

**'Irish by descent': Marianne Moore, Irish writers and
the American-Irish inheritance**

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ABSTRACT

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Despite having a rather weak family connection to Ireland, the American modernist poet Marianne Moore (1887–1972) described herself in a letter to Ezra Pound in 1919 as ‘Irish by descent’. This thesis relates Moore’s claim of Irish descent to her career as a publisher, poet and playwright, and argues that her decision to shape an Irish inheritance for herself was linked with her self-identification as an American poet.

Chapter 1 discusses Moore’s self-confessed susceptibility to ‘Irish magic’ in relation to the increase in contributions from Irish writers during her editorship of *The Dial* magazine from 1925 to 1929.

Moore’s 1915 poems to the Irish writers George Moore, W. B. Yeats and George Bernard Shaw, which reveal a paradoxical desire for affiliation to, and disassociation from, Irish literary traditions, are scrutinized in Chapter 2.

Chapters 3a and b discuss Moore’s ‘Irish’ poems ‘Sojourn in the Whale’ (1917) and ‘Spenser’s Ireland’ (1941). In both poems political events in Ireland – the ‘Easter Rising’ of 1916 and Ireland’s policy of neutrality during World War II – become a backdrop for Moore’s personal anxieties as an American poet of ‘Irish’ descent coming to terms with her political and cultural inheritance.

Expanding upon previous chapters’ discussion of the interrelation of poetics and politics, Chapter 4 shows how Moore’s use of Irish sources in ‘Spenser’s Ireland’ and other poems including ‘Silence’ and the ‘Student’ reflects her quixotic attitude to Irish culture as alternately an inspiration and a tool for manipulation.

The final chapter discusses Moore’s adaptation of the Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth’s 1812 novel *The Absentee* as a play in 1954. Through this last piece of ‘Irish’ writing, Moore adopts a sentimentality that befits the later stages of her career and illustrates how Irish literature, rather than Irish politics, has emerged as her ultimate source of inspiration.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Complete Poems* *Marianne Moore: Complete Poems*. Ed. Clive Driver. First published 1967; revised edition, 1981; repr. 1984. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984.
- Poems* (2003) *The Poems of Marianne Moore*. Ed. Grace Schulman. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
- Letters* *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*. Ed. Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge and Cristanne Miller. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- Prose* *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*. Ed. Patricia C. Willis. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.

Note on American English and British English spelling

As Moore used both American English and British English spelling throughout her career, depending on which publication her work was featured in, I have kept to the original spelling where possible. This also applies to my quotations from other sources.

Therefore throughout the thesis, although the main spelling (and syntactical) system employed is naturally British English, quotations may contain American English spelling (and syntax) without an accompanying notation such as “[sic]”.

Length of thesis, including footnotes and Appendices: 95,236 words.

Excerpts from the thesis

i) Introduction (pp.19–25)

In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate the many ways in which Irish culture, including Irish, Anglo-Irish and Irish-American literature and politics, influenced Moore as a publisher, poet and playwright; and to suggest that Moore shaped these influences according to her own personal and poetic ideals, reflecting her unique modernist ideology. As the thesis progresses, it will consider two main questions. Firstly, why did Moore overlook the relative weakness of her connection with Ireland in order to pursue her interests in it? Secondly, why did Moore feel the need to give her work a ‘sense of life and roots’ outside her country of birth? I intend to show how Moore’s interest in Irish literature, her relationships with Irish and Irish-American writers, and her attempts in her own works to tackle issues relevant to Irish culture and politics, shaped her identity as an American modernist writer. As Cynthia Stamy argues in *Marianne Moore and China: Orientalism and a Writing of America* – a book whose subject may be very different from that of this thesis, but whose aim to depict Moore as essentially ‘American’ is ostensibly very similar – Moore ‘corroborates the essential Americanness of what is garnered abroad’. Stamy views Moore’s ‘originality’ as ‘dependent’ upon the ‘process of retrieval and assembly’ that she employs through this ‘garnering’ of ideas.¹ In a comparable fashion, throughout this thesis I view Moore as an American – to describe her as ‘Irish-American’ would be to overstate the issue, considering that her background is not purely Irish, or even ‘purely Celtic’ despite her claims – who actively creates an American-Irish inheritance for herself from which to ‘garner’ inspiration.

¹ Cynthia Stamy, *Marianne Moore and China: Orientalism and a Writing of America* (Oxford, 1999), p.33.

