

MARIA EDGEWORTH



Castle Rackrent

Edited, with an Introduction, by SUSAN KUBICA HOWARD

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Set in Ireland prior to its achieving legislative independence from Britain in 1782, *Castle Rackrent* tells the story of three generations of an estate--owning family as seen through the eyes—and as told in the voice—of their longtime servant, Thady Quirk, recorded and commented on by an anonymous Editor. This edition of Maria Edgeworth's first novel is based on the 1832 edition, the last revised by her, and includes Susan Kubica Howard's foot-of-the-page notes on the text of the memoir as well as on the notes and glosses the Editor offers "for the information of the ignorant English reader." Howard's Introduction situates the novel in its political and historical context and suggests a reading of the novel as Edgeworth's contribution to the discussion of the controversial Act of Union between Ireland and Britain that went into effect immediately after the novel's publication in London in 1800.

Castle Rackrent Details

Date : Published March 15th 2007 by Hackett Publishing Company (first published 1800)

ISBN : 9780872208773

Author : Maria Edgeworth

Format : Paperback 87 pages

Genre : Classics, Fiction, Cultural, Ireland, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, 19th Century

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From Reader Review Castle Rackrent for online ebook

Travelling Sunny says

Not exactly a page-turner, but I understand why this made it onto THE LIST.

So, to sum up the novel's story, there's this working-class servant type guy in Ireland named Thady Quirk; he's about eighty years old and is telling the history of the owners of the Rackrent property. The first third or so of the novel is a quick breezing through the stories of three owners, but then what seems to be the 'good part' of the story is in the last two-thirds with the story of Sir Condy Rackrent. Each of these four owners so completely mismanages their estate that everything ends up being owned by _____. (view spoiler) Bottom line: the book satirizes Irish landowners.

But, here's the REAL reason I think this story made it onto THE LIST. The book was written and ready for publishing just a few months before the Acts of Union 1800, which united the Kingdom of Great Britain with the Kingdom of Ireland. Shortly before it was published, footnotes and a glossary (written in the voice of an Englishman) were added for political reasons. (Basically, everyone was concerned that someone from Great Britain would read the book and think Irishmen were just as bad as they were made out to be in the book and oppose the imminent Parliamentary Acts.)

And, it was the GLOSSARY that I enjoyed more so than the story itself. Because, it was actually kind of funny to learn some of the old Irish customs and traditions. So, I added an extra star to my rating just for that.

Sherwood Smith says

Most people assume that the first historical novel was written by Sir Walter Scott, but this one was penned by Maria Edgeworth while he was still a poet. I don't think this is yet another case of women's work being ignored, as I suspect that most modern readers who make these lists aren't aware that the novel, published in 1800, is actually set roughly fifty years before, before the Irish constitution was established.

So it stands out for being the first historical novel, and one of the first with an unreliable narrator (Laurence Sterne having begun publishing *Tristram Shandy* around the time this novel was set).

It's Edgeworth's shortest novel, and a lot of people over the years have agreed that it's her best. I think that is entirely due to the narrative voice, a first person elderly Irishman of humble birth named Thady Quirk. He sets out to relate the history of the various owners of Castle Rackrent, the longest history belonging to the one he knew best. He admires them all, though the reader can easily see that they were, at best, a feckless lot, either profligate or miserly, few of them caring much for the people under them.

Some of the incidents are apparently based on real life occurrences (like a wife locked up for decades in a room because she refused to surrender her jewels to her husband), and the book is replete with Irish expressions, customs, and details. It's a short, charming read, ending with delicate poignancy.

Jan-Maat says

This is a little novel that deserves to be well known.

It is the every day story of the decline and fall of a noble Irish house into poverty through drinking, extravagant living and a wild passion for loosing cases at law as told from the point of view of a loyal old retainer. A man so loyal that he interprets all that behaviour as demonstrating the admirable grandeur of the family, none of that penny pinching miserliness of others, noble extravagance whether they can afford it or not is the way to be.

Best of all (view spoiler) it is based on events that actually occurred drawn from Edgeworth's time in Ireland, including locking up wives until they handed over their valuables to their ungallant husbands, getting elected to Parliament to escape debtors(view spoiler) the old retainer's horror of the new Lord's Jewish wife - a union he justifies to himself as neccessary for the money she brought with her, and going to law in a fine old style to keep the bog as part of the heavily indebted estate. Edgeworth naturally delights in the particular uses-ages of 18th century Irish -English such as kilt (ie killed in standard English, rather than the Scotch garment) for injured rather than the standard English meaning of the word (view spoiler).

Too short to miss,it offers a vision of the more colourful side of the world of Jane Austen

Leslie says

I skipped the lengthy introduction (~25% of this Kindle book!).

