

Irish Women's Migrant Writing: George Egerton's The Wheel of God (1898)

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Abstract: *Until quite recently, Irish migrant literature has tended to be an absent presence within the field of Irish Studies, and is only now beginning to be constituted as a vitally important field of enquiry in the field. In the contemporary period, the fixed points on the map of Irish emigration have been disrupted by what Negra calls “transnationalised Irishness”: as certainties about emigration and Irish identities have undergone a series of transformations. However, the literature of 19th and 20th century Irish literary writers reveals that such fixed points were never there to begin with. Writers such as, for instance, ‘George Egerton’ [Mary Chavelita Dunne], Maeve Brennan, and contemporary writers such Anne Enright tend to construct migrant experience as a way of being in the world rather than a journey between two fixed points, which anticipates the kind of “nomadic subjectivity” described by Braidotti. This essay, focusing on Egerton’s 1898 novel *The Wheel of God*, will suggest that reading Irish women’s migrant literature unsettles categories of national and diasporic identity, as their central protagonists construct themselves within a complex nexus of Irish, European, and colonial identities.*

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Montréal poet Dionne Brand draws on David Turnbull’s statement: “In order to find our way successfully, it is not enough to just have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as a practical mastery of way-finding”, repeating the phrase “In order to find our way successfully” (Brand 16). In the fields of Irish history, geography, anthropology and social science, the maps of Irish migration have been plotted for quite some time. However, in Irish literary and cultural studies scholarship, we have lagged somewhat behind on those way-marked paths. And yet, the “cognitive schema” as Turnbull would have it, within which we can make sense of the migrant experience (or experiences), is available to us in the work of Irish literary writers from at least the mid-nineteenth century on. Constructing a discourse within which the literary and cultural, as well as the social and historical aspects of Irish emigrant experience are situated, enables us to see other elements of that narrative, such as affect

for instance. This is certainly the case with George Egerton's work, in particular her 1898 novel *The Wheel of God* which will be my main focus of enquiry here.¹ Before I turn to look at this text, I'd like to sketch in broad brushstrokes some of the contexts within which my reading is situated.

In the past fifteen years a lively and growing dynamic has emerged in Irish scholarship which has broadened critical discourse beyond previous somewhat static literary-historical categories, deploying postcolonial, feminist and queer approaches to Irish literature and culture. In tandem with this, the fixed points on the map of Irish emigration have been unsettled in the context of the contemporary global environment and what Diane Negra calls "transnationalized Irishness" (1). This troubling of the canon and of the old certainties enables us to interrogate the connections and potential incompatibilities between received forms of national identity on the island, and locate these within a more complex nexus of Irish, European, and transnational identities. In the context of migration, these developments can be demonstrated with reference to Kerby Miller's ground-breaking 1985 study *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. The resonance of one of the key terms used here "exiles", now seems a little dated in an Irish context and perhaps this gestures to the shifts in this field since the early 1980s. If anything, even the fixities suggested by the term "diaspora", which has had widespread use since Mary Robinson's presidency in the 1990s, seem somewhat old-fashioned in comparison to terms we are now more familiar with in relation to twenty-first-century migration: hybridity, third space or contact zones, syncretism, and in an Irish context, Arrowsmith's "plastic Paddies". Perhaps we might best locate our praxis in relation to Irish migrant discourses in Ian Chambers' use of the term "migrancy", suggestive of fluidity rather than fixity. Chambers describes migrancy as "a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain" (5). If we consider this framework in the light of Paul White's discussion of the way migration changes people and mentalities, the new experiences resulting from the coming together of multiple influences and peoples, and these new experiences leading to altered or evolving representations of experience or self-identity, it seems to me that we may arrive at a very fluid understanding of both the migrant subject and selfhood more generally. Such fluid understandings are at the heart of work by several women writers of Irish migrant literature, such as that of Maeve Brennan and Anne Enright for instance, who tend to construct migrant experience as a way of being in the world rather than a journey between two fixed points. In some cases, this reflects the tangible life experience of the migrant woman herself: here we find a disruption of the binaries of home and adopted country such as that suggested by Maeve Brennan's statement in her Preface to *The Rose Garden* that "there are a number of places I am homesick for". This reflects James Clifford's description of the "lived tension" between "separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (255). Thus, as we locate Irish emigrant experience in the context of other immigrant communities abroad, and construct selfhood and new families emerging within new

communities in a hybrid way, rather than one fixed and immutably anchored in an Irish past, we ought not to forget this “lived tension” on the part of the migrant particularly when it comes to reading migrant literature.

