

How Travel to Egypt Influenced Lady Gregory's Nationalistic Writing

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By focusing on the travel to Egypt, how it influenced Lady Gregory's writing endeavors as a Celtic Revival writer. She compared circumstances of Egypt with Ireland and realized that as a colonial country, Ireland should gain its national identity to be independent from England. Her experience comparing Egypt and Ireland has not mentioned in earlier studies, so this paper will promote further understanding on Lady Gregory.

Introduction

Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory (1852–1934) is well known as one of first Celtic Revival writers. Here, I focus on how traveling to Egypt in 1882 affected Lady Augusta Gregory's writing. Her earliest work is *Arabi and His Household* (1882), which resulted from her experience in Egypt in the late nineteenth century. At the beginning of the story, she mentioned that Egyptian women are a symbol of the colonized. I therefore investigate how she thought of her own position and background as an Anglo-Irish woman. I also discuss the political situation in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, where Lady Gregory met Dr. Arabi Pasha and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, both of whom influenced her writing. Furthermore, I examine her husband, Sir William Gregory, who suggested that she should consider not only colonized people in Egypt, but also her own tenants in Ireland. As a result, Lady Gregory, an Anglo-Irish descendant, found many similarities between the colonial situations in Egypt and Ireland. Then, after Sir Gregory's death, she traveled throughout the western part of Ireland in search of Irish traditions. Here, I also examine how she superimposed the Egyptian nationalistic experience with the situation in Ireland, paving the way for the emergence of the Celtic Revival. This article therefore aims to allow a deeper understanding to the works of Lady Gregory's by taking the perspective that her journey to Egypt represented a turning point that opened her eyes to the need to reclaim Irish identity

Background of Lady Gregory

Isabella Augusta Persse was born in 1854 on a large estate in Roxborough, County Galway. She was a typical upper-class Anglo-Irish girl educated by a governess at home. When she was a child, her nurse, Mary Sheridan, who could speak both Irish and English, taught her about Irish folktales and the traditional Irish way of life.^{※1)} Although Sheridan has not been mentioned in prior papers, it is clear that she had a strong effect on Lady Gregory's interest in traditional Irish folklore and language, both of which became integral to the Celtic Revival.

In 1881, at the age of 27 years, Lady Gregory married the ex-Governor of Ceylon, who at the time was 35 years her senior, Sir William Gregory (1817–1892), the owner of Coole Park, a large estate in Galway. They remained married until Sir Gregory's passing 12 years later. They mainly lived in London, but returned to Ireland during summer to check on their tenants. In addition, they traveled to not only European countries such as Belgium, Italy, and Spain, but also colonial Oriental countries such as Egypt, North Africa, and the Mediterranean colonies. Generally, travel abroad changed Lady Gregory's perspective in regard to her tenants, and specifically, travel to Egypt represented a major turning point in expanding her opinions of colonies.

Travel to Egypt

In 1881, the couple traveled to Egypt, a country that was attempting to maintain its independence from not only the European countries, but also the Ottoman

※1) See Hill, pp. 19–21.

Empire. This situation in Egypt caused Lady Gregory to sympathize with the colonized country. It is easy to find an idea for her to overwrap the political situation of Egypt on Ireland. As Sir Gregory was the governor of Ceylon, he had a number of connections among the British colonizers. By traveling to Egypt, Sir and Lady Gregory had the chance to become acquainted with politicians in various colonies. One of their Egyptian acquaintances who Lady Gregory took an interest in was Dr. Arabi Pasha^{※2)}. Her encounter with Dr. Pasha had a strong impact. She enjoyed talking with him and loved his character, so she wrote a story that appeared in *The Times* in 1882, entitled *Arabi and His Household*.^{※3)}

