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Erminda Rentoul Esler’s “Physical” and “Virtual” Networks: Women’s Activism, the Irish in London, and the Local-Colour Story

Giulia Bruna 

Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, Radboud Institute for Culture and History, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article illuminates the life and work of Irish-born novelist, short-story writer, and periodical columnist Erminda Rentoul Esler (1860?–1924), who lived and worked in London from the 1890s onwards. First, the essay documents Esler’s participation in various literary and social networks in London. These “physical” networks included London-based Irish revivalist groups where she interacted with other Irish and London-Irish writers, and early feminist groups such as New Women and suffragists (e.g., the Women Writers’ Suffrage League). Second, the essay explores Esler’s equally important engagement with “virtual” networks of readers through her collaboration with English periodicals (women’s magazines) and her local-colour stories. As this article will show, Esler’s local-colour fiction of the 1890s is a critical node that joins together and interrogates discourses surrounding Irishness, the New Woman, and the transnational dimension of the regional story. Reasserting Esler’s presence in the London literary marketplace and in Irish diasporic circuits highlights the complexity of regional, diasporic, and religious varieties of Irish identity that were being negotiated at the turn of the twentieth century. Her involvement also underscores the importance of these networks of sociability to encourage women’s participation in society through education, professionalism, and the vote.


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Erminda Rentoul Esler (1860?–1924) was a novelist, short-story writer, and periodical columnist who lived and worked in London from the 1890s onwards. In 1895, she received a fleeting mention in W. B. Yeats’s articles on “Irish National Literature” for *The Bookman*, in which Yeats sought to make the case for a distinctive Irish canon: in these articles, Yeats describes Esler as “writing charmingly of Presbyterian life in Ireland.”¹ Indeed, the Ulster Presbyterian background of her novels has been a key interpretative angle in scholarship on her work.² In both the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* and

CONTACT Giulia Bruna  giulia.bruna@ru.nl

¹Yeats, 371.

²For example, her 1895 novel *A Maid of the Manse* dealing with the internal crises of the Ulster Presbyterian Church is the one that has received most critical attention in studies of the nineteenth-century Irish novel by Foster (86–9) and Murphy (241).

an essay in Kathryn Laing and Sinéad Mooney's *Irish Women Writers at the Turn of the 20th Century*, Patrick Maume has filled some lacunae regarding Esler's education, family background, and connections with the London literary world. From Maume's work, we know that Esler was born in Manorcunningham, Co. Donegal, where her father, Alexander Rentoul, was the local Presbyterian minister. She was educated to university level at "QCB [Queen's College Belfast] and graduated with honours from the RUI [Royal University of Ireland] in 1879."³ Another source adds that she obtained "honours in science and modern literature."⁴ In 1883 she married Belfast surgeon Robert Esler and in 1889, they left Belfast for London when her husband accepted a position as a police surgeon; in London Esler's writing career burgeoned.⁵

This essay will delve deeper into Esler's life in London, uncovering the literary networks she engaged with, which included women's societies and Irish diaspora groups, and the periodicals (mostly British) to which she contributed. Caroline Levine's powerful observation that "all of us ... are located at the crossings of multiple unfolding networks that are perpetually linking bodies, ideas, and things"⁶ is a useful starting point from which to look at Esler's intersecting interests and simultaneous participation in diasporic circles of Irish cultural revivalism and suffragist groups, and more broadly, her engagement with New Woman discourses and social norms for women. In addition, this essay will focus on her short fiction, partly because her novels, comparatively speaking, have already received more critical attention, and because the periodicals in which some of these stories were first published add to our understanding of Esler's professional career and of the popular genre to which her stories were ascribed—the local-colour, regional, or village tale.⁷ As this essay will show, Esler's local-colour fiction of the 1890s is a critical node that joins together and interrogates discourses surrounding Irishness, the New Woman, and the transnational dimension of the regional story.

Esler was a professional author who actively participated in various networks of sociability in London at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. In a special issue of the *Victorian Periodicals Review* on "Victorian Networks and the Periodical Press," Alexis Easley highlights that Victorian networks were "informed by spatial considerations—the physical locations of individuals, clubs, editorial offices, and other sites of literary exchange," but they also simultaneously worked at a "virtual" level, with periodicals being the "'spaces' where professional networking might take place."⁸ Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin and Angus Mitchell's study of the social

³Maume, "Esler, Erminda Rentoul".

⁴"Daily Independent," 4.

⁵Maume, "Esler, Erminda Rentoul;" "Education, Love, Loneliness, Philanthropy," 167–78.

⁶Levine, 130.

⁷"Local colour" is a term traditionally associated with American post-Civil War fiction that aimed to capture customs, village life, local characters, and speech of specific regions, and whose most famous proponents include, among others, Bret Harte, Hamlin Garland, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Literary periodicals also championed this mode, most notably *The Atlantic Monthly*. Recently, Josephine Donovan has applied this taxonomy also to her comparative study of European regional texts such as Walter Scott's Scottish tales, Maria Edgeworth's Irish tales, George Sand's self-coined *romans champêtres*, and Berthold Auerbach's *Schwarzwälder Dorfgeschichten*, highlighting connections and influences between these traditions. While scholars at times distinguish between "local colour" and "regionalism," casting the first as "low-brow" and the second as "high-brow", June Howard dismisses qualitative distinctions and uses the terms interchangeably, noting that "local colour" was most widely used in the nineteenth century and regionalism in the twentieth (16). "Village tale" is another way in which some of these stories are referred to since they often centre around a village and its immediate surroundings (in German "Dorfgeschichten" means village tales).

⁸Easley, "Introduction," 112, 113.

networks of and correspondence between Irish historian Alice Stopford Green and British writer Vernon Lee in the London of the 1880s draws further attention to the “overlapping” nature of circles that “created a palimpsest of intellectual and cultural circuits through which multiple Victorian discourses were realized and articulated.”⁹ However, they also highlight the often “intangible” and “ephemeral” quality of this connectivity, since traces of these links are often scant and difficult to piece together from multiple sources.¹⁰ Esler inhabited both the “physical” and “virtual” spaces of “overlapping” and “ephemeral” social networks: as a member of professional, political, and diasporic clubs and frequent attendee of many of their gatherings in London, and as an active contributor to the periodical press, she was in dialogue with both readers and fellow writers of the time.

The physical occupation of public spaces aligns with contemporaneous New Woman discourses that saw women increasingly entering previously male-dominated professions and combining a professional career alongside home- and family-caring duties. Esler’s professional, along with her social connections, are crucial to trace, not only because they have yet to be fully retrieved, but also because they illuminate the variety and complexity of the public engagement and forms of activism that were characteristic of many literary women at that time. Despite the fragmentariness of some of the evidence, her involvement with London literary, diasporic, and early feminist networks shows that she was conscious of the role writers could play in influencing the public sphere and creating social change.

Esler also engaged with “virtual” networks of writers and readers through some of her journalism in periodicals and via her village stories. She wrote three collections of village tales set in a fictional hamlet named Grimpat: *The Way They Loved at Grimpat: Village Idylls* (1893), *Mid Green Pastures: Short Stories* (1895), and *Youth at The Prow* (1899). Her stories also enjoyed some international popularity in English, both in the United States and on the Continent, and, later, in translation in France, Switzerland, Denmark, and Sweden.¹¹ Esler’s short fiction was categorized by contemporary critics as belonging to the genre of “local fiction,”¹² or fiction which, at the *fin de siècle*, took a keen ethnographic interest in the language, customs, and people of a specific region and included, most notably, the works of Thomas Hardy and J. M. Barrie. The parallel with the Scottish Kailyard tradition has also been highlighted by Maume in view of Barrie’s and Esler’s shared Presbyterian background.¹³ Another reviewer also named her as one of the “historian[s] of the hamlet,”¹⁴ adding to the list of Scottish comparators the American regionalist Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Esler’s stories were also frequently associated with those by English predecessors such as Mary Russell Mitford and Elizabeth Gaskell and with the work of fellow Irish writers Katharine Tynan and Jane Barlow.

