

**REMAKING THE LITERARY CANON IN ENGLISH:**

**WOMEN WRITERS, 1880-1920**

Edited by María Elena Jaime de Pablos

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## Women, Science and Gender Equality in Emily Lawless' *A Garden Diary*

María Elena Jaime de Pablos

### Emily Lawless as a historical figure

The Irish writer Emily Lawless (1845-1913) was born at Lyons Castle, in County Kildare, to an aristocratic family. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Emily Lawless was already a well-known and respected writer, naturalist and historian within the context of Ireland and England. Her social influence was such that even the British Prime Minister William Gladstone read her books and, most importantly, took them into consideration when designing and implementing policies to deal with Irish issues (Smith 2006: 24).

As a writer, she devoted herself to different literary genres. Among her books, the poetry collection *With the Wild Geese* (1902), the history book *The Story of Ireland*, the biography *Life of Maria Edgeworth* (1904), the diary *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900* (1901) and the novels *Hurricane* (1886), *Grania: The Story of an Island* (1892), *Maelcho* (1894) and *With Essex in Ireland* (1890) stand out. But she also published a substantial number of articles on different natural sciences –botany, entomology, zoology, geology, etc.– in relevant journals versing in these fields of research: *Nineteenth Century*, *Corhill Magazine*, *The Gentleman's Magazine* and *Belgravia* (Hansson 2007: 61).

Both her scientific and literary work have been sources of inspiration for many women who followed the path she blazed. For instance, in the world of letters –where she excelled– the works of brilliant female 20th century writers such as Kate O'Brien or Jennifer Johnston would be unthinkable without those of Lawless (Cahalan 1991: 27, O'Donnell 2018), who, in turn, followed the lead of Maria Edgeworth, on whom she wrote a biography. This, *Grania* and *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900* are essential in knowing Lawless' feminist or proto-feminist position, which, according to Geraldine Meaney, was mainly orientated to vindicate a change in the social and sexual relations on which Victorianism was grounded in the British Isles (2000: 977).

Despite her public notoriety in life, after her death, Emily Lawless was entirely forgotten for decades until some female university lecturers –among them, the expert on fin-de-siècle Irish literature, Elizabeth Grubgeld– rescued her from oblivion at the end of the 20th century. Even today, there are very few critical works that explore Lawless’ writing, but one of them deserves focal attention, the monograph *Emily Lawless 1845-1913: Writing the Interspace*, published in 2007 by Heidi Hansson, who affirms that Emily Lawless was set on the margins of the Irish literary cannon because she did not want to take part in the “Irish Literary Revival”<sup>1</sup>.

Although she was in very good terms with some revivalists, and most particularly with its leaders William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, she openly expressed not only her reluctance to accept the type of cultural nationalism they advocated but also her opposition to the political independence they vindicated (Hansson 2011: 60). She, nevertheless, was in favour of considering Ireland as a differentiated natural and cultural entity, which required specific categories of analysis to be understood (Hansson 2014: 9). Either her unionist ideas (Goodman 2006: 186, Hansson 2011: 60) or her health problems (Cahalan 1991:30) forced her to leave her native country for England, where she settled in the 1890s. A cottage that she shared with Lady Sarah Spencer in Gomshall, in Surrey, would become her home until she passed away. There she would write *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*.

*A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*: naturalist observations, philosophical reflections and historical notes.

Mathew Goodman firmly states that Emily Lawless wrote her works from a naturalist perspective (2006: 185). Naturalism, solidly grounded on Charles Darwin’s or George John Romanes’ evolutionist ideas, was the dominant line of scientific thought in the second half of the 19th century. It linked the study of the human condition to that of nature conceived as biological life.

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<sup>1</sup> This literary movement, taking place mainly between 1880s and 1920s, promoted the Irish Gaelic heritage and was associated through its cultural nationalism with Home Rule.

