

Moore, George Augustus

by Robert Welch

Moore, George Augustus (1852–1933), novelist, critic, memoirist, and cultural activist, was born 24 February 1852 at Moore Hall, Ballyglass, in Co. Mayo, a ‘big house’ in the Anglo-Irish style, built by his grandfather (another George Moore) in 1792 with money accumulated in the Spanish wine trade. However, unlike most such houses, Moore Hall was a catholic residence, the Moores having preserved their wealth and their confessional allegiance over the generations. George Moore was the eldest son of George Henry Moore (qv) – a founder of the Catholic Defence Association, a leading figure in the independent Irish party, and a successful breeder and trainer of thoroughbred horses – and Mary Moore (née Blake). Moore's great-uncle, John Moore (qv) was president for a few days of the short-lived republic of Connacht during the 1798 rebellion. Moore's background and upbringing were unusual: though catholic, the Moores lived very much in the style of the protestant ascendancy, whose houses they frequented in Mayo; and yet the family had strong nationalist and even republican leanings: George Henry Moore, the novelist's father, appears to have taken the Fenian oath. These contradictory tendencies are to be seen in the complexities of Moore's mature narrative art.

Early life: Mayo, England, and Paris The young Moore had, in some respects, an idyllic childhood. Left to his own devices, to a great extent, he spent time with the jockeys, trainers, and stable hands, listening to their talk of racing and money, and their stories and tales. From this immersion in a living folk culture Moore developed an ear for speech and dialogue, and a talent for storytelling. His allegiance to the reality of that culture is reflected in his later publishing practices: from *A story-teller's holiday* (1918) onwards he issued privately printed first editions of some of his work, for subscribers, under the imprint ‘Cumann Seon-eolais na h-Éireann’ (The Society for the Ancient Knowledge of Ireland), where the Gaelic is printed in an adaptation of the Gaelic font used in Louvain in the seventeenth century.

He was not without formal education, though his detractors – among them himself in mischievous mood – often asserted that he was virtually uneducated; from 1861 to 1867 he was at St Mary's College, Oscott, a catholic public school near Birmingham, which played a leading role in the renewal of catholic belief in nineteenth-century England. His father had attended St Mary's before him, but Moore's career there was undistinguished. His father was advised to remove him because of his very slow progress in learning; however, Moore himself claimed, in *Hail and farewell*, that his expulsion came about because of a sexual indiscretion and a refusal to subscribe to the tenets of orthodox catholicism. He returned to Mayo and resumed his informal education on the estate. He also came to know the young Oscar Wilde (qv), whose family holidayed in Mayo. This sojourn back home was to be short-lived.

In November 1868 Moore's father regained his seat at Westminster as MP for Mayo, and the family moved to London. G. H. Moore was keen to see his son join the military, and he was persuaded to study for the army entrance examinations under a tutor, though, as a concession, he was allowed to attend art classes at the Kensington Museum. His father died in 1870 and Moore inherited, thereby avoiding the army. The estate was a large one, some 12,500 acres in all; the income was enough to allow him to go to Paris and continue his artistic studies at the age of 21. Leaving his brother Maurice in overall charge of the estate, Moore enrolled at the Académie des Beaux Arts on the Left Bank, but found it staid and its discipline of a rigour (classes started at 7.00 a.m.) he found not to his taste. His Parisian experiences he was to describe in *Confessions of a young man* (1888), which had an influence on the similarly titled *A portrait of the artist as a young man* by James Joyce (qv), begun in 1904, but not published in book form until 1916. He moved to the studio of Rodolphe Julian, one of the most prestigious of the independent artistic schools in Paris. At the Académie Julian he met the English painter Lewis Welldon Hawkins ('Marshall' in the *Confessions*) who introduced him to Parisian life, including its sexual opportunities. For a time they shared an apartment (and almost a mistress) but they became estranged as it dawned on Moore that he, unlike Hawkins, had no natural talent for painting. After spending more than a year in a state of creative impotence, he turned to literature. First, he studied hard, reading Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Charles de Baudelaire, Théodore de Banville, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé, the latter of whom invited him as a guest to his Tuesday evening get-togethers. With Mallarmé he frequented the famous artistic café, the Nouvelles Athènes on the Place Pigalle. There he met Monet (who was to paint Moore on a number of occasions), Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, and Emile Zola. Zola was, with Balzac, his chief inspiration, in particular his emphasis on naturalism in art, as a kind of science of truth. With excitement he discovered Zola's doctrine that a writer should use as little imagination as possible and that plot and décor were contrivances to distract from the truth of life. He met the great novelist at a costume ball in 1878, to celebrate a play adapted from Zola's novel *L'assommoir*. Baudelaire's and Rimbaud's influences can be seen at work in Moore's first recorded book (a play, 'Worldliness', has been lost), a volume of poems with the unoriginal and decadent title *Flowers of passion* (1878), followed by the equally flagrant *Pagan poems* (1881). These contain poems of advanced and exploratory sexuality.