⁹Ní Bheacháin and Mitchell, 82.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹See References for a list of some of the nineteenth-century editions of Esler’s short story collections. A translation of Esler’s story “Linnets’ Lover” from *The Way They Loved at Grimpat* appeared in cheap paperback editions in Denmark and Sweden: *Ellens Bejlere* (Trans. Inga. København: Fr. Jensens Bogtrykkeri, 1913) and *Kittys Friare* (Trans. Dagmar Sommarström, Stockholm: Nord. förl., 1912). Another story from the same collection (“Eunice”) was published in the French religious periodical *La Bonne Revue* as “Une Idylle Au Village” (June 15, 1906, 364–7). Two of her stories also appeared in French in the Swiss periodical *Bibliothèque Universelle et Revue Suisse*: “Le Secret de Madame Jesop,” a translation of “The Mystery Connected to Mrs Jessop” from *Youth at The Prow*, was published in 1899, and a story entitled “La Folie de Mademoiselle Priscille” in 1906.

¹²Brander Matthews quoted in Quiller-Couch, 224.

¹³Maume, “Erminde Rentoul Esler.”

¹⁴“Another Historian of the Hamlet,” 445.

Although Esler's tales were considered regional literature for their portrayal of village life, they lack the geographical and dialectal specificity found in the work of Scottish regionalists Barrie, S. R. Crockett, and Ian Maclaren, or Irish counterparts such as Barlow.¹⁵ For example, Esler's characters are not made to speak a distinct regional dialect, and ethnographic descriptions of local customs are scant. Contemporary reviewers also noted this lack of a more pronounced local colour and were confused in their identification of Esler's village: American reviewers generally identified it with an English hamlet, while Irish reviewers framed it as an Ulster village.¹⁶

Her short fiction was often first published in British periodicals, ranging from women's publications like *The Woman's Signal* and *The Young Woman*, to family-oriented magazines such as *The British Weekly* and *The Leisure Hour*.¹⁷ Her collaboration with *The Young Woman* (1892–1915) is examined here for two reasons: in it, Esler published some of her Grimpat stories from her second collection *Mid Green Pastures* and contributed an advice column entitled “Between Ourselves: A Friendly Chat with the Girls” for seven years, from October 1892 until June 1899. *The Young Woman: A Monthly Journal and Review* (Figure 1) was published in London and “conducted by Frederic A. Atkins” a writer and clergyman who also edited a similar magazine for a male readership, *The Young Man*, and a family periodical, *The Home Messenger*.¹⁸ Emma Liggins notes that *The Young Woman* had a “broader Christian agenda” and was open to more progressive themes such as the New Woman in its strong emphasis on women's education and professional development.¹⁹ Printed on two columns and featuring comparatively fewer illustrations and less advertising, *The Young Woman* resembled “a newspaper or more scholarly journal, though it still had a large circulation, its first volume going into a third edition and selling 80,000 copies.”²⁰ Because Esler's collections were written during the years in which she penned this advice column, and because some of the Grimpat stories revolve around female protagonists in their transition between girlhood and womanhood, I contend that she conceived some of her village idylls partly with that audience in mind. Her work for *The Young Woman*, moreover, provides some interesting evidence of her own Irish identity, even though in that periodical, as well as in her career, she did not solely perform the role of an Irish (diasporic) writer, but also, more generally, wrote from the standpoint of a professional woman writer addressing a mainly British public. Her approach may be further understood if compared to Irish-born writer Sarah Grand's performance of Irishness, which Tina O'Toole

¹⁵The work of these Scottish “Kailyard” writers of Scotch dialect fiction was championed and transnationally promoted by William Robertson Nicoll (1851–1923), literary advisor for Hodder and Stoughton (the firm who published Jane Barlow's collections), editor of *The British Weekly* (where Esler published her stories), and editor of *The Bookman* (where reviews of Esler's work appeared as well as Yeats's articles on Irish literature mentioned above). Maume has argued that Esler caricatured Nicoll (and supposedly his opportunistic approach to publishing despite his religious background) through a character in her novel *The Trackless Way* (“Education, Love, Loneliness, Philanthropy,” 175).

¹⁶Tynan for instance identified it as an Ulster village (“Mrs. Esler's New Stories,” 91) in line with the rest of her longer fiction; an American reviewer called it a “plain English village” (“*The Way They Loved at Grimpat*, Review,” 443).

¹⁷See References for a list of Esler's Grimpat stories published in periodicals. She also published essays, stories, and travel writing in *The Young Man*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *Temple Magazine: Silas K. Hocking's Illustrated Monthly*, *The Living Age*, *Quiver*, *The Englishwoman*, *All the Year Around*, and others. To my knowledge, she did not publish fiction in periodicals printed in Ireland.

¹⁸Esler's *Mid Green Pastures* is dedicated to Atkins.

¹⁹Liggins, 219.

²⁰*Ibid.* See also Armetta, Doughan, and Liggins, 697.

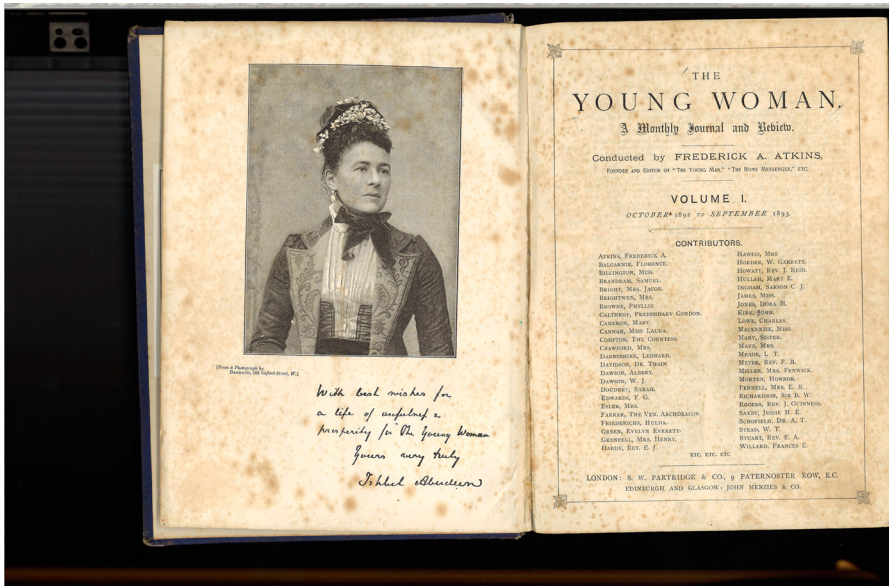


Figure 1. Frontispiece of the first volume of *The Young Woman*. Image courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

describes as varying “depending on its usefulness.”²¹ Esler’s own occasional assertion of Irishness in the periodical complicated stereotypical notions of Ireland for British readers and presented multifaceted Irish identities. In addition, in *The Young Woman* and in her literary production, Esler was concerned with forging sisterly bonds with other women and advancing the position of women in society.

The list of “physical” networks that saw Esler involved in an official capacity is remarkable. In the 1890s, she attended the Women Writers’ Dinners, annual gatherings of women writers held in fashionable London locations such as the Criterion Restaurant.²² The Dinner began in 1889 under the heading “Literary Ladies’ Dinner” and was regularly organized by a committee presided over by Scottish writer Honor Morten and including other London-Irish writers such as Tynan, L. T. Meade, and Kathleen Mannington Caffyn (Iota). With male authors often precluding access to women in literary clubs, Linda Hughes highlights that this event was “on one hand a claim to equal status and privileges enjoyed by male authors, and on the other part of the larger entrance of women into the public spaces of London.”²³

Esler was also an active member of the Lyceum Club (one of the first circles for women authors founded in 1904 by Constance Smedley) involved in many events not uniquely connected to the Irish Circle or to Irish themes. For example, in 1908 she is mentioned in relation to the Lyceum as one of the organizers of a reception in honour of the delegates of the Seventeenth Universal Peace Congress; in 1911, she is listed among the attendees of the British and Irish Industries Dinner held at the Lyceum; in 1915, she presided again at

²¹O’Toole, 4.

