

THOMAS MORAN: (Mohill)

A SKILLED WEAVER OF FINE SONGS

It has long been a practice of mine to spend a large part of my Saturday afternoons browsing through the stacks of record covers which adorn many departments of the larger Dublin stores. The object of this exercise is generally "to locate a bargain" and I approach this task with the same diligence as the housewife on a similar mission constitutes "a bargain". In my case it is either a desire to find a large and varied collection of good music, be it traditional, classical, jazz, or common or garden pop all assembled in the one record or else to discover some rare gem which the record companies throw on the market in their efforts to appeal to some popular cult of the time, and when the latter fails, is withdrawn by them to join its comrades in the dust bin.

It was one such afternoon I came upon a series of records which embodied the collections of such eminent folklorists as Seamus Ennis, Alan Lomax, Peter Kennedy and others. The contributions came from such scattered areas as Cornwall, Edinburgh and Swansea. There among the lists I discovered with the natural pride one always feels when the town of ones birth or the name of a celebrated local appears in an international publication of any description, the name of "Thomas Moran, Mohill, Co. Leitrim".

Thomas Moran was born in 1876 and lived all his life at Drumrahill, Mohill, Co. Leitrim. I had often heard of him as a boy, and he was normally referred to affectionately as "old Moran, the ballad singer". He had been a hard working man all his life by all accounts and because of his vast knowledge of song, he had attracted many folk collectors and made numerous recordings with the B.B.C. One such recording was made by Seamus Ennis in 1954 in Mohill. The record is now in the possession of Mr. Jack Kelly and he himself features on it. Mr. Kelly sang a light-hearted lament (if such be possible) called "Biddy Rooney" and Thomas Moran sang "Brian O'Linn", "The Herring Song" and a rather curious piece entitled "The Airy Little Tailor", which tells the story of a young apprentice who follows his true love Mollie to Dublin to discover that she has become the maid to a rich lady. To this lady he passes himself off as a gentleman and she offers him five thousand pounds if he will marry her. He, not unwisely, accepts the offer. This turns out to be a clever trick on her part and with the collusion of the priest she arranges to let Mollie take her place at what must have been the strangest marriage ceremony of all times. The ruse continues until discovery is eventually made in the marriage bed. Jack Kelly has told me that these recordings were attended by quite a few days of song and revelry with many fine vocal renditions

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B.C.L., LL.B.

from the late Mr. Archie Bradshaw and the then Mr. Dermot Dunleavy, Solicitor (now judge of the Dundalk District Court).

Where Moran excels, is in what could be called the classical traditional ballad of which he had a vast repertoire. These are songs which cannot be constrained by boundaries of districts or even countries and extend over continents. In the words of probably the world's greatest living authority on folk music, A. L. Lloyd "only a small proportion of such ballads are firmly localised. In many cases in its transit from singer to singer, district to district, the same song takes on the local colour and associations of a score of qualities "what county does that song from from?" is a question commonly put by the innocent amateur. They ask in vain. Among those of this genre which Moran sang were Barbara Allen, The Cruel Mother, Jack Mulrow, known in the Appalachian Mountain of America as Jack arge, Lord Randall, as I roved out, The Cherry Tree Carol, The Blind Man He Could See, The Jolly Tinker and Lord Gregory. These songs have strayed into every corner of the world, though they may be placed in differing localities and boast varying heroes, they all tell the same story. One good example is that of Handsome Polly Oh which Moran sings on a record entitled "A Soldier's Life For Me".

Oh a regiment of soldiers came to
Mohill-O,

Oh a regiment of soldiers came to
Mohill-O,

With their captain on parade,
Fell in love with the lady's maid,
Who was known by the name of Hand-
some Polly-O.

Oh, enlist in the army handsome Polly-O,
Oh, enlist in the army handsome Polly-O,
You will have a horse to ride
And a rifle by your side,
And a whole band of music going before
you-O.



Thomas Moran—by Jeannette Duane

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This song is well known across the world as "Pretty Pegg-O" or "The Maid of Fyfe".

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Tom Munnelly who afforded me the opportunity of listening to a great deal of the collected songs of Thomas Moran which are now with the Department of Education and the Folklore Commission. Mr. Munnelly is a very distinguished member of a band of young collectors whose unstinting efforts have salvaged some rare items which otherwise might have been lost forever. I asked Mr. Munnelly of his views on Thomas Moran and of music in Leitrim in general. "Along with John Reilly, a Roscommon man, Thomas Moran can be regarded as a bastion of the classical tradition. I myself have collected more songs in Leitrim and Roscommon than in the rest of the country put together. Ironically the type of song most common is the English Broadside which has faded to a great extent in the country of its origin. Some songs which Thomas Moran sings are of very great age indeed. For instance a song entitled "The Green Wedding" is almost certainly about the character Sir Walter Scott portrays as Young Lochinvar.

In this age of the lounge bar where the more inferior products of Nashville are foisted upon us with vigour one wonders whether the cultural legacy left by people like Thomas Moran has ever been accepted by us its beneficiaries. When one hears a song like "The Jolly Tinker" learned straight from a record and one considers that this was first presented to the world at large by an old man who lived probably but a few miles from those who sing it, one cannot help but smile. Occasionally a song which Moran sang can be heard, like for instance, "Drumholligan Bottoms" which was sung to me by Michael Coyneen. Indeed Thomas Moran's own son has many fine songs which are being collected at the moment by the Department of Education; not all of which he learned from his father. Such incidents, however, are becoming rarer and is indeed a sad reflection that the senior ballad singing competition at the County Leitrim Flea Cool held at Mohill last year could only attract three singers.

I think that it is fitting that the final word should be left with Michael Moran. "Being at the advanced age of seventy-five years at the time of making the recordings, he never had the pleasure of hearing any of his songs broadcast. Had he been a young man, I do believe he would be one of the great ballad singers of his time but as tradition would have it, his singing still lives on in his grandchildren and is deeply cherished by them at all times". Thomas Moran died at the age of eighty-four on the 11th February, 1960. He died where he had lived all his life at Drumrahill. He possessed the gift which all great ballad singers have, namely, the ability to tell a story through the medium of music conveying a sense of humour, ribaldry or tragedy as the mood required. He indeed was a skilled weaver of fine songs.