Return to England and Ireland; early novels In 1879 he moved to England and then back to Ireland, because his income had begun to diminish, owing to his tenants being unable to pay rent as a consequence of poor harvests, but also because they were being radicalised as part of the Land League movement, established in that year in Castlebar, Co. Mayo. He is outrageously ironic concerning this in the *Confessions*, complaining about the lack of consideration shown by the peasantry in depriving him of the luxuries of Paris, his elegant apartment, and his pet python. In London, where he settled in 1880, he set out to become a Zolaesque naturalist in English, his verse having met with no success. His first novel,

A modern lover (1883), described the amorous activities of an unscrupulous artist, and his exploitation of women. Because of its explicit content it was banned by Mudie's circulating library, one of the chief means of book distribution in nineteenth-century Britain. This act elicited an attack by Moore on the circulating library system and its controls: *Literature at nurse; or, Circulating morals* (1885). In that year also he published, with Henry Vizetelly, the English publisher of translations of Zola, *A mummer's wife*. This is a story of seduction, pregnancy, enforced marriage, adultery, and alcoholism, as well as being an account of a woman's subjection to the will of an artistic male, the actor of the title. The book was issued in single-volume format, and was therefore aimed at buyers of books rather than the borrowers using the services of circulating libraries, which preferred the three-decker imprint for commercial reasons. The novel, which sold well, represented another blow against the circulating libraries. It also introduced Zola's social realism and his readiness to depict degradation and addiction to English readers. *A drama in muslin* (serialised in the *Court and Society Review*, 1886) was a feminist novel, reflecting his friendships with Eleanor Marx, daughter of the great social reformer, and Olive Schreiner, the South African socialist and novelist (from whom he gained an understanding of the Boers and their attitude to empire). This novel uses an ascendancy 'big house' as its backdrop, but Moore takes great pains to reveal the divide between rich and poor, the pointlessness of overindulgent and thoughtless living, and the ways in which Anglo-Irish society devalued women as a form of sexual currency in a marriage market that is cruel and heartless. The land question and the issue of women's rights are intertwined in the narrative.

He continued to visit Ireland and Moore Hall, where his brother Maurice was still overseeing the management of the estate by the agent Tom Rutledge. These were increasingly difficult times, as the land war, activated by Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) and Michael Davitt (qv), was marking the beginning of the end for the landlord classes. The age of deference towards his class was beginning to come to a close, and his attitude towards his tenantry was complex, mixing fear, concern, loathing, and indifference. This complex of attitudes towards Ireland and the Irish is given expression in *Parnell and his island* (1887), a collection of bitterly satirical essays and impressions, originally written in French for *Le Figaro*. This attitude also informs sections of the *Confessions*, where he confesses to 'two dominant notes' in his character: 'an original hatred of my native country, and a brutal loathing of the religion I was brought up in'. As an antidote to these passions he chose to live in Sussex close to friends, the Bridgers, where he loved the cultivated countryside, a stark contrast to the Mayo bogs and lakes (to which he was also deeply attached), and where, extraordinarily, he had the idea of running a rabbit farm, a project which failed. Sussex and the Downs provided the setting for the novels *A mere accident* (1887) and *Spring days* (1888), conceived as part of a series of fictions about young men and their vulnerability. John Norton, in *A mere accident*, based on Moore's cousin Edward Martyn (qv), is a homosexual who seeks to bury his instincts in a loveless marriage, but is saved by the accident of the title. Moore, it is clear, was ready to tackle issues that caused discomfort: *A drama in muslin* had lesbian

affection as one of its themes; the thoughtless viciousness of men towards women is, even by now, a constant theme; frustrated homosexual love intrigues him; and he inveighs against any tendency to glamorise Irish country people. In this he reveals, of course, his own prejudices, impulses, and snobberies, but such emotional honesty is unusual, at that time or any other.

