

## Reclaiming Lost and Disregarded Voices: *In the Vine Country*, Memory, Female Independence and Wine Writing in the Victorian Age

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### Abstract

The historical role of Bordeaux and the consumption of claret throughout Georgian and Victorian Ireland has been explored. That fine red wines were drunk and enjoyed by the ascendancy in Ireland is not unusual. What is unusual, however, is the place of *In the Vine Country*, a Somerville-and-Ross travelogue commissioned and written for the *Lady's Pictorial: A Newspaper for the Home*, an illustrated weekly paper founded in 1880, aimed at middle-class women in Victorian era Great Britain and Ireland. From Castletownshend, Co. Cork and Oughterard, Co. Galway, cousins Edith C.E. Somerville (1858-1949), and Violet Martin (1862-1915) were writing partners. Of the Anglo-Irish protestant class, they hold an ambivalent place in the Irish literary canon; as identity politics and “othering” are among factors at play in their becoming lost and disregarded voices. Their commissioning editor dispatched them to the vineyards of the Médoc to document the vintage of 1891; *In the Vine Country* is the collection of their illustrated weekly articles published from October to December 1892. Wine holds deep symbolism (then and now) and has been used as a means of establishing status and making social distinctions. The role of fine red wine in *In the Vine Country* is symbolic of this period of upheaval and social change in colonial Ireland, and of the changing roles of middle-class women. This paper draws on the subtle and overt tensions of two single Irish women travelling alone from West Cork to the Médoc in the late 1800s. Both trauma and tradition are explored through the lenses of women and wine consumption; changing gender politics; and the “othering” of both wine as a distinct beverage and the protestant classes in Catholic Ireland. The question of whether Irish women in the ascendancy may have had more social freedoms than their English counterparts of the period becomes apparent.

### Keywords

Wine; women authors; othering; wine literature; class; distinction; Protestant Irish; Ireland; Somerville and Ross; autoethnography

It began with a search for identity. The slightly tattered cloth-bound books lie on my bookshelf. They have lain there, almost untouched, since 2012, when I shelved them in our new family home. After my mother's death in 2010, driven by grief and

nostalgia, I chose to take them from my childhood home in Rosscarbery, Co. Cork, in the distribution of her worldly goods. They form part of a family narrative, a symbolic identity, one that I know little about but that centres around the nature of being “other”, an English/Irish Protestant in West Cork. They have titles that at first do not give much away; it is the inscriptions on the inside that are more revealing. *All on the Irish Shore*,<sup>1</sup> *The Silver Fox*,<sup>2</sup> and *The Real Charlotte*<sup>3</sup> are all inscribed “to Mollie from Violet” and “To Mollie and Edmund from Violet Martin 1903.” However, *The Smile and the Tear*<sup>4</sup> is different. It is inscribed: “To Dean Charles Webster, with gratitude for much kind help, from E. CE. Somerville May 1939.” Forming part of the collection are biographies - *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.* by Gifford Lewis,<sup>5</sup> and *Dr E. CE. Somerville* by Geraldine Cummins.<sup>6</sup> When *Chapters* bookshop in Dublin was closing in 2022, I spotted and added Julie Anne Stevens’ *The Irish Scene in Somerville and Ross*,<sup>7</sup> bought for almost naught. This comprised my (the Helps family’s) Somerville and Ross collection. Prompted by discussions in my MA Gastronomy and Food Studies classes – examining how food and drink are portrayed in literature, and the changing discourse around sectarian tension – I disturbed the dust to see whether, through these books, Somerville and Ross might have anything to say about the matter.

The decision to use autoethnography to reflect on this forgotten history stems from a consideration of social identity and identity politics discussed in *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*.<sup>8</sup> The authors question who gets a voice and who is silenced by academic discourse, and suggest that this method can offer a way of articulating personal connections to, and investment in, identities and experiences, as a way of providing nuance.<sup>9</sup> The reasons for the voices of Somerville and Ross being disregarded in the debate around Irish identity, as well as in the historiography of Irish literature are complex, and I will try to explain some

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<sup>1</sup> Edith CE. Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, *All on the Irish Shore* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Ross and Edith CE. Somerville, *The Silver Fox* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902).

<sup>3</sup> Edith CE. Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, *The Real Charlotte* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901).

<sup>4</sup> Edith CE. Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, *The Smile and the Tear* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1933).

