

I was amused recently to find that in the entry for Thomas Moore in the Oxford Companion to English Literature, he is referred to as “the son of a grocer “ while in the Oxford Companion to Irish Literature he is “the son of a Catholic retail merchant”.

Thomas Moore

April 2010

At one time in Ireland, no book came closer to the notion “there should be a copy in every Irish home” than the collection commonly known as “Moore’s Melodies”. Like many people of my own and several earlier generations growing up in Ireland, I came upon Thomas Moore at the age of five, as we spent hours rehearsing “The Minstrel Boy” in first class at the local National School. The green-bound volume with its stamped gilt lettering and embossed shamrocks and harps seemed to us in our early childhood to embody the very essence of Irishness. The book was generally opened after tea when relatives and friends gathered round the piano to sing a variety of popular drawing room songs, just as Joyce had depicted, fifty years earlier in his wonderful short story “The Dead”. In this story, Joyce shows his acute and accurate observation of late colonial Ireland when the protagonist, Gabriel Conroy is rehearsing in his mind the speech he is going to make at the Christmas evening of song and dance in the music teacher’s house on Usher’s Island:

“He was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers. Some quotation that they could recognise from Shakespeare or from the Melodies would be better. The indelicate clacking of the men’s heels and the shuffling of their soles reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his. He would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand...”

Joyce’s story has a meaning which goes deeper than social history. Already by the turn of the Nineteenth century, the “Melodies” are beginning to be devalued, and are shown very subtly in the story, to be regarded by the company as provincial, and out of tune with the cosmopolitan musical world being celebrated.

Two major shifts in culture have taken place in Ireland in recent history. The first such shift was before the Famine and involved the change from the old Gaelic system which was medieval in character to a traditional system which was recognisably early modern. The old Ireland of two hundred years ago was the Ireland of late marriages, intensive Anglicization, religious Puritanism and to a large extent of social aspiration combined with demoralisation and the search for a national identity. The second great shift happened around 1950, when that old Ireland began to disappear into history, as the gombeen man gave way to what would eventually become known as the Celtic Tiger.

Thomas Moore is undoubtedly one of the significant figures of the transition at the point where Anglicization was beginning to be fully effective. Gaelic Ireland was rapidly being superseded by Anglicized Ireland and Moore was intensely aware of the ambiguities that could arise from acculturation. Not only was he aware, but harnessed a deep sense of guilt as expressed in the following lines:

*Oh! Blame not the bard, if he fly to the bowers
Where pleasure lies, carelessly smiling at Fame,
He is born for much more, and in happier hours
His soul might have burned with a holier flame;
The string that now languishes loose o'er the lyre
Might have bent a proud bow to the warrior's dart;
And the lip, which now breathes but the song of desire,
Might have poured the full tide of a patriot's heart.*

This was Moore's appeal to be spared blame for his devotion to pleasure rather than to the lost cause of Erin. But nobody blamed the bard: on the contrary. In his lifetime he was a fashionable and famous poet in England where he mingled with the great and the good and his "Irish Melodies" were to make him known wherever romantic nationalism was flourishing. It won him an extraordinary esteem in Ireland, which was to endure, slowly fading, right up to the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Sadly, later generations of nationalists, if they did not blame the bard, at least treated him with little regard. But in his own time, Thomas Moore was accepted right across the world as one who gave expression to the true sentiment of Ireland.

Moore was not merely a poet. He was a classical scholar, historian, biographer, novelist, composer, patriot and darling of London Whig society. His melodies consistently occupied the no.1 spot in Victorian drawing-room charts in the early 19th century until toppled by Childe Harold Cantos 1 and 2, in March, 1812, by an up-and-coming artist named Byron. Moore's performances reduced Victorian female audiences to tears, equivalent to public displays of emotion today inspired by boybands such as Westlife and Take That.

Byron and Moore were great friends. They shared an innate sense of patriotism; albeit in Moore's case a less spectacular form; his physical attributes and temperament making it imperative he should choose the pen rather than the sword. His work influenced many of his contemporaries, particularly Lord Byron; when Byron left England for the Continent of Europe, he wrote: "My boat is on the shore/And my bark is on the sea/But, before I go, Tom Moore,/Here's a double health to thee".

What I want to do here is look at Moore's background, his literary output, his friendship with Byron and consider why this one-time national poet, whose pen kept alive Irish national sentiment during Ireland's darkest and most disastrous years is now almost forgotten.

