptly described by Declan Kiberd in Inventing Ireland :" The indeterminate status of Charlotte Mullen ..

. allows her to speak on self-confident terms with the lady of the manor or, conversely, employ the Irish language to intimidate her tailor, Danny Lydon,

or her powers of English to frighten the washerwoman tenants of her cottages.” This accentuates the fact that the ‘ real’ Charlotte is a crafty character who, in reality, is nothing like the amiable facade she adopts when in the company of the Dysarts. Her calculating nature is also shown to us in the way she adroitly manipulates the other characters using the “ sheer strength of her will”. The most striking example of this is the fulfilment of her plan to acquire the leasehold of Gurthnamuckla and, in the words of Norry the Boat, to “ let on she’s as grand as the other ladies in the counthry”. However, we see Charlotte’s desire for Lambert thwarted by his marriage to Francie.

This means she can no longer accomplish her plans to “ stable their horses together” at Gurthnamuckla and she sees herself “ helpless and broken” and “ aimless for the rest of her life”. This implies to the reader that the middle class ‘ grabbers’ could not have all that they desired – they may have been able to acquire land and emulate the aristocracy but there were limits to what they could achieve through ambition and craftiness. Like Charlotte, the egotistical and pompous Lambert also suffers the despair which accompanies unrealized ambitions. We learn that he holds an “ unassailable” position in society owing to his position as the land agent of the Bruff estate. Additionally, the people of Lismoyle place him “ unhesitatingly at the head of its visiting list” on account of his good looks, a wife with money and a new house.

We see his materialism through the way in which he likes to spend his wife Lucy’s money in as “ distinguished a manner as possible” to impress the upper ranks of society. It is this “ self-destructive showiness of man living

well beyond his means” (Kiberd) which inevitably leads to his downfall and the failure of his emulation of a higher position in society. The aforementioned observations of Charlotte and Lamberts’ characters convey to us their “ gross and thrusting social vigour” (Cronin). Through their failure to climb to the rank of the Ascendancy class Somerville and Ross clearly underline the common notion that, in Irish society at the end of the 19th century, one’s position in society was largely determined by birth. The Big House Ascendancy was something you were either born into or married into; it could not be infiltrated by the pretentious and ambitious ‘ grabbers’ of the middle classes. Somerville and Ross equally give us insight into Irish society at the end of the 19th century through their depiction of the other middle rankers in Lismoyle.

For instance, during Mrs. Beattie’s raspberry party we note the way in which so many people are crammed into a house with a “ little glaring dining room” and windows which rattle with the dancing of the guests upstairs. This failed emulation of Bruff highlights what Somerville and Ross satirically view as the pretentions of the middle class. We further observe their dislike of the Irish middle class through the way in which they depict the Lismoyle residents as gossip mongers. For instance, in the letter which Lambert writes to Charlotte announcing his marriage to Francie he recognises “ how glad they always are to get the wrong end of a story”.

Likewise, when Francie returns to Lismoyle as Mrs Lambert we see the matter grumblingly discussed by Mrs Corkran and Mrs Baker who condemn Francie as a “ young hussy”. As Robinson comments in Somerville and Ross: A Critical Appreciation, this type of scene is a “ dramatic portrayal of the

triviality and snobbery which pervade the society described". What's more, the authors illustrate the disparity between the upper and middle classes of Irish society through their presentation of the lively, light-hearted and insouciant character of Francie Fitzpatrick and her ignorance of the " convenances". For instance, upon her arrival to stay at Bruff we note how she is " uncertain of all things except of her own ignorance" and feels that " visiting at grand houses was not as pleasant as it sounded". In addition, we observe how Francie's risquï¿½ behaviour with Mr Hawkins leads to her leaving Bruff in disgrace and acquiring Lady Dysart's judgement as an " adventuress". These incidences emphasize that the way in which the Ascendancy class conducted themselves and lead their lives was more refined than that of the middle classes.

We likewise witness social disparities between the Ascendancy class and the middle class of Irish society through the authors' depiction of the Fitzpatrick family. At the beginning of the novel they are presented to us as a reasonably affluent family who enjoy the " rubicund prosperity" of Mountjoy Square in the north side of Dublin. However, we later learn that as result of Mr Fitzpatrick's poor business dealings they have had to move to the seaside town of Bray, where they reside in the small and squalid Albatross Villa. This descent in the ranks of society reflects Violet Martin's own personal experience of having to leave the Ross estate in 1872 with her mother and four sisters to go to live in Dublin. Like the Martins, the Fitzpatricks are forced to lead a life of genteel poverty which Francie experiences as a " squalid monotony of hopelessness" after her experience of the elegance and refinement of Bruff.