<sup>5</sup> Gifford Lewis, *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Geraldine Cummins, *Dr E. CE. Somerville; A Biography* (London: Andrew Dakers Limited, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> Julie Anne Stevens, *The Irish Scene in Somerville and Ross* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis. *Autoethnography*, 15.

of them. A book can signify something abstract, the words and the meanings collected within it, for example in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, another writer in the Anglo-Irish ascendancy class; Gearóid Cronin observes that “the Big House, like an archetype or an obsession, haunts [her writing] as an icon and a spectre [...]. It is represented as a symbol [...] of the Anglo-Irish Species.”<sup>10</sup> These words and meanings are something I will explore in this paper regarding *In the Vine Country*, whilst firstly giving a background to Somerville and Ross.

## A Personal Link to the Past

Mollie and Edmund are Mary Alice (Mollie) and Edmund Arthur Helps, my great-great-grandparents; and Charles Webster is another great-great-grandfather. Violet Martin and E. C. Somerville were second cousins, of the impoverished but resourceful Anglo-Irish protestant class.<sup>11</sup> Edith C. Somerville (1858-1949) grew up in Drishane House, Castletownshend, Co. Cork, close to my childhood home, whilst Violet Martin (1862-1915), known by the pseudonym Martin Ross, was from Ross House, Oughterard, Co. Galway. Meeting for the first time in 1886,<sup>12</sup> they began a successful writing partnership, Somerville and Ross, and wrote some 30 books together. The best-known of these are the tragic *The Real Charlotte* (1894), and the comedic *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899), both of which have been the subject of television dramatisations. Of *The Real Charlotte* and its place in the Irish literary canon, Terence de Vere White asks: “Leaving the huge whale – *Ulysses* – basking off-shore, what better Irish novel is there?”<sup>13</sup>

The writings of Somerville and Ross are placed within the Big House genre,<sup>14</sup> alongside Irish writers Maria Edgeworth and the aforementioned Elizabeth Bowen, amongst others. Indeed, the last of these Big House writers, Molly Keane, provided a foreword to *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*.<sup>15</sup> Somerville and Ross’s lives revolved around pursuits such as fox-hunting, riding horses, picnics, luncheons, and

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<sup>10</sup> Gearóid Cronin, “The Big House and the Irish Landscape in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen,” in *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation*, ed. Jacqueline Genet (Dingle: Brandon, 1991), 143-144.

<sup>11</sup> Gifford Lewis, ed., *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), xxiv.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *Letters*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Terence de Vere White, review on back cover of *The Real Charlotte*, by Edith C. Somerville and Martin Ross. (London: Quartet Books, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado, “Women and the Big House Novel in Irish Culture,” *RTÉ Brainstorm*, April 19, 2023, accessed January 6, 2024, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2023/0419/1377780-women-and-the-big-house-novel-in-irish-culture/>.

<sup>15</sup> Molly Keane, “Foreword by Molly Keane,” in *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, ed. Gifford Lewis (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

tea-parties, although there were philanthropic endeavours included in the mix. Edith notes in her diary on January 30, 1891 that

Cameron and I rode around Toe Head Country [Co. Cork]. Sickened and stunned by the misery. Hordes of women and children in the filthiest rags. Gave as many bread and tea tickets as we could. We felt perfectly helpless and despairing in the face of such hopeless poverty.<sup>16</sup>

Both Somerville and Ross were prodigious diarists, letter-writers and note-takers. Of the Edith CEnone Somerville Archive at Drishane House in Castletownshend, Co. Cork, Otto Rauchbauer states that there are more than forty boxes of folders, comprising more than three thousand eight hundred items including letters (both to and from Somerville and Ross from various family members, literary figures, and other correspondents), account books, diary entries, illustrations, photographs and press cuttings.<sup>17</sup> Other archives, most notably at Queen's University Belfast, New York Public Library, and Trinity College Dublin, hold further manuscripts, letters, diaries, and press cuttings.

That the Helps family Somerville and Ross collection holds an almost mythological status in our family is curious, and I wondered about background and history, what that means to me, and why it might be important. In initial research in the biographical books that I have, and online, I established that amidst the bibliography of their writings about Ireland and its people, is an outlier, a book about wine: *In the Vine Country*.<sup>18</sup> When I tried to find it online, it proved harder than I anticipated. I finally tracked down a physical copy in January 2023, and began to read.