Moore's attachment to Ireland, which sometimes smacks of sentimentality and at other times reveals an active interest in the 'burden of the past' which Ireland carries, is, I will contend, part of Moore's self-identification as an American writer.² This active interest is perhaps most evident in Moore's efforts, while editing *The Dial* between 1925 and 1929, to promote the publication of Irish material in this ostensibly American periodical. This period of increased activity in Moore's career provides a fitting first chapter for the thesis, as it illustrates effectively the extent to which Moore used her position as Editor to explore her assumed Irish heritage and its connection with American arts and letters. In 1920, the poet James Oppenheim suggested in *The Dial* that a poet's individuality and interests were what informed his or her identity as an artist from the United States:

Our land's name reveals a dilemma in art. A society of states, in which each state is a society of races, is not a nation in the old world sense; it is not an organic fusion, but a collection, in which the differences are more marked than the likenesses. [...] Americans are held together not by unconscious identity, but by conscious ideals and interests. Americanism is not so much an impulse as a set of ready-made attitudes.³

Moore's 'conscious ideals and interests', including her ongoing relationship with Ireland, at times romantic and at others tempestuous, could be seen, then, as part of what makes her American. In a recent article on Moore's poem 'An Octopus', Fiona Green argues that the poem was written in response to racial debates in America: 'the poem's emphasis on diversity', she argues, 'counters conceptions of American racial purity', and 'the eugenicist polemics that frequently accompanied calls to reinvigorate the American race'.⁴ This thesis will suggest that Moore explored the potentialities of her 'Irish' background in order to respond to similar debates.

² Taffy Martin, *Marianne Moore, Subversive Modernist* (Austin, 1996), p.xi.

³ James Oppenheim, 'Poetry – Our First National Art', *The Dial*, February 1920, pp.238-242 (238).

⁴ Fiona Green, "'The magnitude of their root systems': 'An Octopus' and National Character", in Linda Leavell, Cristanne Miller and Robin G. Schulze, eds., *Critics and Poets on Marianne Moore* (Lewisburg, 2005), pp.137-149 (137).

Moore's understanding of America's 'character' was, I believe, influenced by her view of Henry James as a 'Characteristic American', a description she would give him in her essay of 1934. Moore and James shared a similar (Scotch-)Irish Presbyterian background, while James's 'European' influences and his openness to experiences made him her ideal American writer and reflected qualities that Moore aspired to re-create in her own work. Chapter 3a contends that James's belief in the individual's right to 'accessibility to experience' influenced the political stance of Moore's first 'Irish' poem 'Sojourn in the Whale' in 1917.⁵ Moore's poem worries that if the Irish cannot attain the personal freedoms they deserve, her own accessibility to experience will be threatened, preventing her from tapping into the Irish background which offers so much in the way of poetic inspiration.

Throughout this thesis, I aim to show how Moore appears to promote a cultural view of 'Irishness', which acknowledges the ongoing problems in Ireland but uses them as a backdrop for poetic or personal concerns. Kerby Miller describes the tendency of many of the American descendants of Ulster Protestants, of which Moore was, as least in part, representative, to 'regard themselves as inclusively, if vaguely, "Irish"'.⁶ Moore's particular American-Irish inheritance is both inclusive and exclusive: she does not reference writers simply because they are Irish, but selects writers who appeal to her, or writing which conforms to her particular idea of 'Irishness'. She constructs her American-Irish inheritance from the books she reads, the places she wishes to visit and the parts of Irish politics which interest her: an approach which is by turns inspired and naive. By glossing over the facts of exactly where her family tree took root, Moore allows herself the freedom to envisage an ideal American-Irish inheritance which coincides with her interests.

⁵ Moore uses James's expression in the last line of 'New York' and attributes it in her notes to the poem to 'Henry James'; see *Complete Poems*, pp.54, 269.

⁶ Cristanne Miller, *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p.87.

