

UNSUNG HEROES



Landed gentry's literary legacy

George Augustus Moore came from famous family but carved his own sense of identity

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PROGRESSIVE politics may have been a key part of his family legacy but George Augustus Moore's strong principles and beliefs were played out instead between the pages of the 65 books he wrote over his colourful and sometimes eccentric life. In so many ways his literary acumen and vision is equally as important as the relative successes of other members of this famous Mayo dynasty.

One of the Moores of Moorehall his grand-uncle was John Moore of Straide, who General Ambrose Humbert appointed as the – albeit short-lived – President of the Republic of Connacht after the French invasion of 1798.

John's nephew, and George Augustus's father, George Henry Moore may not have left such a dramatic revolutionary footprint but the Great Famine of the 1840s proved to be quite a wake-up call for his high-living and, ironically, his love of horse-racing meant he was in a position to purchase livestock for his impoverished tenants after a major win of £10,000 as a steeplechase rider at the Chester Cup. He was also one of those landlords who purchased ship-loads of grain for his starving tenantry.

The desperate impact of the famine led him to enter parliament in 1847 as a popular liberal MP for County Mayo. Indeed, the year before his son, George Augustus was born (1852) he was involved

in the setting up of the Catholic Defence Association, which fostered the rights of Catholic tenant farmers. He was also one of the leaders of the Independent Irish Party, which held nationalist values and fostered the rights of Catholics.

As stated above, his eldest son, George Augustus would harness his privilege in a very different manner but at a time when a re-energised political activism – for example the Land League, the United Irish League, the Gaelic League – would invigorate a broader cultural sense of self-determination.

Thus George Augustus's artistic temperament drew him to the fomenting cultural movement that gained momentum in the latter decades of the 19th century and in so many ways reawakened the rich repository of Celtic culture and a sense of separate identity for the Irish. It is worth noting here that he would be among those luminaries who helped to establish the national theatre, the Abbey, along with Lady Augusta Gregory, WB Yeats and Edward Martyn.

LEAVING THE LAND

LIKE his father, he was educated at the Jesuit college, St Mary's, Oscott, near Birmingham, and quickly became known for his colourful character and studied eccentricities. It seemed pretty clear from the beginning, though, as the eldest son and natural heir, he was never going to settle back in Moorehall as a landlord.

As the historian, WJ McCormack writes in his essay on Moore in 'Mayo: History and Society': "Though he enjoyed coun-



▲ **LASTING LEGACY** The works of George Augustus Moore still engender great debate, so much so the 11th George Moore International Conference is scheduled to take place in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick on April 24, 2021.

try sports at home, he was ill-equipped to take up responsibilities as a landlord and would quickly delegate the burden to his younger brother, Maurice George Moore (1854-1939) and sundry unfortunate agents."

Instead, Moore's early experiences of the bohemian and sophisticated salons of Paris – where for a time he thought of becoming a painter – meant writing became his prolific medium.

CATHOLIC CHURCH'S POWER

THAT doesn't mean though that he lived in some literary ivory tower as his many books reveal. Indeed, introducing a symposium on his literary legacy, held at the Princess Grace Library in Monaco in 2014, UCC academic, Dr Mary Pierse observed: "His contention [was] that the Irish Catholic Church stepped into the place vacated by the Ascendancy after the Land War—literally, in the sense that they took over so many Big Houses as convents and monasteries, but virtually in the sense that the church became the ultimate and extra-constitutional authority in the land. The priesthood assumed a kind of personal rule, and assumed with it the character faults of a tyrannical class."

EXTRAORDINARY MAYO PEOPLE YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD OF

Innovative, honest and daring

MARY PIERSE

IT is somewhat astonishing that George Augustus Moore (GM) still needs introduction to a wider public. This talented Mayo man was the author of a truly massive oeuvre: sixty-five book titles include prose, drama and early poetry, and as a perfectionist and tireless reviser, many of those books exist in multiple editions, with some always in print.

GM was a visual art disciple, a discriminating art critic, and is credited with popularising the Impressionists' art in Britain, as well as playing the key role in bringing French literary modernism to English readers in the 1880s and 1890s. He broke new ground in autobiography and memoir.

In the light of his acknowledged excellence and innovative achievements, why is his name not more widely recognised? Some of that neglect results from posthumous disparagement by a literary rival, WB Yeats, but there is more to the story.