### ***In the Vine Country***

*In the Vine Country* was written in the autumn of 1891, and published in the *Lady's Pictorial* weekly, on Saturdays, in twelve parts from October 1, 1892 to December 17, 1892.<sup>19</sup> It was published in book form in 1893. In the opening chapter it is established that the cousins had been summoned by letter to London from Castletownshend, Co. Cork. The letter

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<sup>16</sup> MS 17/874/1, diary of Edith Somerville 1891, Special Collections, The Library, Queen's University, Belfast.

<sup>17</sup> Otto Rauchbauer, *The Edith CEnone Somerville Archive in Drishane: a Catalogue and an Evaluative Essay* (Dublin: Irish Manuscript Collection, 1995), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Edith C.E. Somerville and Martin Ross, *In the Vine Country* (1893; repr., Shrewsbury: Académie du Vin Library, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Dates as ascertained from original copies of the *Lady's Pictorial*, held at the National Library of Scotland.

said majestically, 'You are to go to the vineyards of the Médoc, and must start at once in order to be in time for the vintage;' and in spite of a grand and complete ignorance of Médoc, its vintages, and wines in general, we accepted the position with calm, even with satisfaction.<sup>20</sup>

When I consulted the cousins' diaries, held at Special Collections in Queen's University Belfast, this is corroborated by Somerville, who writes on Saturday August 22, 1891, that she "heard from *Lady's Pic. [sic]* we are to go to Médoc and all will be arranged for us."<sup>21</sup> The cousins

felt a secret scepticism as to our fitness for this large and yet delicate mission – what did we know of a Château Lafite or Mouton Rothschild, except that a glass and a half of the former had once compelled my second cousin to untimely slumber at dessert.<sup>22</sup>

Within the first few pages, the mission is laid out, and the qualifications (or lack thereof) of the authors are established.

It was with some amazement that I read of their travels; firstly to London, leaving on a foggy morning, they drive by horse carriage to the train station in Skibbereen, a train to Dublin, steamboat to Holyhead, and then a further train to Euston station, London, where they arrive the following morning. In London, Alfred Gibbons, the editor of the *Lady's Pictorial* tells them that in the Médoc they are to enjoy themselves, they were to taste claret if they liked, and to speak bad French to the makers of it if it amused them. What they were relieved that they were not to do, having read a pamphlet about the wines of the Médoc that they had been lent, was to try to "improve other people's minds by figures and able disquisitions on viticulture and the treatment of the phylloxera."<sup>23</sup> In reality, the *Lady's Pictorial* had instructed them to treat events in a "pleasant" humorous way.<sup>24</sup> In a later article, "A Record of Holiday,"<sup>25</sup> Somerville and Ross reflect on the "actual time of holiday, and [are] struck by the fact that its more salient features are misfortunes. From a literary point of view this has its advantages; the happy traveller has no history."<sup>26</sup> We get an insight here on their method of writing and their use of pathos to engage the reader. To get to Bordeaux, they travel by train from Victoria to Dover, boat from Dover to Calais, train to Paris, a brief sojourn in Paris, followed by an eleven-hour

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<sup>20</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Diary of Edith Somerville 1891.

<sup>22</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Edith CE. Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, *Irish Memories* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1917), 216.

<sup>25</sup> Edith CE. Somerville and Martin Ross, "A Record of Holiday," *Northern Whig* (Belfast), February 27, 1903.

<sup>26</sup> Somerville and Ross, "Record of Holiday."

train journey to Bordeaux. In the twenty-first century I am exhausted even thinking about this. It is recorded in Edith Somerville's diary for October 7, 1891 that they wanted to call their adventure "From Cork to Claret,"<sup>27</sup> but this was rejected by the publishers as being too subtle for the public.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The Lady's Pictorial***

Intrigued, I wondered who they wrote this book for, and why? How did two Irish single women writers get commissioned to travel to the Médoc to "enjoy themselves" and drink wine? McConnell<sup>29</sup> and Ludington<sup>30</sup> have explored the historical role of Bordeaux and the consumption of claret throughout Georgian and Victorian Ireland. That fine red wines were drunk and enjoyed by the ascendancy in Ireland is not unusual. What is unusual, however, is the place of *In the Vine Country*. The Victorian Period, 1837-1901, saw a burgeoning of print culture in the British Isles, and periodicals for an increasingly diverse audience of women readers became available. An increase in city dwellers, particularly in London, produced a boom in mass-produced entertainment, which served an audience with more free time and money than previously.<sup>31</sup> This period was also significant in women's history; public debate was dominated by the "Woman Question," concerning the place of women in society.<sup>32</sup>

