

## Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849)

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'If the system of female education, if the system of female manners, conspire to shew in the fair sex a degrading anxiety to attract worthless admiration, wealthy, or titles homage, is it surprising that every young man, who has any pretensions to birth, fortune, or fashion, should consider himself as the arbiter of their fate, and the despotic judge of their merit?'

*Practical Education* (1798) Vol II, p. 534.

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by Gillian Dow

A leading Anglo-Irish writer who was one of the most popular novelists of the early nineteenth century, admired by Walter Scott and Jane Austen alike, Maria Edgeworth (henceforth Edgeworth) seemed almost destined to become an educationalist, and a strong proponent of female education. Her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817) was himself deeply interested in education, as befitted a member of the Birmingham-based Lunar society, and indeed any 'enlightened' gentleman in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Richard Lovell Edgeworth (henceforth RLE) was father to twenty-two children, of whom Edgeworth was the second, by his first wife Anna Maria Elers (1743-1773). RLE was inspired by his reading of Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) to educate his elder son Richard using the principles established in Rousseau's work. Despite the encouragement of his friend Thomas Day (a Rousseauvian and author of the popular book for children *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783)), the experiment was a failure. Not for the first time, Rousseau's 'methods' had been tested and found wanting: their lack of practical application was seen as problematic by late-eighteenth century readers in France as well as in Britain. The publication of the Edgeworths' *Essays on Practical Education* (1798) can be seen as an attempt to make a century-worth of educational theory digestible for busy families. Advertised as a joint publication between daughter and father, it is now thought that Edgeworth herself wrote the bulk of the work. With twenty younger siblings, thirteen of whom were educated at home, she was ideally suited to the task: the introduction stresses that 'we have chosen the title of Practical Education, to point out that we reply entirely upon practice and experience'. The work even includes 'notes, containing conversations and anecdotes of children' as an appendix.

Edgeworth's own early education and childhood was turbulent and unhappy. She was born in Oxfordshire in 1768, and was only six when her mother died. The young Maria spent time at school in Derby and London, largely neglected by her father who was much occupied with his new wife, Honora Sneyd, and then with her sister, Elizabeth Sneyd, who became his wife shortly after Honora's death in 1780. It was only when the family moved to Edgeworthstown in Ireland in 1782 that father and daughter became close. Edgeworth was always extremely deferential to RLE, completing her father's *Memoirs* after his death in 1817.

Edgeworth's first attempt at publication was a translation of Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis's 1782 work, *Adèle et Théodore* (it was never to be printed, being beaten to the press by a rival version). In this work, the education of the female child is privileged, and there are many practical suggestions for reading, exercise and learning modern languages. It is a work that informs *Practical Education* in no small way, being quoted admiringly on several occasions throughout the text. In many respects, however, *Practical Education* is quite new. Unlike many other works on female education published in the 1780s and 1790s, it does not dwell on religious education, a fact that did not escape contemporary commentators. Edgeworth had already had practice for a 'defense' of female education in her publication *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), a fiction that encourages women to publish, and serves as a riposte to Thomas Day, who felt strongly that women should prefer more private pursuits.

Throughout her writings, Edgeworth emphasizes depth of study over more frivolous accomplishments. In *Practical Education*, the danger of 'superficial knowledge' for women is stressed:

Whatever young women learn, let them be taught accurately; let them know ever so little apparently, they will know much if they have learnt that little *well*. A girl who runs through a course of natural history, hears something about chemistry, has been taught something of botany, and who knows but just enough of these to make her fancy that she is well informed, is in a miserable situation, in danger of becoming ridiculous, and insupportably tiresome to men of sense and science. But let a woman know any one thing completely, and she will have sufficient understanding to learn more, and to apply what she has been taught so as to interest men of generosity and genius in her favour.

As well as with *Practical Education*, Edgeworth wrote enduringly popular works for children. These were in print throughout the nineteenth century, and indeed into the early twentieth century. Much loved by generations of children, these tales for children of different ages are gently didactic and contain moral lessons that age them somewhat. Nevertheless, they are frequently charming depictions of early nineteenth-century children's lives, and fare well in comparison to the more 'muscular' works of Hannah More and Mary Martha Sherwood.