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## Glocal Irish Village Imaginaries: Local-Colour Fiction of Erminda Rentoul Esler and Katherine Frances Purdon

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In this article, I explore the way two lesser-known Irish women writers—Donegal-born but London-based Erminda Rentoul Esler (1860–1924) and County Meath native and resident Katherine Frances Purdon (1852–1920)—differently construct the ‘local’ in their village tales at the turn of the twentieth century. I highlight the ways in which their regional stories existed in a complex, supranational media environment that was simultaneously alert to local modes of Irish revivalism and international literary trends but also models of regionalism such as the Scottish ‘kailyard’ tradition and North American local colour fiction. I therefore propose that both writers’ villages are ‘glocal’, because of their engagement with other national traditions of village literature and with international audiences and publishers. In the case of both authors, the stories involve a glocal village imaginary which supersedes both Irish national borders and Irish regions and is inspired by existing traditions of village literature beyond Ireland.

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## Introduction

This article examines the village tales of two lesser-known Irish women writers at the turn of the twentieth century: Donegal-born but London-based Ermina Rentoul Esler (1860–1924); County Meath native and resident Katherine Frances Purdon (1852–1920). Esler wrote three popular collections of village idylls set in a fictional hamlet named Grimpat, which contemporaneous Irish reviewers identified as located in her native County Donegal, but whose geographical, ethnographic, and linguistic specificity is often muted unlike much of the regional fiction of the time. Purdon's village fiction was published in book form in 1914, gathering stories which had appeared in the literary supplements of the agricultural journal *The Irish Homestead* between 1899 and 1910. Purdon's stories heavily exploit the local dialect and are set in Ardenoo, a fictional townland in County Meath.

This article demonstrates that, despite their different approach to the village tale, the output of both writers is mediated transregionally and transnationally. The early reception, international circulation, and European translations of Esler's stories show that reviewers and publishers with different agendas responded to them in conflicting ways, at times as examples of a distinctive Irish regionalism due to the author's personal connection with Ulster, and at times as English rural stories. In Purdon's case, her Irish regionalism, which attends to a previously undiscovered literary region within Ireland (County Meath), is presented as an emblem of Irish national distinction. Both writers' village tales, however, draw on a 'glocal' village imaginary, which relies not only on Irish models of village literature (e.g., the fiction of Jane Barlow) but also on the Scottish 'kailyard' tradition and North American local-colour fiction.

First, this article will historicise the transnational reverberations of the nineteenth-century village tale and contextualise the writers' respective short fiction by theorising notions of the 'glocal' and the 'imaginary'. It will then concentrate on the early reception of Esler's stories in England, Ireland, and the United States, and their circulation in Europe in foreign languages, to understand the wider appeal of her 'village imaginary'. Lastly, Purdon's stories will be analysed, to shed light on their entanglements with the cultural milieu of the Irish Literary Revival as well as other models of regional fiction. The comparison between these two case-studies ultimately complicates issues of Irish identity, its location and scale.

## The Transnational Resonance of Local Colour

British, Irish, and European fiction which described customs and communities of specific regions was published and marketed during the nineteenth century under a

combination of geographic modifiers and descriptors: ‘provincial’ novels, ‘studies/études’, ‘sketches/croquis/schetsen’, ‘(rural) scenes/scènes’, ‘idylls/idylles’, ‘village tales/histoires de village/dorfgeschichten/dorpsvertelling’, and other variations. Often centred around a fictional yet recognisable village in the countryside, and reviewed in periodicals as authentically portraying life from specific regions, these prose village stories were popular across Europe in the 1840s: notably in France, with proponents such as George Sand (1804–1876) and her self-coined *romans champêtres*; in Germany, with Berthold Auerbach’s (1812–1882) *Schwarzwälder Dorfgeschichten*; and in the Netherlands, with Cornelis Eliza van Koetsveld (1807–1893) or, a few decades later, the stories of Jacob Jan Cremer (1827–1880).

Scholars have traced transnational influences between traditions of regional fiction. Josephine Donovan, for instance, reads the success of Walter Scott’s Scottish national tales as an influence on the German tradition of village stories, especially Auerbach’s tales of the Black Forest (2010: 98). In turn, Scott’s fiction was influenced by the Irish national tales of Maria Edgeworth (Bellamy, 1998: 54). In the United States, fiction ‘which emphasizes its setting as marked by its customs, dialect, costumes, landscape, or other peculiarities that have escaped standardizing cultural influences’ was often described as ‘local color’ (Hart et al., 2021). A post-Civil War phenomenon, the genre included proponents such as Bret Harte, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, and was also partly influenced by the work of Scott and Edgeworth (Hart et al., 2021).

In Britain, the popularity of regional fiction is also connected to a Victorian penchant for ruralism and the pastoral. Shelagh Hunter’s study *Victorian Idyllic Fiction*, for example, charts the development of fictional modes of the idyll in Victorian Britain in the nineteenth century, through work by Mary Russell Mitford, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, while acknowledging the prose idyll’s indebtedness to earlier modes of pastoral poetry (1984: 2).

These stories are often rooted in a ‘confined locality’, to borrow Mitford’s own words about the Berkshire village (Three Mile Cross) at the centre of her prose (1824: 1). Yet, the genre also breaks provincial, regional, and national boundaries. Josephine McDonagh, for instance, reassesses provincial fiction as a genre ‘rooted from its beginning in emerging global networks’, since provinces in mid-nineteenth-century Britain benefited from ‘complex and robust networks’ which ‘linked places with each other and connected them to the wider world, principally through the production of newspapers and the associated networks of transport and communication’ (2013: 404). In addition, McDonagh (2016) reads Mitford’s early autobiographical village

tales—published with the title *Our Village* in five volumes between 1824 and 1832 (Mitford, 1824; 1827; 1828; 1830; 1832)—as a ‘response to global modernity’ and transatlantic networks of print culture, referencing, for example, a letter from a reader of Mitford who was based in India (Mitford, 1828). McDonagh (2016) also highlights Mitford’s personal and professional relationship with Boston publisher James T. Fields, who published *Our Village* in the United States in 1853 (Mitford, 1853). In terms of late-nineteenth-century regional fiction, critics such as Genevieve Abravanel have drawn attention to the ‘Atlantic’ dimension of Hardy’s Wessex, the traditional interpretations of which have construed the tales as ‘synonymous with local, rustic Englishness’ (2005: 98). Focusing on *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Abravanel argues that ‘the menace of the cross-Atlantic corn trade, the possibility of emigration to North America, the echoes of the slave trade, and the importance of both the American literary market and tourist industry come to suggest the utter relevance of the Atlantic region to Hardy’s Wessex’ (2005: 113). Thus, readings of nineteenth-century regional fiction have problematised assumptions of its embeddedness in a single locality, and have drawn attention to multiple, transnational and transatlantic affiliations that are evident in both fiction of the earlier and later part of the century.