Lady Gregory was invited to Pasha’s home on several occasions. She visited twice with her translator Anne Blunt, the wife of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840–1922), the British Orientalist. Dr. Pasha was the Minister of War in Egypt. He feared Britain, which had great power in Egypt and exploited Egypt in various ways, especially its maritime traffic. He had come to realize that Egypt had to maintain a good relationship with powerful countries to ensure its political independence and avoid being colonized. From 1881 to the summer of 1882, a riot broke out directed at the British Army in Alexandria, a city in northern Egypt; this was called the Revolt of Arabi as he was the Minister of War at that time.^{※4)} As mentioned above, Egypt was under pressure from two colonizers: European countries such as Britain and France, and the Ottoman Empire. Although Dr. Pasha was involved in this revolt, he was not punished and still held the position as Minister of War when he met the Gregorys.^{※5)} In addition, as the construction of the Suez Canal was completed in 1864, he knew Egypt could not ignore the political power of European countries because it had incurred massive debt from both Britain and France, who had paid almost half of the cost of construction. He

therefore believed that Egypt needed to compromise in order to maintain both political and financial balance with not only the Occident, but also the Ottoman Empire. This implies that the West gradually tried to gain power by constructing a canal that would serve as a major transport hub with the East. In addition, Egypt was stuck between two powers: the West and the Ottoman Empire. This situation required care to maintain the balance.

Lady Gregory and Arabi Pasha

Lady Gregory described Dr. Pasha as a very gentle person, as demonstrated in the following passage:

In appearance, Arabi is a tall, strongly built man; his face is grave, almost stern, but his smile is very pleasant. ...As a matter of fact, I believe him to be exceedingly gentle and humane. (Gregory, *Arabi and His Household*^{※6)}, p. 4)

Although she belonged to the landlord class in Ireland and had many tenants, it seems that Lady Gregory harbored no prejudice toward Dr. Pasha; rather, she held many discussions and sympathized with him, placing substantial attention on his “exotic” background.^{※7)} In spite of her Occidental position, she attempted to understand and treat him as fair as any Westerner.

As a result, she was very welcomed by his family. In one story, she sympathized with Dr. Pasha’s wife and mother, who were lamenting his misfortunes in Egyptian politics and insisting that not only his, but also his family’s social status had become less stable after the Revolt.

I said, “Are you not proud now your son is a Pasha?” “No,” she said, “we were happier in the

※2) See Gregory, *Seventy Years*, p. 35.

※3) See Kohfeldt, p. 63. Lady Gregory asked Sir Gregory whether she could publish the story under her real name. It is surprising that he had no objection and actually thought that the story would motivate people to learn more about the harsh situation in Egypt. Blunt had been against her story at first, but eventually agreed to publish it.

※4) See Broadley, pp. 1–55. Broadley documented a series

regarding the Arabi Revolt.

※5) After the series, he was captured by the British Army and sent to Ceylon in exile from 1882 to 1901.

※6) Quotations from *Arabi and His Household* are hereafter abbreviated as *Arabi*.

※7) Lady Gregory’s positive ideas about the East came from the British Orientalist, Blunt, who is discussed in greater detail later in the article.

old days when we had him with us always and feared nothing. ... I can do nothing but pray for him all the time. There are many who wish him evil, and they will try to destroy him.” (Gregory, *Arabi*, p. 11)

The quotation above shows that both Dr. Pasha and the political situation in Egypt were unbalanced. Dr. Pasha’s mother was troubled by her son. In his early teens, Dr. Pasha enlisted in the army and quickly rose through the ranks, becoming lieutenant at the age of 17 years, major at 18, and lieutenant colonel at 20. However, after the Revolt, the family received severe criticism.

On the other hand, Dr. Pasha’s wife was afraid of Egypt being invaded. Her opinion was particularly Egyptian. She stated the following:

They say the *Christian Powers* want to do something to my husband. I don’t understand it at all. We can’t get on without the Christians, or they without us. Why can’t we all live in peace together? (Gregory, *Arabi*, p. 10, emphasis added)

She describes the Occidental powers as the “Christian Powers” (Gregory, *Arabi*, p. 10). Dr. Pasha’s wife, the Egyptian, wanted to live cooperatively with the Occident. Her idea was related to the words of her husband, who suggested the following:

All the slaves will leave as soon as they are freed, and European women will take their places, and they will seduce their masters, and their children will be stronger than ours, and we shall be driven out of the country. ...I often think of her, and of the poor wife, puzzled and troubled, “Why should the Christian Powers want to harm my husband?” (Gregory, *Arabi*, p. 12, emphasis added)

The quote above also implies the crisis of a potential Western invasion. In this quotation, she says, “[a]ll the slaves will leave as soon as they are freed, and European women will take their places” (Gregory, *Arabi*, p. 12), describing the Western invaders as women. This was a unique idea; in general, Orientals are often described as women, implying them to be

inferior and weak compared with the Occident.