In the contemporary period, it is perhaps tempting to see migrant experience as simply part of the modern condition and to dissolve the disjunctures between homeland and adopted country in a pool of cheap air travel and twenty-first century technologies (email, skype, online newspapers, satellite tv, and so on). The diasporic experience of *some* Irish people today is far removed from the traumatic rupture experienced by their compatriots a century or more ago. Thus when we encounter the literary expression of nineteenth-century Irish migrant experience, it is useful to remember George O’Brien’s assessment, that “exile has been a dual negative in Irish life” its combination of depletion and silence making it difficult to represent. This dual negative is perhaps why we don’t find emigration emerging as a significant theme in nineteenth-century Irish writing, although there are some exceptions to this tendency, such as the work of Mary Ann Sadlier for instance.² Using O’Brien’s framework can explain why it is that only more recent generations of Irish writers and scholars feel free to address migration as a central topic in their work (as contemporary novels by Colm Tóibín, Anne Enright, Ronan Bennett and Joseph O’Connor attest). Where it is available to us, the literary work of Irish migrant writers can facilitate, it seems to me, some kind of understanding of the earlier migrant experience, constructing what it is to be neither “here nor there” (to use Bernard O’Donoghue’s formula) enabling the reader to experience the third space – at a remove, perhaps, but nonetheless, in some kind of tangible way. As Joe Lee has pointed out, when talking about twentieth-century emigration:

It is to the writers that the historian must turn, as usual, for the larger truth. It is they, sometimes themselves emigrants, who best convey the fetid atmosphere of the forties and fifties, the sense of pervading, brooding hopelessness at home, the emptiness, the uncomprehending remorse, the heartbreak and heroism of many [...] as families were sundered and communities withered”. (384)

The literary expression of the diaspora experience, too, can help us to fill in the gaps in this history, and perhaps explain why a particular mythology has grown up in the dominant culture relating to migration. As Eilis Lacey, the protagonist in Colm Tóibín’s recent novel *Brooklyn* recalls:

One thing Jack had said remained with her because it was unlike him to be so vehement about anything. His saying that at the beginning he would have done anything to go home was strange. He had said nothing about this in his letters. It struck her that he might have told no one, not even his brothers, how he felt, and she thought how lonely that might have been for him. Maybe, she thought, all three of her brothers went through the same things and helped each other, sensing the feeling of homesickness when it arose in one of the others. If it happened to

her, she realized, she would be alone, so she hoped that she would be ready for whatever was going to happen to her, however she was going to feel, when she arrived in Brooklyn (38).

As well as exploring affect, this passage, it seems to me, sums up some of the reasons for particular versions of migrant narrative to have triumphed over others: such experiences (of fear, loss, or failure) were not written about, or in some cases even spoken, in either public or private discourses. This is why George O'Brien cautions that while recent use of the term "Irish diaspora" might offer us a way forward in constructing useful frameworks for migrant experience (and we might add to that the list of terms I mentioned above), we should also remember that "a phrase cannot lay a ghost".

So to focus on one writer, George Egerton, who used her own diasporic identity to posit a range of different subject positions beyond normative nineteenth-century codes relating to gender, class and nation for her female protagonists (and thereby for her readers). Despite her Irish background, where Egerton's work has been addressed by literary scholarship, it tends to be situated either within the framework of British "New Woman" fiction, or in relation to the *fin de siècle* Scandinavian models from which many of her short stories drew inspiration and form. I propose here to address Egerton's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Wheel of God* (1898), which has received little critical attention. Given how rare in particular Irish migrant literature written by women seems to have been, even up until quite recently, this novel which sits squarely in the frame of "diasporic literature" suggests an exception to the general tendency, such as that suggested by Patrick Ward's synopsis of Irish women migrants: "They were celibate and single and almost totally silent in the discourses surrounding emigration" (152). The *Wheel of God* draws on Egerton's first-hand experience of emigration and ethnic ex-centricity to articulate a feminist subject position and seems to me to posit a direct contradiction of Ward's view that "Those women who did write [about their experience of migration] and were able to publish their material were unable or unwilling to re-write those stereotypes constructed in the interests of men" (158).

