

Critical Views of Thomas Moore

Lord Byron [George Gordon], *The Corsair: A Tale*, dedicatory letter to Thomas Moore: ‘While Ireland ranks you among the firmest of her patriots—while you stand alone the first of her bards in her estimation, and Britain repeats and ratifies the decree—permit me, whose only regret, since our first acquaintance, has been the years he had lost before it commenced, to add the humble, but sincere suffrage of friendship, to the voice of more than one nation.

‘[It is] said among friends, I trust truly, that you are engaged in the composition of a poem whose scene will be laid in the East; none can do those scenes so much justice. The wrongs of your own country, the magnificent and fiery spirit of her sons, the beauty and feeling of her daughters, may there be found [...] Your imagination will create a warmer sun, and less clouded sky; but wildness, tenderness, and originality are part of your national claim of oriental descent, to which you have already thus far proved your title more clearly than the most zealous of your country’s antiquarians [...] &c.]’

William Hazlitt, “Mr. T. Moore—Mr. Leigh Hunt”, in *Spirit of the Age* (1825):

Mr. Moore’s strictest economy is wasteful and superfluous excess: he is always liberal, and never at a loss; for sooner than not stimulate and delight the reader, he is willing to be tawdry, or superficial, or common-place. It has been too much our author’s object to pander to the artificial taste of the age; and his productions, however brilliant and agreeable, are in consequence somewhat meretricious and effeminate. [...]

The craving of the public mind after novelty and effect is a false and uneasy appetite that must be pampered with fine words at every step—we must be tickled with sound, startled with shew, and relieved by the importunate, uninterrupted display of fancy and verbal tinsel as much as possible from the fatigue of thought or shock of feeling. A poem is to resemble an exhibition of fireworks, with a continual explosion of quaint figures and devices, flash after flash, that surprise for the moment, and leave no trace of light or warmth behind them. [...]

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.’

Edgar Allen Poe, on Moore in *Poetic Principles* (1848): ‘It has been the fashion, of late days, to deny Moore imagination, while granting him Fancy – a distinction originating with Coleridge, than whom no man more fully comprehended the great powers of Moore. The fact is that the fancy of this poet so far predominates over all his other faculties, and over the fancy of all other men, as to have induced, very naturally, the idea that he is fanciful only. But there never was a greater mistake. Never was a grosser wrong done to the fame of a true poet. In the compass of the English language I can call to mind no poem more profoundly – more weirdly imaginative, in the best sense, than the lines commencing, “I would I were by that dim lake”, which are the composition of Moore.’ (Quoted in Patrick Raffroidi, ‘Thomas Moore: Towards a Reassessment?’; cited in *Irish Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Kenneally, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1992, p.56.)

C. Litton Falkiner, ed., *Poetry of Thomas Moore* (London: Macmillan 1903)

‘Though not all of the *Melodies* derive their inspiration from patriotism it may fairly be said upon the whole that what gives to these poems their chief distinction is their note of simple, sincere, and natural patriotism. This sentiment of patriotism is a note as real and distinctive in the poems as the note of Celtic melancholy in the music of the *Melodies*. Not merely do they supply in their musical setting the most successful example which poetry can present of the happy union of national song with national

sentiment, but they breathe in every line that genuine love of fatherland which appears to every Irish nature, and which accounts for the affection with which, all the world over, Moore is hailed by men of Irish blood as peculiarly the laureate of Erin. Not that Moore was at any time a patriot in the political sense. He was indeed the early friend of Robert Emmet, and there is no more winning trait in his character than his constant devotion to the memory of the friend whose fate inspired at least three of his most touching lyrics.

Moore was also at all times the energetic champion of the rights of a creed which, however lightly it may have sat on him, he remained true to the end. [...]he did not hesitate to turn on them when they seemed to be false to their profession of solicitude for Ireland. [...]It further illustrates the depth of Moore's political feelings, that the only instances in which the arrows of his satirical wit ever seem to be poisoned by vindictiveness are those with which he assailed Castlereagh as the author of the Union. In other respects Moore's patriotism is singularly pure, singularly unsullied by personalities. [...].’ (pp.xxi-ii.)

W. B. Yeats, “Modern Irish Poetry” (Essay of 1904)

Moore's [...] Irish melodies are too often artificial and mechanical in their style when separated from the music that gave them wings. Whatever he had of high poetry is in “The Light of Other Days”, and in “At the Mid Hour of Night”, which express what Matthew Arnold has taught us to call “the Celtic melancholy”, with so much of delicate beauty in the meaning and in the wavering or steady rhythm that one knows not where to find their like in literature. His more artificial and mechanical verse, because of the ancient music that makes it seem natural and vivid, and because it has remembered so many beloved names and events and places, has had the influence which might have belonged to these exquisite verses had he written none but these.’ (Introduction [‘Modern Irish Poetry’], *A Book of Irish Verse Selected from Modern Writers*, Methuen, rep. in Justin McCarthy, ed., *Irish Literature*, 1904, Vol. III, pp.vii-xiii; p.viii.)

Seán Ó Baoil, ‘Irish Traditional Music’, in *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, ed. Michael Longley (1971), p.122f.:

‘His melodies were far removed from the elemental beauty of traditional singing in the Irish language, which, even in his day, was the predominant vernacular in the whole western half of the country. Moore's songs were nostalgic, pseudo-historical, whimsical, sentimental productions suited to the drawing rooms of the nineteenth century, and were in striking contrast with the living Gaelic love-songs, lullabies, aislingí (vision poems), laments, drinking songs, hymns and work-songs of the Irish speaking-people.) There is no parallel in Moore for the Gaelic songs sung at the plough [&c]; (p.122.)

Seamus Deane, ‘The Politics of Music: Thomas Moore’, in *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (Oxford 1997) [sect. of Chap. 2]

‘[...] Moore's Melodies, and his own placement of them in relation to national character, co-ordinates national history, national character, within a political programme for Catholic repair and renewal. [...] Thus, the disputes about Moore's brilliantly syndicated versions of the Irish in his *Melodies* were inevitably political. Douglas Hyde's verdict on Moore epitomizes the hostility to him—a hostility more marked during the Irish Revival than before or since. Moore ‘had rendered the past of Ireland sentimentally interesting without arousing the prejudices of or alarming the upper classes’ [Hyde, “Irish Language Movement: Some Reminiscences”, 1923] But this is an accusation that applies much more accurately to Moore the melodist than to Moore the political writer. Moore seems to have been disgusted by the servility displayed by the Irish on the occasion of George IV's visit in 1821. Certainly for some years after his prose versions of Irish history manifest a much more acerbic view of his country's history than do the *Melodies*.