²²“Where Man is Never Missed,” 386. For an earlier report of the occasion see also “A Women’s Dinner. By A Diner,” 321.

²³Hughes, 236.

the Lyceum for the War Writers Dinner; and in 1921, she chaired the annual meeting of the Authors' Board.²⁴ She was also involved with other societies and professional bodies: in 1907, she is included amongst the attendees of the Annual Dinner of the Chamber of Commerce with her husband Robert Esler where she gave a speech in favour of women's suffrage; in 1909, she joined "the annual ladies' night debate" of one of the Law Societies in London; between 1909 and 1910, she is listed as a new member of the Irish Texts Society.²⁵ The Irish Texts Society was one of the London-based Revival institutions with a literary association that promoted the Irish language through publications of Irish-language texts with translations and critical apparatus. Richard Kirkland notes that, in this society "steered by two women, Eleanor Hull and Norma Borthwick," women "were more centrally involved," unlike other groups such as the Southwark Irish Literary Club or the Rhymers' Club, where male "homosociality" was dominant.²⁶ Overall, Esler's presence in these diverse groups testifies to her awareness of the importance of networks for professional achievements and to the conviction that women could make an impact in public life by espousing several causes. This form of activism and participation is indebted to *fin-de-siècle* New Woman discourses and, for Esler, would continue with participation into early-twentieth-century suffragist associations.²⁷

Esler's involvement in the Irish Circle of the Lyceum Club illuminates not only Esler's Irish affiliations, but also the interactions between Irish-based and diasporic Revival groups. Regular attendees of the Irish section of the Lyceum Club were other London-Irish writers like Katherine Cecil Thurston, Tynan, and M. E. Francis.²⁸ Writers based in Ireland, such as Edith C. Somerville and Martin Ross, reacted in various ways to the London-Irish scene. In 1906, two private letters by Somerville and Ross mention events at the Lyceum Club partly officiated over by Esler. On 12 June 1906 Ross writes to Somerville, who could not make the evening due to health issues, describing a public reading of *A Patrick's Day Hunt* (1902) and the story "Poisson d'Avril" from the Irish R. M. series performed by Irish actor Frank Fay at the club. At the beginning of the soirée, Ross reported that she had been "introduced by Mrs Rentoul Esler to one or two Australians—all doosed [*sic*] civil."²⁹

Prior to this reading on 3 June 1906, Somerville describes another event of the Irish Circle of the Lyceum Club to her sister Hildegard Coghill, providing an unflattering portrait of "[a] Mrs Rentoul Esler, from the North, a frightful little woman, exactly like a shaved griffon, in spectacles," and referring to her as the "President," who "spoke quite clearly & dully & suitably introducing the guests of the evening."³⁰ The reference to a dog breed aligns with Somerville's love and knowledge of hunting dogs,

²⁴Universal Peace Congress London, England, 70; "British Industries," 9; "Mrs. Rentoul Esler presided last night at the Lyceum ...," 7; "Advice to Young Authors," 6.

²⁵"The Change in English Home Life," 201–2; "Law Societies: Union Society of London," 458; Irish Texts Society, 213, 221.

²⁶Kirkland, 122–3.

²⁷On the connection between New Woman fiction and suffrage feminism, Ardis has drawn attention to readers' identificatory practices and has shown that women readers of New Woman fiction "viewed their reading as both an impetus for and a component of their social and political activism" (195).

²⁸Standlee, *Irish Women Novelists in Britain*, 22.

²⁹Lewis, *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, 276. Maume notes that Esler's husband, before undertaking medical studies in Ireland, had built a successful business career in Australia; he was also widowed while in Australia and had had a son from his previous marriage who would become a doctor in Australia ("Esler, Erminda Rentoul").

³⁰Edith Somerville, Letter to Hildegard Coghill, 3 June 1906. TCD MS 11373/1/52. Quoted with permission of the Board of Trinity College, the University of Dublin. I am greatly indebted to Julie Anne Stevens for directing me to this source.

which was described, for example, in *Irish Memories*, where the authors reminisce on a hunt with “fourteen cur-dogs, ranging from griffons, through fox terriers and spaniels, to a deerhound.”³¹ The zoomorphic simile used for Esler, moreover, recalls the duo’s well-oiled comic mode in their hunting stories.³²

After mentioning Esler, Somerville describes the evening at the Lyceum as “entertaining though Ireland was represented by ‘The Scuff of the Country’” and provides another scathing depiction of the other attendees, starting from Standish O’Grady, who had come from Ireland with his wife to attend:

Standish O’Grady—(Editor of the Kilkenny Moderator or Liberator or something) was like a little sad old countryman, & his wife is a massive female, in weird blue draperies held on by Tara brooches, supposed to be the Garb of old Gael—His speech was very long, & wandering, & dreary—and I thought it a pity that he should—as they told us—have left a rest cure in order to make it. (though it certainly induced rest in others as many went asleep.) Then a horrid youth called Richmond Noble, who spoke as if his mouth was full of fish bones, prated at large about Ireland, from the standpoint of a sentimental Dublin jackeen. Then Arnold Percival [*sic*] Graves talked uninterestingly about the Irish Literary Society in London, & a Miss Eleanor Hull, in a thin mouse-like squeak narrated her achievements in Irish early history & legend. I longed for poor Robert to have been there, or G. B. S.—or David Plunkett. It all was very moderate stuff, & Percy French sang some very moderate songs afterwards—He told a few poor stories, for he is so second rate, [just] like Phil Large, that I can’t feel any nature for him.³³

Despite the parodic mode, this private account provides an insight into the interactions between Revival networks in Ireland and in diasporic settings, and the perceived difference between these groups. In the previous letter describing Fahy’s reading of Somerville and Ross’s stories, Ross comments on Fahy’s “excellent” rendition of the Irish brogue, yet she also admits that “it was a little too esoteric” and “a little too Irish in idiom for some of the audience.”³⁴ This episode testifies to Somerville and Ross’s keen awareness of their different audiences, which were English and Irish, as well as containing members of the Irish diaspora in England. Julie Anne Stevens further notes that Ross insisted on publishing *A Patrick’s Day Hunt* “even though English readers would hardly understand the Hiberno-English,” and that her insistence is “good example” of the way the writers did not always pander to the English audience, as critics often accused them of doing.³⁵ Despite some tensions when Irish and Irish-diasporic networks interacted, these London-Irish soirées described in Somerville’s and Ross’s correspondence demonstrate the variety of initiatives that nevertheless fostered cultural exchange and concretely brought together different groups (Irish, London-Irish, and English).

To return to Esler, Somerville’s description of the evening with O’Grady sheds light on the acquaintance between Esler and O’Grady, which also had a precedent in the pages of

³¹Somerville and Ross, 224. In addition, O’Connor references Gifford Lewis’s biography *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish RM* (New York: Viking, 1985) where Lewis notes that Somerville was often referred to as ‘the dogs’ mother’ (Lewis quoted in O’Connor, *The Female and the Species*, 108).

³²These stories, as Stevens notes, “became more and more populated by animals of the hunt and farmyard,” and the animals were used both as an “allegory to criticize obliquely the Irish situation” and as implying the writers’ “concern for the exploitation of the animals and the land by their new owners” (“Political Animals,” 102, 111).

³³Somerville, Letter to Hildegard Coghill, 13 June 1906. TCD MS 11373/1/52. Quoted with permission of the Board of Trinity College, the University of Dublin.

³⁴Lewis, *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, 277.

³⁵Stevens, *The Irish Scene*, 122–3.

