

# Thomas Moore

## THE EARLY YEARS

1808 saw the publication of the first volume of Moore's *Irish melodies*, a project which lasted until 1834 when the tenth volume appeared. The *Melodies* were hugely successful in Ireland, England, on the continent and further afield. The combination of Irish airs and the poetry of Moore's lyrics transcended class and national boundaries. The success of the *Melodies* and Moore's poetry publications earned him acclaim as Ireland's national poet. In commemorating the *Melodies* this exhibition seeks to explore their origins and their influence, both political and musical, and to reveal the man who was Thomas Moore.

MOORE'S RISE to this pre-eminence is all the more remarkable considering his humble beginnings. He was born in Aungier Street, Dublin, on 28 May 1779, where his parents, John, a Kerryman, and Anastasia (née Codd), from Wexford, ran a small grocer's shop. As Catholics, the Moores were essentially second-class citizens while the Penal Laws were still in effect.

But as Tom grew up, change was in the air: revolutionary ideals from America and France inspired the United Irishmen to shake off English influence. Arguably as influential were Anastasia's efforts on behalf of her 'show child'. She sent him first to Mr T.S. Malone's Classical English School in Aungier Street where, at age six, he won a medal for 'reading history at a public examination'. Anastasia then entered Tom at Whyte's English Grammar School in Grafton Street, the finest school in the city and in 1794 he was enrolled at Trinity College, where new conciliatory measures lifted restrictions on the admittance of Catholics. However, other exclusions still applied, and Tom gravitated towards political activities – led by Robert Emmet, who became a close friend. By the time the United Irishmen rebelled in 1798, Emmet had been expelled and gone into hiding. As a known sympathiser, Moore was interrogated, but he was allowed to graduate. By way of response to the rebellion, Ireland was bound closer still to Britain by the Act of Union.

HAVING GRADUATED in spring 1799, Moore moved to London to read for the Bar at the Middle Temple.

While his legal ambitions came to nothing, literary success came almost instantly. Moore was allowed to dedicate his first book to the Prince of Wales, a translation of odes by the Greek poet Anacreon. The Prince was well known as a friend of the Whigs, the party which called for Catholic rights at Westminster. *The odes of Anacreon* (1800) – celebrating wine, women and song – gave Moore a loose-living, risqué reputation. That impression was confirmed by his next collection, also full of amorous verses, *The poetical works of the late Thomas Little* (1801). Throughout these years he was feted for his musical performances



The Birthplace of Poet Thomas Moore (1779-1852), No. 22 Aungier Street (now rebuilt) *Fiona H. Macbeth* © The National Gallery of Ireland.

in the salons and drawing-rooms of the Whig elite and in 1803 his most influential patron, Lord Moira, rewarded him with a minor civil service posting as Registrar of the Vice-Admiralty Court, in Bermuda.

BERMUDA proved too much of a backwater for Moore and he departed after a few months, assigning his duties to a deputy. He took a long homeward route, touring through North America, where he met President Thomas Jefferson. Settled again in London, he published *Epistles, odes, and other poems* (1806), which featured much coy eroticism. When Francis Jeffrey, editor of the powerful *Edinburgh Review*, subsequently denounced Moore, the poet challenged his critic to a duel. The pair faced off at Chalk Farm, an established duelling-ground in north London, but at the last moment the police intervened. Ironically, while they were detained at the police station, Moore and his critic began a lifelong friendship. Even so, the criticism of his poems – and his morals – stung, and Moore returned to Dublin to lick his wounds. And it was there that a new project was suggested to him, a project that would transform his reputation – the *Irish melodies*.



John Moore  
Anastasia Moore

Show: John Moore and Anastasia Moore  
© The National Gallery of Ireland.



Thomas Moore (1779-1852)  
Martin Archer. Show courtesy  
of the National Library of  
Ireland (Moore 17 803)

My gentle harp:  
MOORE'S IRISH MELODIES, 1808-2008

# Thomas Moore

Then the Moores settled in Paris where they remained for several years.



