An Essay on Irish Bulls

A clear illustration of Edgeworth’s attitudes to Irish vernacular language can be found in her Essay on Irish Bulls published in 1802. This is her only major non-fiction work to deal with the issue, and it reveals both the extent and the limitations of her response to the local tongue.

The Essay was published two years after the appearance of Castle Rackrent, but its composition coincided with the writing of the second part of her first Irish novel, in the last three years of the eighteenth century (U.M., 1, p. 76).

In the Memoirs, (1820, 2, p. 336) Edgeworth stresses her father’s part in its production, and significantly comments that ‘he wished to shew the English public the eloquence, wit and talents of the lower class of people in Ireland’. In this Essay, and in all Edgeworth’s Irish writing, the intention is to remove English prejudice, and so to promote psychologically and socially a Union which was already a political reality.

So the Essay is an extended defence against the English preconception that the Irish display their ignorance in the way that they speak. The Edgeworths counter the assumption that the Irish habitually commit ‘bulls’ or blunders which lay them open to ridicule.

In Chapter III of the Essay several examples of such bulls are given. For instance we hear of the suppliant who said ‘Please your worship, he sent me to the devil, and I came straight to your honour’ (1802, p. 34). Then we learn that an Irish Mayor is reputed to have announced that certain business is to be transacted in (the) city ‘every Monday (Easter Sunday only excepted)’ (p. 37). The book deals, therefore with apparent slips of logic in the use of language and the belief that these are peculiarly Irish errors.

The dominant mode of the Essay is playful irony, and English prejudice is attacked by proving that the Irish have no monopoly on such blunders. Each ridiculous story concerning an Irishman is matched by a story concerning an Englishman or a Frenchman. In defence of the unsophisticated Irish the errors of classical writers such as Milton and Pope are exposed. Nothing is discovered which
is specifically Irish in its absurdity, and in their conclusion the authors claim:

Unable any longer to support the tone of irony, where we feel sincere regard we joyfully speak in our own characters, and avow that we have been all this time friends in disguise. Not withstanding our affected sarcasms, we explicitly declare our opinion, that the Irish are an ingenious generous people; avow that the bulls and blunders of which they are accused are often imputable to their neighbours, or that they are justifiable by ancient precedents, or that they are produced by their habits of using figurative and witty language.

(1802, p. 308)

Two familiar features of the Edgeworth concern with vernacular language are evident in the Essay. Firstly, its timing and argument are strongly motivated by political intention. It reflects their response to the rebellion and the Act of Union. Secondly, in its extensive quotations from Irish vernacular speech it reveals their concern for empirical attention to observable aspects of the human environment which was a distinguishing feature of their Lunar inheritance.

The political agenda is emphasized in the Conclusion where we read:

... it is our sincere wish to conciliate both countries; and if in this slight essay we should succeed in diffusing a more just and enlarged idea of the Irish than has been generally entertained, we hope the English will deem it not an unacceptable service. Whatever might have been the policy of the English nation towards Ireland, whilst she was a separate kingdom, since the union it can no longer be her wish to depreciate the talents, or ridicule the language of Hibernians.

(ibid. p. 315)

And this explicit aim is reflected less openly in various features of the book.

For instance, there are several references to the troubles (pp. 52, 116, 161–2) and on each occasion the humorous and unthreatening context of the account (less than five years after the rebellion) serves to allay any fears of Irish insubordination. In the chapter on 'Irish