London and impressionism In 1889 Moore removed to London, where he rented rooms in the Temple, overlooking the Thames. Through his friendships with the leading French painters, and his immersion in the cultural life of Paris at a crucial stage in its early modernist phase, Moore had a deep familiarity with and understanding of the impressionist painters and their predecessors. He maintained contact with his Parisian friends and returned frequently, and this first-hand appreciation of contemporary art and artists informs his writings on the visual arts. Contributions to various journals were collected in *Impressions and opinions* (1891) and *Modern painting* (1893). These writings proved successful and meant that Moore had now the satisfaction of earning a living through his own labour. Two novels, *Mike Fletcher* (1889) and *Vain fortune* (1891), were not successful, but the latter won the admiration of James Joyce, who was attracted by the love-triangle that forms the basis of the tragic story of misplaced sexual desire. *Esther Waters* (1894) was Moore's first major fictional success, and reflects a relentless grip on the details of ordinary life, a deep awareness of the vulnerability of women, an impressive range of sympathy, and something approaching reverence for the disadvantaged, working people, and addictive personalities. It is an emotionally generous achievement and draws not only on his reading of Zola, Flaubert, and Balzac, but also on his intimate knowledge (from his childhood) of the worlds of racing, gambling, and drink. But the main inspiration for this work was almost certainly his appreciation of women's issues that he came to through his friends Eleanor Marx and Olive Schreiner. *Celibates* (1895), a collection of short stories which are studies in sexual and emotional disorientation, confront themes such as repressed homosexuality, lesbianism, and transvestism. Forceful and bleakly vivid, they only began to find an audience in the relatively recent past, so uncompromisingly do they deal with the emotional consequences of erotic deprivation.

The influence of Wagner and Yeats Moore had become adept at changing his imaginative universe. With excitement he discovered the music drama of Richard Wagner, whose art, it seemed to him, flowed out of deep interiors of the human personality, interiors given shape by the use of symbols, mythology, and what Carl Jung would call archetypes. The ever-shifting tonalities of Wagner's music, combined with his primordial symbology, seemed to reach into the very soul, the 'under life', as he called it in 'Since the Elizabethans', an essay for the magazine *Cosmopolis* (October 1893). The challenge he now set himself was to create a style and mode of narrative that would evoke this under life: hence developed the 'melodic line', as he called it, that he started to evolve in *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and *Sister Teresa* (1901), two Wagnerian novels about the religious life, reflecting his friendship with Pearl Craigie, the American heiress, convert to catholicism, and novelist. Evelyn

Innes, based on Craigie, falls in love with Ulick Deane (based on W. B. Yeats (qv), whom he had now befriended), but turns away from the life of the senses to enter a convent, where peace does not await her. Female sexuality, and its expression and repression, is the dominant theme in these two novels. They reflect his affair with Pearl Craigie and with other women of very different temperaments, but especially his complicated relationship with a young and beautiful American, Maud Alice Burke, who married Sir Bache Cunard in 1895, to become Lady Cunard. Her daughter, Nancy, born in 1896, may have been fathered by Moore. Asked by her many years later if she was his daughter, he told Nancy that only her mother would know that for certain.

Yeats's influence on Moore was profound. They had met in 1894 at the Cheshire Cheese in Fleet St., where Moore found the poet sitting 'in front of a large steak', as he described the scene in *Hail and farewell*. He now found himself drawn back to Ireland, and this cultural reconnection was related to a growing discontent with his life in England, and with England itself, which he regarded as in the grip of a crass materialism and sensuality. The Boer war he saw as an expression of greed and financial self-interest, with Britain seeking to maintain as much control as possible over the fabulously valuable diamond mines. Furthermore, his brother Maurice, who was an army man, was sent out on active service. So, Ireland beckoned, and when Edward Martyn, a fellow Wagnerite, suggested he return to take part in the Irish literary revival, now in full swing, he agreed. Martyn was closely involved with the Irish Literary Theatre, precursor of the Abbey, which had been established by Yeats and Lady Gregory (qv). Martyn was an enthusiast for the Irish language, as was Lady Gregory, and Moore's discontent with the English language itself at this time ('a woolly language without a verbal system', as he later described it in *Hail and farewell*) fuelled an enthusiasm for the revival of Irish. Moore, eccentrically, threatened to disinherit his brother Maurice's children if he did not raise them speaking Irish, though he never troubled to learn the language himself. He did, however, believe passionately in the importance of the Gaelic League, founded in 1893, and headed by Douglas Hyde (qv), a Connacht man like himself, and whom he described cruelly as 'cajoling, superficial, and affable' in *Hail and farewell*.