## LATER LIFE and WRITINGS

In 1811 Moore married Bessy Dyke, an actress he met at Kilkenny. At about the same time he became a close friend of Lord Byron and for a time the two poets shared London's literary and social scene. Both were Whig supporters and regularly published satirical verses advancing the Whig cause. A favourite target was the Prince Regent – Moore's former dedicatee – who had since dropped his youthful liberal allegiance in favour of the Tories, a betrayal which Moore could never forgive.

In 1817 Moore published *Lalla Rookh*, a long oriental poem whose combination of lush exoticism, melodramatic plots and profusion of scholarly notes made it an instant bestseller. In the English-speaking world, only Byron and Sir Walter Scott rivalled Moore for popular and critical acclaim. Though perhaps difficult to read today, *Lalla Rookh* was widely translated in its time; its luxuriant scenes inspired artists and composers such as Turner and Schumann. However, Moore suffered setbacks too: during the composition of *Lalla Rookh* his infant daughter Olivia died and shortly thereafter, another daughter, Barbara, died following a fall. To add to his troubles Moore learned that the deputy he had left in charge in Bermuda had absconded, leaving him responsible for a huge debt. Unable to pay, Moore fled to the continent to avoid imprisonment. At first he travelled through France, Switzerland and Italy – at Venice, Byron made him a gift of his memoirs to sell to raise funds.

WHEN THE ADMIRALTY DEBT was resolved, the family returned to Sloperton Cottage in Wiltshire. Moore continued to produce songs and satires, but increasingly he turned to prose. His *Memoirs of Captain Rock*, inspired by an eye-opening tour of Ireland in 1823, is a funny and scathing indictment of English misrule and Irish misdeeds. Moore's commitment to Ireland is evident in his biographies of the politician and playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1825) and the United Irish rebel, Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1831). His other major work was a celebrated life of Lord Byron (1830–31) – conceived in part as recompense for allowing Byron's executors to destroy the latter's memoirs.

PRIVATE SADNESS continued to affect Moore's public attitudes. When Catholic Emancipation was granted in 1829 – the measure Moore had championed for so long – it coincided with the last illness of his third daughter, Anastasia. 'Could I ever have thought that this event would, under any circumstances, find me indifferent to it?' Moore reflected. 'Yet such is almost the case at present.'

MOORE HAD BEGUN an ambitious multi-volume *History of Ireland* when he and Bessy suffered more heartbreak: their two boys, Russell and Tom, both soldiers, died young, in 1842 and 1846. These losses took their toll on Moore's health, and he died at home in Wiltshire in 1852. A high Celtic cross, slightly odd in this English landscape, marks the family grave at Bromham, Wilts. On the base at the back are Byron's words: 'The poet of all circles and the idol of his own'; and on the front are lines from one of the *Melodies*:



Lord Byron



Lord Edward Fitzgerald



Brinsley Sheridan



Thomas Moore



pay, Moore fled to the continent to avoid imprisonment. At first he travelled through France, Switzerland and Italy – at Venice, Byron made him a gift of his memoirs to sell to raise funds.

Dear Harp of my country! in darkness I found thee,  
The cold chains of silence had hung o'er thee long,  
When proudly, my own island harp, I unbound thee,  
And gave all thy chords to light, freedom, and song.

Above: Thomas Moore © National Library of Ireland Other captions if necessary.

*My gentle harp:*  
MOORE'S IRISH MELODIES, 1808–2008

# Thomas Moore



## THE MOORE LIBRARY at the ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY

Moore was elected to honorary membership of the Royal Irish Academy in 1846, the year in which the fourth and final volume of his *History of Ireland* was published. His election citation refers to his 'poetical eminence'.

THE COMPILATION of the *History* proved immensely frustrating to Moore who was conscious of the fact that he was at a remove from the source materials (many of them in the Irish language), which he realised would be necessary to achieve a balanced, accurate and comprehensive work. The *History* was to be Moore's final work. Worn out by his endeavours, financial worries and the deaths in 1846 of his

The library, consisting of c. 2,000 titles, is housed in the Council Room at Academy House, Dawson Street, Dublin. The collection reflects Moore's scholarly and artistic tastes. In keeping with his classical background, the library contains a representative collection of the classical authors, generally in the original languages. Moore was proficient in French and Italian and the collection also includes the works of all of the great Italian poets and dramatists and the complete works of Rousseau and Voltaire. English literature features strongly, while geography, history, philosophy and travel writings are also prominent. The Irish titles in Moore's library very much constitute a working collection and can be related directly to his prose writings.