George Bornstein's chapter on Moore in *Material Modernism* provides a useful model for explaining the order of this thesis, as its convincing analyses of Moore's Irish affinities in *Material Modernism* are compromised by the assumption that her attitudes are unchanging. Although his basic arguments are convincing – for instance he claims, I believe correctly, that Ireland was a country 'with which Moore persistently associated' – his lack of a chronological perspective means he tends to view this association as largely positive, political and broadly Republican.⁷ For example, he remarks upon Moore's encouragement of Irish contributors to *The Dial*, that:

All of the Irish writers had sympathised to one degree or another with revolutionary events beginning with Easter Week of 1916 and lasting through the Troubles to the subsequent and contested establishment of an Irish Free State, an orientation that would surface in Moore's own Irish poems. (p.91)

However, such 'orientation' is complicated by certain factors. For instance, as the first chapter of this thesis, on Moore's work at *The Dial*, will suggest, Moore encouraged contributions not only from Catholic or Republican Irish writers but also from Anglo-Irish and Irish-American writers. Indeed Moore's interest in Irish writing, as explored in her poetic output, actually pre-dates the events of 1916. In this thesis, I have chosen to group Moore's poems on Irish writers or subjects to illustrate how her poetic technique evolved alongside her shifting views of Ireland. Therefore, the second chapter discusses the poems Moore composed in 1915 to Irish writers, which reveal Moore's early interest in Irish writing in the context of her development as a poet and a critic. Her poems to W. B. Yeats, George Moore and George Bernard Shaw delineate a personal conflict between literary affiliation and moral or aesthetic reservations which influenced her later criticism and poetry. Moore's next 'Irish' poem 'Sojourn in the Whale' (1917), discussed in Chapter 3a, does appear initially to

⁷ George Bornstein, 'Pressing Women: Marianne Moore and the networks of modernism', in *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge, 2001), p.103.

corroborate Bornstein's theory by celebrating Irish nationalism and, more specifically, the 'Easter Rising' in Dublin in 1916; nevertheless its ideology is highly subjective, ultimately revealing more about Moore's personal quest as a poet than Ireland's quest for freedom.

Moreover, Bornstein does not acknowledge that the politics of 'Spenser's Ireland' (1941), Moore's second 'Irish' poem, are more complex than those of 'Sojourn in the Whale'. As Chapter 3b will suggest, the poem's alternating colonial and nationalist critiques of Irish politics and culture reveal an 'orientation' towards Ireland which is far removed from the potentially naive idealism of her earlier poem. Indeed, in an early draft of 'Spenser's Ireland', probably dating from December 1940, Moore despairs of Ireland's continuing policy of neutrality during World War II. [...] We are reminded of Louis MacNeice's portrayal of Ireland's hypocrisy in *Autumn Journal*, which although composed in 1938 appears to anticipate his country's stance during the war.⁹ Chapter 3b will illustrate how 'Spenser's Ireland' represents Moore at her most public and most pertinent, as she, like MacNeice, implies that idealistic representations of Ireland are out of date in a country whose government refuses to accept the dark realities of the Second World War. Yet at the same time, a counter-argument runs through 'Spenser's Ireland' to imply that Moore finds solace in the very literature which MacNeice dismisses. In this second strand of the poem, the poet/speaker suggests that by re-discovering its mythic inheritance, Ireland might find a means of 'reinstating / the enchantment' which might provide a solution to its cultural and political malaise.¹⁰

⁸ See Rosenbach Museum and Library ('RML') I:04:21, Drafts and notes for 'Spenser's Ireland': notes in pen and pencil written on the back of an envelope dated 'Dec 16, 1940'.

⁹ See Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, XVI, *Selected Poems*, ed. Michael Longley (London, 1998), pp.61-4, ll.105-113.

¹⁰ Moore, 'Spenser's Ireland', *Complete Poems*, pp.112-4, ll.19-20.

Chapter 4 will expand upon the literary discussions of the previous chapter to show how Moore's eclectic choice of Irish sources for 'Spenser's Ireland' and other poems including 'Silence' and the 'Student' – ranging from the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish politician Edmund Burke to the twentieth-century Irish-American novelist Donn Byrne – reflect her quixotic attitude to Irish culture as alternately an inspiration and a tool for manipulation. Then, the final chapter will deal with Moore's attempt, late in her career in 1954, to turn her hand to playwriting with her adaptation of the Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth's 1812 novel *The Absentee* as a play.