For Lawless, biological life, “Nature” –written with an initial capital letter to stress its relevance and uniqueness– was a fascinating field of research, a fountain of sensory experiences and a powerful source of intellectual inspiration. In Edith Sichel’s words, Lawless distinguished three different types of Natures “the visible pagan Nature of the senses, and the search into nature which means science, and the search concerning Nature which means thought” (1914: vi).

A clear example of her naturalist spirit is *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*, framed within a narrative literary genre, which includes “Nature diaries” and “garden journals” (Hansson 2011: 60), mainly cultivated by educated women who were also amateur naturalists. In their texts, they included “astute advice and observations about growing habits and the problems of transplantation, but also philosophical digressions, comments on current affairs and personal reflections (Hansson 2011: 61). Outstanding figures in this genre, apart from Emily Lawless, were Elizabeth von Arnim with *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898) and Maria Theresa Earle with *Pot-Pourri from a Surrey Garden* (1897).

For these women, their garden was “a microcosm of the world well suited to teaching about the complexities of life” (Page and Smith 2011: 50). In *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*, this can be easily noticed when we consider the following paragraph, where the author literally says that “a garden is a world in miniature” (13) and establishes a parallelism between gardening –or writing about gardening– and teaching:

Yet after all a garden is a world in miniature, and, like the world, has a claim to be represented by many minds, surveying it from many sides. If it takes all sorts to make a world, it must take a good many varieties of gardeners to exhaust the subject of gardening. Assuming the said gardener to be of the right sort, naturally we accept his exhortations thankfully. Assuming him even not to be quite of the right sort –a mere harmless fumbler and bungler– still ’twere rash to assume that he can teach us nothing. Just as every garden –every real garden, owned by its owner– provides lessons for other garden owners, so even the written equivalent of such gardens, as long as they are genuine ones, not bits of confectionery tossed up to look pretty on tables, may claim the same praise. (13-14)

In *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*, where nature and humankind are irretrievably connected, the author moves from the study of the fauna and flora in her

garden to that of the human condition, which she examines from a spiritual, philosophical and social points of view. History, another of her passions, also intertwines with philosophy and naturalism in this text. Two of the most relevant issues marking the British political agenda from 1 September 1899 to 11 September 1900 –the dates of the first and last entries in her diary– are also discussed by Lawless, who seems to be most emotionally affected by them: the Boer War and the Boxer Rebellion.

Emily Lawless: a fin-de-siècle woman naturalist

In Lawless' autobiographical short story "An Entomological Adventure", included in the collection *Traits and Confidences* (1897), readers can perceive that the Irish author was determined to study "Nature", a fountain of "instilling indispensable truths" (Lawless 1901: 30) and "great arcanum of life" (1901: 177), from an early stage in life. As a little girl, she wanted to become an entomologist:

The very sonorousness of the name was worth anything; a name which you secretly rolled round and round in your mouth, and applied to yourself as you walked about the house. What dignity, what majesty lay in its syllables –En-to-mo-lo-gist! Could anything be more entrancing? (Lawless 1897: 11-12)

On the first page of her diary, Lawless assures that a global knowledge of Nature requires a descriptive and comparative analysis of different types of landscapes, fauna, flora and ethnic groups. Charles Darwin, who set off on a round-the-world expedition on the *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836 in order to obtain the geological, zoological, botanical and anthropological data which led him to publish his "Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection" would be, according to her, the paradigmatic scientist. However, Lawless adds that it is also possible to contribute to scientific development without having contact with animal, plants or human beings in faraway places –her own research scope is the flora and fauna abounding in her garden.

In relation to scientific research, she also devotes some lines to define the nature of those who are better qualified to carry it out, those who, in her words: "see deepest into that great arcanum of life which we roughly call Nature" (1901: 177), i.e. the



“Man[/Woman]<sup>2</sup> of Science” and the “singer” –poet. Whereas the former’s “business it is to chronicle what he sees and learns” as he “must cling to fact, as the samphire-picker clings to his rope”, the latter is “only too ready to toss all fact to the winds, and to account it mere dust, and dregs and dross, so he can awaken in himself, and pass on to others, some hint, some passing impression, of what he would probably himself call the soul of things” (1901: 177).