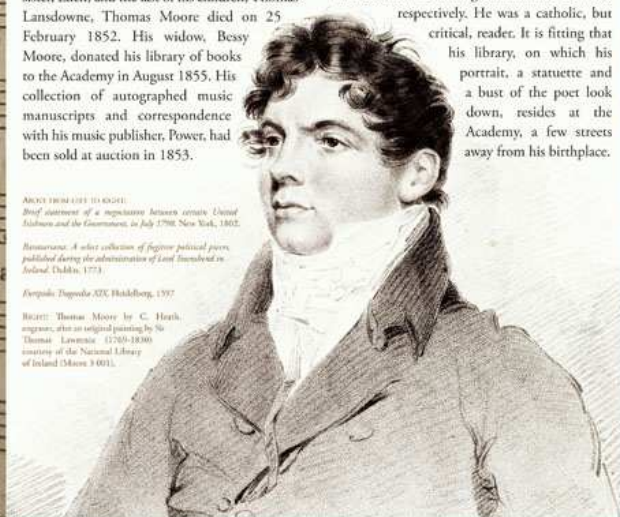
IT IS EVIDENT that Moore read for a number of purposes — for pleasure, for critical purposes (e.g. reviewing), and for research. A prodigious reader from his childhood, he not only bought books, but he also used libraries — Archbishop Marsh's Library, Dublin, the London Library and the British Museum, and the private libraries of his friends Lords Moira and



sister, Ellen, and the last of his children, Thomas Lansdowne, Thomas Moore died on 25 February 1852. His widow, Bessy Moore, donated his library of books to the Academy in August 1855. His collection of autographed music manuscripts and correspondence with his music publisher, Power, had been sold at auction in 1853.

Lansdowne at Donnington Park and Bowood respectively. He was a catholic, but critical, reader. It is fitting that his library, on which his portrait, a statuette and a bust of the poet look down, resides at the Academy, a few streets away from his birthplace.

**ABOUT THE LEFT IMAGE:**  
*Brief statement of a negociation between certain United Irishmen and the Government, in July 1798* New York, 1805.  
*Remarks: A select collection of fugitive political papers, published during the administration of Lord Cornwallis in Ireland* (Dublin, 1773).  
*Euripidis Tragediae* XIV. Hildesberg, 1797.  
**RIGHT:** Thomas Moore by C. Heath, engraver, after an original painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence (1760-1830) courtesy of the National Library of Ireland (Moore 3 001).



*My gentle harp:*  
 MOORE'S IRISH MELODIES, 1808-2008

# Thomas Moore



MACHALE.

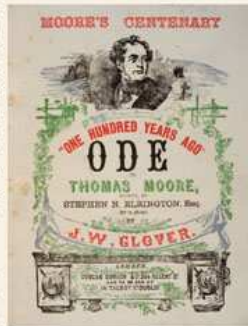
THE IRISH MELODIES:  
RECEPTION AND LEGACY

In producing the *Irish Melodies*, Moore breathed life into Ireland's native music and portrayed powerful and evocative images of her past. The combination proved to be such a success that Moore's contemporary and posthumous reputation would be dominated by the *Irish melodies* more than any of his other works.

