



Lady Gregory's fans: the Irish Protestant landed class and negotiations of power

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'[I]f we are considering Lady Gregory's rise in the world', suggested George Moore in his third volume of autobiography, *Vale*, in 1914, 'we must admit that she owes a great deal to her husband'.¹ Leaving aside Moore's generally negative portrayal of Lady Gregory in *Hail and farewell*, this is a perceptive remark. With her marriage to Sir William Henry Gregory of Coole Park, Co. Galway, Augusta Persse entered the high stratum of society on both sides of the Irish Sea, and was introduced to an established circle of friends including eminent politicians, artists and writers of the British elite. Indeed, becoming Lady Gregory proved to be the first stepping stone to a career as a prolific writer of the Irish Literary Revival and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre. Reflecting on her life in the summer of 1928, she expressed gratitude: 'If he had not given me his name[,] his position, I should not have had so good standing'.² Such an idea of elitism and tradition reveals an awareness of her privileged position within society. The remark suggests a continuity of high social standing in a period of time associated with a decline in wealth and power of that echelon.

Both Moore and Lady Gregory seem to agree that Sir William's renown and name guaranteed continued access to privilege. However, this essay will demonstrate the complexity of Lady Gregory's status within society, as her roles as landlord, widowed mother and cultural nationalist led to tensions with the established elite in both Ireland and England. Thus, her attitude towards the elite as well as the elite's perception of her was under strain, and power or privilege had to be negotiated. From the beginning of her marriage in 1880, Lady Gregory showed concern for the reputation of the Gregory family, in part to further the future career of her son, Robert Gregory (1881–1918), but also with regard to the reputation of the landed class at a time when Irish nationalism gained momentum. With her move towards cultural nationalism in the 1890s, Lady Gregory relied on the support of the same elite circles both to assist her son Robert, whom she wished to become an influential member of the Irish elite, and to support her cultural projects, mainly the founding of the Abbey Theatre in 1904. This period raises questions concerning how the landed elite viewed their position at the end of the Victorian age, whether their power diminished and what methods were employed to retain their elite status.

¹ George Moore, *Vale* (London, 1914), pp 174–5. ² Lady Augusta Gregory, diary entry for 22 June 1928, in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals: volume two, Books 30–44, 21 February, 1925–9 May 1932*, ed. Daniel J. Murphy (Gerrards Cross, 1987), p. 281.



The last two decades of the nineteenth century in Ireland were characterized by agrarian unrest in the midst of the Land War, a diversification of Irish society with a rising Catholic middle class, the franchise reforms of 1884–5 and increasing questioning of British imperialism. These changes were of particular importance to Ireland's elite, advancing the gradual decline of that social stratum in wealth and power. As pointed out by D. George Boyce, 'the decline of deference was particularly marked in the Land War'.³ Thus, a major pillar of power for the landed class began to dismantle with incoming rents dwindling and estates shrinking in size. Yet the Gregorys' landed wealth was already diminishing prior to the land agitation of the 1880s. In 1847, Sir William inherited 15,000 acres and an annual income of more than £7,000. However, this was largely absorbed by up to £50,000 of encumbrances due to mortgages and losses during the Famine. His ardent interest in horse racing added to the already substantial debt. In 1857, he sold about two-thirds of his land in the encumbered estates court and Coole Park was only saved when his mother bought 5,000 acres of land and he took another mortgage from his cousin, Charles Gregory, in 1867.⁴ According to W.E. Vaughan, an estimated 700 landlords owned land of 5,000 acres or above in the 1870s and, by that standard, Sir William could still be considered above average.⁵

Despite a decline in landed wealth, Sir William's leverage in elite circles of London society was founded on a rising political career. After entering the Irish Privy Council in 1871, he was appointed governor of Ceylon the following year. The latter position was secured by Lord Granville's recommendation, which he had gained through his friendship with Lady Waldegrave, prominent hostess of a political salon.⁶ The governorship came with an annual salary of £7,000, which, by the standards of the late 1860s, settled him comfortably among those 30,000 families of Britain with an income of £1,000 or higher.⁷ Yet it was mainly due to the substantial fortune of his first wife, Elizabeth Bowdoin, that Sir William gained financial stability.⁸ After her sudden death in 1873, only a year after their marriage, Sir William wrote to Bess Gregory with relief: 'The legacies are £2,000 to other people and £9,000 to me – besides the life income. [...] I am now so extremely well off that I often doubt whether it is worth while to stay on here and save money'.⁹ With the sale of their house in Eaton Square and the trust fund, his inheritance amounted to