As we know from the work of Kerby Miller and others, the numbers of young, unmarried women emigrating from Ireland in the post-Famine period equalled and eventually exceeded those of Irish men emigrating. Hasia Diner suggests that this was partly due to a conscious rejection by Irish women of their limited familial and economic opportunities in Ireland, and an awareness of the availability of waged work and economic independence in the USA. On the whole, we tend to think of *all* late nineteenth-century women emigrants ending up as domestic servants in the USA (such as those "Biddies" depicted in Maeve Brennan's short stories, as well as in the scholarly work of Hasia Diner and Maureen Murphy) and as with our general perception of all earlier emigrants, as those who never "came back" to Ireland once they had left. Yet, in the case of George Egerton and her fictional protagonist Mary Desmond in *The Wheel of God*, we are presented with a very different kind of emigrant, one who is not just barely literate but who later

constructs fictional accounts of her migrant experiences, and perhaps more importantly, one who returns to “tell the tale”.

The material upon which this essay is based is drawn from my reading of the novel and also of Egerton’s life-writing. It is clear from Egerton’s letters that she consciously deployed her own life experiences as the basis for those of her fictional protagonists, and she draws direct parallels between both in the prefaces to some of her works. However, as with her better-known counterpart Sarah Grand, it is often difficult to differentiate between fiction and fact when it comes to these accounts, which brings to mind Foucault’s discussion of self-representation and self-construction, the basis of which, he suggests, is a mixture of memory and invention. The figure of “George Egerton” was very much a deliberate construct. Married twice and involved in one earlier union, as well as several love affairs, Egerton adopted the names given to her by the men she lived with – and passed through a number of names/identities between her given name, Mary Chavelita Dunne, and her final marriage to Golding Bright. Family circumstances meant that almost every single member of her family, the Dunes, migrated, some of them moving from place to place, others settling in one place almost immediately – as did Egerton’s sister Kit, who settled in Johannesburg where she reared her children and later took in members of her own family along the way, including one of Egerton’s husbands, George Egerton Clairmonte, at one point. In Egerton’s letters to her father, there are references to her young brother Jack coming to stay with her in Scandinavia and then going to India in 1891; in 1893 she tells her father that “Bun”, another sibling, has gone to Algiers, and later that Nan is going to live with Kit in South Africa. Johnny, the youngest member of the family comes back from Paris in 1896 with plans to emigrate to the USA. Doubtless this was due in part to their early life – the children of an Irish Catholic army captain, the Dunne children were each born in a different colonial barracks (not unlike the Bagstocks) and the family moved to settle in Dublin only when Egerton herself was 10. In the main, however, their migrations were economically driven – the struggle to make ends meet was one in which each member of the family was engaged, due in part to their not having had a solid start in life, little education and no money to secure positions.

This background, it seems to me, may be directly addressed with reference to Breda Gray’s observations about the permissible and impermissible narratives of emigration. While there has been a tendency to address migration in a context purely of market forces and economic need, and generally the emigrant story – usually the successful emigrant story – was not one in which other “push” factors were really considered. Gray points out that frequently, the discourse of migration may incorporate family dysfunction or breakup, abuse, unwanted pregnancy or transgressive sexual identities, yet these stories have tended to remain silent, hidden or been pushed aside. In dealing with life experiences such as those of the Dunes – who are just one example of such a migrant story – and narratives such as *The Wheel of God*, social and psychological motives for migration come to the fore and it becomes clear that in fact, they are the main story here.