IN THE PERIOD of their initial publication (1808-34), each volume was eagerly awaited and contemporary reviews demonstrate that they were largely well-received. Their popularity can be further indicated by the fact that many other versions appeared over the years. Nicolas Lee Torres' Latin edition, *Cantus Hibernici* was published in 1835. The Archbishop of Tuam, John MacHale, produced an Irish edition a few years later entitled *A selection of the most national and popular of Moore's Melodies* (1842 and 1845). The Irish artist, Daniel Maclise, published a lavishly illustrated version in 1846. A selection of the *Melodies* entitled *Temperance melodies for the retailers of Ireland* (1843) were reworded by William MacNamara Downes as rallying songs for Father Mathew's popular Temperance Movement. In addition to the composer editions, many individual *Melodies* were produced between 1840 and 1870 as broadside ballads (cheaply printed lyrics of popular songs sold on the streets), thereby demonstrating their widespread and cross-class appeal. From the outset, the political and nationalist nature of the *Melodies* was immediately understood. The use of Ireland's native music combined with tales from the past elevated them beyond mere drawing-room ballads: a derogatory reference from which they would never fully escape. However, Moore was clear on his understanding of the music and its meaning when he stated that:

our music is the truest of all comments upon our history [...] there are many airs which, I think, it is difficult to listen to without recalling some period or event to which their expression seems peculiarly applicable.

One particularly poignant example, 'Oh! Breathe not his Name' was written to commemorate Moore's friend, the Irish patriot, Robert Emmet, who had led a failed uprising in Dublin in 1803, was found guilty of treason and sentenced to be hanged.



The political associations of the songs travelled far beyond Ireland. In 1842, editor of *The Nation*, Charles Gavan Duffy wrote:

They not only have appeared in every European language, but they supplied the Poles with their most popular revolutionary songs during the last war.

At home, an understanding of the *Melodies* as vehicles for inspiring political change continued to be

promoted by James Burke, who wrote in his biography of Moore (1852), that the *Melodies* would 'always be deemed Moore's greatest work'. He added that politicians Richard Lalor Shiel and Daniel O'Connell (founders of the Catholic Association which campaigned for religious and political equality for Catholics) had quoted lines from the *Melodies* in their speeches. Burke and others argued that Moore was equally as important as O'Connell in the campaign for Catholic Emancipation. Furthermore, it was argued that his music had brought the reality of Ireland's past to the salons of the gentry, and provoked sympathy for Ireland's cause.

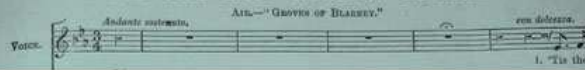


*Believe me of all these endearing young Charms*



*My gentle harp:*  
MOORE'S IRISH MELODIES, 1808-2008

## 'TIS THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER.



IN THE YEARS following his death, the *Melodies* dominated commemorations of his birth. Two concerts in Dublin with audiences of 3,000 apiece marked his Centenary Commemoration at the Exhibition Palace (now the National Concert Hall) in 1879. Festivities were recorded throughout the country and further afield in England, America and Australia. Common to all was the central place that the *Melodies* commanded in Ireland's national culture and Moore's position as a great national figure. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century Moore's place in Ireland's cultural landscape was diminishing and he was all but cast aside as a far more intense nationalism in the form of the Gaelic Revival took hold and relegated Moore's 'parlour music' to the past. By 1894, one commentator, T.O. Russell, could lament:

The growing indifference to Moore seems the darkest thing in the present aspect of Irish National thought. Ireland owes a debt of gratitude to Moore greater than any other nation owes to any other poet, yet many of the present generation of Irishmen, even those among them who claim to be Nationalists, seem not to appreciate either his genius or his patriotism.

Even so, while Moore's position as the 'Bard of Erin' had been thoroughly dismantled, the *Melodies* did not fade into obscurity entirely. Some of the more popular *Melodies* can be found in numerous collections of music. Furthermore, in 1960 the British composer, Benjamin Britten selected a number of the *Melodies* for the fourth volume of his *Folk song arrangements: Moore's Irish melodies*. In addition to the published music, the dawning of the recording era afforded new opportunities for their dissemination. Some early cylinder recordings of 'The Meeting of the Waters', 'The Minstrel Boy' and 'Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms' were made by