Furthermore, we note Somerville’s and Ross’ satire of middle class society when we learn that Mrs Fitzpatrick, on account of not being an Englishwoman, does not have eyes “ formed to perceive dirt”. We equally observe how she skimps on everyday necessities so that her daughters Ida and Mabel may have hats “ no whit less orate than those of their neighbours”. This again highlights what Somerville and Ross saw as the pretentious behaviour of the Irish middle class people. What’s more, Somerville and Ross make us aware that in late 19th century Irish society, generally speaking, a person’s moral standards correlated to their position in society.

This is evident when we are told that sixteen year old Ida has “ passed through several flirtations of an outdoor and illicit kind” with the “ horrible precocity prevalent in her grade of society”. Within the novel the authors indubitably give us an explicit account of what middle class Irish society was like at the end of the 19th century. Yet no analysis of Irish society as a whole during this period would be complete without discussing the authors’ depiction of the Irish peasantry. This was composed of the native Irish people and formed the lower spectrum of society at the end of the 19th century.

As is depicted in the novel, the members of this lower class were virtually all Roman Catholic whereas the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy families were almost exclusively Protestant. Somerville and Ross explore this class of Irish society in the late 19th century with a thoroughly convincing knowledge of their speech, behaviour and customs. In terms of speech, we note how the authors have accurately depicted the way in which the Irish peasantry spoke in the late 19th century. For instance, we observe Norry the Boat and Mary

Holloran speaking to each other in Hibernic speech and we witness Mrs Lyndon speaking to her husband in Irish. Only a writer with first-hand experience of such conversation would be able to give a vivid and accurate presentation of it in their writing.

Likewise, we are made aware of some of the customs of the Irish peasantry. For instance, during Julia Duffy's funeral procession we see Norry the Boat preparing for the Irish Cry – a custom which involved women wailing over the dead at funerals. Furthermore, we note the superstitious beliefs which were prevalent among the native Irish at the end of the 19th century. For example, on the night of old Mrs Mullen's death we observe Norry the Boat thinking " gruesomely of the Banshee". Moreover, when Charlotte visits Gurthnamuckla we are told that Peggy Roche did not give her dying son any alcohol, which would have " kept the life in him", as she maintains it is a " mortal sin for a poor craythur to go into th'other world with a smell of dhrink on his breath". This awareness of the traditions and beliefs of the native Irish highlights the fact that Somerville and Ross could write about the lower class of Irish society in great detail.

We are equally presented with a vivid impression of lower class Irish society in the late 19th century through the authors' depiction of the lowliest people in Ireland: the beggars. As Francie approaches Gurthnamuckla for the first time we witness a " repulsive-looking old man" called Billy Grainy at the entrance gate trying to scrounge money from her and speaking in a " nasal mumble peculiar to his class". Even Francie who we are told is " skilled in the repulse of the Dublin beggar" feels afraid of his " red eyes and clawing fingers". In addition, when we meet Nance the Fool the narrative refers to

her as a “ bundle of rags with a cough in it” and we are told that her eyes are “ so inflamed with crimson” that they seem like “ pools of blood”. Therefore, the authors have presented Billy Grainy and Nance the Fool as rather frightening and ill-dignified characters; suggesting a lack of compassion on their part for the less fortunate members of Irish society. This is equally notable when we read about the washerwomen who live in Ferry Row.

They do not “ assimilate the principles of their trade” and we are told that their “ filthy children” play among the puddles and that a “ slatternly woman” can be found at the lake shore washing clothes in a manner according to the “ immemorial custom of their savage class”. This clearly conveys a certain amount of insensitivity on the part of Somerville and Ross for the poor women in late 19th century Ireland who lived in similar circumstances to these washerwomen. Another way in which the authors explore Irish society at the end of the 19th century is through their presentation of the unfortunate character of Julia Duffy. We are informed that she is the daughter of a wealthy Protestant farmer who married his poor Roman Catholic dairymaid. This ultimately leads to “ social ruin and decay” (Cronin) for Julia as she descends into poverty and loses the leasehold of Gurthnamuckla.

This reflects the fact that in late 19th century Ireland marriage between Protestants and Roman Catholics was not the ‘ done’ thing and often proved to be socially ruinous. In conclusion, it can be gathered that Somerville and Ross clearly had a thorough knowledge and understanding of the various social classes which existed in Ireland in the late 19th century. In ‘ The Real

Charlotte’ they make a “ serious attempt to display a more and less complete society” (Moynahan) and offer their readers an accurate and comprehensive depiction of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class, the “ sloughs of middle class Irish society” and the lower class of Irish peasants and beggars. Ultimately, Edith Somerville and Violet Martin present us with a compelling novel which, in my view, is undoubtedly a critical exploration of Irish society at the end of the 19th century.