

Somerville, Edith Anna Oenone

by Monika Wittmann and Otto Rauchbauer

Somerville, Edith Anna Oenone (1858–1949), and Martin, Violet Florence ('Martin Ross') (1862–1915), writers, were, through their mothers, descended from Charles Kendal Bushe (qv), lord chief justice of Ireland. Owing to their literary collaboration for almost thirty years, their biographies may be conveniently evaluated together.

Violet Martin was born 11 June 1862 at Ross House, Co. Galway, youngest daughter of James Martin (1804–72), DL, and his wife Anna Selina (née Fox) (1822–1906). She was descended from an Anglo-Norman family, which had acquired land in west Galway from the sixteenth century onwards. Originally catholic, the Martins converted to protestantism in the second half of the eighteenth century; nevertheless, some catholic traditions were retained into Martin's times. After the famine years the once flourishing Ross estate incurred heavy debts, which forced James Martin temporarily to take up journalism. After his death the family moved to Dublin, but reopened the house in 1888, and for the next eighteen years the responsibility of running it fell on Violet.

Violet had spent one term at Alexandra College, Dublin, which made her acquainted with suburban life, an experience later used in *The real Charlotte*. Growing up in a family with a strong appreciation for literature and art – Shakespeare and Milton were constantly read – she developed literary interests at an early age. These were also prompted by her eldest brother Robert Jasper Martin (qv), a journalist and well known songwriter, who had settled in London and was a friend of Arthur Balfour (qv).

Among the Galway gentry with whom the Martins socialised were the Persses of Roxborough, the Morrisises of Spiddal, and Edward Martyn (qv) at Tulira Castle; the relationship to Lady Gregory (qv) and her family was particularly strong. At Coole Park Martin met W. B. Yeats (qv) in 1901 and again in 1913, and discussed literature with him; she had the reputation of being a brilliant conversationalist. Her letters and diaries testify that she was interested in the dramatic work of the Irish literary renaissance, appreciating Yeats's plays for their language and style. She was often the guest of Sir Horace Plunkett (qv) at Kilteragh, his literary and political salon near Dublin. During a visit to St Andrew's, Scotland, in 1895, Martin had made a strong impression on the eminent Victorian man of letters Andrew Lang.

Early in 1886 Violet Martin had paid a visit to her second cousin Edith O. Somerville in Castletownshend, west Cork, which turned out to have a lasting effect on both writers' careers; a deep friendship and a unique literary partnership emerged, which lasted till Martin's death in 1915.

Apart from the work written jointly with Somerville, a corpus of prose has survived with Martin as the sole author. These texts were published by the writer in periodicals, or appeared in prose collections under the name of 'Somerville and Ross' (*All on the Irish shore* (1903); *Some Irish yesterdays* (1906)); others were edited by Somerville after Martin's death (*Stray-aways* (1920); *Wheel-tracks* (1923)). Some show Violet Martin's interest in Irish politics, e.g. the *Spectator* article 'The reaping of Ulster' (1912), and a long correspondence with the critic Stephen Gwynn (qv) on the rising tide of Irish nationalism, printed in *Irish memories* (1917). Throughout her life, Violet Martin remained a staunch unionist, betraying a paternalistic stance characterised by her rejection of the rising catholic middle classes, whom she associated with a lack of political and cultural sophistication. At the same time, she retained a deep-felt sympathy for the rural Irish and the potency of their language, which shows in such texts as 'A speaking contrast' (*Irish Homestead*, Dec. 1899) and 'Children of the captivity' (*Some Irish yesterdays*). There is MS evidence that 'In the state of Denmark' (*Stray-aways*), probably the most accomplished tour journal of Somerville and Ross, was largely written by Violet Martin, as was 'An outpost of Ireland' (1895; *Some Irish yesterdays*), a report about a visit to the Aran Islands, which is notable for its descriptions of landscape and was partly anthologised in the *Oxford book of English prose* (1925). Martin's style is characterised by a tendency towards analysis and abstraction, often reflective and impressionist, and at times verging on the symbolist.

On 21 December 1915 Violet Martin, who had been in poor health after a hunting accident in 1898, died from a brain tumour in Cork. She was buried in Castletownshend, which had become her second home after her mother's death in 1906.

**Edith Æ. Somerville** was born 2 May 1858 in Corfu, eldest child of Col. Thomas Henry Somerville (1824–98) and his wife Adelaide Eliza (née Coghill) (1831–95). The family, originally of Anglo-Norman descent, having come to Ireland in the eighteenth century, soon returned to their family home, Drishane, Castletownshend, Co. Cork. Somerville spent a term at Alexandra College, Dublin (1875); in this year she became organist in the parish church of St Barrahan's, Castletownshend, a post that she filled till 1945. In 1876 she took drawing lessons at the South Kensington School of Art, later following her cousin E. Coghill to Düsseldorf, where she took lessons with G. Nicolet and Carl Sohn. In 1887 she moved to various Paris studios, working under Colarossi and Délécluse. Her output in the visual arts consisted of drawings, often in a comic vein, and oil paintings (landscape and portrait). In the second half of the 1880s she was active as a professional illustrator for the *Lady's Pictorial* and the *Graphic*, later illustrating some of her own prose and that written in collaboration. She had exhibitions at the Goupil Gallery in London (1920), Walker's Gallery, London (1923, 1927), and the Ackermann Galleries, New York (1929).

