



Edith Somerville

How she contrived to do all these things, run the farm . . . , the house and garden . . . , continue her literary work and her painting is a mystery to anyone.

Moira Somerville, Edith Somerville's niece writing after her death in 1949.



Edith Somerville was born in Corfu in 1858, when her father was serving in the British Army, but for most of her life she lived at Drishane House, in West Cork. Patchily educated, she demonstrated an early talent for art. Using her earnings from illustrating books, and facing family disapproval, she studied art at Dusseldorf, London and at the *Académie Colarossi*, Paris, where unusually for the time, female students were treated equally. Throughout her life she painted and sketched daily, exhibiting to acclaim in Dublin, London, Paris and New York.



Edith Somerville on her hunter 'Tarbrush' c. 1908.
Source: *The Biographical Press*.

In January 1886 Edith met her distant cousin Violet Martin and they began writing stories together. Their first book, *An Irish Cousin*, was published in 1889, and over the next twenty-six years, they wrote fourteen books under the joint pseudonym of *Somerville and Ross*. Their most critically acclaimed novel *The Real Charlotte*, appeared in 1894. In 1915 Violet Martin died and Edith continued to work alone, using the same pseudonym.

Edith acted as Master of Foxhounds with the West Carbery Hunt from 1903-1912. She acted as Master of Fox Hounds from 1903 to 1908, and from 1912 to 1919. She was the first female Master in Britain or Ireland. The hunt was closed in 1919.



Drishane House during Edith Somerville's childhood.
Source: *Cork Camera Club historical photos*.

While Edith's prestige as a painter and writer increased, due to family problems she assumed the role of manager of Drishane. After her father's death, her brothers were serving abroad in the British Army or Royal Navy. This coincided with a turbulent period in Irish history and although the Somervilles were fair landlords, rural violence and rent strikes were common. This restricted her time for writing and painting.

Edith's interest in women's rights appears to have begun during her struggle to secure professional artistic training. She reminded women that 'it is our business to see that we are not left outside the door when the conditions of our lives are decided upon'. In 1912 Edith became president of the *Munster Women's Franchise League*, who argued for the vote for women. The association spread rapidly, establishing sub-branches around the province. Edith died in October 1949.

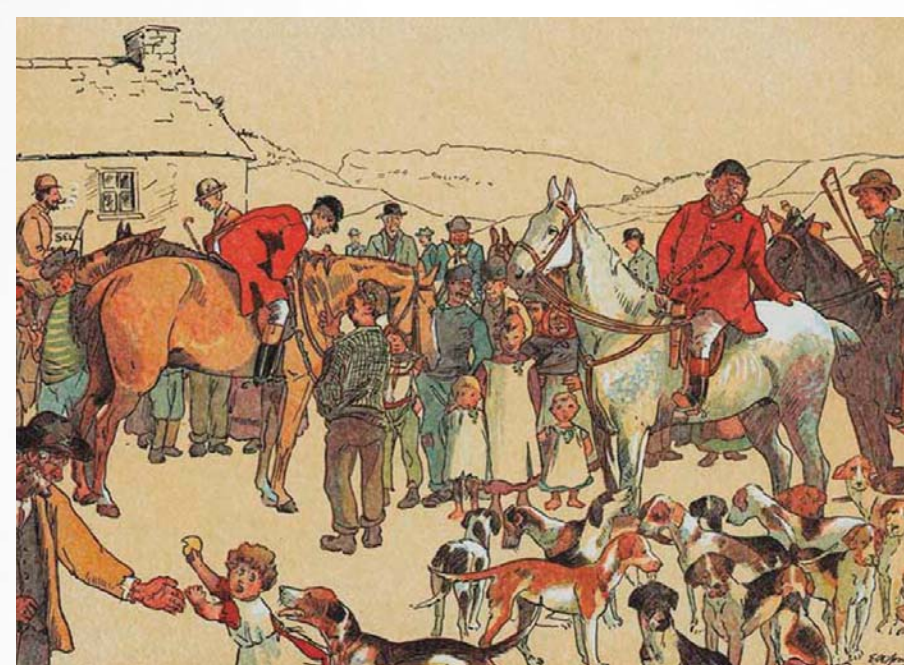
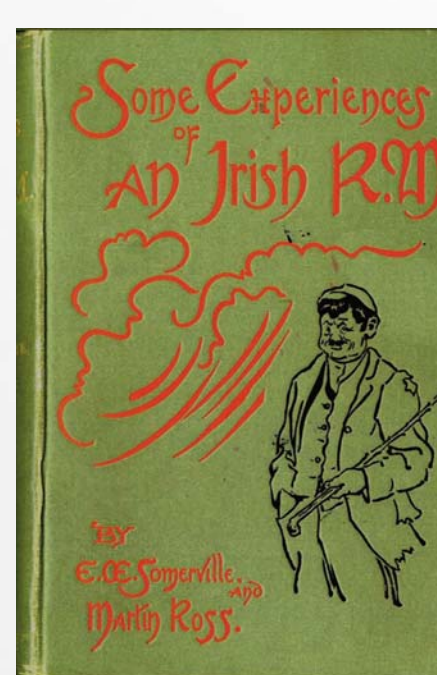


Illustration from *A St. Patrick's Day Hunt 1902* by Edith Somerville.
Source: *Somerville and Ross Literary Estate c/o Curtis Brown, Ltd.*

Her lifelong belief in the importance of female education, and her active participation in the suffrage movement highlights how committed Edith was to the social and political advancement of women at a time when their status was low.



Edith Somerville as M.F.H of the West Carbery Hunt 1905.
Source: *The Edith Oenone Somerville Archive*.



Cover of *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* 1899.
Source: *Author's own*.

Edith Somerville's *The Goose Girl* 1888.
Source: *Cork Corporation*.

