

Ireland's Minstrel Boy gets his encore

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BOSTON — Ireland's first mega star wrote poetry, history tomes and political polemics that made him the talk of the town in his native Dublin as well as in London, Boston and New York.

We're not talking about Bono here, but rather Thomas Moore, whose patriotic-imbued writings earned him the titles Bard of Erin and Ireland's National Poet.

It was Moore's lyrics to ancient Irish airs that brought him fame and notoriety during his lifetime and beyond. His famous collection, "Moore's Melodies," was admired by the likes of Beethoven and Lord Byron, and translated into six languages.

"Moore's Melodies" was a ten-volume set of 124 songs published between 1808 and 1834 by Power Publishing in London. The airs were taken largely from Edward Bunting's famous tune book, "Ancient Irish Music," which was published in 1796, and is still a source book for traditional musicians.

While Moore wrote exquisite lyrics to the Bunting airs, his collaborator, John Stevenson, arranged the music, sometimes distorting the true melody-line to fit the words. The songs expressed the Irish desire for freedom, but because the English gentry loved them, many Irish nationalists concluded Moore was elitist.

But no matter. The tunes were snapped up by music lovers in Ireland and across Europe, which was enamored by the nationalist passion of Moore's sentiments. Moore was a Trinity classmate of Robert Emmet, whose execution in 1803 after the failed 1798 Uprising affected Moore deeply.

The advent of mass printing technology fueled the book's popularity even further, especially in the United States, where the collection was re-printed with abandon in an era of weak copyright laws.

"By 1900, over 30 separate editions of 'Irish Melodies' had been published in America," wrote Irish music scholar W.H.A. Williams in his book, "Twas Only an Irishman's Dream."

And "The Last Rose of Summer," Moore's greatest hit, sold over one million copies of sheet music in the 19th century, according to Professor James W. Flannery, Professor of Arts and Humanities at Emory University in Atlanta.

Moore's legacy continued long after his death in 1852. In Boston, a Thomas Moore Club was quickly formed, as a way of keeping the music alive. And Moore's songs were played alongside Handel, Mozart, and Rossini during Boston's Peace Jubilee in 1869 by Patrick S. Gilmore, according to Gilmore-scholar Michael Cummings.

In 1879, the centenary of Moore's birth, tributes took place in New York City and Boston, where John Boyle O'Reilly called Moore "an original poet of splendid imagination."



Above: Tom Moore. Right: Sheet music for "Tis The Last Rose of Summer."

The songs were kept alive in the 20th century by singers like John McCormack, especially classics like "The Last Rose of Summer" and "Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms." In the early 60s, the Clancy Brothers had a hit with "The Minstrel Boy."

In the early 70s, Moore's popularity began to decline. His songs seemed to fade from fashion with changing musical tastes.

Moore's

music seemed increasingly irrelevant, especially to anyone under the age of 40. But that may soon change.



200 years of Moore's melodies

With the 200th anniversary of the publication of "Moore's Melodies" in 2008, it looks like Moore is making a comeback. The milestone is giving academics, writers and music lovers a chance to reflect on his status as a poet, lyricist and polemicist, as well as his place in Irish history.

One of the chief enthusiasts behind the Moore revival is Professor Sean Ryder of the National University of Ireland, Galway. He is project leader for the Thomas Moore Hypermedia Archive, which aims to compile the "complete poetical, musical and prose works of Thomas Moore." Similar projects have been completed on poets Walt Whitman and

William Blake.

Phase one of the Moore project is slated to go live this November, when the Hypermedia Archive will be launched at a conference in Galway, according to Ryder.

"By next year, we should have all the 'Irish Melodies' available online as texts, manuscript facsimiles and musical files, with commentary," he said.

The interest in Moore is enhanced by two new biographies, including one published last month by Ronan Kelly, entitled, "The Bard of Erin: the Life of Thomas Moore," which Ryder says is superb.

Like Ryder, Professor Flannery in Atlanta never lost faith in Moore's importance in Irish history as a songwriter, a literary influence and a nationalist figure.

Flannery, who also heads up the W.B. Yeats Foundation, asserts that Moore helped to shape modern Ireland through his songwriting, and influenced many noted Irish writers, such as William Butler Yeats.

Flannery has written extensively on Moore and recorded many of his songs. "Dear Harp of My Country: the Irish Melodies of Thomas Moore" was published in 1997, to great acclaim. The double CD set contains 39 of Moore's best songs, and Flannery is accompanied on the Irish harp by Janet Harbison.

Thomas Moore lived and wrote during one of the darkest periods of Irish history — a time when the cultural legacy of Gaelic Ireland was all but dead," Flannery said. "Instead of turning his back on the dying vestiges of that culture, Moore sought to revive and redirect its energies outward."

Brian O'Donovan, host of Boston's popular radio program, "A Celtic Sojourn," thinks the anniversary will refocus attention on Moore's work, which, he pointed out, "suffered from underexposure in recent years."

Moore's work "has its place in the best sessions, next to sean nos songs in Gaelic, rebel songs popularized by the Clancys, or Shane McGowan's Fairytale of New York," O'Donovan said.

Ryder noted that contemporary Irish singers are also rediscovering Moore. He cited Nuala O'Connor's RTE documentary on Moore's legacy, which featured new interpretations of some of the Melodies by Christy Moore, Luka Bloom, Iarla Ó Lionáird, Emer Quinn and others.

And just last month, "The Last Rose of Summer" was played at the funeral of Patrick Hillery, former President of Ireland, said Ryder.

Flannery, who will perform a recital of Moore's melodies at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast on August 21, notes, "The real importance of Moore is that he envisaged a better future for Ireland, even while facing the bitter realities of the present."

Tom Moore Sightings in Popular Culture

Brooklyn's Prospect Park has a bronze bust memorial to Thomas Moore, commissioned by the St. Patrick's Society of Brooklyn in 1879 on the centenary of Moore's birth.

Not to be outdone, Manhattan stepped in a year later, with a bust of Thomas Moore in Central Park, at East 60th St., commissioned by the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick.

In Dublin, there's a statue of Moore on College Street near Trinity Church, and a plaque on the house where Moore was born.

In Wicklow, the poet is commemorated at the Meeting of the Avonmor and Avonbeg Rivers, a tribute to Moore's song, "The Meeting of the Waters."

In Boston, there's a restaurant named Lalla Rookh, named after Moore's famous fable about a Persian princess. There are significant collections of Moore's works at the Boston Public Library, Burns Library at Boston College, and the Boston Athenaeum.

The Island of Bermuda boasts its own Tom Moore Tavern, according to travel writer Betty Lowry. The tavern is on the site where Moore resided in 1804, when he was assigned to the British Court of Vice-Admiralty.