



The
Autograph
Tree

William Henry

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COOLE PARK

I pass beneath the arching trees black with mystery,
Here Gothic and Romanesque combine
To form a fitting entrance to nature's palace,
Lying peaceful and sublime.
Beneath copper beech and elm I pace the rain-sodden earth,
Seven woods surround me, lakes and tumbling streams.
I follow the meandering ways, passing barely visible ruins
Of a house preserved in photographs or in an old man's
dreams,
On the bending arm of a willow a pigeon swoons,
The gates of a garden of orchard greet me, outhouses stand,
Maecenas' head now silent and alone inside a crumbling
door,
His bust once stood at the garden's end
His echoing voice once heard, now no more.
I pass the 'Autograph Tree' of etched memories,
Walking to the end of a garden to the graves of the dumb,
Looking back upon the narrow path I visualise
The founding of a theatre, the writing of a play or poem,
Afternoon conversation of the talented and the wise.
Traversing a similar path I make my way along
Over cobbled stones and acorns withered by the wind,
To the lake's edge, the sanctuary of the swan.

The Autograph Tree

A nipping breeze shatters its reflection,
I stand and gaze upon its beauty and trees so tall,
All passing things, too soon a memory
But their existence assured for generations
To outlive us all.

W. N. Sheerin, 4 April 1975

INTRODUCTION

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Lady Augusta Gregory welcomed numerous distinguished literary and artistic friends to her home in Coole Park. Many of these visitors were invited to carve their initials onto a wonderful 160-year-old copper beech tree in her walled garden, which became known as ‘the Autograph Tree’. This book contains profiles of those signatories.

The book is also a history of the Irish Literary Revival told through the biographical accounts of those people, as many of them played significant roles in this very important event. The revival could be said to have started with the founding of a number of societies in the early nineteenth century to promote Irish language and literature. However, these were mainly academic and appealed only to scholars. The revival really came to prominence with the sudden emergence of a potent dramatic movement in the late nineteenth century.

At the time, there was little evidence to indicate that there would be strong support among the general public for the theatrical world and literature, given that many people were living in poverty and hardship, particularly in the west of Ireland. However, the country was also in the grip of political and social issues that sometimes became prominent and could arouse a patriotic passion in many people – for example, the 1898 commemoration of the

1798 rebellion. Strong Irish ideals and cultural traditions existed just below the surface, waiting to emerge.

Moreover, after the death of Charles Stewart Parnell, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, in 1891, many young people became disillusioned with nationalist politics and turned instead towards the cultural movement. They began to follow or become actively involved in the literary revival, which included and celebrated all aspects of Irish culture.

One of the central organisations of the revival, the Gaelic League, was founded in 1893 and spread quickly across the country, bringing with it a pride in the Irish language, music, dance and storytelling. People were reminded that Ireland was a land of ancient legends and it was important that these should not be forgotten.

One of the most important events that took place during the literary revival was the meeting of Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats in 1896. This signalled the beginning of a lifelong friendship and a total commitment to the Irish theatre. The foundation of Irish literary societies in Dublin during this period was also important for the growing revival's success. These societies paved the way for the literary renaissance that erupted in Ireland over the following years, of which Yeats and Lady Gregory were a driving force. For example, they promoted the urgent need for a national theatre, as they were aware that there were a number of playwrights eager to showcase their work and in need of an outlet.

Of course, finance was necessary to make this dream a reality. Their plan was to request £300 from any prospective sponsors and assure them that Irish plays would be staged annually. They

felt that these plays would bring passion to the stage and result in deeper thoughts of and emotions towards Ireland among the people. There was also an ambition to develop an Irish school of dramatic literature, as they believed that without this no new literary movement could succeed. They were confident that the Irish people would support the venture, as many of them felt misrepresented on the English stage, where they were depicted only as negative stereotypes. It was also intended to show the world that Ireland was the home of ancient idealism.