³ D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-century Ireland – the search for stability* (rev. ed. Dublin, 2005), p. 278. ⁴ See Brian Jenkins, *Sir William Gregory of Coole: the biography of an Anglo-Irishman* (Gerrards Cross, 1986), pp 84–108. ⁵ W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1994), p. 6. Vaughan notes that a minimum of 500 acres entitled 'its owner to be considered a landlord' and the official returns for the 1870s show that there was an estimated 6,500 landowners: *ibid.* ⁶ See Jenkins, *Sir William Gregory of Coole*, p. 211. ⁷ See Stefan Collini, *Public moralists: political thought and intellectual life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), pp 36–7. ⁸ See Jenkins, *Sir William Gregory of Coole*, p. 219. ⁹ Letter from Sir William Henry Gregory to Bess Gregory (17 Aug. 1873), Gregory Papers, Emory University, quoted in Brian Jenkins, 'The marriage' in Ann Saddlemyer and Colin Smythe (eds), *Lady Gregory: fifty years after* (Gerrards Cross, 1987), pp 71–2.



almost £50,000.¹⁰ Knighted in 1875 by the Prince of Wales, Sir William continued to serve as governor for a further year. He resigned in 1876 and returned the following year to Ireland, where he first met Augusta Persse of the neighbouring estate, Roxborough. After their marriage in March 1880, Augusta entered society as Lady Gregory, travelled extensively to Continental Europe and Britain's overseas colonies, attended dinner parties and gradually developed her talent as a hostess and conversationalist among the British elite.

Described as 'an Irish landlord but an English gentleman', Sir William enjoyed spending the social season of the year in London and bought a townhouse at the fashionable address of 3 St George's Place, just off Hyde Park.¹¹ His life is summed up by his friend F. Standish: 'A pretty house, pretty [*sic*] decorated, with artistic surroundings – a good cook and cellar, pleasant friends, and ample income and good health'.¹² It was there that Lady Gregory gained her first experiences as a hostess and was introduced to the art of conversation at dinner tables and tea parties. 'In her drawing-room were to be met men of assured reputation in literature and politics', George Moore wrote, 'and there was always the best reading of the time upon her tables'.¹³ Lady Gregory quickly adapted to the social seasons in London and rose to host 'one of the most agreeable [*salons*] in London', as Frank Lawley, a friend of Sir William, remarked.¹⁴

Lady Gregory, deeply impressed by the importance of their societal circle, started to collect the autographs of selected acquaintances on an ivory fan soon after her marriage, a practice that invited the scorn of George Moore.¹⁵ Arriving at St George's Place as the historian William Lecky was about to leave, Moore recalled 'the look of pleasure on her face when she mentioned the name of the visitor'. On Lecky's exit, Sir Edwin Arnold, poet laureate candidate in 1892, made an entrance and, Moore remembered, 'when Sir Edwin rose to go, she produced a fan and asked him to write his name upon one of the sticks'. It is in his subsequent comment, however, that Moore revealed the reason for his mockery: 'she did not ask me to write my name', he wrote with a recognizable sense of disappointment, 'though at that time I had written not only *A modern lover*, but also *A Mummer's wife*, and I left the house feeling for the first time that the world I lived in was not so profound as I had imagined it to be'.¹⁶ The fan included the signatories Sir John Millais, Sir Alfred Lyall, Lord Tennyson, Lord Dufferin, Lord Randolph Churchill, Sir Edward Malet, Sir Arthur Sullivan, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Ahmed Arabi, W.E. Gladstone, A.W. Kinglake, Sir G.O. Trevelyan and Sir Henry Layard.¹⁷ Significantly, the list is formed mainly by politicians of high social standing, all friends or acquaintances of Sir William. It was not Moore's turn yet, but he would eventually be asked to sign his

10 See *ibid.*, p. 71. **11** Mary Lou Kohfeldt, *Lady Gregory: the woman behind the Irish renaissance* (New York, 1985), p. 45. **12** Letter from F. Standish to Sir William Henry Gregory (20 Mar. 1878) quoted in Jenkins, 'The marriage', p. 72. **13** George Moore, *Ave* (London, 1911), p. 275. **14** Frank Lawley quoted in Kohfeldt, *The woman behind the renaissance*, p. 53. **15** *Ibid.* **16** Moore, *Vale*, pp 175–6. **17** Colin Smythe, *A guide to Coole Park, Co. Galway, home of Lady Gregory* (4th ed. Gerrards Cross, 2003), p. 57.

name to the same fan, as was Sir Edward Arnold, their names representing what was to become Lady Gregory's increasingly Irish-based and literary social circle.

