

Sydney Owenson (1783?-1859)
by Julie Donovan

As the author of an eclectic range of material that included poetry, novels, travelogues, journalism and an opera libretto, the prolific, provocative, and extremely successful Sydney Owenson (1783?-1859) made a considerable contribution to the literary, political, and cultural life of Ireland and Britain in the early nineteenth century. She was a charismatic and controversial figure who drew both intense admiration and admonition. No one was more aware of this than Owenson herself, who wrote in her *Memoirs* (1862) how she had been ‘caricatured to the uttermost--abused, calumniated, misrepresented, flattered, eulogized, persecuted; supported as party dictated or prejudice permitted; the pet of the Liberals of one nation, the *bête-noire* of the ultra set of another’.[1]

Owenson’s date of birth remains uncertain and she remained deliberately vague about her age, remarking of this issue ‘What has a woman to do with dates?’.[2] It was a comment evincing an ironic self-parody that was one of her most noteworthy characteristics. She was the daughter of the Irish actor-manager Robert Owenson, and an English mother, Jane Owenson (née Hill), who seems to have been eclipsed by the exuberant figure of Sydney’s father. When Jane Owenson died in 1793, Sydney and her younger sister, Olivia, attended Madame Terson’s school in Clontarf, a fairly exclusive establishment just outside Dublin, for three years. After her schooling she accompanied her father to Kilkenny, where he was to manage a theatre. Robert Owenson had little business acumen and the theatre project failed, leaving Sydney to realize at an early age that she would need to be financially independent. Thus she emulated her father’s penchant for performing, but she recoiled from his economic ineptness, remaining a lifelong pragmatist armed with plenty of commercial savvy, which she put to tremendous use in the excellent terms she negotiated with her publishers.

Owenson’s *Poems dedicated by permission to the Countess of Moira* (1801), was a sentimental but also at times deftly ironic first work, published whilst she was working as a governess. Though she held this position for about a year and seemed reasonably happy, her ambitions lay elsewhere. In particular, Owenson was confident she could make a living from writing, as evinced in a letter to her father: ‘Now dear Papa, I have two novels nearly finished [...] if I had time and quiet to finish them, I am sure I could sell them, and observe, Sir, Miss Burney got three thousand pounds for *Camilla*’.[2] The two novels Owenson refers to are *St. Clair; or, the Heiress of Desmond* (1803) and *The Novice of Saint Dominick* (1805). Although neither novel was very successful, *The Monthly Mirror* and *The Monthly Review* acknowledged *St. Clair* as a commendable work, and *The Novice of Saint Dominick* introduced Owenson to an enterprising publisher, Richard Phillips (who had been imprisoned for publishing Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*). Phillips obviously saw a star in the making in Owenson, for though *The Novice* was rather rambling and somewhat over-ambitious, it was well-conceived and, as with most people she met, Owenson made quite an impression on Phillips, even though he was a well-known cynic.

Equipped with a strong constitution and an indomitable work ethic, Owenson maintained a prolific output. She published *Twelve Original Hibernian Melodies* in the same year as *The Novice*, a work comprising a set of traditional Irish airs to which Owenson set words. It was a precursor to Thomas Moore's renowned *Irish Melodies* (1807-34), and Moore was gracious enough to acknowledge Owenson's immense influence in the Preface to his work.

It was her enormously successful third novel, *The Wild Irish Girl: a National Tale* (1806), which went into seven editions in just under two years, that made Owenson famous. Set against the political problem of the 1800 Act of Union, which abolished the Irish Parliament and sought to invent an unproblematic unit called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, *The Wild Irish Girl* focuses on the romance between Glorvina O'Melville, a Gaelic princess, who teaches one Horatio Mortimer, the son of an English absentee landlord, the error of his ignorant, colonising ways, and the value of Irish culture and epistemology. The novel's scope is deep and wide-ranging, for the romance plot not only encompasses Owenson's preoccupation with the conundrum of the Union – whether Ireland was a bona fide member of the United Kingdom or a de facto colony – but also her engagement with derogatory travelogues about Ireland, the nationalistically-inflected antiquarian movement of the late eighteenth century, the Gothic genre, the politics of sensibility and the picturesque, and the development of the national tale. One interesting facet of *The Wild Irish Girl* was the way Owenson created a marketable literary heroine in Glorvina. Long before Trilby hats and Harry Potter toothbrushes, Owenson mastered the art of spin-off as Glorvina mantles and hair bodkins became all the rage for upper-class women who wanted to 'go native' in the Celtic vein. Owenson cashed in on the phenomenon by acting out the part of the Gaelic princess in her own life, signing her letters as 'Glorvina', and impersonating her literary character at *ton* parties, where she donned ancient Celtic costume and played what became a kind of stage prop for her, the harp.