The appeal was successful and people from all levels of society supported the idea of an Irish theatre. However, their financial support was not required because Edward Martyn of Tulira stepped in and made a very generous donation to ensure the success of the venture. This laid the foundation for a society named the 'Irish Literary Theatre'. The project provided fertile ground for new and potential playwrights. The influence of Lady Gregory, Yeats and a new group called the 'Irish National Theatre' subsequently led to the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in December 1904. Through its productions, the Abbey became the potent voice of an emerging Irish nation and attracted some of the leading literary figures, artists, actors and actresses of the period. Accounts of these people and the events that shaped the early theatre in Ireland can be found throughout this book.

The biographical profiles that appear here do not follow an alphabetical order. They begin with Lady Gregory, and some of those closest to her, such as her son, Robert, and W. B. Yeats. These are followed by those connected to her mainly through the Abbey Theatre. The idea of recording names on the Autograph Tree began in the summer of 1898 when Lady Gregory invited

Yeats to carve his initials into its bark. Over the following years many more poets, writers and artists were also given this privilege: Jack Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, Sara Allgood, Frank and William Fay, George William Russell, John Quinn, Augustus John, James Dickson Innes, George Bernard Shaw, Lennox Robinson, Sean O'Casey, George Moore, Douglas Hyde, Violet Florence Martin, Lady Margaret Sackville, the Countess of Cromartie, John Masefield, Robert Ross, Elinor Monsell, Dame Ethel Smyth and Theodore Spicer-Simson. Strangely, two soldiers, General Sir Ian Hamilton and General Sir Neville Lyttelton, were also asked to 'sign' the tree. With the exception of these last two, her reason for choosing the signatories is apparent: they were involved in art, literature and the theatre. The Autograph Tree acts almost like a 'who's who' of those involved in the artistic world during that time.

Writing this book proved rather difficult because a number of the personalities shared intertwining lives. It was important that each of the signatories should be profiled as separate individuals and that the profiles could be read independently of each other. Therefore, great care has been taken to ensure that each person remains central in their own profile, but also that the information included is not repetitive. However, it was equally essential to inform the reader of any connections between these people. There are some instances where aspects of individual lives are strongly linked, as with the Fay brothers. Both men were involved in the Abbey Theatre and worked closely together on many occasions. Another instance is the love affair between Lady Gregory and John Quinn; while this episode is mentioned in her profile, it is explored in more detail in his.

Another aspect of the profiles that needs to be taken into consideration is the amount of information available about the various individuals. Some of the personalities achieved greater distinction than others and thus there was more source material available to the author. For example, people such as Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats, Shaw and O'Casey have been the subject of a number of books. In other cases there was much less information available.

It was while visiting Coole Park with my children and family friends over many years that I developed an interest in the names carved into the Autograph Tree. Thousands of people from all over the world flock to Coole Park every year and visit the now-famous tree. While enjoying the afternoon sunshine in May 2013, a friend observed the gentle movement of its branches and remarked how it reminded her of a peaceful ocean floor, with the leaves placidly moving to and fro like the ebb and flow of a tranquil sea. But it was the curiosity of my children that helped to trigger my own interest in the signatories, and so the idea of this book was born. It fills a unique and important void in Irish literary history because it captures the lives of all of these people in one publication.

The Autograph Tree is a living monument and a symbol of Irish culture and heritage. It emits an atmosphere of timelessness from the overburdened branches that shelter its carved bark, thus protecting the names of people who have gained international prominence in the world of literature and art. Coole Park is now celebrated around the world as the centre of Irish literary culture, and the Autograph Tree is the physical link with these people who have left Ireland with an extremely rich inheritance.