Moore belonged to that small group of English-speaking urban Catholics of means, a group whose numbers and significance were to increase rapidly. His formal education at Samuel Whyte's academy on Grafton Street, Dublin, now the site of the internationally famous Bewley's Café, placed him on a level with the Dublin middle-class Protestants with whom he mixed. Another famous past-pupil of Whyte's was playwright Richard Brindsley Sheridan. Moore's religion, however, while the popery laws were in force, debarred him from the professions, from university, from parliament and from the army. For Moore's Ireland of the late eighteenth century was of course one in which a large distinct minority ruled the majority by right of conquest-a right which was

commonly accepted in eighteenth-century thinking. The Glorious Revolution, The Declaration of Rights and the British Constitution, which in England wore the colour of liberty, for the majority in Ireland, wore the colour of alien conquest-alien in religion, in language and in culture. This was felt by Moore and others like him as an intolerable humiliation. He was a brilliant student at Whythe's and excelled in languages, music and the classics. In 1793, the Catholic Relief Act, among the other changes it brought about, opened Trinity College Dublin to Catholics, and Moore, at the age of fifteen, enrolled as a law student; one of the first Roman Catholics to enter these hallowed portals of the ascendancy. While still an undergraduate, he began to publish his poetry and demonstrate his nationalist sympathies. Several of his college friends, including Robert Emmet, were part of a group, most of whom belonged to the Dublin Society of United Irishmen and had become involved in planning which led to the widespread and bloody uprising of 1798. Their influence on Moore was apparent when he anonymously published *A Letter to the students of Trinity College Dublin* proposing they should "*march against the tyrant; let us conquer or die.*" To Mrs. Moore, however, her son's material welfare was more important than Catholic Emancipation or Ireland's political independence. It was because of his awareness of the extraordinary affectionate relationship between mother and son that Robert Emmet, to his eternal credit, discouraged the young Moore from becoming actively involved in a movement which was to have disastrous consequences for all concerned. Years later, in his biography of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Moore speaks of his feelings at that time: "Though but a youth at college, and though so many years have since gone by, the impression of horror and indignation which the acts of the government of the day left upon my mind, is, I confess, at this moment far too freshly alive, to allow me the due calmness of an historian in speaking of them". Moore, undoubtedly a nationalist, was in great sympathy with the ideals of the insurgents but he was never in agreement with their methods. However, he blamed himself for not being involved:

*But, alas for his country!- her pride has gone by,
And that spirit is broken, which never would bend;
O'er the ruin her children in secret must sigh,
For 'tis treason to love her, and death to defend.
Unprized are her sons, till they've learned to betray;
Undistinguished they live if they shame not their sires;
And the torch, that would light them through dignity's way,
Must be caught from the pile where their country expires.*

Another college friend of Moore's, Edward Hudson was to have a profound influence on his future. Hudson was an artist of some merit, a competent flute player, passionately devoted to Irish music. His collection and transcribing of Irish airs, and his exquisite rendering of them, were responsible for Moore's fateful interest in Ireland's native melodies; as was the publication of sixty-six Irish airs by Armagh-born organist Edward Bunting, which he collected during a gathering of native harpers in Belfast in 1792. Moore was so inspired by these beautiful airs that he wrote to Bunting offering words to fit the music. Bunting refused; Moore subsequently used the airs despite Bunting's objections and collaborated with musician, Sir John Stevenson, to form

what must have been the genesis of later song-writing teams such as Gilbert and Sullivan, Rogers and Hart and even Lennon and McCartney.

In his final year at university, Moore worked on his translations from the Greek of the Odes of Anacreon and was encouraged by the Provost to complete the task with a view to getting them published. His friendship with the Provost brought him into contact with what was regarded as the cream of Dublin society. These associations, in his most impressionable years, led to his legendary passion for high society and the drawing-rooms of England.

He took his degree of Bachelor of Arts and like many an Irishman before him, left for London where it had been arranged for him to enter the Middle Temple. He then decided to look for subscribers for the Odes of Anacreon. By April 1799 he was able to write to his parents informing them of his hectic social life; that he had met among others Lord Moira, who was to become his patron. By July of the same year he had met Prince William, brother of the Prince of Wales, Lady Dering, Sir John Coghill, Lord Dudley and was eventually introduced to the Prince, himself, who said he was "happy to know a man of such abilities". Lord Moira obtained permission from the Prince Regent for Moore to dedicate his Odes of Anacreon to His Royal Highness thus engendering profitable subscriptions for their publication.