Pointedly, very few critics, including Bornstein, make more than a passing mention of this work. Although arguably a flawed work, *The Absentee* reveals a sentimentalism that marks a new phase in Moore's relationship with Ireland and its literature. This last chapter will contend that through this last piece of 'Irish' writing, Moore turns away from the new-found realism and political engagement of 'Spenser's Ireland' to a sentimentality and nostalgia which befit the later stages of her career and illustrate how Irish literature, rather than Irish politics, has emerged as her ultimate source of inspiration.

ii) Conclusion (pp.273–6)

I have argued in this thesis that Moore's attraction to Irish culture was influenced by her personal desire, as a writer looking for a means of expression, to link her assumed racial inheritance with her identity as an American modernist poet. Following the model of her 'Characteristic American' Henry James, Moore interpreted American identity as the sum of its racial and national inheritances, so in her case her perceived 'Irish', 'Scotch' and 'purely Celtic' inheritance was what made her American. Thus despite its exoticism, its temporal and ideological distance from American life, Irish culture could feed into American culture through its ability, as Moore described it in

The Dial in 1928, to ‘administer to our restiveness’.¹¹ Yet following the Second World War, and Ireland’s policy of neutrality, it was no longer so simple for Moore to unite the facets of her Irish and American identity in an idealistic fusion. Moreover, the tense political climate, which thrust Ireland onto an international stage, meant that Moore could enjoy no longer a personal, subjective relationship with her assumed ethnic homeland. This change explains the shift in tone, from one-sided optimism to balanced scepticism, between Moore’s two ‘Irish’ poems ‘Sojourn in the Whale’ (1917) and ‘Spenser’s Ireland’ (1941).

Indeed, her dissatisfaction with the necessity of engaging with Ireland on a public rather than a personal level resounds with another of MacNeice’s reasons [in *Autumn Journal*] for why one might ‘like being Irish’.¹² Although Moore was a cosmopolitan writer who embraced international modernism, her quixotic attitude towards Irish sources, and her reading of materials as disparate as Donn Byrne’s *Ireland: The Rock Whence I Was Hewn*, the stories of James Stephens and Pádraic Colum, and little-known works by obscure poets such as Denis O’Sullivan, indicates that she was attracted to the particularities, or ‘localism’, of Irish culture. This attraction helps explain both her promotion of a wide range of Irish writers for publication in *The Dial* during her time as Editor and her decision, towards the end of her career, to revive Maria Edgeworth’s 1812 novel *The Absentee*, with its peculiarly Irish subject matter and characterisations, for a 1950s American audience. In contrast with the sheer size and scope of American culture, the ‘tiny stage’ of Edgeworth’s original drama, and the pleasingly self-contained nature of the subject, may have appealed to Moore as a way of doing ‘local work which is not at the world’s mercy’.

¹¹ Moore, Editor’s ‘Comment’, *The Dial*, March 1928, pp.269-70 (270).

¹² See Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, XVI, *Selected Poems*, (1988), ll.61, 69-70, for the arguments alluded to here; MacNeice’s lines also inspired the title of this Conclusion, ‘Why do we like being Irish?’

It is fitting that Moore's relationship with Irish literature ostensibly ends with *The Absentee* in 1954, as her version of Edgeworth's novel slices through its political complexities and simplifies its characters to increase the sense that the history of the original is both complete and finite. In *The Absentee* Moore sees 'one particular action' through to its expected end, reflecting her ultimate view of Irish culture as both a constant source of inspiration and a closed book of myth and history, untarnished by modern events.

In an undated questionnaire by Arion, concerning 'the classics and the man of letters', Moore responded to a question about whether Greek or Roman myths 'or any new comparable mythologizations' can 'survive our much greater historical knowledge', with the response: 'Myths are primal – do not die'.¹³ The Celtic myths which Moore associated closely with Ireland, and the writers who wrote from this mythic inheritance, helped shape many of the choices Moore made throughout her career, as a publisher, poet, and playwright. Her extensive knowledge of, and subjective approach to, Irish literature helped energise her own poetry and revive in turn the work of Irish writers. On the other hand, however, her idealised view of Irish literature – a result of her 'susceptibility to Irish magic' and her desire, either spoken or implied throughout her 'Irish' writing, to 'reinstate the enchantment' – threatened to prevent those works she admired, or those writers she promoted, from evolving beyond their 'greenness'.¹⁴ [...] In moments of weakness, Moore's deep connection with Ireland, and her complex and often enlightening understanding of Irish culture, can find itself lost in the false remembrance of things past. 'Myths are primal – do not die', but sometimes Moore wishes that they might not change at all.

¹³ See New York Public Library Berg Collection catalogue, undated, Arion questionnaire on the classics and the man of letters, question 10 and response.

¹⁴ See Moore, Editor's 'Comment', *The Dial*, March 1928, pp.269-70 (270); Moore, 'Spenser's Ireland', *Complete Poems*, pp.112-4, ll.19-20; and RML I:04:21, Drafts and notes for 'Spenser's Ireland', third draft.