According to Lawless, the ideal person to carry out the study of the origin, evolution and functioning of nature –human nature included– must display the features associated to both types and exhibit a mind “that can feed on knowledge” but, at the same time, play with data and facts in a dynamic, versatile and creative way “as an athlete plays with his iron balls, and send them flying aloft, like birds through the air” (1901: 178).

She herself would be representative of this type of ideal researcher as she displayed this twofold nature –scientific and literary. She devoted herself to the study of nature as an amateur botanist, entomologist, marine zoologist or geologist with rigor and methodology, but in an open, creative and passionate way. Besides, she did so in Victorian times, in which women were regarded as inferior to men both physically and intellectually, and, therefore, incapable of taking part in scientific development at the level men did. As Hansson states:

Women’s engagement in natural science was understood as a pastime to encourage but not as an activity that might lead to important discoveries. Their roles remained restricted also in amateur organisations such as local natural history societies and field clubs. In some cases, their presence was felt to be a distraction and in other cases it was thought to promote a harmonious atmosphere during club meetings. (2011: 63)

Although woman and self-instructed, Emily Lawless shows in *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900* her determination to enrich Victorian scientific knowledge through the observation a natural scenery which was close, limited and much appreciated, i.e. her garden. She believes that the Earth constitutes an enormous mechanism, whose parts and functioning can be studied by exploring a small fragment of it. Thus, her garden becomes a scientific laboratory, where she not only observes nature, but experiments with it. The

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<sup>2</sup> The word “man” here refers to both sexes.

results of which are codified in a literary language full of wit, irony and humour that entertains readers while illustrating them through botany, zoology, geography, etc.

She loves researching to such an extent that any scientific discovery she makes procures her an enormous personal satisfaction. She finds few experiences in her life as vivifying and stimulating as finding a bond in the mysterious chain of natural law (Lawless 1901: 219). One of these discoveries provided her not only personal satisfaction, but also public recognition as a naturalist. Emily Lawless discovered that a particular type of moth –and not the ordinary bee– was in charge of pollination in the Burren, a stony area to be found in the West of Ireland. Charles Darwin himself was impressed by such discovery and suggested the author to send the prestigious journal *Nature* an article to report about this phenomenon (Nelson 2016: 148).

Despite the fact that she carries out her scientific research with rigor and precision, she considers herself an amateur naturalist (Lawless 1901: 220). Although she states the relevance of those who approach the scientific knowledge of nature by emphasising the fact that they also help to build the “great cathedral of discovery”:

For those who, like myself, are the mere irresponsible camp-followers of science, the importance of any given solution seems often to be less in what it actually teaches us, than in what it allows us indirectly to guess at. The new fact may or may not be important, but the ideas that it starts in our minds can hardly fail to be so. In the imaginative realm there is literally no limit to the revelations to which the tiniest of natural phenomena may not serve as an introduction. The fact itself may be the minutest of facts; a mere pin-point, a scarce perceptible chink of light, but it is a chink in the walls as it were of a great cathedral of discovery, the doors of which may, for anything one knows to the contrary, be thrown widely open to oneself, and to everyone else to-morrow. (1901: 220)

The author clearly indicates in this diary that the efforts of amateur naturalists are as meaningful as those of the professional naturalists that have been instructed at academic institutions and that nature does not recognise any hierarchical difference between these two categories. No doubt, Lawless is claiming a new epistemological framework in which amateur researchers –most naturalist women fall into this category– are not discriminated and in which their work is assessed objectively and incorporated to the scientific corpus:

[...] Nature [...] is an autocrat in whose eyes all subjects stand upon precisely the same level. At her court there is no superior, and no inferior. Geologist, botanist, zoologist, horticulturist–beetle-hunter, stone-breaker, weed-picker, crab-catcher–it matters not what we call ourselves, or what others call us, so long as it is herself alone we follow, she receives us all alike. (240)

That nature is, for Lawless, a source of equality can be noticed in many a passage of her diary, but this one is particularly illustrative: “all the unknown things of the immeasurable Cosmos, meet, and are on a level. There is neither larger or smaller there, neither younger or older, neither wiser or more foolish, neither less or more important” (241). This, no doubt, contrasts with the Victorian view of knowledge, based on a strong and clear-cut hierarchical division of those who dare acquire it.