In Egypt, as the story describes, women were in a weaker position than men, with the relationship between the two consisting of subject and ruler. But in the quote above, the relationship was totally different from the Occidental point of view, as for the Orientals, the West was the “object”. Egyptians are the subjects and Westerners, as foreigners, are the objects. This idea is related to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.

For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. *Orientals lived in their world, “we” lived in ours.* (Said, pp. 43–44, emphasis added)

Said criticizes the relationship between a Western-centered “us” and an Oriental “them”. Egyptians in Gregory’s story, however, regard the West as “them”, and worry that they may look for a chance to take over leadership of the country. Therefore, when Dr. Pasha resisted the British Army in 1881, he found that it was better to understand and compromise with, than to deny and fight against, the Occident.

...he (Hassan, Dr. Pasha’s son) said he liked me (Lady Gregory) but hated other ladies, and would like to come and see me in England, but did not know how he could manage it, as his papa wanted the carriage every day. I advised him to learn English, and his mother said she would like to send him to one of the Christian schools in Cairo... (Gregory, *Arabi*, p. 11, my supplement)

I showed him a picture of my little boy; he raised it to his lips and kissed it, *hoping he would some day come to Egypt to be the friend of his children.* Perhaps I have not been a fair judge in his cause since then. (Gregory, *Arabi*, p. 11, emphasis added)

Dr. Pasha realized that Egypt needed to maintain a good relationship with the West. Knowing a great deal about foreign countries, he planned to send his son to

Christian school, believing that much could be learned from Western art. Also, as the latter quote shows, he hoped his children would become friends with Lady Gregory’s son, a Westerner. His comments imply that he felt equal to Westerners. He, as the Orient, did not feel inferior to the Occident—this may indeed have been suggested by Gregory in her story.

Ireland and Egypt

Lady Gregory was upper-class Anglo-Irish woman living in Coole Park, County Galway. The Gregory family had a large estate with many tenants. Lady Gregory is known to have communicated with her nurse Mary Sheridan, an Irish Catholic woman, but apparently had not been interested in speaking to any local Irish when she wrote *Arabi and His Household*. However, after her trip to Egypt, she seemed to pay much more attention to locals, not only in Egypt, but also in Ireland. Her first work was influenced by her husband and Blunt.

Blunt is known as Lady Gregory’s lover.^{※8)} After retiring from his work as a diplomat for India, he traveled to the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia with his wife, Anne, the granddaughter of the poet Lord Byron. He was passionate about Oriental countries and was an anti-colonialism activist who supported Dr. Pasha’s nationalistic movement. It was therefore natural for him to support Dr. Pasha’s revolt against Britain and the independence of the colonies from the British Empire. When he was in Cairo to work with Dr. Pasha, he met with the Gregorys, who he fascinated greatly.

They (the British) did not suspect the immense commercial selfishness which had led us, collectively as a nation, to so many aggressions on the weak races of the world. (Blunt, p. 9, my supplement)

To England especially, as interested so largely in the future of Islam through India, I addressed myself, urging that her policy should be a profit by its decay for the extension of her own

material interest. ...she cannot destroy Islam or dissolve her own connection with her. Therefore, in God’s name, let her take Islam by the hand and encourage her boldly in the path of virtue. This is the only worthy course and the only wise one, wiser and worthier, I venture to assert, than a whole century of crusade. (Blunt, p. 42)