Irish tenor, John McCormack in 1904, although the great nineteenth-century soprano, Adelina Patti, made her first recording of 'The Last Rose of Summer' some years before this, in 1895. Moore's songs proved popular with other prominent vocalists in the early years of the twentieth century, including Luisa Tetravzini, Dame Nellie Melba, Amelita Galli-Curci, John Charles Thomas, Tom Burke, Lucrezia Bori, Edith Mason, John O'Sullivan and Margaret Burke Sheridan. At the other end of the

spectrum, one of Moore's popular *Melodies*, 'Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms', even found its way into Warner's *Looney Tunes* cartoons in *Ballot Box Bunny* (1951) and others. Several of the songs have remained popular with a wide range of musicians from the latter part of the twentieth century to the present day: 'The Last Rose of Summer' was recorded by Nina Simone (1964) and Nana Mouskouri (1969); an instrumental version of 'The Minstrel Boy' was released by The Corrs (1995), and the song was performed by U2 on their 'Popmart' tour (1997). Joe Strummer (former lead singer with The Clash) recorded it with The Mescaleros in 2001, and produced a second version for the film *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

EVEN THOUGH Moore's position in Ireland's cultural history has considerably lessened, the enduring appeal of at least a handful of the *Melodies* is evident through publications and recordings. It was, in fact, something that Moore suspected when he wrote of the *Melodies* that they:

...are the only work of my pen, as I very sincerely believe, whose fame (thanks to the sweet music in which it is embalmed) may boast a chance of prolonging its existence to a day much beyond our own...

PIRETHORN FAMILY: Moore's centenary. One hundred years ago, still in Thomas Moore's Words by Stephen H. Ellingson, set to music by J. W. Clavin. Title page. London and Dublin: Denton Donovan & Co. Main picture: Thomas Moore by Thomas A. Woodworth (1785-1857), engraving after an original painting by Martin Archer Shee (1760-1830) courtesy of the National Library of Ireland (Moore T10151 001). 'Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms' (Original air: My lodging is on the cold ground) by Sir John Stevenson, A Selection of Irish Melodies with guitar and accompaniment. Dublin: W. Procter.

THE MUSIC: 'Tis the Last Rose of Summer' (Original air: Groves of Blarney) by M.W. Balfe. Moore's Irish Melodies, New York: Novello. Thomas Moore by John Taylor Wadsworth, engraving after an original painting by Martin Archer Shee (1760-1830) courtesy of the National Library of Ireland (Moore 20 001). Moore's centenary supplement to The Shamrock, Vol. XVI, No. 656, May 24, 1879.



# Thomas Moore



## HUNT, THE IRISH MELODIES and their MUSICAL INFLUENCE

Thomas Moore's lasting reputation as a poet rests on the *Irish melodies*, ten immensely popular collections of songs, published between 1808 and 1834, by James and William Power, in London and Dublin. Among the most popular are 'The Last Rose of Summer', 'The Meeting of the Waters', 'Believe Me if all those Endearing Young Charms', 'The Minstrel Boy' and 'Silent, oh Moyle'. Aimed initially at the upper classes, the volumes were inscribed 'To the Nobility and Gentry of Ireland' and the accompaniments for the first seven numbers were provided by Moore's friend, Sir John Stevenson (1761-1833) and for the final three by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop (1786-1855).

THE IRISH MELODIES were such a runaway success that Moore was offered a contract of £500 a year for a further series, providing him with his first regular income.

FOR MOORE, poetry was often inspired by and linked to music; indeed, it was to be many years before he would allow the words of the *Melodies* to be published separately from the airs. The unique effect of the *Melodies* and Moore's poetic genius can be attributed, in part, to the music he chose. The airs were drawn largely from anthologies of ancient harp music, particularly the collections of Edward Bunting, first published after the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792. Moore came into contact with Bunting's collection while a student at Trinity College Dublin. Eight of the twelve airs in Moore's first number (1808) came from Bunting's collections. Through these songs, the harp airs took on a new life and a symbolic meaning, bringing the ancient music of Ireland before a global audience for the very first time. While Moore recognised their unique beauty, he also perceived their symbolic significance.