In the social annals of Regency London we are told that "Mr. Thomas Moore, son of a Dublin grocer, entered drawing-rooms with an air of blythe assurance". To his hostess he would pay his respects "with a gaiety and an ease, combined with a kind of worshipping deference, that was worthy of a prime minister at the court of Love" and towards his own sex he displayed the "frank merry manner of a confident favourite". Byron was later to write "Tom Moore loves a Lord". While Moore undoubtedly had a penchant for the aristocracy, this was an unfortunate remark, in that almost every biography of Byron and Moore has seen fit to remind us of the comment, some insinuating that Moore was the quintessential social climber; the reality being that Moore was the quintessential celebrity. His musical gifts and personal charm made him welcome everywhere.

The Anacreon translations appeared in July 1800. The Morning Post dubbed him "Anacreon Moore", and the book received a wide, and on the whole, encouraging press. However, some of the verses were omitted from the first publication. Mild though they seem by contemporary standards, Victorian editions considered them too risqué. They were certainly different; here are the opening lines to Ode IX:

*I pray thee by the Gods above,
Give me the mighty bowl I love,
And let me sing, in wild delight,
"I will- I will be mad tonight!"*

In 1801 he published his first book of original verse. This volume consisted mainly of juvenile efforts which he published under the pseudonym of "Thomas Little"- alluding to his own diminutive stature {he was only five feet tall}. The "Little" poems were a more daring adventure, culminating in Moore winning a reputation for licentiousness which it took him years to live down. It appears the moral ethos of the

period decreed, at least in some quarters, a blanket respectability for literature and Moore was considered to have transgressed this respectability. The *Edinburgh Review* had referred to his style as "so wantonly voluptuous that it is at once effeminate and childish". Charles Lamb on meeting Moore twenty years later, told him he always held the "Little" poems against him; and Coleridge, who referred to the poems as "wanton", was particularly shocked by the lines:

*Our hearts have suffer'd little harm
In this short fever of desire;
You have not lost a single charm,
Nor I one spark of feeling fire*

*Still the question I must parry,
Still a wayward truant prove:
Where I love I must not marry:
Where I marry, cannot love.*

*Phillis, you little rosy rake,
That heart of yours I long to rifle;
Come, give it me, and do not make
so much ado about a trifle.*

In what might have seemed like an attempt to get Moore out of the way, in 1803, Lord Moira succeeded in getting him the job of Admiralty Registrar at the Naval Prize Court in Bermuda. The Bermuda journey was to prove a major miscalculation in Moore's life. He became bored with this position preferring to tour part of the United States. Unfortunately, instead of resigning, he appointed a deputy, who was to fiddle the books to the tune of £6000.00, for which Moore was held responsible. However, through advances on publications of his works, he eventually managed to pay off the debt. Whatever republican notions he may have had in the 1790's, when Trinity was full of French ideas and talk of liberty, seem to have been dissipated at this stage of his life, when his companions on the American trip were officers of the Royal Navy. The new republic of America did not impress him:

*Who can, with patience, for a moment see
The medley mass of pride and misery,
Of whips and charters, manacles and rights,
Of slaving blacks and democratic whites,
And all the piebald polity that reigns
In a free confusion o'er Columbia's plains?
To think that man, thou just and gentle god,
Should stand before thee, with a tyrant's rod
O'er creatures like himself, with soul from thee.
Yet dare to boast of perfect liberty:
Away, away-I'd rather hold my neck
By doubtful tenure from a sultan's beck,*

*In climes where liberty has scarce been named,
Nor any right but that of ruling claimed,
Than thus to live, where bastard freedom waves
Her fustian flag in mockery over slaves."*

Moore's views here and later were positively libertarian and utterly impatient of hypocrisy and cant; Views he shared with Byron.

In 1806, he published *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems*, which, as I have just indicated, contain poetical satires on America; these and other poems in the volume were criticised with great severity by the *Edinburgh Review*; the reviewer being particularly concerned about the effect the poems might have on the fairer sex; it was on account of the "insult to their delicacy" and "the attack on their purity" that he resented the publication. Although Moore was a warm, friendly, sensual, charming man, whom people liked, he was conscious of being physically small and had a corresponding cockiness and prickliness, feeling called upon to stand up for himself whenever he apprehended a slight. He was so upset by the *Review*'s criticism, he challenged the editor, Francis Jeffrey to fight a duel. The duel was interrupted by the police, who found that neither pistol contained a ball. This nearly led to another duel with Byron, who made a jocose reference to "leadless pistols" in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*; characteristically, Moore went on to enjoy a long-lasting friendship with both Jeffrey, the Scotch reviewer and Byron, the English bard. As for *Epistles, Odes and Other Poems*, it proved to be a roaring success and Moore was again the toast of London society.

