

Molloy, Michael Joseph

by Anthony Roche

Molloy, Michael Joseph (1914–94), playwright, was born 3 March 1914 in Milltown, Co. Galway, son of William Molloy (d. 1920), originally of Glenamaddy, Co. Galway, who ran a shop at Milltown, and Maria Molloy (née Tucker), a native of Claremorris and a teacher at Milltown girls' school. He was the fifth in a family of five boys and three girls; two other children died at birth. Joe (as he was known in the family) was educated at Milltown national school and St Jarlath's College, Tuam, Co. Galway, from 1927 to 1931. His father died when he was six and his uncle Sonny Tucker became an important influence, encouraging his life-long habit of extensive reading. In 1931 he went to St Columba's Seminary at Dalgan Park, Shrulce, Co. Galway, but discontinued his studies for the priesthood when he contracted tuberculosis. He underwent several operations, had to use crutches for three years, and was left with a permanent limp. While under the care of the Newcastle sanatorium in Co. Wicklow in the late 1930s, he was encouraged by a friend to attend a performance of two plays by George Bernard Shaw (qv) ('Candida' and 'Village wooing') at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. He became a regular playgoer and was inspired to begin a career as a dramatist.

Having lived in the family home at Milltown until 1955, he took up residence at a nearby farmhouse on the marriage of his brother Christy. Despite his handicap, he worked the small farm for the rest of his days to supplement the irregular income from his plays. Molloy never married and was attended by his housekeeper, Agnes Johnston. He was a familiar sight as he travelled around his local area on the high bicycle he had fitted with one fixed pedal; the purpose of these journeys was to collect folklore, which provided a rich body of material for his plays and which he gathered into a prose volume, though this remains unpublished (privately held).

M. J. Molloy had nine of his thirteen plays produced at the Abbey Theatre, from 'The old road' in 1943 to 'Petticoat loose' in 1979. His plays reveal him as a folklorist in the line of J. M. Synge (qv) and draw on the same mixture of Christian and pagan beliefs, but with a more sympathetic understanding of his characters' catholicism. There is also the same strong vein of grotesque physical humour. His accomplished one-act play 'The paddy pedlar' (1953) is based on a folk tale about a man carrying the body of his dead mother around in a sack, and takes its bearings from an extraordinary amalgam of beliefs about the afterlife. Molloy's history plays re-create a world that shows the oppressions of colonialism on a subject race who respond with a wild anarchy mixed with subdued acceptance. His plays with a contemporary setting most often take emigration as their theme and are prophetic of later work by John B. Keane (qv) and Brian Friel. Molloy writes in a heightened folk idiom, which only rarely loses touch with natural speech. 'The old road' won an Abbey Prize and was staged in 1943 with Cyril Cusack (qv) as the young farm

labourer trying to decide whether to emigrate to England or to stay in Ireland. Joseph Holloway (qv) gave a touching account of the shy author taking his curtain at this first production, who, though his lips moved, was unable to say anything. 'The visiting house' followed in 1946, and dramatises a night of singing, dancing, and storytelling, peopled by a richly diverse cast of characters.

Molloy's first masterpiece, 'The king of Friday's men', was launched in 1948. It takes the uncompromising theme of the *droit du seigneur* exercised by an eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish landlord on the most beautiful young women on his estate; his latest prey seeks to evade her fate by enticing the aged faction fighter, Bartley Dowd, to fight the landlord on her behalf. The play recreates that eighteenth-century world with colour, immediacy, and a strong sense of how the colonial system envelops all of the characters save the marginalised Bartley (who in the first production was played by the actor and author Walter Macken (qv)). Molloy's even greater 'The wood of the whispering' followed in 1953 at the Queen's Theatre, where the Abbey company was now playing. It is his most probing treatment of the effects of emigration, an issue of which Molloy, living in Galway, was only too aware – he made an unsolicited and heartfelt deposition to the government commission of inquiry on the subject (which reported in July 1954). 'The wood' is the most Beckettian of Irish plays, with its old tramp, Sanbatch Daly, and a host of older characters who are not so much eccentric as damaged in some profound way. At the play's close Sanbatch feigns madness to gain entry to the asylum, though he is not in truth far from genuine madness; the various younger couples agree to stay and marry in Ireland rather than go their separate ways back to England. This idea of cultural renewal also underscored the importance Molloy placed on the staging of his plays by amateur drama companies.

From the 1960s onwards Molloy's plays were less readily accepted by the Abbey Theatre and a Dublin audience, but they still found a ready reception in his native place. In later works, such as 'Daughter from over the water' (1963), the older characters retain their exuberance, but the younger ones seem beyond his reach. His last play, 'The bachelor's daughter', was given its first performance by the Tuam Theatre Guild on 3 March 1985. The revival by Galway's Druid Theatre of 'The wood of the whispering' in 1983, which Molloy lived to see, was a revelation, and a reminder to the wider theatrical and academic world of the continuing importance of this playwright, not just as the 'missing link' between Synge and Keane but as an original in his own right.

In later years Molloy was a member of Aosdána. He died of aortic aneurysms at Galway Hospital on 27 May 1994. He remained a committed catholic all his life and his tombstone reads: 'Woe to those who call evil good and who call good evil' (Isaiah, 5: 20).

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