In the late nineteenth century, moreover, the international circulation of regional stories, especially short fiction, was also partly connected to their shorter format. Contextualising the short story boom of the 1890s, D’hoker and Mourant note that the short story ‘had been on the rise internationally’ (D’hoker and Mourant, 2021: 7). This had been enabled both by a vibrant periodical culture specialising in shorter fiction formats and by the transnational success and circulation of short-story specialists across Europe and the United States (e.g., Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Bret Harte), who, in turn, influenced British writers such as Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, and Robert Louis Stevenson (D’hoker and Mourant, 2021: 7).

In an Irish context, regionalism has been widely researched in poetry and in relation to Northern Ireland. For example, Belfast poet John Hewitt (1907–1987), among others, developed regionalist aesthetics centred on the Ulster region and evocative locations such as the Glens of Antrim; his academic work, moreover, also recovered the ‘eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets who had published poems in the north of Ireland in Scots-influenced dialect’ (Walsh, 2009). Joining regionalism with transregional and transnational perspectives, critic Edna Longley advocates an ‘archipelagic paradigm’ (2010: 8) for a more nuanced understanding of modern poetry in English: a critical perspective which prioritises interrelations between cultures, languages, social, and political formations in the British and Irish Isles. This approach, in her view, ‘complements nation-based studies’ of poetry, ‘helps to identify the

appropriate contexts of explanation and interpretation—local, national, archipelagic, international—in particular cases’, and ‘exposes internal disconnections and transnational connections’ (Longley, 2010: 8–9). Longley reads in ‘archipelagic’ terms the poetry of W. B. Yeats, which was influenced by Wordsworth’s vision of the Lake District, and the work of Louis MacNeice for its western-Irish, Ulster, and southern-English attachments (2010: 4, 6–7).

In the realm of Irish fiction, scholars such as John Wilson Foster (1993; 2008) and James H. Murphy (1997; 2011) have examined nineteenth-century proponents of Irish tales, highlighting the contribution of many female novelists. Most recently, Marguérite Corporaal (2020; 2021a; 2021b) has focussed on a specific corpus of late-nineteenth-century Irish local-colour fiction by Jane Barlow, Frank James Mathew, Katharine Tynan, Charlotte O’Connor Eccles, Shan Bullock, Seumas MacManus, and a few others. Corporaal notes that these writers’ engagement with Irish regions ranges from depictions of ‘a specific local community’ (2021a: 46), such as in Barlow’s fictional Lisconnel in Connemara or O’Connor Eccles’s ‘Toomvara’ in County Tipperary, to more elusive geographical locales in the West of Ireland; the latter functioning as the depository of a pre-colonial, Gaelic-speaking, indigenous Irish identity upon which an Irish nation had to be re-affirmed. Corporaal’s work has also highlighted the multifarious global, diasporic, archipelagic, and oceanic attachments evident in the subject matter, production, and circulation of these Irish tales, which were ‘explicitly marketed as literature for reading communities beyond the region, beyond the nation or empire, and across the globe, including Irish diasporic communities’ (2021a: 46).

In this article, I add two lesser-known women authors to this late-nineteenth-century canon of Irish local-colour writers, who wrote village tales in the 1890s and early 1900s in a different yet transnationally interconnected publishing milieu: Donegal-born but London-based Erminda Rentoul Esler and Meath native and resident Katherine Frances Purdon. In what follows, I explore the way these two Irish writers differently construct the ‘local’ in their village tales, and I highlight the ways in which their stories existed in a complex, supranational media environment that was simultaneously alert to local modes of Irish revivalism but also international literary trends and models of regionalism.

### **Esler and Purdon**

Esler was a novelist, short-story writer, and prolific contributor to leading periodicals of the day. Her stories appeared in such New-Woman magazines as *The Young Woman* (1892–1915), where she also penned an advice column from 1892 to 1899, and *The Woman’s Signal* (1894–1899). She also published in suffragist periodicals such as

*The Vote* (1909–1933) and *The Common Cause* (1909–1920), and family-oriented periodicals like *The British Weekly* (1886–1961) and *The Leisure Hour* (1852–1905) among many others (Esler, 1911; 1914; 1891; 1892a,b,c). Between the 1890s and the first two decades of the twentieth century, Esler was also involved in many literary and activist networks in London. These included the Lyceum Club, where she attended Irish cultural gatherings and women writers' events (Anon., 1914a; Anon., 1914b) and the Women Writers' Suffrage League, whose affiliates Esler joined in pro-Suffrage marches (Anon., 1910; Anon., 1914c).

Esler wrote three popular collections of village idylls: *The Way They Loved at Grimpat: Village Idylls* (1893a), *'Mid Green Pastures: Short Stories* (1895a) and *Youth at The Prow* (1898). The stories in these collections are mostly set in a fictional village named Grimpat, a place that contemporaneous reviewers in Ireland promptly identified as a locality of her native Donegal, but that British and American reviewers saw as a place in England (though one differing from the geographic, ethnographic, and dialectal specificity of other British, Irish, and American regionalists). Esler's village stories also circulated internationally and were printed in the United States (1893b; 1895b) and on the Continent (1894a); unlike her novels, which, to my knowledge have not been translated, some of her short stories also circulated in Europe in foreign languages (1899a; 1906a; 1906b; 1912; 1913). Esler also wrote novels, which, unlike her stories, are unambiguously set in Ulster.

