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Recommended Citation

Roney, John B. "Thomas Moore's Image of Ireland: Real or Commercialized." Purdue University. Community College of Rhode Island, Warwick, RI. 2 November 2013.

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New England Regional Meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies. 1-2 Nov.2013
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“Thomas Moore’s Image of Ireland: Real or Commercialized”

Thomas Moore was Irish, with his father’s pedigree from the Kerry Gaeltacht, and since it mattered a great deal to most Irish of the time, he was Catholic. However, after his studies at Trinity College, he sought a life in England, married a Protestant woman and had his children baptized and raised Protestant. He became a very popular poet, singer and entertainer, and friend to many English aristocrats, including Lord Byron and Prime Minister Lord John Russell. Yet, at the same time Moore ardently defended Irish independence and Catholic freedoms. Underneath his romantic poetry lay a sometimes scathing critique of English colonial power in Ireland. In his lyrics and song, much of Moore’s image of Ireland—the harp, color green, shamrock, and the romantic ‘sunshine and shadow motif’ promoted Irish culture internationally. Thus, in an effort to promote Irish culture outside of Ireland, did Moore create a hybrid form of Irish culture that in the end began to change how the Irish saw themselves as well? In 1844 Thomas Davis criticized Moore for being weak about independence, but again he also criticized O’Connell. Later in the century W.B. Yeats criticized Moore for selling out and trivializing Irish culture. Many others after Yeats seem to accept his critique without attempting to see Moore in his context. On the other hand, in 2008, marking the 200th anniversary of the publication of Moore’s *Irish Melodies*,¹ Martin Cullen, Irish Minister for the Arts, said at the launch of the exhibition ‘My Gentle Harp’ at the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin: “It was the ‘Irish Melodies’ with their international fame that defined Irish culture throughout the nineteenth century at home and

¹ 124 poems set to traditional Irish tunes, with two different composers, Sir John Stevenson and Sir Henry Bishop, published in 10 volumes beginning in 1808 and continuing until 1834.

abroad.”² Much of Irish nationalism in the early nineteenth century was forged in Romantic symbols of patriotism and sacrifice, no doubt gleaned from the experience of the French Revolution. Thus, was Moore faithful to the Celtic and Irish tradition, within the reality of some inevitable change and expression within any established tradition, or did Moore help change the popular sense of Irish culture? This paper will examine hybridity in Moore and attempt to take a fresh look at his overall goals in his writings.

“Celtomania” and Hybrid cultures

It is hard to imagine Ireland without the modern symbols of Finn McCool, the green, white, and orange flag, the harp, and Irish pubs. But if we glance at the world of eighteenth-century Ireland we would notice very few of the things that sell Ireland today, the things of tourism and St. Patrick’s Day. If this is the case, how essentially Irish are the prominent symbols in the twenty-first century? While a few scholars took an interest in re-discovering the real Ireland, their main task was to counter the many negative images projected by the colonizing forces in Great Britain under the Penal laws. Edmund Spenser’s *A View of The Present State of Ireland* found that Irish laws, religion, and customs have brought the present evils to Ireland; the solution could only be in adopting English ways.³ Geoffrey Keating, by contrast, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (compendium of wisdom about Ireland, trans. *History of Ireland*, c.1634), criticized not only what he saw as false depictions of Irish culture but how these ideas were arrived at without proper research and evidence—he had a point. Keating read Irish/Gaeilge sources and wrote in his native language; he found it impossible for English historians to know anything about the

² Martin Cullen as cited in “Sing, Sweet Harp of Erin, Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (1808),” *Folk World*, 37, 11 (2008). <http://www.folkworld.de/37/e/moore.html>, accessed 10/29/2013.

³ See Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 1598. www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E500000-001/. Accessed 10/29/2013. Irenius says “I will then according to your advisement, begin to declare the evils which seme to be most hurtfull to the comon-weale of that land: and first, those which I sayd were most ancient and long growne: and they are also of 3 kinds; the first in the lawes, the second in customes, the last in religion.”