THE *Melodies* were written through the dark period following the 1798 Rebellion and the Act of Union in 1801. Moore's songs frequently took on potent

political meaning with a range of themes from emigration and national identity, to social commentary and revolutionary ideals. His patriotic songs went round the world and later became a symbolic rallying cry in Poland, Hungary, Russia and Cuba. But the long-standing success of the *Melodies* was not due to patriotic sentiments alone. In many of his songs, Moore expressed a deeply personal perspective on themes of romantic love, the beauties of nature, the anger of betrayal, the warmth of friendship, and the sorrow of parting and old age. Through the immediate appeal of his opening lines and his simple and direct style, he achieved a wide range of colour and expression in the poetic language of his entire collection.

Robert Schumann



Hector Berlioz

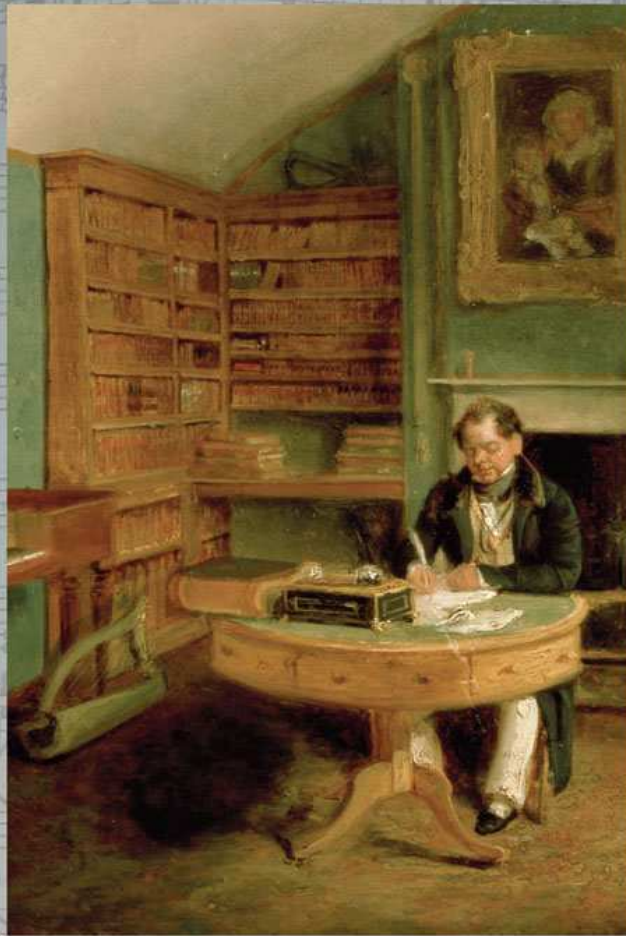
WHILE the *Melodies* were extremely popular, they were not received without censure from contemporary critics. Although the poetry is considered superior by the nineteenth-century music journal *Quarterly Music Magazine and Reviews*, the reviewer also suggests that several of the songs 'have the unsavoury odour of politics about them'. An 'insurmountable objection' is raised against the inclusion of duets and three and four-part glees. A new collection, *A selection of popular national airs* began issuing in 1818, offering fresh lyrics in some of Moore's best and most moving love songs. The first volume contains such enduring favourites as 'Oft in the Silly Night' and 'Hark! The Vesper Hymn is Stealing'.

THROUGHOUT the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the *Melodies* were continually updated. In 1859, Michael William Balfe (1808-70) made arrangements for 87 of the original 124 songs and Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) provided 'restored' settings in 1895. Misconceptions have grown up in relation to the *Melodies* over the years for, while Moore wrote many songs, published either singly or in various collections, he consistently reserved the Irish airs for his *Irish melodies*. Some songs are widely regarded as *Irish melodies*, whereas, in reality they were published in other collections. For example, Moore's poetry for the ballad, 'Love Thee Dearest', is set to a melody by Giovanni Battista Viotti (1753-1824) and the song 'Oft in the Silly Night', set to a Scottish air and included in the first set of *National airs*, has been wrongly included in modern compilations of the *Irish melodies*.



From top: Hector Berlioz (1803-69) by Pierre Petit (1832-1901), Private Collection, Archivo Charco/The Bridgman Art Library; Robert Schumann (1810-56) by Johann (19th century), Private Collection, The Bridgman Art Library; Thomas Moore (creator of the National Library of Ireland) (Moore 201001).

