

Thomas Moore: Enduring endearing young charms?

This year's Conference coincides with the 150th anniversary of the death of Irish poet, Thomas Moore. Moore was not merely a poet. He was classical scholar, historian, biographer, novelist, composer of music, 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 disabilities and temperament making it imperative he should choose the pen in preference to the sword. Moore's work influenced many of his contemporaries, particularly Lord Byron; when Byron finally 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!".¹

This paper looks briefly at Moore's background, his literary output, and considers why this one-time national poet, whose pen kept alive Irish national sentiment during some of Ireland's darkest and most disastrous years, is now all but forgotten.

Moore's formal education was at Samuel Whyte's academy on Grafton Street, Dublin, now the site of the internationally renowned Bewley's Café. He was a brilliant student and excelled in languages, music and the classics. At the age of fifteen, he enrolled at Dublin University {Trinity College} 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 friends, including Robert Emmet, were United Irishmen {a revolutionary society founded in Belfast by Wolfe Tone}. Their influence on Moore was apparent when he anonymously published *A Letter to the students of Trinity College Dublin* proposing that these very men {the Imperial Government} "should by resigning their power, expose themselves to the just vengeance of the nation they have injured and oppressed."² To Mrs. Moore, however, her son's material welfare was more important than Catholic Emancipation or Ireland's political independence. It was because 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: "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".³ Moore was a nationalist, in great sympathy with the ideals of the insurgents, but he was never in agreement with their methods.

Also at Trinity, Moore met Edward Hudson who was to have a lasting influence on his future. Hudson was an artist of some merit, a competent flute player, passionately devoted to 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 1796. 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 duos such as Gilbert and Sullivan, Rogers and Hart and 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.

Moore took his degree of Bachelor of Arts and like many an Irishman before him left for London where it had been decided he should read for the bar and enter the Middle Temple. He also proceeded 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 later to become his patron. By July of the same year he had met Prince William, brother of the Prince of Wales, and was eventually introduced to the Prince, himself, who said he was "happy to know a man of such abilities".⁴ 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".⁵ 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"⁶; and towards his own sex he displayed the "frank merry manner of a confident favourite"⁷. 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, these were considered 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!'⁸

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 took him years to live down. This suggests the moral ethos of the period decreed, at least in some quarters, a blanket respectability for literature. Moore was considered to have transgressed this respectability. Byron, who was later to endure a similar critique refers to Moore in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* as:

The young Catullus of his day
As sweet, but as immoral his lays⁹

Byron was not alone in his censure of Moore's lays. The Edinburgh Review referred to his style as "so wantonly voluptuous that it is at once effeminate and childish"¹⁰. Charles Lamb on meeting Moore as late as 1823, told him he always held the "Little" poems against him; and Coleridge, who referred to the poems as "wanton"¹¹, must have been particularly shocked by the lines:

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

Where I marry, cannot love.¹²

and

Phyllis, 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.¹³

In 1806, he published *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems*, which contain poetical satires on America; these were criticised with great severity in 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"¹⁴ and "the attack on their purity"¹⁵ that he resented the publication. The book was a roaring success and Moore was the toast of London.

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,"¹⁶ 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... If Burns had been an Irishman, his heart would have been proud of such music, and his genius would have made it immortal."¹⁷ 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 edition of *Irish Melodies* was published in April 1808 in two volumes. 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 an album. His singing was highly dramatic; similar to a chant or bardic recitation. This firsthand account by 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.¹⁸

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 lead to one particular critic remarking on the 1810 collection of "*Melodies*" as having more politics than harmony.

Apart from the "*Melodies*", Moores's output was substantial. Long poems included *Corruption and Intolerance*, *The Sceptic*, *The Loves of Angels* and *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*.

His 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 recent 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. 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 anaysable 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:

Botched at first in pedestal and base,
Botched again to fit him in his place.¹⁹

This was how a correspondent put it in the *Dublin Builder*. 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 lavatory in the city, a fact that did not escape 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. Ought to be places for women. 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".²⁰

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}, the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Celtic Revival of Yeats and Lady Gregory, and the birth of "a terrible beauty" following the 1916 Rising, Moore's work was all but forgotten.

There is hope yet, though, for a "Moore come-back". The anniversary of his death was celebrated this year 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 Jeffery Vail entitled *The Literary Relationship of Lord Byron and Thomas Moore* { reviewed in the current edition of 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.

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".²¹

Allan Gregory

ANNOTATIONS

1. *Poetical Works of Lord Byron*: Oxford University Press, London 1930, p 100.
2. Strong, L.A.G.; *The Minstrel Boy*, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., London, 1937, p.48
3. *Ibid.*, p.57
4. *Ibid.*, p.75
5. MacCall, Seamus; *Thomas Moore*, Phoenix Publishing Co., Ltd., Dublin and Belfast 1935, p.64
6. *Ibid.* p.64
7. *Ibid.* p.64
8. *Moore's Poetical Works*: Frederick Warne & Co., London, 1900, p.13
9. De Vere White, Terence; *Tom Moore-The Irish Poet*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1977, p.35
10. *Ibid.* p.54

11. Ibid. p 35
12. *Moore's Poetical Works*, p.62
13. Ibid. p.63
14. De Vere White, Terence; p. 55
15. Ibid. p.55
16. Ibid. p. 72,
17. Ibid. p.72,73
18. Vail, Jeffery W.; *The Literary Relationship of Lord Byron & Thomas Moore*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 2000, p.85
19. De Vere White, Terence; p. xii
20. Ibid. p.xii
21. Vail, Jeffery W.; p. 83