Irish. And, in essence, Keating claimed, the Irish had indeed embraced Christianity much earlier than the English and found it very compatible with their earlier culture of the ancient Gaelic moral order. What is amazing is that Keating also appealed to Irish Protestants. Bernadette Cunningham has found that “It was this focus on the worthiness of the Irish kingdom that also ensured *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*’s wide appeal to Irish Protestant readers when it became available in English as *The General History of Ireland* from 1723 on.”⁴ In 1761 James Macpherson discovered the epic *Fingal* (Fionn mac Cumhail) written by Ossian and published it in translation in musical measured prose. This may be seen as the birth of a new “Celtmania” that rippled throughout all the regions that had roots in a Celtic past. Not only did it remind Scotland and Ireland that they were once more prominent and had a rich cultural past, but many in larger emerging states drew on the inspiration, including Goethe, Thomas Jefferson, and Napoleon. No doubt not everyone bought the story, and debates raged as to authenticity and implications for modern societies. More specifically in Ireland, in 1796, Edward Bunting raised awareness of the importance and indeed unique qualities of Irish music in his *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music*, 66 tunes, which continued with more collections in 1809 and 1840. What had been previously transmitted almost entirely through oral tradition was now in print, and Bunting’s music created a new market beyond the local region, and a new sharing of music began to expand a sense of Irish culture.⁵ What we can establish, however, is that Enlightenment Europe certainly shared ideas, hopes, and fears, and the continued development of national identity had a hybrid foundation.

⁴ Bernadette Cunningham, “*Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* and the Historical Origins of Irish Catholic Identity.” *New Hibernia Review* 5, 4 (2001): 144.

⁵ In 1911 Charlotte Milligan Fox, wrote in her *Annals of the Irish Harpers* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1911) that “...Edward Bunting, who rescued from oblivion the last authentic records of ancient Irish Minstrelsy. The honour of this achievement belongs rightly to him and is shared, moreover, by the town of Belfast. Here he listened to the strains of the last minstrels; here, cheered and encouraged by an enthusiastic band of fellow workers, he lived and laboured from childhood till middle age.”

The Birth of Popularity and the Debates over National Identity

In the modern world deciphering a particular national identity is quite interpretative. Either certain traits can apply to many nation states or due to popular myths and marketing twists of stories, identity can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially when characteristics are seen as superior to all others. One could start with a 'Jeopardy'-type question to many Americans about what is authentically Irish: corned beef? No, this may only be only true of Irish immigrants. OK, the color green? Well, not really, more likely it is royal blue as in 'St. Patrick's blue'. By the late eighteenth century it appears that the most obvious difference between England and Ireland had more to do with poverty. To some degree this changed by the end of the century. While the hated Penal Laws were slowly rescinded in the years 1771, 1778, and 1793, and a period of relative independence allowed the growth of a new Irish identity, British plans reversed any sovereign claims Ireland might have had with the union of Britain and Ireland into one Kingdom in 1801. But the idea of a separate and culturally unique Ireland only grew stronger. Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, labored endlessly in Parliament for Catholic Emancipation, which came in 1829, and the reduction of the place of the state Church of Ireland. Without minimizing the enormous role that O'Connell played in creating a new Irish awareness, Moore's activities have often been under-reported. In his study of Moore, Emer Nolan, claims that "Moore did more than any other single figure in the nineteenth century to create an Irish national sensibility, and who used the success of the *Melodies* to open a new public sphere in letters for previously excluded Irish Catholics, nonetheless stands accused of operating in the classic mode of 'imperial sentimentality', which 'cathects that which it is in the process of destroying'."⁶ Emotion was central to Moore to be sure, but the question remains whether his great investment

⁶ Emer Nolan, "Thomas Moore: *Irish Melodies* and Discordant Politics," in *Catholic Emancipations: Irish Fiction from Thomas Moore to James Joyce* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2007), 3.