Lawless, as some of her female naturalist colleagues, focuses her attention on how nature can be analysed from a gender perspective and that requires the employment of an adaptive paradigm (Hansson 2011: 62) by which women and nature are associated, not in the traditional way with negative features such as inferiority, passivity, irrationality, etc., but in a new way, with positive concepts such as vitality, empowerment or wisdom. Lawless inserts herself into a genealogy of women writers –Priscila Wakefield (1751-1832), Maria Elizabetha Jacson (1755-1829) and Jane Wells Webb Loudon (1807-1858) among others– who studied nature from an ecofeminist perspective, “which opposes patriarchal domination of the natural world as well as male oppression of women” (Cahalan 1991: 30).

By writing *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*, the author proves to her contemporaries that women have a relevant role in scientific development, that their brains are as capable as men’s of producing ideas with which to conceive the world through new mental structures, and that these are necessary to disentangle the mysteries that involve natural life:

There is never a day, there is hardly an hour, in which some new idea may not be upon its road. Now a really new idea for the time being remakes life. It is a solvent which dissolves all old impressions, and rebuilds them anew. Men live by ideas, as surely, almost as literally, as they live by bread, and a world into which no new idea ever entered would be a dead world, tenanted only by corpses. (Lawless 1901: 221)

She herself is a great generator of these types of ideas, which are essential not only to understand natural life in a broad sense, but also the human condition in a more specific one. Scientific research means a great deal to her, thanks to it, she can both perceive herself as a useful element for the progress and popularization of human science, and, most importantly from a personal point of view, endure what she calls the “prose of life” (1901: 221), associated to the repetitive, tedious and wearisome activities that a subject must carry out on a regular basis to live and coexist with others. Lawless can easily forget about these physically and mentally exhausting activities, she says, by concentrating on the study of nature, which she finds extremely fascinating, liberating and rewarding:

As the mind descends deeper and deeper into that serene abyss it seems to shake itself free for the time being from all that confused, battling, disturbing sea in which its daily lot is cast. [...]. “Life” is indeed a marvellous shibboleth; a spell that unlocks innumerable doors; a word of varied and manifold meanings. Merely to write it down, merely to utter it, seems to clear the atmosphere. Mental fogs of all kinds at that touch roll up their dingy tents, and depart. (224-225)

This study, this “quest for ideas”, that would let her connect the limited and temporal human being with the rest of the infinite and eternal creation, becoming a permanent rational occupation absolutely necessary for her (222), and she counts on useful resources to develop it. Firstly, she knows the epistemological principles on which science is grounded; secondly, she is able to relate data and facts in a creative way to imagine and discover new realities; and thirdly, she employs an updated research methodology, Empiricism, which she applies meticulously.

It is surprising that Lawless knows so much about the natural world, taking into account that she lacks university education. It can be inferred by the profusion of book titles and names of male and female authorities related to this world<sup>3</sup> that appear in *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900* that she becomes a competent naturalist by specialised reading and by conversations and letter exchanges with eminent Victorian

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, the first entry of her diary, “September 1, 1899”, makes reference to a substantial number of renowned explorers: Charles Darwin, Mr. Bates, Mr. Belt, Professor Wallace, Collingwood, (2), Stanley, Nansen, Miss North, Mrs Bishop and Miss Kingsley (3).

scientists (among them Charles Darwin and Matthew Arnold), not to mention the obvious field work.