Meath native and resident Katherine Frances Purdon (1852–1920) was a frequent contributor to *The Irish Homestead*, the weekly organ of Horace Plunkett's and George Russell's (AE) Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), for which she regularly penned gardening columns. Her village fiction, *The Folk of Furry Farm: The Romance of an Irish Village*, was published in book form in 1914 in London and New York, gathering stories which had previously appeared in the Christmas supplement of the *Homestead* entitled *A Celtic Christmas* between 1899 and 1910.<sup>1</sup> Purdon's stories are all set in a fictional townland in County Meath named 'Ardenoo' in the 'Furry Hills', and is 'probably derived from the townland of Ardenew ... between the villages of Rathcore and Rathmolyon' (Griffin, 2004: 177n10) and near the bigger village of Enfield. Near Enfield, Purdon lived in Hotwell House, a residence owned by her family and named after the natural hot spring located on the property. Purdon's stories in the periodical were illustrated by Jack

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<sup>1</sup> For the stories in *A Celtic Christmas* see References under Purdon (1899; 1900; 1901; 1902; 1903; 1904; 1905; 1906; 1907a; 1908a; 1909; 1910). See Purdon (1907b) for the story in *The Shanachie*, and Purdon (1911) for the story in the *Irish Review*. For the British and American editions of her book see Purdon (1914a,b).

B. Yeats and Russell,<sup>2</sup> and later illustrators of her work also included proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Dublin, such as Beatrice Elvery (White and Doyle, 2009).

Despite the subtitle ‘The Romance of an Irish Village’ for Purdon’s book, the ‘village’ world of Ardenoo is not simply a village, understood, in the *OED Online* definition, as ‘a collection of dwelling-houses and other buildings, forming a centre of habitation in a country district’ or its smaller version, the hamlet, defined as ‘a village without a church, included in the parish belonging to another village or a town’ (Anon., 2022a,b). Rather, the Ardenoo world references the distinctive Irish geographical units for landscape organisation known as the townlands, that is, in Scally’s definition, indigenous ‘settlements’ and communities which ‘were the nuclei of peasant society in Ireland before the Famine’, not quite corresponding to ‘villages as most Europeans of the age would think of them, not always entities that had standing in law, often not even possessing the geometrical silhouettes that Europeans had long associated with civilization’ (1995: 10). Scally adds that since ‘the village was not a native form of settlement in Ireland ... [I]ts absence from Irish life set the country apart from England and most western Europe until very recent times and probably accounts for a good deal of the vivaciously untidy character of the countryside and for many of its miseries’ (1995: 12)—the latter aspect often highlighted in travel writing by British travellers to Ireland during the nineteenth century.

Esler’s and Purdon’s less-studied village tales make for an interesting case-study because their regional Irish locality is not situated in the paradigmatic West of Ireland, which was a popular location for much literature of the Irish Literary Revival and for bestselling local-colour fiction authors such as Jane Barlow. Adapting the transnationally exploited genre of the village tale, their work further complicates issues surrounding Irish identity, its location and scale. Even if Esler and Purdon create the local using different rhetorical strategies, I propose that both writers’ villages are actually ‘glocal’ because of their engagement with other national traditions of village literature and with international audiences and publishers.

### The ‘Glocal’ and the *Village* ‘Imaginary’

To understand both ‘glocalization’ and the implications of the term ‘glocal’, I adapt the conceptual framework used in anthropological work by Noel B. Salazar (2010), in combination with the notion of ‘tourist imaginaries’ as defined by Maria Gravari-

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<sup>2</sup> Griffin notes that Jack Yeats’s illustrations for Purdon’s stories set in the Meath plain evoke landscapes more readily associated with the rugged and mountainous regions of the west of Ireland (2004: 177), with their emphasis on dry stone walls, and high, barren mountains that are reminiscent of areas such as Connemara.

Barbas and Nelson Graburn: ‘spatial imaginaries that refer to the potential of a place as a tourist destination’ which function both before and during the trip. Imaginaries are sets of representations and practices which actively create and normalise preconceived ideas and behaviours. In tourism studies they are spatial practices that actively ‘participate in the creation of a *modus vivendi*’, like a sort of ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (2012: 1). Salazar’s *Envisioning Eden* is a ‘glocal ethnography’ which examines how the workings of tourist imaginaries in contemporary Indonesia and Tanzania shape current tourist practices, and it argues that ‘lived worlds, distinctively situated as they may be on this globalized planet, are increasingly constructed through fantasies and fabrications that must first be imagined in order to be realized’ (2010: 17–18, 8). Drawing on work by Vogler and Gaonkar, among others, Salazar defines the imaginary as ‘representational assemblages’ which contribute to our comprehension of and engagement with reality; ‘a mental, individual, and social process that produces the reality that simultaneously produces it’ (2010: 6). Salazar’s study focuses on a specific type of informant, ‘local guides’ or tourist professionals, who, in his view, are ‘sedentary cosmopolitans’ (2010: 176). They occupy a liminal position as native of or deeply embedded in a locality, yet are constantly exposed to globalizing processes.

One of Salazar’s theoretical premises is the idea of ‘glocalization’, a term made popular by sociologist Roland Robertson and geographer Erik Swyngedouw. Challenging ‘the idea that globalization is an all-powerful homogenizing process that will eradicate the differences between people and places’, Robertson and Swyngedouw argue instead for a re-evaluation of local forces and processes within globalization (Rogers et al., 2013). Salazar uses ‘glocalization’ to refer to ‘patterned conjunctions that shape localities and by means of which they shape themselves’, a definition which ‘suggests equal attention to globalization and localization (local differentiation) existing in a complex, two-way traffic’ (2010: 12). Salazar’s attention to ‘glocalization’, ‘tourist imaginaries’, and to ‘sedentary cosmopolitans’ can be utilised for this case-study of how Esler and Purdon ‘make it local’ while simultaneously remodelling and recreating a *village* imaginary; one which already existed across national traditions and regional frameworks. The writers examined here, moreover, share some of the characteristics of Salazar’s ‘sedentary cosmopolitans’. They are, like the local guides, positioned as mediators between a knowledgeable community (that they have either experienced first-hand or constructed as such), and the non-local, supranational literary marketplace of international audiences and publishers.