O'Grady's own periodical *All Ireland Review*. In this periodical, in March 1906, O'Grady mentioned in his editorial that he had received an invitation to speak at the "Lyceum Women's Club" in London, and invites subscribers, especially

my women readers, to send me literary contributions dealing, as simply and sincerely as possible, with the things in which they are severely most interested. If the women can see their way to coming with me, I believe there is no limit to the things that we may yet be able to accomplish, with Ireland as a basis of operations, and the *perfevidum ingenium scortum* [*sic*] as our driving force.³⁶

Though her connection with the Lyceum Club is not overtly stated in the *All Ireland Review*, in the same issue Esler wrote a letter to O'Grady entitled "Kind Wishes from London," where she congratulates him on his editorship and the newly implemented change in the subscription model for the periodical, from a single-issue charge to annual subscriptions. This new model, in Esler's view, guarantees the integrity of the press and aligns with O'Grady's lofty ideal of an "ennobled Press" against the "vile," profit-driven press.³⁷ In this letter, Esler emphasizes her perspective as a professional who had been in the business "for almost twenty years."³⁸ Since the *All Ireland Review* ceased publication in 1907 after appearing irregularly between 1906 and 1907, this announced partnership between O'Grady and the women's club in London did not seem to have had a sequel.

Despite these aborted projects, Esler's involvement with the Irish Circle at the Lyceum Club in London continued for many years, and she also lectured on the work of Somerville and Ross in 1913, praising their novels *Naboth's Vineyard* and *The Real Charlotte*. In a piece about this lecture in *The Book Lover*, Esler reportedly highlighted "truthfulness to life of the various characters delineated by the novelists," corroborating this argument with her own personal recollections of Donegal described as "'nutshell novels' of tragic force and intensity," and concluding the address "with a strong appeal for some further measures to brighten the oftentimes dull and sordid life of the Irish peasant woman."³⁹ Esler's plea for Irish peasant women aligns with similar concerns expressed by revivalist associations in Ireland such as the Irish Agricultural Organization Society.⁴⁰ Moreover, her early short fiction about peasant girls that I discuss below may also be read as an expression of these revivalist concerns.

Esler's participation in the social circles of her time also transcended the Irish dimension and turned to suffragism in the early 1910s, when she joined the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL). As Sowon S. Park has reconstructed, the WWSL was "a writers' group and not a literary society," and "defined a writer simply as one who sold a text" (hence not on common poetics or literary merit); its chief characteristic was that it comprised "women of all classes, against the background of class-riven Edwardian society, and ... an increasingly 'high' literary culture."⁴¹ Park further notes that the WWSL united, "albeit temporarily,"

³⁶O'Grady, 544.

³⁷Esler, "Kind wishes from London," 546.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹"Irish Literary Society," 83–4. A news report in the same issue mentions a pamphlet entitled "The Lyceum Annual" edited by Esler that includes one of her stories entitled "The Ghost of Countess Margaret" and contributions from Irish writers "Katharine Tynan, Dorothea Conyers, Ethel Rolt-Wheeler, and Lydia O'Shea" (161).

⁴⁰Lane, 168.

⁴¹Park, "The First Professional," 185.

writers who today are placed in completely different categories: thus, the “New Woman”, such as Sarah Grand ... and Olive Schreiner”, the “popular’ writers,” the “experimental,” the “mystical poet Alice Meynell,” and even Ivy Compton Burnett, a “dame commander of the British Empire,” joined forces for a common feminist cause.⁴² Esler’s contribution to the cause was both literary and organizational. In 1911 she contributed a sketch to the suffragist periodical *The Vote* entitled “One of the Antis,” which can be read as a sympathetic attempt at understanding the way anti-suffrage stances and thinking may affect young women.⁴³ In 1912, a report about a celebration of Olive Schreiner at the Lyceum Club describes Esler as a “keen Suffragist” and quotes part of her speech:

Women are kept busy exploding fallacies, usually man-made, about themselves. A hoary one, which takes a great deal of killing, is that their attitude to one another is full of envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness. The Suffrage movement has given it the lie direct, and has broken down class distinctions in a way our critics cannot understand. It would have enlightened them considerably had they heard the emphatic declaration of Mrs. Rentoul Esler—a keen Suffragist—at the Lyceum Club, on December 29, when women—with many men as guests—gathered to do honour to an outstanding woman of today—Olive Schreiner. “We admire our own sex,” said Mrs. Esler and added, “women are extraordinarily intelligent; when we find an intelligent man we admire him too!”⁴⁴

Esler is also included in reports of “processions” with the WWSL and other suffragist groups; an article on “The Great Procession” in June 1910 features a description of the WWSL pageant attire emphasizing its members’ literary profession: “Each carried a goose-quill and a black-and-white banneret bearing such familiar names as George Eliot, Fanny Burney, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. As Oscar Wilde describes the writers’ function, they put ‘black upon white, black upon white’—hence their colours.”⁴⁵

Esler also contributed fiction to another suffragist periodical: from 8 May to 7 August 1914, a novel set in Ulster was serialized in the weekly *The Common Cause*. Esler’s *Wind and Tide* was advertised as a way for long-standing readers to entice and enrol new subscribers to the paper, given Esler’s reputation as “a novelist of originality and distinction” and “whose work ... ha[d] been compared with that of Miss Edgeworth.”⁴⁶ The serial, however, remained unfinished and ceased publication after fifteen chapters following a brief editorial announcement on 14 August: “We greatly regret to be compelled for the present to suspend publication of our serial. We hope to insert later the remainder of the story, with a full synopsis of the preceding chapters.”⁴⁷ Even if this notice does not provide specific reasons for stopping serialization, it is striking that August 1914 coincided with Britain’s entry into the First World War: as such, the crisis had been amply discussed in a couple of articles in the previous issue (7 August) where Esler’s last instalment appeared. Esler’s unfinished *Wind and Tide* is not directly concerned with suffragism like other types of “suffrage fiction” such as “Mabel Collins and Charlotte Despard’s *Outlawed* (1908), Gertrude Colmore’s *Suffragette Sally* (1911), Elizabeth Robins’s *The Convert* (1907), ... written to persuade and convince,”⁴⁸ but is rather a

⁴²Ibid., 189.

⁴³Esler, “One of the Antis,” 92–3.

⁴⁴“Our Point of View,” 154.

⁴⁵“The Great Procession,” 98–101.

⁴⁶“A New Serial for ‘The Common Cause.’”

⁴⁷*Wind and Tide*. By E. R. Esler,” 387.

⁴⁸Park, “Suffrage Fiction,” 451.

regional tale set in Raphoe, Co. Donegal. Esler's female protagonist is a young farm girl, Kate, who is only partly of peasant origins: while her father is a well-off farmer, her mother, who has passed away, was the daughter of an impoverished Presbyterian rector who had been forced to marry her husband only to keep her family financially solvent. Kate initially follows her mother's destiny when she is forced to marry one of her father's former farm boys now turned business owner as a pay-off for her father's accrued debt with him. Though Kate's husband is sincerely in love with her and had promised to make her the owner of her family farm and pay the heavy medical expenses for her sick brother, after her brother's sudden death, Kate decides to leave her husband and travel around Donegal, in the hope of reaching England and learning dressmaking to provide for herself and start anew. Though the serialization at this point is interrupted, Kate's rejection of the arranged marriage, escape from her household, and resolution to be the sole financial provider for herself are quite forceful.

Despite the lack of overt suffrage themes, *Wind and Tide* can be read as aligning with the proselytizing intents of *The Common Cause* because it is a romance novel, a genre, as Park further argues, "targeted" at "lower-middle-class and working-class women ... the same audience for which the WWSL members were writing with conative aims" and therefore still "an important vehicle to get political messages across on a mass level."⁴⁹ Moreover, the charismatic female lead in the story would have appealed to a similar target group. While aspects of *Wind and Tide* share common concerns with Esler's previous novels especially, in Maume's analysis, "the development of commercial society, tensions within religious orthodoxies, the need for women's economic and intellectual self-reliance,"⁵⁰ the periodical context also illuminates the "virtual" networks of readers for Esler's work, that is, the periodical's intended readership of "lower-middle-class and working women," who could then be both informed about, and drawn to support, women's franchise.