The *Lady's Pictorial: A Newspaper for the Home* was an illustrated weekly paper, founded by the Ingram Brothers in 1880, "aimed squarely at middle class women."<sup>33</sup> It mixed conventional feminine subject matter with debates on gender issues. Other papers in the Ingram Brothers house featured actresses and celebrities in their women's columns, with controversial women's topics contained within an admixture of cookery and fashion. The *Lady's Pictorial*, however, depicted women "out in the world [...] enjoying the London social season, attending charitable events,

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<sup>27</sup> Diary of Edith Somerville 1891.

<sup>28</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Irish Memories*, 215.

<sup>29</sup> Tara McConnell, "Honest Claret": *The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland's Favourite Wine* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Charles C. Ludington, "Inventing Grand Cru Claret: Irish Wine Merchants in Eighteenth-Century Bordeaux," *Global Food History* 5, no. 1-2 (2019): 25-44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20549547.2019.1554347>.

<sup>31</sup> Gerry Beegan, *The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 99.

<sup>32</sup> Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers, eds., *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s: The Victorian Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship, 2019); abstract, <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474433907.001.0001>.

<sup>33</sup> Cardiff University; *Special Collections and Archives: Women's Interest* (website). Accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/special-collections/subject-guides/illustrated-sources/periodicals/womens-interest>.

participating in sports, and engaging in amateur drama.”<sup>34</sup> Using both text and illustrations, it defined a new brand of “modern mobile womanhood.”<sup>35</sup> Beegan suggests that it was a very unusual magazine for its time, run by women for women.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, it was very innovative in its approach to feminism and the female sphere. He argues in his paper “Women of the World: The *Lady’s Pictorial* and its Sister Papers” that the visual side of the magazine was very much part of this. Beegan posits that the last two decades in the nineteenth-century “mark a turning point in gender roles, as legal, economic, medical and social changes affected the status of women and men.”<sup>37</sup> It had a reputation of being one of the best-illustrated papers in England, and was bought frequently for its drawings alone.<sup>38</sup> Despite Edith Somerville being a trained, and skilled, artist, her original sketches and illustrations for two of the three travelogues to be published in the *Lady’s Pictorial* – *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart*<sup>39</sup> and *In the Vine Country* – were either altered or omitted as it was deemed that they might “shock delicate ladies.”<sup>40</sup> The resulting illustrations by W.W. Russell,<sup>41</sup> the *Lady’s Pictorial* in-house illustrator, and F.H. Townsend,<sup>42</sup> cartoonist and art editor of *Punch* magazine, reworked the originals to be more generic, and more feminine, much to Somerville’s horror.<sup>43</sup> She notes that in *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart* the sketches were “without [her] permission, altered and adapted,”<sup>44</sup> and that in *In the Vine Country*, her sketches were treated in the same way, and “thereby lost in authenticity what they may have gained in artistic excellence.”<sup>45</sup> By the time “In the State of Denmark” was serialised in the *Lady’s Pictorial* in 1895, Somerville’s own illustrations were left extant, perhaps

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<sup>34</sup> Gerry Beegan, “Women of the World: The *Lady’s Pictorial* and its Sister Papers,” in *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s: The Victorian Period*, eds. Alexis Easley, Claire Gill, and Beth Rodgers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship, 2019), 248. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474433907.003.0016>.

<sup>35</sup> Beegan, “*Lady’s Pictorial*,” 253.

<sup>36</sup> Gerry Beegan, email message to author, April 23, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Beegan, “*Lady’s Pictorial*,” 232.

<sup>38</sup> Stevens, *The Irish Scene*, 103.

<sup>39</sup> Edith CE Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart* (1893; repr., London: Virago Press, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Irish Memories*, 261.

<sup>41</sup> For *Through Connemara*.

<sup>42</sup> For *Vine Country*.

<sup>43</sup> Stevens, *The Irish Scene*, 103.

<sup>44</sup> Somerville’s Author’s Note in Elizabeth Hudson, ed. *A Bibliography of the First Editions of the Works of E. CE. Somerville and Martin Ross: Compiled and Edited by Elizabeth Hudson: with Explanatory Notes by E. CE. Somerville* (New York: The Sporting Gallery and Bookshop, 1942), 7.