In this article I compare two modes of telling village tales which showcase different approaches to ‘local differentiation’ in an Irish context: while Esler’s Grimpat stories



defy geolocation and are loosely framed around a rural village with muted place and language characterisation, Purdon's Ardenoo tales exploit the local dialect of a specific micro-region within Ireland. However, as shown by their early reception and publication context, both texts are entangled with wider international superstructures such as the transnational and transatlantic media environment with which both writers interacted. Esler's short-story collections, unlike her novels, had American editions and were translated into different languages; Purdon's village tales were first published in an Irish Revival periodical that sought to elevate Irish culture to both national and international standards. These tales were later re-edited for the book version that was intended for the British and American markets. In both cases, the stories involve a glocal village imaginary which supersedes both Irish national borders and Irish regions and is inspired by existing traditions of village literature beyond Ireland.

### Locating Grimpat: The Early Reception and Translation of Esler's Stories

The life and novels of Erminda Rentoul Esler have recently received critical attention in Patrick Maume's work (2019; 2020). Maume contextualises her novels in the Ulster and Scottish 'kailyard' tradition, noting that she embraces typical kailyard themes such as 'doctrinal conflict within Presbyterianism ... the contrast between provincial society and a commercialised, financialised and untrustworthy urban modernity' (2020: 168). However, Maume also observes that Esler 'makes very little use of Ulster/Scottish dialect' (2020: 168).<sup>3</sup> The 'kailyard' context emerges also in Esler's publishing networks. For example, Esler had contributed to *The British Weekly*, a magazine issued by Hodder and Stoughton (one of the chief publishers of Scottish kailyard literature) and edited by William Robertson Nicoll, Scottish minister and literary advisor to the firm, as well as the architect behind the transatlantic success of J. M. Barrie and Ian Maclaren (Nash, 2004). In addition, reviews of Esler's stories in periodicals often compare her work to Scottish kailyard writing such as Barrie's (Anon., 1895: 4), but also to the fiction of proponents from other anglophone regions. Writers associated with Esler in reviews include: the Cornish John Henry Pearce and Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Anon., 1895: 4); Wessex representative Thomas Hardy in *Life's Little Ironies*; American regionalists Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Margaret Deland (Barbe, 1895: 2; Tynan, 1895: 91); Irish author Jane Barlow (Montgomery, 1899b: 805–806); or earlier

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<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of late-nineteenth-century Scottish 'kailyard' work by J. M. Barrie, Ian Maclaren, and S. R. Crockett, see Nash's *Kailyard and Scottish Literature* (2007). In this essay, I use the word 'kailyard' to refer to the work of these bestselling authors, without the negative implications of kitsch and sentimentality that are at times associated with the term. For a full discussion of the 'kailyard' concept in a Scottish context see Nash (2007: 17–48).

English masters of provincial fiction such as Elizabeth Gaskell in *Cranford* (*National Observer*, quoted in Esler, 1898: backmatter).

Contemporaneous reviewers also stressed the difficulty of locating Esler's Grimpat on a map, which highlights the author's decision not to identify the location with Scottish and Irish villages that were well known. The *Review of Reviews* aptly notes that 'Grimpat might be almost anywhere, for "village idyls" are much the same the world around, and "Kitty," "Linnet," or "Naomi" could be duplicated in many an American town' (Anon., 1896a: 113). Similarly, *The Critic* highlights the lack of specificity regarding Grimpat's location, though it ultimately settles for 'a plain English village' (Anon., 1896b: 443). In Esler's stories, descriptions of Grimpat are scant and mostly refer to general features of rural landscapes, such as hills or hay fields at harvest, or to its remoteness from urban centres.<sup>4</sup> Often, Grimpat is evoked as a personified entity that oversees the social mores of the community, such as in matters of marriage:

When Rebecca Broom married John Hart, Grimpat was very much pleased. As a rule, the village did not care about matrimonial problems that left any detail unsolved at the church door. It liked its romances neat and complete, and it considered that marriage ought to merge all early difficulties into the 'happy ever after' period (Esler, 1895a: 47).

Irish reviewers, nonetheless, had no hesitation in solving the alleged mystery of Grimpat's location; they confidently identified it as an Ulster village, and Esler as belonging to an Irish tradition of village literature. In the 1895 article in the *Irish Daily Independent* quoted above, Esler is contextualised as an Irish Presbyterian writer from Donegal who has chosen to portray 'the life of the Manse', particularly in the novel *A Maid of the Manse*,<sup>5</sup> but also the 'humble life among the Presbyterians of the North' in her short stories (Anon., 1895: 4). Noting that 'Mrs. Esler's austere pictures of the North do not label themselves Irish to the eye' because of their lack of 'the usual Celtic characteristics', the author of the article offers a corrective:

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Grimpat tales, another peasant idyll written for *The Leisure Hour* (Esler, 1899c) is unmistakably set in Italy, with specific villages and landmarks explicitly mentioned (Capri, Anacapri, the Vesuvius, Naples) and some Italian words also used in the characters' dialogue. Despite these attempts at increasing the local colour, Esler's regionalism in this story still works within well-established notions of Italian rustic romanticism that were popular amongst British travellers, thus belonging to a pre-packaged 'tourist imaginary' of Southern Italy which appealed also to the armchair travellers/readers of the *Leisure Hour*. Further contributing to this romantic effect is the use of illustrations such as a large image of the female protagonist in peasant costume or the final landscape view (a kind of postcard) of the Bay of Naples with the Vesuvius (Esler, 1899c: 24, 31).

<sup>5</sup> This novel has also been discussed by Foster (2008: 86–89) and Murphy (2011: 241).

Perhaps no one has detected that her book of country sketches, 'How They Loved at Grimpat', had its scene laid in Ulster, and that its peasants were peasants of the North of Ireland. 'How They Loved at Grimpat' is a series of little masterpieces no less excellent because of their quietness of tone and absence of sensation. ... It is a sign of their Irish birth, perhaps, that the love-stories, with all marks of truth and plain simplicity, are so innocent (Anon., 1895: 4).