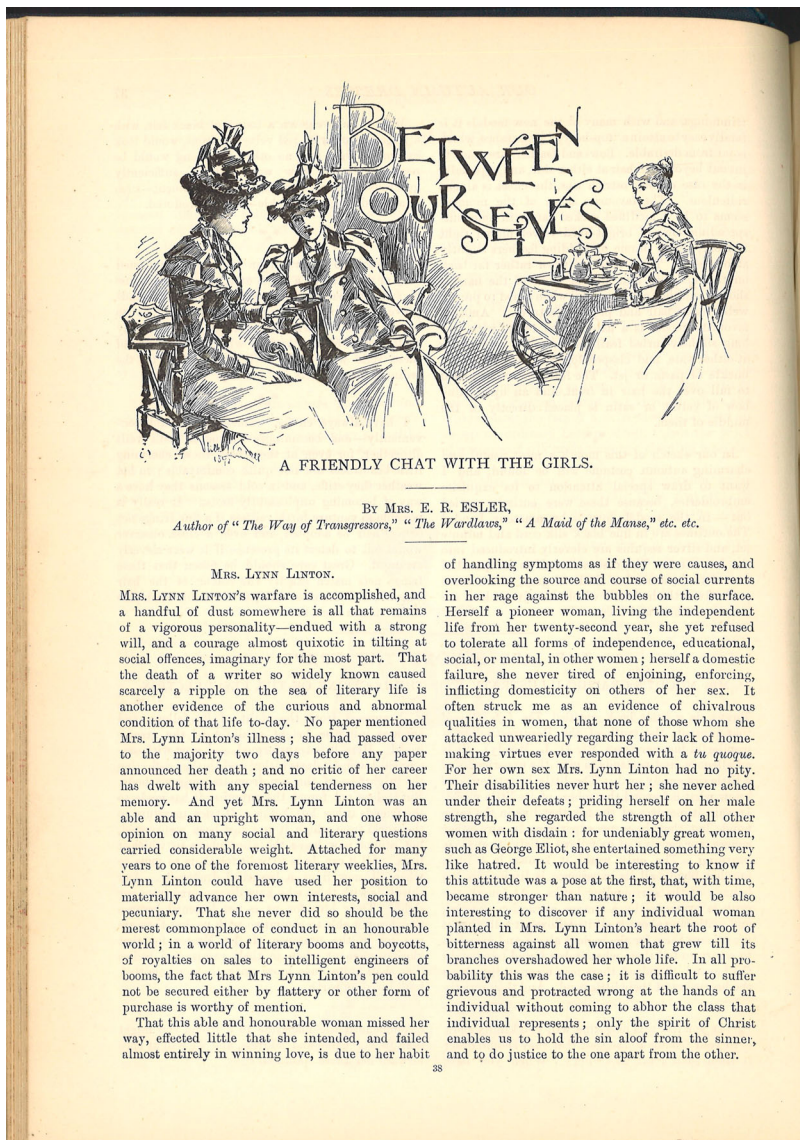
Before her involvement with suffragism, Esler's "virtual" network of readers and fellow women writers in *The Young Woman* during the 1890s sheds light on Esler's positions on the New Woman, her Ulster identity, and the genre of the local-colour story. As introduced at the beginning of this essay, her columns (Figure 2) offer additional background on her literary craft, the regional focus of her stories as well as their transatlantic influences. In what follows, I highlight how Esler's stories comply with her ideal of a dignified Irishness that spotlighted the Ulster region and debunked stereotypes of the poor and improvident Irish; they also express conciliatory New Woman positions, presenting some alternative models of girlhood and singlehood, while still putting marriage on a pedestal; and, lastly, they share similar concerns to Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's popular New England tales as identified also by contemporary reviewers of Esler, who often referred to her as "the Mary Wilkins of England."⁵¹

The Young Woman, like many periodicals of the 1890s, championed the self-contained short story form after many other periodical ventures such as *The Strand* had set a trend, demonstrating the financial viability of this format in the wake of the success of Rudyard Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills* in 1888 and of American local-colour writers such as

⁴⁹Ibid., 453, 454.

⁵⁰Maume, "Education, Love, Loneliness, Philanthropy," 177.

⁵¹"Mid Green Pastures. Review," *The Bookman* 2, n. 6 (February 1896): 466.



A FRIENDLY CHAT WITH THE GIRLS.

By Mrs. E. R. ESLER,

Author of "The Way of Transgressors," "The Wardlaws," "A Maid of the Manse," etc. etc.

MRS. LYNN LINTON.

MRS. LYNN LINTON'S warfare is accomplished, and a handful of dust somewhere is all that remains of a vigorous personality—endued with a strong will, and a courage almost quixotic in tilting at social offenses, imaginary for the most part. That the death of a writer so widely known caused scarcely a ripple on the sea of literary life is another evidence of the curious and abnormal condition of that life to-day. No paper mentioned Mrs. Lynn Linton's illness; she had passed over to the majority two days before any paper announced her death; and no critic of her career has dwelt with any special tenderness on her memory. And yet Mrs. Lynn Linton was an able and an upright woman, and one whose opinion on many social and literary questions carried considerable weight. Attached for many years to one of the foremost literary weeklies, Mrs. Lynn Linton could have used her position to materially advance her own interests, social and pecuniary. That she never did so should be the merest commonplace of conduct in an honourable world; in a world of literary booms and boycotts, of royalties on sales to intelligent engineers of booms, the fact that Mrs. Lynn Linton's pen could not be secured either by flattery or other form of purchase is worthy of mention.

That this able and honourable woman missed her way, effected little that she intended, and failed almost entirely in winning love, is due to her habit

of handling symptoms as if they were causes, and overlooking the source and course of social currents in her rage against the bubbles on the surface. Herself a pioneer woman, living the independent life from her twenty-second year, she yet refused to tolerate all forms of independence, educational, social, or mental, in other women; herself a domestic failure, she never tired of enjoining, enforcing, inflicting domesticity on others of her sex. It often struck me as an evidence of chivalrous qualities in women, that none of those whom she attacked unweariedly regarding their lack of home-making virtues ever responded with a *tu quoque*. For her own sex Mrs. Lynn Linton had no pity. Their disabilities never hurt her; she never ached under their defeats; priding herself on her male strength, she regarded the strength of all other women with disdain: for undeniably great women, such as George Eliot, she entertained something very like hatred. It would be interesting to know if this attitude was a pose at the first, that, with time, became stronger than nature; it would be also interesting to discover if any individual woman planted in Mrs. Lynn Linton's heart the root of bitterness against all women that grew till its branches overshadowed her whole life. In all probability this was the case; it is difficult to suffer grievous and protracted wrong at the hands of an individual without coming to abhor the class that individual represents; only the spirit of Christ enables us to hold the sin aloof from the sinner, and to do justice to the one apart from the other.

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Figure 2. First page of one of Esler's columns in *The Young Woman*. Image courtesy of the Women's Library at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Bret Harte.⁵² While Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins warn against the dangers of setting the late 1880s as the official beginning for the modern short story, noting that shorter tales were also indebted to Romantic Irish, Scottish, and English predecessors (notably Maria Edgeworth, Walter Scott, John Galt, Mary Russell Mitford), the proliferation of a diversified periodical culture in the 1890s increased demand.⁵³ A further testament to the popularity of the short story is also its transnational circulation in book form:

⁵²D'hoker, 24.

⁵³Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins, 6.

in Esler's case, for example, her first two collections of Grimpat idylls were simultaneously issued in American editions, while her novels had only British editions.⁵⁴

The Young Woman exploited the short story as a key feature of its contents, announcing in their promotional material (Figure 3) the publication of stories by leading women writers of the day, many of them Irish: L. T. Meade, Jane Barlow, Katharine Tynan, and Mrs. Rentoul Esler. Like Esler, Meade and Tynan were based in London and their names often appear in reports of women writers' salon gatherings discussed at the beginning of the essay. While not all these writers' stories in *The Young Woman* had a distinctive Irish character, Irish women writers and Irish stories were popular in the British press. For instance, the year in which *The Young Woman* began publication (1892) coincided with the publication of Barlow's *Irish Idylls*, issued by the British publisher Hodder and Stoughton, that had also published bestselling Kailyard writers Barrie and Maclaren. Like its Scottish counterparts, Barlow's *Irish Idylls* circulated in the United States in lavishly illustrated editions.⁵⁵ Regarding Barlow's collection, Heather Ingman states that despite being "written with an eye for the English reader ... [*Irish Idylls*] treats the peasants with seriousness, by and large rejecting the attitude of moral superiority found in earlier nineteenth-century accounts."⁵⁶ In her columns for *The Young Woman*, Esler also voiced similar opinions about the necessity to invalidate negative stereotypes about the Irish that she sees as all too prominent in literary works.