Following on from her success with *The Wild Irish Girl*, in 1807 Owenson published the libretto for an operetta, *The First Attempt, or Whim of a Moment*, a set of poems titled *The Lay of an Irish Harp; or Metrical Fragments*, and a prose piece, *Patriotic Sketches of Ireland*. Owenson's next novel, *Woman; or, Ida of Athens*, focused on a romance set amid historical conflict between Greek and Turk. It was an uneven work, and rich pickings for the *Quarterly Review*, which, as fate would have it, began publication in 1809, the same year as *Woman* was published. The *Quarterly* considered *Woman* a contemptible effort, and charged that Owenson should 'exchange her idle raptures for commonsense, practice a little self-denial [...] she might then hope to prove, not indeed a good writer of novels, but a useful friend, a faithful wife, a tender mother, and a respectable and happy mistress of a family'.^[4] John Wilson Croker was the author of the review, and no doubt revengeful, for in 1804 Owenson had written a stinging riposte to Croker's *Familiar Epistles on the Present State of the Irish Stage* (1804), which rebuked Irish actors and stage managers.

Despite the contempt of the *Quarterly Review*, Owenson pressed ahead and published a novel set during the Spanish-Portuguese conflict in seventeenth-century India, *The*

Missionary: an Indian Tale (1811), which Percy Shelley much admired. In 1812, Owenson married Thomas Charles Morgan and became Lady Morgan. Owenson's was a more technical title than most. She had been invited by Lord and Lady Abercorn to be a sort of artist in residence at their grand homes in Barons Court in Ireland and Stanmore Priory in England, effectively trapped by her own performance as Glorvina during this time, since the Abercorns effectively had her in luxurious thrall, on hand to be charmingly 'Irish' to order. Morgan was their physician, and they arranged the match with Owenson together with Morgan's knighthood, as they considered this beneficial to his marriage prospects. Though her letters and diaries show that marriage was not a priority, Owenson's partnership with Morgan was long-lasting and seemingly happy. It also freed her from the formidable Abercorns, as she and her husband settled at 35 Kildare Street Dublin, which became a thriving political and literary salon.

In 1814, Owenson published *O'Donnel: a National Tale* to great success and teamed up with the enterprising publisher, Henry Colburn, who paid her £1,000 for her next work, the lively travelogue, *France* (1817). Owenson returned to Ireland for the setting of her next novel, *Florence Macarthy: an Irish Tale* (1818), a brilliantly woven account of the vagaries of history and national identity. Owenson's next travelogue, *Italy* (1821), contained a scathing critique of the Austrian Empire, which led to the issue of a decree in 1824, banning Owenson from its territories. The *Quarterly* continued to cast aspersions on her work, led by the consistently impudent Croker. Croker's vehemence back-fired however, since he helped to sell Owenson's books by increasing her notoriety. Her friends were keen to remind her of this: after Croker had vented his spleen on *France*, Baron Denon wrote in a letter to Owenson, 'You are abused, but purchased, in English'.^[5]

Owenson published *The Mohawks: a Satirical Poem* (co-authored with her husband) in 1822, a biography of the painter Salvator Rosa in 1824, and an essay titled *Absenteeism* in the same year. She then completed what is sometimes described as her best novel, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827). Set against the background of the 1798 United Irishmen uprising, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* skillfully plots the travails of a group of Ireland's nomadic patriots damaged by history and a domestic population trying to cope with fracture, displacement, and the general fallout from colonialism. This achievement was followed by a rich and entertaining set of biographical sketches titled *The Book of the Boudoir* (1829), and another travelogue, *France in 1829-30* (1830).

