

## THOMAS MOORE

### AND THE IRISH MELODIES

#### AN IMPEACHMENT

The following article from the pen of Mr. M. Nolan appeared in a recent issue of the *Lyttelton Times* :—

Preparatory to a good deal of undeserved criticism William Hazlitt opens his essay on Moore with the following words:— 'His verse is like a shower of beauty, a dance of images, a stream of music, or like the spray of a waterfall tinged by the morning beam with rosy light. . . His subject is set off by a dazzling veil of poetic diction like a wreath of flowers gemmed with innumerable dew-drops, that weep, tremble, and glitter in liquid softness and pearly light, while the song of birds ravishes the ear, and languid odors breathe around.' Few students of Moore will be inclined to say that this glowing eulogium exaggerates the beauty of his verse. Peris and nymphs, and angels of doubtful character gambol and flirt and pirouette through his pages, but never a leprachaun nor an Irish peasant. His verses are redolent of the fumes of Mayfair, but they never exhale the exhilarating perfume of his own dear bogs.

It was perhaps never before given to a poet to have the same rich field for the display of his genius or for the creation of a national spirit among his countrymen as was given to Moore, but he failed to take advantage of his opportunities. There were few countries whose histories were so rich in that charming romance, which throws its glamour over the legends of the past, as was Ireland, while stories of valor such as has seldom been equalled bristle with ever-recurring persistence through its annals. But Moore made little or no use of them. He had in the history of Ireland the story of a people whose fidelity to faith and fatherland has never been surpassed and whose loyalty to constituted authority could, at any moment, be purchased by the most ordinary kindness. He had a story, that if told as he could tell it, would thrill the hearts of his country's oppressors. He had before him the history of a cause which despised the scaffold and sanctified the felon's den; which was ever trampled upon, but never crushed. He had all this and more than this, but the fatuous smiles of the London aristocracy and the enervating odors of the London drawing-rooms debauched him from his plain duty and his first love. While his country was in chains and suffering all the pangs of famine he had the hardihood to sing

'My dream of life from morn till night  
Was love, still love,'

and when he lightly touched, as he sometimes did, on his country's wrongs, it was as if to show the dwellers of Mayfair how very poetic and sentimental those wrongs could be made. It is true that he wrote clever satires on the penal laws, but like those incisive sermons that were preached in London a few years ago against the smart set, they were so brilliant, so scathing, and so refined that the people they were meant to reach and reform, and make ashamed of themselves, only relished and enjoyed them for their beauty. He never told them of the atrocities of Drogheda or Athlone, nor of the burnings at Wexford. No, the repetition of these things might jar on the polite susceptibilities of his London friends, therefore they must be left unsung. The darling of the upper circle dare not tread too heavily on its toes. There was a certain fence over which the poet may not climb, and over which Moore never tried to climb. The smiles of Royalty and the caresses of high society were the fatal extinguishers of his patriotism.

That Moore possessed the power to stir the hearts of his countrymen to assert themselves and that he had the opportunity given to him to do so, when he was asked to write words to some of the best of the Irish melodies, no one will question. He knew, as perhaps

no other man of his time in Ireland knew, how to tell the story of his country's wrongs, and here was the opportunity offered to him, but he failed signally to embrace it. What is there in the words of such songs as 'The time I've lost in wooing,' 'To ladies' eyes around, boy,' or 'The last rose of summer,' and others of this class to entitle them to be called 'Irish National Melodies,' save for the fact that they are wedded to some of the finest national folk songs the world has yet produced? Those words, beautiful as they certainly are, would long ago have vanished like other equally good things into oblivion but for the sweet music of the outlawed and blind harpers that has saved them. (It may not be out of place to say here that some of the finest of the old Irish melodies, such as 'Shawn O'Dier Anglanna,' 'Roush Agan Garric,' and others of this class have never been touched by Moore on account of the difficulty of adapting their irregular metre to English words.)

Strange as it appears, it is a fact that the intentions of the promoters of the melodies were largely frustrated by Moore. It was suggested by the lovers of Irish folk songs, to collect all the best of the old airs and adapt them to English words containing, as frequently as possible, allusions to the past history of the country, its legends and scenery and the manners and habits of its people. How far Moore has carried out these ideas may be seen by anyone who takes the trouble to look through his melodies, the first number of which appeared in 1807 and the last in May, 1834, thus taking twenty-seven years for their publication.

Perhaps to many readers of this paper my personal opinion on Moore or his Melodies may not be worth two rows of pins, therefore I shall briefly lay before them the opinion of one or two Irishmen whose qualification in this line cannot be questioned. Sir Robert Stewart in a lecture on 'Irish Musicians' delivered in Dublin (of which I have a report before me) referring to Stevenson's connection with Moore in the production of the Melodies said that Moore's musical knowledge was of the very slenderest, though his taste and feeling were indisputable. 'Stevenson,' he said, 'was much blamed for mutilating the airs of the Melodies, but the fault lay with Moore himself, who altered the airs to suit his words.'

Some few years ago Professor Charles Villiers Stanford, an eminent Irish musician, brought out an edition of the Melodies in which he took the trouble to restore to their original beauty and simplicity those airs which Moore had altered or tampered with. The book is published by Boosey and Co., Regent street, London. Mr. Stanford states that his researches were much facilitated by the kindness of the authorities of the British Museum in giving him the free use of the musical section of the library. A good deal of what Professor Stanford writes will be startling news to some of Moore's friends in the Dominion. First, he says that the compositions of Sir John Stevenson, were largely influenced by the works of Haydn the Austrian composer, and that therefore a more unsuitable model for the wild and rugged melodies of Ireland could scarcely be chosen, for this led to the alteration of scales and characteristic intervals, such as the flat seventh, which are the very life and soul of the old Irish music. Then Moore came along and completed the transformation by supplying words, often beautiful in themselves, but quite out of keeping with the style of the airs, such as sentimental poems to jig times, dirges for agricultural melodies, battle hymns for reels, and so on. In a few instances, as Mr. Stanford admits, the melodies are so intrinsically fine, and so versatile in their adaptability to various sentiments as to endure the change of character without loss of expressiveness. The following are some of Professor Stanford's corrections: 'Erin the tear and the smile in thine eyes,' the original of which is 'Aileen Aroon.' In this air Moore has omitted several bars to suit his words; they are restored by Professor Stanford. In 'How dear to me the hour,' Moore has spoilt the tune by introducing wholly irrelevant intervals and altering the final cadence. Of 'Let Erin remember' the author says, 'This air is given by Bunting as a quick dance tune. Moore has altered it, halving the

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