Esler's columns are comprised of two main sections. They open with a short essay on wide-ranging topics, from descriptions of types of girls to be found in society (e.g., "The Popular Girl," "The Unpopular Girl," "The Girl with a Temper," "The Independent Girl"), to sketches of notable women writers (e.g., Romantic poets Anna Letitia Barbauld and Mrs. Amelia Opie, prominent Victorians such as Mrs. Oliphant and Mrs. Lynn Lynton, or American novelist Louisa May Alcott). The second, more extensive part features Esler's answers to correspondents generally grouped by category, with subjects ranging from feedback on correspondents' samples of writing, to advice on educational and professional opportunities for young women (e.g., addresses of schools that offer training as nurses or dressmakers) or domestic issues (e.g., recipes or etiquette at dinner parties).⁵⁷ Emma Liggins and Kristine Moruzi have assessed Esler's columns as espousing some progressive aspects of the New Woman discourse such as entrance into the professional world outside the home and further education, especially university education, while still retaining more moderate and conservative stances on gender roles and marriage.⁵⁸ For instance, in her December 1892 column, Esler provides supportive and detailed advice on how to pursue a career as a female doctor in India (106)—the entry of women into the medical profession being also advocated by Esler's surgeon husband—while in November 1898 she emphasized the sacredness of the marriage bond in front of God with its procreative aim (78). The coexistence of both traditional and progressive stances on the role and function of women in society aligns with *The Young Woman's* agenda that was designed to profit from a growing readership of

⁵⁴See References for information on Esler's American publishers.

⁵⁵On Barlow and the transatlantic circulation of local-colour fiction, see Corporaal, "Where the Atlantic Meets the Land".

⁵⁶Ingman, 76. For an analysis of Barlow's empathetic rhetorical strategies in her short fiction, see also Hansson.

⁵⁷Bibliographic details from Esler's columns in *The Young Woman* are provided in parenthesis in the main body of the essay.

⁵⁸See Moruzi and Liggins.



Figure 3. Page from *The Young Woman* promotional material listing its leading short story writers. Image courtesy of the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

young women entering new professions outside the home without alienating traditionalist readers.⁵⁹

Esler also wrote a dedicated piece on “The New Woman” as part of the December 1894 column. In it, she denies the existence of the popular satirical representations of this new “masculine” type who “smokes, swears, dresses like a French Zouave, regards man as her natural enemy,” and she sees this construction as a base attack on women’s self-fulfilment

⁵⁹Liggins, 217.

—a woman who can now envisage a future in which she might be able to “have opinions of her own, ... express them if occasion arose, ... study seriously any subject that interested her, ... [and] use her brain and body legitimately, and that if she owned or earned anything she might justly retain or dispose of it uncontrolled” (106). She concludes by advocating for equality between men and women on moral grounds, stating that what is important for both sexes is “the justice of what is attempted, the rightness or righteousness of what is desired” (107). In another column in June 1896, Esler features an actual extract from one of her readers’ letters that provides a positive response on some of the New Woman ideas that the journal was espousing. The interesting part of this reader’s comment, however, is this reader’s class and rural background:

It is much a real treat to me to read your Chats and Answers, that I take *The Young Woman* with me when I go into the fields. I am a farmer’s daughter. I live in a very lonely part of the country, near the mountains, and have care, not only of the farm, but of an aged father, almost eighty-eight years old. When I go to look after a sheep, I put on my clogs and a shawl over my shoulders, and take *The Young Woman* under my arm. I am really glad the ‘New Woman’ has appeared on the stage of human life—the woman who thinks for herself, and believes the part allotted to her is not altogether to take care of her hands, study the fashions, and look forward only to being engaged. Thank you once more for upholding the ‘New Woman’ as you do. Long may the New Woman live, in so far as she is better than the Old! (323)

While many of these magazines and novels were certainly targeting young women who had moved to big urban centres for work,⁶⁰ this letter (if taken at face value) testifies to a more complex picture that inserts these progressive discourses of women’s independence and self-reliance into the same rural milieu depicted in many of Esler’s peasant stories.

This rural milieu was likely one that Esler was familiar with and cherished from her childhood and adolescence in Donegal, as she herself recalled in another column for *The Young Woman*. In a piece entitled “The Women of Ireland” (May 1895), Esler speaks openly about her Ulster identity, and offers her own view of Ireland. This article can be read as an addendum to an essay with the same title written by Tynan for the same periodical in March 1895. Tynan’s “The Women of Ireland” is a feature analogous to other articles in *The Young Woman* that presented models of womanhood in other countries to the benefit of English readers and were often written by newspaper correspondents living in foreign capitals.⁶¹ Tynan’s essay on Irish women compares opportunities for Irish and English girls, to the detriment of the first. According to Tynan, Irish girls, despite an enlivened social life offered in Dublin thanks to the University, cannot enjoy more convivial occasions such as the “Commemoration” balls in Oxford, and in the countryside the “ennui” is even worse, affecting both Protestant and Catholic girls alike (212). Tynan then discusses “matchmaking,” a practice that is “going out of fashion” but is still common “in the smaller farming class and among the shopkeepers of the country towns” (213). Despite her regret at the absence of “such a thing as love,” Tynan remarks that the system ends up working well and

⁶⁰Notably, Tynan also wrote fiction about the “bachelor girl” phenomenon in London with Irish protagonists: *The Dear Irish Girl* (1899) and *The Adventures of Alicia* (1906) (Standlee, “A World of Difference,” 76).

⁶¹See Charles Lowe, “The Women of Germany,” *The Young Woman*, January 1893, 116–118 (Lowe was the correspondent for *The Times* in Berlin); Mrs. Crawford, “The Women of France,” *The Young Woman*, October 1892, 7–9 (Crawford was the Paris correspondent for the *Daily News*).

“Irish women are of all women most faithful to the marriage vow” and that “[d]omestic ties in Ireland are very close and tender” (213). She also comments on the reading habits of both Irish men and women, highlighting the taste for “trashy papers” and “penny novelettes” read by girls unbeknownst to their mothers, and the “old-fashioned prejudice against the reading of fiction in Ireland”, that “used to be denounced from the pulpits, and a good many old-fashioned people haven’t yet realised that reading it is not a sin” (213–214). The last part of the article switches subject to the middle and rural classes, remarking that in Ireland both “tradespeople and farmers” are equally refined and culturally not as distant as their English counterparts (214).

Esler’s piece in May 1895 is similarly interested in redeeming the negative image of the Irish in the British press, and thus, to a degree, shares a cultural revivalist sensibility and touches on similar topics such as education, marriage, and literary tastes. Furthermore, her article adds the Ulster region to the map of Ireland and specifically documents the achievements and customs of the women of Ulster. She begins with an invective against negative stereotypes of Irishness which she sees as dangerously pervasive, especially in fiction, namely the long-standing figure of the stage-Irishman and another emerging reproachful type: the poor, “improvident,” and “pathetic” Irish (284). Among the culprits in casting “prodigality, and whisky, and melancholy, and disorder” as “essentially Irish,” Esler cites Edgeworth’s novel *Castle Rackrent* (282).