Yeats enthralled him with his idealised evocations of ancient Ireland and its 'under life', still manifest, so Yeats claimed, in the folklore of Irish country people. From Yeats's standpoint, and that of Lady Gregory, Martyn, and George Russell (qv), the enlisting of Moore to the Irish literary cause was the recruitment of a significant contemporary reputation. Moore settled in Dublin in 1901 in a house on Ely Place, and set to work. He had had produced, by J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre in London, a play called 'The strike at Arlingford' (1893), and he assisted Martyn in the writing of 'The heather field' (1899) and in the rewrite of 'The tale of a town', produced by the Irish Literary Theatre (the latter as 'The bending of the bough') in 1900. With Yeats he collaborated on 'Diarmuid and Grania', Lady Gregory inviting them both to Coole in the summer of 1900, and sitting them under an ash-tree in the garden until she realised how easily they fell into disagreement. When the play

was produced in 1901 (featuring a funeral dirge at the close, specially commissioned from Edward Elgar) the acting of the English players was so execrable that it prompted the brothers Frank (qv) and William Fay (qv) to assert the need for Irish actors in Irish plays, leading to the establishment of the Irish National Theatre Society, later the Abbey.

Responses to a changing Ireland Meanwhile Moore's individualistic approach to the revival of Irish was proceeding: for the Gaelic League he wrote short stories in English, which were translated by Tadhg Ó Donnchadha (qv) and Pádraig Ó Súilleabháin (1874–1918) into Irish, and then published as *An tÚr-Ghort* (1902). The following year the stories were published in English as *The untilled field*. The aim was to provide contemporary literature for a Gaelic readership, and the stories have a modern edge. Far from idealising Ireland and the Irish, these stories are frequently concerned with the narrowness of Irish life, the domineering attitudes of priests and bishops, and the attractions of emigration. It is as if Moore's artistic impulse thwarted his ideological purpose. Living in Dublin meant that he was able to see how much Irish life had changed, and how extensive the influence of the catholic church and its priests had become, as Ireland, at one and the same time, modernised, became more nationalist and more catholic. *The lake* (1905), a fine novel, grew out of these stories and is a sympathetic study of a modern priest who cannot any longer face the aridity of a life lived according to dictate, and who is compelled to seek out the nature of his inner life. The lake of the title is the symbol for this integrity, and the priest makes his escape at the end by disrobing himself of his priestly attire and swimming across the dark lake at night, to the freedom of disappearance and emigration, knowing that his parishioners will think he has drowned or taken his own life. With this novel he brings to its first perfection the floating narrative style he had been seeking, a style to register the 'flux and reflux' of the mind, which had a major impact on Joyce in the development of a style to unite inner impulse and rumination with exterior reality, the style known as 'stream of consciousness'. Moore achieved a synthesis, in *The lake*, of Wagnerian 'under life' and Zolaesque attention to reality. The lake in this novel is very identifiably Lough Carra, which is overlooked by Moore Hall.

Estranged from the Irish literary movement (Yeats had to distance himself publicly from a mischievous call from Moore for censorship from the Irish catholic hierarchy of the Irish theatre, so it could free itself from journalistic opinion) he set about writing the autobiography of his involvement with Irish life: *Hail and farewell*, published in three volumes, *Ave* (1911), *Salve* (1912), and *Vale* (1914). George Russell encouraged him in this endeavour, telling Moore that he always believed that his destiny was to be the Irish Voltaire. His accounts of Yeats and Lady Gregory, as well as of Martyn and his brother Maurice, caused rifts that were never fully reconciled. These volumes reveal a comic dimension in Moore, as he weaves an impressionistic style to capture events and characters, and which synthesises an interior monologue with a clear-eyed appraisal of the vanities and flaws of others, in particular Yeats and Lady Gregory. But the comic vision embraces his own eccentricities and obsessions

and he does not spare himself. His perception of human failings originates in a keen apprehension of his own capacity for foolishness, self-delusion, and mischief. Amongst the characters in *Hail and farewell* is the sensitively depicted 'Stella', actually Clara Christian, a painter who settled in Dublin when he arrived, and who was his mistress for a number of years. She married Charles McCarthy, an architect, and died tragically in childbirth in 1906.

Moore was inclined to sell off the estate in Mayo under the Wyndham (qv) land act of 1903, which allowed for purchase, financed by government loan, of land by the resident tenantry. His brother Maurice did not agree, but in 1906 and 1908 some of the land and timber were sold off. The two brothers quarrelled in 1911, during a visit Moore made to Moore Hall. They argued over money, the estate, and Moore's perverse insistence that his nephews convert to protestantism, to which he now proclaimed himself an adherent. They patched up a working understanding in 1912, but they finally split the following year; Moore had broken the entail on Moore Hall, whereby on George's death Maurice or his sons would inherit; and most of the land was sold. He debarred Maurice from any usage of Moore Hall.