Augusta Persse

‘Lady Gregory’

Playwright 1852–1932

Isabella Augusta Persse, or ‘Lady Gregory’ as she was later known, was born on 15 March 1852 at the family home, Roxborough House, Co. Galway. Her parents were Dudley and Frances Persse (*née* Barry).¹ She was from a wealthy background and was educated by a governess from an early age, as well as being influenced by their housekeeper, Mary Sheridan, who often told her stories of local folklore. While the rest of her family were not overly interested in literature, the young Augusta developed a strong interest in reading and creative writing.² She was described as a vivacious child with soft dark eyes and lustrous brown hair. She had thirteen siblings, but those closest to her were Gertrude and Arabella, who were a little older.

Growing up, Augusta preferred the outdoor life, which was mostly reserved for her brothers. The fact that she managed to have herself included in their activities would indicate that she was a strong-willed young girl. Her time with the boys was spent fox hunting and trapping rabbits and birds. She was also close to her brother Frank, who was two years her junior. She was shy when in the company of adults and sometimes depended

on her sisters to conceal this shyness. It seems her father didn't have much time for Augusta and she reciprocated this lack of affection. Meanwhile, her mother was a fashionable lady dressing in the latest styles of the period and could at times display great courtesy, though she was also self-centred. Augusta differed from her mother, as she had a great capacity for warmth, love, kindness and friendliness, and a keen interest in books. Despite these qualities, her mother considered her a failure. Perhaps this was because she thought that reading books was of no great benefit to girls.

The fact that Augusta had more in common with her brothers than with her sisters throughout her teenage years didn't enhance her confidence when in the company of other young men. Perhaps this was because she spoke with a slight lisp. In 1875 she was chosen to accompany one of her brothers when he was sent abroad. He had been advised to spend the winter in Cannes on the French Riviera because of an illness. While there, Augusta often thought about marriage and wondered if it would be appropriate to marry someone out of affection and mutual respect, rather than love.

When Sir William Gregory had met Augusta as a child, he had told her mother that she was the prettiest of her daughters. Augusta met Gregory again, for the first time as an adult, while he was attending a cricket match at Roxborough in the summer of 1877. He was thirty-five years her senior, but was very attentive to her. This obviously impressed Augusta, as she met him on a number of occasions that summer. It was during this time that she was invited to Coole for what was likely the first time. There was a total contrast between her own home, which was associated

with hunting and a degree of rowdiness, and Coole, known for its civilised manner and culture.

Despite the age gap, a relationship developed between Gregory and Augusta. By this time Gregory was very lonely, but he feared proposing marriage to her as he didn't wish to look foolish because of the age difference. In 1879 he loaned her a book entitled *Roderick Hudson*. When Augusta returned the book in January 1880, she placed a letter inside indicating that she would consider marriage. They communicated through writing and this was how Gregory made his proposal of marriage, which she accepted.³

Shortly before the wedding, Gregory wrote to Augusta concerning his tenants around Kiltartan:

I am very glad indeed that the country people are pleased. Whatever naughty deeds I may have done I always felt the strongest sense of duty towards my tenants, and I have a great affection for them. They have never in a single instance caused me displeasure, and I know you can and will do everything in your power to make them love and value us.⁴

It would seem that Gregory was trying to ensure that she would not bring any bigotry to Coole, as he feared that she shared her mother's distaste for the Catholic religion. However, Gregory needn't have worried, as Augusta didn't agree with her mother's intolerance towards people of that faith. She merely objected to the Catholic Church because she felt it placed intolerable restrictions on people and more or less suppressed their free spirit.