We have little information about Egerton's life between 1877 and 1887, but we do know that during that period she emigrated to New York on her own. Katherine Tynan suggests that this was for a three-year period, before she returned to London to work in the mid-1880s. These experiences in New York were the ones she would return to in her novel *The Wheel of God* and also in some of the short stories, such as "Gone Under". Taking as her subject a young Irish woman who emigrates to New York late in the nineteenth century, fleeing destitution and a dysfunctional family, the novel questions national and social identities during the period. This novel was not as successful as Egerton's earlier work. This fact may be attributed to the decline in public interest in Decadent and New Woman forms in 1898, a mere three years after the Wilde trials. In our own period, despite the resurgence of interest in New Woman fiction, this novel has as yet been neglected apart from one useful essay by Scott McCracken. Yet it seems to me that it is an important text, not only in the context of New Woman themes, but also as part of a matrix of Irish discourses.

The novel begins with a deftly etched background of a family life not unlike that of Egerton's own, where the central protagonist, Mary Desmond, is a young adolescent being sent with notes to beg for financial assistance to a number of wealthy acquaintances of her father around Dublin city in the late nineteenth century. Chapter Three opens with the death of Mary Desmond's mother which is almost immediately followed by Mary's migration to the USA; she later tells us that she had first thought of London but "every one had said her chance was better in America, when the need to earn her living became imperative". Egerton's depiction of the emigrant scene at Cobh, far from being a rose-tinted picture of the Emerald Isle, instead points up images such as Spike Island in the bay, "an English governed convict prison" (59) (as she describes it) and draws our attention to the girl's still-sharp grief for her dead mother and also for the death of Captain O'Hara, an uncle figure. Mary Desmond's last glimpse of shore takes in "the sun striking white sparks off the houses that were each an Irish home, fast fading into a blur of green and white" (63). However, it's clear that these were the homes of others – not of Mary Desmond herself. The juxtaposition of this picture with the sharply delineated life experiences of this young woman in the earlier chapters, make clear to us that this migrant is not leaving an idealised Irish home: her mother dead, father in debtor's prison, siblings already scattered to the four winds, we are not here offered the cold comfort of a cosy domestic scene being left behind which may offer solace in the migrant landscape, or a place to return to. Nor can Mary Desmond find respite in or a sense of solidarity with the company of her fellow-travellers, from whom she feels alienated from the start – partly due to class distinctions of a sort, partly because of their reliance on Catholic prayers which she cannot join in because of her rejection of her religion following her mother's death – an experience very close to Egerton's own.

Like many before her and since, Mary Desmond has a letter of introduction to a distant relative in New York who sets her up with a place to live, from whence she sets

off to find work. At this point, the novel picks up a thread we are familiar with in New Woman texts: addressing the problem of work for women such as Mary Desmond, who, coming from backgrounds of either genteel poverty or the middle classes, are neither trained for skilled work nor able for heavy labour. But the backdrop to her search for work is the alienation experienced by a girl lately arrived from Dublin, a small town in comparison to the vast industrial city she has landed in:

She was scarcely miserable, because she had not time to think of her position, and she was too bewildered by the feverish whirr of this monstrous international sifting sieve [...] Life seemed less concrete, less inside the houses and warehouses; it was everywhere, pounding like a gigantic steam-hammer, full speed, in the air, in the streets – insistent, noisy, attention-compelling. Trains above one’s head, one caught glimpses of domestic interiors, intimate bedroom scenes, as one whizzed past second stories in the early cars [...] Mary Desmond felt that the clocks in America must surely give two ticks to the *one* of the sedate old timepieces at home. (68)

In many ways, this passage is typical of Irish emigrant fiction – it would not have been out of place, for instance, in a Sadlier novel. However, the insistence on Irish exceptionalism we find in other emigrant writing is not echoed here, as Egerton constructs her protagonist in relation to a range of other migrants in a transnational framework. When she finally finds clerical work in a large insurance firm, her job is to make ledger entries based on the new business being brought in by their sales staff:

Murphies, O’Reillys, Bradies, Browns, Jones, Robinsons, Gomez and Mendozas, Müllers and Grüners, Russians and Poles with a hatful of consonants – a grotesque tale of overcrowded mother countries, *wandertrieb*, evictions, enterprise or expedient flight. (75)

Here, we find the usual list of motivations for people to emigrate – and also, the cosmopolitan landscape which the newly-arrived immigrant to New York inhabits. This is enhanced by the relationships Mary Desmond forges with her co-workers (none of whom are Irish) and with others she encounters. So, in contrast to the work of Sadlier, for instance, Egerton doesn’t construct a “diaspora space” within which the Irish emigrant is bound within an Irish expat community, fixed by ties of culture, religion and a predefined relationship to their homeland.