Back in Dublin, he returned again to the Irish Melodies; some of the most famous of these were written in the days of his acquaintance with Hudson in Trinity College; and though he had often sung them for the entertainment of his friends, it was not until he realised that native Irish airs, "like too many of our countrymen", were passing "into the service of foreigners" and "enriching the operas and sonatas of continental composers," that he agreed to their publication. To his publishers he wrote "The task which you propose to me, of adapting words to these airs, is by no means easy. The poet who would follow the various sentiments which they express, must feel and understand that rapid fluctuation of spirits, that unaccountable mixture of gloom and levity, which composes the character of my countrymen, and has deeply tinged their music. Even in their liveliest strains we find some melancholy note- intrude, some minor third or flattened seventh, which throws its shade as it passes, and makes even mirth interesting. If Burns had been an Irishman... his heart would have been proud of such music, and his genius would have made it immortal." There is a hint here of Moore jumping on the Burns bandwagon; imitating that sense of Burns as a national poet who collects the songs of his own people. When Byron read Moore, he, too, would do so in the shadow of Burns and that sense {first voiced by Madame de Stael in *D'Allemagne*}, that literature emerges out of the specific social life of a national group. But Moore was not associating himself with peasants {like Burns} or with some notion of traditional Irish abandon, but with aristocratic English and French traditions of licence and song-making which went back to Cavalier and Restoration poetry {with influences of Catullus and Ovid}. In Moore's tradition, songs are songs-they are written to be sung.

The first number of Irish Melodies was published in April 1808. Their success was immediate. "Melody Moore" had "arrived". The Melodies were whistled and sung across the British Isles and beyond, and the arrangement his publishers now made with Moore was that he should go into society in London and popularize his songs, just as a contemporary pop group or singer might today go on tour to popularize their latest album. Moore's singing was highly dramatic; similar to a chant or bardic recitation. This firsthand account by the American poet Nathaniel Parker Willis indicates Moore's unique style of performance:-

He makes no attempt at music. It is a kind of admirable recitative, in which every shade of thought is syllabled and dwelt upon, and the sentiment of the song goes through your blood, warming you to the very eyelids, and starting you to tears if you have soul or sense in you... We all sat around the piano, and after two or three songs of Lady Blessington's choice, he rambled over the keys for awhile and sang "When first I met thee," with a pathos that beggars description. When the last word had faltered out, he rose and took Lady Blessington's hand, said good-night, and was gone before a word was uttered. For a full minute after he had closed the door, no one spoke.

The Irish Melodies ran to an additional eight volumes up to 1834. Beneath the emotional pathos which Moore used to maximum effect during his performances, there was often the intimation of sedition, and a hint that violence would break out again in Ireland if Catholics were not treated as equal citizens; this led to one particular critic remarking on the 1810 collection of "Melodies" as having more politics than harmony.

Apart from the "Melodies", Moore's output was substantial. Long poems included Corruption and Intolerance, The Sceptic, The Loves of Angels and of course, his most famous long poem, Lalla Rookh; political satires such as Travels of an Irish Gentleman in Search of a Religion, A Letter to the Roman Catholics of Dublin and The Fudge Family in Paris; novels like The Epicurean and Captain Rock; and biographies of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Lord Byron. He also embarked upon a four-volume *History of Ireland*, but his scholarship, though fastidious and searching in its way, did not have the broad command of the professional historian, nor was he sufficiently informed about early and medieval Ireland.

I have written in more detail on Lalla Rookh, particularly in Peter Cochran's book, *Byron and Orientalism*, published by Cambridge Scholar's Press in 2006. This oriental epic is almost unread today: in fact some pundits consider it to be unreadable. However, in its heyday, 190 years ago, it was a commercial success of Riverdance proportions. Our colleague Shobhana Bhattacharji tells me it is on the college curriculum in India. It has also come to the fore recently because of the 200th anniversary celebrations of the birth of Robert Schumann, who turned one section of Lalla Rookh, *The Paradise and the Peri* into an oratorio of the same name and is reported to have said "My life's blood is bound up in this work". Schumann's version was in turn a huge success only to fall out of favour for party political reasons, since the oratorio's many past admirers included Mr. Hitler and the German military of both world wars.

Moore's friendship with Byron is legendary; yet, following Byron's death in 1824, the dispute over the Memoirs remains the dominant incident capturing the imagination of writers and biographers; some even going so far as to denigrate Moore for his involvement - Benita Eisler, for example, refers to him in this context as "the abject Moore". This criticism of the poet is unfair. It is clear that he was no match against the entrenched positions of Hobhouse, Murray and the wily representatives of Augusta Leigh and Anabella Milbanke; and, as a biographer, he would have been appalled at the prospect of burning Byron's memoirs.