With some pleasure, Moore informs his readers that Sir William 'looked a little distressed at her want of tact' as she proudly showed him the newly gained addition.¹⁸ This habit of collecting appears to have been an important tradition for Lady Gregory, however, as she also arranged letters, photographs and articles of English and Irish politicians in a large autograph book. This included not only contemporary letters, but also older ones associated with previous generations of the Gregory family, such as those by the duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel and Daniel O'Connell. Notably, most entries date from the period of her marriage. A signed note by the first Viscount Wolsley, an Irish army officer, for instance, reads 'I hope the enclosed photographs may please your young son'.¹⁹ Equally, Sir Edgar Boehm, sculptor of a statue of Sir William for the Museum of Colombo, wrote in 1883, enclosing 'the photograph you did me the honor to ask for'. With this statue, Boehm contributed to Sir William's stature abroad and, hence, helped Lady Gregory's project of continuing a tradition of a good name and reputation. That she wrote with the future of her son in mind, in part arguably designing the book for him, is exemplified in Sir Edgar remarking 'I wish with all my heart he may yet give you all the happiness & pride a good & talented son is to parents'.²⁰ Thus, both the fans and autograph book functioned as the location for a common heritage and tradition. These artefacts, with their embedded shared memories through photographs and personal letters, provided a basis for future support for her son – an address book in a different format.²¹

Thus endowed by Sir William with a privileged position, Lady Gregory entered early widowhood in 1892. The death of her husband marked as important a moment in her life as did her marriage to him. Showing a sense for practicality, she wrote to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, one of her closest friends, from St George's Place only a few weeks after Sir William's death:

18 Moore, *Vale*, pp 175–6. **19** Viscount Wolsley to Lady Augusta Gregory (undated), Autograph Book, NLI MS 25639. **20** Sir Edgar Boehm to Lady Augusta Gregory (30 July 1883), Autograph Book, NLI MS 25639. **21** In 1914, as demonstrated by L.P. Curtis, Irish Catholics 'were under-represented in the professions'. For detailed percentages by profession in the context of the 1911 census returns, see L.P. Curtis Jr, 'Ireland in 1914' in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, vi: Ireland under the Union, II, 1870–1921* (1996; Oxford, 2003), p. 156. According to Fergal Campbell, the Irish civil service, for instance, was still dominated by Protestants in 1911. Despite the introduction of open competitive examination in 1870, the high positions within the civil service were filled by nomination and appointment well into the twentieth century. See Fergal Campbell, 'Who ruled Ireland? The Irish administration, 1879–1914', *Historical Journal*, 50:3 (2007), 637. Thus, it needs to be emphasized that the decline of the Irish elite was a gradual process, and privileged positions within the professions, for instance, are arguably due to networks based on shared traditions and memories, a system of patronage that Lady Gregory emphasizes through her collecting of autographs.

I want to sell this house & to let Coole. To live at either cd swallow up all I have, & I want to get things straight for Robert before he grows up. I will always take him to Galway for the summer though, that he may keep good friends with the people.²²

Although she considered it to be of great importance to keep contact with tenants in Ireland, Lady Gregory realized the particular importance of London's social elite. Her role as both guest at and hostess of dinner parties gave her 'a feel of independence & power'.²³ It was more important, however, to keep in contact with friends and acquaintances of Sir William. Her entry for 19 April 1894 sums up the urgency of maintaining a residence in Britain's capital:

I [...] had come to the conclusion, that, money permitting, it would be unwise to give up London – I have at present many friends, but there of all places one must keep one's friendship 'in constant repair' [...] And I might probably lose that & become dull in society, whereas now I have the name of brightness & agreeability – I should lose sight of William's friends by staying away & they may in 8 or 9 years time be of great use to Robert, as I see from Paul [Harvey] & others the difference made to a lad by a good start & influential friends.²⁴