<sup>45</sup> Somerville, *Bibliography of First Editions*, 10.

highlighting the enhanced reputations of the cousins, who at that point had published *The Real Charlotte* to critical and popular acclaim.<sup>46</sup>

In Ireland at this time, a complicated history was playing out; post-famine, pre-civil war. The great issue of the 1880s in Ireland was land, with the demise of the Protestant ascendancy being assured following the Land Act of 1870.<sup>47</sup> In politics, bound up with Home Rule, in 1890-1891 the fall of Irish political leader Charles Stewart Parnell occurred, culminating in his death in October 1891.

It is difficult to establish who the women who read the *Lady's Pictorial* were, but an Irish interest can be construed from the advertisements placed in the back page of the periodical, dated April 23, 1891, where *Martin and Mumford*, Ladies' Tailors and habit makers, of 18 Suffolk St., Dublin, are hawking their "Artistic Gowns, Costumes, Walking Coats and Jackets, Driving and Covert Cloaks, and Riding Habits."<sup>48</sup> Stevens noted that Somerville, in her memoirs, believed that there were more social freedoms for Irish women than there were for English women of the period, and this may partly explain why Somerville and Ross take on the Médoc adventure.<sup>49</sup> Devlin posits that as the cousins were accompanying each other, this therefore dispensed with the need to have a chaperone, thus giving an element of freedom in travelling that would otherwise not have been the case.<sup>50</sup> There is a dichotomy between the place of women in Ireland and women in the rest of the British Isles of the era, even as there is a dichotomy in relation to social class between the two countries. Both women were suffragists. Wine has always been symbolic, and has been used as a means of establishing status and making social distinctions.<sup>51</sup> Barthes credits wine as a converting substance, "capable of making a weak man strong or a silent man talkative,"<sup>52</sup> so its role in *In the Vine Country* can be extrapolated as being symbolic of this period of upheaval and social change, and how middle-class women were becoming more financially independent and confident. That the two Irish cousins were manifesting these social changes can be seen throughout their travel writing.

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<sup>46</sup> John Cronin, *Somerville and Ross* (Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 1972), 39.

<sup>47</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage Books, 1995), 23-25.

<sup>48</sup> Cardiff University, *Special Collections*.

<sup>49</sup> Stevens, *The Irish Scene*, 102.

<sup>50</sup> Martina Devlin, "City of Books #41 with Martina Devlin," *Dublin City Libraries and Archives*, podcast, 2023, <https://soundcloud.com/dublincitypubliclibrary/city-of-books-41-martina-devlin>.

<sup>51</sup> Steve Charters, *Wine and Society: The Social and Cultural Context of a Drink* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, (1957; repr., London: Paladin, 1972), 58.



It transpires later in my research that the expedition to the Médoc was proposed by Sir Walter Gilbey, the proprietor of Chateau Loudenne,<sup>53</sup> purchased by him in 1875.<sup>54</sup> Sir Walter Gilbey was one half of “Gilbey’s,” a British firm of wine merchants credited with “transforming light wine from the drink of a moneyed elite into a pleasure accessible to millions.”<sup>55</sup> This firm developed innovative and highly professional systems for retail and consumer communication from the 1860s. It is through this lens that we can interpret the purpose of the trip to the Médoc by Somerville and Ross, as a sophisticated means of reaching middle-class women to promote sales of Gilbey’s claret. It could be said that Somerville and Ross were employed as “influencers;” they mention Chateau Loudenne a number of times within the text of *In the Vine Country* in a complimentary light. They are guests at the Chateau, where “afternoon tea of the English kind stood ready” upon their arrival.<sup>56</sup> Somerville reflects later that although their tour of the Médoc was a very interesting expedition, and they gained a “pleasing insight into the charm of French hospitality, and [they] acquired—and this was the tour’s only drawback—a taste for the very best claret that [they] have since found unfortunately superfluous.”<sup>57</sup>

## Writing Journalism

The cousins were first and foremost writing to earn a living. Martin writes to Somerville: “I must make money – so must you”<sup>58</sup> as well as “Let us take [where we live] and grind its bones to make our bread.”<sup>59</sup> Both unmarried, and with roots in a traditional gentry existence, writing journalism provided for a certain amount of income that novels could not;<sup>60</sup> moreover, Ross’s connection in London with Edmund and Mollie Helps<sup>61</sup> provided both introductions to influential friends, who

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<sup>53</sup> Somerville, *Bibliography of First Editions*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Graham Harding, “‘Competition is Useless’: How Gilbey’s Retail and Marketing Innovation Dominated the British Wine and Spirits Market, 1857–1922,” *History of Retailing and Consumption* 2, no. 1 (2016): 64.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373518X.2016.1176795>.