One side of her life shows a deep attachment to her family home in west Cork and a wide network of relations. After the death of her parents she was in charge of the family home and supervised the farm till 1945; four of her brothers were officers in the British army or navy. From 1903 to 1919 she was master of foxhounds; her passion for horse-riding and hunting, which she shared with her writing partner, stood her in good stead in her literary output. From the first decade of the twentieth century onwards she involved herself in the suffrage movement, becoming president of the Munster Women's Franchise League in 1913 (Martin became vice-president). She became interested in the Arts and Crafts movement and commissioned from Harry Clarke (qv) a series of stained-glass windows in St Barrahan's, Castletownshend. Her interest in spiritualism and automatic writing was particularly strong after the death of her writing partner in 1915. Though rooted in her local community, she also developed more cosmopolitan interests and travelled widely; this is reflected in her travel journals (*Through Connemara in a governess cart* (1892); *In the vine country* (1893); *Beggars on horseback* (1895); *The States through Irish eyes* (New York, 1930; London, 1931); and others). She corresponded with G. B. Shaw (qv), Rudyard Kipling, G. W. Russell (qv), Maurice Baring, Douglas Hyde (qv), Stephen Gwynn, and Sir Horace Plunkett, some of whom she also knew personally. Ethel Smyth (1858–1944), the English composer, became a close friend from 1919 on. She was awarded an honorary D.Litt. by TCD in 1932 and was a founding member of the Irish Academy of Letters.

Somerville had a deep understanding and appreciation of Irish rural people, their folklore and language, and at times sympathised with the cause of nationalists such as Patrick Pearse (qv). On the other hand, she shared with other members of her class a basically ambivalent attitude towards the catholic Irish. Both her painting and writing helped her and her writing partner to gain financial independence and pursue their own interests. Her unique partnership with Martin between 1886 and 1915 was based on a consonance of ideas and on the ability to develop plots and details through conversations. Of the two, Martin was probably more intellectually inclined and had a wider frame of literary reference. Somerville – in part because of her spiritualist beliefs – insisted on retaining the 'Somerville and Ross' label in her books even after the death of her cousin. As a writer she regarded herself in the tradition of Maria Edgeworth (qv) and Sir Walter Scott. Her reading of English and Irish literature was more comprehensive than has been thought. However, in her later life she was less inclined to appreciate modernism in whichever field she encountered it. She showed a certain interest in the work of the Irish literary renaissance, but kept a basic aloofness. She was one of the great letter-writers before the advent of modern means of communication.

A group of works, which may be labelled autobiographical and historical, include *Irish memories* (1917), *Wheel-tracks* (1923), *An incorruptible Irishman* (1932), and *Records of the Somerville family* (1940). After the earliest volume, which is also a tribute to Somerville's dead writing partner, one notices a progression to more representative chronicle material; as has been noted, her method of presentation is

mosaic rather than coherent. There is a desire on the part of the author to record her deep Irish roots, a vanishing order, and sometimes the virtues of Irish landlords.

The fictional work of Somerville and Ross (altogether ten novels) is uneven in quality. Their best work, *The real Charlotte* (1894), which was eventually included in the World's Classics series (1948) and is now rightly regarded as one of the great English-language novels of the Victorian period, is a powerful psychological character study of a young girl, Francie Fitzpatrick, and Charlotte Mullen, a land agent's aspiring daughter, whose attempts at manipulating people end tragically. The three volumes of the RM stories (*Some experiences of an Irish RM* (1899); *Further experiences of an Irish RM* (1908); *In Mr Knox's country* (1915)) became a great success in England. With the memorable, yet stylised characters of Flurry Knox and Major Yeates, these are pure comedy, although occasionally a few stories also show the darker sides of life; some of them are technically highly accomplished. Three later novels, *Mount Music* (1919), *An enthusiast* (1921), and *The Big House of Inver* (1925), are the author's response to the troubled period of Irish history in the twentieth century. *Mount Music* is a fictional representation of the protestant–catholic antagonism in terms of two big houses and an aspiring doctor's family. The second novel is centred on a young agricultural reformer, who is killed during the Anglo–Irish war, trapped, as it were, between the two sides. The third shares with Yeats's *Purgatory* the subject of the deterioration of a Big House family through intermarriage with the native Irish; its main achievement is again a convincing female character portrait (Shibby Pindy).

Somerville moved to Tally Ho, a house in Castletownshend, in 1947; here she died 8 October 1949 and was buried in the churchyard of St Barrahanes next to her writing partner. In 1997 a memorial was set up in a room in Drishane which she had used as a studio from 1892 to 1946.

Manuscript collections are in QUB; TCD; NLI; the Sir Toby Coghill family archive, Scotland; the Drishane archive, Drishane, Co. Cork; the Berg collection, New York Public Library; and the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Portraits of Somerville include Charlotte Bushe's pastel/ crayon of her aged about five (Drishane), a copy of a daguerreotype done in Dublin in the 1860s; and John Crealock's portrait, c.1930 (Drishane). Somerville's portraits of Martin are dated 1886 (National Portrait Gallery, London); 1890 (pastel of Martin asleep in a wood in Ross; Drishane archive, item R.43.a); 1908 (Drishane); and Dec. 1915 (crayon/ drawing of the dying Martin; location of original unknown; reproduced by Gifford Lewis (1985), p. 185).

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