Lady Gregory revealed a sense of practicality, whereby the social connections she gained through her marriage provided an important platform to further the career of her son in the future. Giving up St George's Place, she rented rooms at Queen Anne's Mansion in London for £95 per year and was glad for its independence and 'absence of housekeeping & servant troubles'. Left with a jointure of £800 and the still unpaid mortgage from 1867, Lady Gregory had to economize and was glad for the support of friends who helped with the furnishing.²⁵ With a modest income and a mortgaged estate in Ireland, wealth no longer offered security and access to privilege. More than ever, friendships and social networks provided the means by which to ensure both her own position within society, and that of her son.

In order to maintain the social connections already established, it was again

22 Letter from Lady Augusta Gregory to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (31 Mar. 1892), 233 A.L.S. 2 A.L., 17 T.L.S., 1 A.N. to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt [June? 1882]–18 June 1922. 50 folders, Lady Gregory collection of papers, the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, Folder 23 (hereafter: Berg). James Pethica acknowledges Lady Gregory's emphasis on the importance of patronage for the benefit of her son. See James Pethica, 'Patronage and creative exchange: Yeats, Lady Gregory and the economy of indebtedness' in Deirdre Toomey (ed.), *Yeats and women: Yeats annual no. 9* (2nd ed., London, 1997), p. 171. **23** Entry for 30 Jan. 1894 in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's diaries, 1892–1902*, ed. James Pethica (Gerrards Cross, 1996), p. 19. **24** Entry for 19 Apr. 1894 in Gregory, *Diaries*, p. 26. **25** James Pethica, 'Introduction' in Gregory, *Diaries*, p. xiii; Lady Augusta Gregory, *Seventy years*, ed. Colin Smythe (New York, 1974), p. 269.

crucial to work on a collective memory and enhance the reputation in elite circles. Thus, Lady Gregory started editing her husband's autobiography, which he had written with her encouragement from 1886 onwards. However, as she admitted in her preface, his memoir was 'first intended only for me and our boy, but he afterwards showed them in part to one or two old and dear friends'.²⁶ Lady Gregory took great care in her editorial work not to cause offence. Particularly in the political climate of the time, with the Second Home Rule Bill introduced in 1893, she was careful with regard to the subject of her own country. Writing to Sir Henry Layard in the final stages of the editing process in October of that year, Lady Gregory noted that she would not 'give any of the passages about Ireland [...], as the language is often incisive & I don't want to make enemies for Robert over here'. Keen to emphasize Sir William's liberalism, she was 'anxious it should be known how much he did in his lifetime, & what a kindly nature, & liberal mind he had'.²⁷ On 30 January 1894, she wrote in her diary that she had 'sent the MS to [John] Murray'. Murray agreed to make an offer after further editing and shortening and his proposition was greatly received:

he wd publish at his own risk & expense, giving me half profits – this was an immense relief to my mind, I was anxious, for Robert's sake, to publish, that his father's name might be kept alive a little longer – but the risk & expense wd have been an anxiety to me – though 'a good name is better than riches' & I would if necessary have laid the money out.²⁸

The importance placed on achieving and maintaining a favourable standing cannot be overestimated, especially with a lack of financial security. '[H]e wont have that poor little man', Lady Gregory regretfully wrote to Sir Henry Layard, informing him that she was saving to pay off the mortgage as 'when that is done we shall be easier'.²⁹ Consequently, the publication of the autobiography has to be seen as a deliberate method by a representative of the elite, supposedly in decline, to restructure power from the realms of wealth and land to the realm of social networking. Lady Gregory expressed this most eloquently when outlining that her 'hope in publishing them is that [Sir William's] name [...] may be kept alive a little longer, and that for his sake a friendly hand may sometimes in the future be held out to his boy'.³⁰ In addition, her work as family editor raised her own profile in society and offers a further example of her sense of practicality and political manoeuvring.