To counteract these negative representations, Esler resorts to her first-hand experience of Donegal, stating that the poverty of the Irish is not as bad as it is made to look:

Now, as one who has known Ireland from infancy to maturity, who has lived in one of its remotest districts, among a population partly Roman Catholic, partly Presbyterian, who has visited some of its least prosperous quarters, and known intimately peasant proprietors who lived on a few acres of freehold or partly freehold property, I may urge the quality of knowledge in observing that in my experience there is no starvation in Ireland. The tradition of the famine of 1849 still lives vividly in the memory of old people, the land has an unkempt aspect that contrasts very badly with the trim and orderly fields of England, the methods of agriculture are rougher and different, but of want of the acute kind, starvation behind closed doors, destitution, I have no knowledge. I never saw it, I never heard of it, save in the abstract way which says, ‘So-and-so is badly off, has a hard time of it, hardly knows how he will get through’. (284)

In addition, she uses examples from Ulster to provide a positive image of Ireland. She praises the advancements in higher education for women carried out by Belfast educationalist Isabella Tod, who “began to advocate, with voice and pen, University training for her sister-women,” and whose work resulted in the “establishment of University Examinations for women in Ireland” (285). She then examines the arranged marriage custom in Ulster, particularly the idea that marriage is a means to obtain material comfort and maintain harmony in the family:

An Ulster woman wants no clandestine courtship, wants no romantic black sheep in her wake, would never think of disobeying her parents and marrying in their despite, unless under circumstances the exceptional. ... But an Ulster girl sees for herself the desirability of comfortable settlement. ... Yet fiction has it that the Irish race is improvident. (286)

This materialistic view, in Esler’s opinion, is not a negative aspect but rather a praiseworthy asset for Ulster girls as it undermines the stereotype of the “improvident” Irish.

In Esler's first collection *The Way They Loved At Grimpat*, it is not difficult to find in the Grimpat girls some characteristics of Ulster women as depicted in Esler's column, despite the lack of more specific geographical locators and the absence of pronounced dialect in the stories. In "Kitty", for example, the titular character finds the "comfortable settlement" Ulster girls see as desirable (in Esler's view) and ultimately marries her wealthy suitor. Similarly, in "Betty's Luck," the "plain"⁶² yet good-hearted and hard-working farm girl also gets a "comfortable" arrangement for herself, her widowed mother, sister, and brother-in-law when she marries a wealthier young farmer who loves her and respects her, without having to compromise with a rich uncle. In these stories, marriage is generally depicted as a crucial part of women's identity and an important goal to be sought with spiritual and moral integrity, even when some of its more conservative terms can be renegotiated (albeit only slightly). Some of these renegotiations include, for example, contemplating the possibility of marrying later than the socially-expected age ("Kitty" is also one example of this aspect) and the potential to find love and happiness in married life despite not conforming to beauty ideals. In "Eunice" and "Betty's Luck," for example, both women marry well, despite their plainness, and thanks to their integrity and industriousness in their everyday work. In these stories, marriage does not contribute to substantial upward mobility, and differences and separation between the aristocratic gentry and the middle and working classes are maintained (e. g., "Linnet's Lover" and "Daisy Wynn").

The identification of Grimpat girls with Ulster women is also clearly indicated by Tynan in her review of Esler's second collection *Mid Green Pastures*, which was published in *The Young Woman*. Though admitting the lack of a more emphatic local colour, Tynan underlines Esler's Irish connections, stating that the fictional village of Grimpat is a typical Ulster village, thus providing a clear corrective for British readers.⁶³ Later, in 1903, Tynan would more forcefully frame Esler as a leading Irish Revival writer by featuring one of Esler's later stories, "The Criminality of Letty Moore", in *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*.⁶⁴ The tale is set in Grimpat, though it is not included in any of her previous collections. This time, the story features a specific reference to a "Calvinist" minister (278) who provides spiritual counsel to the female protagonist, thus linking the fictional Grimpat to the similar Presbyterian and Ulster-Scots background of Esler's longer fiction. In *The Cabinet*, the author's biographical note stresses, once more, that Esler's "studies [are] of North of Ireland life, of that Presbyterian portion of it which is as different as possible from the Catholic and Celtic" (272). In assessing Tynan's editorship of the 1902 revised edition of *The Cabinet* (originally published in 1878), Margaret Kelleher notes that, despite some striking cuts in the Irish language and oratory material, the fourth volume where Esler's story is included is Tynan's most significant editorial achievement, as it "displays an openness to contemporary writing and to women's literature" with forty-three women representing over ninety-one authors, "a ratio (and quality) of inclusion ... unique in the history of Irish anthologies."⁶⁵ In addition to foregrounding women writers as equally influential in the literary

⁶²Esler, *The Way They Loved At Grimpat*, 172. Page numbers from Esler's short story collections are given from the British editions.

⁶³Tynan, "Mrs. Esler's New Stories," 91.

⁶⁴Esler, "The Criminality of Letty Moore," 272–80.

⁶⁵Kelleher, 87.

sphere compared to their male counterparts, Tynan's editorship also ensures Irish regional and religious diversity, demonstrating the importance of these "virtual" networks of women writers for shaping a more diverse cultural revivalist project.

Unlike reviewers outside of Ireland, those in Irish-based publications did not hesitate to identify Esler's Grimpat as located in Ulster, albeit also recognizing the author's distance from other local-colour writers. The 1895 anonymous reviewer in *The Irish Independent*, for example, mentions that despite the lack of more overt references, *The Way They Loved at Grimpat* "had its scene laid in Ulster, and ... its peasants were peasants of the North of Ireland."⁶⁶ J. K. Montgomery, the editor of the *Irish Homestead*, also draws attention to the Ulster setting of Esler's village stories, which are compared to the work of Donegal writer Shan Bullock.⁶⁷ Both reviews underline that in Esler's work "there is none of the Celtic fire, the Celtic impulsiveness, the Celtic romance," and that Esler is a writer "against whom the charge of conventionalising the Irish character can least be brought."⁶⁸ The underplayed local colour (i.e., geographical and dialectal specificity) of Esler's stories, in the context of her Irish reception, allowed Esler to stay true to her own idea of how Ireland should be represented in fiction, that is, in a dignified and self-sufficient way, despite the rural and impoverished background, and not complying with other popular stereotypical representations of the Irish.

While the marriage plot for young village girls remains a staple of many of the stories in all her collections, some stories also offer portraits of older male village characters who, after some tribulations, find filial and familial love ("Jabez Gaunt's Testament" in *Mid Green Pastures*), or spiritual fulfilment and religious revelation in quiet pursuits ("Jamie Myles's Vehicle" from the same collection). In a couple of stories, moreover, alternative paths to marriage and positive aspects of singlehood are explored. For example, "An Idealist," first published in *The Young Woman* as "A Grimpat Idealist" (Figure 4), revolves around a clumsy yet quirky and bookish country girl—"the elder, the plainer, the less popular" daughter of a parson's widow—who does not marry but rather becomes a successful writer of village idylls, "brief little sketches ... full of reality and sly humour and sweet philosophy, so redolent of the fields and the hills ...".⁶⁹ This story, which may be seen as partly evoking autobiographical references such as Esler's move from Ulster to London and the beginning of her career as a writer of rural idylls,⁷⁰ attempts to accommodate rural and urban spheres (the country girl who earns money from publishers in the big city for her work as a writer of rural subject matter). It also evokes the image of Esler's reader described above, the farmer's daughter who read *The Young Woman* in the fields and welcomed inspiring New Woman ideas.

In "A Tardy Wooing," included in *Mid Green Pastures* but first published in *The Woman's Signal*, thirty-two-year-old Martha is relieved to get out of an eleven-year betrothal that would have led her to follow her future husband to America, the home from which he has temporarily returned to fulfil the marriage promise. Martha, whose

⁶⁶"Daily Independent," 4.

⁶⁷Montgomery, 805–806.

⁶⁸Ibid., 805; "Daily Independent," 4.

⁶⁹Esler, *Mid Green Pastures*, 143, 151. Sinéad Gleeson also included this story in her 2016 anthology *The Glass Shore*.

⁷⁰Maume has also drawn attention to other autobiographical references in Esler's longer fiction ("Education, Love, Loneliness, Philanthropy," 169).