Similarly, in a review of *Mid Green Pastures for The Young Woman*, Irish writer Katherine Tynan notes that Esler's Grimpat is likely an Ulster village (1895: 91). Tynan even goes so far as to say that the lack of 'brogue' and 'dialect' in Esler's work comes as 'a boon at a moment when one is expected to understand all the dialects' (1895: 91). Later she also included her work in the famed anthology of Irish writing *The Cabinet of Irish Literature* (Esler, 1902–1903). The Irish repatriation of Esler's village tales aligns with contemporaneous discourses of Irish revivalism at the turn of the twentieth century and multifarious attempts by Irish writers to put Irish literature and culture on the map as a distinctive tradition in a national sense.<sup>6</sup> Village literature also played its part in this mobilisation, as will be evident even more so in Purdon's case.

While framing Esler as part of a regionalist canon was one concern for reviewers, another was foregrounding the sentimentality, simplicity, and idyllic nature of her stories: for example, George Saintsbury noted in *The Academy* that Esler's stories were 'conceived entirely in the Romantic style' with 'happy endings' and 'morals as sound as the Catechism', yet were also balanced by 'a current of melancholy, and even satire' (1894: 146); a reviewer in the *American Book Buyer* pointed out that in Esler's first collection 'not one [idyl] is too fine or too intense' (Anon., 1896c: 413). This narratorial and representational equilibrium, praised by reviewers, may be associated with narrative modes typical of Victorian idyllic writing which, according to Hunter, emphasised 'the maintenance of a distance, or in other words, of a balance between [the narrator's] sympathy and whatever it is (time or sophistication) which removes him from the fictional world' (1984: 58). In this regard, the earlier mentioned personification of Grimpat counts as one of these rhetorical strategies that aimed to achieve a balanced distance from the sentimental turmoil of the characters' feelings and the events narrated in the stories.

Many of Esler's Grimpat stories are centred around female characters who are facing a sentimental conundrum; they can be read alongside contemporaneous discourses on marriage and the 'New Woman' that were rehearsed in many of the periodicals

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<sup>6</sup> On the rich literary and critical nonfictional output of key Irish revival writers and thinkers, see the anthology by Kiberd and Mathews (2015).

where these stories first appeared and to which Esler also contributed journalism.<sup>7</sup> In the December 1892 issue of *The Young Woman*, for instance, Esler's advice column provided extensive information on professional opportunities for women, from more traditional careers such as dressmaking to new vocations open to women in the late nineteenth century, such as female doctors in the colonies (Esler, 1892c: 104–106). In these columns, however, Esler still upheld marriage as a central objective in women's lives; for working women no less (1895c: 105–108). In a similar way, Esler's village girls strive to pursue a respectable and spiritually fulfilling marriage—often against adversities and delays—while standing by values such as hard work, righteousness, and self-reliance which ultimately reward them for their efforts. At times, deviations from prescribed marriage routes are accommodated. For example, in 'An Idealist', first published in *The Young Woman* in July 1894 and included in *Mid Green Pastures*, the female protagonist does not marry but gains respectability in the village by pursuing a literary career as a writer of village sketches. In 'A Tardy Wooing', the main character rejoices at her broken engagement, which excuses her from emigrating to the United States and enables her to continue a more gratifying single life in her local community (Esler, 1895a).

Accommodating traditional marriage plots to a changing social landscape for women within the context of New Woman discourses is a challenge that is also present in the work of other women writers and contributors to female periodicals of the time. Elke D'hoker (2021) has looked at the Scottish writer and editor Annie S. Swan, whose short story series *The Woman at Home* (1893–1918) is concerned with professional female doctors, nurses, and teachers. While conceding to the marriage and domesticity imperatives of the romance genre, Swan's stories also make a strong case for the compatible nature of a professional career outside the home and more traditional female values, in an attempt to increase the social acceptability of changing roles for women. D'hoker has noted that Swan's stories also use strategies such as deferring the marriage plot for characters to their thirties and forties, thus 'well beyond marrying age by Victorian standards' (2021: 57). In an American context, Freeman's stories also resist some of the conventions of romance fiction by representing older and single female characters (Turkes, 1999). Unlike Swan's fiction, Esler's stories focussed primarily on country girls with professional opportunities different from their urban counterparts. Yet, to some degree, the stories reflect New Woman debates by contemplating exceptions and tweaks to the marriage finale, and cater to the evolving

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, in addition to *The Young Woman* (Esler, 1893c; 1894b; 1895d; 1899b), many stories from her second collection, *Mid Green Pastures*, were first published in another female magazine, *The Woman's Signal* (Esler, 1894c; 1894d; 1894e; 1894f; 1894g).

values of the female audiences which they shared with the woman's magazines in which they were first published.

The 'Romantic style' of Esler's stories (Saintsbury, 1894: 146), their allegedly English rural setting, and the Scottish kailyard context of her early reception in Britain and Ireland are aspects that reoccur in the foreign reception and translation of her short fiction in Europe. For example, one of Esler's stories of the 1890s, 'Linnet's Lover' from *The Way They Loved at Grimpat*, circulated in book form in Denmark and Sweden in the 1910s. These publications further contribute to the conflicting reception of Esler's setting for her tales, this time highlighting a quintessential English countryside setting for the story and thus superseding regionalisms. Published in Sweden and translated by Swedish educator Dagmar Sommarström as *Kittys Friare* (1912) and in Denmark translated by 'Inga' as *Ellens Bejlere* (1913), the covers of these paperback editions both feature portraits of young women. This would have likely appealed to local female audiences of romantic fiction and have reflected a readership that was comparable to that of the late-Victorian women's magazines to which Esler contributed. In the translations, the characters' names are slightly altered but the village name of Grimpat is retained; in the Swedish translation, moreover, the promotional material on the back cover also refers to a general 'idyllic background of English country life' as the setting for the tale (Esler, 1912), thus skirting over any additional geographical specificity and certainly avoiding the Ulster setting so specifically evoked by Esler's contemporaneous Irish reviewers.