Importantly, Lady Gregory proved very conscious of her audience and sent

²⁶ Sir William Henry Gregory, *Sir William Gregory KCMG – formerly Member of Parliament and sometime Governor of Ceylon – an autobiography*, ed. Lady Gregory (2nd ed. London, 1894), p. iii. ²⁷ Letter from Lady Augusta Gregory to Sir Henry Layard (29 Oct. 1893), 17 A.L.S. to Sir Austen Henry Layard, 6 Mar. 1892–3 Feb. 1894, 4 folders, Berg, Folder 4. ²⁸ Entry for 30 Jan. 1894 in Gregory, *Diaries*, p. 18. ²⁹ Letter from Lady Augusta Gregory to Sir Henry Layard (29 Oct. 1893), 17 A.L.S. to Sir Austen Henry Layard, 6. Mar. 1892–3 Feb 1894, 4 folders, Berg, Folder 4. ³⁰ Gregory, *Sir William Gregory*, p. iii.



presentation copies to a selected, yet diverse, group of people. Among these were members of parliament such as George Russell and Henry Labouchere, Sir William's long-time friend Lord Dufferin and Lord Rosebery. Moreover, Father Fahey, parish priest of Gort, received a copy, as did Baron Clonbrock, lieutenant of Co. Galway. Dr James Edward Welldon, headmaster of Harrow School, where Robert continued the Gregorys' family educational tradition, was also sent a copy.³¹ Surely the selection is not mere coincidence and Lady Gregory presumably was thinking about Robert's future career in parliament, the civil service or academia. Moreover, with the two representatives from Co. Galway, she reminded the local community, both religious and governmental, of the Gregorys' liberalism. It conveniently demonstrated to the local nationalist community a positive example of a representative family from the landed class.

Showing an increasing awareness of the profits patronage would bring to her family and herself, Lady Gregory maintained a full calendar of social engagements and constant correspondence, as her diary attests. She received favourable comments after the publication in 1893 of her anonymous anti-Home Rule pamphlet entitled *A phantom's pilgrimage, or home ruin*, which, she would note with pride, had 'been a success'. Among 'those who knew me to be the writer', she added, were Lord Randolph Churchill (1849–95), Sir Henry Layard, Sir Frederic Burton and W.E.H. Lecky.³² Significantly, her initial antagonism towards the possibility of Home Rule was well received, mainly by members of Sir William's generation – a generation that petered out with the end of the nineteenth century. Lady Gregory, having married a man thirty-five years her senior, found that Sir William's friends were equally part of an older generation. His central companions, Alexander Kinglake and Sir Henry Layard, died in 1891 and 1894 respectively. The death of her husband and some of his closest friends underlined the need for her to establish her own social network. The witnessing of the end of a generation that had been not only her support, but also the means through which she had gained access to the elite, and the changing political and social climate of the time, resulted in a sense of nostalgia, as is evidenced in her autographed book and fans.

Such nostalgic practice, it can be argued, had a particular function. Maurice Halbwachs argues in his chapter on the 'Social classes and their traditions' that 'whilst a society may be broken down into a number of groups of people serving a variety of functions, we can also find in it a narrower society whose role, it may be said, is to preserve and maintain the living force of tradition'. With the diversification of the social stratum in Ireland, society did indeed break down. Lady Gregory would belong to that 'narrower society', and her two fans and autograph book functioned as artefacts in which a collective memory for an elite group was located and stored for future generations. Halbwachs stated that 'whether that society is directed toward the past or toward what is a continuation of the past in the present, it participates in

³¹ Entry for 18 Oct. 1894 in Gregory, *Diaries*, pp 39–40. ³² Entry for 17 June 1893 in *ibid.*, pp 13–14.



present-day functions only to the extent that it is important to adapt these functions to traditions and to ensure the continuity of social life throughout their transformations'.³³ This can be equally applied to Lady Gregory, as her second fan was decorated with autographs by Henry James, W.E.H. Lecky, J.A. Froude, Sir William Orpen, Mark Twain, Thomas Hardy, Antonio Mancini, Augustus John, Rudyard Kipling, Bernard Shaw, J.M. Synge, George Moore, John Eglington, Sean O'Casey, Douglas Hyde, Jack B. Yeats, George Russell, Edward Martyn and W.B. Yeats. While the tradition of creating a collective memory in an artefact continued, the frame of reference had changed: the representatives here are mainly Lady Gregory's new circle of friends who would become associated with the Irish Literary Revival. The second fan marks the shift from the political to the cultural.