Figure 4. Illustration from "A Grimpat Idealist" in *The Young Woman* (July 1894). Image courtesy of the Women's Library at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

passion for Walter meanwhile has waned, has mixed feelings about uprooting her life and leaving the comfort of her beloved Grimpat as well as the gratification that "her talent for needlework, for clear starching, for delicate embroideries"⁷¹ gives her. It is in stories of this kind that many parallels with the work of American regionalist Freeman can be traced, an influence also identified by Tynan in her review of Esler for *The Young Woman* mentioned above. Notably, in one of Freeman's most popular stories, "A New England Nun" (1891), Louisa, who "dearly loved to sew a linen seam, not always for

⁷¹Esler, *Mid Green Pastures*, 163.

use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it,”⁷² also experiences relief in calling off a long-term and distant engagement. In Freeman’s tale, the protagonist is engaged to Joe, who has returned from Australia to marry her after a long engagement. Upon accidentally discovering Joe’s feelings for another village girl, Louisa calls off the wedding, not because of the rival love interest, but rather based on the argument that “she had lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change.”⁷³ In Esler’s story, Martha discovers that Walter had been previously married via a more dramatic coup de théâtre; her reaction is a happy “laugh like a little chime of silver bells” and the resolution to help dumbfounded Walter find a way to “cheer up, and make the best of it” as well as “make least talk when we go back.”⁷⁴ While Freeman’s story is written in a more minimalist and symbolic style, Esler’s “A Tardy Wooing” includes more characters and dialogue exchanges. However, the stories are similar in their subversive appraisal of female domesticity (the sewing and care of their homes) against patriarchal norms. Ultimately, both stories equally foreground plausible alternatives to marriage and hence a positive acceptance of female singleness.⁷⁵ Stephanie Palmer, in sketching new avenues of research for Freeman, has highlighted analogies between Esler and a number of British and Irish writers: for example she notes that Esler’s “stories about bashful, belated lovers ... resemble Freeman’s characters in their humor and humility.”⁷⁶ Elsewhere, Palmer confirms that Freeman’s regional fiction was often praised as a model for British and Irish short-story writers (Mabel Quiller-Couch and Jane Barlow, among others) because it was a type of fiction centred around “eccentric, cross-grained, difficult, elderly heroines” and characters made distinctive by what American reviewers referred to as their “stubbornness and inflexibility,” and by being set in a close-knit religious community.⁷⁷

Esler herself often mentions Freeman in her columns for *The Young Woman*, praising Freeman’s transatlantic success *Pembroke* (1894) or suggesting her short stories as models for fledgling writers who had sought her feedback.⁷⁸ Another reference to Freeman occurs in relation to an interesting exchange between Esler and her readers in the columns. In the July 1893 issue, Esler publishes a letter from one of her correspondents that includes detailed information and practical advice on how to shop and eat on a very small budget (356–7). This anecdote causes a stir among some of her readers and, in September 1893, Esler replies to those who were indignant about the fact that people could live seemingly comfortably with so few resources. Esler is surprised at this indignation and advocates for a dignified frugality citing as a model the characters in Freeman’s stories:

⁷²Freeman, 9.

⁷³Ibid., 15.

⁷⁴Esler, *Mid Green Pastures*, 178.

⁷⁵For a similar feminist reading of Freeman’s story see Fetterley and Pryse, 41–2.

⁷⁶Palmer, “Prospects for the Study of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman,” 182.

⁷⁷Palmer, *Transatlantic Footholds*, 99n, 81. Palmer’s study explores Freeman’s contemporaneous reception in Britain drawing on an extensive corpus of essays and reviews in periodicals, and problematizes discourses surrounding gender, religion, and Anglo-Saxonism.

⁷⁸See Esler’s columns for February 1894 (179), and August 1894 (394). *The Young Woman* positively reviewed Freeman’s work, particularly *Pembroke* in the December 1894 issue (see Dawson) and featured one of Wilkins’s illustrated Christmas stories, “Found in the Snow,” in December 1899.

Why indignation? The more unusual an actual fact is, the more it should awaken interest. For my part I was touched to the heart by the thought of a little woman living as cheerily and frugally as a squirrel, and being grateful to Heaven in spite of loneliness, privations, and physical infirmity. In one of Miss Wilkins' stories she would have been an unforgettable figure, but in the pages of a veracious Magazine she is a rock of offence. Truly human beings are strange! (424)

While Esler's promotion of edifying models of self-reliance, integrity, and dignity in poverty worked best in her fiction, these real-life models did not always sync with the evolving tastes of young female audiences. These intertextual relations between Esler's short fiction and her nonfiction in *The Young Woman* are instances where multiple and at times contrasting visions of "New Women" are synthesized in a dialogic and (through her columns) collaborative way: rural, self-reliant, and Irish, with a specifically Ulster inflection, yet inspired by American regional models.

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Levine analyses the "affordances" of forms, a term borrowed from design theory that indicates "the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs."⁷⁹ In analysing the affordances of networks, Levine notes that, despite appearing boundless due to their potential for constantly generating new connections, they are also governed by "systematic ordering principles" and are hence ascribable to "distinct forms—as defined patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience."⁸⁰ Levine's study is also interested in the simultaneous interaction of overlapping networks, a process that does not always result in connection but can "disrupt" rather than "unite."⁸¹ To illustrate this process, she uses Trish Loughran's study of the role of print culture in America's nation-building process (1770–1870), *The Republic in Print*, in which Loughran argues that "multiple, overlapping networks—mail, print, money, and roads—interrupted each other and frustrated the work of consolidating a new nation."⁸² Loughran debunks Benedict Anderson's argument that networks of print and communication succeeded in forming a shared national consciousness understood as an organic whole that subsumed local differences.⁸³ Instead, Loughran considers it more useful to see early American print culture "as the factory that produced the nation-fragments called regions and sections rather than as the great unionizer and unifier it is so often remembered as."⁸⁴ Loughran's work gives the example of the pre-revolutionary postal system that failed to work in a unified manner across all territories due to the presence of "too many networks, each with its own logic, overlapping and running into one another—town, regional, print, and political networks, all working at once."⁸⁵ In a similar way, researching Esler's role in Irish- and London-based literary networks points to new, unexpected connections, but also to failures in network connectivity and to its "ephemeral"⁸⁶ quality. For instance, O'Grady's interrupted collaboration with Esler and London women writers, Esler's unfinished serialization in *The Common Cause*, or reviewers' conflicting opinions

⁷⁹Levine, 6.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 111, 112.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 131.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 115.

⁸³Loughran quoted in Levine, 121.

⁸⁴Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, 30.

⁸⁵Loughran quoted in Levine, 121.

⁸⁶Ní Bheacháin and Mitchell, 82.

about either the Irish or English setting of her short stories highlight, on the one hand, the fragmentation and disconnection of some of these revivalist, feminist, and literary projects despite their transnational outreach and intersection with like-minded groups. Arguably, her simultaneous participation in so many overlapping literary, journalistic, New Woman, suffragist, and Irish diasporic networks in London have also partly hindered a fuller critical grasp and classification of her work.

On the other hand, this essay's partial retrieval of Esler's "physical" and "virtual" networks of fellow women writers, coteries, and readers has foregrounded the multiple modes of engagement through which Esler actively sought participation in the public sphere: fiction, journalism, and Irish diasporic, New Woman, and suffrage groups in London. This analysis of Esler's extensive and wide-ranging engagement with networks hopes to serve as a model for a more rounded understanding of the complex, multifaceted, and not univocal position of women writers at the turn of the twentieth century, especially diasporic women writers. Reasserting Esler's presence in the London literary marketplace and in Irish diasporic circuits—still partly obfuscated by the limits of network connectivity and the lack of more substantial archival evidence—highlights the complexity of regional, diasporic, and religious varieties of Irish identity that were being negotiated at the turn of the twentieth century. It also illuminates her involvement in transnational early-feminist discourses on women's participation in society through education, professionalism, and the vote. Reading her critically-neglected Grimpat stories of the 1890s alongside her contribution to New Woman periodicals and in light of her networks demonstrates many of Esler's personal concerns: overturning simplistic and degrading clichés about the Irish in literature and complicating univocal notions of Irishness via local attachments and transatlantic models of regionalism. Albeit lacking in the more subversive themes of some New Woman fiction but addressing a target audience receptive of these ideas and of New Woman magazines, Esler's stories centred on female protagonists ultimately show that alternative, equally rewarding options to marriage are conceivable even within the narrow radius of a village.

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ORCID

Giulia Bruna  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3497-2778>

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