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H. E.
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GEORGE MOORE

—and some literary propagandists

By H. E. BATES

WITH the death of George Moore English literature has lost its most poetical novelist and one of its most impudent and beautiful story tellers. If Moore had been a Frenchman it is fairly safe to say that his reputation in England would have been many times as great as it was even during the height of his popularity and notoriety, when the whole literary world was discussing such books as *Confessions of a Young Man*, *Hail and Farewell*, and *Esther Waters*, praising him for his originality and poetry, and damning him for his cheek and conceited outspokenness.

As it is, his death at the age of eighty has provoked so little popular comment or regret that many a man who will be mourning John Galsworthy will be wondering who George Moore was and what the reasons are for his greatness as a novelist and his comparative obscurity.

OUT THIS WEEK

- DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS. H. J. Laski. (Allen and Unwin. 7/6.)
 SPEND OR SAVE. M. O'Gorman. (Denis Archer. 6d.)
 BRUSH UP YOUR GERMAN. Grundy and Schöfer. (Dent. 2/6.)
 OUTSIDE EDEN. J. C. Squire. (Heinemann. 7/6.)
 IS CHRISTIANITY TRUE. Arnold Lunn and C. E. M. Joad. (Eyre and Spottiswoode. 7/6.)

Moore was Irish, having been born in Mayo somewhere about the middle of the nineteenth century, which was equivalent to having been born in England during the eighteenth. He wanted to be a painter, and there was only one place in which to learn to be a painter, and that was Paris, and to Paris he went in 1873. He gives a fascinating and provocative account of those early Parisian days in *The Confessions of a Young Man*.

The influence of French life and literature on him as a man and as an artist is inestimable. He learned his whole technique as a writer from the French, the very subjects of which he wrote were such as Flaubert or Maupassant would have loved, and there is a general feeling throughout his work that he himself considered it a mistake that he was not born French. But there is a feeling also that to be born an Irishman was the next best thing.

Someone—possibly Shaw—has said that all the greatest English writers were Irishmen and therein perhaps lies the secret of the Englishman's mistrust of the Irish artist. One feels that Shaw, for all his popularity, is deeply mistrusted by the English. Similarly with Moore, who was not only mistrusted but misunderstood and never really accepted.

His native arrogance, his artistic conceit, his impudent frankness, his maddening vanities all helped to keep him

estranged. It is said that he longed for the highest honours to be conferred upon him. He never received them. And it is hardly surprising. He aimed to be nothing but the pure artist, and what would have been regarded as a natural aim in France was something to be misunderstood and regarded with suspicion in England.

Here at once is the reason for Moore's greatness and his unpopularity: he was the pure artist. He had no axe to grind. In Galsworthy we had the earnest and sometimes sentimental propagandist; in Shaw we have the satirical propagandist; in Wells we have the fantastic propagandist—all these men, except perhaps Galsworthy, were artists secondarily. But Moore had no propaganda. He was content to be the artist first, last, and always—tolerant of all kinds of life and character, concerned only with the interpretation and illumination of life, ready at any time to broaden or deepen the range of his sympathy and understanding in order to embrace some fresh aspect of it.

He would take some pitiful or despicable character and reveal him to us tenderly and clearly, without sentimentality or harshness and force us not only to feel and believe in him, but to pity him also.

There is no one comparable to Moore in all the whole of English literature. Outside of it he constantly recalls Turgenyev, and it is significant that Turgenyev also learnt his art from the French. Like Turgenyev, Moore wrote exquisitely—at times he was too exquisite, and his long, carefully woven sentences became precious and irritating. He seemed to be painting words rather than writing them. His best pages shine vividly with the purest colour and light.

He was not always so good. He worked hard to perfect his style, becoming more and more fascinated by the beauty and power of words and their rhythms as he grew older. His earliest works gave no indication of the writer who was to come—the author of such stories as those in *Celibate Lives*, of *Memoirs of my Dead Life*, or *A Story Teller's Holiday*. These books alone would have made him a high and secure place in English letters. *The Lovers of Orelay*, which is included in *Memoirs of my Dead Life* is one of the world's loveliest love-stories. He made also one exquisite translation—*The Pastoral Loves of Daphnis and Chloe*, from the Greek of Longus.

Now that he is dead it is not unlikely that his work will be seen in a truer perspective: an irony he, with his shrewd sense of humour and his ability to laugh against himself in spite of all his vanity, would have relished keenly.

For, just as Shaw is the best friend and advertisement his work has ever had, so Moore was the greatest obstacle to his work's wider appreciation and popularity. Like Shaw, he never tired of telling the world how well he wrote but for some reason the world would not swallow his words as it swallowed Shaw's. The world was even irritated by that self-advertisement. He enraged it also by his attack on Hardy at the height of Hardy's popularity as the grand old man of contemporary literature. Yet time is steadily proving him to have been right about Hardy. And doubtless it will also prove him to have been right about himself.

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