<sup>55</sup> Harding, “Competition is Useless,” 45.

<sup>56</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 119.

<sup>57</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Irish Memories*, 215.

<sup>58</sup> Lewis, *Letters*, 164.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *Letters*, 134.

<sup>60</sup> Lewis, *Somerville and Ross*, 79.

<sup>61</sup> Edmund Helps was well-connected. His own profession was a school inspector, and he later compiled and published collections of songs and ballads. His father was Sir Arthur Helps (1813–1875), a social activist and literary figure. Sir Arthur Helps was appointed Clerk of the Privy Council; under Queen Victoria, see Stephen L. Keck, *Sir Arthur Helps and the Making of Victorianism* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 7; Edmund Helps published what remained of his father’s papers and letters, as the bulk - at his father’s direction - were destroyed upon his death; see Edmund A.

included the editor of the *Spectator*,<sup>62</sup> and encouragement to write travel guides. They undertook at least four significant tours and subsequently published their accounts of them for periodical magazines; Connemara (1890), Bordeaux (1891), Wales (1893), and Denmark (1893).<sup>63</sup> Despite this, Somerville and Ross's writing is not included in an analysis of Irish travel writing, *Irish Cultures of Travel: Writing on the Continent, 1829-1914*,<sup>64</sup> suggesting that their role within the canon of Irish Studies is ambivalent. Furthermore, their Anglo-Irish identity, their gender, and the dual-voice that they have as authors, give them a unique but uneasy place in the Irish literary canon. Kiberd summarises it well when he suggests that there has been a struggle to reconcile the superficial nature of their subject-matter with their command of writing of human experience.<sup>65</sup> He says that "for decades, Irish Irelanders refused to read them at all, on the basis of a notorious review of *The Real Charlotte* which depicted its authors as finished *shoneens*, abject imitators of English ways."<sup>66</sup> Lennox Robinson, poet, dramatist and Abbey Theatre director and producer, in his preface to Geraldine Cummins's 1952 biography argues that they depicted a certain phase of Irish Life with beauty and power,<sup>67</sup> although this may have been a contentious view at the time. Allegedly Eamon de Valera<sup>68</sup> referred to Somerville's home village, Castletownshend, as "my little Britain."<sup>69</sup> Rauchbauer suggests that "with the passage of time some personal facts and problems may have lost their sting and, from a later vantage point, can be viewed more coolly and objectively."<sup>70</sup> That Somerville and Ross did not embrace the Celtic Revival, as W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory did, perhaps imparts a suspicion and notion of "other", in the nascent Irish Catholic state. A post-colonial desire to remake Ireland created

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Helps, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir Arthur Helps, K.C.B., D.C.L.* (London: John Lane, 1917), viii, <https://archive.org/details/correspondenceofhoelpiala/page/n9/mode/2up>; Mollie Helps was the headmistress of a girl's school in Norwich. Ross describes her as a "fine creature" in a letter to Somerville in August 1889, who "knows everything, and more especially the lower grades of London slums, sweaters, Board Schools, and gives her opinion very squarely – but moderately." Martin Ross, letter to Edith Somerville August 20, 1889, mic. 141/37, microfilms copied from a set made of "The Complete Surviving Somerville and Ross Letters" from New York Public Library, Trinity College Dublin.

<sup>62</sup> Lewis, *Somerville and Ross*, 78.

<sup>63</sup> Anne Jamison, *E. C. Somerville and Martin Ross: Female Authorship and Literary Collaboration* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016), 108.

<sup>64</sup> Raphaël Ingelbien, *Irish Cultures of Travel: Writing on the Continent, 1829-1914* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 69.

<sup>66</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 69.

<sup>67</sup> Lennox Robinson, "Preface," in Geraldine Cummins, *Dr E. C. Somerville; A Biography* (London: Andrew Dakers Limited, 1952), xii.

<sup>68</sup> 1882-1975, former Taoiseach (head of government), and former President of Ireland.