That "Moore has been neglected" is an understatement. It is now hard to believe that during the mid-decades of the nineteenth century he was revered as "The Bard of Erin". Yet, in Declan Kiberd's best-selling work *Inventing Ireland*, he doesn't merit a mention. His neglect is due to an amalgam of circumstances, the primary one being that by today's standards, he was not a great poet. Moore's kind of poetry {and it includes Byron's songs} has not been amenable to new criticism and its heirs. The traditional model of lyric as in Shakespeare's songs or Rochester's songs {or Moore and Byron} was displaced by the new Romantic lyric as in Ode to a Nightingale. The new model of middle class writers like Wordsworth and Keats was earnest, not social, not sexual. In this new Romantic tradition poems called songs are not usually meant to be sung; they invoke an idea of song but are not songs themselves. Also, Schubert's dramatic professional performance song replaced the whole tradition of poetic song, making it seem almost archaic and inferior. It is just as true of Burns, who is read in Scotland but hardly ever in England and then only his satires, never his songs, because we don't know how to read them. They seem too simple. Another reason is that Moore is not aristocratic or, like Burns, bawdy enough. There is a whiff of drawing-room taste about him {as there is with Campbell, Rogers and Byron's songs} which is very difficult for modern academic-led taste to come to terms with. Twentieth Century criticism is only interested in analysable meanings and pays no attention to cadence, lilt and song properties which culminate in the marriage of words to music.

Following his death in 1852, Irish novelist, Lady Morgan and poet, Sir Samuel Ferguson, among others, decided to form a committee to seek funds for the erection of a statue to Moore. This committee crawled from crisis to crisis finding very little national enthusiasm or money for the project. Following reams of negative publicity, the statue was eventually unveiled by the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Carlisle, in October 1857. It was immediately apparent that someone had blundered. This was how a correspondent put it in the Dublin Builder:-

Botched at first in pedestal and base,
Botched again to fit him in his place.

Lady Morgan decided the statue was "grotesque" and might be anyone but little Moore. As if to complete the humiliation of the National Bard, Dublin Corporation saw fit to let him preside over the largest public gent's lavatory in the city, a fact that did not escape the wily James Joyce. In *Ulysses*, Bloom passes "under Tommy Moore's roguish finger. They did right putting him up over a urinal; meeting of the waters {and all that}. {There} ought to be places for women {though}. Running into cake shops". The saga of the statue led to endless caricatures of Moore and, to quote Terence

De Vere White, in his biography, was "the strongest argument for his {Moore's} decision to live in England". De Vere White goes on to call the statue "a libel in metal, holding Moore up to posterity's ridicule and contempt".

However, the truth of his neglect in Ireland lies more in the fact that Moore's Melodies came to represent sentimental nationalism, in all its pitiful glory, extolled in poetry and song by armchair republicans. With the founding of Conradh Na Gaeilge {the Irish language revival movement} towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Celtic Revival of W.B. Yeats, John Millington Synge and Lady Gregory, and the birth of "a terrible beauty" following the 1916 Rising, Moore's work was all but forgotten.

However, there are occasions, in Ireland, when Moore makes a brief come-back. In 1995, Hyperion issued an album called *Invocation – Thomas Moore's Irish Melodies* with new and interesting arrangements directed by Timothy Roberts and in 1998, the 200th anniversary of the 1798 rebellion, a further CD of his melodies came out under the title *Romancing Rebellion* by the prominent Irish soprano, Kathleen Tynan. The 150th anniversary of his death in 2004 was celebrated by numerous concerts and biographical programmes on Irish television and radio, bringing his name once again to millions of people. In the academic world, the recent book by our colleague, Jeffery Vail entitled "*The Literary Relationship of Lord Byron and Thomas Moore*" {reviewed in the Byron Journal} is a welcome and important study, demonstrating the influence both poets had on each other's life and work, and is an excellent basis for further study in this area. Two further biographies of Moore have appeared since then. Lucinda Kelly's *Ireland's Minstrel* was published in 2006 followed by her namesake, Ronan Kelly with *Bard of Erin*, quite a comprehensive study, in 2008.

In conclusion, let us remember Byron's words:

**"Moore has a peculiarity of talent, or rather talents-
poetry, music, voice, all his own;
and an expression in each, which never was, nor will be, possessed by another".**

Allan Gregory, April, 2010