In a Francophone context (Switzerland and France), Esler stories circulated in periodicals with quite different readerships. They appeared in *Bibliothèque Universelle et Revue Suisse*, a literary review which was alert to international trends in fiction but also to literature with a solid moral grounding; it was published in Lausanne, with distribution in Paris by Firmin-Didot, London by Hachette, and Leipzig by Twietmeyer and Brockhaus. Her stories also appeared in *La Bonne Revue* (1905–1968), a smaller, local venture from Die (Drôme) which provided reading content and religious instruction for families. Yet, in both outlets, connections with a Protestant and kailyard context can be traced. In 1899, *Bibliothèque Universelle* published 'Le Secret de Madame Jesop' (Esler, 1899a), a translation of 'The Mystery Connected to Mrs Jessop' from Esler's latest volume *Youth at The Prow*, which is set in an unspecified place named 'Sudbury' located near 'Nutford'; the latter being the bigger, neighbouring town to Grimpat. Another story, entitled 'La Folie de Mademoiselle Priscille' (Esler, 1906b), was published in French in 1906. This story does not belong to her previous volumes, and I have not been able to source an English version. It is a story that is set in a fictional village named 'Fairview' in the French version. 'Fairview' is another rural village that

is described, like Grimpat, through images of bucolic tranquillity at remove from fast-paced modernity; it, too, is a personified entity that witnesses and casts judgements on the events and characters of the stories.

These translations in *Bibliothèque Universelle* represent isolated cases of Esler's reception, and her work is neither reviewed nor mentioned in other articles; even though the magazine was very much attuned to British and American regionalist trends in fiction, with frequent reviews of the bestselling kailyard authors of the 1890s (Barrie, Maclaren, and Crockett), the Irish Barlow (often compared to the Scottish writers), and New-England local-colour writer Wilkins Freeman (Gardon, 1896a, 1896b). Some of these writers' stories also feature in translation in the periodical (Wilkins Freeman, 1893; 1894–1895). The reviewer of this regional fiction was Auguste Gardon (1839–1922), a Swiss Presbyterian pastor and missionary to India, who had studied theology in Geneva and Scotland; for the periodical he also contributed stories under the pseudonym of Paul Gervais and Marcel Valmont (Crivelli, 2007). From 1866 to 1909, *Bibliothèque Universelle* was edited by Édouard Tallichet (1828–1911) who, according to Gilles Revaz (2011), wanted to impart moral rigour on the publication, especially through the medium of fiction that was deemed suitable for this purpose. In this context, Esler's stories, where wrongs are rectified and her female protagonists are by the end typically happily married after overcoming obstacles through self-reliance and hard work, may be seen as promoting the rigour that Tallichet had in mind.

One of Esler's stories from her first collection, 'Eunice', was published on 15 June 1906 in *La Bonne Revue*, under the title 'Une Idylle Au Village' (1906a). This outlet was a family-oriented monthly that published stories, travel writing, games, and recipes, but also religious content of Protestant-Christian flavour: biblical calendars, interpretations of biblical passages, and quotations from religious personalities like the American evangelist D. L. Moody. *La Bonne Revue* was edited by the writer, literary critic and translator Hedgar Pluviannes. Pluviannes had contributed fiction to other religious periodicals such as *Le Journal de la Jeune Fille: Organe des Unions Chrétiennes des Jeunes Filles* (1893–1951) and the *Bibliothèque Universelle* (Pluviannes, 1903). He had also translated an extract from S. R. Crockett's *The Stickit Minister* for the *Revue Chrétienne* (Crockett, 1903). In Esler's story as it appears in *La Bonne Revue*, the name of the village is altered to a French-sounding 'Grinpate'. Some character names are also familiarised for French readers: Eunice South, for instance, becomes Eunice Soute. Another significant change is the title: instead of using the main character's name as in Esler's original English version, the anonymous translator opts for 'Une Idylle au Village', thus accentuating the universal and ideal character of the idyll. This serves to

reinforce the above mentioned idea, from the *Review of Reviews*, that: “‘village idyls’ are much the same the world around’ (Anon., 1896a: 113).

As the early British, Irish, and American reception and European translation of Esler’s stories show, the village imaginary in Esler’s short fiction is constructed at the intersection of discourses and agendas that often conflict: the supposedly Irish (Ulster) identity and location promoted by Irish contemporary critics; the unspecified yet quintessential English rural location postulated by reviewers, in line with a well-established anglophone canon of village literature; and, the sentimental mode pertaining to both Scottish kailyard writing and romance fiction for female audiences.<sup>8</sup> Esler’s local-colour tales circulated across national traditions despite downplaying regional specificity. Indeed, this lack of local colour allowed for further adaptability abroad. What travelled, in Esler’s work, was the enduring power of a universal ‘village imaginary’, a benchmark of Victorian fiction that was also widely exploited in regional literature in Europe and the United States.

### **Purdon’s Revival Village Stories and Transnational Models of Rurality**

In addition to being the gardening columnist for *The Irish Homestead*, Katherine Frances Purdon also contributed gardening pieces for a number of British periodicals. Notices in digitised newspapers in the *British Newspaper Archive* mention Purdon’s gardening columns ‘Lesson from a Garden’ in *Helping Words* (1892–1907) (Anon., 1897) and ‘Letters from a Gardening Girl’ in *The Woman’s Magazine* (Anon., 1917). Her fiction—from tales for children to Christmas stories—also appeared in Irish weeklies printed in Dublin such as *The Weekly Freeman* (Purdon, 1913a,b; 1917), in Christmas numbers of *The Irish Weekly Independent* (Anon., 1913) and other British publications such as the *Queen* (Purdon, 1908b). Brian Griffin (2004: 176) points out that while most of her Ardenoo stories were first featured in *The Irish Homestead*’s Christmas number *A Celtic Christmas*, a couple were also written for other Irish Revival literary magazines. These were *The Shanachie* (1906–1907) (Purdon, 1907b) and *The Irish Review* (1911–1914) (Purdon 1911); the latter a magazine edited by the poets, critics, and 1916 revolutionaries Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Plunkett. Purdon’s stories in *The Folk of Furry Farm* follow recurring characters such as Mickey Heffernan, a middle-aged bachelor who owns the Furry Farm and is in search of a wife. The stories chronicle typical themes of Irish rural life: matchmaking, emigration to or return from America, local beliefs

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<sup>8</sup> Nash also points out that the sentimentality and nostalgia emphasised in condescending readings of Scottish ‘kailyard’ literature, in a synecdochic way, have almost entirely come to signify ‘kailyard’ literature to the detriment of more nuanced readings of this Scottish realist tradition (Nash, 2004: 13–14).

and episodes concerning the fairies. These themes, together with the extensive use of Hiberno-English and occasional references to Ireland, leave readers and reviewers in no doubt as to the Irish setting of Purdon's local-colour fiction.