Even as an adult, she was not close to her mother; in fact, one of the reasons she embraced marriage to a man so many years her senior was to escape the burden of having to look after her parents in old age. It comes as little surprise then that her mother's death at the Croft, Taylor's Hill, Galway on 23 March 1896 did not have much of an effect on Lady Gregory. If anything, it seemed to unshackle her. A year later she wrote about the importance of Catholic Emancipation and this was something she would not have done were her mother still alive. This could indicate that she had been controlled to some extent by her mother's domineering influence.⁵

The wedding of Augusta Persse and Sir William Gregory took place on 4 March 1880 at St Matthias' church in Dublin. Gregory took his new bride to the Continent on their honeymoon and introduced her to European aristocratic society, with whom he was well acquainted. They returned to Coole on 29 July 1880 and were received with the traditional welcome for a newly married Anglo-Irish couple. Members of the local clergy and the temperance band, along with a huge crowd, greeted them at Gort. A bonfire was lit at the gates of Coole and a welcome slogan was placed over the gateway. A month later, Augusta announced that she was pregnant. There were rumours at the time that the father of the baby was a local blacksmith named Seán Farrell. Some said that this gossip arose because they believed that Gregory was too old to father a child. However, this was highly unlikely.

The baby was born on 20 May 1881 and was christened William Robert Gregory, but he was always known as Robert. Typically, babies born into landed gentry families at that time did not interfere with the lifestyle of their parents and were normally

handed over to a 'wet nurse' to be looked after. Therefore, shortly after the birth of Robert, his father insisted that the couple resume their travels. They left Coole soon afterwards and journeyed to London, where they attended the Queen's Ball. During their travels they stayed with some highly influential people in England. Gregory also planned a trip to Egypt for them later that year. This trip changed everything for Lady Gregory and it revealed her true sensuality.⁶

It is known that Lady Gregory had at least two lovers in her lifetime: Wilfrid Blunt and, later, John Quinn. Both could be described as men of the world, confident and experienced.⁷ The first, Blunt, had been in the diplomatic service. He married Lady Annabella King-Noel and they had at least one daughter, Judith. Augusta met Blunt in Egypt during the winter of 1881–82. She didn't record her first impressions of him but later wrote that she admired his outspoken manner. Politically, she found herself supporting him and his views regarding local policies, sometimes in opposition to her husband.

It was during this time that Blunt and Augusta first kissed. While neither of them ever made direct reference to sexual relations in their writings, they did refer to the affair in different ways. Blunt, in his *Secret Memoir*, hinted at the liaison, writing that they found comfort in each other's arms and in each other's affection. Augusta wrote in her earliest sonnet that after kissing Blunt for the first time she realised she could become his lover. The intense pleasure that it brought her was marred by the guilt and fear of this forbidden love, which would suggest that it was a sexual affair. Although she tried to resist, she could not give Blunt up and was ultimately unrepentant – given the choice she

would have allowed it to happen again. The only fear she had was of being discovered.

In the end, Blunt's wife became aware of the affair. She had ignored others over the years, but this time she challenged her husband. It is not known for certain if William Gregory was aware of the situation while it was going on, but after it ended he did encourage Augusta to write, as he felt she needed an outlet to release her energy.

In July 1891 Gregory began having breathing difficulties. By Christmas of that year he was more or less confined to his room. The couple had planned a trip to Algiers for the spring of 1892, but, because of the illness, his doctor advised them to go to Bournemouth instead. As his health continued to deteriorate, he confessed his undying love to Augusta. Sir William Gregory died on 6 March 1892.⁸

Following her husband's death, Lady Gregory found herself with the responsibility of managing the Coole estate. She was a practical and intelligent woman and set about the task professionally to try to ensure that it would pass on intact to her young son when he came of age. Lady Gregory also spent considerable time in London, as this was the centre of her social life. She was a committed unionist, but, being an open-minded woman, she adapted to change as time passed. She made an attempt to improve the situation for the inmates at the Gort Workhouse. Her suggestions included employing people to manufacture fishing nets and helping them to develop carpentry

skills. While this seemed like a good idea, the local parish priest, Fr Jerome Fahey, didn't approve and so her plans never became a reality. She later became involved with a local convent school, where her idea for linen-weaving was taken on board. The girls were soon manufacturing products to designs supplied by Lady Gregory. These were exported to London, where they were sold as Irish Cottage Industry items. Over time, she became increasingly interested in Irish literature and indeed other aspects of life in Ireland.