in resurrecting Irish melodies was merely sentimentality. Karen Tongson goes further in exposing what she sees as his many purposes for the *Irish Melodies*, which were “made consumer-friendly by Thomas Moore’s lyrical adaptations into English, and sweetened by his musical collaborator Sir John Stevenson’s symphonic arrangements, the *Irish Melodies* did indeed become a consumable, fetishizable artifact of Irishness for a British consumer class.”⁷ Tongson’s thesis is that the “...category of the nation is, if not effaced in Moore’s work, modified into a cultural transnationalism that refuses to engage colonialism through contestation, but strives... to ‘get them in their wallets’ by ‘getting them right between the eyes’ ...[and this] cultural transnationalism simultaneously engages and undermines colonialism by using cultural particularity itself—the ‘native beauty’ and ‘charm’ of the melodies, as Moore refers to it—to appeal affectively to a consumer base that extends beyond the colonizer, and engages with an international aesthetic community.”⁸ This is a significant point: any separate identity that Ireland could claim had to be negotiated through the lens of colonization. England’s superior strength and decision to forcibly include Ireland into Great Britain reduced its ability to claim independence.

Thomas Moore faced a choice already in his university years. As one of the first Catholics to enter Trinity College in 1795, he quickly associated with some of the most important radical students, Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmett, who called for a revolt against England. With great sympathies for attempts to forcibly separate, it neither fit his character nor his goals for independence. Rather, Moore found himself arguing with a new weapon, his pen. Unlike O’Connell’s rallying middle-class Catholics within Ireland, or Emmett’s violent

⁷ Karen Tongson, “The Cultural Transnationalism of Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies*,” *Repercussions* 9, 1 (Spring 2001): 7.

⁸ Tongson, 9.

struggles, Moore was able to enter the homes of middle- and upper-class English through his popular songs and writing. This choice to stay in Ireland or seek a life elsewhere was a very real issue for the Irish. Declan Kiberd claims that “the Irish Writer has always been confronted with a choice ... of whether to write for the native audience—a risky, often thankless task—or to produce the texts for consumption in Britain and North America. Through most of the nineteenth century, artists tended to exploit far more of Ireland than they expressed.”⁹ I think Moore’s life in England and his English audience had far more than commercial or goals of popularity. Driven by his close associations with Wolfe and Emmet, Moore devoted his life to becoming the conscience of his English audience, a voice they would not write off as a mere Irish rebel.

The problem that Moore faced was to write poetry, literature, and lyrics that would on the surface be attractive and even entertaining, but when the verse was delivered, a nagging recognition of the message might engender some deeper thoughts about human failure, justice and equality in the commonwealth, and respect for differences. But of course the problem remains an interpretation. Writing at the height of the Romantic movement, the audience developed a taste for the exotic without fully embracing what it may be. Leith Davis shows that “While Irish readers of the *Melodies* could see their own desires for independence expressed in the work, English readers saw Romantic images of Irish defeat and subordination. Such a double reading was possible because the *Melodies* were conceived, produced, and distributed within a hegemonic system of English colonialism.”¹⁰ The real problem was not in Moore’s ability to sell his books and music but in whether he was taken seriously; whether the second part of his goal to change English opinion about the so-called backward Irish would work.

⁹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 136.

¹⁰ Leith Davis, “Irish Bards and English Consumers: Thomas Moore’s ‘Irish Melodies’ and the Colonized Nation.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 24, 2 (April): 11.