Griffin notes that Purdon's Ardenoo stories in *A Celtic Christmas* rely heavily on Hiberno-English for both narrator and characters, with the accent rendered phonetically on the page; in the book version (as well as for the stories for *The Irish Review* and *The Shanachie*) the phonetic spelling is toned down and standardised, particularly for the main narrative voice, with explanatory notes also added to the book to help readers decode Irish-language expressions and local idioms (2004: 177). Compare, for example, the following extract, as first printed in the 1905 issue of *A Celtic Christmas*, to the later book format which follows:

In the coorse of time, there was a Heffernan in the Furry Farm, Michael by name, that was what you might call a rale chip off the ould block; quiet-goin' and silent, and fond of industherin', and a bit near on the top of that. You'll often see the like; as if thim that worked hard, had no time to spare for enjoying the money they'd make ... (Purdon, 1905: 1).

In the course of time, there was a Heffernan in the Furry Farm, Michael by name, that was what you might call a chip of [sic] the old block. Quiet-going in himself, he was; silent and fond of industering; and a bit near about money, on the top of all. You'll often see people like that; as if them that worked hard had no time for enjoy-ing what they make (Purdon, 1914a: 3–4).

While the syntactical arrangements of the sentences are not substantially altered, phonetic spellings in the book version are standardised. These changes presumably reflect the different audiences to which the periodical and the book were aimed: the dialect stories in *A Celtic Christmas* for mostly a local audience based in Ireland, and the other a wider, anglophone readership based both inside and outside of Ireland. *The Folk of Furry Farm* was first published in book form in 1914 in London by James Nisbet and in New York by G. P. Putnam & Sons, with a preface by novelist George A. Birmingham and the subheading 'The Romance of an Irish Village'.<sup>9</sup> In Ireland, it was printed a decade later, in 1925 by the Irish publisher Talbot Press, and after Purdon's death in 1920, with an introduction by Purdon's friend Susan L. Mitchell (Purdon, 1925).

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<sup>9</sup> Except for the novel's explanatory subtitle, the word 'village' is never used in the book to refer to Ardenoo and surrounding areas. In a similar way to the simplification of the dialect for the book version, the use of 'Irish village' in the book subheading gestures towards both the Irish locale but also a wider homogeneous 'village' imaginary, thus mediating the expectations of global anglophone readerships of village fiction.



The tensions implicit in combining the standardised English with the Hiberno-English vernacular are also present in other Irish local-colour writers. Analysing Jane Barlow's linguistic strategies in her local-colour fiction, Heidi Hansson cites Graham Shorrocks's distinction between 'literary dialect ... "aimed at a general readership"' and 'dialect literature ... primarily intended for a "non-standard-dialect-speaking readership"' (quoted in Hansson, 2008: 58). On the one hand, Barlow chooses to use both for different purposes: the dialect, a marker of lower-class extraction, Catholicism, and lack of education, for dialogue amongst her peasant characters; standard English for the educated, upper-class, and Protestant narrator addressing anglophone educated readers. Yet, Barlow also tries to bridge the class divide by openly siding with the peasant community and using modifiers such as 'our' or 'us' (Hansson, 2008: 64). Though not fully resolving the tensions and class hierarchy between communities of educated readers and authors and the peasant subjects of the stories, in Hansson's view this strategy is far from condescending. Rather it 'allows Barlow to retain her credibility in relation to her middle-class English audience as well as her commitment to her country and its people' (2008: 66). Some of Barlow's stories, with their distinctive linguistic code-switching, are also featured in *A Celtic Christmas*. By the time the *Irish Homestead* issued the first Christmas supplement in 1897, Barlow was already an international success; her first two collections of village tales, *Irish Idylls* (1892) and *Strangers at Lisconnel* (1895), had been bestsellers in both Europe and the United States. This success was due to the transatlantic connections of publisher Hodder and Stoughton, who, as mentioned, had also facilitated the earlier transatlantic success of Scottish regionalists Barrie and Maclaren (Nash, 2004; Bruna, 2021). In *A Celtic Christmas*, Purdon's stories took a different approach to the dialect of the region by privileging the nonstandard variety. This stylistic choice may be read as mimicking oral storytelling modes, thus fostering an intimacy between local readers across Ireland and the community depicted in the tales; it is, however, also a strategy which would set the stories apart from the other writers of village tales in *A Celtic Christmas*, such as Jane Barlow and Seumas MacManus.

Purdon's careful reproduction of the language of Meath was praised by fellow fiction writer Birmingham, who wrote the preface to the 1914 edition for the American market. Birmingham links her use of the spoken language not only to the realism of the peasant experience but also to Purdon's authentic vantage point as an insider of the community she describes: 'She could not—no single person could—have invented all the phrases and expressions which she has put into the mouths of the characters of her stories. We have in her book a living tongue spoken by a neglected class of Irishmen' (quoted in Purdon, 1914a: ix). Griffin's contemporary assessment of Purdon also corroborates

this stance—‘one can still hear strong echoes of her characters’ voices in the Rathcore area today’ (2004: 177)—and juxtaposes Purdon’s *dialect literature* to the *literary dialect* of Revivalists such as Synge. That being said, it is still important to acknowledge the broader context: the preface was written with audiences outside of Ireland in mind. The skill of mastering local vernaculars and rendering them with accuracy, while certainly Purdon’s strength, was not unique to Purdon and was almost a prerequisite for late-nineteenth-century regional fiction in both the British Isles and America, as noted by reviewers of works by Hardy, Barrie, and Maclaren, but also by reviewers of the American local-colour fiction of Harte, Cable, and Jewett.<sup>10</sup>