My gentle harp:  
MOORE'S IRISH MELODIES, 1808-2008



Thomas Moore in his study at Slopstone Cottage © The National Gallery of Ireland.

**IN HIS INTRODUCTION**, Moore had written that he wished to reach the 'pianofortes of the rich and educated' so as to further Ireland's cause. In the end he reached people of many nationalities from the gentry down to the most humble. 'The Last Rose of Summer' sold no fewer than one and a half million copies in the US alone and was among the most popular songs of the nineteenth century. Friedrich von Flotow used the air in his opera *Martha*. Furthermore, as transcriptions frequently highlighted the most popular vocal music of the day, countless pianist-composers and other instrumentalists used the air in their fantasias and variations.

**BERLIOZ AND SCHUMANN** both employed Moore's translated texts in their works: Schumann in his cantata 'Das Paradies und Die Peri', taken from the second part of the oriental poem *Lalla Rookh*, and Berlioz used nine of Moore's songs under the title *Irlande*. The

*Melodies* enjoyed considerable popularity in Parisian cultural life in the early part of the nineteenth century. Berlioz himself was enthralled with Moore's songs and held romantic notions about Ireland, fuelled by his interest in the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, whom he married.

**SCHUMANN'S ADAPTATION** of *Lalla Rookh*, 'Paradise and the Peri', was given its first performance in Dublin in 1854 at the Antient Concert Rooms, Marlborough Street, by the Royal Choral Institute, conducted by John William Glover. Following Moore's death, Glover held commemorative concerts and produced a new edition of the *Melodies* in 1859. Perhaps the most illustrious presentation of the work was given on 23 June 1856 by the Philharmonic Society in London, with 'the Swedish Nightingale', Jenny Lind, singing the part of the Peri and the English composer, William Sterndale Bennett, conducting.

*My gentle harp:*  
MOORE'S IRISH MELODIES, 1808-2008

# Thomas Moore's Harp

THE ROYAL PORTABLE HARP OF JOHN EGAN

As an emblem of both the country and its music, the harp features prominently in Thomas Moore's *Irish melodies* (1808-34). In 1821, Moore was presented with a beautiful green Irish harp decorated with gold shamrocks, a 'Royal Portable Harp' made by John Egan, Dublin's leading harp maker.

JOHN EGAN had harp workshops in Dublin from c.1804 to 1841. However, Egan is best known for his Royal Portable Harps: small Irish harps, about three feet in height, decorated with gold shamrocks. Egan was granted the royal warrant from King George IV (hence, 'Royal' Portable). Brass plates on these harps are engraved with the coat of arms, a royal warrant, and Egan's address. The inscription on Thomas Moore's harp is: *J. Egan, 30 Dawson St. Dublin / Harp Maker by Special Appointment To His Most Gracious Majesty George IV & to the Royal Family / No. 1858.* John Egan's Royal Portable Harps are 'revival' harps, combining elements of the ancient Irish harp shape with modern harp design to create a new Irish harp.

THE HARP has been played in Ireland for over a thousand years, however by the late 1700s, only a few harpers remained, and the tradition of harp playing was in danger of disappearing. Efforts were made to revive interest in the harp with the *Belfast Harp Festival* of 1792. Edward Bunting, a young organist, was hired to act as scribe, recording the harp tunes as they were played, to preserve them for posterity. These collections of tunes were later published in three volumes as Bunting's *Ancient Irish music*, and Thomas Moore used many tunes from these collections in his *Melodies*.

IN 1807, the Belfast Harp Society was formed and the society opened a boarding school for blind boys, to encourage harp playing. There was a tradition of blind harpers in Ireland. Arthur O'Neill, a blind harper from the Belfast Festival, was engaged as the harp teacher. The pro-

gramme collapsed in 1813 due to lack of funds, but a second Belfast Harp Society was revived in 1819 and lasted until 1839. John Egan made all the harps for the school. Dublin also had a Harp Society, from 1809 to 1812, and members included Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Moore.