In 1833, with the publication of *Dramatic Scenes from Real Life*, one can detect a certain disillusion with Ireland on Owenson's part, as she portrayed a country seceding from the vision she had for it. Although she unconditionally supported Catholic Emancipation, which was granted in 1829, Owenson was less certain about the mounting groundswell of Irish popular politics. The architect of this new order, Daniel O'Connell, was a luminary Owenson admired, but she also remained jealously suspicious of him, especially since O'Connell's political clout was very much buttressed by the power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which she tended to characterize as tending towards the mercenary and guileful. Such an attitude towards the church was consistent with Owenson's life-long wariness of any doctrinaire attitudes toward religion, as she

remained happily pluralist and agnostic. Her 1835 novel, *The Princess, or the Beguine* had her regain her ebullient tone, as she celebrated the independence of small nations in a plot set largely in a newly independent Belgium.

At the behest of Lord Melbourne's government, Owenson became the first female recipient of a literary pension of £300 per annum in 1837, whereupon she moved to London and set up a lively salon in her handsome home at 11 William Street, Belgravia. She contributed articles and reviews to the *Athenaeum*, and in 1840 wrote a non-fictional work, *Woman and her Master*, decrying how women had been written out of history. Owenson and her husband published a selection of their journalism in *The Book without a Name* in 1841, and although she never completely recaptured the mystique of her Wild Irish Girl days, Owenson continued to mix with the fashionable set and remained an important figure in literary and political circles.

She never lost her capacity for gauging public taste either. Her popular 1851 pamphlet, *Letter to Cardinal Wiseman, in answer to his 'Remarks on Lady Morgan's statements regarding St. Peter's Chair'*, which was reprinted five times, had Owenson relish the fruits of notoriety well into the Victorian age. The pamphlet's provenance was the furor surrounding Owenson's travelogue, *Italy*, in which she alleged that St. Peter's Chair in the Vatican had been plundered from the Arabs, and that the inscription on it actually read 'There is but one God, and Mahomet is his Prophet'. Nicholas Wiseman's invective about Owenson's claim was instrumental in having *Italy* listed on the *Index Purgatoris* (something Owenson was suitably proud of at the time, given her penchant for provocation and her consistent suspicion of organized religion). But she was even more delighted when she could capitalize on her battle with Wiseman much later in Victorian England, where Wiseman was now a controversial figure, having been appointed the first Roman Catholic Cardinal in England since the Reformation. As she defended her claim in *Italy*, Owenson's *Letter to Cardinal Wiseman* cleverly adapted to an increasingly sympathetic audience – Victorians alarmed about the insidious power of Rome. This must have given her some motivation to write a letter to *The Times* in 1848 advocating freedom of the press, and petitioning that *Italy* be removed from the Roman Index Expurgatorius. Owenson still had her lovely way of feigning humility: after she describes her request as 'humble', she compares herself to Galileo.

After she published *Passages from my Autobiography* in 1859, and whilst preparing a re-worked version of *The Missionary* titled *Luxima, the Prophetess: a Tale of India*, Owenson died suddenly at her home on 16 April. She had done well through writing and marketing her charisma, bequeathing £15,000 to her only surviving relatives, two beloved nieces. To the end she remained a vital figure, fond of irritating her critics with her bombastic Whiggism and excessive showmanship, but genuinely earnest about the position of Ireland, social reform, and the future of women in literary and political life.

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1 *Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries and Correspondence*, 2 vols (London: W. H. Allen, 1862), Prefatory address.

2 *Ibid*, p. 6.

3 Undated letter Sydney Owenson to Robert Owenson. Quoted in *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, p. 134

4 *Quarterly Review*, December 1809. Review of Sydney Owenson's *Woman; or, Ida of Athens*, 1809.

5 Letter Baron Denon to Sydney Owenson dated June 6, 1818, in Sydney Owenson, *Passages from My Autobiography* (London: Richard Bentley, 1859), p. 23.