While Mary Desmond is typical in that she misses her father and siblings, at no point in this text does she either write or receive letters to or from home – the usual means by which the Irish emigrant story has been narrated. Instead, on the occasions we find her solitary in her boarding house, her companions are library books – she spends her first Christmas day in New York with “a book of Norwegian peasant tales by a man

with an unpronounceable name". Her imaginary life transports her away from her circumstances, not to an Irish hearth and home, but to Bjornson's Scandinavian north: "She was away in the fjords, and up in the saeters with Arne, sitting on the cliff with Marit" (87). It seems to me that this is just one of the ways in which Egerton marks out her central protagonist as not so much an Irish emigrant to New York, but as a nomad with an Irish diasporic identity, with much the same heritage and cultural allegiances as her own and that of her Dunne siblings. This is not, therefore, the narrative of a homesick Irish girl, alienated in New York; more that of a "nomadic subject" (to use Braidotti's formula). In the case of Mary Desmond, however, we do not have two fixed points in her history – a past rooted in a specific place and time, mother country, mother tongue – and a present in a new place where she will forge a new life. Instead, we have a variety of cultural markers and geographical places, held together by her attachment to her family and her sense of herself as a Desmond "after all, there was no one like one's own" she tells us. Added to this is her knowledge of the wider world and an adherence to a wider European, rather than simply an Irish, intellectual or cultural tradition. Egerton's construction of the emigrant here as hybrid is a very modern one, which anticipates Stuart Hall's "necessary heterogeneity" (31), or Edward Said's "contrapuntal consciousness" (366). Therefore, *The Wheel of God*, clearly located within *fin de siècle* literary forms, anticipates the twentieth-century transnational subject, and perhaps we can compare it with an early example such as Conrad's *Nostramo* (1904). Thus, rather than taking refuge in a fixed and identifiably "Irish" past, Mary Desmond has the ability to read herself into, and out of, the narratives of her own life history which are her sources of sustenance in this strange land. In this way too, Egerton's protagonist corresponds to the nomadic consciousness outlined by Braidotti, who defines this as being: "akin to what Foucault called counter-memory; it is a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self." (25). Mary Desmond's resistance could be read in just this way, as a refusal to be assimilated to the received Irish emigrant story – in a similar way to that found in the work of Egerton's contemporary, George Moore. In his short story, "Home Sickness" Moore constructs emigrant nostalgia in relation to the country of adoption, rather than the "home" country, thus refusing what diaspora theory calls the "myth of return", and troubling the construction of home in earlier literary texts such as Sadlier's 1861 *Bessy Conway* for instance, where the "old country", is fetishised. If anything, James Bryden in "Home Sickness", brings to mind the words of Tarry Flynn's much-travelled uncle: "The best way to love a country like this is from a range of not less than three hundred miles" (Kavanagh 251).

As with other New Woman fiction, in other words, this novel is derived from *fin de siècle* feminist thought, its central protagonist is sexually and economically liberated, striving to forge a life for herself autonomously. Mary Desmond, Egerton tells us, "was turning over a great many pages in the book of life, and readjusting moral values" (90). Shortly after beginning to work in New York, she asks Cora, one of her colleagues: "How do the shop-girls get sealskin sacques and ostrich feathers?" and