Throughout her marriage, Lady Gregory had learned the importance of patronage for her own benefit, yet when Edward Martyn visited her at Coole Park in the summer of 1897 with his guest, the young poet William Butler Yeats, she soon became a prominent patron herself. Following her meeting with Yeats, Lady Gregory quickly developed a keener interest in the literary movement, which was not always perceived in positive terms. For instance, on a visit to the judge Lord Morris, she discussed the recent developments in Ireland with her host, who referred to the Irish Literary Society as 'a set of schemers', and she confided in her diary that she 'did not like to say I have just been elected to it!'³⁴

After the death of her husband, Lady Gregory, through her responsibility as land-lord of Coole Park, rediscovered Ireland, took up Irish lessons and supported Horace Plunkett's cooperative movement. She developed an interest in local Irish folklore and her political stance of anti-Home Rule was moving towards Irish nationalism. This would result in increasing tensions between her and the elites in Ireland and England, as shown by Lord Morris' remark. In 1898, Lady Gregory published *Mr Gregory's letter-box*, continuing her work as family editor in order to uphold the reputation of the Gregorlys.³⁵ By the end of the year, her friend Frederic Burton 'reproved me for having become a red hot Nationalist!'³⁶ From the late 1890s onwards, her previous focus on the family reputation and concern to endow her son with the necessary contacts for a political career among the elite became difficult to uphold due to her nationalist sympathies and her support for the Gaelic League and Irish Literary Society. Yet she retained both concerns simultaneously and proved able to negotiate in both the political and cultural sphere through continued use of patronage.

Not only did she secure the publication of a number of articles on Irish folklore she worked on with Yeats in the 1890s through her contacts with editors of magazines such as the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Fortnightly Review*, but she also supported the poet financially. Yeats wrote in 'Dramatis Personae' of his *Autobiography* in 1934

33 Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, ed. and trans., Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992), p. 129. 34 Entry for 12 Apr. 1897 in Gregory, *Diaries*, p. 146. 35 Sir William Gregory, *Mr Gregory's letter-box: 1813-1830*, edited by Lady Gregory (London, 1898). 36 Entry for 16 Dec. 1898, in Gregory, *Diaries*, p. 195.

that he was 'ashamed' to find out that the debt to his life-long friend and patron had come to £500.³⁷ James Joyce equally owed his position as a reviewer for the *Daily Express* to Lady Gregory. Most importantly, however, the first list of guarantors for the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897 consisted mainly of names of Lady Gregory's acquaintances such as Lecky, Lord Dufferin, Aubrey de Vere, Lord Castletown, Lord Morris, Lord and Lady Ardilaun and Count de Basterot.³⁸

Lady Gregory's diary entries demonstrate how she kept both interests simultaneously. While she dined at Horace Plunkett's, where she met supporters of the Irish Literary Theatre such as Edward Martyn, Sarah Purser, Lady Balfour and Lord Lytton, she was also attending parties with a more political audience including Lord Robert Cecil, son of Lord Salisbury, Lord Balfour and Grant Duff.³⁹ Dining at John Murray's, she sat between the editor of *The Times*, George Earle Buckle, and Lord Eustace Cecil, Lord Salisbury's brother. Her diary entry 'if there was any friend I cd give a lift to' demonstrates her awareness of favours and possible opportunities to converse about her projects.⁴⁰

Considering Robert's educational development at Oxford in 1899, Lady Gregory discussed her son's career options in either the House of Commons or the foreign office with William Peel and her protégé Paul Harvey.⁴¹ Her ambitions for her son to enter the political elite explain her continued efforts to sustain her contacts. As she stated,

I keep my purpose in mind, Robert's good – & have been kept in mind of it by various things – E. Martyn said the other day 'You are right to go to London – you have nice friends there – I never had any friends there' – & I don't want R. to have to say that.⁴²

Lady Gregory expressed strong assurance that her social network would bear fruits as she noted a few months later that she felt 'that Robert will have good houses open to him, whether I am here or not'.⁴³ However, her increasing movement towards political nationalism heightened the already existing tensions between her and her elite circles.