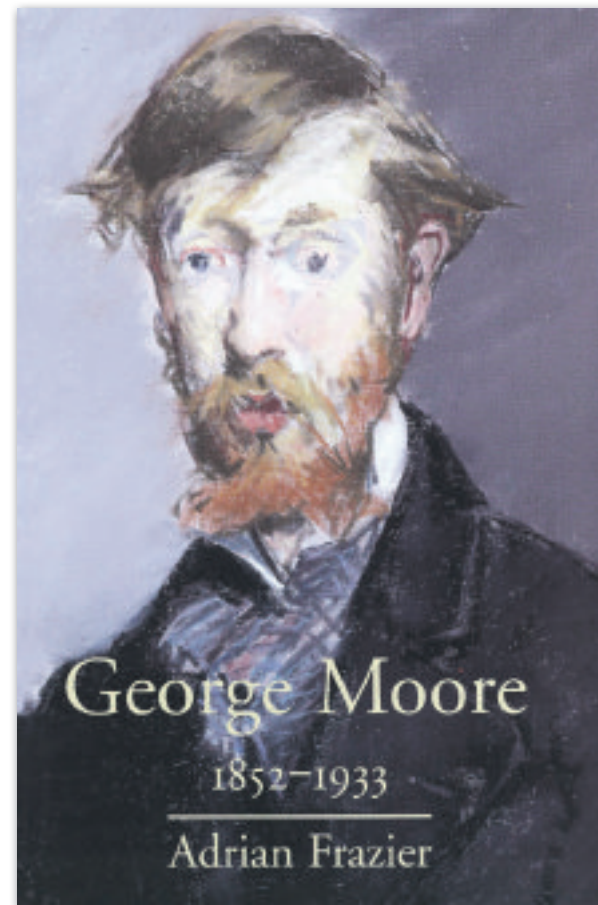
Today, Ireland can uncover the prejudice, prurience, and scandals of its past, recognise pressures during early statehood, and admit the horrors of institutional violence. That was difficult and threatening a century ago when George Moore, so often far ahead of prevailing taste, was condemned for honesty, innovation and daring. He refused to compromise with the establishment, truth mattered too much.

GM contended that a Catholic clergy came to take the place of the ascendancy, that they lacked the cultured education of previous generations of priests, and assumed tyrannical powers. Inevitably, Moore was branded un-Irish and anti-Catholic but neither label stands up to scrutiny today. He showed that nineteenth-century marriage was frequently not a happy place, that human sexuality is infinitely varied and complex, that loftier social status does not guarantee superior morality. In touch with humanity and society, he was prescient and humane.

In *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) and *Parnell and his Island* (1887), his portraits of Mayo and Ireland did not spare peasant or landlord, church or state, patriarchy or 'patriot'. Moreover, Mayo resented and remembered unwelcome disclosures of contemporary unorthodoxy in identifiable persons. *A Drama in Muslin* exhibited Moore's feminist depiction of the marriage market, uncharitable attitudes to unmarried mothers (a topic he treated in *Esther Waters*), shades of lesbianism, and flagrant adultery.

GROUND-BREAKING

HIS ground-breaking short story collection, *The Untilled Field* (1903) – a model for James Joyce's *Dubliners* – shone light on the poverty and hardship of rural



▲ **CHRONICLE** An excellent starting point for readers wanting to know more about George Moore is Adrian Frazier's, 'George Moore 1852-1933'.



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Ireland rather than cloak it in literary revival romanticism. *The Lake* (1905) was a riposte to such fantasy, engaging with the contemporary, including a normalising of non-marital relationships, even as it exuded the sight, sound and texture of Lough Carra. The landscape of Moorehall and the west of Ireland was ever close to GM's heart, reflected and resounding repeatedly in his writ-

ings.

With George Moore scholars active in Australia, USA, Japan, Brazil, France, Spain, and UK, recent publications are numerous. An excellent starting point for new readers is Adrian Frazier's, *George Moore 1852-1933*. Then, read the chosen books and embark on a cultural tour embracing the newly refurbished gardens at Moorehall, visit Ballintubber Abbey, Ashford Castle, home territory of the Brownes, Blakes, Martyns and Pesses, go to Ely Place, and the Shelbourne Hotel, and follow up with Moore's Paris, London, Bayreuth and Palestine. The 11th George Moore International Conference will take place in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick on April 24, 2021.

MORE

Dr Mary Pierse taught diverse literature courses at the School of English, and has given courses on Irish feminisms for the MA programme in Women's Studies at University College, Cork. Instigator of the George Moore international conference series, she has edited and co-edited several volumes on Moore's works. www.georgemooreassociation.org.



▲ **LEAVING THE LAND** As the eldest son and natural heir, George Augustus Moore could have settled back in Moorehall as landlord, but his colourful character and studied eccentricities meant from an early age, his energies were focused elsewhere. Pic: Darren Moran/Firefly Photography

Importantly, she also noted: "His belief that nations ask too much of the humans born into them in the way of duty, and that they thereby diminish the development of personality and freedom; he was a visionary of a post-national phase of civilisation."

Her observations on why his work was somewhat eclipsed by his more famous contemporaries – such as WB Yeats and John Millington Synge is interesting.

Dr Pierse writes that Moore was 'not a typical Irish nationalist, and his work does not begin and end in the Literary Revival although he was enthusiastically involved and insisted that publication of the Irish-language version of his short story collection *An t-Úr-Ghort* should precede the English version, *The Untilled Field*'.

Influenced by his life in France, where he became friends with such renowned artists as Degas and Manet, he was always 'much more a European artist than one who was completely devoted to the glory of any nation, or nation yet to be', she suggests.

This certainly adds to the poetic pathos of his ancestral home being burned down by anti-Treaty activists during the Civil War.