<sup>69</sup> Rauchbauer, *Somerville Archive in Drishane*, 158.

<sup>70</sup> Rauchbauer, *Somerville Archive in Drishane*, 155.

“othering” of the old protestant Anglo-Irish cohort, and together with questions around whether the characters portrayed in Somerville and Ross’s books were “Stage-Irish,”<sup>71</sup> meant their relegation in the Irish literary canon. Reading them in the twenty-first century is curious; yes, the language has changed, but in the rendering of the vernacular dialogue, I can hear the West Cork idioms and accent coming through.

After Martin Ross’s death in 1915, Edith continued to write using the dual signature. This was based on a belief that Martin’s spirit was communicating with her through automatic writing, and also the use by her of the commonplace notebooks that they kept; they were keen and astute observers of the vernacular, particularly in Irish life. A collection of notebooks (1886-1945) held in the Queen’s University Belfast Archive, in which they recorded overheard phrases and idioms that they use in their writings, has an index as to the type of anecdotes and dialogue used. Interestingly one of these headings is “Cookery & food &c – .”<sup>72</sup> Gifford Lewis points out that Somerville and Ross happened to be in, and wrote about, many unusual places, such as kitchens and laundries, that would have been unseen by the “centre-stage male,”<sup>73</sup> thus giving them opportunities to write about novel aspects of Irish life, and giving their writing an authenticity that is still in evidence today.

Claude Fischler’s Incorporation Principle<sup>74</sup> can be used as a theoretical scaffold when addressing Somerville’s statement that “My family has eaten Irish food and shared Irish life for nearly three hundred years, and if that doesn’t make me Irish I might as well say I was Scotch, or Norman, or Pre-Diluvian!”<sup>75</sup> This suggests an inextricable link between food and identity, but also resonates with how I sometimes feel about the nature of being Irish. Some one hundred and thirty years after the publication of the travelogues, and seventy-five years after Edith Somerville’s death, perhaps the enduring legacy in West Cork of Somerville and Ross is the annual picnic held at the top of Lough Hyne hill on the last Sunday of August.<sup>76</sup> Now hosted by the Cork Slow

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<sup>71</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* gives a definition of “Stage-Irish” as a term for stereotypical Irish characters on the English-language stage from the seventeenth century. It is also applied to characters in fiction in whom Irish national characteristics are emphasised or distorted. A product of colonialism, it was used commonly to provide amusement to English audiences. Robert Welch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 533.

<sup>72</sup> MS 17/881/1 Brown hardback notebook, Special Collections, The Library, Queen’s University, Belfast.

<sup>73</sup> Lewis, *Letters*, xxv.

<sup>74</sup> Claude Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity,” *Social Science Information* 27, no. 2 (1988): 275-292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901888027002005>.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted from a letter from Edith Somerville to one of her brothers, cited in Lewis, *Somerville and Ross*, 164-165.

<sup>76</sup> Darina Allen, “Slow Food Picnic,” *Irish Examiner* (Cork), September 25, 2004, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/food/arid-10045965.html> and Ivan McCutcheon, “Slow Food West Cork Annual Summer Picnic,” *Food Culture West Cork* (blog), August 18,

Food Movement in memory of Somerville and Ross, it was originally instituted as an annual tradition by the cousins, at least as far back as 1906; we are told that it was at this particular picnic, in 1906, that there was a “good deal of banter about G.B.S.’s<sup>77</sup> vegetarianism, which he took in good humour.”<sup>78</sup>

### **Writing for the Senses: *In the Vine Country***

The narrative in the book is brought to life through the drawings by F. H. Townsend, based on Somerville’s sketches. The characters of the vineyards, comprising the peasants, the hotel owners, and the wine-makers are vividly rendered, both through words and illustration. Cowman suggests that Ross may have had synaesthesia, the involuntary transposing of sensory images,<sup>79</sup> and this transmits in *In the Vine Country* for example, as descriptions of smell as “painful deliciousness.”<sup>80</sup>

It is in St. Lambert that their most complete description of the wine making process occurs, including the splashing of feet in the *pressoir* and their tasting of the *moût*. It is this *moût* that generates abject disgust in both women that they would be expected to drink a “turgid magenta” juice, “deadly, deadly sweet, and had a faint and dreadful warmth.”<sup>81</sup> This disgust is amplified in the diary entries of both women for that day – Martin records that, she “had to taste the awful sickly juice,”<sup>82</sup> and Somerville “had to taste the sweet filthy juice, called ‘moue’ [*sic*].”<sup>83</sup>

