INTRODUCTION

Cultural historians regard it as axiomatic that creative acts – be they literary, musical or artistic – know neither place nor time. It is, however, reasonable to say that in certain geographical areas – in this case urban centers, at a particular time with special people – royal, aristocratic or wealthy bourgeois patrons, the arts tend to flourish. In due course these centers of creative excellence come to be dominant, and to be regarded as the highest and best exposition of the arts. In the opinion of sophisticated cognoscenti, all other expositions are seen to be inferior and are sometimes designated as "primitive" or "provincial."

It may, however, well be argued that this is a false or, perhaps a superficial hypothesis. Cultural and creative acts are unique, and to limit one or another by geography is not useful. There is indeed a "provincial" culture, but it is not necessarily inferior, rather it is just different. The difference in some instances is one of time, rather than place, for there is some evidence that what is called "provincial" is something that is affected by a time lag. For example, architecture in Tasmania exhibits this fact very consistently, because some of those who designed buildings and houses were convicts and forcibly removed from the presumed creative center, London. What they built represented frozen designs. New ideas simply were not part of the creative "baggage" of these Tasmanian architects. It was not until well into the middle of the nineteenth century that a change began to occur, and even in that time styles that dominated in Britain only began to penetrate the consciousness of the architect and to be *in evidence* in new constructions.

In the British Isles, "provincial" culture of a sort could be seen in Edinburgh or Dublin. In both cities, there was a double cultural pattern – one the Anglicized and the other the native or Gaelic. In Ireland this was particularly evident since the Anglicized culture represented the dominant political and social force, known as "the Ascendancy." The native or national Gaelic tradition was regarded as inferior, at least

until the twentieth century when it was "revived" and expounded as being much superior to that of "the Ascendancy."

There is a popular concept – now gradually being demythologized – that women played a very inferior role in society well into the twentieth century. While this may have been the case in certain of the professions and in the business and industrial world, it was not necessarily true in the arts. There were women in the musical and literary community working in a highly successful fashion. With the advent of the novel as a popular art form, women came into their own. A brief glance into the card catalogues of libraries will prove the truth that women writers were no less important than their male counterparts. This was as true in Ireland as elsewhere. In addition, women wrote poetry as successfully as men, and their poems found a popular audience, since literature does not have a sexual boundary.

Irish writers represent the best aspects of "provincial" culture. Sensibly, the worlds they describe are not worlds they have never seen or experienced. Rather, the writers in "the Ascendancy" chose to write about things that would be understood in Ireland. In doing so, they emphasized a way of life that was often quite distinct from the social mores in England. "The Ascendancy" were not English; they were colonials, although they might not have been prepared to admit it. Like most colonials, they enjoyed the approbation given to them by their fellow citizens, but they often hankered for the approval of the larger cultural scene. The larger world had formed a picture of Irish culture as expounded by these writers who came from "the Ascendancy." There was little realization in London, for example, that since these authors differed in religion, social outlook and class from the majority of the population, that whatever they said, was naturally only a limited statement. Irish prose and Irish poetry has a special charm, and as such it appealed to the romantic spirit of the Victorian world.

Inevitably, in selecting authors as examples of the Irish spirit, there are bound to be those who reject what seems to be a limitation of choice, implying that a broader canvas is required to give a better perspective. What has been attempted is to provide not a full-length portrait but, rather, a pencil sketch. Maria Edgeworth is obviously the doyenne of Irish women writers; Sydney Morgan was her contemporary and less talented but, nonetheless, part of the ongoing literary scene; Lady Blessington is very much the writer for "the lady"; Caroline Norton and her sister, Lady Dufferin, the daughters of Richard Sheridan, were regarded by the world as being "very Irish" in character and outlook, although most of the life of the former, and some of the

latter, was spent in England; Speranza, Lady Wilde expresses the nationalist spirit in her early writings and the *Zeitgeist* of the would-be intellectual in her later effusions; Lady Gregory is an obvious choice; as is Edith Somerville.

All of these writers have certain strengths. They all were well received in their own day, but posterity has viewed them differently. When Maria Edgeworth is read at all, it is usually by university undergraduates in courses of literature and history; Lady Gregory is still regarded as one of the spiritual regenerators of Irish traditional culture; and Edith Somerville holds a particular place with her special evocation of the dying world of "the Ascendancy" before the forces of nationalism. The other writers have been neglected almost totally, but so too are many of their contemporaries elsewhere. Caroline Norton may deserve a better fate – not for her role in literature, but as a crusader for women's rights. However, all of them provide an insight into "provincial culture" and demonstrate that it is not inferior, but rather different, and that it has a life of its own that is both agreeable and perceptive. The characters that play a role in literary creation, both in prose and poetry, are very properly part of "the great Chain of Being" of Western Culture.