### The garden as a laboratory

As the garden is part of the domestic sphere, traditionally a feminine one, Victorian women can observe it, describe it and reflect upon it without fearing social criticism. Lawless, no doubt, uses hers as a laboratory to explore nature. There is no element in it (soil, seed, plant, flower, weed, insect, animal, etc.), process (soil conditioning, plantation, fertilisation, pollination, flowering, etc.) or phenomenon (season, climate, light, rain, etc.) that is not an object of detailed analysis on her part.

Although Lawless studies different disciplines in it, she, for obvious reasons, pays special attention to botany. According to Judith Page and Elise Smith, in Victorian times, this was regarded the most suitable science for women as it involved the study of flowers, feminine elements par excellence in the creation because of their beauty, delicacy and size and profusion in natural landscapes (2011: 55). In her diary, Lawless not only offers detailed information of the plants that can be found in her garden –their Latin and English names, their features, their needs, their survival rate, etc., but also specifies the characteristics of the different botanic formations that give it shape, some of them recreating familiar landscapes in Ireland, for instance, she has “a Burren corner, a West Galway corner, a Kerry corner, a Kildare corner, even a green memento or two of the great lost forest of Ossory” (Lawless 1901: 126),

In *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*, among plants, weeds are given special attention. They are used, on one hand, to illustrate how living beings struggle for survival, how they aim at colonising as much space as possible to guarantee their continued existence; on the other hand, to make visible their usefulness in the maintenance of the habitability of the planet, as “weeds [...] with their crowding roots; these knotgrasses, these clinging bind-weeds,–it is such as they, backed by sea-spurreys, and bents, and by reeds and rushes innumerable, that do more to keep the waters of the globe in order, and to maintain dry land, than man, with all his dykes, dams, embankments” (Lawless 1901: 24). For her, all plant species –weeds, of course, included– have an essential role to play

in the development of life on the Earth and, therefore, they all should be valued, studied and protected.

Emily Lawless also manifests a fascination for the little insects, amphibians and other animals that populate her garden, paying particular attention to frogs to which she devotes many a line. She provides plenty of information about different varieties of frogs together with their life cycle, reproductive system, breathing organs, etc. They are particularly suitable to introduce the “Theory of Evolution” by Charles Darwin, by describing their different growth stages, she explains how simple life forms give rise to more complex ones.

Nature: the great matriarch

As we have seen, in *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*, Emily Lawless employs the concepts of nature and life as if they were synonyms and believes that the study of nature is but the study of life in its many manifestations. However, it must also be noted that she states that this “Nature”, this “indomitable” and “multifarious” life with unlimited capabilities, transformations and possibilities has been designed by an “Inventor” (224) and that this almighty entity has created nature, which is “everywhere eternally building up, [...] with apparently no blind hand, but with a most clear, definite, and shaping policy (25). This “inventor” lets the writer introduce a spiritual element in the study of nature which helps her present nature as a place where human beings can experience “a great exhilaration, an extraordinary sense of width, of serenity, and of detachment” (224).

Curiously enough, although Lawless’ nature is but the material manifestation of its “Inventor”, God (traditionally a masculine icon), she defines it in feminine terms, it is either a fertile, generous and fair mother who rewards the labours of those who care for her (34), or a dangerous and terrible *femme fatale* who is able to recklessly destroy that which human hands have arduously built. No matter the role nature decides to play, “[her] law runs through the planet” (43).

However, she denounces, that, far from understanding this reality, men, vain, ignorant and arrogant believe that they “set the tune, and that she [Nature] merely plays it” (43), that nature –like women– was created passive and submissive to meet their needs.

These men, who Lawless calls “unfeathered bipeds” (174), cannot see the infinite power of nature, nor feel the sense of comfort it instils and, much less connect with it from a spiritual point of view.