A bottle of Grand St. Lambert 1885<sup>84</sup> plays a cameo role in the book, being first mentioned as a promissory note to the proprietor of a restaurant in Bordeaux, from the producer. This they redeem:

It was a large bottle, with a beautiful white-and-gold label, and after we had scientifically smelt its bouquet, and slowly absorbed as much as we thought becoming, morally and physically, there was still two-thirds of the bottle left, far too much either to squander upon the waiter or to finish ourselves. The waiter had left a mound of grapes in front of us, and had decorously retired; on a buffet behind us were a number of old newspapers; the hand-basket was on the floor at our feet;

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2009, <https://foodculturewestcork.wordpress.com/2009/08/18/slow-food-west-cork-annual-summer-picnic/>.

<sup>77</sup> George Bernard Shaw, he was a cousin by marriage of Edith Somerville.

<sup>78</sup> A diary entry of Edith Somerville’s, August 25, 1906, in Rauchbauer, *Somerville Archive in Drishane*, 191.

<sup>79</sup> Roz Cowman, “Lost Time: The Smell and Taste of Castle T,” in *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>80</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 63.

<sup>81</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 45.

<sup>82</sup> MS 17/874/2 Diary of Violet Martin 1891, Special Collections, The Library, Queen’s University, Belfast.

<sup>83</sup> Diary of Edith Somerville 1891.

<sup>84</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 86.

all was as perfect as if it had occurred in a romance of detective life. My second cousin stealthily abstracted an *Intransigéant* of a responsible age from the buffet, wrapped up the bottle in its woolly folds, and forced it diagonally into the basket.<sup>85</sup>

It makes a reappearance as a half-bottle on page 135:

we drew forth the half bottle of Grand St. Lambert that had for the last few days been carried perilously about in a bonnet-box, and with grapes and croissants began a repast that continued through stages of bovril, tea, and gingerbread biscuits till we neared Paris.

The *denouement* of the Grand St. Lambert 1885 occurs in the closing passage of the book:

We took a last look out of the train window at the electric star of the Eiffel Tower, perched among the elder stars in the sky behind us, and my cousin opened her bonnet-box and drew forth for the last time that widow's cruse,<sup>86</sup> the bottle of Grand St. Lambert. There was about a wine-glassful left, and out of a thick green Pauillac mug we solemnly drank success to our first vintage.<sup>87</sup>



Figure 1: Illustration by F H Townsend, from Somerville and Ross, 1892.

## Conclusion

The personal connection with Somerville and Ross, and the construction of socially meaningful identities and identification led to this navigation through the intricacies of Victorian writing and the notion of Irishness.<sup>88</sup> Somerville and Ross's

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<sup>85</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 88.

<sup>86</sup> The widow's cruse (*cruse* being a small vessel for holding liquid) is a biblical reference, from the widow's cruse of oil that miraculously supplies Elijah during a famine (I Kings 17:8–16), *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "widow's cruse," accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/widow%27s%20cruse>.

<sup>87</sup> Somerville and Ross, *Vine Country*, 141.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas M. Wilson, "Drinking Cultures: Sites and Practices in the Production and Expression of Identity," in *Drinking Cultures: Alcohol and Identity*, ed. Thomas M. Wilson (Berg: Oxford, 2005).

novels are tied up in pursuits of their time and place; however, *In the Vine Country* stands out for its humour in this period of social change and upheaval in its descriptions of wine making, for the purposes of educating, and selling claret to, middle-class Victorian women. A growing economic confidence and technical advances such as the bicycle were helping travel to become more prevalent. In addressing the *Lady's Pictorial*, I have shown how there was a dynamic and integral relationship between women's history and print culture in Victorian society.<sup>89</sup>

The historic tension in Ireland's past, in which forgotten and inconvenient narratives were lost, is perhaps leading to a more reflective society, more able to reconcile with its past. Identity politics and "othering" are among factors at play in Somerville and Ross becoming lost and disregarded voices. It would be a wonderful thing if in West Cork, alongside celebrating Michael Collins, O'Donovan Rossa and General Tom Barry, the legacy of Somerville and Ross might be recognised in tandem.

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<sup>89</sup> Easley, Gill, and Rodgers, *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture*.