Egerton tells us that “Cora had enlightened her [about the sexual economy of the place] with frank amusement at her ignorance” (90-1). The general attitude to this, and other ways of actually earning a living through sex-working, is one of acceptance – as Mary’s landlady comments about one of her lodgers: “Well, she’s proper enough here, and one must live”. Paul White considers the ambivalence of many migrants towards standards of behaviour in the adopted country, suggesting that emigrants question “whether to cling to the old or to discard it, whether to compromise via symbolic events whilst adhering to the new on an everyday basis” (3-4). Mary Desmond experiences such ambivalence in response to these sexual transgressions and what she sees as her own complicity in them: “I seem to have lost a grip of everything since I came to America. I am confused by all sorts of moral issues; and I haven’t sifted them yet – to my own satisfaction” (106). She seeks refuge in a brief return to her Catholic roots – she goes to Confession. But Egerton tells us “she found no comfort, only struck her hand and bruised it against the granite wall of ecclesiastical authority.” In response to this, she takes one look back at the altar, sanctuary lamp and tabernacle “with regret” but realises that “henceforth she must wander outside” (91). Chief amongst her New York friends is a young woman who works in the same firm, called Septima, or Sep. Throughout, Sep is having an affair with a married man and bit by bit, Mary Desmond becomes aware of this illicit relationship and supports Sep through some of the difficult patches. Eventually however this transgressive relationship becomes impossible to maintain and when Sep’s lover goes back to his wife and family, she commits suicide. For Mary Desmond, the loss of Sep breaks her link with her new life in New York and she determines to leave – not, interestingly, to “go back” Ireland, but to London, where she will try to forge another new start. In this way, it seems to me that Egerton’s text generates what Sneja Gunew calls “serial accommodations”, leading away from fixities of class, gender or national identities. Mary Desmond is very clearly situated at the end of the novel, as “neither here nor there” and *perhaps* “therefore home” as Bernard O’Donoghue’s poem suggests.

This brings me to the question: if we are to read the work of Irish literary writers such as Egerton within a transnational framework, how might we say their work reflects or responds to changing notions about Irish identities? In the case of some of this work, there is a revelation, as I have demonstrated that the fixed points were never really there to begin with, or weren’t as fixed as they now seem. Using a different lens opens up a series of new questions for us in relation to this literature, and we might go on to ask: how do these texts deal with, or shape, that experience of migration, write that tension between tradition and modernity, or as Piaras MacEinrí describes it: “between the communally-defined subject and the modern, isolated, self-defined subject”. The work of Sadlier in particular, can yield very interesting material in response to this question, it seems to me. Furthermore, we might consider placing such a text within the burgeoning field of affect studies, or perhaps look at the embodiment of diasporic subjectivity, following Catherine Eagan’s discussions of the fraught racial status of Irishness, and the work of Richard Dyer on heterosexuality as a discourse within migration.

So to draw some of these threads together into a skein: it seems to me that, granted wider access to texts such as *The Wheel of God*, both in terms of our own research but also in our teaching and interaction with students, we may begin to piece together different perspectives on Irish women's writing from earlier centuries, and begin to see earlier Irish women authors as *active* cultural producers and agents. In this way, we may further develop the resistance in contemporary feminist thought to the appropriation of Irish femininity evident in the more stereotyped constructions which have tended to dominate in Irish writing and scholarship. In a more general way, the kind of reflexivity I'm suggesting here, in which we look outward in an interdisciplinary way to diaspora theory, in tandem with a more in-depth engagement with the Irish literary past *and present* in all its diversity, it seems to me, can only enhance our understanding of Irish discourses, and thus enable us to construct more meaningful readings of contemporary identities, and hegemonies, in Ireland. The migrant perspective, or perhaps more accurately, the migrant process, situates the subject outside and frequently in opposition to the closed space of the nation, highlighting the boundaries of that space, revealing its constructedness and artificiality. Adopting such an interdisciplinary approach also enables us to ask, at a metalevel, how viable the traditional forms of enquiry we are used to in an Irish Studies context *are* in our altered world, particularly in the context of transnationalism.

Notes

- 1 George Egerton [Mary Chavelita Dunne] (1860-1945) was one of the "New Woman" novelists of the 1890s whose most celebrated work was the short story collection *Keynotes* (1893). Egerton was born in Melbourne, Australia, the daughter of an Irish Catholic army captain who returned to Dublin with his family in the late 1860s. She wrote *Keynotes* while based in Millstreet, Co. Cork. On the whole, she led a peripatetic existence spending several years in Scandinavia and New York before settling in London. For further information see *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001. 75-6).
- 2 Mary Ann Sadlier (1820-1903), who emigrated to North America from Cootehill, Co. Cavan in the 1840s, published over sixty novels in the USA and Canada in the 1850s and 60s, many of which dealt with Irish migrant communities in the USA and had Catholicism and the "myth of return" as central themes.

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