Mother nature, who feels compassion for these disobedient and derisive “sons”, employs multiple strategies to induce them to leave the wrong path and pursue the righteous one:

Yet even dull, and quite unfeathered bipeds have their glimmerings now and then of sense, and of instinct. There are hours in which the great Mother befriends them, as she does the rest of her two-legged, four-legged, or many-legged offspring. That she should continue to do so is I think amiable, and rather surprising on her part, when one considers how they disobey and deride her; how they sit day after day in stuffy rooms, eating dinners of many courses; hardly ever getting up to see the sun rise, or doing any of the other things she directs, and which her better-behaved scholars invariably do.

In spite of this, when the right winds blow, when the spring is afoot, and the leaves are beginning to bud, she allows the old visions to return to them. She brings back the old voices from the old haunts, to whisper once more in their ears, so that for the moment they forget the years that the locust has eaten, and their own incredible stupidities, and all that has been, and time rolls itself up like a scroll, and they are once again in very deed, though but for a little while, as they once were. (174-175)

Emily Lawless: popularising scientific knowledge

That Emily Lawless has assimilated not only the principles and methodology necessary to study nature, but also the skills and terminology required to transmit her scientific knowledge to non-specialist readers in a clear, easy, but precise way can be observed in innumerable passages in *A Garden Diary: September 1899-1900*. It is worth noting that this transference of scientific knowledge is not devoid of proto-feminist and ecological tones. For example, in the last pages of the diary, the author explains the “Theory of Evolution” by dealing with the life cycle of the axolotl, or Mexican gilled salamander, which, given the required conditions, suffers a transformation from water-breather to air-breather. Lawless not only outlines the transformation process, but adds, with satisfaction, that it was first observed and described by a woman, Fraulein Marie

von Chauvin, whom the author regards as a professional “naturalist” and not as an “amateur naturalist”, an expression she applies to herself, most probably resorting to the modesty trope, a means of self-devaluation, to make her intrusion into the scientific world, a male dominion, more palatable.

According to Lawless, Fraulein Marie von Chauvin can witness the transformation process of the specimens of axolotl she keeps because she cares for them in a sort of maternal way. She suggests, this way, that a feminine perspective to science can give excellent results:

[...] it is pleasant to remember that it was through the energy and perseverance of a woman naturalist, Fraulein Marie von Chauvin, that the matter was finally cleared up. By continually damping the specimens of axolotl kept by her on land, and assiduously feeding them, she was able to preserve two out of five through the gradual process of decreasing their gill-tufts, and tail-fins, changing their skins, and so forth. Finally to her own and everyone’s triumph, the complete amblystoma form was assumed, and the transformation was thereby accomplished. (1901: 192-193)

Lawless is pleased to make visible and praise the work of a female colleague, Fraulein Marie von Chauvin, who has achieved her goal, witnessing and describing the evolutive transformation of the axolotl, because she possesses two fundamental tools for scientific research: energy and perseverance.

Von Chauvin, like Lawless, would represent a feminised vision of scientific endeavour. In an article, Lawless published in 1877, in *Nineteenth Century*, she makes reference to this vision. She praises Von Chauvin for caring for her specimens of axolotl and describes her as a sort of protective mother for them as she provides them with the appropriate environment to facilitate their adaption to land and makes sure they have the diet and healthy conditions they require to complete their transformation process with success.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is pertinent here to quote Sally Shuttleworth when informing that Von Chauvin’s “achievements in ‘triumphantly evol [ing]’ *Amblystoma* out of more than one axolotl’ are set in explicit contrast with the failed, clumsily violent, means of her male predecessors’ who resorted to “such violent measures as excision of the gills” instead of “gradually accustoming the animal to life on land” (2016: 427).



For her invaluable contribution to the development of popularisation of natural sciences, history and literature, for her genuine interest in making visible and valuing women's achievements in all these fields, for her defence of new parameters on which science, politics and social relations could be based, Emily Lawless must be rescued from oblivion and given the place of honour she deserves in Irish letters.

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