I wonder whether Susanna Clarke (author of "Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell") was a fan of this classic because Edgeworth's glossary and Clarke's footnotes were similar in style!

I found many of the anecdotes amusing but the final story about Sir Condy struck me as rather sad.

MJ Nicholls says

Edgeworth's satire inspired the oeuvre of Walter Scott—this unappealing fact aside, it is an excellent lampoon in the Swiftian tradition and something of a progenitor to the popular technique of frametales, found books 'edited' by the authors, and unreliable narrators. The rambling narrator Thady Quirk tells of the Rackrent clan and their various adventures in the age of Irish revolt over landlordism. More impressively, this book boasts three levels of foot- and endnotes, making the book read more like a historical or legal document, which adds to the fun of the book in a way only Foster Wallace or Flann achieve with their tangents. For students of the Irish novel and the history of satire in fiction.

Bruce says

Maria Edgeworth's father owned an estate in Ireland, and it was through observing the lives and fortunes of Anglo-Irish landowners that she derived the material from which she wrote this novel, published in 1800. It

is considered one of the first Irish novels and seems certainly to be the first to use the narrative devise of an unreliable narrator, in this case Thady Quirk, the steward of the Rackrent family during four generations. The novel traces the mismanagement of the sequential heirs to their final absolute impoverishment and loss of their ancestral landholdings, a story typical of the landed aristocracy of the period. Edgeworth is an astute observer and writes in a masterful style, sometimes being compared to Jane Austen. She was the friend of Sir Walter Scott and apparently was instrumental in influencing his first attempts at historical fiction. This short novel is most entertaining and skillfully written, providing an historical window into an era of Irish politics and economics. In addition, it is highly witty and filled with delicious irony.

Renee M says

Readers of Austen and Scott should not miss this one. It's quite short and kinda odd, but funny and fascinating from a historical perspective. (Poor old Thady!) The glossary in itself is a hoot. And the traditional introduction is not to be missed, but can be saved until the end when you'll be curious about this Maria Edgeworth.

Bill Kerwin says

This enjoyable one volume novel--brief as a medium-sized novella--was published in 1800, but is set in the years from the middle of the 18th century to the establishment of the Irish constitution of 1782. It gives us a satirical view of four generations of the Rackrent family, each an example of the irresponsible Irish gentry. Parsimonious or profligate in his habits, amiable or arrogant in his demeanor, each Lord Rackrent impoverishes his peasants and abuses his wealth, leading to the destruction of the Rackrent fortune and the mortaging--and eventual loss--of the Rackrent estates.

The tale is told in the voice of Thady Quirk, an old house servant, who, while loyally praising or excusing each former master, observes so precisely and narrates so colorfully the history of the family that he makes each Lord of Rackrent look very bad indeed.

This narrative--arguably not only the first historical novel but also the first novel of any sort featuring an unreliable narrator---taught Austen something about irony and gave Scott a great model for his lengthier, more ponderous books (including revelatory monologues by comic servants in ethnic dialect and the use of an imposing apparatus of notes and appendices to explain the little-known singularities of a minority culture).

Unlike many historically important works, *Castle Rackrent* is *entertaining, well worth the short amount of time it will take you to read it.*

Craig says

Some books are definitely for certain times, people, contexts, etc. (or various combinations of said variables). This was not for me or my time at this reading. Edgeworth provided a brief yet scattered work in my eyes. Some insights about the relationship between Ireland and England and land ownership, but not

much else this time around.

Lisa says

Having finished my previous book at the beginning of a long train journey, and being mindful of not spending any more money (and thanking the inventor of the Kindle for letting me carry a virtual library with me everywhere I go), I went for the free and fairly short *Castle Rackrent* thinking that a quick classic might help the journey to speed by. But, while short, this bored the ass off me, helping make the journey feel like it was three times longer than it was and driving me to play on my phone as often as possible instead.

Told by 'Honest' Thady, the house servant, *Castle Rackrent* tells the story of four generations of its owners, charting the rise and fall of their fortunes as the house falls into the hands of the family before passing back out and into those of Thady's son. Fawning over each of its lords in the telling of their tales while making clear the various character defects that have caused their downfall – pennypinching, litigious, degenerate, cruel, or just plain dense, each of the lords are utter knobs - Thady's tale is apparently a satire that shouldn't be missed, according to those lists of books you should apparently read before you die. I beg to differ.

It probably didn't help that I've had a staggeringly good run of books this year, having enjoyed everything I've read so far, as well as having also only just put down a much more entertaining book, but the only list that *Castle Rackrent* is gracing in my head is that of the most dull and underwhelming books I've ever read.