Later writings By the time *Salve* appeared in 1912 he had returned to London, where he would reside at 121 Ebury St. in Pimlico until his death. He continued to visit France, and in 1914 he travelled to the Holy Land to research the background and topography of the first work of his last phase, *The Brook Kerith* (1916). By now his style had become supple, fluid, and relaxed, a seemingly effortless engagement with things, the normalities of the everyday, connecting with the activity of consciousness. This quality of Moore's later phase was somewhat undervalued during his lifetime, but in the later twentieth century it began to win admirers: a style in which the troubled and various characteristics of Moore's different personalities and traditions are accepted in a serene and lucid relaxation. The comic appraisals and self-appraisals of *Hail and farewell* have brought him to an examination of Christianity in *The Brook Kerith*, a novel about the origins of that faith in the life and death of Christ. This subject had enthralled Moore for years, and his long struggle with belief (comically exhibited in a public announcement of a conversion to protestantism in the *Irish Times*) is reflected in this story. Instead of dying on the cross Jesus is restored to life by Joseph of Arimathea, who takes him to a quasi-Buddhist sect called the Essenes. Years later St Paul visits this community and encounters the man whose death provides the cornerstone of Pauline (and Christian) theology. These themes had been the subject of a play, 'The apostle' (1911), later revised as 'The passing of the Essenes' (1930).

A story-teller's holiday (1918) is a loosely linked series of tales with Irish settings that mix stories from medieval Ireland with personal anecdote and other narratives from European literature, all cast in the loose late style. It shows his interest in Irish culture to be undiminished. Privately published, by subscription, the stories are often titillating and pornographic. Other work includes a retelling of the story of *Héloïse and Abélard* (1921); conversational memoirs in *Conversations in Ebury*

Street (1924); and *Aphrodite in Aulis* (1930). This last is a tale of family life across generations, told with great simplicity. Set in ancient Greece, it conveys a mood of total calm and contemplative acceptance, even though as he was writing it he was suffering from uraemia, a kidney infection. A further volume of autobiography, *A communication to my friends* (1933), appeared posthumously.

In 1920 he was approached by the New York publishers Boni & Liveright to do a collected edition of his works, as 'the greatest living English author'. Always an inveterate rewriter of his work, he revised for this new edition also. The complexity of Moore's revisions makes his bibliography a particularly exacting one, and he is fortunate to have been favoured by an outstanding bibliographer: Edwin Gilcher.

In 1922 Moore Hall was burned down by anti-treaty forces in the civil war, his brother Maurice being pro-treaty. Maurice, in spite of his brother's injunction not to use the house, did stay in it from time to time, and, during the civil war gave permission to the pro-treaty military to billet there. This action incensed the locality, which was mostly anti-treaty. Moore got compensation from the Irish Free State of £7,000. He later sold a large part of the estates to the Irish land commission. When he died (21 January 1933) he left an estate valued at £80,000 but did not leave any of it to his brother, from whom he was now long estranged.

Moore is recognised as a superb prose stylist, and a writer who brought a European breadth of understanding to the formative phase of modern Irish literature, in the 1890s and the early twentieth century. His commitment to his art was a total one, and rewriting was the most important part of the work for him. His art was based on a reverence for life itself and for people, and a source of his comedy is his sense of the absurdity of those whose estimation of themselves exceeds what the reality can allow. He was a major influence on modern literature, and James Joyce held him in the highest esteem, sending a wreath to his cremation in 1933.

Moore's papers are widely dispersed. The key relevant collections are in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library; the BL; the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Austin, Texas; as well as the NLI, Dublin. There is an authoritative biography by Adrian Frazier, listed below, to which this entry is indebted.

Maurice George Moore, *An Irish gentleman: George Henry Moore* (1913); John Eglinton (ed), *Letters from George Moore to Ed. Dujardin, 1886–1922* (1929); Joseph Hone, *The life of George Moore* (1936); Joseph Hone, *The Moores of Moore Hall* (1939); Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *George Moore: letters to Lady Cunard 1895–1933* (1957); Helmut E. Gerber (ed.), *George Moore in transition: letters to T. Fisher Unwin and Lena Milman, 1894–1910* (1968); Edwin Gilcher, *A bibliography of*

George Moore (1970); Richard Allen Cave, *A study of the novels of George Moore* (1978); Janet Egleson Dunleavy (ed.), *George Moore in perspective* (1983); Helmut E. Gerber and O. M. Black, jr. (ed.), *George Moore on Parnassus: letters (1900–1933) to secretaries, publishers, agents, literati, friends, and acquaintances* (1988); Adrian Frazier, *George Moore, 1852–1933* (2000)

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