Blunt also worked as a diplomat for the British colonies; his background was very similar to that of Sir Gregory, and they felt sympathy toward each other’s colonies. Blunt was a poet and nationalist who traveled around Eastern countries, whereas Sir Gregory was a landlord in Galway and the Governor of Ceylon. It was natural that Blunt’s ideas and experiences in the East influenced Lady Gregory’s interest in the colonies, where locals are suppressed by the Occident. Sir Gregory, who was positioned by the colonizer’s side in Ceylon, was familiar with the locals. He tried to understand the character of the colony and govern it appropriately with compromise and in accordance with local customs, as opposed to forcing the Western way of administration. He wrote the following to his friends:

September 26, 1876 to Sir A. Henry Layard —
...With a companion, a wife, a sister, or even a very intimate friend, I should prefer the government of Ceylon to anything that could be offered to me. It is such a comfort when you find things going wrong to be able to set them right with the strong hand, and it is such a gratification to see great public works begun and finished according to your own plans, and not marred by vexatious interference. *The people, moreover, are pleasant to govern; they are quick witted and intellectual, and higher classes singularly well-bred and taking in their deportment. I think, too, there are indications, in a faint way, no doubt, of the quality of gratitude, in the existence of which, in the East, I had long disbelieved. I am sure much may be done with them by kindness, courtesy, and respectful treatment.* I have known some whom

※8) They wrote many letters and poems (sonnets) to each other. They also talked a lot about nationalism in colonial counties, including Ireland (Gregory, *Seventy Years*, pp.

203–261). In addition, Sir Gregory took Lady Gregory to European countries such as Belgium, Germany, and Italy to keep her away from Blunt (Kohfeldt, p. 62).

I would trust as implicitly as I would Englishmen, and I am as confident as one can ever be of human conduct, that if future rulers of Ceylon will endeavor to induce the natives to trust them and rely on them, much more of the administration of the country may be vested in them. Weakness and moral and physical timidity are their main faults, and, as you well know, cowardice is a difficult defect to cure. *The way to deal with such a race is to give them confidence and encouragement, to reward even ostentatiously good conduct, fidelity, and strength, but to be down on offenders with relentless severity. I have pursued this course, and without egotism I can say that I believed no Governor ever before succeeded in inspiring such a universal trust in his motives.* (Gregory, *Sir William*, p. 264, emphasis added)

Sir Gregory treated the Ceylonese as a naïve people who needed a leader to learn the Western way of rationality without violence. He knew that exploiting tenants could lead to a struggle between the rulers and the ruled. He had held this idea since he was a member of the British House of Commons, where land law was often discussed, and also in Galway, where he had a huge estate with many tenants. He cared for and frequently held friendly conversations with his tenants, with whom he considered to have good relationships. He often invited them to his house for dinner and asked about their troubles not only in business, but also in daily life. Sir Gregory was regarded as a conservative because he disagreed with the land law stating that tenants could own their land as property. However, in fact, as a landlord, he had treated his tenants fairly. In addition, when he was a member of the House of Commons (1842–1847), he often reported on the realities of exploited peasants. Thus, based on his own experiences in Ireland, he learned patience and how to compromise, which allowed him to have a good relationship with his Ceylonese subjects.

As the former governor of Ceylon, he witnessed the Revolt of Arabi, which indicated a failure in terms of

colonialism. He agreed with Blunt and watched the invasion of Egypt by the British Empire carefully. Based on Sir Gregory's attitudes toward his tenants in Galway and colonized subjects in the East, Lady Gregory found it interesting that although locals in both Ireland and the British colonies were naïve, in addition to having a nostalgic national identity, they also supported both their own and the ruling countries' economies through the provision of products.^{※9)}

From Egyptian Women to the Celtic Revival

In *Arabi and His Household*, Lady Gregory focused on women with families because these women represented the core of the family, which was the core of the town, which was the core of the country. She described households (family) in the Arabis. It implies describing a family, especially women in a family described as a small part of the society, but further understanding of the country itself. In the story, she tried to regard a situation of Egypt, especially as a title mentioned, she wanted to focus on realities of women in there. The story appeared in the *Times* in 1882. Blunt pushed her to publish her writing to inform people about Egyptian life. Sir Gregory agreed because he also had the idea to support the nationalist movement against Western countries. As for Sir Gregory, Lady Gregory and Blunt, the story is a good media to show a reality in Egypt.^{※10)}

As noted above, Sir Gregory passed away in 1892. From the year before his death, Lady Gregory started to learn Gaelic from her gardener. Also as mentioned above, Mary Sheridan was one of first Irish friends of Lady Gregory, and this situation was the first opportunity Lady Gregory had to learn about native Irish culture. Although 10 years had been passed since her trip to Egypt, in 1893, Lady Gregory decided to learn Gaelic and travel to Inisheer of the Aran Islands in Galway. After that, she frequently visited western Ireland to learn the language and folklore.