Moore had plenty of contemporary critics. The well-known William Hazlitt, in *Spirit of the Age*, wrote in 1825 that Moore's poetry was "... like a shower of beauty; a dance of images; a stream of music; or like the spray of the water-fall, tinged by the morning-beam with rosy light." When it comes to Moore's more direct plead for the beauty and importance of Ireland in the *Irish Melodies*, Hazlitt has no patience however: "If these national airs do indeed express the soul of impassioned feeling in his countrymen, the case of Ireland is hopeless. If these prettinesses pass for patriotism, if a country can heave from its heart's core only these vapid, varnished sentiments, lip-deep, and let its tears of blood evaporate in an empty conceit, let it be governed as it has been. There are here no tones to waken Liberty, to console Humanity. Mr. Moore converts the wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff-box...."¹¹ Could Moore have purposely played to the sentiments of the time to increase his popularity, as well as place himself in a financially secure position so that later he could use his position as a writer to get to his real agenda of speaking for the Irish people. If he did produce sentimental poetry, he could also use satire to shock his audience. He published several collections, including *The Twopenny Postbag* (1813) and *Cash, Corn, and Catholic* (1828) that criticized and condemned. As early as 1808, in the preface to *Corruption and Intolerance* (2 poems) Moore condemned all English political parties. "In speaking of the parties which have so long agitated England, it will be observed that I lean as little to the Whigs as to their adversaries. Both factions have been equally cruel to Ireland, and perhaps equally insincere in their efforts for the liberties of England."¹² In his poem on *Intolerance*, we are able to discern his method in channeling his lyrics about Ireland through the medium of music. "The language of sorrow however is, in general, best suited to our Music, and

¹¹ William Hazlitt, "MR. T. MOORE.—MR. LEIGH HUNT." *The Spirit of the Age; or, Contemporary Portraits*. Paris: A. & W. Galignani, 1825. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11068/pg11068.html> . Accessed 10/30/13.

¹² Thomas Moore, *Corruption and Intolerance: Two poems*. With notes addressed to an Englishman by an Irishman (London: J. Carpenter, 1808), pp. ix-x.

with themes of this nature the poet may be amply supplied. There is not a page of our annals which cannot afford him a subject, and while the national Muse of other countries adorns her temple with trophies of the past, in Ireland her altar, like the shrine of Pity at Athens, is to be known only by the tears that are shed upon it; '*lacrymis altaria sudant*' [tears altar]....There is a well-known story, related of the Antiochians under the reign of Theodosius, which is not only honourable to the powers of music in general, but which applies so peculiarly to the mournful melodies of Ireland,...."¹³ Thus, Moore believes that it is not through words alone that an authentic Irish voice is to be heard, but carried by and through music one enters into an understanding of the Irish spirit.

The power and importance of music has been examined by Simon Kreis, who has followed the lead set by Seamus Heaney. Commenting on Heaney's poem "Song," the second verse says:

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.¹⁴

Kreis underlines the importance of the phrase "the music of what happens," and underlines that it "has become nearly a commonplace in Irish popular culture....frequently...under the category 'Celtic Spirituality'."¹⁵ In calling attention to the music of what happens Kreis sees that "Heaney is enacting his own principle of privileged listening: the music of what happens can be heard only by the sensitive artist, and the music, which we might also call the meaning, of poetry can

¹³ Moore, , *Corruption and Intolerance: Two poems*, 62, 64.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, "Song," in *Field Work: Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 48.

¹⁵ Simon B. Kreuss, "The Music of the Sentimental Nationalist Heart: Thomas Moore and Seamus Heaney. " *New Hibernia Review*," 15,1 (Earrach/Spring 2011), footnote 20, p. 128.

be heard only by the sensitive reader, or auditor.”¹⁶ In commenting on Moore, Heaney understands why Yeats and Joyce exclude him from ‘high-brow’ literary tradition set in late nineteenth-century Ireland, but questions whether they speak for the more common Irish culture. Kreuz says “By associating Moore with the banners of Irish nationalism in defining his sense of an Irish past, Heaney markedly dissociates Moore from a literary tradition. The implication, however, of this dissociation is that Moore is in fact more in touch with the actual experiences of most Irish people than certain doyens of Irish modernism.”¹⁷