By this period, things were changing dramatically for landlords and, indeed, their tenants, because of the introduction of new land acts. These acts compelled landlords to sell part of their land to tenants, who were being financially assisted by the government to buy the land. Some landlords resisted and this caused friction, which in some cases resulted in violence. Take, for example, the case of Lady Gregory's neighbour and friend Edward Martyn of Tulira, who paid the price for his indifference; or rather his steward did, when he was shot dead near the gates of Coole. This shooting caused much fear among the landed gentry, and Martyn had to have police protection for a time.

Lady Gregory accepted the changes being introduced. She must have been aware of the legacy of the landlord system when she later recorded in her journal: 'God knows many of our ancestors and forerunners have eaten or planted sour grapes and we must not repine if our teeth are set on edge – I would like to leave a good memory, and not a monument of champagne bottles.'

On 27 July 1896 Lady Gregory visited the home of Count de Basterot at Duras, on the Co. Clare and Galway border. It was there that she first met the poet W. B. Yeats. She took an

instant liking to Yeats and, before leaving, invited him to visit her at Coole. Thus began thirty-five years of a warm, mutually beneficial, platonic relationship. This also turned out to be the most important meeting in the world of Irish literature, as the first seeds of the Irish Literary Theatre were sown that day.⁹

One cannot over-estimate the influence that Lady Augusta had over Yeats. She became not only his friend, but also his counsellor and confidante. Over the following years, Yeats spent almost every summer at Coole, and often visited her during the winter.¹⁰ But their friendship also benefited Lady Gregory. Encouraged by him, she began collecting Irish stories and legends from people in the locality, and later based many of her plays and books on this material.

After a meeting with writer and nationalist Douglas Hyde, she formed a branch of the Gaelic League in the Coole district. Times were certainly changing for her. She was now venturing down a path which her family would never have approved of or envisaged. She also became a supporter of Home Rule, which would have given Ireland a degree of independence, and recorded an entry in her journal: 'I defy anyone to study Irish history without getting a dislike and distrust of England.'

She was by now committed to raising awareness of the rich culture of Ireland and continued to collect local folklore. These stories found an opening on the national stage through her books, some of which were *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902); *Poets and Dreamers* (1903); *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904); *Kiltartan History Book* (1909) and *Kiltartan Poetry Book* (1918). Her most successful plays were *Spreading the News* (1904); *The Rising of the Moon* (1907) and *The Workhouse Ward* (1908).¹¹

When the Abbey Theatre opened on 27 December 1904, with Lady Gregory's advocacy for a national theatre being one of the main reasons behind its foundation, she was unable to attend due to illness. However, she made a barmbrack that was two feet in diameter and sent it as a gift to be shared among the actors, actresses and staff at the opening-night celebrations. Incidentally, this was remembered on the Abbey's ninetieth anniversary when the theatre ordered a similar barmbrack from O'Connor's Bakery in Gort to have at their celebrations.¹²

Lady Gregory became further absorbed in the world of literature and art following the theatre's opening, surrounding herself with like-minded people. Over time more writers, poets, playwrights, actors and actresses began visiting her at Coole. Her home became a Mecca for these people and they found a wonderful and generous host at Coole. Lady Gregory loved Coole and its acres of foliage, and had a particular fondness for a large copper beech tree in her walled picnic garden. This became the Autograph Tree, as she began inviting her visitors to carve their initials into its bark.¹³

It was while touring the United States with the Abbey Theatre in 1911 that Augusta fell deeply in love with the American lawyer John Quinn, whom she had met earlier in Ireland. On her return home, she wrote some passionate letters to Quinn. She met him again during another visit to the United States the following year. (This relationship will be explored in more detail in the profile on John Quinn.)¹⁴