THE ANCIENT IRISH HARP, or *clairseach*, that was played at the Belfast Festival was wire-strung, tuned in modes, and the soundbox was made from a single hollowed-out log of wood. Egan's wire-strung harps for the Belfast school had a similar high-headed shape, but were constructed with several pieces of wood. They had rounded backs, like the pedal harps of Sebastian Erard, whose design was used by most harp makers.

MOST OF EGAN'S HARPS were gut-strung, with sharpening mechanisms for playing in different keys, well suited to the popular art music of the day. Some portable harps were fitted with brass *ring stops* to fret, or shorten, each string, raising the pitch a semi-tone. For the Royal Portable Harps, Egan invented a new system using the *fourchette*, or 'fork' disc action of Erard pedal harps, but incorporating levers instead of pedals. These ivory hand levers or *ditals*, were placed on the inner side of the harp's column. The ditals operate rods inside the column, which move metal discs on the neck to fret the strings. For example, when the F dital is engaged in a slotted position, the corresponding discs for all the F strings turn, and create F-sharps. Portable harps were tuned in E-flat major, like pedal harps, and one could play in different keys by pre-setting the ditals, or play an accidental within a piece. Ditals had been used on harp-lutes and similar hybrid instruments made in the nineteenth century by Edward Light in London. Thus, the Royal Portable Harp cleverly combined the three concepts: the shape of the ancient Irish harp, the construction and mechanism of Erard pedal harps, and ditals similar to those on popular harp-lutes.



Thomas Moore in his study at Sligo, c.1800. © The National Gallery of Ireland





EGAN, proud of his new invention, and eager to promote it, wrote to Thomas Moore in August, 1820. In *The Journal of Thomas Moore*, the poet writes:

Received a letter from Egan, the harp-maker in Dublin, very well & flatteringly indited, telling me of the perfection to which he had at last brought the Irish Harp, & begging me to allow him to present me one of his best, as a mark of admiration ...

**ROYAL PORTABLE**

**HARPS** were available in black, blue or green, and all were decorated with hand-painted clusters of gold shamrocks. There are at least two Egan's with a shamrock, rose, and thistle motif, one in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, and another in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Portable harps were supplied with leather cases. A leather strap could be attached to two brass knobs, at the top and bottom of the harp. Inside the soundbox, Egan ingeniously stored a stabilizing rod, which extends to the ground to steady the harp held in the lap.



ON THE 17<sup>TH</sup> OF OCTOBER, 1821, Thomas Moore's Egan harp arrived. Moore writes:

Egan, the Harp-maker, most anxious that I should judge the power of his improved Irish Harps- sent his son with one — the Chaise at the door at ½ past three, and some beautiful Irish airs played to me during my last moments — Had wine in & all filled bumpers to the Irish Harp & our

next happy meeting.

Thomas Moore played his harp to accompany his singing, and Egan harps were popular in the society drawing rooms of Dublin and London. Sydney Owenson, (later Lady Morgan), wrote in May 1805, "...the first purchase she made for herself out of her literary earnings were an Irish harp, from Egan, and a black mode cloak!"

In 1827, Charles Egan published *The royal harp director*, a method book with harp arrangements and a discussion of the harps invented by John Egan. Charles Egan states that John Egan restored the Irish harp to its former glory, of its place in the 'Palaces of Kings'.

**THE ROYAL PORTABLE**

**HARPS** with ditals eventually fell out of fashion. They were heavier and more cumbersome than harps made with levers or blades, which eventually became the choice of players. Upon Egan's death, his nephew, Francis Hewson continued the business. There are possibly fewer than fifty Egan harps extant today in museums and private collections.

**THE EGAN HARP**

shape and decoration became the new model for Irish harps, and were copied by other harp makers like Morley Harps in England, late nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century by Melville Clark in America. The Egan shape is still used by harp makers today. Two hundred years ago, Thomas Moore contributed to the revival of ancient Irish music with his poetry, in *the Irish melodies*. At the same time, John Egan revived the Irish harp with his new harp models, including his Royal Portable Harp, an important contribution to the continuation of the harp tradition in Ireland.



*My gentle harp:*  
MOORE'S IRISH MELODIES, 1808-2008