In 1900, she published an article entitled 'The felons of our land' in which she

³⁷ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London, 1977), p. 408. Lady Gregory provided substantial financial help to the young poet from the late 1890s onwards, buying for him furniture, clothes and food. In addition, she paid for Yeats' medical bills when he underwent treatment for his teeth and eyes. Yeats eventually repaid the sum in 1914. See Pethica, 'Patronage', p. 174. ³⁸ *Times*, 11 May 1899. ³⁹ Entry for 22 Feb. 1899, 23 Feb. 1899 in Gregory, *Diaries*, pp 205, 206. ⁴⁰ Entry for 23 Feb. 1899 in *ibid.*, p. 206. ⁴¹ Entry for 25 Feb. 1899 in *ibid.*, p. 208. Robert started at New College, Oxford, in the autumn of 1899. His move to England provided a vital component in Lady Gregory's continued efforts to sustain her London circle of friends. She noted in her diary on 2 Mar. 1899: 'I get a sort of passion to keep going in society now Robert's appearance here is comparatively near': *ibid.*, p. 212. ⁴² Entry for 12 Feb. 1899 in *ibid.*, pp 202–3. ⁴³ Entry for 6 Mar. 1899 in *ibid.*, p. 214.

wrote in favour of Irish ballads of rebellion and defeat. Considered as her most political piece, the article almost certainly was inspired by the Boer War, which radicalized Irish nationalism. Lady Gregory notes in her diary in April of that year that Count de Basterot, a neighbouring landlord, 'read it & gave me a talking to in the evening – complimentary as to style, but thinks I am going too far away from the opinions of my husband & my son'. She assured him in their conversation that she had already decided 'not to go so far towards political nationalism in anything I write again as in "Felons", partly because I wish to keep out of politics & work only for literature, & partly because if Robert is Imperialist I don't want to separate myself from him'.⁴⁴ She would have been equally aware that the overt declaration of her political opinion might alienate vital contacts among her friends, thus endangering Robert's future career paths. However, once Robert decided to become an artist, his mother's own interest appeared to merge with her son's and strengthened Lady Gregory's ambition to keep the family name in high esteem in the cultural realm.

In 1903, she was keen to make use of her social network to find the best possible education in art for Robert. As she wrote in her diary, '[h]e would have tried for H[ouse] of C[ommons] clerkship to please me, but his heart was on art – I told him he shd choose as he liked'.⁴⁵ Her preference for a career in the civil service is possibly linked to a desire to continue the tradition of Gregory men in great political offices. However, as she was considerably involved in the Irish Literary Revival at the time, with her success in collaborating with Yeats on the famous nationalist play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Lady Gregory more willingly supported her son's entrance into the cultural sphere. Writing to Blunt, she enquired 'whatever place is best, Paris or London. I should think Paris. Do you know where the best teaching is?' She also explicitly asked Blunt to get in contact with Lord Lytton, whom she believed

could answer [more] satisfactorily than any of my artist friends of an older generation who may be a little out of date. I had a nomination for a House of Commons clerkship, if Robert cared to try for it, but his heart is in art – & I must say I am very glad he should have chosen for himself, he is sure to work better at what he cares for.⁴⁶

The letter suggests that, whatever Robert's ambition in life, she would be able to provide him with the necessary contacts to support his choice. By the end of 1903, she expressed in a tone of relief that '[i]t is such a blessing not having to attend to politics, now I am sure Robert wont take to parliament'.⁴⁷ Her efforts to maintain a prominent and diverse social network had left him in a privileged position, although she did acknowledge that some of her acquaintances were no longer of use. Again, working on new connections was crucial to keep up with the changes of time. Of

⁴⁴ Entry for 30 Apr. 1900 in Gregory, *Diaries*, p. 267. ⁴⁵ Entry for 26 Apr. 1903 in *ibid.*, p. 314. ⁴⁶ Letter from Lady Augusta Gregory to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (17 Apr. 1903), Berg, Folder 30. ⁴⁷ Letter from Lady Augusta Gregory to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (29 Dec. 1903), Berg, Folder 31.



even more importance was the necessity to create a narrative of continuity in a period of change, which guaranteed the Gregory family, and by extension the landed class of Ireland, a persistent claim to their elite status.