The Great War of 1914–18 proved to be a double tragedy for Lady Gregory, as she suffered two personal losses. First her nephew Hugh Lane was drowned in the sinking of the *Lusitania*

in 1915 by a German submarine.¹⁵ Her son, Robert, was then killed on 23 January 1918, after his plane was shot down.¹⁶ Robert had been married to Margaret Graham Parry and they had three children: Richard, Anne and Catherine. Even though Lady Gregory was devastated by her son's death, the wonderful relationship she shared with her grandchildren somewhat consoled her.¹⁷

The secure world that Lady Gregory had known in her youth was changing. The political strife that followed the 1916 Rising led to the War of Independence in Ireland and culminated with a civil war. Lady Gregory's former home, Roxborough House, was burned down during the latter war, possibly because it was seen by many as a symbol of bigotry.¹⁸ Throughout the early 1920s she struggled to hold on to her property; however, the upkeep of the house and land ultimately proved too much. Thus, in December 1927, she sold Coole to the Department of Lands and Agriculture, and it was agreed that she could lease back the house and gardens. One can hear the sadness in her when, in 1930, on the eve of her grandson's birthday, Lady Gregory recorded:

I used long ago to say I should like, I thought, to live until Richard's 21st Birthday. And it comes tomorrow. And I am still here in health and strength, and he is well and doing so well at Chatham! But it is a contrast to Robert's coming of age, with the gathering of cousins and the big feast and dance for the tenants. Coole is no longer ours. But the days of landed property have passed. It is better so. Yet I wish someone of our blood would after my death care enough for what has been a home for so long, to keep it open.¹⁹

While she accepted the changes in Ireland during the early part of the twentieth century, the death of her only son had undoubtedly been devastating. As the mother of a young child, the future had seemed secure and she envisaged that Coole would eventually pass on to Robert. However, the war changed everything, leaving her hopes and dreams in ruins. Shortly before her death, she had the Gregory burial vault in Kiltartan securely sealed. She then made arrangements for her own burial beside her sister Arabella in the New Cemetery at Bohermore, Galway.

Lady Gregory died on 22 May 1932. Upon hearing the news of her death, a devastated Yeats wrote that he had lost someone who had been his strength and conscience for almost forty years.

In the years following her death, Coole House gradually deteriorated. The lead was stripped from the roof, and the windows and doors fell into a ruined state for want of maintenance. In 1941 the Local Defence Force hoped to use the house as a field hospital for training, but it proved unsuitable due to its dilapidated state. It was decided to demolish the house in 1942 and the contents were sold at auction.²⁰

Lady Gregory's contribution to Irish literature is immeasurable. She was a guiding light to some of the leading writers and poets of her time; an avid collector of folklore; a writer, poet and author of twenty-seven plays. Her legacy still lives on at Coole, as people from all over the world meet for the annual 'Autumn Gathering', where they celebrate the literary revival, of which she was one of the leading figures. One of the many great tributes paid to Lady Gregory was from playwright Sean O'Casey:

Living her own life with insistent intensity, Lady Gregory lived, at

the same time, ardently, a life among the plain people. She knew Curley the Piper as well as she knew Yeats, and Ardrahan church better than Westminster Abbey ... Though far from being well-off, she gave of what she had and added a large part of herself to the gift.²¹

In the days of Lady Gregory, one of the driving forces behind Ireland's Literary Revival, the big house at Coole Park hosted many of the greatest names in Irish literature and art. W. B. Yeats was a constant visitor, while the likes of George Bernard Shaw, J. M. Synge, Jack B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey and Sara Allgood all spent time there. The most favoured of Lady Gregory's visitors were invited to carve their initials on 'the Autograph Tree', which today is a living monument to this vibrant period in Ireland's history.

With short biographies of the twenty-seven people who left their mark on the copper beech at Coole, *The Autograph Tree* gives an insight into the lives, loves and tragedies of the signatories, as well as into the social, political and cultural events of their day.



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