Ireland has also been thought of as being more Orient than Occident because it had been a colony of England for centuries. This means that Ireland is the closest thing to the Orient for the Occident. Leerssen points how Ireland, owing to its historical marginalization,

※9) Leerssen mentions that there was a quasi-colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland (Leerssen, p.

161).

※10) See Kohfeldt, p. 63.

has a unique nationalism (in terms of the Orient, not the Occident) as demonstrated by the existence of ingrained reflexes, including the following:

- (a) to concentrate mainly on Irish-English differences or tensions and extrapolate from them to describe the Irish historical experience as “special” *tout court*, different from all the rest of Europe;
- (b) to privilege as aboriginal and authentic that part of Irish culture which is Gaelic and “folk”;
- (c) to marginalize and disagree, for the sake of the clear-cut binary oppositions of political conflict, the cultural tradition and praxis of the Protestant community in the North; and
- (d) to invoke a bogeyman image of the “English” presence in Irish history, and to apply straightforwardly and without any necessary *nuance* the name of “colony” to Ireland. (Leerssen, pp. 164–165)

As Leerssen mentions, Ireland is in a marginal position because of its historical and political reason to be in the Occident; it is the nearest colony (Orient) for England and the European countries. Lady Gregory realized that her homeland was positioned on the Oriental side. Her idea that superimposing the Irish situation on that of Egypt marked the emergence of postcolonial thought. After traveling to Egypt (an Oriental country) and comparing the situations between the Orient and Ireland, she keenly felt that her homeland was inhabited by Oriental people who had been marginalized and thrown away by England (and the Occident); therefore, she thought that she had to show Irish people how to regain their Irish identity from the perspective of the Orientalists. She therefore wrote many poems, plays, and stories with a Celtic theme; these Celtic works had originally been made in Ireland, before England invaded. Celtic literature was exactly the same as the unique Irish culture, she thought.

In 1901, Lady Gregory founded the Irish Literary Theatre with William Butler Yeats, Edward Martyn, John Millington Synge, George William Russel (AE),

Annie Horniman, William and Frank Fay.^{※11)} In 1899, she wrote *A Book of Saints and Wonders* and from 1909 to 1910, published the *Kiltartanese series*. In these works, she mentioned the Irish way of life to identify with her native country. In this way, she gained a nationalistic point of view, and her writing career as a Celtic Revivalist began.

Conclusion

In the present work, how travel to Egypt affected the writing career of Lady Gregory was examined. In considering her writing background, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and Sir William Gregory were mentioned. These individuals had an accommodating view of the East and were resistant to British colonialism. Lady Gregory was influenced by both men: Blunt gave her the chance to see the Eastern colonies, and Sir Gregory showed her how the colonizer should treat the colonized as well as how a good relationship between the two could be maintained. In combining these views, she came to know the traditional local life, in which women had an essential role not only in the colonies, but also in Ireland.

Her travel to Egypt and encounter with Blunt were turning points for Lady Gregory in terms of how she viewed her homeland. In addition, learning the Irish language and culture and visiting the western part of the country contributed to her knowledge of old Irish folklore. Her tales became a catalyst, evoking a unique Celtic identity among the Irish people. Consequently, the re-realized Irish identity became a catalyst to Irish nationalism. Therefore, her journey to Egypt was indeed a milestone, for not only Lady Gregory herself, but also for the Irish as whole in the struggle to regain an Irish identity.

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Theatre) followed in 1904.

※11) The Irish Literary Theatre collapsed in 1901 and the Irish National Theatre Society (famous for the Abbey

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