After Moore; After the Famine

By the 1840s, the lack of substantial success in real emancipation undid some of the work of both Moore and O’Connell. But, the larger context was that revolution was in the air again throughout Europe and a new group of Irishmen emerged. The Young Ireland (*Éire Óg*) movement wanted a more aggressive position toward the colonizing English. They had much less faith in working within the British Parliament to promote change, and were disgusted even more at what they viewed as a selling out to a British taste for a pseudo-poetry and music at the expense of any authentic Irish culture; this was largely Moore’s fault. James Flannery has shown that the Young Irelanders were determined to replace Moore’s melodies with a new kind of national music: “...the Young Irelanders sought to foster support for their goals through the creation of a new school of ‘national ballads’. By deliberate policy the tradition of Moore and O’Connell was rejected as the ‘wail of a lost cause’; in its stead *The Nation* set out to express the hopes of a ‘triumphant future’ in a ‘cataract of coloured words’.”¹⁸ Thomas Francis Meagher’s “The Sword Speech,” delivered the 28th of July 1846 recast the Irish nation: “The very

¹⁶ Kreuz, “The Music of the Sentimental Nationalist Heart,” 128.

¹⁷ Kreuz, “The Music of the Sentimental Nationalist Heart,” 132.

¹⁸ James W. Flannery, *Dear Harp of My Country: The Irish Melodies of Thomas Moore* (Nashville: J. S. Sanders & Co., 1997), 108.

consciousness of being dependent on another power for advancement in the scale of national being weighs down the spirit of a people, manacles the efforts of genius, depresses the energies of virtue, blunts the sense of common glory and common good.”¹⁹ Thomas Davis added the language question to the purpose of real Irish identity: “to impose another language on a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation—’tis to tear their identity from all places....”²⁰ The dynamics changed with the Young Islanders. Irish culture did not need acceptance by the English, the Irish people did not need approval by the British government, and in fact even precise communication would need to be mediated through a careful translation of terms. The Irish needed no sympathies from the British. In the place of Moore’s entertaining songs Davis wrote stirring nationalistic ballads and rebel songs *A Nation Once Again & Lament for Owen Roe O’Neill*. One should question, however, whether the Young Irelanders understood the underlying power of Moore’s message rather than the more sentimental exterior.

Whatever progress the Young Islanders achieved prior to 1845 was cut short with the advent of An Gorta Mór, the Great Famine, and this was also the year that the 30 year old David passed away of Tuberculosis. Until 1860 any discussion of Irish identity was subordinated to the tragedy of human death and suffering, exposing poverty and inequality with very little pride in any unique Irish culture. Later in the century Yeats criticized Moore for selling out and trivializing Irish culture. Yeats, for example, although he praised certain of the *Melodies*, called Moore “merely an incarnate social ambition.”²¹ Thus, the question is posed, was Moore faithful to the Celtic and Irish tradition within the reality of inevitable change and expression within any established tradition, or did Moore help change the popular sense of Irish culture? So, after several decades of struggle and debate who wins? In a 1906 article entitled “Is the Celtic Revival

¹⁹ Thomas Francis Meagher, “The Sword Speech,”

²⁰ Thomas Davis,

²¹ Davis, “Irish Bards and English Consumers,” (*Letters* 4 4 7), 7.

Really Irish?” Mary Ford notes how Moore’s songs still portrayed popular Irish culture:

“... ‘Believe Me, if All Those Endearing Young Charms’, is perhaps the best known of Moore’s songs, and, set to music so suitable that the one can hardly be recalled without the other, still has the power, a century after it was written, to bring an Irish audience to its feet.”²² Thus, Moore’s *Irish Melodies* did a great deal to foster Irish pride and arouse sympathy for the Irish nationalist cause. Kreis’ quotation of Heaney perhaps underlines Moore’s importance: “‘Moore was a growth ring in consciousness and the whole of Irish historical culture. From about 1808 to, I would say, 1908, he was like a kind of imaginative bridge that carried the sentiment of Irish belonging from penal days to the age of Padraig Pearse. Moore’s achievement, his melody, not just the music, but the melody of sympathy and the melody of remembrance and the melody of what it meant to be Irish for that time’.”²³

²² Mary K. Ford, “Is the Celtic Revival Really Irish?” *The North American Review*, 183, 601 (Oct. 19, 1906): 722.

²³ Kreis, “The Music of the Sentimental Nationalist Heart,” 137.