Another prerogative of Purdon’s local-colour fiction was the focus on a previously undiscovered region: County Meath. This innovation was highlighted in a review in *The Bookseller*, which noted that previous Irish fiction was ‘usually placed in Galway, Cork, Wicklow, Connemara or Donegal’ (Anon., 1916: 485). Birmingham also flags this aspect in his introduction (quoted in Purdon, 1914a: x). Since the location of the fictional Ardenoo in Meath is generally flagged in paratexts but not in the actual work, highlighting the novelty of the depicted region presumably constitutes a distinctive selling point for the book—in addition to Birmingham’s positioning of Purdon’s work as an integral part of the Irish Literary movement (quoted in Purdon, 1914a: x).

In the context of the publication of her stories in *A Celtic Christmas*, this addition of another (fictional yet traceable) locality to the map of Irish literary regions aligned with the IAOS’s objective of growing its network of cooperatives across the country. As such, often the Christmas number of *The Irish Homestead* featured an end-of-the-year report about the organisation which included a map with the number, type, and distribution of farmers’ societies (Anon., 1908: vii). A similar map of Ireland with its cooperatives was also used as the background for the cover of the Christmas numbers from 1903 to 1910 and was drawn by American artist Pamela Colman Smith; superimposed on the map, Smith also drew a cloaked female figure whose edges partly blend with the outline of the map. The figure is possibly a rendition of Kathleen Ní Houlihan as the personification of Ireland. Thus, Purdon’s local-colour fiction alongside Barlow’s in *A Celtic Christmas* testifies to the IAOS commitment to valorise the diversity of regional rural traditions in Ireland, including nonstandard language varieties and local accents.

While the Christmas supplement of *The Irish Homestead* showcased the art of the literary and artistic revival in Ireland, some literary content in the newspaper also drew

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<sup>10</sup> On the trend and prominence of dialect literature in the United States, see *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Jones, 1999).

attention to international literary depictions of rural life such as the Scottish kailyard regional tales. In a review of M. E. Francis's collection of local-colour stories set in Ireland and Lancashire, *Frieze and Fustian* (1896), the reviewer identifies a specific 'kailyard' tradition of 'so-called "kail-yard" stories, that is stories dealing with the every-day life of the peasantry ... as a distinct class of literature' (Anon., 1898: 465). The word kailyard was first used by reviewers of Scottish writers Barrie and S. R. Crockett in an ironic way but rapidly became synonymous with Scottish local-colour fiction (Nash, 2007: 12). The reviewer of *The Irish Homestead*, however, uses the word transregionally to include Maclaren's and Barrie's 'Scotch' stories, Barlow's Irish stories, and those by Francis, 'who seems equally at home in dealing with certain phases of both English and Irish life' (Anon., 1898: 466). Elsewhere, *The Irish Homestead* also draws attention to some negative aspects connected to the literary type of the "'Kail-yard" Irishman': often a one-sided and idealised representation of the Irish peasant (Montgomery, 1899a; 1899b). Against these versions, less stereotypical and more authentic representations are juxtaposed, such as those to be found in the stories by Irish duo Somerville and Ross and Erminda Rentoul Esler. In *The Irish Homestead*, Esler's *The Way They Loved at Grimpat* was compared first to the work of Barlow, 'the greatest' of the Irish kailyard school, and then to Shan Bullock for the common Ulster background in their fiction (Montgomery, 1899b). These reviews are an example of how the Scottish village imaginary of the *fin de siècle*, with its controversial sobriquet of 'kailyard', was re-localised in Ireland and more positively adapted to signify—and legitimise—Irish peasant culture and rurality. *The Irish Homestead* also presented American literary models to its readers, namely Harte's stories of American miners (Anon., 1899) and Wilkins Freeman's tales set in a Puritan New England community (Norman, 1899). Despite admitting the differences between the American community and what *The Irish Homestead* reviewer calls the 'Celtic glamour' of Ireland, Wilkins is also seen as sharing Barlow's "'greyness" in the stories', a mood and atmosphere 'not always so remote from Irish life as we could wish' (Norman, 1899: 865). In this context, the pervasive use of the dialect in Purdon's stories for *A Celtic Christmas* aligns with the IAOS's intent of elevating Irish regional diversity and richness, yet it simultaneously borrows from models of regional literature outside Ireland—championed also in the *Irish Homestead*.

Purdon's *village* imaginary in her Ardenoo stories—as published in *A Celtic Christmas* and subsequently, with some edits, in book form—is deeply entangled with discourses of Irish national identity at the turn of the twentieth century. Her localisation strategies, with their detailed attention to regional linguistic idiosyncrasies, partake in a revivalist reappraisal of Irish rural culture in its diversity and variety; they are, however, also

glocal in terms of their indebtedness to a careful selection of non-Irish (and non-British) regional and national models of village fiction, namely the Scottish kailyard and the American local-colour traditions.

### Conclusion

As this comparison between Esler's and Purdon's village stories has shown, the late-nineteenth-century Irish village tale was a prominent genre of fiction remoulded *ad hoc* to fulfil different yet interconnected priorities. Despite the differences between the village tales of both writers in their depiction of rural life and its varied characters, the localism is mediated both transregionally and transnationally in both cases. Despite the contradiction, reviewers and publishers with different agendas consider Esler's stories simultaneously regional (Ulster) and national: Irish but also quintessentially English. Purdon's Irish regionalism, with its attention to a new literary region within Ireland, still largely works as an emblem of Irish national distinction for both Irish and international audiences. However, both Esler's seemingly contradictory early reception and European translation history, and Purdon's attempts to 'make it local' in County Meath during the Revival, are processes which engage with and are legitimised by other models of localism. In other words, Esler's and Purdon's village imaginaries—or 'representational assemblages' (Salazar, 2010: 6) of literary village traditions—rely on Irish and non-Irish models due to the influence of Scottish-kailyard and North American models of local-colour fiction.

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