Also posted at Cannonball Read 9

J.G. Keely says

An unexpectedly delightful book, one of the first I've read that really captures what I've come to think of as quintessentially British humor, the sort later typified by Wilde and Wodehouse. The pointlessly loyal teller of this tale is one of the best examples of the 'Unreliable Narrator' that I've seen in fiction, and seems to be a prototype for a similarly humorous servant in Collins' 'The Moonstone'. Add in the political and social satire concerning Anglo-Irish relations and you've got quite the solid little novella.

classic reverie says

In my quest for first time novels by certain authors, Maria Edgeworth was on my list, especially after enjoying Belinda. I had no idea what to expect but I found a truly interesting portrayal of Irish gentry and it reminded me in a sense of Anthony Trollope's Macdermots of Ballycloran, in the sad state of these gentlemen and their positions. Having Irish ancestry, I found this very interesting in culture and custom. Edgeworth had great copy from her father's friends and neighbors. This story is based on a neighbouring estate and Sir Kit's treatment of his wife a almost parallel but also Thomas Day's Sabrina project is mentioned which was copy for Belinda. I did not read this edition but a collection of her works from Delphi. For additional information on this, I copy and pasted with my notes. Thady Quirk tells the story of all the masters of Rackrent that come and go, where he stays the same.

Kim says

I'm going to be honest. I read this book because I had to. I'm glad it was short because it was tremendously boring. The old Irish expressions make it difficult for a contemporary reader to understand.

Duane says

Castle Rackrent, by Maria Edgeworth, published in 1800.

Who is Maria Edgeworth you may ask, well, she was an English/Irish writer during late 18th century and early 19th century. She was a contemporary of Jane Austen, Ann Radcliffe, and Sir Walter Scott, among others. I mention these three because they acknowledge being influenced by Edgeworth's writing. She wrote several novels and many works that were politically and socially motivated by Irish politics and social class inequality.

Castle Rackrent is a satire on Irish landlords, the abuse of their tenants, and the mismanagement of their estates. It is the story of four generations of the Rackrent family, as told by "Old Thady", a loyal male servant who witnessed the actions of all four Lords and eventually the downfall and loss of the estate.

David says

Cited as an early satirical work and one of the first English historical novels, *Castle Rackrent* is the story of the Rackrents, formerly the O'Shaughlins, a family of land-holding Anglo-Irish aristocrats who sink into dissolution and ruin over the course of four generations. The narrator, "Old Thady" or "Honest Thady," is the Rackrents' steward. Offering occasionally obsequious, occasionally wry commentary, never directly insulting the family he's served for his entire life but making it pretty clear that some of them are wastes of space, Thady is also supposedly an early example of an unreliable narrator.

As a work of satire, *Castle Rackrent* isn't that funny, though the Rackrents are certainly comical figures. Thady describes one Rackrent heir after the next: the generous but spendthrift Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin, the litigious Sir Murtagh Rackrent, the cruel Sir Kit Rackrent, who abuses his Jewish wife and locks her in her bedroom for seven years, and the last of the Rackrents, Sir Condy, who ends up selling the estate to the narrator's son, Jason. It emerges as a single long stream of narration, interspersed with Thady's highly vernacular commentary, telling the history of Castle Rackrent until at last it falls into the hands of their long-time Irish steward's son.

Politically, this book was apparently something of a hot potato, being published just prior to the 1800 Act of Union that supposedly united Ireland with Britain. Edgeworth was ostensibly describing the Irish people for her English readers. From the Author's Preface:

For the information of the IGNORANT English reader, a few notes have been subjoined by the editor, and he had it once in contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain

English; but Thady's idiom is incapable of translation, and, besides, the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner.

Several years ago he related to the editor the history of the Rackrent family, and it was with some difficulty that he was persuaded to have it committed to writing; however, his feelings for 'THE HONOUR OF THE FAMILY,' as he expressed himself, prevailed over his habitual laziness, and he at length completed the narrative which is now laid before the public.

As she puts it, the Irish were more alien to the English than the people of continental Europe. Her description of the Irish is sympathetic yet slightly condescending; betwixt the lines one sees the sharp criticism of English overlordship, and how mismanagement by profligate and irresponsible, mostly absentee, landlords has driven the Irish to poverty and pathos.

That said, it's a very early work. The novel form was still being refined. Edgeworth writes with a certain amount of humor and depth, but I saw little of the wit or understanding of *story* found in Jane Austen's much better novels, which came a few years later. This would be of interest to people with a historical interest in Anglo-Irish relations, and Edgeworth casts neither the English nor the Irish as heroes or villains; they're just two groups of people thrown together into a historical stew; the bloody outcome persisting for generations was probably not foreseeable by the author, even if she shows an awareness of what sort of calamity is already being perpetrated. 2 stars for entertainment value, 3 stars for its historical value and place in literary history.