Writing retrospectively on the founding of the Abbey Theatre in *Our Irish theatre* (1913), Lady Gregory quotes Aubrey de Vere's letter as the first response to the subscription for the Irish Literary Theatre:

Whatever develops the genius of Ireland must in the most effectual way benefit her; and in Ireland's genius I have long been a strong believer. Circumstances of very various sorts have hitherto tended much to retard the development of that genius; but it cannot fail to make itself recognised before very long, and Ireland will have cause for gratitude to all those who have hastened to the coming of that day.⁴⁸

The 'genius' de Vere referred to was a cultural one, and Lady Gregory's use of that quotation reflects her shift from the political to the cultural sphere. Subtly, Lady Gregory positioned herself at the top of the list of those Ireland should be grateful for – next to William Butler Yeats and John Millington Synge – her co-founders of the Abbey. Thus, the continuity of the Gregory family's stature would be maintained and lead as an example of the continuous importance of that social stratum for Irish culture – if not for Irish politics.

In accordance with Halbwachs, the publication of *Our Irish theatre* marked a link between past and present, a link that would bind together the political tradition of the Gregory family and the emerging cultural tradition with herself as patron of Ireland's national theatre, the Abbey, and her son as an artist. Aubrey de Vere (1814–1902) was the quintessential link of past and present as his support was 'carrying as it were the blessing of the generation passing away to that which was taking its place'; and he was a poet.⁴⁹ Indeed, Lady Gregory underlined the continuity from past to present in her second chapter, entitled 'The blessing of the generations'. Here, she remembered her friend Sir Frederic Burton and stressed, importantly, that despite his unionist politics 'his rooted passion for Ireland increased', adding that 'all politics seem but accidental, transitory, a business that is outside the heart of life'.⁵⁰ Thus marginalizing politics, culture took centre stage. In some detail, she continued to dwell on Burton's interest in the Irish language movement. Lady Gregory closes the chapter with Douglas Hyde, whom she considered to be instrumental in the establishment of the theatre, with his 'disclosure of the folk-learning, the folk-poetry, the folk-tradition' that so greatly influenced the writers of the revival. Thus she described him as one who

⁴⁸ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish theatre* (New York/London, 1913), p. 10. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.



tells what he owes to that collaboration with the people, and for all the attacks, he has given back to them what they will one day thank him for. . . . The return to the people, the re-union after separation, the taking and giving, is it not the perfect circle, the way of nature, the eternal wedding-ring?⁵¹

Thereby closing the gap between her husband's generation and her son's, Lady Gregory created a new framework in a time when the social order in Ireland started to change to ensure a continuous claim to an elitist status.

Writing in 1895 in an article about Sir William's friends, Sir Henry Layard, Sir Alfred Layall and Alexander Kinglake, Lady Gregory bemoaned the demise of her husband's generation: 'many have been the changes within the last decade', she observed nostalgically as she looked on those who entered and left the building of the Athenaeum Club at 107 Pall Mall, London. 'Without, the building has become a whited sepulchre; within, to many, many, as to me, it is "peopled by ghosts"'.⁵² As has been argued, these 'ghosts' of a lost generation were kept alive through established patterns of collective memory, thereby linking the past with the present and leading a way into a future in which the elite status of the members of the subsequent generations might still be secured.

After her husband's death, carrying the responsibility for her son's legacy, it became pivotal for Lady Gregory to find new methods of upholding the social standing she and her family had previously enjoyed. During the 1890s, she thus found herself working tirelessly on her three central concerns: providing her son Robert with the necessary social network for a career as a member of the elite, maintaining and enhancing the Gregory name, and supporting Irish cultural nationalism. These at times conflicting aims resulted in tensions between Lady Gregory and the British elite on both sides of the Irish Sea. As a result, she began to operate on three fronts. Firstly, she kept a regular residence in London with a full social calendar to uphold old connections and establish new ones, both among the political and cultural elite. Secondly, she edited and published the Gregory family history to sustain a favourable reputation for the benefit of her son, herself and her class. And thirdly, by using artefacts such as the fans, an autograph book and, ultimately, the famous autograph tree in the grounds of Coole Park, she embraced the idea of a collective memory that would link the past with the present and bridge the gap between the political and the cultural realm. Eventually, Lady Gregory would attain her most enduring cultural legacy by becoming the patentee of the Abbey Theatre – a project supported by a financially and socially privileged elite. As such, it acted precisely in the way that Lady Gregory required: as a means not only of maintaining, but also of extending, her family's and her class' position of leadership and power well into the twentieth century.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp 76, 77. ⁵² Lady Augusta Gregory, "Eothen" and the Athenaeum Club', *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, 158:962 (Dec. 1895), 797.